Rethinking the Concept of Literary Authorship Through Vladimir Nabokov and W. G. Sebald

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Abstract

Reflecting on the complex legacy of ideas of authorship in modern literary theories, this dissertation aims to develop an approach to authorship that makes a strong case for retaining this controversial concept in literary criticism without losing sight of its complexity, situatedness, and diverse manifestations. This aim is achieved by putting recent theories of authorship in conversation with specific writers' ideas and practices. Taking two innovative, self-reflexive, and theoretically informed writers – Vladimir Nabokov and W. G. Sebald – as the occasions for my discussion, I explore how their critical ideas and creative practices contribute to theories of authorship and, in return, how theoretical discussions of authorship illuminate some of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of their creative practices, thus attesting the value of this concept for literary criticism. Following an introduction which delineates the development of ideas of authorship in modern literary theories, outlines several key topics for discussion, and proposes potential methods for the study of this concept, the main body of this dissertation (nine chapters in total) is divided into four parts; in each part, I extrapolate ideas of authorship from a different set of sources (Nabokov's critical writings, Nabokov's novels, Sebald's critical remarks, and Sebald's prose fiction) and explore their implications for recent theories of authorship. Three common themes arise from my analysis: authorial creativity, authorial communication, and authorship as self-presentation. This in turn provides the basis for an approach to authorship which is at once more positive and more relativised: I suggest that the complex notion of authorship can be divided into several interconnected themes which reflect common functions, values, and concerns that have been rather consistently associated with this concept; under each theme, each writer may consider a different range of questions and provide distinct answers through critical reflections and creative practices.

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Acknowledgements

After completing a dissertation on the concept of literary authorship, writing these acknowledgements seems to me like an opportunity to apply some of my academic views to my own experiences as an author, though not a literary one in this case. With surging curiosity, gratitude, and tenderness, let me now carefully peep through the half-transparent surface of my polished work to appreciate the more visible scaffolding and the less visible foundation, generously contributed by a number of lovely people, that have gone into the construction of this dissertation, and let me look very intently into the mirroring surface of this work in an attempt to discern and scrutinise the hazy reflection of myself.

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Yet quite apart from these perceptible support and contributions, other influences run deep and far, like the underground water that nourishes entire forests through an extensive, ultra-complex root system. When I contemplate how I have got here, which I catch myself doing while finishing off the last stage of editing, so many disparate moments flash through my mind and fill my heart with shimmering joy. I think back to Dr Simon Cooke's course on modernist literature at the University of Edinburgh, which initiated my interest in narrative studies; I think back to Dr Frank Polzenhagen's course on linguistic theories at Heidelberg University – what I learnt in that course has hugely benefited my research in narrative studies and will continue to do so in the future. With immense gratitude, I think of Dr Robert Webber and Dr Yanhua Fang, whose courses on academic writing in English laid a solid foundation for my later study and research. And tenderly, lovingly, I think of that evening in my sophomore year, when I was moved to tears in my dorm room by a certain passage in *The Mirror and the Lamp* and felt the beauty of literary criticism with all my heart.

Another thread of memory takes me back to the Chinese creative writing group 青虫 (‘green worm’) that I co-founded while studying in Edinburgh in 2015-16, where I read my more or less finished poems to some of my most inspiring friends and appreciative readers. To that summer right before Edinburgh, when an old friend persuaded me to set up my own creative writing blog, “because all these years I’ve always missed reading your writings.” To my secondary school years, when I co-writ diaries with my best friend, and when my essays were passed among friends and read out in front of the whole class. To a Chinese teacher who told me that my writings stood out with keen logical reasoning and genuine sincerity, and another Chinese teacher who praised my use of details, appreciating my description of watching late-night fireworks from my bedroom window in “棉毛衫”, a kind of long-sleeve cotton thermal underwear. To the hundreds of ancient Chinese poems which I recited and will carry in my mind no matter how far I wander from home. To the summer nights I spent leafing back and forth, for I don’t know how many hundred times, the eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which I still believe to be one of the greatest novels of all times. And way, way back, to the scene of my mother reading bedtime stories (and, occasionally, poems) to me (once she was so tired that she fell asleep while reading a long story about a lost little bee, and as an English teacher she started sleep talking *in English*); and to my father, who tried (perhaps too pre-maturely, as Asian parents often do) to teach me the first two short sentences in English.

But there is no clear formula for self-identity, and personal recollections, even in its most orderly form, is not one life story but a stream or network of consciousness where one half-begun, half-ended narrative blends into another. Perhaps this is why I should be grateful to myself, author and medium, who absorbed all these influences, digested them in some inexplicable way, and eventually completed this intellectual magic trick called a dissertation. For some reason, my memory hovers over a moment more than a dozen years ago, when I, a teenager of 15 or so, woke up before dawn on a summer day and was transfixed by the morning sky in a most luminescent aquamarine, ornamented by the shiny shell of a waxing gibbous moon. For no specific reason, my heart was teeming with joyous expectations for an indefinite future. I wonder what that girl would think of the Mengchen right now, whether she would be proud of me.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

My article manuscript titled “Fictional Worlds Theory Problematized: Global Logical Impossibilities in Vladimir Nabokov’s Novels” is currently under review by the journal *Style.* The content of this manuscript is partly drawn from Chapters I, II, and IV of this dissertation.

Another manuscript titled “Conceptions of Authorship in Modern Literary Theories: History, Issues, Approaches”, currently under review by the *Literature Compass*, is based on the introduction of this dissertation.

A third manuscript titled《自传典故与自我建构——以〈塞巴斯蒂安·奈特的真实生活〉为例》(“Autobiographical Allusions and Self-Construction in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*”), recently submitted to the Chinese journal《外国文学研究》(*Foreign Literature Studies*), draws from Chapter V of this dissertation.

Introduction: Reconstructing the Concept of Literary Authorship – Why and How

At the end of his seminal essay "What Is an Author?" (1969), Michel Foucault suggests that the reconsideration of the author as "a complex and variable function of discourse" may well lead to a future where the concept of authorship is no longer needed (138). Reiterating the question from Samuel Beckett that informed his earlier analysis, Foucault claims, "Behind all these questions [about the author-function] we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference: 'What matter who's speaking?'" (138). It seems, however, that his prophecy has not been fulfilled in the field of literary studies. Although many literary theorists and critics have answered Foucault's call to treat the notion of authorship as a discursive function formed under certain social relationships, evoked through complex interpretative practices, and variable across times, cultures, and modes of discourse, a significant proportion of these endeavours have contributed not to the elimination of the concept from the study of literature but to its revision, refinement, and consolidation. This still ongoing trend cannot be simply explained away by the tenacity of habitual critical practices; rather, it says something about the positive value of this concept for our understanding of literature (at least under the current sociocultural context) as well as its flexibility to adapt to valid criticisms.

This study is my attempt to contribute to recent theoretical discussions of authorship as a crucial yet problem-ridden literary concept. Analysing ideas and practices of authorship in Vladimir Nabokov's and W. G. Sebald's critical reflections and literary works, I explore their rich implications for recent theories of authorship. By putting reflections, practices, and theories of authorship in conversation, I aim to suggest more nuanced ways to conceive of the author, and by doing so, to make a strong case for the need to retain this concept in literary theory and criticism.

In order to better understand the theoretical background against which this study is situated, we need an overview of the diverse thoughts and complex debates about the notion of authorship. In the next part of this introduction, I will briefly delineate the shifting attitudes toward the concept of authorship in twentieth- and

twenty-first-century literary theories before moving on to expound several of the most disputed subtopics. I will then identify several methods to take the present theoretical discussions of authorship further and situate my approach in relation to these options. Finally, I will give a brief outline of my structural design and a quick synopsis of each chapter.

As a preliminary note, I would like to delimit the conceptual scope and methodological approach of this study. First, while authorship is a relevant concern in various discourses such as academic writing and film production, this study is limited to the consideration of 'literary authorship', an author's functions, powers, limitations, and responsibilities in the production and consumption of literary works. Second, I distinguish between 'author' and 'writer': the latter simply refers to an occupation, while the former refers to a complex, culturally determined role in literary production, the conception of which informs our interpretation of particular works, our understanding of literature in general, and our perception of the individuals, groups, or other entities that are assigned this role. Finally, as Foucault observes, authorship is a social construct which arises out of negotiations between multiple parties (writers, critics, lay readers, literary theorists, editors, etc.); these negotiations are often informed by – and in return bear upon – ideas, relations, and technologies beyond the realm of literature such as copyright law and mass media. Yet the current study does not attempt to examine the full spectrum of factors that inform recent ideas of authorship; nor does it aim to measure the full impacts of these ideas. Instead, it focuses on an integral part of these dynamic interrelations, namely, how specific writers' ideas and practices of literary authorship contribute to theories of authorship, which in turn inform literary interpretation.

'Death' and 'Resurrection'? A Brief History of Ideas of Authorship in Modern Literary Theories (ca. 1900 – the Present)

The general development of conceptions of authorship in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary theories is often conceived of as a two-stage story – a gradual 'death' of the author starting at the turn of the twentieth century and consummated by Roland Barthes' iconoclastic essay "The Death of the Author" (1967), followed by various attempts to 'resurrect' the notion and 'return' it to the critical vocabulary. This story is implied in book titles such as *The Death and Return*

of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida (by Seán Burke, first published in 1992) and *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?* (edited by William Irwin, 2002), though the plot is always complicated upon closer reading. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik also observe that recently "a return of the author into narrative studies is being promoted in clear violation of what has almost become a taboo in literary studies" (14). The narrative of 'death – return/resurrection' aptly captures a general shift of attitude towards the notion of authorship in modern literary theories, with the critical point falling around the publication of "The Death of the Author". However, this widely adopted narrative also has at least two weaknesses. First, it wrongly suggests that there was a historical moment when the notion of authorship was largely eliminated from modern literary theories, while in fact it has never stopped being a major theoretical concern, even though some ideas about the concept are articulated in negative forms. Second, it gives the misleading impression that theorists 'for' and 'against' the notion of authorship stand in direct opposition to each other, while a closer look reveals that they often propose similar ideas in different tones or from different perspectives. I suggest, therefore, that we should consider the recent history of the notion of authorship in less polemical terms: rather than the return of a banished concept, the shift of sentiments around 1970 is but a change of the main question from 'how *not to* conceive of the author' to 'how *to* conceive of the author'.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a number of (pre-)modernist writers, from Stéphane Mallarmé and Gustave Flaubert to T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce, who argued in their respective ways for the impersonality of literary creation. Mallarmé claims in "Crisis of Verse" (1896) that "[t]he pure work implies the disappearance of the poet speaking, who yields the initiative to words, through the clash of their ordered inequalities" (208); in "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919), Eliot argues that the poet's journey is "a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable [i.e. the sense of tradition]. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (52-53). Burke points out that the (pre-)modernists' emphasis upon the free play of words and the sense of tradition over the revelation of the author's personality is not drastically new; rather, it amplifies an important yet often overlooked aspect of Romanticist poetics, namely,

the perception of the author as a God-like genius-creator that "can be identified with the entirety of the work while being nowhere visible within the work", and the perception of writing as "an empathetic act which requires the emptying-out of all personal concerns" (*Authorship* xxii).[1] Other scholars attribute the growing emphasis on impersonality around 1900 to writers' strive for autonomy – their distancing from "extra-literary judgment based on moral, ideological, or economic criteria" (Sapiro, "Authorship" 6) and resistance of the fixation on writers' personality or biography by the written press (Dubbelboer 138-40). Seen in these contexts, the declarations of impersonality do not cancel the notion of authorship; quite the contrary, they highlight the complexity of authorial subjectivity.

The (pre-)modernist writers' creative aesthetic was joined by methodological concerns on the part of literary critics. Formed at the dawn of the institutionalisation of literary studies, Formalism and New Criticism aimed to develop a rigorous methodology for literary criticism which establishes it as an estimable science distinct from literary history, rhetoric, philology, and other related disciplines (Bennett 72-74). A main solution they proposed was to abandon biographical criticism, which they deemed as unprofessional gossip, and focus instead on the work itself (74-75). Formalism and New Criticism thus initiated the separation of authors' life and work in literary criticism, despite some efforts from within the schools to relativise this separation (see, for example, Boris Tomaševskij's essay "Literature and Biography", first published in 1923). It is under these circumstances that W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley wrote "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), in which they argue that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (468). It should be noted that Wimsatt and Beardsley do not deny that authorial intention is involved in the composition of literary works; nor do they seem to completely reject the presumption of intentionality in literary interpretation. Rather,

1. Andrew Bennett illustrates the double-sidedness of Romanticist ideas of authorship in more detail in *The Author* (55-66). The Romantics, he claims, "both inaugurated a certain sense of authorship and, at the same time, in the very same breath, announced the author's imminent demise. Thus, the idea of the author as originator and genius, as fully intentional, fully sentient source of the literary text, as authority for and limitation on the 'proliferating meanings' of the text, has particular importance for a culture that also, at the same time, begins to extol the virtues of a 'disinterested' aesthetic, an impersonality" (55-56). As with Burke, this observation leads Bennett to argue for the continuities between Romanticist and modernist thoughts on authorship (66-71).

they merely argue that an author's *statements of intention* outside the work in question should not be seen as oracles that circumscribe the meanings of the work or used as the basis for its evaluation. I will discuss this essay in more detail in the section below.

Structuralist narratology is another strand of literary theory that brackets authors methodologically. Germinating in the early twentieth century and established in the 1960s and 1970s, it shares Formalism's emphasis on literary texts as autonomous structures (Meister, pars. 25, 35). Heavily informed by Saussurean linguistics' prioritisation of *langue* over *parole,* structure over agency, structuralist narratology aims to uncover the "narrative *langue*", the general rules underlying all narratives (Meister, par. 36; Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan 68). It follows that the author is no longer seen as a genius-creator but as a convention-bound medium that realises existent deep structures of narrative, just as in structural linguistics "the speaking subject was subjected to the laws and constraints of the language s/he did not author" (Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan 68). This may explain why the foundational works of structuralist narratology written in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. "Actants, Actors and Figures" by Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Structural Analysis of Narrative" by Tzveten Todorov, "The Logic of Narrative Possibilities" by Claude Bremond, and "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" by Barthes) rarely consider the notion of the author in detail and instead focus on the categorisation of character functions, the logic of plot progression, and the distinction between fabula/story as the deep structure of narrative and syuzhet/discourse as its varied expressions.[2]

Ruth Ginsburg and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argue that Saussurean linguistics also serves as a crucial source of influence for poststructuralist ideas of authorship exemplified by Barthes' "The Death of the Author" and Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (68-69). They note that Saussure's theory of the dual structure of signs inspires anthropology and psychoanalysis to argue for the duality of the subject and undermine the notion of transcendental subjectivity, which in turn informs Barthes' and Foucault's subversion of the author as the origin of her/his writings and

2. For a brief summary of the foundational works of structuralist narratology and their major contributions, see Jan Christoph Meister's entry "Narratology" in *The Living Handbook of Narratology,* pars. 34-39.

the principle governing textual meanings (68-69). Beneath this common agenda, however, Barthes' and Foucault's essays differ in scope, attitude, and not least the changes they call for. In "The Death of the Author", Barthes argues that to conceive of a God-like figure of an Author that precedes and gives meaning to a text is "to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147), and that the removal of the Author is an "anti-theological activity" that liberates our reading of literary texts (147). Harking back to (pre-)modernists such as Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Marcel Proust, and the Surrealists as pioneers of this initiative, Barthes advocates the perception of literary texts as "multi-dimensional space[s] in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). He also states that, with the death of the Author, the reader now serves as the place where the multiplicity of the text finds its unity (148). Many of these ideas are reinforced in "From Work to Text" (1971), in which Barthes claims that the text, as a complex tissue of signifiers, "reads without the inscription of the Father [i.e. the Author]" (161).

However, the notion of authorship has never completely left Barthes' discussions. Not only does he refer to certain writers' ideas and practices in "The Death of the Author", but he also proposes to replace the 'Author-God' with the notion of 'the modern scriptor' which is "born simultaneously with the text" – an instance of writing, a performative 'I' (145). This notion is reiterated in "From Work to Text", in which Barthes claims that the author may come back in his text as a "guest", a "paper-author", whose "life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work" (161). The same notion is re-named as the decapitalised 'author' in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), in which Barthes observes, "As institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person has disappeared . . . but in the text, in a way, I desire the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection), as he needs mine (except to 'prattle')" (27). In this sense, "The Death of the Author" is a manifesto *about* authorship rather than *against* it: it criticises one conception of authorship (i.e., the author as a transcendental subject) only to suggest another (i.e., the author as a performative 'I', a textual function or effect).

Compared to Barthes' attack on the Author-God in "The Death of the Author", Foucault's discussions in "What Is an Author" is broader in scope and

more moderate in tone. Foucault also draws attention to (pre-)modernists' pursuit of impersonality, but he claims that the consequences of the "death of the author" have not been fully examined (117). The "empty space left by the author's disappearance", Foucault argues, should not be filled with other totalising concepts such as 'work' or 'écriture'; rather, it is time to reconceptualise the author as a historically and socially variable discursive function (118-31). It is under this agenda that he identifies several prominent characteristics of the author-function in modern literary criticism: that it "explains the presence of certain events within a text", "constitutes a principle of unity in writing", "serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found in a series of writings", and is "a particular source of expression who, in more or less finished forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in a text, in letters, fragments, drafts, and so forth" (128-29). Seen as a discursive function, this conception of the literary author does not have to be perpetuated or cancelled; rather, it needs to be relativised, contextualised, continually reflected upon, and given the space to evolve. Although Foucault claims that, given the contingent nature of the author-function, it is not difficult to imagine an authorless culture, he also stresses that the most important task for the present is not to dismiss the concept of authorship but to reconsider it under different questions: "[U]nder what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?" (137-38). Agreeing with Barthes on how *not to* talk about the author, Foucault offers a more detailed roadmap about how *to* reconceptualise authorship.

Barthes' and Foucault's ground-breaking essays have certainly caused some palpable qualms, if not inhibitions, about the notion of authorship among literary critics. In the field of literary theory, however, Barthes and Foucault have evoked greater interest in the concept of authorship: their ideas have since been reviewed, refined, refuted, extended, and incorporated by theorists with diverse agendas and inclinations. Burke's monograph *The Death and Return of the Author* makes a strong case for the notion of authorship through an extensive, detailed analysis of the theoretical contexts, merits, and flaws of Barthes', Foucault's, and Derrida's ideas on authorship. Similarly, Irwin's anthology *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?* brings together a range of responses to Barthes' and Foucault's ideas of authorship,

mostly written by scholars from philosophical backgrounds. Other works such as Andrew Bennett's monograph *The Author* (2004) and Burke's reader *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* (1995) take a historical approach, tracing changes in conceptions of authorship across centuries.

In *Authorship*, Burke identifies a broad domain of literary theories which has been concerned with questions of authorship and especially the legacy of 'the death(s) of the author': he points out that the various politically-informed critical theories – Marxism, new historicism, feminism, and postcolonialism – *both* reinforce the conception of authorship as dependent upon social relationships *and* argue for the need to uphold some mode of authorial subjectivity, agency, and accountability (145-50, 215-21). In particular, Burke delineates feminist critics' uneasy relationship with poststructuralist theories of authorship: while some feminist critics applaud poststructuralists' attack on the patriarchal figure of the Author, others argue that the cancellation of the concept of the author presents unjustified obstacles for feminist criticism (147-49). These ambivalent attitudes are further elaborated in Cheryl Walker's essay "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author". Examining relevant discussions by Gayle Greene and Coppéla Kahn, Nancy K. Miller, and Toril Moi, Walker shows that theoretically informed feminist critics tend to welcome poststructuralist criticisms of the Author, although they do not necessarily agree that all attempts to decipher intentional meanings should be avoided or that the notion of 'the Author' applies to women writers as well (142-48). Walker herself is more wary of the potential negative effects brought by the cancellation of the notion of authorship. Believing that "to erase a woman poet as the author of her poems in favor of an abstract indeterminacy is an act of oppression" (157), Walker argues that what feminist critics need, "instead of a theory of the death of the author, is a new concept of authorship that . . . does not diminish the importance of difference and agency in the response of women writers to historical formations" (148).

The notion of authorship also occupies a central position in Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory of literature, which is systematically illustrated in *The Rules of Art* (1992). Bourdieu considers authors as agents in the literary field, who, inevitably and durably shaped by their social surroundings (as is conveyed through the notion of 'habitus'), also actively shape the field by taking up unique, changeable positions in relation to other existing or potential positions (232). Moreover, Bourdieu argues

for a homology between "the space of positions" (i.e., authors' relative positions in the field) and "the space of position-takings" (i.e., the relation between literary works) (231); this means that the stylistic analysis of a literary work may well be illuminated by "a search for its author's trajectory", and vice versa (234). Although Bourdieu sees the author as a social construct, he does not consider the possibility of an authorless future; rather, he sees authors as necessary links between specific textual features and the broader power dynamics in and beyond the literary field. Bourdieu's ideas bear upon several classic issues of authorship such as creativity and intention; as I will show in the section below, these implications have been discussed in recent publications such as *Authorship Revisited* (2010, edited by Dorleijn et al.) and the *Paragraph* special issue *Bourdieu and the Literary Field* (vol. 35, no. 1, Mar. 2012), which seek to illustrate and develop Bourdieu's theory of literature.

A strand of narrative theories that have contributed to discussions of authorship since the mid-twentieth century is the Chicago School, with its more recent manifestations known as rhetorical narrative theory. Originally formed as a reaction to New Criticism, the main concern of the Chicago School is to "conceiv[e] of narrative not as a structure of meanings but rather as a rhetorical action, a multilayered purposive *communication from author to audience*" (Phelan, "Chicago School" 134; my emphasis). The concept of the author therefore occupies an indispensable place in this school of thought. Initially overshadowed by New Criticism, the Chicago School has achieved much success in the long run, as the rhetorical theory of narrative is still gaining momentum today. A major contribution made by the Chicago School to discussions of authorship is the concept of the implied author proposed by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Originally devised as "an attempt to restore to literature the human dimension that structuralism and New Criticism (and afterwards, deconstruction) denied, without falling victim to . . . 'the intentional fallacy'" (Ryan, "Meaning" 30), this concept has since been subject to numerous expansions, revisions, and criticism (e.g., Dawson 234; Phelan et al. 50; Ryan, "Meaning"; Shen 88-93).[3] Marie-Laure Ryan notes that three main functions are commonly attributed to the implied author: "a necessary

3. For more extensive discussions of the concept of the implied author, see Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller's *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy* (2006) and the *Style* special issue (vol. 45, no. 1, Spring 2011) titled *Implied Author: Back from the Grave or Simply Dead Again.*

parameter in the communicative model of literary narrative fiction", "a design principle responsible for the narrative techniques and the plot of the text", and "the source of the norms and values communicated by the text" ("Meaning" 34-35). In the section below, I will demonstrate how this concept participates in debates about authorial intention and self-presentation. Other recent contributions to ideas of authorship made by the rhetorical theory of narrative include James Phelan's model of authorial intention as "a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response" (Phelan et al. 30) and Richard Walsh's conception of authorial creativity as mediation in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (130-47).

My roughly chronological sketch above shows that the notion of authorship has been a crucial topic for modern literary theories: on the one hand, it presents methodological and ideological challenges for literary criticism, so much so that some theorists feel tempted to do away with the concept; on the other hand, it is so indispensable to our interpretation and appreciation of literary texts that even the most forceful declarations of 'the death of the author' suggest some form of ideas about the author. My account also shows that the concept of authorship poses not one but many interrelated questions for literary theories, as it is connected with a range of notions such as creativity, agency, intention, and selfhood. Theories of authorship – both the 'how to's and the 'how not's – often argue on different planes. To disentangle the threads of discussion, I will now identify several main issues of authorship, illustrate the debates over each of them, and suggest future directions for research on these topics.

Main Issues About the Concept

Authorial Agency and Creativity

In *The Death and Return of the Author*, Burke argues that Barthes' iconoclastic claims in "The Death of the Author" largely target a straw man: the conception of the author as the absolute origin of his works can hardly be found in existent thoughts about literature, and especially does not hold for twentieth-century literary theories (24-26). Burke therefore claims that Barthes "does not so much destroy the 'Author-God' but participates in its construction" (25). Moreover, Burke points out that Barthes fails to consider forms of authorial agency and creativity other than the theological monologism of the 'Author-God': "Barthes' entire polemic

is grounded on the false assumption that if a magisterial status is denied the author, then the very concept of the author itself becomes otiose" (25-26).

Yet Barthes does briefly hint at a mode of authorial creativity in "The Death of the Author": like copyists, he argues, the writer's "only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (146). Paradoxically, he already reveals in this very statement why authors are more than copyists: an author deliberately brings together existent discourses to facilitate their mingling or collision, although he cannot anticipate every reaction they produce. Similarly, Foucault quickly points to a notion of authorial agency in "What Is an Author" when he claims that writing "implies an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates" (116). On the whole, however, both theorists downplay authorial agency: while Barthes subverts a largely hypostasised 'Author-God' in favour of anonymous textuality, Foucault emphasises the author-function as subjected to social relationships in general and readers' projections in particular.

In the wake of poststructuralists' diminishing of authorial agency, and in reaction to what Burke calls "the disarming effects of linguistic determinism" (*Authorship* xxviii), it is time for literary theory to rediscover non-theological modes of authorial creativity in which agency is manifested as the facilitation, channelling, elaboration, and subversion of existing traditions, discourses, principles, and intuitions. This mission has been taken up in recent studies of authorship. One main approach is to investigate historical and contemporary perceptions of authorial creativity through close analyses of specific literary works and paratextual materials. For example, Bennett shows how Romanticist poetics, known for its exaltation of the author to the "centre of the literary universe" (59), simultaneously advocates the inexplicability of genius (60-61) and the "evacuation of selfhood" (64). Analysing the reflections of a range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists, Walsh proposes the conception of authorial creativity (specific to narrative fiction) as the mediation of existent imperatives; under this conception, Walsh argues, the exercising and the loss of authorial control in fiction writing are regarded as two means to the same end – the discovery and elaboration of culturally-rooted modes of narrative understanding (*Rhetoric* 130-47). Similarly, Sophus Helle calls for the replacement of the "polarized image of the author as either creative God or passive

scribe" by "a focus on the middle ranges of literary agency" ("What" 113); this can be done, he suggests, by examining metaphors of authorship throughout literary history (134). In "What Is an Author?", Helle illustrates how the classic metaphor of author as weaver conveys an imagination of medial agency (123-28); in "The Birth of the Author", he argues that the metaphors of authorial creation as childbirth and rebirth in Enheduana's *The Exaltation of Inana* suggest that the notion of authorship is co-created through the invocation of traditions and through conversations between multiple participants. Such investigations, I suggest, should be extended to a wider range of texts and paratexts in order for us to appreciate the complexity and diversity of notions of authorial creativity, and this dissertation participates in this endeavour.

Another way to reconsider the notion of authorial creativity is to draw from ideas of human agency in related disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and political theories, as well as literary theories that have previously been sidelined. For instance, Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan argue that Bakhtinian dialogism suggests a third mode of authorial agency that avoids the extremity of both 'Author-God' and 'the death of the author' (77-79). Authorial creativity is also a key theme in the critiques and revisions of Bourdieu's sociological theory of literary production. Gun-Britt Kohler, Gisèle Sapiro, and John Speller all point out that Bourdieu is fully aware that there is no direct, mechanical correspondence between textual features and the author's position in the literary field (Kohler 12-15; Sapiro, "Autonomy Revisited" 38-40; Speller 65). As Kohler puts it, Bourdieu perceives the author as "an agent whose actions are neither completely conscious and reflected, nor automatic and objective" (15). Informed by Bourdieu, Jérôme Meizoz and Liesbeth Korthals Altes ("Slippery Author Figures") further emphasise the author's ability to make strategic use of traditions and principles in a given context to create singular positions and original works. These varied attempts to reconsider the notions of authorial creativity and agency make a strong case for the indispensability of the concept of authorship for literary criticism.

Authorial Intention and Authority

Many arguments for the bracketing or cancellation of the concept of authorship are based upon an anti-intentionalist stance, or the belief that "one should not, or even cannot, base one's interpretation of a literary work on what was intended by the author" (Kindt and Köppe 214). Proponents of this stance include "the so-

called ‘werkimmanente Interpretation’, the New Criticism, structuralism, deconstruction and discourse analysis” (214). In this section, I will identify several classic arguments for anti-intentionalism and demonstrate how they have been amply and justly refuted by the intentionalists, who, upholding the view that the notion of authorial intention is indispensable for our reading of literary texts, have developed more nuanced and contextualised understandings of authorial intention in response to the anti-intentionalists’ concerns. These new conceptions of authorial intention bear methodological implications for our interpretative practices.

In “The Intentional Fallacy”, perhaps the most classic anti-intentionalist manifesto, Wimsatt and Beardsley provide a range of arguments as to why the notion of authorial intention is “neither available nor desirable” for literary criticism (468). They contend that not all of an author’s intentions are necessarily realised in her/his work; the work itself is sufficient evidence for the successfully conveyed intentions, while those intentions that did not become effective are irrelevant to literary interpretation (469). They also argue that, unlike practical messages, poetry is “a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once”; literary criticism should focus on appreciating these nuanced meanings through the performance of words without “inquiring what part is intended or meant” (469-70).

Several challenges can be raised here. First, is it unclear how Wimsatt and Beardsley conceive of the notion of authorial intention. When they claim that unsuccessful intentions must be found outside the work, they seem to equate authorial intention with the author’s paratextual statements of intention. However, as Robert Stecker notes, “professions of intention are not necessarily better evidence of intentions than products of intention” (131), for they are also texts which require interpretation. When they claim that poetic language transcends quests of authorial intention due to its richness and nuance, they seem to consider authorial intentions as clear propositional messages readily stored in the author’s mind, which she/he tries to replicate in the reader’s mind through verbal performances. Yet recent theories have also questioned this assumption and suggested alternative models. Drawing on Dreyfus’ distinction between ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-that,’ David Herman argues that intentions are not “inner mental objects” but “structures of know-how” that are “built into the doing” and “distributed across text producers, text interpreters, textual designs, and the communicative environments” (255-56). Similarly, Phelan

states that the rhetorical theory of narrative has its interest in "public, textualized intentions" rather than "private intention" ("Implied Author" 125). Phelan further conceptualises such intentions as "a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual phenomena), and reader response" (*Experiencing Fiction* 4). In the field of pragmatics, Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber's claim that verbal communication is mostly "ostensive-inferential" (*Meaning* 241) and "geared to the maximisation of relevance" (6) gives a central position to the communicator's intentions; meanwhile, the idea that these intentions only need to be made "mutually *manifest* to communicator and audience" and not necessarily *known* (241; my emphasis) suggests another alternative to the popular yet problematic imagination of authorial intentions as propositional messages stored in the author's mind.

Second, Wimsatt and Beardsley assume that it is possible to talk about textual meanings without evoking the notion of authorial intention. Similarly, Jason Holt claims that although "the presumption of intent" is necessary to the interpretation of literary texts, the actual content of the author's intentions need not be a matter of concern (77). However, can the presumption of intentionality and the inference of authorial intentions be so conveniently separated? Herman, for example, argues for the opposite: analysing how we process deictic shifts in literary narratives, he demonstrates how "basic aspects of narrative interpretation are inextricably bound up with the adoption of the intentional stance as a heuristic strategy" (Herman 249). Kindt and Köppe also point out that, stripped of the element of intention, the interpretation of work-meaning can only resort to conventions, which, however, are never specific enough for our understanding of any particular work (215-17).

Third, Wimsatt and Beardsley's division of 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' execution of authorial intentions is too reductive, as it fails to account for a range of possible scenarios such as radically different inferences of authorial intentions regarding the same work and the inference of failed intentions by observing textual inconsistencies. Moreover, as Kindt and Köppe point out, the possibility of failed or inadequately realised intentions in literary communication does not undermine the notion of authorial intention; they are exceptions that prove the rule of successful communication (220).

Partly conceived of as "a design principle responsible for the narrative techniques and the plot of the text" (Ryan, "Meaning" 34), the notion of the implied author straddles the line between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism: it offers a way to talk about artistic intention but attributes such intention to an abstract textual function rather than a real person. Ryan lists three common reasons for this move: first, it captures the *speculative nature* of intentionalist readings; second, it accounts for the perception of a *unified consciousness* in collaborative works; third, it offers an explanation for the *richness, subtlety, and openness* of literary meaning, which makes it unlikely for real authors to fully anticipate the meanings of their works (38-39). Yet the flaws of these arguments have been exposed by theorists who take a solid intentionalist stance. Herman contends that the concept "entails a reification or hypostatization of what is better characterized as a stage in an inferential process"; in other words, it overlooks the defeasibility of inferences and readers' capacity to change their interpretations (Phelan et al. 50). Ryan notes that, equated with the sum of textual meanings, the concept "denies the existence of non-intended meaning" ("Meaning" 39). Therefore, these theorists argue that the word 'implied' should be dropped.

In contrast to anti-intentionalism, the intentionalists' central claim is that "reference to an author's intentions can or even should play a vital role in literary interpretation" (Kindt and Köppe 214-15). This position has been subjected to various elaborations and qualifications. Some scholars demonstrate how authorial intention can take forms other than simple authoritarian declaratives in specific literary texts. For instance, Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan argue that, by self-consciously depicting "a gradual renunciation of authority and knowledge, combined with an opening up to surprising facets of the other" in *Jazz*, Toni Morrison invites readers to perceive a less authoritarian author who speaks for others by "freeing them to speak for themselves" (81, 85). Nickolas Pappas points out that Leopold Bloom's meditation on word play in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Marcel's depiction of the associative power of memory in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* can be seen as the authors' call for readers to perform their own word play or associative memory upon the respective texts in ways which the authors could not have foreseen (122-24). These case studies remind us that intentionalist reading after "The Intentional Fallacy" should not be limited to the inference of clear, propositional

messages but should also consider more tentative, reflexive, and egalitarian forms of authorial intention such as the intimation of certain perspectives, approaches, and potentialities.

Other intentionalists concede that readers may go beyond inferring authorial intention when interpreting literary texts. Stecker observes, for instance, that the author "would be repressive if regarded as the only principle that determines legitimate interpretations" (137). Similarly, Pappas notes that, for some interpretative practices, "the most interesting question has ceased to be the authors' intentions" (118). Kindt and Köppe also agree that "The fact that a work of literature is composed in order to convey something is not to say that specifying what was meant to be conveyed is *all* that can be said about artworks" (217). Nevertheless, these theorists emphasise that the possibility and benefits of anti-intentionalist readings do not cancel the value of intentionalist readings; nor do they warrant the cancellation of 'authorial intention' as a literary concept (Kindt and Köppe 218; Stecker 137).

Sociological theories of literature also have important implications for the conception of authorial intention. As Robert Darnton points out, the history of books sees the social life of books as "a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher . . . the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader" (67); by analysing each participant in this circuit, the history of books seeks to "understand how ideas were transmitted through print" (65). This agenda puts the signalling and inferencing of intentions at the centre of literary production and consumption, but it also foregrounds the indirectness of literary communication, the transformations, both in terms of content and in terms of contextual framing, that a work may undergo during the editing and distribution processes. Kohler notes that Bourdieu's theory of the literary field both affirms and circumscribes the notion of authorial intention: it considers the author to be "guided by a subjective intention whose motives partly stem from the unconscious" (14). Sapiro and Speller further argue that, although authors cannot be fully aware of their intentions, they are able to gauge their future practices to the reception of their published works, thus gradually working towards their desired effects on the field (Sapiro, "Autonomy Revisited" 42; Speller 63). I suggest that, despite significant differences between field theory and the history of books, they both point to the need to pay attention to the negotiation of authorial intention in paratextual materials such as reviews, prefaces, letters to/from editors,

and interviews. Without providing any definitive interpretations, these materials offer clues about potential forms of authorial intentions and showcase the process of their negotiation; they also demonstrate the possibility and even the inevitability to talk about intentions, especially if we see literary creation as part of a longer and wider exchange of ideas.

Finally, when Barthes states that with the Author's death comes the rise of the reader ("Death" 148), he points to the crucial fact that the contentions around the notion of authorial intention ultimately reflect the negotiation of authority between authors, readers, and critics. Kindt and Köppe go one step further: they argue that the debate between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism cannot be empirically solved, as the two stances reflect different assumptions about the role of literature, the goal of interpretation, the rules of language, and the notion of meaning (226-27). They therefore call for a meta-theoretical approach which aims to "unfold the different normative conceptions that lie at the heart of the debate [over the notion of authorial intention]" (227). Yet this observation does not necessarily mean that it is impossible to pick a side in the debate about authorial intention; it merely reminds us to be more reflective about the assumptions and values behind our views on this issue.

Authorship and Narrative Fiction

As a popular and highly malleable literary genre, narrative fiction poses distinctive questions for the conception of authorship. One such question is the relation between author and narrator. Structuralist narratology regards the distinction between the author who invents and the narrator who knows as a definitional feature of fictive narrative (e.g. Genette 214; Stanzel 17). The Chicago School pays more attention to the variable relation between the author and the narrator. First proposed by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (158-59) and significantly developed by Phelan (see "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*"), the now widely adopted notion of unreliable narrator is defined by the variable distance between the narrator's and the author's perceptions, knowledge, and values.

As discussions unfold over the author-narrator relation in narrative fiction, two further questions arise. One question is whether (and how) this relation can be applied to other genres and media such as nonfictive narrative, lyrical poetry, and graphic novel (see, for example, Claudia Hillebrandt's and Markus Kuhn and

Andreas Veits' contributions to the collection *Author and Narrator*, as well as Phelan's essay "The Implied Author, Deficient Narration, and Nonfiction Narrative"). Another question is whether the distinction between author and narrator holds for all narrative fiction. The collection *Author and Narrator*, edited by Dorothee Birke and Tilmann Köppe, presents a range of arguments on this issue. In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, Walsh questions the conception of the narrator as a distinct category in theories of fiction; instead, he claims that "fictions are narrated by their authors, or by characters" (84).

As Walsh points out, his argument against the narrator is ultimately an attempt to firmly ground narrative fiction in real-world communication, to dissolve the "closed border between the products of representation and the real-world discourse of the author" (84). This remark in turn points to a more fundamental issue that narrative fiction raises for discussions of authorship, namely, how different conceptions of fictionality affect the roles, intentions, and responsibilities assigned to the author. Fictional worlds theory perceives the author primarily as the creator of fictional worlds; although it also points to the author's role as a communicative agent by considering questions of relevance or "narrative point", this role is subordinated to, and contingent upon, the representational function of world-construction.[4] In contrast, Henrik Skov Nielsen's definition of fictionality as "intentionally signaled invention in communication" ("Fictionality" 107) and Walsh's conception of fictionality as "a contextual assumption" which "subordinate[s] implicatures that depend upon literal truthfulness to those that achieve relevance in more diffuse and cumulative ways" (*Rhetoric* 30) both foreground the author of fiction as a communicative agent who employs fictionality as a resource for serious real-world communication. The next questions are: What meanings and effects can fictive communication achieve? Are they distinct from those achieved through nonfictive communication, and if so, how? I will dedicate substantial parts of this dissertation to exploring the relation between notions of fictionality and notions of authorship. Instead of adopting one fixed definition of fictionality, I will draw on different theories of fictionality to investigate specific writers' assumptions of fictionality – in

5. See Walsh's *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, pp. 16-20, for a brief summary and critique of fictional worlds theory's ideas on relevance.

this context, whatever qualifies their works of fiction as such – and discuss the implications of these assumptions for the respective writers' notions of authorship.

Authorship as Self-Presentation

Partly defined as "the source of the norms and values communicated by the text" (Ryan, "Meaning" 35), the notion of the implied author points to another important aspect of authorship, namely, that writing is "inevitably an act of self-presentation" (Phelan et al. 31). Dan Shen argues that it is in this sense, and this sense only, that Booth conceives of the implied author (81-87). Proponents of the concept claim that it provides a way to talk about differences between an author's images shown in daily life and through literary works, or differences between authorial images projected through several works by the same writer (Shen 93-95; Phelan et al. 31-33). However, as other theorists point out, this notion of the implied author is built on a reductive, essentialist assumption of the 'real' or 'flesh-and-blood' author. Paul Dawson argues that "an authorial persona cannot be any less 'real' than any other self that writers adopt in their lives" (234). Ryan asks, "[W]hy not recognize that the self is the product of diverse moods, emotions, ideas, desires, and attitudes, and that it creates itself through imaginative activity as much as through interaction with physical reality?" ("Meaning" 40). It should be noted that there are two dimensions to these refutations. First, extraliterary sources or personal interactions do not give more direct access to writers' 'real selves' than their literary works; our perceptions of others are always a matter of interpretation. Second, authors themselves do not possess any 'real selves' or complete self-understanding; rather, they are also involved in an ongoing process of self-presentation, self-construction, and self-exploration, and they often consciously use literary creation for this purpose.

The attribution of textual norms to the implied author is not only logically flawed, but it also reflects a larger issue: by suggesting that the proper business of literary criticism ends with the inference of implied authors, and that the real author is but a vague, distant figure that critics may be aware of but need not be much concerned with, the notion of the implied author perpetuates the separation of work from life that has frequently been upheld since Formalism and New Criticism. In order to establish literary criticism as a rigorous science, these schools singled out 'the text itself' as the object of study, bracketing biographical and other contexts.

This methodological move paved the way for the declaration of 'the death of the author': as Burke points out, the 'Author-God' attacked by Barthes is a transcendental subject deprived of any psychological or biographical content – however, he asks, must the author be conceived as such? (*Death* 103). Burke argues that the re-conception of the author as a biographical subject, cultivated through close attention to the "proximity of work and life, the principles of their separation and interaction" (180), is key to the re-establishment of the concept of authorship in literary theory. This suggestion has deep implications for literary studies: not only does it invite us to consider biographical contexts as illuminating rather than contaminating factors for literary interpretation, but it also draws more attention to how literary texts bear upon real individuals' lives and thoughts, how literature *is* a part of the heavily textualised 'real world'.

Burke's call for the reconsideration of the author as a biographical subject has since been taken up by a number of recent studies. In *Authorship Revisited,* Meizoz analyses how Rousseau adopts "the posture of the 'modest and independent craftsman'" (85) through a range of textual and para-/extra-textual strategies; Altes discusses how the notion of *ethos*, or "the author's attitude" ("Slippery Author Figures" 96), underlies the critiques of Houellebecq's controversial works; and Marieke Dubbelboer shows how Alfred Jarry strategically adopts an "author persona" in his daily life, blurring the boundary between work and life (150-51). The edited collection *Mirror or Mask? Self-Representation in the Modern Age* contains essays which explore the mechanisms and strategies of authorial self-(re)presentation in a variety of genres such as lyrical poem, drama, and narrative prose (Chalupa, 2003; Choinière, 2003; Fiebach, 2003; Hauck, 2003; Hofmann, 2003; Liddell, 2003). These studies provide conceptual tools and exemplary case analyses which help us perceive authorship as situated acts of self-presentation and self-construction, with a focus on the continual process of sense-making rather than the quest for a finalised version of author-image.

As an emergent field of research, autofiction studies have made significant contribution to the conception of the author as a biographical subject in recent years. Deliberately troubling the conventional boundary between autobiography and fiction (Dix, "Introduction" 2-6; Vilain 5), autofiction raises the question of how fictionality serves as an important means for self-presentation and self-construction. Autofiction

studies engage with several theoretical conversations. First, they expand the existent research on narrative construction of selfhood in both literary studies and narrative psychology, which has focused predominantly on nonfictive autobiographical narrative (e.g., Brockmeier and Carbaugh; Clark; Freeman; Josselson and Lieblich; Mascuch; McAdams), by giving more attention to fictive modes of narrative. Second, autofiction studies contribute to theories of fictionality. Stefan Kjerkegaard argues that autofiction aptly illustrates the rhetorical theory of fictionality, which sees fictionality as "one of several rhetorical devices at the author's disposal" that "can be used regardless of genre and medium" (143). Hywel Dix notes that, through the use of fictionality, autofiction provides the author with opportunities to work through traumatic experiences by giving "new symbolic and emotional meaning" to past events ("Autofiction" 81). Finally, by examining a literary genre that self-consciously dissolves the line between text and paratext, autofiction studies defy the separation between work and life and problematise the notion of the implied author. As Kjerkegaard remarks, autofiction reinforces the perception of literature as part of a wider communication between real authors and real readers, a notion that has been gaining currency in an increasingly mediatised society (139-40). The 'self' that engages the interest of autofiction readers is not the self of an abstract implied author, and not just the self of the narrator, but the self of the (actual) author, a biographical subject with an extratextual existence.

These theoretical points made by autofiction studies, I suggest, have the potential to be transferred to the study of narrative fiction in general. Dix indicates this potential when he calls for a "cognitive shift in how autofiction can be understood" – not merely as a literary genre, but as a "properly theoretical approach to representations of subjectivity and of the self that are manifest in specific forms of writing" ("Autofiction" 83). Instead of keeping the author's personal life out of the proper realm of literary criticism, we should ask: how does our prior perception of the author, shaped by paratextual materials, inform our reading of a work of fiction? And how does a work shift our understanding of the author's character, experiences, emotions, and values? How do authors strategically use fiction writing to negotiate their sense of self, to make new sense of their past and reshape their self-perception?

Why Authorship Matters

Having demonstrated how literary interpretation calls for the notion of authorship in various ways, I would like to situate these theoretical debates within a bigger picture and elucidate why conceptions of authorship matter for literary studies. Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan note that the author is a "'threshold-concept,' pointing inside and out, before and after simultaneously"; it is "both an agent responsible for the text and a position within it" (72). As such, this concept is difficult to theorise, for "[f]rom the traditional perspective of hierarchy, the status of 'author' is an oxymoron" (72), However, it is exactly this Janus-like structure that makes the notion of authorship so important for our understanding of literature in context. Straddling the line between the textual and the para-/extra-textual, this notion is an indispensable tool for us to grapple with the role literature plays in the human world: how is literature distinct from, yet firmly connected with, other types of semiotic articulation, other modes of human activity? How does it reflect and actively shape our understanding of ourselves, others, and the material world? And in return, how do material, social, cultural, and biographical contexts influence our interpretation and evaluation of specific texts? Therefore, in a time when both writers and scholars are highly concerned with the social value, cultural diversity, psychological impacts, and ethical weight of literature, the notion of authorship also demands a more prominent place in literary theory.

Towards the end of *The Death and Return of the Author*, Burke notes that "the question of the author poses itself ever more urgently, not as a question within theory but as the question *of* theory" (184). He admits that the notion of authorship "cannot be practically circumvented", but he also expresses concerns over whether this highly complex, flexible, and case-specific notion can be theorised, since "all theory is finally predicated upon an idea of order and systematicity" (183). He further reflects, "Indeed a concerted programme of authorial reinscription may well be inconceivable under the banner of literary theory; it could even be that since theory became possible with the exclusion of the author, the author signals the impossibility of theory" (183-84). Yet he ends on a hopeful note, stating that "[t]his is a conclusion to be resisted" by future theorists (184). I believe that the restoration of the notion of authorship to literary studies need not mean the end of theory, but I agree with Burke that the theoretical reconceptualisation of authorship after the

'deaths of the author' calls for, and may facilitate, a drastically different kind of literary theory – one that is less clear-cut, totalising, authoritarian, and more situated, pragmatic, flexible.

Potential Methods, and Design of Current Project

Having illustrated some current theoretical discussions about authorship as well as their wider significance for literary studies, the next question to consider is the approaches literary scholars may take to contribute to theories of authorship. Below is a non-exhaustive list of potential methods, all of which can be observed, though to different extents, in existent research.

One widely adopted method is to bring together different theories of authorship to explore their genealogical connections, similarities and differences, common problems, complementary features, and not least possibilities of synthesis. Burke's *The Death and Return of the Author* and his introductory notes in the edited reader *Authorship* are both examples of this approach. Some scholars facilitate felicitous exchanges between theories that are not obviously related, which in turn give rise to original ideas. In "Is There a Life after Death?", for instance, Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan draw on Booth's notion of the implied author and Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on the ethical relationship between author and fictional characters to respond to post-structuralist declarations of 'the death of the author'.

Another approach is to draw on theories from other disciplines to critique, revise, and refine existing theories of authorship. Such cross fertilisation has long been taking place: structuralist narratology's downplaying of the author was inspired by Saussurean linguistics, and the poststructuralist attacks on the Author were influenced by ideas of the split subject from anthropology and psychoanalysis (Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan 68-69). More recently, theoretical discussions of authorship have been informed by cognitive science (e.g., Herman), philosophy (e.g., Irwin), and the social sciences (e.g., Dorleijn et al.). Ideas about agency, intention, communication, creativity, and selfhood proposed by linguistics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and other related fields may contribute to key debates in literary theories of authorship.

A third and frequently used method is to put theories of authorship in conversation with specific literary texts. Barthes and Foucault refer to writings by

Honoré de Balzac, Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust, and Beckett as sources of inspiration for their theoretical claims, though they do not discuss these texts in detail. Among recent studies, Phelan argues for the need to distinguish between the implied author and the narrator in nonfictive narratives through a close reading of Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* ("Implied Author" 129-35); Herman analyses deictic shifts in the opening passage of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" to illustrate how our interpretation of narratives is deeply intentionalist (Herman 249-52); Ginsburg and Rimmon-Kenan, through their reading of Morrison's *Jazz*, propose a fluid, non-authoritarian notion of authorship (80-86). It should be noted that the relation between theoretical discussion and textual analysis is often dialogic: literary texts not only illustrate theories of authorship, but they also facilitate the generation of new ideas of authorship or the refinement of existing ideas. This is particularly the case with literary texts that are self-consciously concerned with questions of authorship.

Besides literary texts, theories of authorship may also draw from writers' reflections on questions of authorship in prefaces, memoirs, interviews, diaries, letters, and critical essays. Recent examples of this approach include Walsh's chapter on authorial creativity in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (Chapter Seven: "Narrative Creativity") and Helle's "What Is an Author? Old Answers to a New Question". With their diversity and subtlety, writers' reflections may cast theories of authorship in new lights, contextualising current debates, questioning prevalent assumptions, and providing unexpected answers to classic questions.

This dissertation is an attempt to combine these methods into an in-depth study which contributes to recent theories of authorship. Taking the third and fourth approaches above, I choose critical reflections and literary works by Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) and W. G. Sebald (1944-2001) as the occasions for my theoretically orientated exploration. Analysing ideas and practices of authorship in the two writers' critical reflections and literary works, I explore their dynamic relation with theories of authorship – how they illustrate, expand, trouble, and synthesise theoretical conceptions of authorship, and how they highlight areas for further discussion. I also illustrate how, on certain topics, the two writers' ideas and practices set the stage for comparisons between different theories of authorship or facilitate interdisciplinary contributions (see the first and second methods above).

Limiting the scope of my exploration to two writers allows for more in-depth discussions, which is especially desirable since the notion of authorship raises not one but multiple interconnected questions. Besides, as I will specify below, these two writers elicit meaningful comparison between themselves.

Nabokov and Sebald suit the purpose of the current study for multiple reasons. First, both writers self-consciously illustrate aspects of authorship in their respective works of narrative fiction. Among Nabokov's novels, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* depicts the process and problems involved in the composition of a literary biography, which is itself concerned with the relation between a novelist's work and life; *Look at the Harlequins!* presents a deluded narrator's reflections on the uncanny interpenetration between his private life and fictive creation; in *Pale Fire*, the thin line between the (mis)interpretation and re-creation of literary texts is deliberately trespassed, and the relation between author and critic troubled. In Sebald's prose works, the narrators depict various stages of their writing process, the inspiration, research, note-taking, drafting, and editing – as well as the surprise, ecstasy, relief, frustration, scruples, and many other feelings experienced during these stages – that make up the final work they present to us. Moreover, they refer to many other writers' reflections on the purposes, processes, and problems of authorship. These self-conscious depictions and discussions of authorship are not to be automatically taken as Nabokov's or Sebald's view, especially when uttered by unreliable characters; however, they do indicate the two writers' strong interest in issues of authorship, which makes it promising to put them in conversation with theories of authorship and with each other.

Second, both writers are acclaimed for their sophisticated, challenging styles, though the effects they produce are quite different. Nabokov is known for his meticulous rendering of details, humour and wordplay, ambiguous characters and plots, metafictional devices, and frequent autobiographical allusions. Sebald stands out for his weightily meandering sentences, multiple layers of embedded narrative, creative merging of miscellaneous sources, and blurring of genre boundaries, not least the boundary between fiction and nonfiction. Many of these challenging stylistic features raise questions about the authors' relation with characters, readers, literary conventions, and their own past experiences. These questions can sometimes

be elucidated with the help of theories of authorship; other times, they expose inadequacies in existent theories and suggest revisions.

Apart from their literary works, the two writers' critical reflections, often presented in fragmentary forms such as interviews, short essays, lectures, and letters, also contain rich, complex ideas of authorship, some of which illuminate – and are in return complemented by – their respective authorial practices in literary works. Nabokov's and Sebald's critical ideas are especially interesting for theories of authorship for two reasons. First, both writers draw on multiple literary traditions and are influenced by a wide range of predecessors. A passionate reader since childhood, Nabokov was especially well read in Russian, French, and English literature; among his favourite writers are Jane Austen, Alexander Pushkin, Andrei Bely, Franz Kafka, Proust, Joyce, and Jorge Luis Borges.[5] On Sebald's side, Jo Catling shows that his working library is "what one would expect from a professional Germanist" with a remarkably heavy presence of Austrian literature; that it is also "strikingly European, cosmopolitan, and polyglot"; and that the "relative lack of contemporary English writers . . . is made up for by an emphasis on earlier epochs" ("*Bibliotheca abscondita*" 283-84, 286). Sebald repeatedly emphasises the German prose tradition as a major influence on his literary writings (see Section 6.2), and the predecessors he names are mostly nineteenth- and twentieth-century German-language writers – Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Keller, Thomas Bernhard, Robert Walser, Peter Weiss, etc. Intriguingly, one of the few English-language writers he refers to as an influence, and by far the most frequently mentioned in his interviews, is none other than Nabokov. These multilingual, cross-cultural influences make it more likely for both Nabokov and Sebald to bring together ideas of authorship from diverse literary traditions; meanwhile, the remarkable overlaps and differences between their main sources of influence set them up as an interesting pair for comparison.

Another reason that makes Nabokov's and Sebald's ideas of authorship theoretically interesting is that both writers are deeply in touch with literary theories as well as theories in related fields such as art, philosophy, and psychology, which

6. These writers are mentioned one or more times in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov's self-edited interview collection. For more detailed discussions of Nabokov's view on some of these writers, see *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*.

may be partly attributed to their academic training in literary studies and subsequent careers as literary critics and lecturers. An inspection of Sebald's working library shows that he is familiar with the theoretical works of many important nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, György Lukács, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Foucault (see Catling's catalogue of Sebald's library and her chapter "*Bibliotheca abscondita*: On W. G. Sebald's Library" in *Saturn's Moons*). Nabokov's theoretical knowledge is harder to trace in material forms, but perceptible influences on his artistic ideas include Russian Formalism, Bergsonian philosophy (see Michael Glynn's *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* for an extended discussion), and Freudian psychoanalysis (though in a highly ambivalent way; see, for example, Jenefer Shute's chapter "Nabokov and Freud" in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*). This does not mean that either of the two writers have consciously engaged with theories of authorship; nor is my study limited to exploring the felicitous exchanges between their ideas of authorship and theories they may have known. Nevertheless, both writers' familiarity with literary and related theories, as well as their generational differences in this respect, anticipates rich reverberations between their critical ideas and conceptions of authorship in modern literary theory.

A main type of sources that I draw on extensively for the discussion of both writers' ideas of authorship is their respective interviews. This may seem an unusual choice, and I would like to explain the rationale behind it through a brief reflection on the literary interview as a genre. Literary interviews have long been used as secondary sources for literary criticism, but not until recently have they started to gain theoretical attention (Masschelein et al. 10-12). These theoretical discussions reveal the complexity the genre, which in turn yield methodological implications.

The literary interview is often described as a "hybrid" genre (Lewis 6; Masschelein et al. 1; Maunsell 16). For one thing, it has stylistic and functional affinities with various other genres: commercial, social comment, essay, criticism, autobiography, memoir, confession, drama, documentary, even fiction (Lewis 6-7; Masschelein 18). For another, it demonstrates a number of contradictory traits: it is oral and written, spontaneous and carefully crafted, owned by the interviewer and the

interviewee, and is both part of an author's *oeuvre* and a commentary of that *oeuvre* (Maunsell 3, 16). Also, some scholars emphasise the literary interview as a public performance, a more or less conscious act of self-presentation or self-fashioning (Masschelein et al. 9; Maunsell 9; Rodden); the way in which a literary interview constructs the interviewee's persona, they note, is not unlike that of character creation in fiction or drama (Masschelein et al. 34; Maunsell 9). Highlighting the versatility, ambiguity, literariness, and diversity of the genre, these observations suggest that we should not take a writer's interview remarks at face value; instead, we should give due consideration to contextual factors such as the medium of the interview, its editorial process, its explicit goals and implicit motives, and how it stands in relation to various traditions of the genre.

However, recognising the formal and functional complexity of the genre does not mean that we should avoid using literary interviews as an interpretative resource. Quite the contrary: as Kelley Penfield Lewis shows, literary interviews often yield valuable clues about authors' creative intentions (329-67); in fact, she notes, it is extremely difficult for writers, even the most adamant supporters of New Criticism, to hold "a strictly anti-intentionalist position" about their own works in interviews (340). Yet Lewis also demonstrates that these clues often take indirect forms such as the disclosure of anecdotes and the rejection of certain (mis)readings, and therefore need to be carefully detected and deciphered (329-67). Anneleen Masschelein et al. point out that the credibility of literary interviews as a source of information largely derives from "the *lingering* and *renewed* belief – against the intentional fallacy – that authors can offer unique insights into their work" (3; my emphases). This statement suggests that literary interviews can still serve as a valuable type of secondary source for sophisticated intentionalist interpretation after "The Intentional Fallacy".

These theoretical reflections only partially convey the importance of literary interviews as sources for my study. Since this study focuses not on the interpretation of certain works but on Nabokov's and Sebald's ideas and practices of authorship, the two writers' interviews are not just *useful* but *essential* materials, for they grant access to the writers' thoughts on a range of relevant topics such as inspirations, influences, obstacles, writing habits, and artistic principles, some of which are very difficult (if not impossible) to elicit from other sources. Moreover, the value of these self-reflections is not dependent on whether they contribute to, or are supported by,

my analysis of the respective writers' literary texts (though they often do); these reflections constitute part of the respective writers' notions of authorship even if they are not reaffirmed by any other sources. In other words, I use literary interviews as both primary and secondary sources for this study.

When it comes to the analysis of these interviews, I take several measures to avoid a naïve reading which falls prey to the intentional fallacy. First, I acknowledge the writers' images constructed through their respective interviews in order to better detect the subtlety of their words beneath the façade of public performance. Second, I consider the writers' interview remarks in relation to the questions raised, for the interviewers often supply the critical vocabulary, literary conventions, and cultural contexts which serve as the basis or the target for the interviewees' responses. Third, I bring together the respective writers' fragmented reflections on a certain aspect of authorship in different interviews, exploring how they illuminate, complicate, or contradict each other. This enables us to transcend the limited space of individual answers and appreciate the complexity (including the potential inconsistencies) of the writers' thoughts. Finally, although the two writers' interview remarks often shed light on their respective literary practices, I do not automatically take these remarks as definitive explanations; instead, I pay equal attention to the discrepancies between critical ideas and creative practices of authorship as well as how they complement each other in some respects. In a word, I see the writers' interviews as complex verbal performances that stand alongside their respective literary works rather than transparent revelations of authorial intention which circumscribe the meanings of, yet remain secondary to, their creative practices.

The main body of this dissertation is divided into four parts, each of which consists of two or three chapters. Part One (Chapters I-III) and Part Two (Chapters IV-V) focus on Nabokov's critical ideas and creative representations/practices of authorship respectively; Part Three (VI-VII) and Part Four (VIII-IX) are concerned with Sebald's critical ideas and creative representations/practices of authorship respectively. By devoting separate chapters to each writer's critical reflections, I aim to demonstrate the complexity and interconnectedness of both writer's critical ideas of authorship. Some of these ideas illuminate my discussions of the writers' creative representations and practices of authorship. However, as I have explained above, I

do not consider such 'applicability' as the ultimate justification for my analysis of Nabokov's and Sebald's critical ideas. Rather, I argue that those ideas that are not perceptible in, or differ from, the writers' own creative practices are equally valuable for theoretical discussions of authorship.

In Part One, I explore Nabokov's critical ideas of authorship. The main sources for my analysis are *Strong Opinions* (1973), Nabokov's self-edited collection of interviews, articles, and letters to editors, and *Speak, Memory* (1966), his autobiography. In Chapter I, I discuss Nabokov's ideas on authorial communication, intention, and creativity. A close analysis of three sets of metaphors for author-reader relation shows that Nabokov not only emphasises authorial communication but also reflects on its mechanisms, conditions, and limitations. His remarks on the complexities of literary interpretation and his responses to critics make space for a renewed notion of authorial intention. His reflections on the role of inspiration in his writing process highlight the author as a medium that facilitates, sanctions, and channels his discursive impulses. Chapter II explores Nabokov's critical ideas of authorship specific to narrative fiction. Starting with an analysis of his notions of reality, I argue that Nabokov emphasises the aesthetic effects of fiction and regards fiction writing as a way to renew conventionalised perceptions of reality. The perception of fiction writing as a communicative act – and the novelist as a communicative agent – is further manifested in his flexible use of the 'fictional world' metaphor as well as his imagination of the novelist as God's rival and translator. In Chapter III, I examine Nabokov's reflections on the interconnections between personal life and fiction writing. Nabokov not only sees his personal memories as a necessary source of fictional representation, but he also perceives in them a motivation or impulse for fictive communication, which in return alters his feelings towards these very memories. This dialogic relation between life and work enables the author to continually reshape his self-understanding through fiction writing in a way that is often marginalised in autobiography. These ideas provide a way for us to think of the author as an (auto)biographical subject.

The second part of my dissertation discusses Nabokov's self-reflexive novelistic practices of authorship, focusing on three prominent examples—*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Pale Fire* (1962), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974). In chapter IV, I explore Nabokov's play with the notion of 'fictional world'

and its implications for ideas of authorship. Although Nabokov upholds 'fictional world' as an important metaphor, he troubles it as a theoretical concept. Through his indeterminable characters and plots, he suggests that 'fictional worlds' are tentative products of interpretation which serve as flexible tools for readers to perceive the aesthetic value and communicative purposes of fictional narratives. Through his quasi-metafictional play, he further suggests that an author's very decision to construct, maintain, or subvert a 'fictional world' is informed by his communicative intentions. Nabokov thus subordinates the author's role as a creator of 'fictional worlds' to his roles as an artificer and communicative agent. Chapter V explores the prominent use of autobiographical allusions in Nabokov's novels as well as his self-conscious representation of the complexities in the reading and writing of autobiographical allusions. Nabokov suggests that, compared to the problematic practice of inferring further similarities from perceived correspondences, a more valid approach to reading autobiographical allusions is to see them as the author's creative reworking of his personal recollections, with attention to differences as well as similarities. Drawing on this idea, I analyse several autobiographical allusions in Nabokov's novels, demonstrating how fiction writing provides opportunities for the author to cast his personal memories in different lights and therefore serves as a means of self-transformation.

Part Three explores Sebald's critical ideas of authorship by analysing a number of his interviews and other miscellaneous sources. In Chapter VI, I examine Sebald's reflections on his purposes and process of writing. Sebald identifies two important purposes for his literary creation: to establish a more robust sense of self, and to create a form of meaning that is more tentative and profound than can be achieved by academic research. While the first reason suggests the personal value of authorship, the second reason points to its collective relevance. However, Sebald also discloses various scruples; he admits that the professed purposes do not fully explain his act of writing and suggests that authorship calls for frequent self-scrutiny. Imagining authorial communication as a long conversation with a tangible readership, he is sensitive to reception and draws ideas for future works from readers' responses. Sebald's reflections on his creative process foreground the author as a bricoleur and artificer: he delineates how he exploits and channels contingencies in different stages of his writing process, and he describes how he crafts his prose

style to highlight aesthetic effects and trouble prevailing novelistic conventions. In Chapter VII, I further explore Sebald's two purposes of writing in connection with two challenging aspects of his style – his unconventional use of fictionality and heavily autobiographical first-person narrators. Sebald's prose works raise questions about the definition of fictionality, its communicative effects, and its ethical implications. Drawing on Nielsen's and Walsh's theories of fictionality, I argue that Sebald's works are 'overdetermined fiction': they invite readers to adopt, and self-consciously oscillate between, two mutually exclusive communicative assumptions. A look into Sebald's comments on the relation between himself and his highly autobiographical narrators suggests that he sees writing not only as a means of (inevitably partial) self-presentation but also as situated acts of self-interpretation. These reflections in turn illuminate his claim that his prose works are a form of self-analysis even though they do not focus on his own past experiences.

In Part Four, I examine Sebald's ideas and practices of authorship in his four main works of prose fiction – *Vertigo* (1990/1999), *The Emigrants* (1992/1996), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995/1998), and *Austerlitz* (2001/2001).[6] Taking his narrator's comparison of writers to silk weavers as a starting point, I illustrate in Chapter VIII how Sebald's self-conscious representations and discussions of authorship in his prose works enrich his critical ideas. Sebald highlights the secluded environment and compulsive nature of authorship; his observation of potential purposes of writing is complicated by reflections on multi-layered writing scruples. He also emphasises the aesthetic dimension of writing, with special focus on the rendering of details and the construction of textual patterns; moreover, he points to the epistemological, psychological, and ethical implications of aesthetic effects. In Chapter IX, I extend the two threads of discussion initiated in Chapter VII, exploring Sebald's perception of the relation between authorship, selfhood, and fictionality in his prose works. Using *The Emigrants* as a primary example, I illustrate how the reflective narrator, who continually negotiates his perspectival relation with the four emigrants and the impacts of narrative writing on himself, suggests a way for us to perceive narrative as a means of self-presentation, self-exploration, and self-transformation, regardless of whether a narrative is primarily about oneself. I then proceed to discuss how

7. The numbers before and after each slash show the years of first publication in German and English respectively.

Sebald's self-conscious depictions of confabulation and speculation provide clues for our understanding of his unconventional use of fictionality, which in turn informs my analysis of two specific cases of his fictionalisation of nonfictive sources.

By bringing the two writers' complex, nuanced ideas and practices into conversation with theories of authorship, I hope to make contributions to theories of authorship as well as Nabokov/Sebald studies. I will break down the complex notion of authorship into several interconnected themes; under each theme, I will look at how the two writers raise (partially overlapping, partially distinct) questions of authorship, and how their respective attempts to answer these questions bear upon existing theories of authorship. Through these analyses, I hope to show the depth of the two writers' critical reflections and cast new lights on some of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of their creative practices. More importantly, I aim to demonstrate how discussions of specific writers' ideas and practices contribute to more positive and relativised conceptions of authorship. It is time, I believe, to turn our attention from what the author *is not* to what it *is*.

Part One: Ideas of Authorship in Nabokov's Critical Writings

Chapter I "A Sonorous Void": Authorship and Literary Communication

In a 1964 interview with *Playboy*, Nabokov claims that the difficult decision he made in the late 1930s, to switch his language of novel writing from Russian to English, was based less on financial considerations than on considerations of readership (*Strong Opinions* 31). He states that, although he is "all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please one reader alone—one's own self", he "also needs some reverberation, if not response, and a moderate multiplication of one's self throughout a country or countries; and if there be nothing but a void around one's desk, one would expect it to be at least *a sonorous void*, and not circumscribed by the walls of a padded cell" (31; my emphasis). This statement is typical of Nabokov's interview remarks: playful in tone, carefully worded, and full of apparent contradictions. Nabokov admits that his need for readership is so strong that it compelled him to take on the painful task – nothing short of a "private tragedy" – of switching from his "rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue" to "a second-rate brand of English" as his main language of writing (13). However, he refuses to conform to stereotypical ideas about authorship, for example, the idea that an author chooses her/his 'target audience' and 'speaks' to them through her/his works. Nabokov insists that he does not write to please readers and does not even imagine directly addressing them through his writings; instead, he considers his readers as a "multiplication" of himself, a presence more often felt by the author as a hazy "reverberation" than a clear "response". These ideas are encapsulated in the intriguing metaphor of his readership as "a sonorous void", which he puts in contrast with the image of "a padded cell". Nabokov suggests that the notion of readership, if not actual individual readers, creates an essential condition for writing, a condition characterised by the author's solitude but not mental isolation.

Nabokov's interview remark, especially his imagination of readership as "a sonorous void", points to the complexity of literary communication. It also raises

questions about how such communication can be understood in more specific terms without losing sight of the ambiguity of literary texts and the openness of literary interpretation. These questions are further addressed in Nabokov's interviews, lectures, essays, and autobiography. In this chapter, I will explore Nabokov's critical ideas about author-reader communication by analysing three sets of metaphors he deploys: wrestling and climbing (Section 1.1), chess problems and riddles (Section 1.2), and mirrors and masks (Section 1.3). This analysis, especially my discussion on the implications of Nabokov's critical remarks for the notion of authorial intention, raises further questions about authorial creativity, which I will address in Section 1.4 by examining Nabokov's reflections on his creative process.

To contextualise my subsequent analysis and clarify my methodology, I will first draw a sketch of *Strong Opinions*, a source that I draw on most extensively in Chapters I-III. Edited by Nabokov himself, *Strong Opinions* consists of twenty-two of his interviews conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by a small selection of his letters to editors and short essays. The collection is preceded by a short foreword, which serves as a useful (if somewhat deceitful) source for our understanding of the dynamics behind the individual pieces as well as the collection as a whole.

Nabokov is known for the strict conditions he imposes on interviewers: as he describes in the foreword, he insists on receiving questions in advance, responding to them in writing, and having his answers published verbatim (*Strong Opinions* ix). In the foreword to *Strong Opinions*, he attributes this demand to his ineloquence in oral communication: "I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child" (ix). However, this statement is not only of questionable credibility – interviewers have attested to the fluency of Nabokov's spoken English – but it also fails to explain some of his other acts such as rearranging and omitting interview questions (Lewis 198). A more plausible explanation is that these acts are all part of Nabokov's manoeuvre to gain control over the interviews – not just for the sake of accuracy, as Herbert Gold suggests (qtd. in Lewis 198), but also to present himself as a bold, fastidious, and authoritarian writer with full mastery of his own words.

This insistence on maximum control is carried over into the editing of the collection: Nabokov stresses that he has made effort to "gradually eliminat[e] every element of spontaneity, all semblance of actual talk" from previous editions of the interviews, recasting them into "more or less neatly paragraphed essay[s]" (*Strong*

Opinions x). Again, he gives a partial explanation for this editorial choice: he claims that the essay form is "the ideal form a written interview should take", while the little touches that imitate oral spontaneity in the original versions are but "floating decor" (ix-x). It is true that written imitations of orality are so conventionalised that it has become as much a cliché as a mark of authenticity, but it is debatable whether the essay form is indeed "ideal". However, by claiming an unconventional artistic ideal on which his editorial work is grounded, Nabokov makes space for himself to exert more stringent and overt control over his interviews, which in turn contributes to the construction of a more distinct and coherent persona.

This persona, as Lewis aptly summarises, is that of an "eloquent, bold writer who can alternately seduce or butcher with his words" and "an unapologetic elitist, a blatant snob in his tastes and opinions" (200). This strong image is consistent with, and therefore highlights, some of Nabokov's most important views on authorship such as his emphasis on the difficulty of reading and writing (see Sections 1.1 and 1.2) and his aversion to the conventionalised, automatised 'average reality' (see Section 2.1). However, it also overshadows some of his more complex and nuanced ideas, which can only be extrapolated through a close reading of the interviews which looks beyond the most eye-catching statements and resists the urge to take the writer's words at face value. I will follow this approach in my analysis of Nabokov's critical remarks in his interviews as well as his essays, lectures, and autobiography in Chapters I-III.

1.1. Wrestling and Climbing: Writing and Reading as Analogous Activities

Nabokov often stresses that art is difficult for both artists and audiences, and that, just like writing, reading literary works requires active and creative engagement. In a 1968 interview, he states, "I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work in his turn – so much the better. Art is difficult" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 99). A closer look at how Nabokov metaphorically depicts the creative efforts on each side, as well as how he breaks down such efforts into specific mental activities, may help us understand his ideas on literary communication.

Nabokov's requirement for readers' active engagement is reflected in his imagination of the author-reader relation as wrestling. He claims that "a good reader

is bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author, but those efforts can be most rewarding after the bright dust has settled" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 155). Compared to our usual conception of communication as a cooperative exchange of information, the 'wrestling' metaphor depicts a more confrontational relation between author and reader, in which the author resists readers' pursuit of information or meaning. However, Nabokov also notes that this confrontation is ultimately rewarding and gratifying for the reader – a virtuoso wrestling match rather than a brutal fight of life and death. He further expands on this latter aspect in another interview by stating that literary communication is *mutually* gratifying: "[The pleasures of writing] correspond exactly to the pleasures of reading, the bliss, the felicity of a phrase is shared by writer and reader" (34).

A variation of the 'wrestling' metaphor can be found in the introductory chapter of *Lectures on Literature*, in which Nabokov conceives of author-reader relations in terms of mountain climbing. Describing the novelist as the first person to chart and conquer her/his 'fictional worlds' (I shall say more on Nabokov's negotiation with the notion of 'fictional world' in Chapter II), he writes, "Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever" (Nabokov, *Lectures* 2). Consistent with the remarks quoted above, the 'mountain climbing' metaphor highlights the difficulty of reading and writing as well as the mutual gratification they generate: while the author must climb a "trackless slope" onto a "windy ridge" to meet the "panting" reader, she/he ultimately "embrace[s]" the "happy" reader and even forms a connection with her/him that is more solid and long-lasting than momentary satisfaction. Yet the 'mountain climbing' metaphor also differs from the 'wrestling' metaphor in two respects. First, it foregrounds the indirectness of literary communication: rather than a hand-to-hand fight, the 'mountain climbing' metaphor perceives the felicitous encounter between author and reader as the outcome of their respective struggles with a difficult text. This imagination suggests a notion of literary communication beyond direct address from the author to the reader, a conception that allows the author to write in solitude and to please her/himself alone yet still be communicative. Second, the 'mountain climbing' metaphor suggests that literary communication is achieved through a somewhat symmetrical movement

between author and reader: they climb up the same mountain, though from different sides, to meet at the summit. This symmetry, I suggest, may provide a structural basis for indirect literary communication. The next question is: does Nabokov specify what this symmetrical movement entails?

A partial answer to this question can be found in "Good Readers and Good Writers", the opening chapter of *Lectures on Literature*. Outlining his approach to literary criticism, Nabokov defines a good reader by four characteristics – "imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense" (*Lectures* 3). The need for "a dictionary" should be understood both literally and metaphorically. A good reader, Nabokov suggests, must be sensitive to the author's art of diction. A dictionary helps when it comes to specialised terminology, slangs, and archaic expressions, but attention should also be paid to creative uses of common words in context. By "memory", Nabokov means not only a reader's sensitivity to register textual details but also to her/his ability to *visualise* them. He asserts, "We must see things and hear things, we must visualize the rooms, the clothes, the manners of an author's people. The color of Fanny Price's eyes in *Mansfield Park* and the furnishing of her cold little room are important" (4). The visualisation of textual details is commonly considered as a function of imagination,[1] but Nabokov emphasises its demand for memory. He claims that, in order to facilitate visualisation, it is important to reread a work many times until one can perceive the entirety of the work instantaneously – similar to how one looks at a painting – instead of having to be constrained to "the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page", which "stands between us and artistic appreciation" (3). The comparison of novels to paintings reappears in Nabokov's reflections on his creative process, as I will show in Section 1.4.

Deviating from ordinary senses of the word, Nabokov uses the word 'imagination' as a rough equivalent of 'association'. Under this broad sense, he distinguishes between two kinds of imagination. The first type is "the comparatively lowly kind which turns for support to the simple emotions and is of a personal

1. The Macmillan Dictionary lists "the ability to form a picture, story, or idea in your mind" and "the ability to think, feel, or believe something that is not real or true" as two common definitions of the word 'imagination'("Imagination"). Both definitions accurately describe a reader's visualisation of textual details. Meanwhile, Nabokov's use of the word 'imagination' partly deviates from the dictionary definitions, as I will show below.

nature" (Nabokov, *Lecture* 4). For example, one may have strong feelings for a book which evokes one's personal associations with a landscape, a living style, a past event, etc., or one may even identify her/himself with a fictional character (4). Regarding this type of imagination, Nabokov first asserts resolutely that it is "not the kind of imagination I would like readers to use" (4), but he soon admits that it is an inevitable and not entirely undesirable part of reading: "Everything that is worthwhile is to some extent subjective. . . . But what I mean is that the reader must know when and where to curb his imagination and this he does by trying to get clear the specific world the author places at his disposal" (4). However, it is not always clear where the boundary lies between (excessive) personal associations prompted by a text and the visualisation of the 'fictional world' it represents, for the visualisation of a verbal text already requires the participation of imagination, the ability to form and process images, which inevitably draws from personal experiences. In fact, Nabokov himself points to this blurry boundary by foregrounding 'fictional worlds' as tentative products of interpretation, which I will further discuss in Chapters II and IV.

While he urges readers to check their use of this "lowly kind" of imagination, Nabokov stresses the importance of activating another form of imagination – an "impersonal imagination" that is synonymous with what he calls "artistic sense" or "artistic delight" (*Lectures* 4). He explains, "We ought to remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy—passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers—the inner weave of a given masterpiece" (4). Nabokov suggests that, as one restrains personal associations and maintains some emotional distance from a literary work, one is more able to see it as an artefact and to focus on drawing associations between distant textual details (such as echoing phrases or recurrent images); this in turn stimulates strong aesthetic pleasure – a passionate appreciation of the ingenious structure of the work much akin to the appreciation of elaborate textile patterns. Nabokov's foregrounding of literary works as artefacts also draws attention to the author, the master weaver who embeds connected details and shapes the structure of her/his works. As he remarks, the aesthetic pleasure of reading generates "an artistic harmonious balance between the reader's mind and the author's mind" (4).

What is remarkable about Nabokov's conception of a good reader is that all four criteria he proposes correspond with his view on the author's creative process. Nabokov is known for the meticulous care of his wording in both creative writing and translation. A photo taken by his wife Véra Nabokov shows him writing in a hotel at Le Boulou in 1929, accompanied by "the four volumes of Dahl's Russian dictionary" (Nabokov, *Speak*, the tenth unnumbered page between p. 99 and p. 100). In *Nabokov Translated*, Jane Grayson argues that a comparison of Nabokov's earlier and later works of English prose, especially different versions of the same works, shows his growing preference for precise wording, specialist terms, and non-standard vocabulary (such as Russianisms and Americanisms), which all contributes to his highly individual style (190-93). Nabokov's scrupulous attention to accurate wording in his own writings matches his requirement for readers' attention to the author's diction.

Nabokov sees memory and imagination as symbiotic tools of artistic creativity. When asked about the significance of autobiographical allusions in his novels, Nabokov replies: "I would say that imagination is a form of memory. . . . An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory" (*Strong Opinions* 66). I will analyse this remark more closely in Chapter III with regard to Nabokov's view on the role of an author's personal life in fiction writing; suffice it to say here that Nabokov believes the working of memory and imagination are as inseparable in the process of writing as in that of reading, so much so that "imagination *is* a form of memory". Just as a reader's visualisation of 'fictional worlds', evocation of personal associations, and appreciation of aesthetic effects are all dependent on the faculty of memory, Nabokov states that an author's personal memories provide both materials ("supplied") and incentives ("prompted") for her/his creative association. He goes on to emphasise that the faculty of memory should be celebrated for this exact reason: "When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may want to use when combining it with later recollections and inventions" (66).

Yet the remark that "imagination is a form of memory" does not mean that Nabokov invites readers to see his novels as thinly disguised autobiographies; quite

the contrary, he notes that, by exercising her/his capacity of association at a complex level, an author may create artworks that are quite distant from her/his personal life. Talking about his feelings towards *Lolita*, Nabokov states, "It was my most *difficult* book – the book that treated of a theme which was so distant, so remote, from my own emotional life that it gave me a special *pleasure* to use my *combinational talent* to make it real" (*Strong Opinions* 13; my emphases). The phrase "combinational talent", reminiscent of his emphasis on the "inner weave" of literary masterpieces, foregrounds literary works as artefacts. Nabokov observes that he takes pleasure in the aesthetic value of his own work; this pleasure derives from the difficulty experienced and the complex combinations of memories and inventions generated in the writing process. He reaffirms the aesthetic pleasure of writing in the same interview by re-emphasising pleasure and difficulty as two co-existing incentives of his literary creation in general: "Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty' (14).

The correspondences between Nabokov's conception of good readers and his reflections on key elements of literary creation suggest that he considers reading and writing as analogous activities. This idea fleshes out the symmetrical movements between author and reader implied in the 'mountain climbing' metaphor. It provides a way to think about writing as a communicative act independent from the author's conscious intention to address or cater to a certain group of audiences: even if the author writes to please himself alone, he still enters into a communicative pact with his potential readers through the very acts of writing and publishing. Nabokov also demonstrates that reading and writing are both difficult tasks which require creative engagement and yield aesthetic pleasure. This emphasis on difficulty, creativity, and aesthetic effects is reinforced and further developed in another metaphor of authorship used by Nabokov – the 'chess problem' metaphor.

1.2. Chess Problems and Riddles: Authorial Communication Foregrounded

As an enthusiastic and accomplished lover of chess problems, Nabokov discovers many connections between his role as a chess problemist and his role as an author. The 'chess problem' (and 'riddles' in general) provides one of Nabokov's most favoured and elaborate metaphors of writing. When asked about his reasons for writing *Lolita*, Nabokov replies, "I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions" (*Strong Opinions* 14). In a posthumously

published epilogue to *Speak, Memory*,[2] Nabokov compares his memoir to a chess problem: "There are some main lines and there are numerous subordinate ones, and all of them are combined in a way recalling chess compositions, riddles of various kinds, but all tending to their chess apotheosis form . . ." (*Speak* 239). This metaphor consolidates several of Nabokov's key ideas on literary communication that I have discussed above; it also adds to these ideas by foregrounding authorial communication in the specific context of narrative fiction.

Nabokov often stresses the differences between chess problems and chess games. When an interviewer observes that "games such as chess and poker" seem to play a significant role in his novels, he replies, "I'm not interested in games as such. Games mean the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance – chess problems, for example, which I compose in glacial solitude" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 101). His emphasis on the chess problem as a "lone performance" in "glacial solitude" resonates with the statement that he writes in an "ivory tower" to please himself alone (31). Like a chess problemist, an author composes in solitude without having to feel involved in a conversation with a specific audience and to anticipate their distinct responses. Nonetheless, like chess problems, literary works are of a communicative nature, for their very design already implies the participation of solvers/readers. This communicative nature is not so much based on the problemist's/author's conscious intent as on shared assumptions and approaches – in the case of chess problems, explicit goals, specific constraints, and a set of rules about moves; in the case of literary works, assumptions of relevance, genre conventions, and culturally-rooted interpretative approaches.

Another similarity between chess problems and literary works is their common emphasis on aesthetic value. As Janet Gezari points out, a major difference between chess problems and chess games is that chess problems are not about *whether* one can win the game but about *how* the pre-destined victory can be achieved (152); therefore, a high level of complexity and difficulty is essential to good chess problems (152-53). Gezari's observation is aptly illustrated by one of Nabokov's own chess compositions, which he mentions in *Speak, Memory*. The

2. This epilogue, taking the appearance of a pseudo-review, is referred to by Nabokov as 'Chapter Sixteen' or 'On *Conclusive Evidence*'. Nabokov wrote it in 1950 but later decided not to publish it. It was first published as an appendix in a new Penguin edition of *Speak, Memory* (see editor's footnote in *Speak, Memory*, p. 237).

charm of this problem, he explains, is that it has a simple solution that serves as a disguise for the more complex 'real solution', which requires an expert solver to go through a difficult detour in order to reach the simple key move (Nabokov, *Speak* 222). Exploiting the difference between two potential solutions, this chess problem clearly emphasises the 'how' over the 'whether'. Moreover, Nabokov specifies Gezari's notions of complexity and difficulty through his description of the desirable qualities of this chess problem: contrast (the juxtaposition of a simple and a complex solution), deception (the problem gives the illusion of "a fashionable avant-garde theme" but upsets it with one little move), spatial harmony (the final position was "balanced like a constellation"), and above all, originality (222). All these qualities foreground the aesthetic value of chess problems: instead of simply being instrumental to the goal of winning, an elegant chess problem draws attention to itself as an object of beauty. These reflections on the aesthetic value of chess problems resonate with Nabokov's advice for readers to "[b]y all means place the 'how' above the 'what'" (*Strong Opinions* 57), to focus on minute details and formal features rather than crude symbolism or general ideas. Nabokov suggests that, like good chess problems, good novels are not simply instrumental to the creation of fictional worlds or the conveyance of general ideas but draw attention to themselves as verbal art. This perception in turn highlights authorial creativity and points to literary communication as a felicitous confrontation, as readers are invited to grapple with the author's ingenious design.

Not only does the 'chess problem' metaphor illuminate Nabokov's ideas of literary communication in general, but it also foregrounds such communication in the specific context of narrative fiction. Drawing connections between his passion for chess problems and his love for writing, Nabokov notes in *Speak, Memory*, "It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the [reader])" (221).[3] Restating the idea that author-reader

3. Nabokov's original words are "between the author and the world". However, when asked to elaborate on this statement in a later interview, he replies, "I believe I said 'between the author and the reader,' not 'the world,' which would be a meaningless formula, since a creative artist makes his own world or worlds" (*Strong Opinions* 155). As he clarifies, the word "world" in the former quote does not refer to imaginations of 'fictional worlds'; rather, it points to the idea of literary fiction as a means of real-world communication between author and reader.

communication takes the form of a "clash", Nabokov further claims that it supersedes issues of fictional representation. He argues that, like the possible strategies one contemplates when faced with a chess problem, what we call 'fictional events' or 'fictional worlds' are tentative interpretations that serve the real-world communication between author and reader. In this respect, the 'chess problem' metaphor participates in Nabokov's negotiation between the representational and the communicative dimensions of fiction, which will be my main concern in Chapter II.

The 'chess problem' metaphor highlights the communicative nature of authorship and the aesthetic value of literary works; as an inevitable trade-off, it downplays the ambiguity of literary texts and the openness of literary interpretation. These latter aspects are more carefully negotiated by Nabokov through his 'mirror/mask' metaphors and his responses to critics.

1.3. Mirrors and Masks: Literary Interpretation and Authorial Intention

When asked about his target audience in a 1962 BBC interview, Nabokov replies, "I don't think that an artist should bother about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning. I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask" (*Strong Opinions* 15-16). This statement has multiple resonances with his remark in the 1964 *Playboy* interview, which I have quoted at the beginning of this chapter (31): the claim that an author's best audience is "the person he sees in his shaving mirror" is reminiscent of the claim that he writes to please himself alone, and the imagination of his audience as "a room filled with people wearing his own mask" reminds one of his need for the "reverberation" or the "moderate multiplication of one's self" supplied by his (hypothetical) readers. Although Nabokov's conception of reading and writing as analogous activities shows how literary communication can be independent from the author's conscious intent to address or please a certain group of readers, the comparison of his readers to reflections/imitations of the author's own image and reverberations of his own voice still invites questions about his ideas on the complexities of literary interpretation: are these metaphors a manifestation of what Michael Wood describes as the "dull and narrow" mandarin-Nabokov, who "airily dismisses" much of the subtlety and ambiguity demonstrated in his literary works (*Magician's Doubts* 22), or do they

allow for the consideration of uncertainties, surprises, and individual differences in literary interpretation after all?

I suggest that, despite its apparently haughty tone, Nabokov's statement above subtly negotiates the openness of literary interpretation. At first glance, the image of people wearing the author's mask may look like Nabokov's assertion of his own interpretative authority over his readers, a deliberate burial of the readers' imperfect faces under the ideal face of the author. However, if we consider the fact that Nabokov makes this statement from an author's point of view, this image starts to take on a new light: it can be seen as his recognition that it is impossible to communicate with each of his readers personally, to anticipate, receive, understand, and/or respond to their interpretations with all the individual differences. This is especially the case with literary works: as William Paulson puts it, complex literary texts are "noisy channels", a mixture of order and chaos, the meaningful and the not (yet) meaningful, which "can lead to the emergence of new levels of meaning neither predictable from linguistic and genre conventions nor subject to authorial mastery" (42-43). Rather, Nabokov suggests that an author is inevitably constrained by his own perspective; even his imagination of others is veiled by his own image. The impossibility for the author to penetrate his readers' minds or to capture the full range of interpretations of his works may explain why Nabokov believes that "an artist should not bother about his audience" on the one hand, and why he needs readers on the other.

But this is not all: this remark takes on yet another new light when read in connection with another statement by Nabokov about his intended audience: "My books, all my books, are addressed not to 'dunderheads'; not to the cretins who believe that I like long Latinate words; not to the learned loonies who find sexual or religious allegories in my fiction; no, my books are addressed to Adam von L.,[4] to my family, to a few intelligent friends, and to all my likes in all the crannies of the world, from a carrel in America to the nightmare depths of Russia" (*Strong Opinions* 167). Nabokov suggests that he does have an intended audience, but unlike common conceptions of 'the target reader', his notion of intended audience is defined by their resemblance to the author, not in their sociocultural backgrounds, and not necessarily

4. 'Adam von Librikov' is one of many anagrams of Nabokov's full name that can be found in both his fiction and nonfiction.

in their actual interpretations of a particular work, but in their shared approach to literary interpretation, which in turn points back to the four criteria for good readers discussed in Section 1.1. In this light, Nabokov's imagination of readers as people wearing his own mask may be understood as his hope for such like-mindedness among his readers as well as his indifference to bad readers.

Through these remarks on intended audience, Nabokov both acknowledges that literary works are open to interpretation and sets his own boundary for interpretative freedom. This negotiation over the openness of literary interpretation is further reflected in Nabokov's responses to critics in interviews and prefaces to subsequent editions of his novels. Different from ordinary readers, critics are not simply part of the insubstantial 'reverberation' to an author's voice; rather, they are themselves writers who respond to the author with distinct voices and who influence other readers with their cultural authority. While their distinct voices make it possible for Nabokov to respond to them, it seems likely their influence on a wider readership may have motivated him to do so.

Nabokov is aware that, when responding to his critics, he is no longer the author of the work he comments on but is transformed into a somewhat privileged critic. He highlights this transformation with a playful statement in his afterword to *Lolita*: "After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one – may strike me, in fact – as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book" ("On" 311). Without actually equating himself with his character John Ray in whose voice the fictional foreword to *Lolita* is written, Nabokov invokes this comparison to emphasise that he inevitably adopts the role of a critic in his paratextual comments on his work; as such, his afterword does not have the same authority as authorial commentary in the work itself and is not to be read as a definitive interpretation of the novel. True, the author-as-critic is not just an ordinary critic, for her/his name already suggests a certain level of authority which derives from the assumption that the person who composed a literary work has a relatively thorough grasp of her/his own creation and is able to disclose her/his understanding with accuracy and honesty. Yet these assumptions can be subverted with sufficient textual evidence, which may in turn cast doubt on the author's ability to communicate her/his ideas through her/his work, discredit the author's integrity, or

raise questions about the limitations of authorial agency. As Jacqueline Hamrit puts it in her analysis of the afterword to *Lolita,* the author-as-critic Nabokov plays a double role: he is both the author "and thereby entitled . . . to give his own particular opinion *by virtue of coherence*", and one of his own readers who creates a new discourse which cannot exhaust the original text (22; my emphasis).

This self-awareness may have informed the kinds of responses that Nabokov gives – or refrains from giving – to his critics. Charles Nicol notes that a remarkable feature of Nabokov's paratextual responses to critics is that they often consist of various forms of negation such as "[r]ejection of comparisons and influences", "[d]enial of moral purpose and social commentary", and "[r]ejection of 'general ideas' and trashy authors" (qtd. in Hamrit 2-3). For example, in response to the criticism that *Lolita* does not teach good morals, Nabokov claims in his afterword, "I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has *no* moral in tow" ("On" 314; my emphasis). In the introduction to *Bend Sinister,* Nabokov states, "I have *never* been interested in what is called the literature of social comment . . . I am *not* 'sincere,' I am *not* 'provocative,' I am *not* 'satirical.' I am *neither* a didacticist *nor* an allegorizer" (vi; my emphases). These polemical negations are sometimes followed by affirmative statements that at first glance sound too absolute to be taken literally but, upon a closer look, reveal more complexities. For instance, after refuting moral criticisms of *Lolita*, Nabokov asserts, "For me a work of fiction exists *only* insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where *art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy)* is the norm" ("On" 314-15; my emphases). It is hard for readers to be convinced that the value of *Lolita* lies solely in its ability to evoke aesthetic pleasure; however, Nabokov goes on to indicate that he sees "tenderness" and "kindness", attributes commonly considered as ethical qualities, as elements of the aesthetic, which in turn suggests a place for the ethical in the novel, albeit a secondary or subordinate one. Although both his negations and affirmative statements call for more detailed explanations, Nabokov usually refrains from supplying such details. Instead of providing what may be taken as definitive readings of his own works, he uses strong, condensed, and ambiguous statements to simultaneously resist crude misreadings, foreground certain aspects of his works that have been overlooked, and spark off more critical debate.

When it comes to interpretations that he appreciates, Nabokov usually avoids discussing them at all. In the afterword to *Lolita,* he acknowledges that "there have been a number of wise, sensitive, and staunch people who understood my book much better than I can explain its mechanism here" (Nabokov, "On" 315), but he does not offer any details about who these people are or how they interpret the novel. Similarly, having been invited to contribute to a special issue of *TriQuarterly* that commemorates his seventieth birthday, Nabokov reflects at the beginning of his contribution, "My first intention was to write an elaborate paper . . . I soon realized, however, that I might find myself discussing critical studies of my fiction, something I have always avoided doing" (*Strong Opinions* 247). Instead, he devotes his contribution mainly to the correction of factual errors in the subsequent essays and gives evaluative statements only in the most impressionistic way. Among these evaluations, another 'mirror' metaphor stands out: Nabokov comments that "Mr. [Robert] Alter's essay is *a most brilliant reflection* of that book *in a reader's mind*" (249; my emphases). The description of a good reading as a "brilliant reflection" suggests lucidity and faithfulness, while the phrase "in a reader's mind" points to the subjectivity and creativity of literary interpretation. Nabokov's awareness of such creativity (as well as the delightful surprises it brings about) may explain his restrained responses to criticism as well as his desire for a readership.

Nabokov's negotiation over the openness of literary interpretation, along with his emphasis on the communicative and aesthetic dimensions of writing, has several implications for the notion of 'authorial intention', a much-debated concept in theories of authorship. First, by dismissing "dunderheads" from his intended audience, and by rejecting crude misreading in his responses to critics, Nabokov stresses the fallibility of intentionalist reading and problematises the kind of literary criticism that appropriates the notion of 'authorial intention' for its own authority. However, this very criticism of misreadings, along with the discreet guidance to the reading of his own works, also suggests that Nabokov sees authorial intention as an indispensable concept in the interpretation of literary works. This synthesis of the indispensability of the concept of authorial intention and the fallibility of specific inferences of authorial intentions is accounted for by several narrative theories. In the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Raymond Gibbs introduces what he calls "hypothetical intentionalism", which is based on the belief that "[a]

narrative's meaning is established by *hypothesising intentions authors might have had*, given the context of creation, rather than relying on, or trying to seek out, the author's subjective intentions" (248; my emphasis). Gibbs considers this stance to be a "middle ground" between subjective intentionalism and various anti-intentionalist approaches (248). Adopting this stance to analyse narrative films, Jan Alber notes, "My basic assumption is that we all attribute intentions and motivations to films in order to find out what they might mean", although "we can never be sure that we have interpreted a film correctly" (167). Taking a more radical view on the deep connections between narrative and intentionality, David Herman argues that "the intentional stance", a heuristic strategy which assumes the object in consideration to be "a rational agent" that "will act to further its goals in light of its beliefs", is a highly risky interpretative strategy, but the risks are compensated by its "efficiency and heuristic power" (Herman 236-37). In other words, although the hypothetical attribution of authorial intentions is highly fallible, it is still the "best available resource for interpreting language-based practices" (247). Therefore, anti-intentionalist approaches to literary interpretation, though possible, have limited applicability, for they disregard a fundamental aspect of literary creation and interpretation.

A second implication of Nabokov's ideas on literary interpretation is that they invite us to look beyond the conception of authorial intentions as 'messages' or propositional statements and consider more diverse forms of authorial intentions. As I have illustrated above, Nabokov persistently resists interpretations of his works that build on general ideas and crude symbolism; instead, he repeatedly emphasises the importance of visualising details and appreciating the aesthetic value of literary texts. He also foregrounds the ambiguity of literary works through suggestive yet restrained comments on his own works. These gestures to expand the notion of authorial intention find explicit expressions in linguistic and narrative theories. Based on the idea that the majority of communication is ostensive-inferential, Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber state, "We see communication not as a process by which a meaning in the communicator's head is duplicated in the addressee's, but as a more or less controlled modification by the communicator of the audience's mental landscape – his *cognitive environment*, as we call it – achieved in an intentional and overt way" (*Meaning* 87). They go on to specify different types of possible

modification: “The cognitive environment of an individual can be modified by adding a single piece of new information, but it can equally well be modified by a diffuse increase in the saliency or plausibility of a whole range of assumptions, yielding what will be subjectively experienced as an *impression*” (87).[5] This idea of a diffuse and subtle set of intentionally-achieved cognitive effects lends itself to a renewed understanding of authorial intention that accounts for the complexity, subtlety, and ambiguity of literary works. In fact, Wilson and Sperber use exactly this distinction between information (or strong implicatures) and impressions (or weak implicatures) to distinguish between practical and poetic uses of language: they argue that, while it is typical of practical uses of language to “achieve relevance by conveying a few strong implicatures”, it is typical of poetic uses to “achieve relevance by weakly suggesting a wide array of possible implications, each of which is a weak implicature of the utterance” (“Relevance Theory” 270). While Wilson and Sperber provide a conceptual basis for an expanded notion of authorial intention, James Phelan suggests specific aspects that it needs to cover. In *Experiencing Fiction*, Phelan claims that one problematic legacy of New Criticism is a predominant focus on thematisation in literary criticism; as a result, “we have a far richer inventory of ways for talking about the thematic meanings of narratives than we do for talking about the *affective* and *ethical* dimensions of them, especially in relation to readerly dynamics” (91; my emphases). Based on this observation, Phelan calls on critics to gradually expand the vocabulary with which we talk about how authors stimulate affective responses in readers or negotiate ethical relations with them (91-94). In the same vein, Nabokov’s repeated claims that he *intends* his works to be read for their aesthetic effects point to yet another dimension, hitherto often overlooked or disassociated from the author, that the notion of authorial intention should account for.

A third implication can be identified in Nabokov’s acknowledgement of the felicitous surprises that may arise from readers’ interpretations, as is exemplified by his acclamation of the critics who understand *Lolita* better than the novelist himself. Nabokov suggests that, although literary creation is an intentional act, the author can never exhaustively articulate her/his intentions outside the work itself. This

5. Wilson and Sperber further note that the communication of specific information and the communication of impressions lie on two ends of a continuum (*Meaning* 87).

recognition illustrates Herman's claim that authorial intention is "a structure of know-how" (Herman 244). Drawing on Dreyfus's distinction between 'knowing-how' (skills) and 'knowing-that' (abstract, propositional knowledge), Herman argues that "in narrative contexts communicative intentions need not be construed as inner, mental objects, located in a particular region of space-time – such as the projected mind of a hypothesized implied author. Rather, such intentions are *distributed* across text producers, text interpreters, textual designs, and the communicative environments in which such designs are produced and interpreted" (255-56; my emphasis). As I have demonstrated in the introduction, Herman's idea of distributed intention resonates with Phelan's notion of "feedback loop" (*Experiencing* 4), and his conception of authorial intention as 'knowing-how' shares similarities with Wilson and Sperber's claim that, in the case of ostensive-inferential communication, the communicator's intentions are not necessarily made known but are made "mutually manifest to communicator and audience" (*Meaning* 241). These ideas about (authorial) intention shed light on Nabokov's appreciation of insightful critical interpretations and his claim about the need for a readership: since a significant proportion of authorial intentions are only manifest to and not known by the author, readers' interpretations may illuminate a text (even for the author her/himself) by transforming some of the author's 'knowing-how' into their 'knowing-that'. However, this does not mean that any number of interpretations can exhaustively state the authorial intentions regarding a certain text, or that this ideal is worthy of pursuit for literary interpretation. Rather, recent narrative and linguistic theories have demonstrated that authorial intention participates in literary communication in a diffuse and mostly implicit way; enabling literary production and interpretation to function as such, it works on a level far more fundamental than the proper concerns of literary criticism.

Not only does the understanding of authorial intention as "a structure of know-how" shift our perception of literary interpretation, but it also points to the complexity of authorial creativity, especially the role of authorial agency in literary creation, a much-discussed topic which I have briefly outlined in the introduction. Nabokov contributes his own reflections on this topic, using a term that is at once familiar and obscure – inspiration.

1.4. Inspirations Channelled: Discursive Impulses and Authorial Agency

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov stresses that there is an "ecstatic core" to various creative endeavours from the composition of chess problems to the exploration of uncharted waters. Writing, of course, is one such endeavour, where "the author, in a fit of *lucid madness*, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients – rocks, and carbon, and blind throbbings" (Nabokov, *Speak* 221; my emphasis). The paradoxical phrase "lucid madness" suggests that the writing process involves both conscious control over the shape of the text and the loosening of such control. Nabokov further elaborates on this "lucid madness" on two occasions – a 1964 interview with *Playboy*, and a 1972 article titled "Inspiration" for *Saturday Review* – where he reflects on how inspiration is at work throughout his novel writing process. What is noteworthy in these reflections is not his recognition of the working of inspiration (which is a key theme in writers' and artists' self-reflections dating as far back as Plato's *Ion*), but his delineation of the varying forms it takes at different stages of the writing process, as well as how it is constructively channelled by the author's conscious mind.

Nabokov states that he usually begins his writing process by accumulating potentially useful materials in the form of short notes without having an idea of the whole structure of the novel (*Strong Opinions* 26). He therefore believes that he is already driven by a sort of inspiration at this stage – a mysterious force that directs him to the right materials for the unknown book (26). It should be noted, however, that this inspiration is constantly accompanied by the author's hard work and guided by his experience. Also, the value of this type of inspiration is not immediately manifest but is determined retrospectively by its contribution to the ensuing process and the final product.

After this preliminary accumulation of materials, inspiration takes the new form of a "shock of recognition – a sudden sense of '*this* is what I'm going to write'" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 26). In his 1972 article, Nabokov further divides this shock into two successive steps – "an epileptic attack" without source or object, which informs the author that he is ready, followed by a more specific "forefeeling" of what he is going to write, an "instant vision turning into rapid speech" which the

author hastens to jot down (*Strong Opinions* 268). As Nabokov shows with one of his preliminary notes for *Ada*, the product of inspiration at this stage is often not the sketch of an overarching plot or theme but a glimpse of an elaborate scene of structural importance which later appears in the novel in a significantly altered form (268-69). Different from writers who claim to have experienced "demonized or Dionysian inspiration" (Walsh, *Rhetoric* 133), Nabokov describes a mutually facilitating relation between inspiration and his conscious mind. At this stage, inspiration is a "rare and delightful phenomenon" which the author not only welcomes but also helps to concretise and develop: by taking down an inspired vision in words, the author "transforms what is little more than a running blur into gradually dawning sense" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 268).

The first vision of a new work is followed by a longer process in which detailed ideas gradually develop in a loosely controlled way. At this stage, Nabokov observes:

> [T]he novel starts to *breed by itself*; the process goes on solely in the mind, not on paper; and to be aware of the stage it has reached at any given moment, I do not have to be conscious of every exact phrase. I feel a kind of gentle development, *an uncurling inside*, and I know that the details are there already, that in fact I would see them plainly if I looked closer, if I stopped the machine and opened its inner compartment; but I prefer to wait until what is loosely called *inspiration* has completed the task for me. (*Strong Opinions* 26-27; my emphases)

Here Nabokov uses metaphors of organic growth ("breed", "uncurling") to describe the complex, self-regulated, and somewhat mysterious way in which ideas form in his mind. These metaphors are reminiscent of Henry James' frequent description of the development of ideas for a work of fiction as a germination process, in which "seed[s]", "germ[s]", or "grain[s]" of real-life impressions sprout, grow, and expand in the author's mind, eventually maturing into the living plant of a completed work (1072, 1156, 1304).[6] Compared to James, However, Nabokov puts more emphasis

6. See Jacek Gutorow's article "Toward the Incalculable: A Note on Henry James and Organic Form" for a nuanced discussion of Henry James' metaphors of organic growth in his prefaces and their implications for James' ideas of fiction writing.

on the author's role to provide a favourable condition for this organic growth. Rather than an overwhelming expansion of ideas that occupies the author's mind beyond her/his comprehension or control, Nabokov sees inspiration at this stage as the purposeful liberation of subconscious sources of creativity sanctioned, supported, and controlled by the conscious mind – a fit of "lucid madness". Not only does he restrain the interference of conscious thoughts to allow for the organic growth of ideas in his subconscious mind, but he is also able to sense the overall progress, including the final moment when he is "informed from within that the entire structure is finished" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 27). As in the previous stages, the relation between inspiration and the author's conscious thoughts or acts is characterised by mutual facilitation and satisfaction.

Sensing that the new novel is ready in his mind, Nabokov proceeds to take it down in no fixed order with a pencil on index cards, which he then reassembles into the right order (*Strong Opinions* 27). Nabokov thus describes his working process at this stage: "Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing" (27). This remark suggests a two-fold transformation: first, the author gradually casts subconscious ("dimly illuminated") visions of a novel into distinct ideas, using the "flashlight" of consciousness; second, he painstakingly transforms his primarily visual ideas into verbal expressions, re-writing each index card many times in order to articulate his visions as faithfully as possible (27). While it is not uncommon to rely on visual images as the predominant medium of creative thinking, Nabokov's imagination of his ideas for a whole new novel as a motionless mental painting seems to be at odds with the linear sequentiality of narrative. Yet I suggest that this imagination yields insights about narrative temporality: just as viewers may infer a narrative from a painting by drawing on various contexts (such as genre conventions, paratextual prompts, and allusions to existing narratives) and/or by moving their gaze across different parts of the work in a certain order, the linear temporal sequence in a verbal text, which is a

key component of its narrativity,[7] is not tied to a fixed set of formal features but ultimately depends on readers' inferences of authorial intentions.

In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, Richard Walsh argues that the various forms of inspiration – anywhere between divine enlightenment and demonic possession – that novelists so often experience contribute to the author's role as "a mediator between that source [of inspiration] and the reader, one whose claim is not to have originated meaning, but to have gained access to it, discovered it, or identified it and sanctioned its authority" (135). Yet Walsh also points out that even the most powerful manifestation of inspiration does not cancel authorial agency: "[h]owever compelled authors may claim to have been in writing a certain narrative a certain way, the compunction to have written at all (or, having written, to have published) could arise only from an authorial decision to grant authority to the inspiration" (133). In Nabokov's case, although he does not claim that his inspiration is divine or infallible, he casts it in a highly positive light, seeing it as a felicitous source of creativity – in contrast to Sebald, who, as I will show in Chapter VI, holds a more suspicious attitude to the compulsive nature of writing. Nabokov also demonstrates how he facilitates the working of inspiration with conscious thoughts and acts throughout the writing process, recognising the first shock of recognition, recording the first vision of a work promptly, allowing mental space for the subconscious breeding of ideas, keeping track of their progress, and casting them into their final verbal form. Instead of undermining authorial agency, Nabokov still upholds it as a key element of authorial creativity and celebrates its ability to channel other sources of creativity.

Through an analysis of Nabokov's critical remarks on author-reader communication, literary interpretation, and authorial creativity, I have demonstrated how he both highlights the author as a communicative agent and qualifies this conception in several respects. The 'wrestling/mountain climbing' and 'chess problem/riddle' metaphors illustrate an indirect mode of literary communication

7. In his chapter "Narrative Theory for Complexity Scientists", Richard Walsh defines narrative as "the semiotic articulation of linear temporal sequence" (12). He goes on to elaborate on each component of this definition, including "sequence" (13-14), "temporal" (14-15), and "linear" (15-17).

based on shared frameworks and approaches, which enables the author to engage in communicative acts without feeling that she/he is accommodating or directly addressing her/his readers. The ‘mirror/mask’ metaphor both highlights the openness of literary interpretation and suggests Nabokov’s view on the boundary of interpretive freedom; it thus provides clues for us to understand Nabokov’s restrained, deliberately ambiguous responses to critics. These reflections and responses in turn illustrate multiple theoretical conceptions of authorial intention, foregrounding its fallibility as well as indispensability in literary communication, extending the notion beyond propositional, thematising statements, and perceiving it as “a structure of know-how” distributed across the communicative act (Herman 244). Nabokov’s understanding of authorial intention also paves the way for a less polemical notion of authorial agency. Through his reflections on the working of inspiration in different stages of his writing process, Nabokov illustrates a model of authorial creativity in which agency sanctions, facilitates, and channels various forms of discursive impulses.

Chapter II The Art of Re-Creation: Authorship and Narrative Fiction

Nabokov seldom distinguishes between narrative fiction and other literary genres, or even between literature and other forms of art, in his critical remarks, often using 'novelist', 'writer', and 'artist' as interchangeable terms. Sometimes he uses examples of novel writing to make claims about art in general; other times he makes statements about the reading and writing of novels which would easily apply to other literary genres as well. It seems that Nabokov often sees narrative fiction (especially the novel) as the default form of literature rather than a distinct literary genre, which is not surprising given that he has made his most prominent contribution to literature as a novelist. In the previous chapter, I have mostly followed this tendency in Nabokov's critical ideas, blurring the boundary between narrative fiction and other genres and talking about the reading and writing of literary works in general. Most of the inferences I have drawn from Nabokov's remarks on authorial communication, authorial intention, and authorial agency have some applicability beyond discussions of narrative fiction alone.

In this chapter, however, I will focus on Nabokov's perception of the distinct value and challenges of narrative fiction, which in turn gives rise to ideas of authorship that are specific to this genre. Section 2.1 analyses Nabokov's notions of reality – or rather, 'realities' of different kinds and degrees – and his claim about the purpose of fiction writing in relation to these realities. These discussions provide the basis for us to understand Nabokov's creative adaptation of the conventional metaphor of 'fictional world' and its implications for his ideas of authorship, which will be the focus of Section 2.2.

2.1. Nabokov's Notions of Reality

The topic of reality comes up recurrently in Nabokov's interviews, as interviewers are keen to know how Nabokov, a novelist known for his fictive depictions of delusions, illusions, dreams, and transcendental realms of being, conceives of reality and its relation to fiction. A close look at several of Nabokov's remarks in this respect reveals his distinctive perception of reality, which in turn

serves as a departure point for his reflections on what fiction is, what its primary goals are, and the author's role therein.

When asked in a 1962 BBC interview to explain the statement by one of his fictional characters that real art "creates its own reality",[1] Nabokov gives an answer which illuminates the foundation of his conception of reality:

> Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless. (*Strong Opinions* 9)

In this remark, Nabokov addresses two questions about reality: the ontological question of 'what is reality' and the epistemological question of 'whether/to what extent/how are we able to grasp it'. When answering these questions, he uses the word 'reality' in two different ways – first, as an uncountable noun referring to the object of a final knowledge, which is an ideal state that can be infinitely approached through the "gradual accumulation of information" but never fully attained, and second, as a countable noun referring to an individual's subjective constellation of knowledge about an object at a given moment. In order to differentiate between these two senses, I will refer to the first sense as 'the real' and the second sense as 'reality'/'realities' in the discussions below.

Nabokov highlights the subjectivity of reality by pointing out that each reality is an individual perception built on a selective combination of knowledge, since an individual can never possess all the knowledge about even one single object.

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1. This fictional character is Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. Commenting on a painting technique used by Eystein, a Zemblan portrait painter, Kinbote states that "'reality' is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 106).

This perception enables one to talk about 'realities' in the plural, to conceive of clashes between different individual realities and shifts in socially accepted realities. Moreover, through the instance of the lily, Nabokov introduces his criterion by which different realities can be comparatively evaluated, stressing the importance of minute details, and more specifically, the value of specialist knowledge – knowledge unfamiliar to the general public, details largely unseen. In other words, his view on reality is characterised by a notion of knowledge that values microscopic details and original discoveries above social consensus and utility.

It is no accident that Nabokov uses an example from the realm of science to respond to a question about where art stands in relation to reality: in fact, he often stresses the essential similarities between scientific research and artistic creation, drawing on his experiences as both writer and entomologist. One such claim arises from an explanation for his passion for lepidopterological research:

> The tactile delights of precise delineation, the silent paradise of the camera lucida, and *the precision of poetry* in taxonomic description represent the artistic side of the thrill which accumulation of new knowledge, absolutely useless to the layman, gives its first begetter. Science means to me above all natural science. Not the ability to repair a radio set; quite stubby fingers can do that. Apart from this basic consideration, I certainly welcome the free interchange of terminology, between any branch of science and any *raceme of art*. There is *no science without fancy*, and *no art without facts*. (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 67-68; my emphases)

Not only does Nabokov support "the free interchange of terminology" between science and art, but he also practices it through phrases (marked in italics) that use words widely associated with one field to describe the other. This free exchange of terms is backed by the striking resonances between Nabokov's understanding of the respective fields. In this remark, he states that natural science is all about the "accumulation of new knowledge", the discovery and delineation of specialised details that are "absolutely useless to the layman" – which, in his view, represents a pursuit of better realities. Moreover, he highlights the aesthetic pleasure – the "tactile delight", "silent paradise", and "thrill" – deriving from this pursuit, which serves as a reward for the scientist. Notably, textual details and aesthetic effects are also two

major aspects that Nabokov repeatedly emphasises when talking about the reading and writing of literary works, as I have shown in Chapter I. Nabokov's conception of reality, along with his perception of essential similarities between science and art, paves the way for his ideas on the relation between reality and fiction writing, which he eloquently articulates in a 1969 interview with *Time*. In response to the interviewer's question of whether/how he distinguishes between "imagination, dream, and reality", Nabokov remarks:

> Your use of the word 'reality' perplexes me. To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials. Now if you mean by 'old reality' the so-called 'realism' of old novels, the easy platitudes of Balzac or Somerset Maugham or D. H. Lawrence – to take some especially depressing examples – then you are right in suggesting that the reality faked by a mediocre performer is boring, and that imaginary worlds acquire by contrast a dreamy and unreal aspect. Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual. When my fancies will have been sufficiently imitated, they, too, will enter the common domain of average reality, which will be false, too, but within a new context which we cannot yet guess. Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture. (*Strong Opinions* 101-102)

Nabokov criticises two common ways in which the word 'reality' is employed, arguing that they are anything but 'real'. The first common but false sense of 'reality' is what he calls "average reality" – a conventionalised, generalised, automatised worldview widely shared in a certain social, historical, and cultural context. Not only is it characterised by crude generalisations – the equivalent of a layman's perception of a lily – but it also tends to be taken for granted and not recognised as a subjective construct. However, noting that an average reality is "perceived by all of us", Nabokov also indicates that our minds are so entrenched in the average reality of our sociocultural environment that we cannot entirely evade it no matter how alert we are. This observation suggests a positive function of what

Nabokov regards as a false sense of reality: an average reality constitutes a shared context between author and reader, within which alternative forms of reality can be communicated.

The other misuse of the word ‘reality’ that Nabokov criticises is the equation of reality with literary realism (which is itself a very broad and somewhat muddled concept – note the remarkable differences in approach and style between the three writers he names), which leads to the perception of those works of fiction that deviate from realist conventions as ‘unreal’, ‘dreamy’, and ‘fanciful’. Nabokov argues that there is nothing about literary realism that is real by his definition; instead, the fact that it is commonly seen as the most ‘real’ type of fiction indicates exactly its affiliation to average reality. The phrase “easy platitudes”, which summarises his criticism of literary realism, corresponds with his characterisation of average reality.

Following his criticism of common misconceptions of reality, Nabokov argues that the purpose of fiction writing is to break away from average reality and create “authentic” realities. In contrast to average reality, authentic realities are characterised by originality: they seem “unusual” and have not yet been much imitated. This emphasis on originality is consistent with Nabokov’s view that the accumulation of specialist knowledge is the way in which scientific research infinitely approaches the real. Moreover, he argues that an authentic reality “animate[s] a subjectively perceived texture” – in other words, it self-reflexively foregrounds its constructedness and draws attention to its *aesthetic value*. This idea further illuminates Nabokov’s repeated emphasis on the aesthetic pleasure of both reading and writing, for it suggests that the design and detection of the “texture” or “inner weave” of a text is not just a game between author and reader but part of a serious pursuit of an authentic relation to reality. It should be noted that, although Nabokov considers aesthetic pleasure as part of the experiences of both artists and scientists, he seems to give it a more essential role in artistic creation: while the delights and thrill of lepidopterological research are only a by-product of the acquisition of specialist knowledge, the aesthetic pleasure in the reading and writing of fiction is both a result and an indicator of original perceptions of reality. Nabokov goes on to emphasise that, like average realities, authentic realities are perceived in context: an average reality provides a common ground for the communication of an

authentic reality, and this authentic reality, once dulled by familiarity, will eventually degenerate into another average reality. He thus foregrounds fiction writing as a situated communicative act driven by the author' intention to shift conventionalised perceptions of reality, which in turn suggests the author's social responsibilities.

Nabokov's perception of fiction writing as a means to expose and replace average reality may have been influenced by Russian Formalism. In *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels*, Michael Glynn argues that Nabokov was profoundly influenced by the Formalist theory of estrangement propounded by Viktor Shklovsky. Glynn points out that central to both Shklovsky's and Nabokov's thoughts about art is the idea that the human mind has a tendency towards automatisation, that in our everyday life we engage "not with actual phenomena but with conventionalized, symbolic representations thereof" (31, 44) – in Shklovsky's words, we "do not *see* [things] but recognize them by their initial features" (161). Based on this observation, both Shklovsky and Nabokov believe that the purpose of art is to revitalise our perceptions through its power of defamiliarisation (Glynn 31, 44). A closer comparison reveals that Nabokov's ideas deviate from Shklovsky's in several aspects. Glynn notes, for instance, that while Russian Formalism considers the author as a mere vehicle in an impersonal system, Nabokov gives more credit to authorial agency (47). Another difference (in degree, if not in kind) is that, while Shklovsky seems to waver between the more essentialist belief that art enables us to perceive things as they are and the more self-reflexive view that art renews our awareness of the process of perception (162),[2] Nabokov states more emphatically that all perceptions of reality are artificial constructs, and that some are more authentic than others because they are more original, more self-reflexive about their own constructedness, and have higher aesthetic value.[3] Still, Russian Formalism may have inspired Nabokov to consider fiction writing as a

2. Shklovsky advocates the self-reflexivity of art when he states in "Art, as Device" that the goal of art is to rejuvenate the "process of perception" through "the complication of the form", but he seems to also hang on to a more essentialist view when he claims (in the same paragraph) that art exists "in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony" (162).

3. Glynn misreads both Shklovsky and Nabokov in this respect when he claims that Nabokov shares the "Shklovskyite sense" that literature should "seek to wrench out of context the immediate material world in order that we might value it" (42). He is more accurate when he later argues that, for Nabokov, the purpose of artistic estrangement is to "make us more intensely aware of the conventional nature of what we accepted as reality" (31).

continual renewal of perceived 'realities', thus foregrounding it as a communicative act.

So far, however, Nabokov's comments only consider narrative fiction as a typical rather than a distinct form of art. While the *Time* interviewer poses a question about Nabokov's conception of fictionality when he asks whether he "see[s] the categories of imagination, dream, and reality as distinct, and, if so, in what way" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 101), Nabokov focuses on the delineation of different kinds of reality in his response and does not directly address the question of fictionality. Still, he drops a few brief hints in the response above, which may serve as a window for us to explore his ideas on the unique capacities and challenges of fiction as well as his perception of the novelist's role.

2.2. Beyond 'Fictional Worlds'

In his above-quoted remark on the distinctions and dynamics between different forms of reality (*Strong Opinions* 101-102), Nabokov uses two words to describe fiction as a distinct form of art. First, he refers to his novels as "my fancies". Standing in contrast with his claim that the constituting parts of his autobiography "belong to unadulterated life" (Nabokov, *Speak* 238), this phrase indicates that Nabokov sees invention as a key attribute of fiction. This notion applies unproblematically to most of Nabokov's works of fiction, but a few exceptions still exist. For example, Nabokov's autobiographical accounts of a childhood girlfriend 'Colette' and his former Swiss governess 'Mademoiselle O', first published as nonfictive essays in magazines, later appeared with minimal revisions in *Nabokov's Dozen* (1958), a collection of short stories.[4] This arrangement raises the question of whether invention is definitional for the notion of fictionality, which I will further discuss in Chapter VII.

Nabokov also refers to fictions as "worlds" when arguing that his unusual imagination is an indication of "authentic worlds". The 'fictional world' metaphor, widely deployed by generations of writers and readers, seems too conventional to be worth noticing. However, the brief appearance of this metaphor in the remark above evokes associations with other critical remarks in which Nabokov compares fiction writing to the construction of imaginary worlds (and the reading of fiction to the

4. Nabokov traces this publication history in his introduction to *Speak, Memory* (ix-x).

reconstruction of these worlds) in a more elaborate manner, which eventually complicates this metaphor. In a 1968 interview with *The New York Times*, for example, he argues that an artist's task is not to portray or comment on the so-called 'modern world', which he considers as a hollow abstraction (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 96-97). Instead, he states, "What I feel to be the real modern world is the world the artist creates, his own mirage, which becomes a new *mir* ('world' in Russian) by the very act of his shedding, as it were, the age he lives in" (97).

At first glance, this statement shows remarkable congruity with fictional worlds theory, which conceives of fictional discourse as the simultaneous construction of and reference to "fictional worlds", or "specific structures generated by fictional texts, to which all the entities founded by fictional texts are ultimately related" (Fořt 45-46). [5] Centring on the fictional world as a referential frame, fictional worlds theory "reorient[s] literary theory toward questions of reference, ontology and representation" (Ronen 5). Similarly, Nabokov seems to consider narrative fiction primarily in terms of fictional representation, seeing fiction writing as first and foremost the construction of 'fictional worlds'[6] rather than a depiction of or comment on the actual world.

However, a closer examination complicates this apparent claim. Nabokov's belief that the author's task is to create a new world by "shedding . . . the age he lives in" points to a principle of originality that informs the author's world-building process. Yet this principle is not intrinsic to the notion of 'fictional world'; rather, it is a principle of relevance[7] rooted in real-world communication, manifested in the author's deviation from average reality, which generates renewed perceptions and

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5. Drawing on possible worlds theory in the field of logical semantics, fictional worlds theory was largely formulated in the 1980s and 1990s. Some pioneering scholars include Lubomír Doležel, Ruth Ronen, Umberto Eco, Thomas Pavel, and Marie-Laure Ryan. Bohumil Fořt's monograph *An Introduction to Fictional Worlds Theory* (2016) offers an in-depth analysis of the historical development of the theory, the major issues it addresses, and variations in approaches and ideas between theorists.

6. I use the term 'fictional world' with inverted commas to differentiate Nabokov's flexible metaphor from the theoretical concept of fictional world proposed by fictional worlds theory. As I will argue below, Nabokov's flexible use of the 'fictional world' metaphor ultimately troubles fictional worlds theory and points to a primarily communicative notion of fiction.

7. I draw on Wilson and Sperber's definition of relevance as the capacity of an input to "yield positive cognitive effects" in a certain context (*Meaning* 6). Wilson and Sperber argue that the notion of relevance plays an indispensable role in communication, as "[e]very act of overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (6).

aesthetic pleasure in readers. Therefore, despite his repeated emphasis that he has "never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment" (*Bend Sinister* vi), Nabokov nonetheless suggests that the construction of 'fictional worlds' is driven by communicative purposes, albeit more complex, nuanced, and self-reflexive ones. Besides, the word "mirage" reminds us that the so-called 'fictional worlds' do not exist in their own right but are flexible mind products which need to be considered in relation to the circumstances and processes of their (re)construction. It also points to the limitations of 'fictional worlds', prompting one to ask: what happens when the mirage of a 'fictional world' wobbles, dissolves, multiplies, or transforms into something different? As I will show in Chapter IV, this question lies at the centre of Nabokov's play with fictional representation.

The same complication of the 'fictional world' metaphor also appears in Nabokov's comments on reading narrative fiction. In *Lectures on Literature*, he reminds his students and readers:

> We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as *something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know*. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge. (1; my emphasis)

Perceiving the creation of 'fictional worlds' as the necessary core of fiction writing, Nabokov argues that the reconstruction of such 'worlds' should be the primary task for readers. He further observes that a 'fictional world' exists somewhat independently, "having no obvious connection" with either the world we live in or other 'fictional worlds'. Although readers may explore the links between a 'fictional world' and other worlds, this should only come after the reconstruction of the 'fictional world' in and of itself. These ideas strike remarkable resonances with fictional worlds theory, as the latter also claims that "a literary artwork's meaning can be identified with a fictional world" (Fořt 78) which is "separate from the actual [world]" (53-54) and "non-dependent on it" (54); therefore, we can analyse the meaning of a work of fiction "by analysing that world's structure" (78). The relevance of a fictive text to readers is considered under the topic of 'accessibility

relation' as a second-order question about the connections between an already (re)constructed fictional world and the actual world (53-54).

However, when talking about the particulars of his reading experiences, Nabokov starts to deviate from the approach he advocates. In an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., for example, he explains, "Very often you meet with some person or some event in 'real' life that would sound pat in a story. It is not the coincidence in the story that bothers us so much as the coincidence of coincidences in several stories by different writers, as, for instance, the recurrent eavesdropping device in nineteenth-century Russian fiction" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 58). Nabokov suggests that, rather than examine a 'fictional world' in and of itself before drawing connections with other fictional or actual 'worlds', readers often form such links *as* they are trying to reconstruct a 'fictional world' by constantly making aesthetic evaluations about textual details. These evaluations are sometimes backed by clear reasoning (as Nabokov does above), but more often they take the form of rather intuitive feelings such as boredom (as is also the case above) or a "tingle in the spine" (35). These immediate aesthetic judgments are essentially evaluations of relevance, which affect the amount of energy readers expend on noting details, visualising scenes, and appreciating the author's creative designs.

In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, Walsh gives a brief yet insightful critique of fictional worlds theory. Examining Marie-Laure Ryan's 'principle of minimal departure' and Thomas Pavel's 'worlds of various sizes', their respective solutions to the incompleteness of fictional worlds, Walsh points out that the notion of relevance supersedes the pursuit of logical completeness, limiting readers' consideration of fictional representation to their interpretative needs. As he puts it, "The horizon of the reader's encounter with a fiction is determined not by what it is possible to infer, but by what is worth inferring" (Walsh, *Rhetoric* 18). Walsh further argues that this notion of relevance, which fictional worlds theory regards as 'internal' to the construction of a fictional world, is ultimately indistinguishable from what it regards as the 'external' type of relevance, the global relation between the fictional world and the actual world (18). Consequently, he claims, the concept of fictional world itself proves cumbersome and unnecessary, since our ability to understand fiction can be explained by the notion of relevance alone (18-19). Focusing on the problem of incompleteness, Walsh's critique ultimately points to a broader issue of fictional

worlds theory, namely, that it brackets off the real-world communication between author and reader.

As I have illustrated above, Nabokov still embraces the notion of 'fictional world' in his critical remarks, regarding it as a crucial idea that informs both the writing and reading of fiction. However, in contrast to fictional worlds theory, which sees fictional worlds as the deep structure of narrative fiction, Nabokov uses 'fictional world' as a flexible metaphor. A close analysis of his critical comments reveals that he recognises how the (re)construction of 'fictional worlds' is firmly grounded in real-world communication: the creation of a 'fictional world' is driven by the author's intention to communicate authentic reality, and the reader's reconstruction of the 'world' is accompanied throughout by aesthetic evaluations, which are essentially judgments of relevance. Resonating with Walsh's critique of fictional worlds theory, these ideas trouble a primarily representational conception of fiction and move towards one that foregrounds real-world communication – in Nabokov's own words, on the "real clash" between author and reader (*Speak* 221; see Section 1.2 for a detailed discussion). Nabokov's assumption of fictionality is therefore closer to Henrik Skov Nielsen's definition of "intentionally signaled invention in communication" ("Fictionality" 107) than fictional worlds theory. As I will argue in Chapter IV, Nabokov further subordinates fictional representation to fictive communication through his creative practices: balancing the imagination of 'fictional worlds' with their subversion, he suggests that 'fictional world' is a flexible interpretive tool that may not always apply to our reading of narrative fiction, and that the very decision to sustain or subvert a 'fictional world' depends on the author's communicative intentions. For Nabokov, the writing and reading of narrative fiction are primarily communicative acts rather than world building games.

Nabokov's emphasis on real-world communication over the (re)construction of 'fictional worlds' informs his perception of the novelist's role. In particular, by creatively tweaking the conventional metaphor of "novelist as God", he places the novelist's role as a communicative agent above her/his role as a 'world maker'. In the 1964 interview with *Playboy*, he claims, "A creative writer must study carefully the works of his *rivals*, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of re-combining but of *re-creating* the given world" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 27; my emphases). Noting that creative writers have the Almighty as a

rival, Nabokov seems to suggest that novelists are creators of 'fictional worlds' just as God is the creator of the actual world. However, the following claim that an author must be able to "re-creat[e] the given world" troubles this analogy. The word '*re*-create' points to the fact that a novelist inevitably draws on her/his experiences of the material world as a source of representation; in this sense, a 're-creation' is always a form of 're-combination'. However, by distinguishing between 're-*creation*' and 're-*combination*', Nabokov again draws our attention to the importance of originality in fiction writing and, by implication, the relevance of fictive creation to readers' perceptions of reality. Whereas 're-combination' suggests dependence on pre-packed general ideas (in Nabokov's words, the conformity to average reality), 're-creation' foregrounds the novelist's mission to re-shape readers' perceptions of reality by evoking original, aesthetically powerful authentic realities. Therefore, Nabokov may see the novelist as God's rival, not because they create comparable 'worlds', but because they both have the capacity of creating something original: while God creates the material world, novelists create new perceptions of the material world.

Nabokov shows even more emphasis on the author as a communicative agent in a letter to his mother in 1925, in which he describes novelists as "translators of God's creation, his little plagiarists and imitators, we dress up what God wrote, as a charming commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius" (qtd. in Boyd, *Russian Years* 245). Here he seems to contradict the above-mentioned metaphor of 'novelist as God's rival' and instead imagine the author as subordinate to God. However, a closer examination of the several roles assigned to the novelist here reveals more consistency between the two remarks. Similar to his notion of 're-creation', Nabokov's imagination of novelists as God's "plagiarists" points to the fact that the material world is an inevitable source of fictional representation, and his perception of novelists as God's "imitators" may suggest that they imitate God's creative act in generating original perceptions of the material world. Besides these two roles, Nabokov adds that novelists are also God's "translators" and "commentator[s]". These two metaphors reinforce the author's role as a communicative agent, for the aim of both translation and commentary is to communicate the meaning of a foreign or difficult text to a specific readership in a certain context.

A closer look into Nabokov's view on translation may help us better understand his imagination of the novelist as God's translator. In her study of Nabokov's philosophy and practices of literary translation, Julia Trubikhina argues that he adopts the "allegorical mode", which "allows the translator to partake of the same 'gesture' as the original by signifying difference, by focusing on other things (commentary, criticism)" (20-21). In other words, instead of mimicking the shape of the original text, Nabokov aims to reproduce the *effects* of the original in a new linguistic and literary context. As Trubikhina explains with Nabokov's own masterpiece of translation, "Nabokov's translation of *Onegin* is not 'metaphorical' in the sense that it is not supposed to be 'like' the original. It is allegorical (or, more specifically, metonymical) insofar as it allows the Commentary and Index to perform in English the function that Pushkin's text of the poem is supposed to perform in Russian . . ." (21). A metaphorical formulation of this exact idea can be found in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*, where the protagonist Adam Krug compares the translator's task to one's effort to replicate the "unique shadow" of a tree by inventing "a prodigiously intricate piece of machinery" which, though unlike the original tree in appearance, casts the exact same shadow (145-46). According to this view on translation, the novelist's main task as God's translator is not to create 'fictional worlds' that look like the world we live in but, by renewing readers' perceptions of reality, produce effects that resemble those generated by God's creation of the material world, the original act of originality.

Starting with an analysis of his notions of reality, I have shown that Nabokov regards fiction writing as a way to renew conventionalised perceptions of reality, to communicate authentic realities that expose and replace the average reality in a certain context. Showing influences from Russian Formalism, this idea connects Nabokov's focus on the aesthetic effects of literary works with considerations of the relevance of literary fiction and the author's social responsibility. Nabokov's reflections on the purpose of fiction writing underlies his creative tweaking of the conventional metaphors of 'fictional world' and 'author as God', which simultaneously acknowledges the world-building effect common to fictional representation and stresses that it is contingent upon readers' inference of authorial intentions based on the principle of relevance. Thus, he foregrounds narrative fiction

as situated communication and the novelist as a communicative agent. Apart from the notion of average reality, Nabokov also reflects on a more specific context in which fictive communication is situated, namely, the biographical context. I will focus on this aspect of his critical ideas in the next chapter.

Chapter III "The Proximity of Work and Life": Author as (Auto)Biographical Subject

In *The Death and Return of the Author*, Seán Burke argues that the methodological, moralistic, and epistemological 'deaths of the author' in modern literary theories are largely based on the problematic equation of the author with a "transcendental subject" devoid of all psychological and biographical content (103). From Stéphane Mallarmé's and T. S. Eliot's aesthetic of impersonality to Roland Barthes' call to subvert the 'Author-God', the author is taken to be a "purely ontological principle of the text" rather than "an empirical agency" (103). Based on this assumption, theorists either maintain the "strange and supposedly impermeable opposition" between life and work or bracket the notion of the biographical author under the concept of textuality (180). However, Burke asks, "Is the concept of the author only tenable if a transcendental subjectivity is thereby designated?" (103) – in other words, does the denial of transcendental subjectivity necessarily lead to the death of the author?

Burke's own answer is a definite *no*. He argues that, instead of marking the death of the author, modern criticisms of transcendental subjectivity should lead to a reconsideration of authorship. An important aspect of this reconceptualisation is to find ways to theorise the author as a "biographical subject" which is "no longer normative but disclosive, not timeless but rootedly historical, not an aeterna veritas but mutable, in process of becoming, not transcendent but immanent in its texts, its time and world" (Burke, *Death* 106, 110). To achieve this, he suggests that literary theories should pay more attention to "the proximity of work and life, the principles of their separation" (180). As a starting point, he suggests that theorists should focus more on those texts that foreground their biographical context, making it difficult to ignore in the process of interpretation. He asks, "[W]hat does a pure textualism or formalism do with a text which incorporates the (auto)biographical as a part of its dramaturgy, a text which stages itself within a biographical scene?" (180). Nabokov's ideas and practices of authorship provide a promising occasion for such exploration: not only do many of his novels contain dense, elaborate autobiographical allusions, but he also discusses the interconnections between personal life and fiction writing in both his literary works and critical remarks. I will

examine Nabokov's critical reflections on "the proximity of work and life" in this chapter. In Chapter V, I will go on to explore his self-conscious discussions and creative practices in this respect in some of his novels.

3.1. Memories: Representational Source, Communicative Intention, Discursive Impulse

Nabokov often warns against simplistic biographical readings that conflate fictional characters who share some of the author's past with the author her/himself. A recurrent theme in his interviews is his criticism of "a certain type of critic who when reviewing a work of fiction keeps dotting all the i's with the author's head" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 16). For instance, when an interviewer observes that some reviewers of *Transparent Things* see in the character Mr. R "a portrait or parody of Mr. N[abokov]", he replies that such interpretation, based on the superficial similarities that both are émigré writers with American citizenship living in Switzerland, is a "mere flippancy of thought" (166). Talking about *The Gift* in another interview, he claims, "It portrays the adventures, literary and romantic, of a young Russian expatriate in Berlin, in the twenties; but he's not myself. *I am very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity*" (12; my emphasis). Nabokov reminds his readers that the use of a few autobiographical elements in the creation of a fictional character does not necessarily suggest more essential or general resemblances between the character and the author. He further stresses that none of his characters are thinly disguised versions of himself; therefore, readers should not make unwarranted inferences about his own thoughts and feelings by assuming that his (somewhat autobiographical) characters' views are unaltered pieces of his own mind.

Nabokov's criticism of this simplistic, unwarranted way to read autobiographical allusions in his novels does not amount to a refusal to reflect on the biographical context of fictive creation; rather, it clears the way for his discussions of the complex dynamics between an author's personal life and fiction writing. Nabokov makes a particularly illuminating remark on this subject in an interview with Appel: when asked to talk about "the significance of autobiographical hints in works of art that are literally not autobiographical", he answers, "I would say that imagination is a form of memory. . . . An image depends on the power of association, and association is *supplied* and *prompted* by memory" (*Strong Opinions*

66; my emphases). It should be noted that, in this remark as well as all the statements I quote below, Nabokov does not talk about how life as such participates in his fiction writing but reflects on the role of personal memories, which is already at one remove from the author's engagement with(in) the material world. However, as Mark Freeman points out, the fact that memories are semiotic representations and are subject to recurrent rewriting does not necessarily mean that they are undesirable distortions of 'life in itself' which block our access into the 'real past': not only are they still an important (and often quite reliable) source of information about our past, but they are also acts of sense-making that are inseparable from our experiences of and engagement with the material world, a mechanism of "reconstruction rather than destruction" contributing to our psychological reality, which, as Freeman claims, is no less real than our material being (89-91).

In the remark above, Nabokov indicates two types of connection between personal memories and fiction writing, which he encapsulates with the words "supplied" and "prompted". Both types of connection are further elaborated in Nabokov's interviews and autobiography. By claiming that imagination is "supplied" by memory, Nabokov points out that personal memories serve as an inevitable source of fictional representation. Appel also captures this relation in his interview question: he suggests that works of fiction necessarily draw on personal recollections even when they are "*literally* not autobiographical" – in other words, autobiographical allusions are the perceptible crystallisation of a much more common yet often invisible mechanism. Seeing personal memories as the novelist's artistic reserve, Nabokov cherishes them and cultivates them diligently: "I keep the tools of my trade, memories, experiences, sharp shining things, constantly around me, upon me, within me, the way instruments are stuck into the loops and flaps of a mechanician's magnificently elaborate overalls" (*Strong Opinions* 132).

Nabokov further claims that fictive creation is so firmly rooted in personal memories that his readers are often able to detect correspondences between his fictional characters and himself even when he has no intention to make autobiographical allusions. He admits in an interview, "The more gifted and talkative one's characters are, the greater the chance of their resembling the author in tone or tint of mind. It is a familiar embarrassment that I face with very faint qualms, particularly since I am not really aware of any special similarities – just as one is not

aware of sharing mannerisms with a detestable kinsman" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 103). While he is confident about creating characters "beyond the limits of [his] own identity" (12), he also grants that many of his characters may share traces of his own personality, thoughts, and habits without him being aware of it. Readers may justly perceive resemblances where the author does not, although they should not take their observations too far and make unwarranted claims about overall likeness between these characters and the author.

True as they are, these reflections still seem inadequate, for they fail to explain the prominence, density, and specificity of autobiographical allusions in Nabokov's works of fiction. If he takes care to keep his characters "beyond the limits of [his] own identity", and given that he is fully capable of creating 'fictional worlds' drastically different from the world we live in, why does he still deliberately embed so many autobiographical allusions in his fiction, including some very conspicuous and/or elaborate ones? Clues may be found in the second type of connection, namely, that fiction writing is "prompted" by personal memories.

In *Speak, Memory*, a memoir in which Nabokov traces various origins of his artistic creativity, he illustrates how personal memories may act as two different forms of stimuli for fiction writing. Sometimes memories give rise to communicative intentions which the author works hard to fulfil. For example, recalling the stirring sensations kindled by a splendid summer sunset and sharpened by his teenage crush, Nabokov reflects, "I did not know then (as I know perfectly well now) what to do with such things – how to get rid of them, how to transform them into something that can be turned over to the reader in printed characters to have *him* cope with the blessed shiver – and this inability enhanced my oppression" (*Speak* 161). Similarly, recalling the "handful of fabulous lights" which beckoned outside the window of a night train, leaving "an inexplicable pang" in his young heart, he describes them as "diamonds that I later gave away to my characters to alleviate the burden of my wealth" (9). In these cases, the emotional intensity of certain recollections stimulates the author's desire to communicate his observations and feelings to readers, an act which, as Nabokov suggests, requires much skill and experience. Other times, however, Nabokov talks about the stimulating power of personal memories in a regretful tone, seeing it as an irrepressible discursive impulse that leaves undesirable impacts on the very memories it draws on. For instance, when recounting his long

wait for the arrival of 'Mademoiselle', his Swiss governess, Nabokov gives a loving description of various objects in the drawing room, which culminates in a lamenting confession: "Alas, these pencils, too, have been distributed among the characters in my books to keep fictitious children busy; *they are not quite my own now*. Somewhere, in the apartment house of a chapter . . . I have also placed the tilted mirror, and the lamp, and the chandelier drops. *Few things are left, many have been squandered*" (71; my emphases). What he describes as the distribution of treasured old objects among his characters is essentially the distribution of personal recollections among texts for readers.

The communicative intention and the discursive impulse evoked by personal memories share an important feature: they are both two-way mechanisms, altering the author's feelings towards his own past while serving the purposes of his novels. Their difference lies in the reverse impacts they each have on the author's memories: while the former brings about a much-desired alleviation of emotional burden, the latter is felt to be a much-regretted squandering of cherished memories. Nabokov also notes that different recollections may be affected to different extents by fiction writing. Some extremely affectionate memories of childhood, he claims, are not affected at all: "that kind of thing is absolutely permanent, immortal, it can never change, no matter how many times I farm it out to my characters, it is always there with me" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 11). In contrast, some other recollections, especially those that are "intellectual rather than emotional", are "very brittle and sometimes apt to lose the flavor of reality when they are immersed by the novelist in his book, when they are given away to characters" (10). The imagination of personal memories as precarious objects which may be lost to fictional characters resonates with Jorge Luis Borges' reflection in "Borges and I": "Little by little, I am giving over everything to [the one called Borges], though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things" (230). Like Borges' reflection, Nabokov's metaphor is more of a playful conceit than a literal statement. Nonetheless, it effectively captures the dialogic relation between an author's personal life and fiction writing. As Barthes claims in "From Work to Text", "[an author's] life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work; there is a reversion of the work on to the life" (161).

Nabokov's perception of personal recollections as voluntary or involuntary stimuli of fictive creation partly explains why he deploys autobiographical allusions so heavily in his works of fiction: in some cases, he wants to share his most intense experiences with his readers in order to make them less overwhelming for himself; in other cases, he feels an inexplicable urge to use certain memories to build his 'fictional worlds'. However, this idea also raises new questions: if the 'prompting' force of memory may cause cherished personal recollections to "lose the flavor of reality", why does Nabokov choose to write fiction in the first place? Can fiction writing contribute to the author's perception of his own past in ways that autobiography cannot?

3.2. Stained Glass and Incomplete Painting: The Limitations of Autobiography

These questions loom large when one reads the beginning of Chapter Five of *Speak, Memory*, a chapter dedicated to Nabokov's former Swiss governess, whom he refers to as 'Mademoiselle'. The chapter opens with a touching contemplation of how the author's use of personal memories in fiction writing often makes these treasured recollections less distinct, less endearing, less real in his mind: "I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered on in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self" (Nabokov, *Speak* 66). Therefore, Nabokov claims, this chapter is an attempt to resurrect an important figure from his past whom he has since subjected to this memory-consuming power of fiction: "The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle" (66). However, if Nabokov is well aware that fiction writing may lead to the derealisation of personal memories, and if he is not averse to sharing his most cherished and intense recollections with readers through autobiography, why does he choose to subject these memories to *fictive creation* in the first place? What does fiction writing offer to his self-understanding that autobiography writing cannot?

A key to answering these questions lies in Nabokov's reflections on the working of memory and his aims in writing autobiography. In the chapter on Mademoiselle, Nabokov depicts a scene in which Mademoiselle read to him and his

brother Sergey on the veranda while his thoughts wandered and landed on various objects in his surroundings, the most enchanting of which being "the harlequin pattern of colored panes inset in a whitewashed framework on either side of the veranda" (*Speak* 75). He goes on to describe how each pane of stained glass worked a different magic on his view of the garden, and how they were intermitted by some pieces of "normal, savorless glass", through which one saw "a matter-of-fact white bench under familiar trees" (75). However, Nabokov observes, "[O]f all the windows this is the pane through which in later years parched nostalgia longed to peer" (75).

This is a rare moment in which Nabokov laments that autobiography cannot represent one's past as it was, comparing memory to a stained-glass window that yields a view into the past coloured by the present perspective. Most of the time, Nabokov celebrates the capacity of memory to actively organise and shape one's perception of their personal past. Although he still believes in the possibility and importance of adhering to the principle of factuality (he emphasises that "the parts selected [for *Speak, Memory*] belong to unadulterated life"), and although he takes pride in his own "abnormally strong" memory which enables him to "stick to the truth through thick and thin and not be tempted to fill gaps with logical verisimilitudes posing as previously preserved recollections", he points out that the numerous grains of "unadulterated life" can only be turned into a coherent, meaningful memoir when supplemented by what he calls "impersonal art" (Nabokov, *Speak* 238). The method of this impersonal art, he explains, is to "explore the remotest regions of his past life for what may be termed thematic trails or currents. Once found, this or that theme is followed up through the years" (238). For instance, Nabokov points out how an arrangement of matches imitating "the stormy sea", shown to him (as a child) by the family friend General Kuropatkin, eerily resonates with the later defeat of Kuropatkin's army in the Russo-Japanese War (11-12). At another point, he observes how his uncle's loving nostalgia upon finding some familiar French children's books in the Nabokovs' house echoes the "agony and delight" he himself experienced when discovering the same books in a nursery decades later (51-52). It is the combination of the rigorous adherence to factuality and the carefully woven thematic patterns, Nabokov argues, that contributes to the "permanent importance" of his autobiography (238).

This importance is partly defined by the aesthetic value of the work, but it also has a more personal aspect, as Nabokov talks about how the thematic patterns are essential to his sense of self. In the opening chapter of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov claims that patterned memories mark his individuality and ultimately point to a mysterious force that has shaped his life into such an exquisite form: "Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap" (10). He also sees in the rich resonances among his personal recollections a way to transcend the irreversible passing of time and the inevitable loss of loved ones. When an old memory is triggered by a related object or similar situation and resurfaces in his mind with all its clarity and vividness, it evokes a blissful feeling of timelessness: "Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (52). Nabokov further illustrates this "enjoyment of timelessness" with a metaphor that compares his personal past to a patterned carpet that can be folded up: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another" (102-103). The thematic patterns of memory serve as the key for Nabokov to travel across different stages of his past, transcending the constraints of time by perceiving all the harmony and happiness in one moment.

At one point in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov goes further, suggesting that the generation of thematic patterns out of one's past is not just an artistic device that an autobiographer chooses to deploy, or a rare talent possessed by a selected group of artists; rather, it is part of the very nature of memory that he, as an artist, foregrounds and enhances. Concluding a chapter on his former tutors, he reflects, "I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past" (Nabokov, *Speak* 128). He suggests that memory does not simply provide a mass of unrelated recollections so that the autobiographer can draw connections between them as he likes; instead, the ability to strike "harmonies" is engrained in the faculty of memory. The moment a piece of memory is evoked, it is already situated in a web of relations with other recollections. Memory, therefore, is not the past as it was lived, with all its "suspended and wandering tonalities", but the

ordering and reordering of the past in the present which contributes to an evolving self-understanding.

Nabokov's strong awareness of how one's present self necessarily permeates her/his account of personal past ultimately leads him to reflect on a fundamental limitation of autobiography, which he explicates with an analogy in the epilogue to *Speak, Memory*: "An observer makes a detailed picture of the whole universe but when he has finished he realizes that it still lacks something: his own self. So he puts himself in it too. But again a 'self' remains outside and so forth, in an endless sequence of projections . . ." (244). This reflection is the exact opposite of his lamentation over the impossibility of generating a picture of the past untainted by the present; it is the recognition that no self-representation is complete, as the narrating-I is always in a reflexive relation to the narrated-I and can therefore only be indirectly presented through aspects of textuality (e.g. wording, structure, and sequencing) rather than directly represented in a self-narrative. Nabokov's contemplation on the inevitable incompleteness of self-representation resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin's discussions on the limit of autobiography. Bakhtin argues that the impossibility of forming a complete picture of oneself by oneself (just as one cannot lift her/himself off the ground by the hair) gives rise to the desire to perceive oneself from an external vantage point, a perception he calls 'I-for-the-other' (Erdinast-Vulcan 416).[1] Similarly, autobiography in the strict sense of the word is utterly impossible, for the narrating-I and the narrated-I can never coincide: "No act of reflection upon myself is capable of consummating me fully. . . . My own word about myself is in principle incapable of being the last word" (Bakhtin 142-43). Instead, Bakhtin states, "[t]here is no clear-cut, essentially necessary dividing line between autobiography and biography" (151): autobiography is essentially a form of biography, an attempt to gain a comprehensive view of oneself by assuming an external perspective.

In Chapter Fourteen of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov foregrounds the desire for 'I-for-the-other' or 'autobiography-as-biography' with a literary trope. Recalling

1. In her article "Heterobiography: A Bakhtinian Perspective on Autobiographical Writing", Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan synthesises Bakhtin's philosophy of autobiography by exploring some of his more fragmented and obscure writings. My summary of Bakhtin's ideas in this chapter is informed by this article.

various encounters with other Russian émigré writers in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, Nabokov writes toward the end of the section:

> But the author that interested me most was naturally Sirin. He belonged to my generation. Among the young writers produced in exile he was the loneliest and most arrogant one. Beginning with the appearance of his first novel in 1925 and throughout the next fifteen years, until he vanished as strangely as he had come, his work kept provoking an acute and rather morbid interest on the part of the critics. . . . Across the dark sky of exile, Sirin passed, to use a simile of a more conservative nature, like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness. (*Speak* 219)

Readers who are familiar with Nabokov's early career will recognise that 'Sirin' is none other than Nabokov's own pen name during his European years. By referring to himself in third person, Nabokov tries to portray his younger self from an outsider's point of view, playfully acting the role of a biographer. But this is not all: the "I" who *was* interested in Sirin – note Nabokov's use of the past tense in the quote above – is not the older Nabokov who is writing the autobiography but a contemporary of Sirin, a subject position he invented in order to see himself as part of the literary scene constituted by Russian émigré writers in Europe. Not only does Nabokov highlight the duality of the narrating-I and the narrated-I implicit in all self-narratives, but he goes one step further and splits the narrated-I into two – the young writer 'Sirin' and the younger 'I' who reflected on Sirin's character and career – both of whom are subjected to the narrative representation of the older Nabokov (the narrating-I). This explains why Nabokov claims in the epilogue that his main purpose of using this trope is to "project himself, or at least his most treasured self, into the picture he paints" (*Speak* 244).[2]

However, just as Nabokov highlights the desire to paint a complete picture of himself from an external vantage point, he also illustrates the impossibility to obtain

2. Interestingly, Nabokov employs the same trope again in the epilogue itself, which takes the form of a pseudo-review of "Mr Nabokov's" autobiography by an anonymous reviewer. This time, it is the 'I' who has written the autobiography that Nabokov tries to perceive from an external point of view.

this ideal. The moment young Nabokov tried to look at himself as ‘Sirin’ from an external perspective (‘I’), he started to become more than ‘Sirin’. Readers may follow ‘I’s’ perception of ‘Sirin’ and see Nabokov as a lonely, arrogant émigré writer who simultaneously attracted critics’ interest and made them uneasy, but they may also infer from ‘I’s reflection about ‘Sirin’ a Nabokov who was witty, self-reflective, confident yet capable of being self-critical (he describes ‘Sirin’ as “the most arrogant one”), and more concerned with the creative legacy of his European years than he cared to admit (‘Sirin’ disappeared “like a meteor”, but ‘I’ lived on). Similarly, if one recognises that both ‘I’ and ‘Sirin’ are portrayed by ‘the autobiographer Nabokov’, one may come to see yet another Nabokov that is more than – though closely related to – both ‘I’ and ‘Sirin’, not least because of the temporal distance. This is a more mature Nabokov who looks upon an exciting yet challenging stage of his past with a mixture of nostalgia, wonder, and amusement.

Nabokov demonstrates with his playful trope that one’s sense of self can never be fully contained in a single narrative; instead, it constantly evolves through one’s attempts to tell and retell one’s past. His reflections on the ultimate unattainability of ‘I-for-the-other’ in turn point to the indispensability of a complementary mode of self-perception, which Bakhtin calls ‘I-for-myself’ (Erdinast-Vulcan 416). This mode sees the self as an unfinished project, a “unity yet-to-be”, which is “free to choose and to act” and is able to “transcend or transgress any external framing perspective” (421). Analysing a range of Bakhtin’s essays and notes, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan argues that Bakhtin’s attitudes toward the two modes of self-perception shifted over the years: while he began by considering ‘I-for-myself’ as an imperfection that one seeks to mend with ‘I-for-the-other’, he later came to see it as an ethical drive that defies the finalising attempt of ‘I-for-the-other’ (418-21). I suggest that, while Nabokov’s analogy of the painter’s never-ending task apparently leans towards the former attitude, the playfulness of the ‘Sirin’ trope with which he illustrates this ‘problem’ indicates a more positive view on the indispensable role of ‘I-for-myself’ in one’s evolving sense of self.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s ideas about the two modes of self-perception, Erdinast-Vulcan further points out that each autobiography can be seen a product of the dynamic interplay between ‘I-for-the-other’ and ‘I-for-myself’, between “the ‘centripetal’ vector of subjectivity, that is, the need for narrative framing, coherence

and containment, and the equally powerful 'centrifugal' vector generated by the subject's innate 'incompleteness', the resistance to being framed and contained" (422). Nonetheless, each autobiographer has her/his own perception of where autobiography as a literary genre stands in relation to the two vectors. For instance, Barthes puts the unfinished, boundary-defying 'I-for-myself' centre stage in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Presenting a bunch of fragmentary, seemingly tangential, alphabetically ordered 'autobiographemes', he overtly resists any attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of himself. In contrast, Nabokov still considers a somewhat comprehensive representation of one's past as the default purpose of autobiography writing. Based on this assumption, he notes that that one's evolving sense of self eludes such representation, and that it needs to be inferred from the structure, perspective, sequencing, tone, and other artistic tropes of a self-narrative. In other words, Nabokov still places 'I-for-the-other' at the core of autobiography and regards 'I-for-myself' as peripheral to this literary genre, something important yet hidden which requires readers' sensitivity to textuality – and maybe a few subtle reminders by the autobiographer – to be seen and understood.

Nabokov's assumption about autobiography as a literary genre may offer us some clues to understanding his decision to subject personal memories to fictive creation as well as the prominence of autobiographical allusions in his works of fiction. Since he believes that, despite its importance to one's sense of self, the unfinalised and unfinalisable 'I-for-myself' is only manifested at the periphery of autobiography writing, he may turn to fiction writing for opportunities to bring this mode of self-perception into the spotlight. In particular, autobiographical allusions provide an author with opportunities to overtly rework certain recollections that she/he has shared with readers in (auto)biographical sources. Unconstrained by the criterion of literal truthfulness, such reworking generates a special relation between one or more fictive narratives and one or more biographical sources, characterised by both resonances and dissonances. The intimacy and tension between the texts may in turn cast new lights on the personal recollection(s) under consideration. Therefore, I suggest that Nabokov may feel 'prompted' by personal memories to write fiction, not just because fiction writing offers a way for him to relieve the emotional burden by sharing some of his most intense personal experiences (as they were) with readers; but, more importantly, because fiction writing gives him the opportunity to

reconsider certain memories through creative reworking, which contributes to his evolving sense of self.

Nabokov's critical reflections on the complex, dynamic relation between personal memories and fiction writing point to several ways in which the author can be considered as an empirical subject. Most obviously, personal recollections serve as an important source of fictional representation, a tool that the author cherishes and cultivates. In addition, personal memory 'prompts' fiction writing in two ways: the author may experience the discursive impulse to subject certain recollections to fictive creation despite her/his preference to keep them to her/himself, or she/he may have the intention to share those past experiences with readers in order to relieve excessive emotions. Both the discursive impulse and the communicative intention are two-way mechanisms in that they alter the author's feelings toward personal recollections while serving her/his fictive creation. A closer look at Nabokov's reflections on the limitations of autobiography suggests that fiction writing not only offers the author a channel to share personal experiences in disguise, but it also provides the author with opportunities to continually reshape her/his sense of self in a way that is often marginalised in conventional autobiography. These ideas answer Burke's call for the author to be theorised as a biographical subject and intimate several ways to do so; in fact, Nabokov suggests that authors can be more than biographical subjects: by self-consciously negotiating the dynamic relation between life and work, they become *autobiographical* subjects. In Chapter V, I will go on to illustrate how Nabokov self-consciously discusses the dialogic relation between authors' life and work in his novels, and how he overtly exercises the self-transforming power of fiction writing through his use of autobiographical allusions.

Part Two: Ideas and Practices of Authorship in Nabokov's Novels

Chapter IV 'Fictional Worlds' Disrupted: Author as Communicative Agent

Through my discussion of his critical ideas of authorship in Part One, I have shown that Nabokov is far from a "dull and narrow" mandarin (Wood, *Magician's Doubts* 22): his playful, deceptive, confounding, and provocative remarks, when perceived in connection, often reveal creative, insightful, and nuanced understanding of the author's role in relation to her/his readers, texts, and personal past. These critical ideas of authorship direct our attention to certain aspects of Nabokov's creative practices and provide clues for their interpretation; in return, a close analysis of specific creative practices may add to some of these ideas, taking them to a level of complexity and subtlety that critical discussion alone can seldom achieve. Based on this assumption, I will focus on two aspects of Nabokov's fiction in Chapters IV and V. The current chapter examines how he simultaneously preserves and subverts the imagination of 'fictional worlds'. I will demonstrate that, consistent with his critical remarks on 'fictional world' and fictive 're-creation' (which I have analysed in Chapter II), Nabokov's playful engagement with the 'fictional world' metaphor in his novels calls fictional worlds theory into question; instead, it suggests a primarily communicative notion of fiction, subordinating fictional representation to authorial creativity and author-reader communication. In Chapter V, I will pick up my discussion in Chapter III and go on to explore how Nabokov negotiates the dialogic relation between personal memory and fiction writing in his novels through fictional characters' reflections and his prominent use of autobiographical allusions. I choose *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (henceforth referred to as *Sebastian Knight*), *Pale Fire*, and *Look at the Harlequins!* (henceforth referred to as *Harlequins*) as the key texts for my analysis due to the remarkable complexity, density, and creativity with which they play out the above-mentioned aspects of authorship. Moreover, since these three novels span Nabokov's career as a writer in English, they may suggest

major consistencies in his notions of authorship as well as some variations and developments.

4.1. Precarious 'Worlds', Puzzling Texts, Creative Author

I have shown in Chapter II that, by treating the notion of 'fictional world' as a flexible metaphor and complementing it with other ideas such as 'authentic reality' and fictive 're-creation', Nabokov deviates from fictional worlds theory, which upholds 'fictional world' as a theoretical explanation of fictionality and considers narrative fiction primarily in terms of the (re-)construction of fictional worlds. Instead, he foregrounds fiction writing as a communicative act which aims to renew conventionalised, automatised, over-generalised perceptions of reality; the (re-)construction of 'fictional worlds' only takes place when it serves communicative purposes. In the same vein, Nabokov reinvents the 'novelist as God' metaphor in his critical remarks. Comparing novelists to God's "rival[s]", "commentator[s]", and "translators", he emphasises the author as a communicative agent.

This playful engagement with the notion of 'fictional world' is given more creative and captivating expressions in Nabokov's novels. His utterly unreliable character-narrators (such as Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*) remind us of how difficult it can be to determine the 'facts' of a 'fictional world', and novels such as *Pnin* and *Transparent Things*, by concealing the identities of the character-narrators until the very end, demonstrate how easily a 'fictional world' can be drastically reformed. In this chapter, I will focus on some more unconventional designs with which Nabokov highlights the limit of the 'fictional world' metaphor, prompting us to question the premises of fictional worlds theory and pay more attention to the aesthetic and communicative dimensions of fiction.

Sebastian Knight, *Pale Fire*, and *Harlequins* share a remarkable feature: their characters and plots are irresolvably plural and ultimately indeterminable. In other words, they invoke logical impossibility[1] – more specifically, what Marie-Laure

1. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, logical impossibility is the violation of "the laws of noncontradiction (not p AND ~p) and of Excluded Middle (either p or ~p)" ("From" 66). Theorists who argue for the incompleteness of fictional worlds (e.g. Lubomír Doležel, Thomas Pavel, and Umberto Eco) may not agree with the second part of Ryan's definition. However, this potential disagreement does not affect my arguments in any major way. My analysis of Nabokov's novels below shows that radical indeterminacy produces effects very similar to explicit logical contradictions: when indeterminacy is employed on a global level, readers can no

Ryan calls "'pure' logical impossibilities" that cannot be attributed to plot needs ("From" 66) – on a global level. *Sebastian Knight* seems to tell a straightforward story at first glance: the character-narrator V sets out to write a biography of his late half-brother Sebastian Knight, a celebrated novelist. V's narration of Sebastian's past is interlaced with an account of his own journey in search of Sebastian's 'real life'. However, readers may gradually notice a number of strange details that call their original assumptions of characters and plots into question. At the beginning of the book, V already observes that since Mr. Goodman, Sebastian's other biographer and former literary agent, fails to mention him in his biography *Tragedy of Sebastian Knight*, he is "bound to appear non-existent – a bogus relative, a garrulous imposter" to Goodman's readers (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 6). Later, when describing his visit to Goodman, V notes in particular how Goodman was unpleasantly surprised by the fact that Sebastian had a half-brother whom he did not know of (48). These observations are apparently part of V's criticism of Goodman's ignorance and dishonesty; however, they also cast doubts on V's identity: one may wonder whether V is indeed the unacknowledged half-brother he claims to be, or whether he is in fact a "bogus relative" as he jokes.

Another suspicious aspect of V's narration is that he sometimes penetrates Sebastian's mind without signalling convincing sources of such knowledge: even Sebastian's best college friend is unlikely to grasp the young Sebastian's complex feelings of *déjà vu*, excitement, amazement, solitude, and awkwardness when he first arrived in Cambridge, which V depicts in vivid detail (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 36-37), and although Miss Pratt used to be an acquaintance of both Sebastian and his ex-lover Clare Bishop, she is unlikely to know the exact feelings behind Sebastian's struggle with words, which V takes a full page to describe (70-71). At one point, V claims that he and Sebastian share "some kind of common rhythm" which often gives him intuitive insight into Sebastian's thoughts and acts (28-29), although they lived separate from each other for many years. However, readers may question the plausibility of this explanation as well as V's reliability, or they may ask what this "common rhythm" actually is – whether it could be something other than telepathy between half-brothers.

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longer attribute it to the incompleteness of fictional worlds; instead, one is prompted to ask whether the text constructs a fictional world at all.

Even stranger is the fact that V's descriptions of Sebastian's novels are all mirrored in the themes, style, and structure of V's biography itself. V sees *The Prismatic Bezel* as a parodic detective story and "a wicked imitation of many other things" (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 76), *Success* as a "methodical quest" for the formula of human fate (80), *Lost Property* as a highly autobiographical novel, "a summing up" of Sebastian's literary journey (92), and *The Doubtful Asphodel* as a depiction of the dying process of a mysterious old man (146-51). Strikingly, V's biography meets all these descriptions globally or locally: it features V's search for the obscure past of a famous writer; it contains a review of each of Sebastian's works; and it culminates in a poignant scene of V's belated realisation of Sebastian's death, a disappointing blunder which paradoxically leads to a moment of enlightenment. All these suspicious details and striking resonances gradually give rise to a completely transformed reading of the novel: Sebastian is not dead, what looks like V's biography is Sebastian's new (autobiographical) novel, and V is merely another fictional character created by Sebastian. However, there is no evidence that this new reading is more justified than the one generated earlier on; rather, each reading challenges but does not cancel the other. The readers' task is not to choose between two interpretations but to sustain two equally plausible yet logically incompatible readings simultaneously.

Pale Fire presents a similar yet even more complex case. At first glance, the novel takes the form of a scholarly edition of an autobiographical poem written by the newly deceased American scholar John Shade with a foreword and a commentary supplied by his colleague Kinbote. However, readers soon realise that Kinbote is a narcissistic critic who usurps the academic commentary for a legendary, highly suspicious account of the exile of Charles the Prince of Zembla, which he eventually claims to be nothing other than his own life story (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 195-96). In fact, Kinbote is so keen to appropriate Shade's poem for his own storytelling that he refers to Shade as "my poet" (78) and his poem as "'my' poem" (145); he is even tempted to fabricate parts of Shade's draft manuscript in order to fit the poem to his (mis)reading (62, 180, 206). Besides his very unfaithful reading of Shade's poem, Kinbote's account of his interactions with Shade, Shade's wife Sybil, and other colleagues at Wordsmith College also suggests that he is obsessive, egoistic, paranoid, probably delusional, and in a word, an extremely unreliable

narrator. For example, he continually spies on Shade's private life through his neighbouring window (21, 71-72), sees Sybil's cold attitude to him as a series of jealous attempts to undermine his secret, intimate bond with Shade (146), believes that Shade died from an assassin's misdirected gunshot intended for himself, the Zemblan Prince (230-35), and even himself betrays a slight suspicion that he may be subject to hallucinations (80).

As these textual clues gradually surface, it becomes more and more difficult for readers to ascertain any aspect of Kinbote's past experiences, even his real name. Ultimately, these textual clues trouble the readers' original assumption that Shade and Kinbote are two parallel character narrators. Readers may suspect that Shade as well as his poem is just another creation of Kinbote's deluded mind, or they may wonder if the sophisticated poet Shade has created Kinbote and his perplexing commentary. As with *Sebastian Knight*, however, it is impossible to secure any of these suspicions as the final truth in *Pale Fire*. As Mary McCarthy observes, "[e]ach plane or level in its shadow box proves to be a false bottom; there is an infinite perspective regression" (Review 127). The novel requires readers to juggle between several logically incompatible interpretations of characters and plots without fully committing to any one of them.

In *Harlequins*, the indeterminacy of characters and plots escalates towards the end. The novel appears to be an autobiography of the writer Vadim Vadimovich, whose surname remains unrevealed throughout the novel. This lack of information, which readers may hardly notice when reading most of the novel, grows into a key problem in the seventh and final part. Newly awakened from a swoon, Vadim tries to re-establish his identity as he lies alone in the ward: "To the best of my knowledge my Christian name was Vadim; so was my father's" (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 210). However, even this piece of information, which he is most certain about, is soon cast in doubt, as he notes that "in rapid Russian speech longish name-and-patronymic combinations undergo familiar slurrings", and therefore what he believes to be his own name might be a slurring of "the hardly utterable, tapeworm-long 'Vladimir Vladimirovich'", which, notably, is the same as Nabokov's (211). It is even more difficult for Vadim to recall his surname. At one point he feels "it began with an N" and makes several unsuccessful attempts – "Notorov", "Nebesnyy", "Nabedrin", "Nablidze", and "Naborcroft" – all of which are conspicuously close to 'Nabokov'.

Eventually, he writes, “I gave up. And when I gave up for good my sonorous surname crept up from behind, like a prankish child that makes a nodding old nurse jump at his sudden shout” (211). Vadim seems to have recalled his surname, but readers are denied this important information, let alone given the ground to infer whether it is correct.

During this difficult process, Vadim observes the unsettling effects of not being able to ascertain his name: “Without a name I remained unreal in regained consciousness. Poor Vivian, poor Vadim Vadimovich, was but a figment of somebody’s – not even my own – imagination” (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 211). In fact, the uncertainty about Vadim’s real name is just as unsettling for readers as it is for Vadim himself, especially when put alongside two other factors. The first one is the manifold mental disorders which Vadim has suffered from, as he confesses throughout the novel (13-14, 120, 150-52, 195, 199-200, 204); the second, perhaps interconnected factor, is Vadim’s life-long intuition of living under the influence of an unknown force – that his life is “the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man’s life, somewhere on this or another earth” (74; I will say more about this aspect in Section 4.2). Together, these textual clues raise fundamental questions about how the entire novel is to be understood: Under what condition does Vadim write this book – is he mad or sane? Does he write from his current perspective, or does he assume the perspective of a younger self or alter ego? Is ‘Vadim Vadimovich’ his real name, or is it the name of one of his schizophrenic personae, as Donald Barton Johnson argues (304)? Could ‘Vadim’ be a fictional character created by ‘Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov’, the fictional namesake of the real author Nabokov, which means that the book is to be read as a fictional fiction as well as a fictional memoir? Having no decisive evidence to resolve any of these questions, readers reach the end of the novel with more uncertainties than ever about how to understand the entire work.

In his discussion of Nabokov’s innovative play with the genre conventions of detective story, Nikolai Mel’nikov describes *Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire* as “relativist” novels: they both present mysteries that are not meant to be resolved but to be appreciated for their rich, elegantly balanced ambiguity; any attempt from the reader to fix a solution overlooks the ingenuity of the respective works (20-21). As Mel’nikov puts it, the “riddle[s]” of these novels were “never originally designed to

be unlocked by the skeleton keys of 'one true' interpretation" (20). Seconding his view, I choose the words 'radical indeterminacy' and 'logical heterogeneity' to describe the kaleidoscopic impression of Nabokov's novels in a more literal way. All three novels employ logical impossibility, but according to Ryan's categorisation ("From" 66), the logical impossibility in these works rarely takes the form of explicitly *contradictory* statements, i.e., the violation of the law of noncontradiction (not p AND ~p);[2] instead, it is mostly manifested as the *indeterminacy* of characters and plots, i.e., the violation of the law of the Excluded Middle (either p or ~p). Moreover, unlike largely realist novels with an open ending or a mysterious character, the indeterminacy in Nabokov's novels is so *global* and affects such *fundamental* aspects of fictional representation that one cannot summarise the works in any straightforward way (hence 'radical indeterminacy'). Rather, readers' imagination of 'what may have happened' in each novel takes the form of multiple tentative interpretations. Each interpretation provides a different (and in itself logically consistent) way to read the whole novel, constructing its own character identities, sequence of events, and causal relations. Some of these interpretations may partially overlap (e.g. the interpretation that Kinbote is a colleague of Shade's who suffers from hallucinations and the interpretation that Kinbote is a fictional character created by Shade both suggest that Kinbote's account of his exile from Zembla should be read as a fanciful story rather than somewhat reliable memories), but they are ultimately logically incompatible (e.g. Sebastian is either dead or still alive, and Shade cannot have created Kinbote if Kinbote has created Shade) and cannot be synthesised into one overarching plot summary. Some of these interpretations are assumed early on and fleshed out throughout the reading process; others dawn on the reader later and are partially constructed in retrospect. Once multiple interpretations start to form in a reader's mind, they compete for credibility, prompting the reader to pay more attention to textual details, as some details may foreground one possible reading over the others. On the whole, however, no single interpretation stands out as the most legitimate; readers are left with a *plurality of*

2. Several instances of denarration can still be found in *Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*, where the narrator negates an earlier statement (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 44, 144-45; Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 180). However, these local instances of logical contradiction can still be seen as a means of characterisation and therefore do not seriously trouble the imagination of 'worlds'. See Brian Richardson's analysis of Nabokov's use of denarration in "Denarration in Fiction".

unconfirmed possibilities which they may desire to, but cannot, reconcile (hence 'logical heterogeneity').

It should be noted that Nabokov does not completely disable the imagination of 'fictional worlds' with his use of radical indeterminacy and logical heterogeneity; nor does he completely cancel the notions of character and plot. Readers can and must still engage with these novels by trying to imagine fictional characters as human-like agents that experience certain events in a world-like environment. However, by multiplying potential interpretations of characters and plots, pitching them against each other, and highlighting moments when one interpretation tips over into another, Nabokov refuses to let these fluid imaginations solidify into fictional worlds in the theoretical sense. Ryan remarks that fictional worlds, "though created by texts, are imagined as existing *independently* of the medium" ("From" 81; my emphasis). Ruth Ronen perceives fictional worlds as "*concrete* constellations of states and affairs which . . . are non-actualized in the world" (51; my emphasis). These statements point to a basic assumption of fictional worlds theory, namely, that fictive texts are a largely transparent medium which yields essentially clear, stable, and coherent mental representations. In contrast, the 'fictional worlds' generated from Nabokov's relativist novels are far from independent and concrete: readers cannot but be aware that these mental representations are drawn from a verbal text, often with great effort, and that they can be transformed, blurred, challenged, or subverted from one moment to the next. Through his use of global logical impossibility, Nabokov emphasises that the construction of 'fictional worlds' is far from the only way to exercise the creative power of fictive language: fictions are also able to generate ambiguities, suspicions, paradoxes, nonsense, and other effects that the notion of 'world' does not capture.

Well aware of the challenges that logical impossibility poses to its validity, fictional worlds theory has proposed several ways to account for this anti-mimetic practice. However, a close look at three solutions that the theory may provide for Nabokov's relativist novels exposes their inadequacies. The first explanation is that, despite their radical indeterminacy and logical heterogeneity, these novels nonetheless construct a special type of fictional world called the 'impossible world'. This solution is extrapolated from such theorists as Ronen and Thomas Pavel who propose to expand the concept of fictional world to accommodate logical

contradictions. Pavel argues that it is both feasible and necessary to consider 'impossible world' as a kind of fictional world: "Contradictory objects nevertheless provide insufficient evidence against the notion of *world*, since nothing prevents the theory of fiction from speaking, as some philosophers do, about impossible or erratic worlds" (49). He further argues that logical heterogeneity is as much a part of the world we live in: "Consistent worlds originate in a strong idealization, and our commitment to coherence is less warranted than it appears. After all, humans lived in notoriously incongruous universes long before these became more or less cohesive" (50).

Indeed, nothing prevents fiction from generating contradictions, and we may well perceive incongruities in our own world. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to imagine what such 'impossible worlds' may look like when it comes to cases like Nabokov's, in which logical heterogeneity affects our interpretation of the entire work, rendering characters' identities, relations, and even their individuated existence uncertain. This intuitively felt difficulty points to a serious problem about the notion of 'impossible world', namely, that it overstretches the definition of 'world', turning it into a hollow concept. Pavel emphasises that, although fictional worlds theory is inspired by the possible worlds theory of logical semantics, it is free to reinterpret the latter to suit its own purpose of "represent[ing] the variety of fictional practice" (50); therefore, fictional worlds do not have to fulfill the basic criteria of possible worlds: logical consistency, logical completeness, and validity of logical implication (Fořt 16-17). True as Pavel's claim is, he does not specify where the relaxed definitional boundary of fictional world lies. He thus runs the risk of assuming that a fictional world can be anything that a fictive text allows it to be. The same tautological reasoning also lurks behind Ronen's argument that "with postmodernism, impossibilities, in the logical sense, have become a central poetic device, which shows that contradictions in themselves do not collapse the coherence of a fictional world" (55).

Meanwhile, a look at several widely accepted definitions of fictional world suggests that this concept can accommodate logical impossibility, but only to a limited extent. Ryan defines fictional worlds as "totalities that encompass *space, time, and individuated existents* that undergo transformations as the result of events. Worlds can be thought of in two ways: as containers for *entities* that possess a

physical mode of existence . . . and as *networks of relations* between these entities" ("From" 63; my emphases). Similarly, Bohumil Fořt describes fictional worlds as "specific structures generated by fictional texts, to which all the *entities* founded by fictional texts are ultimately *related*" (45; my emphases). These definitions leave room for local logical impossibilities contained within an essentially consistent and unambiguous text, to which applies Ryan's "Swiss cheese strategy" – readers "close their eyes on the holes and process the rest of the text according to normal inference processes" ("From" 66). However, these definitions do not seem to accommodate global logical impossibilities which, as in Nabokov's cases, make the relations between fictional characters fundamentally unclear or even blur the boundaries between one character and another.

The second potential solution can be extrapolated from theorists who claim that fictive texts are capable of creating not just one unified fictional world but an "entire univers[e]", with "an actual world of narrative facts" (which is often called textual actual world, or TAW) at the center and "a multitude of possible worlds created by the mental activity of characters" in the periphery (Ryan, "From" 65; see also Ronen 31). Lubomír Doležel, who believes that "[t]o exist fictionally means to exist in different modes, ranks, and degrees" (*Heterocosmica* 147), explicates in more detail how such universes are established. He argues that a possible state of affairs represented in a work of fiction needs to be "authenticated" in order to enter what he calls the "factual domain" of its fictional world (an equivalent of TAW), while "nonauthentic" possibilities such as the characters' desires, beliefs, and illusions belong to the "virtual domain" (151). The power of authentication can be granted to the narrator (usually the authorial narrator) by genre conventions, or it can be achieved through consensus between fictional characters (151). Based on this idea, can Nabokov's employment of logical impossibility be considered as the construction of several nonauthentic virtual domains, each of which is congruous within itself?

The problem with this solution is that Nabokov's relativist novels refuse to construct any concrete TAWs or factual domains, since hardly any utterance is authenticated. As Ryan observes about *Pale Fire*, "we know little that is definitive about the individual facts of the TAW" (*Possible Worlds* 40). Meanwhile, it is problematic to conceive of a fictional world that consists of virtual domains only. If

we follow Doležel's definition that "[t]o exist fictionally is to exist as a textually authenticated possible" ("Mimesis" 490), the virtual domain, as the not (yet) authenticated, is also not (yet) existent. As fictional characters' desires, illusions, dreams, or fantasies in specific texts, virtual domains may be said to 'exist' fictionally, but only insofar as these (sometimes consistent, sometimes contradictory) mental activities occupy time and space in an authenticated TAW, which makes them what Ryan calls fictional "entities" ("From" 63). In other words, virtual domains cannot exist on their own but must be anchored in a more or less concrete TAW. With his use of radical indeterminacy and logical heterogeneity, Nabokov refuses to provide this essential anchorage; thus, the logically incompatible imaginations about 'what has happened' in his novels remain *readers'* tentative interpretations and cannot be attributed to any mode of fictional existence.

A third explanation is that Nabokov's relativist novels refuse to construct fictional worlds. Indeed, some fictional worlds theorists concede that radical logical inconsistency obstructs the creation of fictional worlds. Suspicious of the notion of 'impossible world', Ryan claims, "Without denying their potential for meaningfulness, I regard texts that use contradictions for their own sake as refusing to construct a world" ("From" 68). Similarly, Doležel argues that the employment of logical contradictions "voids the transformation of nonexistent possible into fictional entities and thus cancels the entire world-making project" (*Heterocosmica* 165). However, two interrelated problems can be identified in this potential solution, which in turn raises two questions. The first problem is that it challenges the status of fictional worlds theory: if only some fictive texts construct fictional worlds while others do not, fictional worlds theory risks being downgraded from a theoretical explanation of fictionality to an optional creative device and interpretative strategy that works better for some texts or some parts of a text than others. This shift of status in turn raises the question: what are the higher principles that guide the application (or not) of world-creation as a strategy? The other problem with this solution is that it fails to illuminate the value of global logical impossibility as a creative practice. One is prompted to ask: what is achieved through the destabilisation, interruption, or nullification of fictional worlds? These questions cannot be answered within the framework of fictional worlds theory.

My examination of three solutions that fictional worlds theory provides for logical impossibility shows that they fail to account for Nabokov's relativist novels without either undermining the logical soundness or risking the status of the theory itself. Compared to these solutions, Nabokov's own 'riddle' or 'chess problem' metaphor of fiction (which I have analysed in Section 1.2) provides a more revealing framework for us to appreciate his relativist novels and answers the two questions above. Seen through this metaphor, fictional representations are no longer thought of as the (re)construction of essentially clear and stable 'worlds' which exist unproblematically, but rather as potential strategies forming and unforming in a solver's mind when faced with a chess problem. This metaphor has several implications for our conception of fiction which serve well to illuminate Nabokov's creative practices. First, it suggests that, just as potential moves of chess pieces are laboriously conjured from a given chess problem, what we call fictional beings and events are not the self-obvious core of a work of fiction but are inferred, often with difficulty and uncertainty, from a given work of fiction. As tentative products of authorial imagination and reader's interpretation, they are generated and constantly reshaped during the writing or reading process based on certain shared contextual assumptions (such as genre conventions); in this process, they do not always assume the appearance of a lucid, consistent whole, but may well be subject to ambiguities and contradictions. Second, the 'chess problem' metaphor reverses the fundamental logic of fictional worlds theory: whereas fictional worlds theory considers fictive texts as instrumental to the (re)construction of fictional worlds, the 'chess problem' metaphor suggests that readers' tentative imaginations of 'fictional worlds' are instrumental to their appreciation of literary artifice and authorial creativity. In Nabokov's own words, the clashes between fictional characters are secondary to the "real clash" between author and reader (*Speak* 221). It follows that, instead of seeing ambiguities and contradictions in fictional representation as obstructions to readers' reconstruction of – and immersion in[3] – fictional worlds, the 'chess problem' metaphor regards them as an indication of the aesthetic value of fictive texts, just as complexity and difficulty are indicators of good chess problems. Indeed, Nabokov

3. Seeing the construction of worlds as the essential task of fiction, fictional worlds theory highlights immersion as the primary way in which fictive texts are enjoyed and appreciated. As Ryan argues, the concept of fictional world "provides the surrounding environment required for immersion": it explains why we are able to empathise with fictional characters, be absorbed in vivid descriptions of scenes, and eagerly follow the progression of the plot ("From" 81).

demonstrates through his relativist novels that readers can still comprehend and enjoy fiction even if – and in many cases, *especially when* – the imagination of 'fictional worlds' becomes inadequate, for these are moments when the "real clash" between author and reader is self-reflexively highlighted, when readers' strenuous efforts to make sense of a complex, ambiguous text point directly to the appreciation of the author's ingenuity. As Brian Boyd observes, Nabokov is able to create elaborate scenes, vivid characters and engaging plots, but he can also "shift readily at any point *from* the scene . . . to the mind evoking the scene in words, or to the mind of the reader recreating it" ("Nabokov" 33); thus, he "becomes a kind of personal trainer in mental flexibility, his novels workouts that stretch our capacity for attention, curiosity, imagination, and memory, not to stress our limits, as so often in twentieth-century literature, but to extend them" (34).

Of course, metaphors are inevitably partial: they highlight some aspects of the target domain at the cost of hiding others (Lakoff and Johnson 12-13). The 'chess problem' metaphor effectively illuminates Nabokov's emphasis on authorial creativity and the aesthetic value of literary fiction through his play with imaginations of 'fictional worlds'; however, comparing fiction to an abstract puzzle, it falls short of illustrating how his creative play serves specific communicative purposes, how, as Nabokov argues in his critical remarks, aesthetic pleasure brings about renewed perceptions of reality (see Section 2.1). To further illustrate how Nabokov subordinates fictional representation to fictive communication, I will now look at a specific aspect of his play with 'fictional worlds' – what I call 'quasi-metafiction'.

4.2. Nabokov's Quasi-Metafiction: A Communicative Gesture

In each of the three novels discussed above, there are moments in which Nabokov chooses to maintain the integrity of a 'fictional world' when it is on the verge of subversion. *Sebastian Knight*, *Pale Fire*, and *Harlequins* all feature particularly self-conscious narrating characters who *almost* see through their own fictionality and grasp the existence of someone like the author Nabokov who presides over their respective 'worlds'. As Michael Wood puts it, "There is a moment in each book when the ontological walls give way (or could give way) and allow a fictional character to cross over into another zone of existence—also fictional, but so eerily akin to our own world that for a moment we believe it is that

world, the world of history and time we share with the author" ("Nabokov's Late Fiction" 201). However, Nabokov brings the novels to a close without giving his characters the opportunity to turn their vague intuitions into clearly articulated statements.

In *Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*, the critical moment appears at the very end. *Sebastian Knight* closes with V's meditation about the fluidity and interchangeability of souls. V claims, "Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us know" (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 173). The last sentence is especially intriguing: it can simply be read as an elaboration of V's statement about the interchangeability of souls, with the "someone" referring generally to anyone, but it is also tempting to infer from V's final remark the character's faint suspicion of his own fictionality, his vague apprehension of someone beyond his grasp who has created both him and Sebastian. However, V does not articulate his suspicion explicitly or further elaborate on his thoughts about that "someone", let alone turn this suspicion into an affirmative statement. Thus, Nabokov obliquely suggests a way in which a 'fictional world' could be subverted without actually subverting it, poising the novel on the verge of the metafictional without employing explicit metafictional devices.

Pale Fire ends in a remarkably similar way. In his commentary to the last line of Shade's poem, Kinbote states that he will try not to commit suicide after he finishes the current work. He claims, "I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 236). Intriguingly, one of the possible disguises Kinbote imagines he might assume is a Russian lecturer at another university: "I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art" (236). This imagination is eerily akin to the author Nabokov; more specifically, it can be seen as a superimposition of two images of Nabokov in different stages of his life: the "old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian" when writing *Pale Fire* in the 1960s, and the younger Russian émigré writer and lecturer "sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art" in the early 1940s. The uncanny resemblance prompts one to ask whether Kinbote's imagination of his own future implies a vague intuition of some

mysterious power above his plane of existence, a being that resembles the author Nabokov. However, as in *Sebastian Knight*, this reading remains a suspicion in readers' minds, for Nabokov closes the novel without providing further textual clues to reinforce this reading. Again, a 'fictional world' is subtly troubled but not overthrown.[4]

While this metaleptic gesture occupies critical moments in *Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*, it is developed into a key theme in *Harlequins*. Vadim confesses that, throughout his life, he has been troubled by the feeling of living under the influence of an unknown force. In the opening paragraph of the book, he is already reflecting that the development of odd circumstances in his life resembles a "clumsy conspiracy" with a "main plotter" (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 3). He further elaborates on this feeling in Part Two when describing his visit to the Boyan Bookshop in search of a new typist. Vadim reflects:

> I now confess that I was bothered that night, and the next and some time before, by a dream feeling that my life was the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon, I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer who was and would always be incomparably greater, healthier, and crueler than your obedient servant. (74)

Unlike V and Kinbote, Vadim explicitly describes his "dream feeling" as a suspicion of being manipulated by a malign unknown force to act out a parodic version of "another man's life". He even specifies this unknown prototype of his impersonation as "that other writer", which directs readers' thoughts more explicitly to the author Nabokov. Vadim's reflection thus creates suspense, as readers are curious about how his suspicious feeling will develop: will he come to see "that other writer" with more certainty and in more detail? Will he eventually realise that he is a fictional character created by the writer Nabokov? This suspense is further reinforced by the fact that Vadim's autobiographical account *does* look like a twisted, parodic version of

4. The possibility of such a reading, as well as its tentativeness, is briefly delineated by Brian McHale in the first chapter of *Postmodernist Fiction* (18), and by Michael Wood in "Nabokov's Late Fiction" (200-201).

Nabokov's own life in all aspects – the titles of his novels,[5] the trajectory of his emigration, and his views on other novelists such as H. G. Wells (19) and Dostoevsky (83-84), to name just a few.

Vadim's "dream feeling" resurfaces a few more times throughout the novel, either in the form of brief reiterations of the intuition about "some other existence" (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 147) in "another world" (80, 165), or as repeated metaphors that compare his life to a book, phrases such as "every paragraph of the house, every parenthesis of its furniture" (137) and "my wives and my books are interlaced monogrammatically" (71). This theme finally reappears as part of Vadim's self-reflection in Part Seven when, newly awakened from unconsciousness, he tries to settle questions of his name and identity (210-11). As I have mentioned in Section 4.1, Vadim claims that his "sonorous surname" dawned upon him after a laborious, frustrating struggle to recall it (211); however, much to the reader's irritation, he does not disclose what the surname actually is. Readers can only infer from his unsuccessful tries that it must be very close to 'Nabokov', if not 'Nabokov' itself. His remark that 'Vadim Vadimovich' may be a careless slurring of 'Vladimir Vladimirovich' further adds to readers' uncertainty about his name and the suspicion that it might be 'Vladimir Nabokov' after all. It is at this crucial moment that Vadim resumes his contemplation about "that other writer". He asks, "What was, apart from my own identity, that other person, promised to me, belonging to me?" (211). In fact, even if Vadim is the namesake of the author, it does not necessarily mean he realises that he is a fictional character. Still, having inferred the striking proximity between his name and the author's, readers may feel at this point that Vadim is closer than ever to the reality they know all along, namely, that he is a fictional character created by the author Nabokov. As a result, they are more intrigued than ever to know whether Vadim's contemplation is rewarded by any enlightening revelation. However, as with his previous reflections on this topic, Vadim does not dwell on his apprehension of "that other person"; instead, as soon as he has raised the question, he

5. *Harlequins* opens with a list of Vadim's previous works, which consists of six Russian novels published between 1925 and 1950, and six English novels published between 1939 and 1970. Readers familiar with Nabokov's publications will recognise that this list is a parodic imitation of Nabokov's bibliography: "*Tamara*" is an allusion to *Mary*, "*See under Real*" is an allusion to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, etc. The fact that this list is titled "Other Books by *the Narrator*" instead of "Other Books by *the Author*" also emphasises that Vadim is a fictional character created by Nabokov, thus reinforcing the suspense over Vadim's intuition of "that other writer".

shifts away from it to describe how he slipped out of bed to lift the blinds, fell due to weak legs, was brought back to bed, fell asleep, and, when he woke up again, "Reality entered" (212).

This "Reality", embodied by his fourth and final lover, seems to cure his psychological disorders, most of all his confusion of space with time, so does it also provide a solution to his paranoia of being watched and manipulated by a mysterious supernatural force? Irritatingly, this question is (again) left unanswered: readers may imagine that Vadim has realised his fictional status, or they may imagine alternative revelations that may have dawned on him – Johnson, for instance, suggests that Vadim's intuition of "that other writer" is in fact his vague awareness of his sane self while he suffered from life-long schizophrenia (304-305) – but none of these imaginations are sufficiently backed by textual clues to be a well-grounded, widely-accepted interpretation, let alone to enter what Doležel calls the "factual domain" of the fictional world (*Heterocosmica* 150). In the end, readers are left with as much uncertainty as they have accumulated throughout the novel.

The lack of any final resolution to V, Kinbote, and Vadim's intuitions of "that other person" creates contradictory effects. On the one hand, the fundamental indeterminacy of fictional representation troubles the theoretical concept of fictional world, as I have argued in Section 4.1. On the other hand, Nabokov maintains the imagination of 'fictional worlds' with the same indeterminacy, for although he implicitly encourages a metafictional reading of the characters' self-reflections (i.e. that they eventually realise their fictional status), he refrains from breaking the 'mirages' of 'fictional worlds' with any explicit metafictional device such as meta-comments on the fictionality of the books or a clear mention of the novelist's name. Moreover, the metafictional reading remains one of multiple possible readings, an uncertain hypothesis rather than a confident interpretation. I therefore propose to describe Nabokov's design as 'quasi-metafictional', for although it fulfils the definition of metafiction as "a style of prose narrative in which attention is directed to the process of fictive composition" (Klinkowitz), it does so in such a covert and elusive way that the realisation of metafictional effect is highly dependent on the reader's sensitivity and interpretative choice.[6]

6. I suggest that Nabokov's quasi-metafictional design can be seen as a type of what Werner Wolf calls "implicit metareference", which foregrounds "the medium as such and/or of aspects

Nabokov's quasi-metafictional play raises a question: if an author may just as well break the illusion of a 'fictional world' with explicit metafictional devices, and if Nabokov so often destabilises his 'fictional worlds' anyway, why does he deny his characters a full realisation of their fictionality and a clear identification of their author, thus poising his novels on the verge of the metafictional without crossing the threshold? The answer cannot be found in any principles of fictional representation but must be sought in the author's communicative purposes. Drawing on Vladimir E. Alexandrov's claim that in Nabokov's novels "the metaliterary is camouflage for and a model of the metaphysical" (554), I suggest that the fictional characters' vague intuitions of a higher being offer readers an original way to perceive the potentials and limitations of their own metaphysical quests. Like the fictional characters, we are unable to secure a definite answer to metaphysical questions; we can only formulate tentative hypotheses about an otherworld based on observations of the world we live in. Yet Nabokov also suggests that our metaphysical pursuits are not worthless, for we might hit upon the truth incidentally without being fully aware of our insight, just as the characters' vague intuitions about "someone" or "that other writer" actually hit upon the fact (shared only between the author and his readers) that they are fictional characters created by Nabokov.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov lovingly describes his mother's religious view:

> Her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life. All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour. (21)

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of given works as artefacts" through devices other than clear, quotable metacomments (40). However, compared to the instances of implicit metareference identified by Wolf (e.g., the "typographical devices" and a one-sentence chapter in *Tristram Shandy*), Nabokov's quasi-metafictional devices seem even more elusive: not only is it possible for readers to overlook their meta-implications, but these implications remain quite uncertain even after they are detected by the reader (Wolf 40).

This combination of faith in an otherworld with the acknowledgment of one's inability to clearly perceive it has deep Christian roots and is not utterly new. I suggest, however, that Nabokov rejuvenates this metaphysical outlook with his mind-stretching quasi-metafictional play, which is itself a creative reworking of conventional metaphors such as 'novelist as God', 'fictions as worlds', and 'human world as a divine text'. By re-combining several conventional metaphors and playing them out in creative ways, he conveys what he calls authentic reality – an original perception of the material world which foregrounds its own constructedness and aesthetic value. Through his quasi-metafictional play, Nabokov stresses that fictional representation is subordinate to fictive communication: not only does he re-emphasise 'fictional world' as a flexible metaphor which can be subverted to generate aesthetic effects, but he also demonstrates that the very decision to maintain or subvert the imagination of a 'fictional world' is dependent on the author's communicative intentions.

Through an analysis of Nabokov's mind-stretching play with the notion of 'fictional world' in *Sebastian Knight, Pale Fire,* and *Harlequins,* I have demonstrated how he subordinates the representational dimension of fiction to the aesthetic and communicative dimensions. Characterised by radical indeterminacy and logical heterogeneity, all three novels trouble the theoretical conception of fictional world as the deep structure of fictional representation; instead, they foreground 'fictional world' as a useful but not universally applicable metaphor, a flexible creative strategy and interpretive product. Compared to fictional worlds theory, Nabokov's 'chess problem' metaphor better illuminates his play with fictional representation: it emphasises that imaginations of 'fictional worlds' are inferred with effort from fictive texts, that they serve the "real clash" between author and reader, and that the destabilisation or subversion of 'fictional worlds' generates aesthetic pleasure. Through his quasi-metafictional devices, Nabokov further suggests that the imagination of 'fictional worlds' is anchored in real-world communication: the very decision to maintain or subvert a 'fictional world' depends on the author's communicative intentions. Subordinating the (re)construction of 'fictional worlds' to the generation of aesthetic and communicative effects, Nabokov foregrounds the author as an artificer and communicative agent.

Chapter V Memories Recreated: Fiction Writing as Self-Transformation

As part of his creative engagement with the 'fictional world' metaphor, Nabokov's quasi-metafictional play subordinates fictional representation to fictive communication. Yet there is another dimension to this practice: it can be also seen as a type of autobiographical allusion. In each of the three novels, Nabokov's subtle destabilisation of his 'fictional worlds' is partly achieved through some similarities between his characters and himself in terms of experiences, expertise, views, or simply names. In this sense, Nabokov's quasi-metafictional play also draws our attention to how his novels are deeply rooted in biographical context.

Through an analysis of Nabokov's critical remarks, I have illustrated his perception of the author as an (auto)biographical subject in Chapter III. Nabokov believes that personal memory plays an indispensable role in fiction writing: not only do personal recollections serve as a necessary source of fictional representation, but they also supply the communicative intention or discursive impulse for fictive creation; in return, fiction writing often alters the author's feelings towards certain memories, thus reshaping her/his self-understanding. Meanwhile, Nabokov's reflections on the inevitable incompleteness of autobiography prompt one to ask whether (and how) fiction offers an alternative way of self-exploration which resists the ideal of a stable, finalised self-image and embraces the continual transformation of self-perception.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Nabokov picks up and further develops these ideas in his novels, and how these ideas inform our reading of his fiction in return. Nabokov's novels belong to what Seán Burke calls "text[s] which incorporat[e] the (auto)biographical as a part of [their] dramaturgy" (*Death* 180), not only because of the density and specificity of autobiographical allusions, but also because they self-reflexively address the complex role of the biographical context in the reading and writing of fiction. Starting with the latter aspect, I will devote Section 5.1 to a reading of *Harlequins* as Nabokov's self-parody of his view on the interpenetration between personal memory and fiction writing. This will be followed by an analysis of how *Sebastian Knight* self-consciously negotiates approaches to reading autobiographical allusions in Section 5.2. Finally, I will focus on several

prominent autobiographical allusions in these two novels in Section 5.3, exploring how Nabokov's critical and creative reflections on "the proximity of work and life" (Burke, *Death* 180) provide clues for our interpretation of these allusions, and how these interpretations in turn illuminate the biographical situatedness of authorship.

5.1. Look at the Harlequins!*: The Interpenetration of Memory and Imagination*

Many critics see *Harlequins* as Nabokov's self-parody in reaction to the public's desire to spy on his private life and, in particular, his qualms about his biographer Andrew Field. Susan Sweeney claims, for instance, that writing this oblique fictional memoir is a creative way for Nabokov to mock Field's "search for whatever secrets and sources might lie behind his art"; it is also "calculated to make a fool of anyone who reads *Look at the Harlequins!* as a *roman à clef*" (305). Her opinion is echoed by Boyd's detailed account of how *Harlequins* originated from Nabokov's growing discontent with Field, who went into Nabokov's private matters against the writer's will and tried to assert his independence as a biographer by ignoring Nabokov's suggestions for corrections and revisions (*American Years* 602-22). In response, Boyd argues, Nabokov created through *Harlequins* a "parodic exaggeration" of popular misconstructions of his personal image and a "deliberate travesty" of his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (614, 625).

I agree with Sweeney and Boyd that *Harlequins* can be read as a self-parody, and I hope to develop two aspects of this reading. First, although the novel may have stemmed from Nabokov's discontent with invasions of his privacy or misconceptions of his personal image, as a work of art it ultimately goes beyond a simple attack on others and facilitates a careful, ambivalent, and playful self-appraisal by the author. In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon points out that a parody is formed by both similarity with and difference from the original, with emphasis on the latter – it is "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). The emphasis on difference, however, does not mean a simple dismissal of the value of the original; rather, it can suggest a range of attitudes "from respectful admiration to biting ridicule" (16). As Nabokov himself puts it in an interview, "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game" (*Strong Opinions* 65), for parody is able to convey more diverse and ambivalent meanings. Therefore, a closer look at both the similarities and the differences that constitute Nabokov's self-parody in the novel may illuminate his complex self-understanding as well as his

attitude towards readers, critics, and biographers. Second, Nabokov's self-parody in *Harlequins* is not limited to the creative reworking of his personal past; it also plays out on a more self-reflexive level as a parody of his view on the interconnections between personal memory and fiction writing. This latter and less noticed aspect will be the focus of my discussion in this section.

In this respect, the character Vadim shares some apparent similarities with the author Nabokov. Like Nabokov, Vadim observes that his personal recollections provide both a representational source and certain intentions or impulses for fiction writing. This idea is already manifested at the beginning of *Harlequins,* where Vadim declares the main purpose of his memoir: "Indeed, the present memoir derives much of its value from its being a *catalogue raisonné* of the roots and origins and amusing birth canals of many images in my Russian and especially English fiction" (7). The imagination of his personal experiences as the "roots", "origins", and "birth canals" of images in his fiction sounds like a more eccentric variation of Nabokov's interview remark that imagination is both "supplied" and "prompted" by memory (*Strong Opinions* 66).

A remarkable illustration of Vadim's proclamation is his account of how Dolly von Borg informed his fiction writing. He discloses that, during his short stay with the Stepanovs' after his first wife's death, he secretly fondled Dolly, the eleven-year-old granddaughter of his friend Mr. Stepanov, and even indulged his erotic reverie by transforming her into a character in his Russian novel *Krasnyy Tsilindr* (translated as *The Red Top Hat*) (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 65). Vadim writes, "She had flaxen hair and a freckled nose, and I chose the gingham frock with the glossy black belt for her to wear when I had her continue her mysterious progress right into the book I was writing, *The Red Top Hat*, in which she becomes graceful little Amy, the condemned man's ambiguous consoler" (65). Although Vadim does not provide more details about the image or role of "little Amy" in his novel, his description of having Dolly "*continue* her mysterious progress" and "*becom[e]* graceful little Amy" not only indicates essential similarities between Dolly and Amy but also suggests Vadim's full awareness of using a person in his own life as the prototype of a fictional character. In this respect, Vadim's account of Dolly reminds one of Nabokov's half-playful, half-nostalgic description in his memoir that his family's Berlin residence in the early 1920s was "one of those large, gloomy, eminently

bourgeois apartments that I have *let* to so many émigré families in my novels and short stories", or his lamentation that the coloured pencils he treasured as a child "have been *distributed* among the characters in my books to keep fictitious children busy" (*Speak* 28, 71; my emphases).

Apart from deliberately using Dolly as a representational source, Vadim also suggests that he has created Amy partly to satiate his erotic desire for Dolly. Creating Amy after Dolly allows Vadim the pleasure to dress the girl as he likes and to subject her to the role of a "consoler", whereas the real Dolly would "wriggle out of [his] arms and make for the door" in the middle of a chat (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 65). Indeed, it is hard to tell whether "the condemned man" in Vadim's account refers to a fictional character in his novel who is consoled by Amy, or Vadim himself who is consoled by the creation of Amy, or perhaps a mixture of the two. A similar case can be found in Nabokov's autobiography, where he confesses how he used his creative power as a novelist for a mischievous 'revenge' on a lepidopterist called Kretschmar for having already described a rare moth which the young Nabokov thought was his original discovery: "I received the sad news . . . with the utmost stoicism; but many years later, by a pretty fluke (I know I should not point out these plums to people), I got even with the first discoverer of *my* moth by giving his own name to a blind man in a novel" (*Speak* 99).[1] Like Vadim, Nabokov acknowledges that some artistic choices in his fiction are directly motivated by desires and frustrations in his personal life.

This kind of prompting is already a two-way process, as fiction writing offers the authors a partial compensation, if not complete fulfilment, of their unsatisfied desires in real life. Yet through his account of a sequel to the case of Dolly, Vadim further shows that fiction writing not only affects his feelings towards past experiences but also shapes his perception of future experiences. Later in the book, Vadim discloses that his life trajectory crossed with Dolly's again thirteen years later, when he, now a lecturer and renowned writer, bumped into the twenty-four-year-old Dolly in New York (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 115). This time, Dolly took advantage of Vadim's still amorous feelings towards her to develop an affair with him and break it to his wife Annette, bringing Vadim's second marriage to an end

1. The fictional character Nabokov refers to is the art critic Bruno Kretschmar in *Laughter in the Dark*, who loses his sight from an all-but-suicidal car crash.

(115-23). Finally realising Dolly's scheme to destroy him, Vadim regrets, "I should never have put her in my *Krasnyy Tsilindr;* that's the way you breed live monsters – from little ballerinas in books" (122). Due to Vadim's life-long dementia and his recurring suspicion of being manipulated by an unknown force (see Chapter IV), it is difficult to tell how serious this statement is. He may genuinely believe that there is a cause-effect relation between his creation of a Dolly-like character and Dolly's 'monstrous' trick on him, but it is equally probable that he is only making a half-joking statement which simultaneously emphasises his frustrated resignation and betrays his failure to reflect on his own immoral conduct. In either case, however, Vadim's reflection indicates a "reversion of the work onto the life" (Barthes, "From" 161): it suggests that the creation of a character after Dolly affects his feelings towards his later affair with her, as he now perceives a fateful reverberation between his fictive creation and personal life. Vadim encapsulates the interpenetration between life and work in a metaphor when he claims, "In this memoir my wives and my books are interlaced monogrammatically like some sort of watermark or *ex libris* design" (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 71). The image of a monogram, a new pattern formed by the superimposition of two or more letters, highlights the dialogic exchange between an author's personal life and fiction writing.

Upon further inspection, however, significant disparities start to arise out of the apparent similarities between Vadim's and Nabokov's thoughts about the dialogic relation between life and work. First, although both authors reveal how some personal recollections have been used in their works of fiction with little alteration, and how certain thoughts and feelings in their personal life have directly prompted their fictive creation, Nabokov talks about these instances with a less agitated, more playful or meditative tone, which indicates his ability to distance himself emotionally from his fictional characters, objects, and places, drawing a clear distinction between fiction and real life despite their frequent intersection. This difference in tone and attitude is further strengthened by the fact that only Nabokov balances his accounts of how his personal recollections have informed his fiction writing with the claim that he is "very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity" and that, even in the cases of obvious allusions, "[r]aisins of fact in the cake of fiction are many stages removed from the initial grape [i.e. personal life]" (*Strong Opinions* 12, 131). In contrast, Vadim's earnest remarks on

the transformations between Dolly and Amy suggest a lack of distinction between life and fiction, which puts both his sanity and his morality in question. For Nabokov, the fictional character Bruno Kretschmar is *not* the lepidopterist Kretschmar, and his appearance in *Laughter in the Dark* serves more purposes than a simple compensation for the novelist's past disappointment. Readers can also be sure that, despite his playful revenge in fiction, Nabokov would never have attempted or wished any harm on the real Kretschmar had they been contemporaries. In Vadim's mind, however, the images of Dolly and Amy are blurred together: he creates Amy to satisfy *and* perpetuate his passionate yet immoral desire for Dolly; this act of creation in turn anticipates, if not directly contributes to, his later attempt to quench this desire in real life.

Second, although Nabokov agrees with Vadim that an author's personal life supplies the "roots" and "origins" of her/his fictive creation, he considers his own autobiography as anything but a "*catalogue raisonné*", a comprehensive list of personal experiences that have informed his fiction writing (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 7). In particular, the aspect of personal life that Vadim primarily focuses on – namely, details of his (dramatic, chaotic, and sometimes quite absurd) romantic relationships – is an aspect that Nabokov is highly protective of: even his beloved wife Véra Nabokov is barely represented in *Speak, Memory* (more on this in Section 5.3), let alone his other relationships before and after marriage.[2] Nabokov puts forward his own view on the value of literary (auto)biography in an interview, where he claims that "[t]he best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but *the story of his style*" (*Strong Opinions* 131; my emphasis). This statement shares some similarities with Vadim's declaration of the purpose of his memoir: they both suggest that, in a literary autobiography, personal memories should be related less for their importance in the author's private life and more for their contribution to her/his aesthetic pursuit. However, crucial differences can also be spotted between these two statements: whereas Vadim's "*catalogue raisonné*" suggests a willingness verging on exhibitionism to disclose every incident in the author's personal life that has contributed to his fictive creation, Nabokov's "story of his style" suggests a focus on those personal experiences that have helped expand his aesthetic capacity

2. Judith Thurman's article "Silent Partner" in *The New Yorker* paints a succinct picture of what may have been the more dubious and less glamorous side of the love story between Vladimir and Véra Nabokov.

(e.g. synaesthesia, sensitivity to details and patterns, mastery of languages, and familiarity with diverse literary traditions); in other words, Nabokov is concerned with the more reflexive question of 'how life and work interconnect' rather than where each point of intersection lies.

This principle of selectivity may explain Nabokov's reservation about the disclosure of real-life inspirations for fictive creation in *Speak, Memory*. When revealing his fictive 'revenge' on Kretschmar, for instance, Nabokov notes in parenthesis, "I know I should not point out these plums to people" (*Speak* 99). At another point, between a brief summary of his "numerous childhood illnesses" and a vivid account of a strange clairvoyant experience in his sickbed (he envisioned how his mother went to the stationery shop to buy a pencil as a comforting gift for him, which turned out to be true except for one unexpected detail – that it was not a normal-size pencil but the giant showpiece in the shop window), he notes, "The future specialist in *such dull literary lore as autoplagiarism* will like to collate a protagonist's experience in my novel *The Gift* with the original event" (19; my emphasis). These remarks show that, although Nabokov acknowledges the proximity between life and work, he holds a more cautious and ambivalent attitude when it comes to the disclosure of how particular incidents in his personal life have informed his fiction writing. Nabokov is aware that, by relating these experiences in his autobiography, he creates or increases the possibility of autobiographical allusion retrospectively; however, he expresses uncertainty as to whether such disclosure adds to the value of his novels. These reflections also suggest questions for readers: what should one look for when reading autobiographical allusions? Is it possible to perceive autobiographical allusions as more than mere "autoplagiarism", and if so, how?

By creating a parodic fictional character who is only apparently similar to himself, Nabokov resists reductive understandings of his reflections on the biographical situatedness of authorship. Vadim's simplistic, overzealous view of the dialogic relation between personal life and fiction writing, as well as his distasteful statements about the purpose of his memoir, highlights by contrast the subtlety of Nabokov's own ideas. Through the critical distance of parody, Nabokov reminds us that his perception of the proximity between an author's life and work is complemented by a clear distinction between fiction and real life. He also suggests

that literary autobiography should not lapse into an exhibitionistic display of the numerous crossings between a novelist's personal life and fictive creation; instead, the author needs to consider the communicative effects of such self-disclosure, and by extension, readers should also reflect on their interest in – and approaches to interpreting – autobiographical allusions.

5.2. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: How (Not) to Read Autobiographical Allusions*

The question of how (not) to read autobiographical allusions, hinted at in the parodic play of *Harlequins*, is self-reflexively discussed throughout *Sebastian Knight*. This is enabled by two features of the novel. First, the character-narrator V is a reflective biographer who keeps negotiating his approach to autobiographical allusions. Second, *Sebastian Knight* is a relativist novel (see Section 4.1); its radical indeterminacy and logical heterogeneity provide readers with more than one way to perceive V's practices and reflections.

Troubled by the scantiness of reliable sources in his attempt to reconstruct Sebastian's 'real life', V often resorts to reading Sebastian's works of fiction in the hope that they will offer him a few glimpses of Sebastian's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Yet V is not one of those simple-minded critics who keep "dotting all the i's with the author's head" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 16), taking characters with a few superficial similarities to the author as thinly veiled portraits of the novelist himself. Instead, he is a reflective biographer who keeps negotiating his approach to reading autobiographical allusions in Sebastian's works of fiction.

V's methodological reflections are partly manifested in his relentless criticism of the logically and ethically flawed practice of his rival biographer Mr. Goodman, who worked as Sebastian's literary agent and published *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight* after his death. V already dislikes Goodman for advising him against writing about Sebastian on an earlier occasion while deliberately concealing his own ongoing biographical project (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 49-51); reading the finished work, he loathes Goodman even more. According to V, Goodman's biographical endeavour is based on a banal, overgeneralised, and preordained main idea: "His sole object is to show 'poor Knight' as the product and victim of what he calls 'our time'" (52). In order to achieve this problematic goal, Goodman resorts to

questionable practices. V points out that Goodman's extremely distorted account of Sebastian's 'tragic life' partly results from his inability to distinguish truthful accounts from invented tales: in order to write about Sebastian's childhood and youth, of which he knows very little, he credulously presents some 'anecdotes' that Sebastian once told him, although it is obvious to both V and readers of the novel that Sebastian was merely teasing his agent with popular folk tales and thinly disguised retellings of literary fiction (54-55). This ineptitude is coupled with a selective biographical reading of Sebastian's works of fiction based on strong personal bias – V observes that Goodman "never quotes anything that may clash with the main idea of his fallacious work" (55) – which further discredits his account of Sebastian. It should be noted, however, that V only criticises this approach for its biased selectivity, not for its attempt to speculate about the novelist's personal life by reading his works of fiction.

This is probably because V himself partakes in the latter practice as well – in fact, he reflects on the revelations and problems it brings throughout the book. Unlike Goodman, V is mostly able to maintain a clear distinction between Sebastian and his fictional characters.[3] Moreover, he is aware of Sebastian's creative power to rework personal memories into something recognisably autobiographical yet substantially different in fiction. Commenting on a fictional love letter in Sebastian's novel *Lost Property*, V expresses his amazement at the "baffling manner" in which Sebastian "made use of his art" to transform his personal feelings into fiction:

> The *light* of personal truth is hard to perceive in the *shimmer* of an imaginary nature, but what is still harder to understand is the amazing fact that a man writing of things which he really felt at the time of writing, could have had the power to create simultaneously – and out of the very things which distressed his mind – a fictitious and faintly absurd character. (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 95; my emphases)

3. Occasionally, however, this distinction is blurred. Claiming that *Lost Property* is Sebastian's "most autobiographical work" (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 6), V conflates the author Sebastian with his fictional character-narrator, quoting the narrator's statements as if they represent Sebastian's own opinions (6, 56, 90). Exceptional as they are, these moments suffice to induce suspicions in a sensitive reader's mind about the validity of V's interpretation and, more broadly, the success of his biographical pursuit.

V's comment on Sebastian's fictive creativity resonates with Nabokov's claim that he is "very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity" (*Strong Opinions* 12) – in fact, it can be seen as an illustration of the effect of this creative approach from a reader's perspective. V points out that the employment of autobiographical allusions in the creation of a fictional character does not warrant more general or fundamental resemblances between the character and the author; rather, a novelist may rise above even her/his most intense personal memories, drawing on them to create fictional characters that are drastically different from the author. Besides, the metaphor of personal memories as "light" enfolded in the "shimmer" of fictive invention emphasises that it is often difficult, if not impossible, for readers to clearly distinguish autobiographical elements from fictive invention in a work of fiction, as they can be intricately interwoven by a creative author. This observation is further extended by Nabokov's remark that imagination "is a form of memory" (*Strong Opinions* 66), as he points out that memory and imagination are equally inseparable from the author's perspective.

Do these observations genuinely inform V's reading of autobiographical allusions in Sebastian's novels? V admits that, although Sebastian is his half-brother, their life trajectories have taken different directions since their youthful years, leaving him unsure of even some of the most basic facts about Sebastian's later life, let alone his thoughts and feelings. Therefore, he makes use of his limited knowledge about Sebastian's past to identify autobiographical allusions in his works of fiction in the hope that, besides the determinable correspondences, more direct borrowings from the author's personal experiences can be inferred from these passages, yielding new insights into the author's 'real life', especially the more private realm of thoughts and feelings. For instance, right before he relates Sebastian's act of kindness to a poor stranger (in which Sebastian, initially ignoring a poor old man, soon turns back to take the printed advertisements he was handing out), V quotes a passage from *Lost Property*, in which the narrator states that he is often distressed by how people are often blind to the 'little people' around them such as waitresses and taxi-drivers: "I have often felt as if I were sitting among blind men and madmen, when I thought that I was the only one in the crowd to wonder about the chocolate-girl's slight, very slight limp" (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 90). V does not state the link between the fiction excerpt and the real-life incident, but his juxtaposition of

them suggests that he perceives in this passage a piece of Sebastian's own mind: the fiction excerpt serves as a convincing explanation of Sebastian's act, although the fictional narrator's thoughts are much more specific, and his feelings more intense, than is indicated by Sebastian's quick gesture.

In the next chapter, V applies the same approach to another part of *Lost Property*, drawing bolder and more questionable inferences. After giving a very vague account of Sebastian's separation from his lover Clare Bishop based on the little information he has acquired, V turns to an appraisal of *Lost Property*, "which Sebastian had begun at that time" (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 92). In particular, he quotes at full length a farewell letter included in the novel which declares the end of a relationship. This lengthy quote is followed by V's comment: "If we abstract from this fictitious letter everything that is personal to its supposed author, I believe that there is much in it that many have been felt by Sebastian, or even written by him, to Clare" (94-95). V does not explain how he comes to this conclusion, but it is most likely that he infers similarity in thoughts and feelings between the fictional character and Sebastian himself from a few perceived correspondences between their respective relationships: in both cases, the man is compelled to leave his partner despite much love and happiness due to a vague, quite inexplicable fissure in the relationship; "the damned formula of 'another woman'" is also involved in each separation (93-94). However, perceptive readers will realise that V is making a highly risky interpretative move here: the similarities in the rough course of the two relationships do not necessarily lead to the resemblance in thoughts and feelings between the lovers.

A close look at the instances above shows that the difference between V and those critics who keep "dotting all the i's with the author's head" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 16) is but a difference of degree. Without conflating the author with any of his characters, V's approach to autobiographical allusions in Sebastian's novels is fundamentally similar: identifying a fictive passage which contains perceived correspondences with what he knows about Sebastian's personal past, he tentatively extends the resemblance to other aspects, especially the less determinable realm of thoughts and feelings. Although this metonymic extension of similarities may hit upon some truth about the author's personal experiences, and although V employs this method in moderation, it is nonetheless logically fallacious.

Interestingly, V tries to mitigate the logical fallacy underlying his approach by quoting lengthy passages from Sebastian's works as they are, without stating which parts of the characters' thoughts and feelings are directly drawn from the author's own. His comment on the farewell letter in *Lost Property* is a good example: he makes the general remark that much of the character's confession in the letter may be a direct borrowing of Sebastian's own feeling about his relationship with Clare, but he does not specify where exactly the resemblances may lie. Earlier in the book, V observes that *The Prismatic Bezel*, another novel by Sebastian, contains "a passage . . . strangely connected with Sebastian's inner life at the time of the completing of the last chapters" (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 82). Without specifying what these 'strange connections' may be, V provides a full quotation of this passage that spans across two pages (82-83). By refraining from drawing specific inferences from perceived autobiographical allusions, V re-emphasises the inseparability of the "light" from the "shimmer", the novelist's personal life from his fictive invention; he also leaves space for readers to consider the exact extent and ways to/in which the quoted passages are autobiographical. However, this sustained ambiguity does not resolve the logical fallacy that lies at the foundation of V's approach. Rather, it indicates his escape from a biographer's mission to tell a truthful and detailed story of the biographee's life, which eventually brings the success of his endeavour into question.

As his biographical project goes on, V is increasingly haunted by a sense of failure. Early in the book, V claims that, despite his limited knowledge of Sebastian, he is confident about his ability to accomplish the daunting task of biography writing thanks to his "inner knowledge of [Sebastian's] character" (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 28), a "common rhythm" (29) they share: "Inner knowledge? Yes, this was a thing I possessed, I felt it in every nerve" (28). V is hopeful that this "inner knowledge" can guide him to make more or less intuitive moves which shed light on his understanding of Sebastian. However, when he restates this belief later in the book (84, 154), he sounds less and less confident. Towards the end, he ponders, "If here and there I have not captured at least the shadow of his thought, or if now and then unconscious cerebration has not led me to take the right turn in his private labyrinth, then my book is a clumsy failure" (154). V's confession of self-doubt prompts readers to reconsider the credibility of his account and the validity of his

methods, not least his identification and interpretation of autobiographical allusions in Sebastian's novels. They may come to realise that V's approach puts them in a difficult situation: they must either believe in V's "inner knowledge" and comply with him by reading Sebastian's personal experiences out of his fiction excerpts with a fallacious method, or they must refrain from drawing any conclusions from the excerpts and regard V's biographical project as a failure.

V's approach to autobiographical allusions in Sebastian's works of fiction illustrates a common interpretative practice adopted by readers who read fictions with what Robert McGill calls "biographical desire", or the desire to draw "possible autobiographical content" from fictive texts (4): identifying some traces of a novelist's personal past in one of his fictional characters, events, or settings, we are often tempted to infer – or at least suspect – that some other aspects of the same character, event, or setting are also literal transcriptions of the author's personal experiences, especially when it comes to the most private and abstract aspects of personal life such as one's beliefs, thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, and dreams. With his quite unattainable goal of writing substantial parts of Sebastian's biography by reading Sebastian's works of fiction, V is largely dependent on this problematic approach, although he is well aware of Sebastian's creative power to intricately blend autobiographical elements with fictive invention. In the meantime, V's negotiation with his interpretative practices exposes the logical fallacy of this common approach, reminding readers that this kind of biographical reading, though not always leading to misinterpretation, is problematic and should be exercised with much discretion and self-reflexivity.

Whereas V's interpretive practices turn out to be highly problematic if not a total failure, Nabokov, by making *Sebastian Knight* a relativist novel (see Section 4.1), points to an alternative approach to reading autobiographical allusions that goes beyond metonymic inferences of similarities. If we assume the possible reading that *Sebastian Knight* is a new autobiographical novel written by Sebastian, we come to see its self-conscious discussions of autobiographical allusions in a different light. Instead of focusing predominantly on the possible similarities between Sebastian's works of fiction and his personal life, readers are prompted to wonder at the aspect of autobiographical allusions that V overlooks, namely, how Sebastian self-consciously draws on his personal memories, including some that he has already

used in his previous works, and reworks them in a new novel. This question has no answer, of course, because there are no (auto)biographical sources against which we can read Sebastian's new novel. Nonetheless, this change of question already gestures towards a new approach to autobiographical allusion, one that emphasises authorial creativity over potential truthfulness and pays as much attention to differences as similarities between texts. One asks: why does an author draw on certain personal memories and rework them in a specific way? What does the creative reworking of personal memories reveal about the author's perception of her/his own past and her/his self-understanding? These key questions guide my reading of Nabokov's autobiographical allusions below.

5.3. Nabokov's Autobiographical Allusions: Seeing One's Past in Different Lights

Informed by the approach extrapolated from *Sebastian Knight*, I will now analyse three of Nabokov's own autobiographical allusions in *Sebastian Knight* and *Harlequins*. The cases I choose for my analysis are some of the most conspicuous to modern-day readers who are familiar with Nabokov's life trajectory in general and his autobiography in particular.[4] They allude to three important figures in Nabokov's life – his former governess, his father, and his wife – all of whom serve as lasting inspirations for his fictive creation. More importantly, these autobiographical allusions strike rich resonances with specific passages in *Speak, Memory*. Through a close analysis of the intertextual resonances and dissonances, I will illustrate how autobiographical allusions can be read as a means of self-transformation, a way in which the author casts his personal memories in different lights.

Toward the end of the second chapter of *Sebastian Knight*, V describes his visit to 'Mademoiselle', Sebastian's and his own former Swiss governess, in order to learn more about Sebastian's childhood. V recalls that, when Mademoiselle worked

4. These autobiographical allusions may not have been as obvious and specific in the eyes of an earlier readership, especially when Nabokov was still obscure as a writer of English, and before his autobiography was published. A look at Norman Page's selected collection of contemporary reviews of Nabokov's works shows that, while most reviews of *Harlequins* (1974) comment on the extensive and parodic use of autobiographical allusions, few reviewers mention the employment of autobiographical allusions in *Sebastian Knight* (1941), although readers nowadays are likely to detect heavy allusions to Nabokov's early life in this novel, too. This contrast reminds us that autobiographical allusions are not simply inscribed in textual features but are generated through readers' inferences of authorial intentions based on perceived intertextual correspondences between (auto)biographical and fictive sources. Therefore, the identification and interpretation of autobiographical allusions are dependent on communicative context(s).

as their governess, she constantly lived in her nostalgia for Switzerland and remained immune and even hostile to her Russian environment. Now, "very deaf and grey, but as voluble as ever", she lived in Lausanne amongst other retired Swiss governesses who had worked in Russia (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 18-19). In this community, all the old ladies "lived in their past", or rather, their highly sentimentalised memories of their Russian past, for their native land had also grown foreign to them after many years abroad (18). Upon seeing V, Mademoiselle gave him "effusive embraces" and "started to recall little facts of [his] childhood which were either hopelessly distorted, or so foreign to [his] memory that [he] doubted their past reality" (18-19).

This passage strikes heavy resonances with Nabokov's account of his (as well as his brother Sergey's) former Swiss governess in his autobiography. Nabokov devotes a whole chapter of *Speak, Memory* to the portrait of his own 'Mademoiselle'. At one point, he describes how Mademoiselle used to recall in a highly sentimental manner the "good old days" she spent with the boys in the Nabokovs' country estate (Nabokov, *Speak* 76). According to Nabokov, however, he and Sergey were never the naïve, obedient children she imagined them to be, and Mademoiselle lived in constant misery during her seven years' stay in Russia, where home was far away and everything was utterly foreign to her. Towards the end of the chapter, Nabokov recounts a visit to the retired Mademoiselle in Lausanne. Seeing her again after many years, he found her "[s]touter than ever, quite gray and almost totally deaf" (83). She had retired into a community of former governesses who "formed a small island in an environment that had grown alien to them" so they could "huddl[e] together in a constant seething of competitive reminiscences" (83). Mademoiselle welcomed Nabokov with "a tumultuous outburst of affection" and "spoke as warmly of her life in Russia as if it were her own lost homeland" (83).

The striking, almost word-for-word correspondences between the fictional and the real Mademoiselle provide solid evidence for a highly elaborate autobiographical allusion. Meanwhile, they also form the common ground on which the significant differences between the two Mademoiselles start to show. In *Sebastian Knight*, Mademoiselle shed profuse tears when she learnt of Sebastian's death, but she did not ask "one single thing about Sebastian's later life, not a single question about the way he died, nothing" (20), which was particularly upsetting for

V. Instead, she dwelled on her own fantasised image of a "tender" and "noble" Sebastian; she even asked V to write "a fairy-tale with Sebastian for prince", making V "dismally uncomfortable" (19). These details all point to Mademoiselle's mental isolation – her self-absorption in wilful distortions of the past and her inability to genuinely care about others. As V's first main informant, she also foreshadows a series of disappointing informants who failed to understand Sebastian. The real governess, in contrast, showed genuine kindness to Nabokov. Finding Mademoiselle almost deaf, Nabokov brought her a hearing aid the next day. Although she could hear nothing at first because the hearing aid was misadjusted, she still thanked Nabokov with teary eyes and "swore she could hear every word" (Nabokov, *Speak* 83). Despite her own bodily ailment and life-long misery, she still tried to "have [Nabokov] depart pleased with [his] own kindness" (84).

This major difference between the two Mademoiselles that shines through numerous similarities may reflect or facilitate a subtle shift of emphasis in Nabokov's memories of his own former governess. Nabokov's depiction of Mademoiselle in *Speak, Memory* is full of hilarious humor about her clumsiness and sentimentality; it is also filled with tender sympathy for her perpetual unhappiness, first as a foreigner in Russia and then as a foreigner in Switzerland. In defence of her idealisation of the past, Nabokov remarks, "One is always at home in one's past, which partly explains those pathetic ladies' posthumous love for a remote and, to be perfectly frank, rather appalling country, which they never had really known and in which none of them had been very content" (*Speak* 83). Nonetheless, Nabokov asks himself at the end of the chapter whether he had "utterly missed something in her" that was beyond her funny features and her life-long misery (84). In fact, Nabokov has already captured this "something" and subtly conveyed it in his chapter on Mademoiselle. This important character, reflected in her "radiant deceit" (84), is her capacity to be generous towards others despite her own suffering, which indicates a triumph of personal dignity over tragic fate. By creating a remarkably similar Mademoiselle in his novel who turns out to be the exact opposite in her capacity of empathy and kindness, Nabokov foregrounds this noble character of the real governess, which is only illustrated marginally in *Speak, Memory*. Rather than add something utterly new to his autobiographical account, he shifts the emphasis with which he perceives a certain aspect of his own past (in this case, an important figure

in his early years) through a carefully arranged constellation of similarities and differences.

Nabokov's ability to draw on important personal recollections to develop something remarkably similar yet significantly different in his fiction is again manifested in the allusion to his father Vladimir Dimitrievich Nabokov in *Sebastian Knight*. At the end of the first chapter, V recounts how his and Sebastian's father died from a pistol duel when both brothers were still young (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 10-12). He then quotes several paragraphs from Sebastian's autobiographical novel *Lost Property*, in which the novelist "gives his own impressions of that lugubrious January day" (13).[5] Interestingly, this passage is at once very different from and very similar to Nabokov's account of his father's duel in *Speak, Memory*. A number of differences can be spotted between the fictional and the real duel: the fictional duel resulted from scandals over a previous marriage, while the real one was called out due to a personal attack resulting from political disputes; Sebastian's father kept the upcoming duel all to himself, while V. D. Nabokov's duel was only kept secret from the children; Sebastian knew nothing about the duel until he returned home from school on that very day to find it over, while Nabokov learnt about his father's duel earlier on that day from a magazine passed among his classmates. Above all, the outcomes of the duels are different: Sebastian's father lost the duel and was shot dead, while V. D. Nabokov's duel was cancelled last-minute with the rival's apology (Nabokov, *Sebastian Knight* 10-13 and *Speak* 142-46). In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov concludes the account of his father's duel with a moving description of his blissful feeling upon knowing its cancellation, followed by a poignant remark that "ten years were to pass" before his father finally met the end of his life by shielding his friend from an assassination (146). I suggest that, by imagining an alternative ending to this important childhood memory in fiction, Nabokov highlights the fragility and preciousness of the exultation brought by the cancellation of his father's duel. He suggests that, with a few twists in the plot, the story of his whole family would have been substantially rewritten. Moreover,

5. The following passage in *Sebastian Knight* is therefore an autobiographical allusion in two senses: it is Sebastian's allusion to his father's duel in *Lost Property* as well as one of Nabokov's autobiographical allusions in *Sebastian Knight*. As Sebastian's autobiographical allusion, this passage points to some typical problems in V's biographical reading of Sebastian's works of fiction, which I have discussed in Section 5.2. My analysis below will focus on this passage as Nabokov's allusion to his father's duel as is depicted in *Speak, Memory.*

Sebastian's rather straightforward shock at finding his father dead upon coming home casts a contrasting light on Nabokov's complex thoughts and emotions after learning about his father's upcoming duel at school – his anger at the betrayal of his gossiping classmate, a sudden realisation of things that had happened at home in the previous days, agonised imagination of what would happen at the duel, fear, anxiety, and above all, dear memories of his "tender friendship" with his father (143-46). Against the superficial similarity of a dramatic duel, Nabokov foregrounds a deep respect and love for one's father that only he, and not his fictional character, gets to enjoy.

Meanwhile, despite all these differences between the two duels, readers who have read about V. D. Nabokov's duel in *Speak, Memory* are still likely to feel a strong sense of familiarity when reading about the fictional duel in *Sebastian Knight*. This familiarity lies less in what is commonly perceived as the 'basic facts' of the respective duels (participants, causes, results, etc.) and more in their narrative representation – in other words, in *how* they are told by Nabokov and Sebastian respectively. Both duels are narrated mostly from the perspective of a young son; both narrators depict minute details of their everyday family life on the eve of the duel, when they were still kept in the dark about what was going to happen, which takes on an aura of poignancy in retrospect; both narrators recall having a particularly unpleasant day at school on the day of the duel, though for different reasons; both learnt the result of the duel through telling sounds that reached their ears upon coming home from school – "loud, cheerful voices" in *Speak, Memory*, the sobbing of the father's orderly in *Sebastian Knight* (Nabokov, *Speak* 143-46 and *Sebastian Knight* 12). Through these similarities in narrative representation, Nabokov again foregrounds the textuality of autobiographical narratives, the reflexive relation between the narrating-I and the narrated-I. He also reminds readers that autobiographical allusions are a kind of intertextual allusions, that they may allude not only to verifiable facts in novelists' life but also to their own or others' narrative understanding of them. It should be noted, however, that this emphasis on (inter)textuality does not mean that (auto)biographical accounts are undesirable distortions of the 'real past' and that autobiographical allusions are mere intertextual games. Rather, it foregrounds narrative as an indispensable tool with which we make sense of our lived experiences and suggests that, by shifting the focus of certain

(auto)biographical narratives, the intertextual play of autobiographical allusions is able to transform authors' perceptions of their personal past and reshape their self-understanding.

This emphasis on the intertextual nature of autobiographical allusion is taken to an extreme in *Harlequins*. Halfway through the novel, Vadim suddenly addresses a mysterious "you" (Nabokov, *Harlequins* 71) whose identity is not revealed until much later in the novel, when Vadim recalls the chance encounter which soon developed into their romantic relationship (191). This "you" turns out to be a former schoolmate of Vadim's daughter Bel who eventually becomes his last lover and probably his fourth wife. However, apart from the most basic information, Vadim refuses to provide more details (including the lover's name) for fear that her image and the purity of their love might be tainted by spying readers. He claims, "Reality will 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" (192). This precaution is exceptional given the exhibitionistic tendency of Vadim's autobiographical account (see Section 5.1), which signals fundamental differences between this relationship and Vadim's previous marriages and affairs.

Vadim's reference to his lover as "you" is an obvious allusion to Nabokov's reference to his wife Véra Nabokov as "you" throughout his autobiography. Nabokov's reference to a mysterious second person first appears briefly in Chapter Six (*Speak* 95). More clues are only provided towards the end of the book: Nabokov mentions "you" together with "our child" in Chapter Fourteen (223) and confesses his deep, tender love for "you" and "our child" in Chapter Fifteen (224-36). However, even in this final chapter, information about Véra and their romantic relationship is kept to a minimum: her appearance, character, and remarks are rarely represented, and readers can hardly learn anything about her personal past through *Speak, Memory*.

These resonances constitute what I call a limit case of autobiographical allusion, for the similarity between Vadim's last lover and Véra Nabokov lies less in any aspect of their represented images or life trajectories than in their common anonymity and a common lack of direct representation in the respective texts. It is therefore hard to tell if Vadim's address to his lover as "you" still counts as an

autobiographical allusion, or if it should only be seen as an intertextual allusion to a remarkable narrative device in *Speak, Memory*. I lean towards the former because the intertextual correspondences can be read as Nabokov's reflection on his relationship with Véra – in other words, because there is still an autobiographical dimension to their communicative effects. On the one hand, Vadim's explanation of why he refuses to portray his lover can be seen as Nabokov's implicit explanation for his use of the same technique in *Speak, Memory* when referring to Véra; on the other hand, the fact that it is the parodic character Vadim who employs this technique in *Harlequins* may suggest Nabokov's ambivalent attitudes towards the ethical implications of this device – is it really a gesture of profound love and a measure of privacy protection, or is it (also) an indication of narcissistic self-indulgence in the abstract notion of love rather than genuine care for the partner?

In this chapter, I have first explored Nabokov's self-reflexive discussions of the relation between an author's personal life and fiction writing in two novels. As part of Nabokov's self-parodic play, Vadim's approach to memoir writing in *Harlequins* highlights the complexity and subtlety of Nabokov's own perception of the interpenetration between life and work, especially his emphasis on a clear distinction between fiction and real life as well as his concerns about the aesthetic and communicative effects of the disclosure of particular interconnections. *Sebastian Knight* is self-consciously concerned with the question of how (not) to read autobiographical allusions. Through his depiction of V's negotiation with his approach to reading autobiographical allusions in Sebastian's novels, Nabokov reveals the logical fallacy of a common way of reading autobiographical allusion, which is based on metonymic extension of similarities. Meanwhile, the possible interpretation of *Sebastian Knight* as Sebastian's new novel suggests that a more valid and fruitful approach to reading autobiographical allusions is to see them as authors' creative reworking of their personal memories rather than thinly veiled confessions of their past, with a focus on differences as well as similarities. Drawing from these discussions, I proceed to analyse several prominent autobiographical allusions in the two novels. I have demonstrated that these allusions offer opportunities for the author to cast his personal recollections in different lights – to underline specific aspects of a memory, to foreground certain feelings towards it, or

to reflect on the textuality of autobiographical accounts, including the sense-making power of narrative and the ethical soundness of certain narrative techniques. Through my analysis of Nabokov's self-conscious discussions and novelistic practices, I suggest that autobiographical allusions not only foreground the biographical situatedness of fictive creation in general, but they are also public, intentional re-negotiations of the author's understanding of her/his past; as such, they are simultaneously communicative acts and acts of self-transformation.

Part Three: Ideas of Authorship in Sebald's Critical Remarks

Chapter VI Author's Roles and Challenges: Purposes and Process of Writing

In each of the four narratives that constitute *The Emigrants*, one of Sebald's major works of prose fiction, Nabokov appears as a spectral figure. For instance, a photograph showing Nabokov on a butterfly hunt in the Swiss mountains is inserted halfway into the first narrative "Dr Henry Selwyn", right after the narrator's description of a picture of Dr Selwyn "in knee-length shorts, with a shoulder bag and butterfly net", which he found astonishingly similar to the photo of Nabokov (Sebald, *Emigrants* 15-16). In the second narrative, in which the narrator retraces the past of his former primary school teacher Paul Bereyter after the latter's suicide, his main informant Lucy Landau recalled that she became acquainted with Paul as she was reading "Nabokov's autobiography on a park bench", which attracted Paul's attention (43). These explicit references to Nabokov's life and works are complemented by a specific type of allusion to the same writer in the third and fourth narratives, namely, the transient appearance of a series of anonymous 'butterfly men'. These butterfly hunters vary in age and appear in such disparate places as Ithaca in New York, Mount Grammont near Montreaux, and Bad Kissingen, Germany; however, readers familiar with Nabokov's life trajectory will recognise that these are all places he had been to, and that the time and year of each butterfly catcher's appearance falls within the period of Nabokov's stay in that very place.

The intermittent apparition of Nabokovian figures has prompted critics to suggest other, more implicit forms of Nabokov's haunting presence in the book. For instance, Leland de Durantaye argues that *Speak, Memory* is an important intertext for *The Emigrants*: he shows how Nabokov's emphasis on the thematic patterns of memory, his belief in the power of memory to redeem personal losses, and his exploration of metaphysical questions in his autobiography all resonate within *The Emigrants* through Sebald's self-conscious emulation or deviation ("Facts"). In the introduction to his interview with Sebald, James Wood observes two possible

influences of Nabokov's writings on *The Emigrants*: the inclusion of photographs in *Speak, Memory* may have germinated the more complex relation between visual images and verbal narratives in Sebald's work; and *Sebastian Knight,* a novel that requires to be read simultaneously as V's biography, Sebastian's new novel, and Nabokov's autobiographical novel (see Chapter IV), may have inspired Sebald's more radical experimentation with fictionality (Sebald, Interview by Wood).

With its multidimensional connections with Nabokov's life and works, *The Emigrants* serves as a prominent example of Nabokov's profound influence upon Sebald, which the latter acknowledges in his interviews. Sebald occasionally points out specific allusions to Nabokov in his prose works, such as a nod to *Pnin* in *Austerlitz* through a thrice mediated memory of Austerlitz's childhood fascination with squirrels ("In This" 369). More often, Sebald expresses his admiration for Nabokov's stylistic ingenuity, such as his meticulous attention to details in the rendering of memories (369) and the powerful aesthetic effects he evokes through his excellent command of language ("Questionable Business"); it is probably not a coincidence that these descriptions apply just as well to Sebald's own writings. These verbal tributes indicate Nabokov's special importance to Sebald, for Sebald hardly mentions any other English-language writers in his interviews, let alone in such detail. Besides his references to Nabokov in interviews, Sebald has also published an essay titled "Dream Textures: A Brief Note on Nabokov",[1] in which he suggests that Nabokov's depictions of various ghostly figures – the dead, the alienated emigrants, the supernatural beings one vaguely senses – in his memoir and novels are both illustrations of and responses to the personal losses he experienced in his émigré life. This reading is very likely to have inspired Sebald's own emphasis on the ghostly appearances of the dead through memories, dreams, and photographs in his prose works.

Nabokov's deep influence on Sebald, manifested in the latter's critical and creative engagement with the former, provides the context for my exploration of the rich resonances between these two writers' ideas and practices of authorship. Although Sebald's explicit comments on Nabokov in this respect are almost

1. The original German version of this essay, titled "Traumtexturen", was first published in 1996. For more information, see entry D.61 of "Primary Bibliography" compiled by Richard Sheppard in *Saturn's Moons,* p. 470.

exclusively limited to the appreciation of the aesthetic value of his works, a closer look at Sebald's interviews and prose works reveals that he is concerned with a range of questions about, or associated with, the concept of authorship which Nabokov also addresses attentively. To begin with, both writers are concerned with the purposes, process, and challenges of authorship, illustrating the communicative nature of literary creation (despite authors' desire for solitude) and observing various inner drives, scruples, and contingencies that complicate the author's pursuit of communicative purposes. On top of these reflections, both writers consider two further questions: first, how do their respective ideas of authorial creativity and communication account for the employment of fictionality? Second, how does narrative writing draw on personal experiences and contribute to the author's self-understanding in return? This substantial overlap of concerns forms a meaningful basis for us to explore Sebald's notions of authorship in relation to Nabokov's, which may in turn illustrate and enrich key theoretical discussions of authorship.

In this part, I will discuss Sebald's critical ideas of authorship extrapolated from a number of his interviews.[2] The current chapter focuses on his ideas about the purposes and process of writing. By reflecting on the motives behind his own pursuit of a literary career, and by delineating his creative process, Sebald presents the author as an amalgamation of multiple roles, such as hermit, researcher, bricoleur, artificer, and communicative agent; he also discusses the challenges of authorship, not least his own experience of writing scruples. In Chapter VII, I will explore how some of these ideas are further complicated by Sebald's exchanges with interviewers about his unconventional use of fictionality and the role of heavily autobiographical narrators in his prose works. In Part Four, I will discuss how Sebald addresses the same topics in his prose works themselves, especially through his self-conscious representation and discussion of aspects of authorship. I will show how these creative reflections and practices reinforce, clarify, or expand on his critical ideas.

2. An index to interviews with Sebald, compiled by Sheppard, is included in *Saturn's Moons* (pp. 593-94). It lists 54 interviews conducted in German, English, French, and Dutch, some of which have been translated or have more than one published version. All except one were conducted between 1990 and 2001, after Sebald became known as a literary writer. Interviews in English were exclusively conducted between 1996 and 2001, following the publication of the English translation of *The Emigrants* in 1996. For my discussion in Chapters VI-VII, I mainly focus on interviews conducted in or translated into English. For each interview, I look at the least abridged and edited version.

Compared to Nabokov, Sebald seems to be a more cooperative interviewee. Although he "gives only rare interviews and is obsessively private" (Jaggi), he treats those interviews he did accept as occasions for genuine conversation rather than pre-controlled stage settings for his lone performance. However, like Nabokov, Sebald projects a distinct personality through his interviews, one that is highly consistent with the author's image conveyed through his literary works. As James Wood puts it, "Like his writing, Sebald was calm, surreptitiously funny, erudite, and oddly pure [as an interviewee]" (Sebald, Interview by Wood). The fact that literary interviews are inevitably acts of self-creation (Masschelein et al. 9-10) means that Sebald's answers to interviewers are at best partial truths. Moreover, as I will show in Section 7.1, the writer may sometimes fail to give a convincing explanation for his creative practices. Nonetheless, Sebald's interviews yield subtle and thought-provoking reflections on multiple aspects of authorship. Some of these reflections stand on their own; others shed light on, and are further complemented by, specific aspects of Sebald's literary practices. Therefore, despite inevitable biases and inadequacies, Sebald's interviews serve as a valuable resource for our understanding of his ideas and practices of authorship.

6.1. Noble Pursuit or Questionable Business? Purposes and Scruples of Writing

In contrast to Nabokov, who had already published a number of poems before the age of twenty, Sebald's literary career did not begin until his mid-forties. Although he had been publishing scholarly works since the late 1960s, his first literary work *Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht* (translated as *After Nature*), a book-length narrative poem, only came out in 1988. This exceptionally late start prompts interviewers to ask about the circumstances and motives behind his transformation into a literary writer. In response, Sebald recalls that, when he first began to write creatively, this kind of writing was a "very, very private affair" ("Ghost Hunter" 61), and he had "no intentions to publish [his writing]" ("Questionable Business"). The most immediate incentive for pursuing this mode of writing, Sebald notes, was the need to temporarily liberate himself from the ever-increasing stress brought by his academic work: in his own words, he felt an urge to "[look] around for a way of re-establishing myself in a different form simply as a counterweight to the daily bother in the institution" ("Characters" 17). Besides, Sebald remarks that he resorted to creative writing as a way to fight against what

seems like a typical midlife crisis. He reflects, “you feel that at that midway point in life your personality is being eroded and you must think of measures of self-defence”; the measure he took was to retreat into his potting shed and develop “an eccentric pastime that no one knew about” (Sebald, “In Conversation” 152).

These remarks remind one of Nabokov’s description of literary creation as a “lone performance” in “glacial solitude” (*Strong Opinions* 101) and the statement that he is “all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please one reader alone – one’s own self” (31). Like Nabokov, Sebald emphasises writing as a solitary pursuit, an “eccentric pastime” in his potting shed. As I will show in Chapter VIII, he also depicts a number of solitary writers and artists in his prose works, thus foregrounding solitude as a common experience in artistic creation. In his own case, using creative writing as a retreat from the “daily bother” at work, Sebald sees solitude not only as a desirable condition of authorship but also as a partial end for his literary creation, a pleasure in itself. As such, he casts solitude in a predominantly positive light, although he does admit at times, half-jokingly and half-apologetically, that “You become a boring person for those around you. It must be extremely uncomfortable to live with a writer - all that preoccupation and brooding” (Jaggi). Sebald further observes that the temporary relief from professional duties and other social obligations makes space for the development of a more robust sense of self. Exactly how he considers writing as an act of “self-defence”, and how he self-consciously uses narrative writing to reshape his sense of self, will be the focus of my discussion in Sections 7.2 and 9.1. Sebald’s perception of writing as a means of self-exploration, along with his longing for the solitude it requires, grounds his act of writing in biographical context and partly explains why he undertook creative writing even when he had no intention for publication. However, it also prompts one to ask: why did Sebald decide to publish his works after all?

Sebald does not answer this question explicitly; however, talking about the genesis of his literary pursuit, he does refer to another purpose of his creative writing, which may have relevance not only for himself but also for a wider readership. This purpose, he claims, is to create a form of meaning which he finds difficult to attain through academic writing. In interview with Christopher Bigsby, Sebald reflects:

> I always felt somewhat hemmed in by the discipline of academic writing. . . . Increasingly I felt drawn to write in a much more tentative sort of way and I moved from the straight monograph to essayistic exploration . . . But even so I constantly came up against a borderline where I felt, well, if I could go a little bit further it might get very interesting, that is, if I were allowed to make things up. That temptation to work with very fragmentary pieces of evidence, to fill in the gaps and blank spaces and create out of this a meaning which is greater than that which you can prove, led me to work in a way which wasn't determined by any discipline. ("In Conversation" 151-52)

In this remark, Sebald attributes several characteristics to the form of meaning that he aims to create. He claims that it is facilitated by unsystematic research, imaginative associations or speculations ("to work with fragmentary pieces of evidence"), and invention ("to make things up", "to fill in the gaps"). Whereas these methods are often considered unorthodox and questionable, if not outright unacceptable, in academic writing,[3] Sebald argues that they bring about a different form of meaning that is "more tentative" and more significant ("greater"). For him, tentativeness is not a *lack* of certainty but a positive attribute, as it is associated with the quest for knowledge beyond solid proof. Sebald sometimes refers to such tentative, profound knowledge as "metaphysics" ("Conversation" 115; Lubow 165). He further notes that metaphysical contemplations are disfavoured in modern academia: not only are they prohibited in historical research (Lubow 165), but philosophers also "decided somewhere in the nineteenth century that metaphysics wasn't a respectable discipline and had to be thrown overboard" (Sebald, "Conversation" 115). Yet metaphysics is exactly what fascinates Sebald, "in the sense that one wants to speculate about these areas that are beyond one's ken" (115). He therefore turns to literary creation, for it allows one to express wonder without

3. This is not to say that these methods are not used in academic research. Quite the contrary, some of the most influential scientific breakthroughs arose from chance discoveries (e.g. x-rays and penicillin) or bold speculations (e.g. heliocentrism and the theory of evolution). Elements of invention can also be found in traditional forms of history writing. However, these methods are often deemed questionable by modern philosophies of science that emphasise rationality, systematicity, and factual evidence, and, though still quite commonly applied in academic research, are often concealed or downplayed in academic writing.

having to secure a definite answer: “I am not seeking an answer . . . I just want to say, ‘This is very odd, indeed’” (Lubow 165).

Interestingly, Nabokov also has a pronounced interest in metaphysics. This interest is manifested in *Speak, Memory* through his brief contemplation about possible forms of one’s prenatal and post-mortem existence (5-6) as well as his imagination of the unfathomable supernatural forces which he refers to as “the anonymous roller” (10), “human fate”, or “tender ghosts” (103) for convenience’s sake. Moreover, he gives creative expressions to these metaphysical questions in his novels through quasi-metafictional play, as I have shown in Section 4.2. In Chapters VIII and IX, I will illustrate how Sebald conveys his metaphysical interest in his prose works using the methods he mentions above.

As a reaction to an institutionalised and widely respected system of meaning-making, Sebald’s pursuit of an alternative form of meaning has potential relevance for a wider audience; it thus provides a ground for the publication of his works. Meanwhile, this pursuit also adds another dimension to his longing for solitude. Explaining his avoidance of writers’ circles, Sebald states, “The art really is in isolating yourself and letting as few things into your head as possible. To only admit those things into your head that come from a direction where no one else ever looks” (“Permanent Exile” 22). I suggest that Sebald’s ambition to generate a kind of meaning that is marginalised, if not prohibited, by academic writing is such an effort to look in a different direction, and that, as he claims, solitude provides a much-needed condition for this self-conscious pursuit of originality, which in turn lays the foundation for literary communication. This is probably also why, as his literary career progresses, Sebald often felt troubled by the increasing worldly obligations associated with it (e.g., phone calls, letters, interviews, and readings) and missed the initial phase, when writing was still a completely solitary pastime (“In Conversation” 165; Jaggi).

The potential relevance of Sebald’s writings for a wider audience was first realised when *After Nature* was published in 1988. More works followed, including four major works of prose fiction, a number of critical essays, and more poems, some of which were published after the writer’s death in a car accident in 2001. Aware of his growing audience, Sebald talks about his engagement with readers. For instance, he describes the different responses he receives in readers’ letters: “I got

many letters of a very personal kind from people in [the United Kingdom] and in the United States, letters of the sort I had never received from my German readers who tended to be very reticent. And some of these letters, in turn, provided me with insights and lines of enquiry and bits of information that I could scarcely have hoped to come across myself" (Sebald, "In Conversation" 164).[4] Besides these specific exchanges, Sebald states that he also takes his readership into account on a more fundamental level. Talking about the ethical precariousness of making the Holocaust and its aftermaths one of the main themes in his works, he reflects, "Do I, who carry a German passport and have two German parents, have the right? I try to do it as well as I can. If the reactions were different, I would stop – you do take notice" (Jaggi). As it turned out, Sebald did not stop; quite the contrary, he "somehow [felt] obliged to go on" after his initial success ("In Conversation" 152). Sebald suggests that he not only draws ideas for his future works from readers' responses, but his very decision about whether or not to keep writing and publishing is also affected by the general atmosphere of readers' reception.

These remarks show that, like Nabokov, Sebald is aware of the communicative nature of authorship and the author's social role; however, whereas Nabokov imagines his audience as an abstract "reverberation" or "multiplication" of himself (*Strong Opinions* 31) and largely refrains from commenting on critical reviews of his works (see Section 1.3), Sebald is more open to talking about readers' reception as distinct responses. Observing how these responses simultaneously engage with his existing works and suggest ideas for his future writings, Sebald depicts his engagement with readers as a long conversation between two equally tangible participants. This divergence between the two writers may derive from a more fundamental difference. Although Nabokov emphasises the situatedness of authorial communication by setting authors' pursuit of original and self-reflexive 'authentic realities' against the background of an 'average reality', a conventionalised and generalised worldview widely shared in a given social, historical, and cultural context (see Section 2.1), he does not question whether he and

4. This is, of course, a very partial description of his readers' written responses. Ulrich von Bülow, for example, discovers a number of readers' letters in Sebald's *Nachlass* which "[sought] to set him straight on factual matters" (252). As Bülow observes, Sebald's readership "was rarely inclined to separate fact from fiction" (252). The challenge that Sebald poses for readers with his unconventional use of fictionality, as well as the uneasiness it generates even among his professional readers, will be discussed in Chapter VII.

his readership always share such an average reality. Nor does he seem to be much concerned about receiving predominantly negative reviews for a work, or the possibility that a majority of readers approach his works in ways that he does not expect or approve of: as I have shown in Section 1.3, Nabokov insists that he only writes for like-minded readers and does not need to make extra effort to accommodate what he thinks are 'bad readers'. In contrast, Sebald seems to be less confident about the existence of a solid basis of shared beliefs, values, and knowledge for his communication with readers, or of an indisputably preferable approach to reading literary works that is comparable (as Nabokov imagines) to the rules of chess problems. Instead, he points out that the meanings of a literary work result from the author's negotiation with specific groups of readers, especially if the work addresses sensitive topics. Without denying the key role of discursive norms and literary conventions in both writing and reading, he suggests that the value and ethical soundness of a work also depend on its communicative effects among a specific audience. Sebald's remarks on the role of reader responses in his literary creation reflect his awareness – and deliberate facilitation – of the "recursive relationship . . . among authorial agency, textual phenomena . . . and reader response" (Phelan, *Experiencing* 4). Compared to Nabokov, Sebald puts more emphasis on the role of reader responses as "a test of the efficacy of [the author's] designs" (Phelan, *Experiencing* 4).

Sebald's sensitivity to reception may also derive from his sense of uncertainty as an author. Both Nabokov and Sebald consider writing as a difficult occupation; however, while Nabokov usually associates the difficulty of writing with the aesthetic pleasure it generates for himself as well as his readers (see Sections 1.1 and 1.2), Sebald perceives it as a largely negative and potentially devastating experience, describing it as "self-paralysis", "writer's block", and the inability to "keep one's nerve" ("Conversation" 108-109). He remarks that, unlike other professions, "in writing one acquires a sense of uncertainty the more one is doing it" (Sebald, "Characters" 17). This uncertainty, which he often calls "writing scruples" (Sebald, "Conversation" 109), is partly constituted by doubts over his competence as a writer: Sebald mentions that he is frequently troubled by the fear that he cannot finish the work at hand, which in turn makes him reluctant to look back at past works "because one gets the idea that one was able to do it once . . . but no longer" (Green

et al. 400). But this is not all: his fear of being unable to finish the work at hand is accompanied by a more fundamental uncertainty about why one should write at all. In an interview with Joseph Cuomo, Sebald admits that the narrator's depiction of writing scruples in *The Emigrants* reflects his own experiences: "These scruples concerned not only the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to, no matter what approach I tried, but also the entire questionable business of writing" ("Conversation" 108).

This deeper doubt is not least caused by the feeling that writing is not a completely purposeful act. When prompted by Toby Green to explain why writing is a "questionable business", Sebald replies, "One doesn't know why one does it" ("Questionable Business"). He admits that "there are of course some noble motives – trying to say something that is true, and being analytical about oneself", but these applaudable motives often mingle with "less savoury motives" such as vanity, exhibitionism, and mercenary considerations (Sebald, "Questionable Business"). Moreover, Sebald feels that the sum of all these more or less noble motives still cannot fully account for the act of writing; to some extent, writing can only be explained as "a compulsive habit with neurotic dimensions" ("Questionable Business"). Describing writing as the symptom of an unknown psychological issue, Sebald refuses to reassure himself and his readers that it is a primarily worthwhile or justifiable pursuit; instead, his scruples can be seen as a reminder for himself to frequently scrutinise his motives for writing, reinforcing "noble motives" while checking the "less savoury motives".

Acknowledging the "noble motives" underlying his literary creation, Sebald reaffirms the intentionality of authorial communication; meanwhile, his reflections on the "less savoury motives" and the "compulsive" nature of writing leave space for unintended meanings as well as notions of authorial intention other than "inner mental objects" readily possessed by the author (Herman 255).[5] Some intentions, Sebald suggests, only become (partially) transparent to the author her/himself upon re-examination of the text. Sebald's remarks on the difficulty of writing also draw

5. See the section "Authorial Intention and Authority" in the introduction for various philosophical, linguistic, and literary theories that suggest ways to transcend this conception of authorial intention.

one's attention to the complexity of the writing process, another topic that he often addresses in interviews.

6.2. Author as Bricoleur and Artificer: Agency and Contingencies in the Creative Process

Like Nabokov, Sebald realises that his writing process is not dictated by conscious design; instead, authorial agency is complemented and delimited by other factors. While Nabokov reflects on how discursive impulses, facilitated and channelled by the author's conscious decisions, participate in different stages of his writing process (see Section 1.4), Sebald focuses on how contingencies in his surroundings, accepted and cultivated by the author, contribute to his creative process. His reflections on the complex interplay between authorial agency and these contingencies further illuminate his purposes of writing.

Sebald's creative process begins with various forms of research such as visits to specific sites, searches in library archives, perusing of mass media, and exchanges with other people. Sebald emphasises the importance of this initial research and laments the lack of what he calls "the art of *recherche*" in contemporary writings, which usually results in "something very anemic" ("'But'" 108). As Arthur Lubow notes, Sebald's research for writing is a process of "diligent dredging and mining" (161), which requires the author's conscious effort, yet Sebald himself points out that this laborious searching is also full of contingencies. Talking about his library visits, for example, he says, "I can't afford to sit in the Munich War Archive for two years . . . So I have to rush in and sit there for a week or two and collect things like someone who knows he has to leave before too long. You gather things up like a person who leaves a burning house, which means very randomly" (Lubow 162). Walking is another form of research that often involves surprise findings and spontaneous actions: "You find things by the wayside or you buy a brochure written by a local historian, which is in a tiny little museum somewhere . . . And in that you find odd details which lead you somewhere else, and so it's a form of unsystematic searching, which of course for an academic is far from orthodoxy" (Sebald, "Conversation" 94).

Sebald admits that his research method for creative writing is partly determined by time constraints, but he also suggests that this "unsystematic

searching" is far more than a short-cut, a time-saving relaxation of academic rigour; instead, it sets its own requirements and has its own values. For one thing, "unsystematic searching" sets high demands for the author's sensitivity and devotion. The author needs to look into largely unnoticed sources such as brochures in local museums, perceive intriguing details, and further pursue these clues. More importantly, Sebald considers his "unsystematic searching" as a deliberate deviation from – and questioning of – the academic "orthodoxy" of systematic research. He suggests that academic research often upholds an ideal of systematicity without reflecting on its feasibility or limitations. In contrast, Sebald himself is strongly suspicious of the idea of systematicity, not just in academic research, but in any kind of thinking. He states that he "cannot imagine anything like systematic thought"; instead, he sees human thinking as "a completely random process" close to the hunting behaviour of those sea creatures which "just flat these tentacles out in the hope that something will drift by that they can catch and ingest" (Sebald, "In Conversation" 148). In fact, Sebald's approach may not be as "completely random" as he professes to be – his visits to museums and archives, where materials are organised systematically, as well as the very fact that he is able to summarise his methods of material collection, indicate that his research is still based on some degree of systematicity. Nonetheless, instead of shunning "unsystematic searching" or presenting it as systematic, he recognises contingency as an essential part of human thinking and consciously explores its potential.

While Nabokov only expresses his amazement at the mysterious foresight that guides him to collect materials which later prove useful (see Section 1.4), Sebald delineates several ways in which "unsystematic searching" contributes to his writing. He remarks that chance discoveries sometimes supply key ideas which initiate a work: *Austerlitz*, for example, was partly inspired by a documentary about a woman who was sent from a Munich orphanage to a Welsh family by *Kindertransport* at an early age, which he "happened to see by sheer chance" (Sebald and Bell 6). Other times, they compel the author to modify his plans and alter the shape of a work: Sebald discloses that his original plan for *The Rings of Saturn* was to "make a little excursion" and write "ten tiny little essays" out of it, but "of course things have a habit of getting the better of you and no sooner did I try to keep to that small format than I realized that there was much more to some of these topics than I had bargained

for. My curiosity as a reader was awakened and the project proliferated until it reached its full-scale proportions" ("In Conversation" 162). There are also moments when, by sheer chance, he comes across materials that fit exactly into a work he is planning or writing, which he sees as a reassuring sign that he is on the right track (Sebald, "Introduction" 25-26). These remarks show that contingency can serve as a desirable source of inspiration, generating spontaneous ideas which the author identifies, sanctions, and painstakingly develops. Besides, by calling himself a "reader" and revealing how the collected materials shifted his original plan for a book, Sebald emphasises writing as an interpretative act and suggests that an author should do justice to her/his materials, dedicating adequate attention to their reworking and offering sufficient space for their elaboration rather than force them into predetermined plans. In other words, as an author draws on certain materials for her/his writing, she/he is also held accountable by these very materials. This idea also underlies the ethical concerns over Sebald's fictionalisation of nonfictive sources, which I will discuss in Chapter VII.

However, "unsystematic searching" does not always give rise to the spontaneous overflow of ideas; it may also constitute a kind of challenge that Sebald deliberately poses for himself. As he remarks in the interview with Cuomo:

> And so you then have a small amount of material, and you accumulate things, and it grows; one thing takes you to another, and you make something out of these haphazardly assembled materials. And as they have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to *strain your imagination* in order to create a connection between the two things. If you look for things that are like the things that you have looked for before, then, obviously, they'll connect up. But they'll only connect up in an obvious sort of way, which actually isn't, in terms of writing something new, very productive. *So you have to take heterogeneous materials in order to get your mind to do something that it hasn't done before*. (Sebald, "Conversation" 94-95; my emphases)

He further notes that this method of writing, which he calls "bricolage", is inspired by his childhood play on the farm: "Bits of string and bits of wood. Making all sorts of things, like webs across the legs of a chair. And then you sit there, like the spider" (Lubow 159).

Sebald's reflection on the challenge posed by his "heterogeneous", "haphazardly assembled" materials as well as the reward they offer further illuminates his professed aim to create a form of meaning that breaks the restraints of academic writing and, more broadly, to look in "a direction where no one else ever looks" ("Permanent Exile" 22). He suggests that, apart from a deviation from academic orthodoxy in itself, his "unsystematic searching" also provides a promising ground for the generation of original ideas. Circumventing commonly perceived links, it presents challenges as well as opportunities for the author to make original connections between apparently disparate materials. In Walsh's terms, Sebald perceives contingency as "a mechanism for innovation": evading habitual modes of thinking, it serves as a source of "creative surprise and discovery – for the [author], as for the reader" (*Rhetoric* 134). Meanwhile, as Walsh points out, the exploitation of chance, like the exploitation of the unconscious, is "irreducibly frame[d]" by "conscious authorial choice" (134). In Sebald's case, it is the author who deliberately chooses to subject himself to contingencies, and who extracts, elaborates, and sanctions the original ideas that the collected materials hold in store. Sebald's reflections on his 'bricolage' method thus illustrate that, much as literary creation is the mingling and collision of existent texts, authors are not the mere copyists that Barthes claims them to be ("Death" 146; see the introduction for more detailed discussion); rather, authorial agency plays a crucial role across different stages of literary composition.

Sebald's conscious, methodical pursuit of originality may also explain his emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of literary creation, another idea that he shares with Nabokov. In response to an interviewer's comment on the "finely wrought internal structure" of his works, he states emphatically, "I would say that they are artefacts. They're consciously built as artefacts. At that level the author is shaping the material in a way which goes far beyond documentary" (Sebald, "Characters" 17). Sebald's conscious shaping of his works as artefacts is manifested in multiple ways such as his meticulous attention to details and the embedding of recurrent details throughout a work, as I will demonstrate in Chapter VIII. In his interviews, however, he mainly comments on the aesthetic effects he aims to achieve through his attentively crafted literary style and the implications of this style for current novelistic conventions.

Sebald acknowledges the deep influence of nineteenth-century German prose writing on his own literary style, mentioning such names as Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Keller, Heinrich von Kleist, and Jean Paul Richter in interviews ("In This" 369-70; Lubow 166). When talking about these predecessors, he often highlights their assiduous attention to "the quality of the writing" (Sebald, "Books") and the elaborate prose styles they produce. The "main concern" of nineteenth-century German prose writers, Sebald claims, was "the production of flawless prose, so that page by page the prose, as it were, *stood in its own right like we expect language to stand in its own right in poetry*" ("In This" 369; my emphasis). This description of effect illustrates what Roman Jakobson calls "poetic function", an aspect of language which "focus[es] on the message for its own sake" and "promote[s] the palpability of signs" (356). Jakobson notes that poetic function is not only manifested in poetry; rather, it is present in all verbal activities but plays an especially prominent role in verbal art (356). Observing the key role of poetic function in nineteenth-century German prose writing, Sebald foregrounds this prose tradition as a form of verbal art comparable to poetry proper.

Drawing from this literary tradition, Sebald further remarks on the aesthetic effects he aims to achieve: "What matters to me is that the prose on the page has a certain density and a certain quality and a high measure of specific weight. That there aren't passages which are there only to get you from one point to another" (Houpt D3). Although he does not specify the techniques he uses to achieve these effects, this remark still provides important clues about the principles behind Sebald's distinctive prose style. The word "density" suggests a richness of meaning, which may be attained by the "obsession with detail" that interviewers note in his writings (Sebald, "Questionable Business"); it also suggests a high degree of complexity (as is the case with a densely woven or embroidered fabric), which interviewers perceive in his "extraordinarily complex" syntactic structure with "extended parallelisms and long adjectival phrases" (Sebald, Interview by Kafatou 33). Sebald further states that this "density" is sustained throughout a work so that readers are compelled to read slowly and attentively rather than lapse into a superficial, cursory mode of reading from time to time. According to Geoff Dyer, this aim is achieved: using words that strongly resonate with Sebald's own, he observes that Sebald often embeds important clues in "the passages one was most

tempted to skim. The reader was thereby forced to attend (in every sense) with a patience-straining diligence" (Dyer et al. 18). Another keyword in Sebald's statement above is "weight", which, besides richness and complexity, also connotates an emotional effect – a melancholy or pensiveness that the "density" of prose generates in its readers. This connotation points to a difference between Sebald's aesthetic pursuit and Nabokov's: although the latter also upholds the value of details, complexity, and difficulty, his comparison of literary works to wrestling and puzzles suggests that he considers the difficulty of art to be conducive to invigorating, gratifying play. This subtle divergence between the two writers may be a matter of idiosyncrasy, but it may also lie in the different stylistic choices they make to set off their respective thematic concerns.

Although he identifies nineteenth-century German prose writers as his predecessors, Sebald's emphasis on the aesthetic value of literary creation is not just simple adherence to a certain tradition. Instead, he suggests that this particular tradition offers him a way to expose, question, and go beyond prevailing conventions of fiction writing. In his interviews, Sebald often juxtaposes the tradition of nineteenth-century German prose with that of contemporary English and French novels ("Characters" 17 and "Poem" 77-78). He notes that, while the former emphasises the quality of the prose, the latter focus primarily on "mechanisms of the novel" such as characters and plots (Sebald, "Poem" 77-78). According to Sebald, it is this latter tradition that has become the "standard novel format" ("In This" 375) of our times; however, he finds these norms "tedious" (Interview by Wood), "artificial", "constricting" ("In This" 375), and "terribly contrived" (Lubow 169). He observes that this is partly because literary devices lose their effectiveness after repetitive use: for instance, "[t]he business of having to have bits of dialogue to move the plot along is fine for an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novel, but that becomes in our day a bit trying, where you always see the wheels of the novel grinding and going on" (Lubow 169). Moreover, he argues that some of these conventional practices are at odds with modern beliefs and values: for example, while omniscient narration was acceptable in Jane Austen's world, where "rules are clear and where one knows when trespassing begins", it has become problematic nowadays, when "these certainties have been taken from us by the course of history" (Sebald, Interview by Wood). By drawing on an alternative tradition that pays more

attention to the aesthetic dimension than the representational dimension of fiction, Sebald aims to expose the limitations of novelistic conventions and (re)discover a way of fiction writing that speaks to modern readers. In this sense, he suggests that the author's role as an artificer serves her/his role as a communicative agent.

Reading Sebald's interview remarks on the purposes and process of his prose writing, one can see that he delineates several dimensions of writing, casting the author in various roles. Sebald identifies two important purposes for his literary creation: first, he hopes to be analytical about himself and develop a more robust sense of self; second, he aims to create a tentative and profound form of meaning that transcends the restraints of academic writing. He further points out that a solitary environment for writing, apart from being a pleasure in itself, also facilitates his pursuit of these two objectives. While the desire for self-exploration may explain why he regarded writing as a private matter at first, the aim to create a different form of meaning suggests a wider relevance of his literary creation, which lays the ground for the eventual publication of his works and his perception of authorship as a communicative act. Unlike Nabokov, Sebald sees literary communication as a long conversation with more or less tangible readers: he shows great sensitivity to the reception of his works and draws ideas for future works from readers' feedback. Through his comments on writing scruples, Sebald acknowledges that his professed purposes do not fully explain his act of writing and suggests that it is necessary to frequently scrutinise one's motives for writing. These reflections both affirm and complicate the notion of authorial intention by demonstrating how it is negotiated in the author's own mind as well as distributed across author, text, and reader.

While Nabokov reflects on the interaction between authorial agency and discursive impulses during his writing process, Sebald focuses on the interplay between authorial agency and contingencies. He observes that his creative process begins with "unsystematic searching" (Sebald, "Conversation" 94), during which the author willingly subjects himself to various contingencies in his surroundings, allowing himself to be taken from one clue to the next. He further points out that the haphazardly collected materials contribute to his writing in multiple ways, sometimes giving rise to spontaneous ideas for him to work on, other times presenting challenges that require him to stretch his imagination. The author-

bricoleur exploits contingency for creative surprise, channelling it with conscious decisions and efforts. Drawing on nineteenth-century German prose writing, a literary tradition that gives more weight to prose style and aesthetic effects than mechanisms of fictional representation, Sebald aims to trouble prevailing novelistic conventions and develop a style that is more effective for and relevant to modern readers. He thus foregrounds the author as both an artificer and a communicative agent. The interconnectedness between the aesthetic, communicative, and self-analytical dimensions of authorship is also illustrated in Sebald's interview discussions of his unconventional employment of fictionality and his use of highly autobiographical first-person narrators, which will be the focus of Chapter VII.

Chapter VII Fictive Communication and Self-Exploration: Two Dimensions of Authorship

In this chapter, I will analyse Sebald's critical remarks on two distinctive features of his prose works: his unconventional, boundary-blurring use of fictionality and his deployment of heavily autobiographical first-person narrators. The fact that these features are some of the most questioned aspects of Sebald's writings in interviews indicates the challenges they pose to his readers, and a close look at Sebald's responses may add to our understanding of his works. More importantly, as I will show throughout this chapter, these two aspects of his creative practice foreground, respectively, the two main purposes Sebald puts forward for his literary writing: to generate a tentative, profound form of meaning that is difficult to attain through academic writing, and to establish a more robust sense of self. Therefore, an analysis of Sebald's critical remarks on these practices may further illuminate his ideas on the communicative and self-analytical dimensions of authorship.

I have demonstrated in Chapters II and IV that, by playing with the 'fictional world' metaphor, and by complementing it with other ideas such as the 'chess problem' metaphor and the notion of 'authentic reality', Nabokov subordinates the representational axis of narrative fiction to the communicative axis, seeing the novelist primarily as a communicative agent rather than a world-maker. However, when it comes to the notion of fictionality, or whatever compositional strategies, textual features, or communicative approaches that qualify his works of fiction as such, he still seems to uphold a somewhat representational assumption. Calling his works of fiction "my fancies" (*Strong Opinions* 102) and stressing that the constituent parts of his autobiography "belong to unadulterated life" (*Speak* 238), Nabokov suggests that a key attribute that distinguishes fiction from nonfiction is the use of invention: while fiction sanctions global use of invention and signals it with textual and paratextual clues, nonfiction requires predominant commitment to facts, sometimes with great effort on the author's side. His assumption thus corresponds with Henrik Skov Nielsen's definition of fictionality as "intentionally signaled invention in communication" ("Fictionality" 107): for both, invention is essential to fictionality, although it is ultimately embedded in a communicative context.

This notion of fictionality can be unproblematically applied to most of Nabokov's narrative works. However, there are still a few cases in which this distinction between fiction and nonfiction is troubled. Nabokov's accounts of a childhood girlfriend 'Colette' and the Swiss governess 'Mademoiselle O', first published as nonfictive autobiographical essays in magazines, later appeared in the short story collection *Nabokov's Dozen* with minimal revisions (Nabokov, *Speak* ix-x). This arrangement raises the questions: does Nabokov present these two narratives as fiction, nonfiction, or both in the collection? What does it mean to read them as fiction and/or nonfiction after all? We may come to realise that, if a narrative that draws exclusively from the author's personal experiences can also be read as fiction, invention is no longer an essential element of fictionality but must be contingent upon some other criterion.

While these ambiguous cases are only exceptions in Nabokov's *oeuvre,* Sebald brings the question of fictionality centre stage in his major prose works. His unconventional use of fictionality is partly reflected through many interviewers' descriptions of his works as hybrids between fictive and nonfictive genres. For example, Maya Jaggi introduces Sebald's prose works as "genre-defying fiction – part memoir, travelogue and history" (Jaggi); Toby Green talks about "Sebald's blend of personal narrative, investigation, fiction, history and travel writing" (Sebald, "Questionable Business"). These observations, coupled with Sebald's own claim that his works are "prose fiction" ("In Conversation" 156 and "Books"; Jaggi), give rise to some frequently asked interview questions: in what sense does Sebald consider his prose works as fiction, and why does he choose to write (this kind of) fiction? These questions in turn point to several more fundamental questions that underlie Sebald's exchanges with interviewers: what assumption(s) about fictionality does he hold? Does fiction writing have an advantage in achieving certain communicative effects, and does it entail certain risks? Can a work be read as both fiction and nonfiction, and how? In Section 7.1, I will extrapolate Sebald's answers to these questions from his interview remarks. I will argue that, despite the apparent resonances between Sebald's remarks and Nielsen's definition of fictionality, Richard Walsh's theory of fictionality as communicative orientation better explains the interpretative difficulty and ethical controversy brought by Sebald's transgressive play with the boundary between fiction and nonfiction.

Sebald's play with the boundary between fiction and nonfiction also generates a sense of uncertainty among interviewers as to how one should perceive the first-person narrators that play a prominent role in all his major prose works. This question is further complicated by the fact that, although all his narrators are highly autobiographical, Sebald insists that they should not be conflated with the author himself. Moreover, he claims that, though he sees narrative writing as a self-analytical act, he does not resort to autobiographical narratives but prefers to perform self-analysis by telling the life of others. Through a close analysis of these remarks in Section 7.2, I aim to illuminate Sebald's understanding of the self-analytical potential of narrative writing, manifested in his negotiation of the complex dynamics between the narrating-I and the narrated-I, author and narrator, self and others.

7.1. Understanding Sebald's Overdetermined Fiction: Fictionality as Communicative Orientation

It is noticeable that, in their conversations with Sebald, interviewers unanimously juxtapose 'fiction' with 'fact' rather than 'nonfiction'. Jaggi remarks that *Austerlitz* "blurs boundaries between fact and fiction, art and documentary" (Sebald, "Last Word"); Malcolm Jones notes a "strange, intoxicating brew of fact and fiction" in Sebald's prose works (Sebald, "Books"). This dichotomy is also adopted by Sebald himself, as I will show below with his responses to Jaggi, Christopher Bigsby, and James Wood. The mutual adoption of this dichotomy between 'fact' and 'fiction' has two implications. First, it suggests that neither Sebald nor his interviewers distinguish between the notions of fiction (a literary genre) and fictionality (attributes that are essential to fictive discourse, including generic fiction, but may also appear locally in nonfictive discourse) in their remarks. (I will take care to differentiate between these two notions in my discussions below, though.) Second, it suggests that both parties consider fictionality primarily as 'non-factual' utterances – in other words, invention. This shared assumption of fictionality lays the ground for discussions about the creative process and communicative intentions of Sebald's "genre-defying fiction"; however, it also leads to dead ends in these discussions, which in turn prompt some critics to shift their assumptions about fictionality and ask different questions.

To begin with, this shared notion of fictionality gives rise to a frequently asked question: if Sebald insists on calling his literary works prose fiction, how

much and what kinds of invention does he make? In response, Sebald talks about how he draws on nonfictive sources and reworks them with the tool of invention, reflecting on both specific instances and general principles. He reveals that he sometimes blends the life stories of two or more real individuals to make one character: Max Ferber in *The Emigrants* draws from the German-British painter Frank Auerbach and Sebald's former landlord (Sebald, "Conversation" 104), Paul Bereyter's story in the same book is mostly based on that of Sebald's own primary school teacher but also contains traces of Wittgenstein's life as a schoolteacher in Austria (Sebald, "Who" 72-73), and behind Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist of *Austerlitz*, "hide two or three, or perhaps three and a half, real persons" (Sebald, "Last Word"). Sebald also explains, for example, that he invented Ambros Adelwarth's wait for "the butterfly man" in the sanatorium in Ithaca (in Part III of *The Emigrants*) and Luisa Lanzberg's[1] encounter with a butterfly-chasing boy in Bad Kissingen (in Part IV of *The Emigrants*) based on the knowledge that Nabokov, the real individual who inspired the creation of these butterfly hunters, was staying in Ithaca and Kissingen at the times mentioned ("Ghost Hunter" 52). On other occasions, Sebald talks about his general approach to fictive invention. Commenting on *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*, he claims, "I would say that the most dramatic events that are related are usually described as they were. . . . My fictional interference comes in more at the level of detail, in the margins. That's where I change things" (Sebald, "Characters" 17). He re-emphasises in another interview, "The changes I made, i.e., extending certain vectors, foreshortening certain things, adding here and there, taking something away, are marginal changes, changes of style rather than changes of substance" (Sebald, "Ghost Hunter" 38).[2]

All these remarks pull in two opposite directions simultaneously. On the one hand, Sebald openly acknowledges reworking nonfictive sources with various kinds of invention and describes specific cases in detail; he thus foregrounds fiction writing as fictionalisation, or the deliberate re-working of existent nonfictive sources

1. Luisa Lanzberg is Max Ferber's mother in *The Emigrants*, whose diary Ferber passes on to the narrator following their reunion.

2. Here Sebald seems to be using the word 'style' in a very broad sense to refer to any aspect of a narrative other than its main plot. Blending life stories of different individuals to make one fictional character or inventing brief encounters may be marginal changes, but they are not strictly stylistic.

(such as historical writings, diaries, autobiographies, and oral accounts) with the tool of invention. On the other hand, he keeps reminding readers how heavily his works borrow from historical sources, and how he takes care to limit the extent to which invention is used. Sebald's simultaneous emphases on his employment of invention and his self-imposed restraints on its use prompt interviewers to enquire about the communicative intentions of this fictive practice. They ask: why does Sebald choose to write a kind of fiction that not only draws heavily from nonfictive sources during the creative process but also gives them an unusually prominent presence in the final works?

In response, Sebald argues that the remarkable presence of nonfictive sources in his prose fiction is not as unconventional as interviewers perceive it to be: "Every novelist combines fact and fiction . . . In my case, there's more reality. But I don't think it's radically different; you work with the same tools" (Jaggi). He raises the same point in another interview, using Thomas Mann as an example: "If you read a novel by Thomas Mann, the vast majority of his characters are based on people he knew and observed closely, or he collated a character out of two people he knew. For those who knew the Mann family and their social surroundings, these novels were romans-à-clef" (Sebald, "In Conversation" 153). Sebald points out that fictional representation is necessarily supplied by nonfictive sources; the difference only lies in how much nonfictive material is preserved as it is in a completed work and is identified by readers.

Moreover, Sebald suggests that the opposite is equally true yet easily overlooked: just as fictional representation draws on nonfictive sources, nonfictive narratives, which are usually presented and perceived as plain 'facts', often contain various degrees of invention. As he notes in the interview with Bigsby, "I fully agree with you that fact and fiction are, as it were, both hybrids. They are not alternatives. They are both hybrids with the constituent parts in different measure" (Sebald, "In Conversation" 153). This recognition of the common presence of invention in nonfictive as well as fictive discourses lays the ground for one of Sebald's claims about the intentions behind his fictive practice:

> But what I'm trying, fairly consciously beyond that,[3] is to precisely point up that sense of uncertainty between fact and fiction, because I do think that we largely delude ourselves with the knowledge that we think we possess, that we make it up as we go along, that we make it fit our desires and anxieties and that we invent a straight line of a trail in order to calm ourselves down. So this whole process of narrating something which has a kind of reassuring quality to it is called into question. (Interview by Wood)

Sebald claims that his fictionalisation of nonfictive sources serves a communicative purpose. The purpose is self-reflexive: to foreground the complexity of nonfictive narratives such as autobiographical and historical accounts which are often credulously taken as plain facts. In accordance with Nielsen's definition of fictionality, Sebald argues that he deploys fictionality – or "intentionally signalled invention" (Nielsen, "Fictionality" 107) – to draw attention to less intentional and/or less signalled forms of invention such as confabulation or falsification. He prompts readers to ask: If it is still so difficult (if not impossible) to discern all traces of invention in his prose fiction even though we know for sure that invention is involved, what about all the nonfictive narratives we produce and encounter in everyday life? Are they plain facts as we often take them to be, or do they contain just as much invention, which we are often unaware of or fail to discern? Yet Sebald is not just concerned with invention in nonfictive narratives here: when he observes how we "make [our professed knowledge] up as we go along" and "invent a straight line of trail", he refers not only to invention but also to aspects of narrative artificiality such as sequencing and the selectivity of details; together, they make nonfictive narratives complicated constructs which we need to approach critically. It should be noted, however, that Sebald foregrounds the constructedness of nonfictive narratives (including their use of invention) not just to reveal their fallibility, but also to point out the important role they play in our attempts to construct a meaningful past and a robust sense of self. It is exactly this "reassuring quality" of nonfictive

3. "That" refers to the necessary participation of nonfictive materials ('fact') in fictional representation ('fiction'), which "leaves you always unclear as to how much was invented" (Sebald, Interview by Wood).

narratives, he suggests, that calls for us to be reflective about their complexity and fallibility, which in return helps us better appreciate their meaning-making capacity.

Nevertheless, these explanations that Sebald presents for his fictive practice are still inadequate: true as they are, they fail to capture the unsettling feelings that Sebald's prose fiction generates in its readers. Different from Mann's novels, in which the dense autobiographical or historical allusions can be seen as local phenomena that are subordinate to the global inventedness of the texts, Sebald's prose works do not fall comfortably into the category of historical or autobiographical fiction. Neither does his statement about his intention to highlight the "sense of uncertainty between fact and fiction" tell us about how his works are distinct from various other works that fall under the broad category of what Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" (*Poetics* 5), or why, having encountered the works of John Fowles, Salman Rushdie, and Kurt Vonnegut, to name just a few postmodern writers known for their historiographic metafiction, professional readers still consider Sebald's play with fictionality to be both fascinating and challenging?

I suggest that a key feature which distinguishes Sebald's prose fiction from historical fiction and much of historiographic metafiction is that, by giving a conspicuous presence to his nonfictive sources in his works, and by emphasising their role in his interview remarks, Sebald makes it difficult for readers to perceive his works primarily as fiction (or invented narratives) and regard the identifiable traces of nonfictive sources as raw materials that serve the author's invention; instead, he tempts readers to keep trying to discern historical truths from his works despite his fictionalisation and the fallibility of the nonfictive sources themselves. In other words, Sebald invites readers to not only reflect on but also experience the "sense of uncertainty between fact and fiction" throughout their reading process. As Jones observes, "[Y]ou wind up not knowing what to believe, or who. Everything – history, one's personal mental health – is called into question. It's even hard knowing what to call the books themselves. . . . All of them gnaw at the problem of the unreliability of memory and the chaos of modern history" (Sebald, "Books"). One may become more aware of the fallibility of memory and the constructedness of history by recognising Sebald's practice of fictionalisation, but the 'gnawing' effect can only be attained by reading these works as *a special kind of* fiction – fiction that

can be mistaken as nonfiction at first glance, and more importantly, fiction that one persistently desires to read as nonfiction even after realising its use of invention.

Therefore, in agreement with interviewers who describe Sebald's prose works as hybrids between fictive and nonfictive genres, I suggest that his works are what Nielsen calls "overdetermined fiction", or "texts that present themselves – in some cases at different times, in others at the same time – as *both* fiction *and* nonfiction" ("Natural Authors" 284).[4] Taking Bret Easton Ellis's autofiction *Lunar Park* as an example, Nielsen points out that the author's use of invention and his extensive borrowings from personal experiences are both obvious to readers: "[T]here is no doubt that much of what is said about Bret the protagonist holds true for Ellis the author as well. . . . But there are also elements that are not in accordance with Ellis's biography. . . . As the book progresses, its more overtly fictional elements increase" ("Double Exposures" 133-34). More importantly, Nielsen argues that this curious blend of invented and biographical elements creates an effect that is distinct from both embellished nonfiction and historical fiction ("Double Exposures" 134; "Natural Authors" 292-93). He claims that, rather than subordinate invention to biographical storytelling or vice versa, Ellis invites the reader to enter into, and oscillate between, "two mutually exclusive pacts": "One asking her to use the material in the novel in a search for the truth about what really happened *and* another telling her to treat the material in the novel as creating a nonreferential fictional world that makes all search for truths outside the work itself useless" (Nielsen, "Double Exposures" 134). Comparing this effect to that of double exposure in photography, Nielsen notes, "[A]utofictions superimpose an image of the real author over an image of characters in a fictional world. . . . [T]he reader's knowledge about the author (from interviews, biographies, the media, and so on) contributes to his or her view of the author in the literary work and vice versa: exaggerations, fictional inventions, narrative fantasies in the work contribute to rumors and fantasies about the author" (136).

Interestingly, Nielsen's conception of overdetermined fiction ultimately brings his own definition of fictionality into question. Reading his statements that

4. According to this definition, an overdetermined fiction presents itself as "both fiction and nonfiction" in a *simultaneous* or *sequential* manner. This qualification suggests the potential diversity of creative practices.

Ellis's autofiction is "very far from embellished nonfiction" (Nielsen, "Double Exposures" 134) and "quite different from" historical fiction (Nielsen, "Natural Authors" 292-93), one may realise that the decisive difference between fiction, nonfiction, and overdetermined fiction is not whether or how much intentionally signalled invention is employed in a work; rather, it lies in the 'pact(s)' that readers are invited to enter into, the interpretative framework(s) they adopt based on their inferences of the author's communicative intentions. Nielsen's metaphor of double exposure also suggests that overdetermined fiction is special, not because it consists of both invented and factual elements (which applies to most works of fiction and many works of nonfiction, too), but because it requires readers to perceive one text in two mutually exclusive lights: to read primarily for historical truths *and* to read primarily for meanings that are independent from the criterion of literal truthfulness. Therefore, compared to Nielsen's own definition of fictionality, his discussion on overdetermined fiction suggests a notion of fictionality that falls more in line with Walsh's conception of fictionality. In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, Walsh defines fictionality as "a contextual assumption: that is to say, in the comprehension of a fictive utterance, the assumption that it is fictive is itself manifest. The main contextual effect of this assumption is to subordinate implicatures that depend upon literal truthfulness to those that achieve relevance in more diffuse and cumulative ways" (30). Like Nielsen, Walsh sees fictionality as a communicative resource, but instead of drawing a necessary connection between fictionality and invention, he considers fictionality as a communicative orientation, a matter of what types of relevance one draws from a work of narrative.[5]

It is this latter notion that underlies the following exchange about Sebald's use of fictionality. While translating *The Emigrants* into English, Michael Hulse confesses his troubled feelings about the work in a letter to Sebald:

5. James Phelan's opinions on this issue fall between Nielsen's and Walsh's. In "Local Nonfictionality within Generic Fiction", Phelan defines fictionality as "intentionally communicated invention in discourse" (363), which sounds like a slightly modified version of Nielsen's definition; yet he also notes that fictionality is "not an escape from the actual world but an indirect way of engaging with it" (364), which resonates with Walsh's conception of fictionality as a contextual assumption that prioritises indirect forms of relevance. However, Walsh believes that the latter attribute (i.e. indirect engagement) is essential to the definition of fictionality, while invention is a common but not necessary feature of fictive discourse.

> Now, the impression conveyed – that your narratives are fictions – troubles me, since my own reading of them depends to a substantial extent, I think, on my feeling that what matters in them is true. . . . That fiction and imagination are in some manner involved I do not question, but it matters to me to locate them within the documentary aspect of your texts, as a token of your dedication to your quest for these lives, rather than without it, where it would be something different – no less arresting, but somehow embroidery rather than substance. (197)

Like many of Sebald's interviewers, Hulse expresses his uncertainty about whether *The Emigrants* is fiction or nonfiction. However, instead of asking how much and what kinds of invention are employed, Hulse realises that the more important question is how the author intends the work to be read: does he intend it to be perceived as a creative form of nonfiction, read primarily for its informative relevance (while still allowing for some invention), or does he intend it to be perceived as historical fiction, read primarily for more indirect and reflexive kinds of relevance (while acknowledging that a large part of it may be literally true)? Hulse further suggests that this question has a strong ethical dimension: he expresses the worry that Sebald's potential intention for his work to be read as fiction may indicate his failure to convey the full historical weight of the nonfictive sources he draws on, especially when they are concerned with the profound suffering of real individuals during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. As he observes in a reflective essay on his collaboration with Sebald, his uncertainty about Sebald's use of fictionality is ultimately "a moral rather than an aesthetic dilemma" (Hulse 198).

In response to Hulse's questions and concerns, Sebald writes:

> Fictionalization, as I see it, is, in this text, not a matter of substance, that is to say it is nothing to do with making up characters, events that befall them & complicated plots. Rather, the sense of fiction, the feeling that one is at a level removed, by a notch or so, from reality is meant to come out of adjusting the 'Sehschärfe' [focus] of the telescope one looks through, so that some things seem very distant & others (especially those which are in the past) quite close & immediate. (qtd. in Hulse 198)

Sebald agrees with Hulse that his use of fictionality is not so much about inventing characters and plots as about foregrounding certain types of meanings and downplaying others. Faced with Hulse's question of whether *The Emigrants* is fiction, Sebald again gives a two-fold answer. On the one hand, he suggests that, since he does not alter his nonfictive sources in any substantial way, the work still makes a strong commitment to uncovering the obscured life stories of real individuals, and that he invites readers to partake in this commitment. On the other hand, he stresses that this is not the dominant light in which the work should be read; rather, he aims to create "the sense of fiction". Using the telescope as an analogy, he suggests that this "sense of fiction" is achieved by adjusting one's psychological distance in an unusual way, so that one feels "removed, by a notch or so, from reality" and closer to certain things in the past. But how should we understand this shift of focus in more specific terms, and how does Sebald achieve it?

By stating that this shift of focus generates the feeling that "one is at a level removed, by a notch or so, from reality", Sebald points again at his aim to make readers more critical of nonfictive representations of the past. During his own engagement with nonfictive sources, Sebald is acutely aware that the pursuit of historical truths, especially on the personal level, often leads to dead ends. He reflects:

> [I]t is extremely difficult to determine what the past contained in terms of the personal experience of others. The accepted version of the past is largely of a fictional nature, or large tracts of it are. As regards the lives of your immediate relations – parents, for instance – there are stock memories which are constantly or repeatedly reeled out when people start talking about the past. Between these 'stories' there are enormous lacunae of non-memory, of a past that somehow seems to have had no existence at all. (Sebald, "In Conversation" 143-44)

Here Sebald identifies several problems he encounters in his investigation of others' past. First, as he repeatedly emphasises, historical accounts and life stories are saturated with various forms of invention (from confabulation to lies) and are dependent on aspects of narrative artificiality – this is what he means by the "fictional nature" of accepted accounts of the past. Moreover, he points out that these available and accepted narratives of the past are often "stock memories":

consolidated and automatised through repetition, they become the definitive version, blocking one's quest for alternative accounts that may be more truthful, detailed, or reflexive about their own constructedness. I suggest that Sebald strives to generate the same feelings of uncertainty and reflective distancing in readers by frustrating their attempts to secure historical truths in his openly unfaithful narratives – a task which he tempts them to undertake in the first place with the prominent presence of nonfictive sources in his works.

Sebald also notes that "stock memories" are often accompanied by significant gaps in the narratives, as people tend to repress or ignore large segments of their personal memory that do not fit into a reassuring storyline. These gaps are often irrecoverable, especially in the cases of deceased individuals; this in turn gives rise to a regrettable distance between these individuals and their living posterity which can hardly be bridged by historical research proper. This is probably why Sebald resorts to another mode of understanding to cultivate a closer bond with these individuals, making their personal past seem more immediate. Restressing that his works are "prose fiction", Sebald explains:

> They reinvent a life almost lost or something that perhaps nobody thought might be recovered. And it is that reinvention, that attempt to answer the question 'who was this man or this woman?', which necessarily draws you into all kinds of fictional strategies because you have to make things up. Why did he become like this? Why did he do this? What drove him to do that? Yes, it is certainly fiction. ("In Conversation" 156)

Sebald points out that, instead of being constrained by the scanty historical sources that are available, he often resorts to speculation in the attempt to develop an empathetic relationship with these obscure individuals. It may be argued that speculation does not always activate the contextual assumption of fictionality; rather, it often serves as a means to the inferential quest for historical truths, with the inferences being subject to the test of new-found evidence. However, in Sebald's attempts to speculate about life stories that are largely forgotten and may never be recovered, this function gives way to more reflexive contemplations about the emotional and ethical values of speculation as a mode of understanding. In other words, rather than a potential version of history, Sebald presents his works as one

man's informed intuitions of others' past, with a focus on the emotional bonds generated through the means of narrative. By setting out to tentatively answer the questions "Why did he become like this? Why did he do this? What drove him to do that?", Sebald invites readers to consider other, more reflexive questions: why does the author still speculate about others' past experiences, even when he knows that the true stories can never be recovered? What kinds of details does he speculate about, and how do these speculations affect his perceptions, feelings, and sense of self?

Both the distancing from nonfictive representations of the past and the reflections on the capacity of speculation to facilitate empathy belong to implicatures that are independent from the criterion of literal truthfulness and "achieve relevance in more diffuse and cumulative ways" (Walsh, *Rhetoric* 30). By foregrounding these implicatures in his critical remarks, Sebald encourages readers to see his prose works as fiction. Paradoxically, however, he also suggests that these implicatures only achieve their full communicative effects when juxtaposed to, or built upon, quests for literal truthfulness. As I have argued above, Sebald enhances readers' awareness of the limitations of nonfictive narratives by frustrating their desire to secure historical truths in his works, a desire which he has kindled in the first place; he also suggests that his employment of speculation is an extension rather than a relaxation of solid historical research. He draws the distinction between empathetic speculation and self-gratifying fantasy more emphatically in *The Emigrants*, as I will show in Chapter IX. Therefore, according to Walsh's definition of fictionality, Sebald still presents his prose works as overdetermined fiction through his deliberately ambivalent interview remarks: he foregrounds "implicatures that depend upon literal truthfulness" as well as "those that achieve relevance in more diffuse and cumulative ways" (*Rhetoric* 30). Moreover, by inviting readers to self-consciously oscillate between the two contextual assumptions, he demonstrates that fictionality and nonfictionality often coexist in narrative communication, and that the hierarchical relation between them can be easily flipped.

Sebald further suggests that the employment of fictionality does not necessarily detract from the ethical weight of his works; quite the contrary, his decision to write prose fiction is informed by ethical considerations. Contemplating his entitlement to write about such sensitive topics as natural disasters, human atrocities, and especially the profound aftermaths of the Holocaust, he remarks,

"What right do you have to write about any of these things? Have you been there, and felt these things for yourself?" (Sebald, "Questionable Business"). More specifically, he asks, "Do I, who carry a German passport and have two German parents, have the right [to write about Jewish experiences of the Holocaust]?" (Jaggi). These remarks indicate Sebald's concern about whether one can genuinely understand others' past without sharing their experiences, or how one can write empathetically about others' lived experiences, especially their sufferings, without appropriating them. In this light, Sebald's decision to evoke "the sense of fiction" (qtd. in Hulse 198) may be understood as a gesture of respectful distancing from the experiences of victimised individuals, which adds to, rather than detracts from, the author's "dedication to [his] quest for these lives" (Hulse 197).

Yet Sebald is also aware that fictionality itself is not a cure-all for potential ethical problems of Holocaust writing, for as much as it may facilitate empathy and respect, it may also be used as a license for dishonesty and self-gratification. Commenting on some German writers' attempts to write about the Holocaust in the 1960s and 1970s, Sebald claims that they are "morally not right", for "something is spun out of the lives of these victims which is gratifying for the author or for the author's audience" ("Conversation" 112). Sebald's critical essays on some of these writers provide more details about what such unethical self-gratification may be. Examining a range of his essays, Brad Prager argues that Sebald is strongly critical about images of 'good Germans' created by a generation of German writers of the Holocaust. For example, Sebald attacks Alfred Andersch for his idealised self-depiction, which suggests his inability to honestly scrutinise some of his own life choices (Prager 86); he also criticises Günter Grass for creating 'good Germans' in his novels to give his German readers the illusion that they too would act righteously in such situations, thus absolving them from any sense of responsibility or guilt (86-87). In contrast, Sebald refuses to grant himself or his readers such self-gratification; rather, he regards narrative writing as a means of self-analysis and self-transformation, a way to understand the profound, complex impacts that others' experiences may have on his own sense of self.

7.2. Self-Analysis by Proxy: Narrative and the Author's Sense of Self

Like Nabokov, who criticises readings that equate some of his fictional characters with himself, Sebald repeatedly emphasises in interviews that the first-

person narrators in his prose fiction should not be conflated with himself. Arthur Lubow reports, "[H]e cautioned that the narrator was of course not to be confused with an 'authentic person.' In other words, the narrator of Sebald's novels was not to be mistaken for Sebald himself" (169). When Steve Wasserman, host to one of Sebald's readings, tentatively observes, "I perhaps should not confuse the narrator of the story with you yourself", Sebald quickly approves this remark with an emphatic "no" ("In This" 369).

Compared to Nabokov, however, Sebald's claim is more questionable. For one thing, while Nabokov takes care to "keep [his] characters beyond the limit of [his] own identity" (*Strong Opinions* 12), making them noticeably different from himself, Sebald's narrators are almost completely autobiographical. Although they are represented to varying degrees across different works, their more or less concrete images all match up closely with what we know about Sebald himself. Jaggi notes, "Sebald's narrator is one 'WG Sebald',[6] who lives in Norfolk, comes from the German village of 'W',[7] and has a companion, 'Clara'. Max Sebald lives in an old rectory outside Norwich with his Austrian wife, Ute" (Jaggi). Other correspondences of biographical information include his childhood life in rural Bavaria, his arrival in Manchester in the 1960s, and his wanderings in East Anglia. Other interviewers claim that Sebald's narrators share similarities in dispositions, interests, and views with the author, whom they come to know in person. Simon Houpt states, for example, "[H]is four books all feature narrators very much like Sebald, a ruminative and lonesome fellow with catholic interests that run from the biology of the silkworm to the history of military fortifications" (D3). This proximity is further reinforced by the fact that, as I have shown in Section 7.1, Sebald presents his works as both fiction and nonfiction and invites his readers to self-consciously oscillate between two communicative assumptions. This play with fictionality makes it difficult for readers to consider the narrators primarily as fictional characters and to perceive their striking resemblances to the author as common instances of autobiographical allusion subordinate to global fictive communication. Instead, one

6. This statement is somewhat misleading. Only in *Vertigo* does Sebald give a name to the narrator, and he does so obliquely – by inserting a photo of what is supposed to be the narrator's new passport (based on contextual inference) with the signature 'W. Sebald' on it (114). In all the other prose works, the narrators remain anonymous.

7. Sebald comes from the German village of Wertach.

may ask whether the narrators should be primarily seen as nonfictional self-representations of the author.

The difficulty in understanding Sebald's highly autobiographical narrators is manifested in the ambiguous ways in which interviewers and critics describe the relation between the narrators and Sebald himself. Some critics gloss over the issue: for example, A. D. Miller notes that Sebald's main works "have a narrator who both is and is not Sebald himself" but does not give any further explanation (Miller). Others simply follow Sebald's admonitions and separate the narrators from the author, identifying striking similarities between the two without venturing to draw further connections (Sebald, Interview by Kafatou 31; Houpt D3; Alvarez). Lynne Schwartz, in a commemorative article, describes Sebald's narrators as "facets of himself, Sebald the prism" (Dyer et al. 19). This description suggests a potential way to perceive the relation between the narrators and the author, namely, that the former are selective representations of the latter; however, without further elaboration, this statement lacks in specificity and therefore adds to, rather than resolves, the ambiguity of critical comments in this respect.

This uncertainty over how to understand the relation between Sebald and his highly autobiographical first-person narrators prompts us to scrutinise his critical remarks for clues. The first question is: since overdetermined fiction can be read as both fiction and nonfiction *simultaneously* or *sequentially* (Nielsen, "Natural Authors" 284), does Sebald intend his narrators to be read primarily under one of the two contextual assumptions throughout his works, or does he intend them to be perceived as both fictional characters and nonfictional self-representations, alternately or simultaneously? Under which contextual assumption does he elaborate on the necessity to distinguish the narrators from the author, and how?

A way to understand Sebald's insistent emphasis on the distinction between himself and his narrators would be to perceive the narrators under the contextual assumption of fictionality, seeing them primarily as products of fictional representation that convey – or contribute to the communication of – indirect forms of relevance that are independent from the criterion of literal truthfulness. In other words, the narrator's account of his personal experiences should not be seen as referring to the author's past, and even when resemblances between a narrator and the author are identified based on intertextual correspondences, they should be

considered as incidental to the meaning of the given work or passage. Under this contextual assumption, the narrators should be perceived as distinct from the author, as a conflation of the two overlooks the narrator's fictional status.

However, Sebald does not argue along this line, at least not explicitly: nowhere in his interviews does he emphasise that his narrators should be primarily seen as fictional. The closest he comes to suggesting this perception is when, faced with Bigsby's question of why the narrators refer to their childhood village as 'W.' and the nearby town as 'S.' (rather than Wertach and Sonthofen, the two places where Sebald spent his childhood), Sebald replies that 'W.' and 'S.' "have more of a symbolic significance than anything. I wanted to avoid the trap of them being identified and the text being seen as a realistic and faithful portrayal of these places, when in the texts they are in fact imaginary locations" ("In Conversation" 141). In more precise terms, Sebald argues that 'W.' and 'S.', despite bearing great resemblances to the real places of Wertach and Sonthofen, should be read as *fictional* locations. Under this contextual assumption, they are first and foremost seen as a kind of German village or small town with their monotonous routines, eccentric people, and dark history – typical places that are deeply scarred by the two world wars. As fictional locations, they are also to be seen as places that held out fascination as well as horror for the *fictional* narrators in their childhood, places of origin that have shaped the narrators' interests, character, and worldview.[8] Because the depictions of 'W.' and 'S.' are closely tied to the representation of the narrators, a fictive reading of these passages implies the perception of the narrators as fictional, too, which in turn requires a distinction between the narrators and the author.

More often, however, Sebald's remarks suggest that he considers his narrators as products of nonfictional self-presentation. When asked about the opening of *The Rings of Saturn*, where the narrator was hospitalised and suffering

8. It should also be noted, however, that the use of initials for place names also generates opposite effects: as a long-established convention of nonfiction writing which signals both the reference to a real person or place and the author's preference to not reveal the full name, it suggests that 'W.' and 'S.' should (also) be seen as nonfictional. Therefore, it is probably better to understand the remark above as Sebald's emphasis on the indirect forms of relevance conveyed by his accounts about 'W.' and 'S.' – meanings that are often overlooked or considered secondary in nonfictive communication – rather than the writer's instruction about a single correct way to read certain parts of his works. Using a literary device with double effects, Sebald again suggests that fiction/nonfiction is not a binary opposition; instead, their distinction lies in the relative emphasis each genre puts on different types of meaning, which can be easily shifted.

from immobility, Sebald quickly identifies the passage as an account of his own past and explains that *he* was hospitalised for a fractured disc rather than the mental collapse which some critics have inferred from his text ("In Conversation" 158-59). Talking about *Vertigo*, he discloses that, since Stendhal's and Kafka's stays in Italy reminded him of his own trip to northern Italy in 1980, he "wrote *an account of that trip* in the long story *All'estero*, which ended up as a part of a triptych in between the stories about Stendhal and Kafka" (Sebald, "Echoes" 350; my emphasis). He also talks about the final part of *Vertigo* as a nonfictive account of his own past: "In the fourth and final part, *Il ritorno in patria*, *I recalled my childhood* in the little village of Wertach" (350; my emphasis).[9] I suggest that it is under the contextual assumption of nonfictionality that most of Sebald's arguments about the need to distinguish between the narrators and the author should be understood, and that such understanding in turn sheds light on his perception of narrative writing as a self-analytical act.

To begin with, Sebald emphasises that his narrators are selective and necessarily incomplete representations of himself. When asked whether "the sense of loss, regret, and decay" in his books reflects his own worldview, and whether his view of life is consciously or unconsciously infused into his books (Sebald, "Lost" 361), he replies by sharing his own and his writer friends' experiences at readings events:

> Of course, the audience has a certain expectation of the author because they identify him very closely with the narrator, or the other way round and they expect you to be on the verge of suicide! If you are not so, then they are quite inclined to sue you under the Trade Descriptions Act. . . . That does, of course, not mean that I am constantly given to outbursts of hilarity! I have been called a rather boring and gloomy person by some people. (361-62)

Sebald realises that this question should not be answered in any straightforward way: he admits that he has endowed his narrators with his own pessimistic worldview and gloomy character; however, he is also aware that a simple affirmative answer may reinforce the problematic assumption held by some readers that the narrators'

9. This statement contradicts the claim above that 'W.' should be seen as a fictional location, which shows again that Sebald presents his works as both fiction and nonfiction.

thoughts, values, and disposition should fully correspond with the author's outside the works. In order not to reinforce this assumption, Sebald stresses that, although crucial aspects of himself are presented through the narrators, the author is always more complicated than any of his narrators; therefore, readers should be open to surprises, differences, and contradictions when perceiving the author in non-literary contexts in relation to his self-presentations in literary works.

Sebald's emphasis on the selectivity of self-presentation points to an important reason for distinguishing between the author and the narrator: to the extent that the narrator is a represented character, the question of why the author represented the narrator in this or that specific way always obtains. In this sense, Sebald's insistence on the distinction between himself and his narrators resonates with Nabokov's emphasis on the incompleteness of self-representation through the analogy of the never-ending painting (*Speak* 244), which I have discussed in Section 3.2. Yet Sebald's reflections go beyond the foregrounding of the reflexive relation between the narrating-I and the narrated-I, the fact that, in any self-account, the author's image is not only directly represented through the experiences she/he chooses to disclose but also indirectly presented through her/his narrative style. More importantly, Sebald suggests that the narrating-I and narrated-I combined are still a partial (re)presentation of the author which is engendered in a certain communicative context.

This latter thought is made more explicit and further developed in another remark that clearly resonates with the one above. "Say you write fairly gloomy things," Sebald notes in an interview, "They think they should sue you under the Trade Descriptions Act if you tell a joke. Who's to say? What you reveal in a dark text may be closer to the real truth than the person who tells a joke at a party" (Lubow 170). At first glance, this reflection reminds one of James Phelan's distinction between the implied author and the real (or flesh-and-blood) author, with the concept of the implied author replaced by the concept of narrator.[10] Phelan

10. Phelan himself argues for the necessity to differentiate between the narrator and the implied author in nonfictive narratives in order to account for unreliable narration, deficient narration, and shifting narrative voices ("Implied Author"). Sebald, however, is not concerned with such phenomena. What he calls 'the narrator' is an amalgamation of three narratological concepts: direct self-representation in the texts (the narrated-I), indirect self-presentation through narrative style (the narrating-I), and aspects of the author that can be learnt or inferred from his works (the implied author), which, in Sebald's view, is the sum of the previous two concepts.

defines the implied author as "a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of a particular text" (*Living* 45). In other words, the real author possesses a reserve of characteristics that are selectively activated when composing each work; therefore, multiple working subsets or 'implied authors' can be inferred from different works by the same author. Sebald seems to uphold this distinction too when he argues that readers need not be shocked or disappointed when, through extraliterary channels, they discover aspects of an author that do not fully correspond with the images she/he projects through literary writings.

Upon closer inspection, however, Sebald's reflection subtly troubles Phelan's distinction between the implied and the real author. By suggesting that the personal images presented through an author's literary works may be "closer to the real truth" than those presented through everyday interactions, Sebald points out that there is no authentic version of the author to be readily found in her/his extraliterary life, against which her/his self-presentation through literary works can be gauged. He thus reminds us that, contrary to what is wrongly suggested by the terms, the so-called 'real author' or 'flesh-and-blood author' is not the material being of an author but, liked the implied author, a product of interpretation. As Marie-Laure Ryan argues, the only difference between the implied author (IA) and the real author (RA) is the size of dataset from which the author's images are derived: "IA is an author-image derived by the reader from textual-internal clues, while RA can be constructed through any kind of data relating to this author" ("Meaning" 40-41). This observation lays the ground for Ryan's argument that the notion of the implied author is unnecessary and even counterproductive for our reading of literary works. She asks, "[W]hy not recognize that the self is the product of diverse moods, emotions, ideas, desires, and attitudes, and that it creates itself through imaginative activity as much as through interaction with physical reality?" (40). Ryan suggests that, instead of perceiving static, self-sufficient images of an author from her/his literary works and holding them against a more general yet equally static image of the 'real author' manifested in her/his personal life, we should regard the author's self-presentation through literary creation as part of a larger process of her/his self-expression and self-construction; based on this perception, we should consider our

reading of a work as an effort to contribute to our understanding of *the author* rather than an attempt to infer an 'implied author' from the text alone while believing that the 'real author' is beyond our concern and ultimately unfathomable.

But this is not all: with the question "Who's to say?", Sebald goes one step beyond Ryan's argument. He points out that an author does not necessarily have a more authentic or comprehensive understanding of her/himself than readers; instead, for both author and reader, the author's self is what Daniel Dennett calls "a fictional object" (104), a purely abstract object posited to facilitate our interpretation of human thoughts and acts. Comparing the notion of self in phenomenology or hermeneutics to that of centre of gravity in physics, Dennett claims, "It turns out to be theoretically perspicuous to organize the interpretation around a central abstraction: Each person has a self" (105). In other words, a self is not only a *product* of interpretation but also a conceptual *tool* that serves our interpretation of humans, including ourselves. An author's self-presentation through a literary work is therefore not a more or less selective revelation of a complete, definitive 'self-image' which she/he readily possesses; rather, it is a situated attempt to make sense of her/his own ideas and experiences, an act of self-interpretation which, as Dennett remarks, is at least as difficult as the interpretation of others (105). This idea in turn points to a shift in readers' interpretative approach: Sebald suggests that, instead of seeing their readings as attempts to partly unveil the self-image possessed by the author, readers should consider an author's works as her/his invitations for readers to join her/his own quest for self-understanding.

Sebald's ideas about how narrative writing both reflects and shapes the author's sense of self, encapsulated in his emphasis on the distinction between himself and his narrators, shed light on his perception of narrative writing as self-analysis. In his interview with Green, Sebald mentions that one of the "noble motives" of writing is to "[be] analytical about oneself" ("Questionable Business"). He further elaborates on this purpose in an interview with Piet de Moor: "You try to shed light on something in your mind. Somewhere, pieces of evidence must be lying around under the carpet or in the loft or in other hidden places that offer explanations for the course of your own life. That is why writing is also a forensic activity" (Sebald, "Echoes" 353). Sebald's desire for self-analysis and self-defence may partly derive from the urge to tackle his midlife crisis, as I have discussed in Section 6.1. It

is also prompted by his belated realisation of how the profound aftermath of the Holocaust is closely intertwined with the whole course of his life. Looking back at his early years, he reflects, “It is the simultaneity of a blissful childhood and these horrific events that now strikes me as quite incomprehensible. I know now that these things cast a very long shadow over my life” (Sebald, “In Conversation” 144). In order to comprehend this “quite incomprehensible” aspect of his past, Sebald needs to reinspect, and perhaps reconstruct, his sense of self.

While these objectives are not uncommon per se, they become less self-explanatory when one realises that Sebald’s prose works are not what is commonly considered as autobiography. Sebald rarely gives lengthy and detailed accounts of his own past through his literary writings; instead, his works focus predominantly on the life stories of others, some of whom are his personal acquaintances, some of whom are people he came to know through written texts or oral accounts. Jaggi notes that Sebald is “obsessively private” and does not divulge much about his personal life in either his works or his interviews (Jaggi). This is probably why, even though he sees self-exploration as a main purpose of writing, Sebald does not resort to autobiographical storytelling but chooses an alternative route: “There is always the desire to find out how one is made up, to get to those layers that are out of sight; but I would find it hard to write anything confessional. I prefer to look at the trajectories of other lives that cross one’s own trajectory – do it by proxy rather than expose oneself in public” (Atlas 291). Yet how exactly does he analyse himself “by proxy”? Does he further explicate this approach in interviews?

Again, Sebald’s remarks on his deliberate use of highly autobiographical first-person narrators provide illuminating clues. When Jon Cook notes that Sebald’s works “maintain a levelness of tone”, he replies: “[The narrator] doesn’t say a great deal about himself but his presence is there in his voice. It’s this which I imagine gives the text the kind of thing that you describe, i.e. the narrator is affected by what he finds, what he is describing is probably what causes this” (Sebald, “Lost” 360). Sebald emphasises that a narrator consists of two aspects – the narrated-I and the narrating-I – and that he pays attention to both aspects when constructing his narrators. First, each narrator is directly represented as his past experiences are recounted. Sebald notes, however, that he employs this device with discretion, probably because he “would find it hard to write anything confessional”. Second,

each narrator is indirectly presented through his "voice" or "tone", a narrative style formed by various factors such as diction, tropes, sentence structures, sequencing, and focalisation, which suggests his disposition, views, feelings, and interests. In this sense, each narrator is constructed throughout the narrative regardless of whether or how much he is directly represented. As Walsh argues, "Every narrative act inherently makes commitments that implicate the narrating subject, which therefore acquires a range of perspectival attributes by virtue of that act. These attributes – spatiotemporal, conceptual, emotional, ethical – are contextually cumulative, and all contribute to the constitution of a narrating self whether the narrative is about the self or not" ("Centre" 395). Cook notes the perceptible effects of such indirect presentation when he comments on "the levelness of tone" that permeates Sebald's works. In response, Sebald affirms that such indirect presentation plays an important role in the shaping of his narrators. Moreover, he claims that a causal relation can be inferred between his narrators' voice and the narrated events: the narrators' character and worldview, reflected in their voice, are partly shaped by the narrated events. I will show in Chapter IX that the opposite also holds: the narrators' decisions to investigate and write about certain individuals or incidents indicate the emotional, ethical, and/or philosophical relevance of the topics to the narrators, which may be partly explained by the narrators' disposition and preoccupations.

Not only does Sebald reflect on how he deliberately shapes his narrators through both direct representation and indirect presentation, but he also suggests that these two methods build upon each other to facilitate his self-analysis. Talking about his use of represented narrators in all his major prose works, Sebald observes that they serve as a supporting "banister" that helps him "[establish] an emotional relationship with the main figures and the minor witnesses and so on" ("Lost" 362). It should be noted that represented narrators are not necessary for the establishment of emotional relationship between the author and the individuals represented in his works: as I have argued above, the author already suggests his feelings towards these individuals through the narrators' voice. Nonetheless, with the 'banister' metaphor, Sebald points out that the direct representation of the narrators plays a facilitating role: it not only foregrounds the above-mentioned emotional relationship as a major concern for Sebald himself, but it also enables him to self-consciously negotiate this relationship in his prose works, asking such questions as "Which aspects of myself

do I present in this work through the narrator's voice, and why? Which parts of my personal past are important to the formation of these attributes? How do these attributes contribute to my understanding of the individuals I write about, and vice versa?" The focus of Sebald's self-analysis, I suggest, is not the pursuit of a definitive image of himself (which, as he realises, is an unattainable ideal), but the understanding of narrative writing as situated acts of sense-making about oneself. Informed by these ideas, I will discuss how Sebald performs self-analysis "by proxy" with the help of his self-reflective first-person narrators in Chapter IX. My reading will further illuminate the underdiscussed question of how narrative in general (and not just autobiographical narrative) serves as a means of self-presentation, self-exploration, and self-transformation.

In this chapter, I focus on two main aspects of Sebald's self-professed purposes of authorship: first, I discuss how his unconventional employment of fictionality contributes to his intention to create and communicate a form of meaning that transcends the constraints of academic writing; second, I explore how he perceives narrative writing as a means of self-analysis. Sebald's classification of his prose works as 'prose fiction' prompts interviewers to ask about how much and what types of invention are involved. His replies to these questions pull in two directions simultaneously: on the one hand, he openly acknowledges the use of invention in his reworking of nonfictive sources and gives specific examples; on the other hand, he emphasises that he uses invention with restraint and foregrounds the remarkable presence of nonfictive sources in his finished works. Sebald further suggests that his fictive practices are not uncommon in historical fiction and historiographic metafiction; however, neither genre can fully capture the unsettling effects his works evoke in his readers. I suggest that Nielsen's concept of 'overdetermined fiction' captures Sebald's fictive practices more accurately. A closer examination of Nielsen's discussions on overdetermined fiction shows that invention, though a crucial element in most works of fiction, is not a definitional attribute of fictionality; instead, fictionality is better understood as a contextual assumption under which narratives are read for indirect forms of relevance independent from the criterion of literal truthfulness. It is this understanding of fictionality that underlies Hulse's question about whether Sebald intends his works to be read as fiction or nonfiction.

Again, Sebald's answer pulls in two directions: on the one hand, he suggests that he is dedicated to the pursuit of historical truths despite various limitations, and that he invites readers to share this pursuit; on the other hand, he foregrounds several indirect forms of relevance he intends to convey – a self-reflexive understanding of the limitations of nonfictive narrative and the appreciation of how speculation may facilitate empathy. By inviting readers to self-consciously oscillate between fictionality and nonfictionality, Sebald foregrounds fictionality as a communicative resource with its own ethical potentials and risks; he also suggests that fictionality and nonfictionality often coexist in one narrative, and that the hierarchical relation between them can be easily flipped.

Many interviewers have noted Sebald's claims that his heavily autobiographical narrators should not be confused with himself, but the exact meaning of these remarks, as well as the implications they may have for our reading of his works, remains unclear. I suggest that, although Sebald's use of fictionality may explain the necessity to distinguish his narrators from the author, most of Sebald's own remarks on the complex relation between himself and his narrators are made under the contextual assumption of nonfictionality. Sebald points out that the narrated-I and the narrating-I combined are still a partial (re)presentation of the author, whose sense of self is constructed through literary *and* extraliterary activities. Furthermore, Sebald suggests that an author does not possess a complete, definitive image of her/himself; rather, her/his self-presentation in literary works is a means of self-interpretation oriented towards situated sense-making. Therefore, instead of searching for any static author-images, readers should perceive Sebald's works as situated acts of self-exploration. These ideas trouble the concept of the implied author; they also help us understand Sebald's claim that his prose works provide a way for him to perform self-analysis "by proxy" – not through detailed accounts of his own past but by telling the life stories of others. Sebald suggests that his moderately represented narrators not only foreground the author's emotional connections with the depicted individuals, but they also facilitate his self-conscious discussions of how these connections derive from and contribute to his sense of self. In Chapter IX, I will explore how Sebald's ideas on fictive communication and the self-analytical capacity of narrative are further developed in his prose works.

Part Four: Ideas and Practices of Authorship in Sebald's Prose Fiction

Chapter VIII Writers as Silk Weavers: Self-Conscious Discussions of Authorship in Sebald's Works

Like Nabokov, who portrays many of his fictional characters as reflective authors, Sebald makes authorship a prominent theme in his four main works of prose fiction: *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* (henceforth referred to as *Rings*), and *Austerlitz*. In all four works, the represented narrators emphasise writing as the medium of their narration by referring to the different stages of their writing process that contribute – or may have contributed – to the final works we are reading. The creative process often begins with various forms of research. In Part II of *Vertigo*, for example, the narrator describes his brief stay in Desenzano in the footsteps of Dr K., who spent a "profoundly disconsolate" day in that town in 1913 (85). Later in this part, he recounts a visit to Biblioteca Civica di Verona, where he consulted bound volumes of "the Verona newspapers dating from August and September 1913" (117-23). These passages suggest the kinds of research which may have informed the narrator's writing of Part III, "Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva", an account of Dr K.'s trip to northern Italy in September 1913.[1] Besides visiting archives and historical sites, the narrators also visit individual informants who not only share their own life stories but also grant the narrators access to a range of privately kept sources: Lucy Landau shows a photo album which documents "a few gaps aside, almost the whole of Paul Bereyter's life" (Sebald, *Emigrants* 45); Aunt Fini shares photo and postcard albums that brings the narrator closer to Ambros Adelwarth's past (74, 78); Max Ferber entrusts his mother's diary to the narrator (193); and Austerlitz even gives the narrator a key to his London house so that the narrator can peruse at will the hundreds of photographs Austerlitz has stored there (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 408). These accounts about the discovery, sharing, and

1. The name 'Dr K.' seems to be a thin veneer of anonymity, half concealing and half revealing the name 'Franz Kafka'. In fact, "Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva" is heavily based on Kafka's personal experiences as can be reconstructed from historical sources. These observations raise questions about Sebald's intentions behind the use of an initial and the employment of invention in this part, which I will further discuss in Section 9.2.

entrustment of material sources highlight the narrators' role as bricoleurs who bring together miscellaneous existent materials and rework them into an organic whole.

Sebald's narrators also foreground their note taking and drafting process, describing the changing surroundings and the passage of time, noting surges of inspiration and difficult periods. In *Austerlitz*, for example, the narrator recalls how, after a long conversation with Austerlitz, he sat alone in his hotel room "writing down, in the form of notes and disconnected sentences, as much as possible of what Austerlitz had told me that evening" (138). In Part IV of *Vertigo*, the narrator's home-coming trip to his childhood village W. is simultaneously a writing retreat. His stay in W. begins with a week spent solely in the Engelwirt Inn, where he "spent the afternoons sitting in the empty bar room, turning over my recollections and writing up my notes" (Sebald, *Vertigo* 204); it ends with his resolution to leave, "particularly as my writing had reached the point at which I either had to continue for ever or break off" (252-53). Similarly, *Rings* contains the story of its own genesis. It opens with the narrator's account of how this book started to take its form when he "began in my thoughts to write these pages" when lying immobile in a hospital in Norwich (Sebald, *Rings* 3), and how it is coming into physical existence "[n]ow that I begin to assemble my notes, more than a year after my discharge from hospital" (5). The book closes with a reference to the here and now, the scene of writing – "Today, as I bring these notes to a conclusion, is the 13th of April 1995" (294) – followed by a list of historical events that reveals the atrocities and sufferings that are associated with this seemingly random date.

The narrators' self-conscious representations of their writing process are the exact opposite of a historian's footnotes which aim to settle problems of authority. Instead, as in Nabokov's novels, they emphasise the complexity of authorship, raising questions about the purposes and challenges of writing, contingencies in the creative process, the impacts of writing on the author's worldview and self-understanding, and the fallibility of historical sources and personal memories. These depictions of the narrators' writing process are further complemented by two other kinds of self-conscious discussions of authorship in Sebald's works. First, the narrators often observe the creative process and self-reflections of other writers and artists, including personal acquaintances and historical figures. Many of them serve as role models for the narrators, and their ideas and practices touch upon some

lasting issues of authorship. Second, the narrators often convey their understanding of authorship with illuminating metaphors and analogies. Together, these three kinds of self-conscious discussion of authorship resonate with and further develop the ideas of authorship that Sebald has raised in his critical remarks; they also help us better understand some aspects of Sebald's distinct style.

Taking one remarkable analogy as the starting point of my analysis, I will discuss in this chapter how the self-conscious representations and discussions of authorship in Sebald's prose works illuminate his ideas and practices of authorship. In the final part of *Rings*, the narrator compares writers to silk weavers (282-83).[2] Tracing the history of sericulture, he notes that silk weavers before the Industrial Age "had much in common" with "scholars and writers" (283). Both weavers and writers are likely to suffer from melancholy due to the body-bending and eye-straining conditions of their work. Both are engrossed in their work and haunted even in their dreams by the suspicion of having made mistakes. However, in sharp contrast with their strained bodies and troubled minds, both weavers and writers produce artworks "of a truly fabulous variety, and of an iridescent, quite indescribable beauty" (283). This analogy highlights several characteristics of authorship such as its demand for solitude, its compulsive nature, and its pursuit of aesthetic value. The analogy also raises important questions: if writing is such a taxing pursuit, what are the reasons for undertaking it? What features constitute the "indescribable beauty" of literary works, and what effects does it exert in readers' minds, as well as the author's own? I will show how these ideas are expanded on, and how these questions are addressed, in Sebald's prose works.

2. This analogy is a creative invocation of a classical metaphor of authorship. Citing examples from diverse literary traditions, Sophus Helle states that "[t]he idea of authorship as textile labor is ubiquitous in literary history" ("What" 123). In particular, Helle observes that this metaphor illuminates "a notion of medial agency" (127), as it depicts authorship as the *creative arrangement* of *existing materials* which "are imbued with historical weight and a force of their own" (128). These two sides of medial agency are implicit in Sebald's self-conscious discussions of the purposeful *and* compulsive nature of authorship, which will be analysed below. However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, Sebald's comparison of authors to silk weavers also illuminates aspects of authorship that go beyond the issue of agency.

8.1. Seclusion, Compulsion, Purposes, and Scruples: Complexities in the Creative Process

The silk weaving analogy depicts the author as a secluded and compulsive worker. Noting similarities between weavers' and writers' postures at work, the narrator implicitly compares writers' desks to weavers' looms, which, he feels, "are reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages" (Sebald, *Rings* 283). Given the isolated, exhausting working conditions, it seems that writers' devotion to their work is driven by some form of compulsion, just as the weavers are so "engrossed" in the design of the fabrics that they appear to be "*harnessed* to the machines" (283; my emphasis). This image of the secluded, compulsive author is embodied by Sebald himself, who retreats into his potting shed to pursue the "eccentric pastime" of literary writing ("In Conversation" 152), which he regards as "a compulsive habit with neurotic dimensions" ("Questionable Business"). The image is also exemplified by a number of scholars and artists depicted in Sebald's prose works. The scholar Janine Dakyns, the narrator's colleague and friend in *Rings*, has accumulated so many notes, memoranda, letters and documents in her office over the years that they form an ever-evolving "virtual paper landscape . . . with mountains and valleys" around her easychair, in which "she could be seen bent almost double scribbling on a pad on her knees or sometimes just lost in thought" (8, 9). The painter Max Ferber works ten hours a day in his dark, crowded studio for decades, leaving the floor "covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings [from the canvas], mixed with coal dust, several centimetres thick at the centre and thinning out towards the outer edges" (Sebald, *Emigrants* 161). The farmer Thomas Abrams[3] is so absorbed in his project of building a complete model of the Temple of Jerusalem that he "fail[s] to look after his fields and to collect the subsidies he was entitled to" and instead retreats into an "unheated barn" to work on the seemingly never-ending piece (Sebald, *Rings* 244). He is so absorbed in his project that his family and neighbours "had more or less openly expressed their doubts about whether he was of sound mind" (244).

It should be noted, however, that both Sebald himself and his represented narrators play a far more complex role as authors than that of the compulsive recluse.

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3. 'Thomas Abrams' is a pseudonym for Alec Garrard, a friend of Sebald's, as is revealed by the writer in his interview with Sarah Kafatou (34).

They visit historical sites and record their observations through photographs and notes; they wander through cities and countryside, experiencing places at first hand; they explore archives and museums and uncover historical details that would otherwise pass into oblivion; they also talk with many people, listening to their stories with exceptional patience and empathy. The image of the compulsive recluse only reflects the last stage of their creative process, namely, when they assemble their notes and recast them into finished works. I suggest that, by selectively foregrounding this image through his interview remarks and his narrators' comments, Sebald emphasises the creative nature of his writing: he invites readers to perceive his prose works as more than journalism, documentary, or biography; rather, he urges them to pay attention to the aesthetic value of these works, the psychological impacts of narrative writing, and his unconventional use of fictionality, which I will further explore in Sections 8.2, 9.1, and 9.2, respectively.

The foregrounding of this (in itself quite classical) image of the secluded, compulsive author prompts one to ask what purposes may lie behind the strong urge for writing, which often drives writers into voluntary self-isolation. Through their observation of other writers' self-reflections and practices, Sebald's narrators point to several purposes of writing. One commonly claimed purpose is to relieve excessive emotions and cope with overwhelming memories. François-René de Chateaubriand remarks that, although writing requires him to re-experience past losses and fixate them in black and white, it is still "the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories which overwhelm me so frequently and so unexpectedly" (Sebald, *Rings* 255). Similarly, the narrator notes that Marie Henri Beyle (*alias* Stendhal) needs to set down his romantic passion on paper in order to "recover his emotional equilibrium" (Sebald, *Vertigo* 20). The narrator's account of the genesis of *Rings* indicates that he may be compelled to write for the same reason: he suggests that he started to compose the work in response to the "paralysing horror" he experienced during a walk in Suffolk, where he was confronted with omnipresent traces of destruction (3). These remarks suggest that writing is paradoxically both a manifestation of personal memories or emotions and an effort to transcend them. This double effect, I suggest, lays the ground for Sebald's deliberate use of narrative writing as a way to present *and* shape his sense of self (see Section 9.1).

Another common purpose of writing is raised by Michael Hamburger, the narrator's writer friend in *Rings*. Noting that we often "see in the increasing complexity of our mental constructs a means for greater understanding", Hamburger hopes that writing can "[render] one more perceptive" (Sebald, *Rings* 182). This broad epistemological ideal is specified by other writers. Thomas Browne, for example, pursues "greater understanding" by searching for ubiquitous patterns and studying remarkable abnormalities (Sebald, *Rings* 19-21). As I have demonstrated in Chapter VI, Sebald himself also strives for greater understanding and perceptiveness when he states the aim to create a tentative and profound form of meaning through literary writing ("In Conversation" 151-52). This pursuit of greater understanding points to the social value of authorial communication, namely, the author's contribution to ongoing cultural dialogues through the extension, recombination, and/or questioning of prevailing perceptions of reality.

Nonetheless, Sebald's narrators are aware that these purposes cannot fully account for the compulsive nature of authorship. For one thing, one doubts whether these professed goals are achieved, or whether they are attainable at all. In the opening part of *Rings*, for instance, the narrator reports his colleague's understanding of "the scruples which dogged Flaubert's writing": "Janine maintained that the source of Flaubert's scruples was to be found in the relentless spread of stupidity which he had observed everywhere, and which he believed had already invaded his own head. It was (so supposedly once he said) as if one was sinking into sand" (7). In other words, Flaubert's apprehension of the irresistible permeation of stupidity leads to his doubt about the meaningfulness of his own writings. Later in the same part, the narrator reveals two aspects of Browne's scruples: the perception that all human knowledge is but "isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance" (19) and the apprehension that, like many predecessors, his name will fall under "the iniquity of oblivion" (24). Although Browne does not consider his works completely meaningless, he is concerned that their communicative value is too trivial, and their impacts too short-lived, to be worth the effort. For another thing, one asks whether the laudable aims of coping with ones' memories or achieving greater understanding are honest explanations of one's desire to write, or whether they are mere excuses that cover up less commendable motives or even a lack of purpose. Hamburger's reflections on writing are clouded by this kind of scruple. He confesses, "For days

and weeks on end one racks one's brains to no avail, and, if asked, one could not say whether one goes on writing purely out of habit, or a craving for admiration, or because one knows not how to do anything other, or out of sheer wonderment, despair or outrage . . ." (Sebald, *Rings* 181-82). Like these fellow writers, the narrators themselves are often troubled by writing scruples. In *Vertigo*, for example, the narrator recalls that, after working on his notes for half a day in a hotel bar in Limone, "[t]he writing was becoming increasingly difficult, and soon it all seemed to be the most meaningless, empty, dishonest scrawl" (95). All these observations and self-reflections culminate in the narrator's comparison of writers to silk weavers, who are "pursued, into their dreams, by the fear that they have got hold of the wrong thread" (Sebald, *Rings* 283). Together, these self-conscious discussions add specificity and perspective to Sebald's interview remarks on his writing scruples, which I have examined in Section 6.1.

As in his interviews, Sebald's emphasis on writing scruples in his prose works reveals a less desirable side of authorship. He suggests that the compulsive nature of writing cannot be explained by laudable purposes alone; instead, authors are often compelled by less savoury motives as well as inexplicable forces that are more dubious than gratifying. At first glance, this perception seems to undermine the notion of authority often associated with authorship; upon a closer look, however, Sebald's self-conscious discussions suggest indirect connections between writing scruples and writers' authority. First, the scruples serve as a token of an author's sincerity, which may in turn strengthen her/his bond with readers. As Liesbeth Korthals Altes argues in her analysis of François Bon's *Daewoo*, a work not unlike Sebald's prose fiction in its fusion of the social and the aesthetic, "[The narrator's] self-critical reflections, which tone down the concrete social effects of literary *engagement*, may paradoxically enhance the writer-narrator's personal ethos of sincerity" (*Ethos* 185). I suggest that, apart from a trust-winning gesture of sincerity per se, the self-critical reflections on writing scruples in Sebald's works are also an implicit commitment by the author to scrutinising the personal value and social relevance of his writings, and checking unsavoury motives as best he can. Second, by commenting on Flaubert's, Browne's, and Hamburger's writing scruples, Sebald highlights such scruples as a tradition of literary creation, an experience shared by

some of the most prestigious writers. Thus, the experience of self-doubt is consistent with the authority that these writers also evidently have.

So far, I have demonstrated how the analogy between writers and silk weavers draws our attention to a range of self-conscious discussions on authorship in Sebald's prose works, which in turn illustrate his interconnected ideas on the conditions, drives, purposes, and scruples at play in the author's creative process. I will now turn to another important aspect of this analogy – the aesthetic value of literary works and the author's role as an artificer – which is also much discussed in Sebald's works.

8.2. Details and Patterns: Literary Works as (More Than) Artefacts

Having described the solitary, exhausting, and mind-racking process of silk weaving, the narrator further observes that the weavers' mental status was in sharp contrast with the exquisite beauty of the wide range of fabrics they produced:

> [W]hen we consider the weavers' mental illnesses we should also bear in mind that many of the materials produced in the factories of Norwich in the decades before the Industrial Revolution began – silk brocades and watered tabinets, satins and satinettes, camblets and cheveretts, prunelles, callimancoes and florentines, diamantines and grenadines, blondines, bombazines, belle-isles and martiniques – were of a truly fabulous variety, and of an iridescent, quite indescribable beauty as if they had been produced by Nature itself, like the plumage of birds. (Sebald, *Rings* 283)

As the narrator has just compared the silk weavers' working environment and psychological condition to those of writers and scholars, his marvelling at the "iridescent, quite indescribable beauty" of the silk fabrics also suggests a rival ability of literary works to evoke aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, as in his critical remarks (see Section 6.2), Sebald also foregrounds the aesthetic dimension of authorship in his prose works. This emphasis is not only reflected in his own attention to details and textual patterns but also demonstrated through the narrators' comments on the practices of various writers and visual artists.

Quite a few artists and writers impress Sebald's narrators with their mastery of details. One example is Abrams, a Norfolk-based farmer, lay-preacher, and artist,

whose ambition is to "recreat[e] the Temple of Jerusalem exactly as it was" (Sebald, *Rings* 242). Abrams confesses to the narrator that, over the course of his creation, he has gradually realised the daunting amount of work that the project entails: "After all, if the Temple is to create the impression of being true to life, I have to make every one of the tiny coffers on the ceilings, every one of the hundreds of columns, and every single one of the many thousands of diminutive stone blocks by hand, and paint them as well" (245). This realisation, reinforced by his awareness that the entire project is based on research findings which change over the years, makes Abrams doubt whether his model can ever be finished, and whether the project is meaningful at all (245). Nevertheless, there are also moments when he relishes the precision of his model and feels that, through the meticulous reconstruction of every little object, he has almost achieved the intended effect:

> But on other days, when the evening light streams in through this window and I allow myself to be taken in by the overall view, then I see for a moment the Temple with its antechambers and the living quarters of the priesthood, the Roman garrison, the bath-houses, the market stalls, the sacrificial altars, covered walkways and the booths of the moneylenders, the great gateways and staircases, the forecourts and outer provinces and the mountains in the background, *as if everything were already complete and as if I were gazing into eternity*. (248; my emphasis)

Abrams' ambition, frustration, and exultation remind one of Nabokov's understanding of the significant role of details, as well as the aesthetic pleasure they evoke, in both scientific research and artistic creation. As I have illustrated in Chapter II, Nabokov argues that 'the real' is an epistemological ideal that can never be fully attained; however, it can be infinitely approached through the perception of largely unseen details, which in turn generates intense aesthetic pleasure. Abrams' ambition to recreate the Temple of Jerusalem "exactly as it was" on a miniature scale, which straddles the line between scientific research and artistic creation, can be seen as an attempt to grasp 'the real'. In this case, the notion of 'the real' also takes on a temporal dimension, as the artist tries to reconstruct a historical site. Whereas Abrams' scruples illustrate the unattainability of this goal, the illuminating, rejoicing moments he experiences demonstrate that the pursuit is nonetheless

meaningful: the intense crafting and relishing of minute details may bring about the euphoric vision that one has reached the unreachable – that 'the real' has been grasped and that time has been (momentarily) halted.

Another artist admired by Sebald's narrator for his rendering of details is the Italian Renaissance painter Pisanello. In Part II of *Vertigo*, the narrator states that he decided to stop in Verona on his trip to northern Italy in 1980 mainly because he wanted to study Pisanello's fresco in Chiesa Sant'Anastasia (72-73). He goes on to explain his long-held admiration of Pisanello's painting style:

> What appealed to me was not only the highly developed realism of his art, extraordinary for the time, but also the way in which he succeeded in creating *the effect of the real*, *without suggesting a depth dimension*, upon an essentially flat surface, in which every feature, *the principals and the extras alike*, the birds in the sky, the green forest and every single leaf on it, are all granted *an equal and undiminished right to exist*. (73; my emphases)

The phrase "the effect of the real", which also appears in both English and French in Sebald's interviews (Jaggi; Sebald, "Who" 72), suggests the influence of Barthes' notion of 'the reality effect' ('*l'effet de réel*').[4] In his essay "The Reality Effect", Barthes argues that modern Western narratives, especially those that fall into the category of literary realism, often contain a number of "superfluous" descriptive details with no functional value for the narrative structure – they do not contribute to the representation of characters, the development of the plot, the creation of a certain atmosphere, or the conveyance of any deeper meanings (141-42); rather, these details create what Barthes calls "the referential illusion" or "the reality effect" – they "finally say nothing but this: *we are real*" (148). Barthes claims that the reality effect draws on the tradition of classical rhetoric, especially that of the epideictic discourse, which upholds the idea of "an aesthetic finality of language" (143). He also states that the depiction of superfluous details highlights the fact that concrete

4. Although there is no direct evidence that Sebald has read Barthes' essay on the reality effect, his familiarity with Barthes' works, and the latter's deep influence on him, is attested and illustrated by scholars who inspect Sebald's personal library and *Nachlass*. See, for example, Clive Scott's essay "Sebald's Photographic Annotations" and Jo Catling's catalogue of Sebald's Library, both of which are collected in *Saturn's Moons*.

reality can never be completely understood; it thus "confirms the great mythic opposition between the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible*" (146).

Sebald's narrator refers to these ideas when he notes that Pisanello creates "the effect of the real" by rendering "every feature, the principals and the extras alike" in meticulous detail regardless of whether these features have functional value for the whole painting – for instance, whether they carry any thematic or formal significance. Moreover, the narrator perceives an ethical significance in this predominantly aesthetic practice, namely, that it reflects the artist's respect for the right of every creature or object to exist, no matter how physically weak they are or how far they seem to be from our main concerns. The germ of this idea can be detected in Barthes' claim about the opposition between the lifelike and the intelligible, yet Sebald's narrator gives it a more explicitly ethical tweak: he points out that the detailed rendering of every object highlights the belief that things are not worthless simply because they appear unintelligible or pointless to us. Besides, the narrator notes that "the effect of the real" is accompanied by the viewer's awareness that the works are not real after all but the artist's mind-products – what Werner Wolf calls the "aesthetic illusion" (qtd. in Fludernik 56) – and that Pisanello's painting facilitates this awareness with its lack of perspective. The viewer's sense of wonder is therefore directed primarily at the artist's creativity rather than the represented objects.

In *Rings,* the narrator also comments on a writer who pays exemplary attention to details – Thomas Browne. The narrator remarks that, reading Browne's works, "[i]t is as if one were looking through a reversed opera glass and through a microscope at the same time", for he combines clarity in the rendering of "the tiniest of details" with a sense of distance achieved through "the fullness of his erudition", "complex metaphors and analogies", and "labyrinthine sentences" (Sebald, *Rings* 19). In other words, the narrator notes that Browne not only foregrounds details but also highlights the verbal – and perhaps also the cognitive – effort to conjure up these details. The narrator does not illustrate this impression with examples from Browne's works; however, such a distant yet microscopic style is often exemplified in Sebald's own writings. Consider, for example, the narrator's description of a teasmade in his hotel room when he had newly arrived in Manchester in 1966:

> [Mrs Irlam] explained that it was called a *teas-maid*, and was both an alarm clock and a tea-making machine. When I made tea and the steam rose from it, the shiny stainless steel contraption on its ivory-coloured metal base looked like a miniature power plant, and the dial of the clock, as I soon found as dusk fell, glowed a phosphorescent lime green that I was familiar with from childhood and which I had always felt afforded me an unaccountable protection at night. That may be why it has often seemed, when I have thought back to those early days in Manchester, as if the tea maker brought to my room by Mrs Irlam, by Gracie – you must call me Gracie, she said – as if it was that weird and serviceable gadget, with its nocturnal glow, its muted morning bubbling, and its mere presence by day, that kept me holding on to life at a time when I felt a deep sense of isolation in which I might well have become completely submerged. (Sebald, *Emigrants* 154)

This description of the teasmade is indeed microscopic: it grants readers a close-up view and even some multi-sensory impressions of the colour, texture, shape, sound, and function of different parts of the machine. Together with the power plant simile and the misspelt term ("*teas-maid*"), this meticulous description casts a strange light on the object, which not only captures the narrator's unfamiliarity with this electric appliance but also suggests his feelings of isolation, confusion and loss when first confronted with a completely strange environment as a new immigrant. The narrator also endows the teasmade with emotional intensity by revealing the fragments of memory with which he associated it, both at that moment and later – his childhood bond with a phosphorescent clock face, Mrs Irlam's words and manners, and his general mental state during the first months of his stay in Manchester. However, with the words "[t]hat may be why", a shift of focalisation from the past-I to the present-I occurs, which establishes the temporal and psychological distance between the narrator and the remembered object. The distance is further reinforced by the labyrinthine sentence structure which gives the impression of a reflective tone, as well as the double uncertainty suggested in the phrase "[t]hat *may* be why it has often *seemed*".

Like Pisanello's highly detailed yet perspectiveless paintings, this oscillation between the acute depiction of details and the distancing effect generated by

syntactical complexity, characteristic of Sebald's style, stimulates aesthetic illusion, which draws readers' attention to textuality and authorial creativity. Moreover, this highly aesthetic device also takes on a psychological dimension in Sebald's works, as it illustrates the plasticity of memory and the strange effects it produces. Sebald's characters sometimes comment self-reflexively on the important role of details in their personal recollections as they relate their past experiences. In Part IV of *The Emigrants,* for example, Max Ferber painfully admits that "when he thought back to that May morning at Oberwiesenfeld[5] he could not see his parents. He no longer knew what the last thing his mother or father had said to him was, or he to them. . . . And yet he could picture Oberwiesenfeld down to the last detail, and all these years had been able to envisualize it with that fearful precision, time and time again" (187). He also recalls how his suitcase, full of clothes carefully folded and packed by his mother, was opened at Frankfurt airport for customs check (188). He confesses to the narrator, "covering his face with his hands", that now "it feels as if I ought never to have unpacked it" (188). Ferber's reflections demonstrate that detailed visualisation of objects plays contrasting roles in the working of his memory: while the memory of the suitcase acts as a shorthand that helps Ferber unpack the narrative of his emigration as well as his feelings about the journey, the mental imprint of Oberwiesenfeld serves as a substitute for the repressed memory of a traumatic event, haunting Ferber with its monstrous detailedness yet obstructing his access to what he believes should have been the main elements of the narrative – his parents and their final words to him. Through Ferber's reflections, Sebald suggests a special significance that the meticulous rendering of details may have for narrative writing: it helps capture one's mental landscape, especially in the wake of traumatic experiences. In other words, the aesthetic function of details is oriented less towards the lost reality of events than towards the depiction of their affective aftermath for the individuals involved.

Apart from his microscopic yet distanced style, the narrator in *Rings* comments on yet another aspect of Browne's writings: he notes that, in order to understand "the order of things" as much as human knowledge allows, "Browne

5. According to his own account, Ferber was separated from his parents for good at the Oberwiesenfeld airport in 1939, where he boarded a plane to England alone to flee from the persecution of Jews. His parents were deported in 1941 and later died in concentration camps (Sebald, *Emigrants* 188-91).

records the patterns which recur in the seemingly infinite diversity of forms" (19). The narrator illustrates this approach with an example: "[I]n *The Garden of Cyrus*, for instance, he draws the quincunx, which is composed by using the corners of a regular quadrilateral and the point at which its diagonals intersect. Browne identifies this structure everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter" (19-20). I suggest that Sebald inherits this attention to patterns in his own prose writing, but he shows it in a more diffuse and implicit way: instead of listing the recurrent presence of an object or phenomenon across diverse settings (as Browne does), he embeds recurrent details in different parts of a work, forming connections between seemingly disparate narratives. One example is the year 1913 in *Vertigo*. It is first mentioned early in Part II, when the narrator discloses that his trip to Verona in 1987 was partly motivated by the desire to learn about "the disconcerting afternoon . . . that Dr K. spent there in September 1913 on his way from Venice to Lake Garda" (Sebald, *Vertigo* 84). However, he had became "[s]trangely transfixed" in his seat when the train reached Verona and eventually got off in Desenzano, where Dr K. stayed "on Sunday the 21st of September, 1913", right after he left Verona (85). Finally making his way to Verona a few days later, he visited Biblioteca Civica to browse bound collections of "Verona newspapers dating from August and September 1913" (118). "1913 was a peculiar year," The narrator comments after revealing some of his finds, "The times were changing, and the spark was racing along the fuse like an adder through the grass" (121). When he went to meet his friend Salvatore Altamura later on the same day, he found Salvatore reading a book titled *1912+1* (128), a work by Leonardo Sciascia which Salvatore considered "a fascinating synopsis of the years immediately before the First World War" (129). Salvatore's perception of the year 1913 resonates heavily with the narrator's. He remarked, "It is curious to observe . . . how in that year everything was moving towards a single point, at which something would have to happen, whatever the cost" (129). These references to the year 1913 reveal the narrator's research trajectory and his special feelings about this historic year, which in turn set the stage for his account of Dr K.'s 1913 trip to northern Italy in Part III. The year 1913 reappears a few more times in Part IV: it was inscribed above the front door of the head forester's villa in W. which, since the narrator left the village as a child, has been demolished (185); it is also the year of publication for the edition of Samuel Pepys's diary that accompanies the narrator on the last stretch of his journey home (261).

Such striking recurrences of a single detail form textual patterns which, like the eye-catching patterns on a silk fabric, draw readers' attention to the aesthetic value of the work and the author-artificer's ingenuity. Moreover, like Nabokov, Sebald sees the construction of textual patterns as a way to convey metaphysical thoughts. As I have shown in Section 3.2, Nabokov states that the thematic patterns of his personal recollections prompt him to wonder about the possible existence of a supernatural force that has shaped his individuality – "the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark" (*Speak* 10); he also sees in the pattern-weaving capacity of memory a way to defy the irrevocable passage of time and his personal losses (52). Similarly, as I have shown in Section 6.1, Sebald claims in his interviews that the freedom to draw connections between "fragmentary pieces of evidence" in creative writing facilitates the generation of a tentative yet profound form of meaning which he calls 'metaphysics', or "speculat[ion] about these areas that are beyond one's ken" ("In Conversation" 152 and "Conversation" 115). Sebald points to Browne as his predecessor in this respect: in *Rings*, the narrator states that Browne regards the recurring structures he identifies as a "shorthand" for "the order of things", the "innermost essence" of which we can never grasp (19). Through the construction of textual patterns in his own works, Sebald invites readers to participate in his metaphysical speculation and infer deeper meanings from recurrent textual details. It should be noted that Sebald's textual patterns often take a much darker tone than Nabokov's: while the thematic patterns in *Speak, Memory* highlights the intensity and harmony of Nabokov's recollections of a happy childhood, those in Sebald's prose works often produce a chilling, haunting effect, reminding us that past disasters, atrocities, and sufferings cast long shadows behind them, that their aftermaths invade various aspects of our present life.

Taking his narrator's comparison of writers to silk weavers as a starting point, I have illustrated how Sebald's self-conscious representations and discussions of authorship in his prose works enrich his critical ideas of authorship, and how they shed light on some of his creative practices. Through the narrator's depiction of the weavers' poor working conditions and troubled mental state, Sebald highlights the image of a secluded, compulsive author. Although he shows different writers' perceptions of the personal and social value of literary creation, he also demonstrates

their complex writing scruples. These scruples are partly constituted by the writers' doubt over their ability to achieve – as well as the very attainability of – their professed goals, and partly by their suspicion of unsavoury motives or even a lack of purpose behind their acts of writing. However, Sebald also regards these writing scruples as a gesture of sincerity, an indication of self-reflexivity, and a long-held tradition, thus suggesting indirect links between them and a writer's authority. Through the narrator's remark on the variety and exquisiteness of the silk fabrics produced by the weavers, Sebald foregrounds the aesthetic value of literary texts. He further elaborates on the aesthetic dimension of authorship through his narrators' comments on, and his own attention to, details and textual patterns. Observing the creative practices of their artist and writer role models, Sebald's narrators suggest that the meticulous rendering of details not only highlights the author's creativity but also serves epistemological purposes, has ethical implications, and depicts psychological effects; these reflections in turn illuminate Sebald's own style, which is at once telescopic and microscopic. Similarly, through his narrator's comment on Browne's interest in recurring phenomena in the natural world, Sebald draws readers' attention to his own construction of textual patterns. Besides generating aesthetic pleasure, these textual patterns also convey Sebald's metaphysical ideas about the interconnectedness of things, and more specifically, the omnipresent, long-lasting traces of violence and destruction. The combination of purposefulness and self-reflexivity relativises the notion of authorial agency, and the perception of the links between the aesthetic and the psychological, epistemological, and ethical value of writing complicates the idea of the author as an artificer, pointing to its connection with the conceptions of the author as an (auto)biographical subject and a communicative agent, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter IX Rewriting the Self, Rewriting Others: Narrative as Self-Analysis and Fictionality as Communicative Orientation

Under the rather loose notion of 'rewriting', I dedicate this chapter to the exploration of two aspects of authorship that Sebald has repeatedly addressed in his critical remarks (see Chapter VII). One aspect is the self-analytical and self-shaping capacity of narrative writing, even when the narrative is not primarily about oneself. The other is the communicative effects and ethical implications of Sebald's unconventional use of fictionality, which (he claims) aims to bring out a shift of focus in readers' inference of textual meanings (Hulse 198). A close look into these two aspects may contribute to our understanding of the author as an autobiographical subject and a communicative agent, two notions of authorship that Nabokov also foregrounds with his critical remarks and creative practices. The word 'rewriting' encapsulates two remarkable creative practices employed by Sebald: first, his works often contain self-conscious representations of not one but several consecutive attempts to write the story of an individual's past; second, as Sebald himself remarks in his interviews, his prose fiction often features more or less perceptible reworkings of various nonfictive sources. Both practices in turn point to a dialogic conception of narrative – a more fundamental type of 'rewriting' – which emphasises narrative writing as situated acts of communication and foregrounds the cumulative effects of narrative acts on readers as well as on the author her/himself.

9.1. Beyond Autobiography: Narrative Writing as Self-Analysis and Self-Transformation

In *Rings*, Part IX, the narrator's account of a short rest in Ilketshall St Margaret during his walk develops into an extended narrative of the life and writings of François-René de Chateaubriand, French writer and politician (250-59). In particular, the narrator expresses his appreciation of Chateaubriand's phenomenal, multi-thousand-page memoirs (256-57). He notes that these memoirs are a blend of autobiography and historical writing, in which the writer's "personal feelings and thoughts unfolded against the background of the momentous upheavals of those years" (256). With a striking metaphor, the narrator describes his impression of Chateaubriand's writings: "The chronicler, who was present at these events and is once more recalling what he witnessed, inscribes his experiences, *in an act of self-*

mutilation, onto his own body. In the writing, he becomes the *martyred paradigm* of the fate Providence has in store for us" (257; my emphases). The metaphors of self-mutilation and martyrdom point to narrative writing as a discursive act which leaves indelible – and, in this case, painfully destructive – marks on the author's sense of self; it also emphasises narrative writing as an act of self-presentation, as readers are invited to perceive the narrated events through the narrator's 'mutilated body' or affected mind.

The exceptionally broad scope of Chateaubriand's memoirs reminds one of Sebald's own prose works, in which the narrators' accounts of their own past set up, merge into, and string together numerous (and often more detailed) narratives about others, some of whom are/were the narrators' personal acquaintances, some of whom they have heard or read about. Meanwhile, the narrator's description of Chateaubriand's writings as acts of "self-mutilation" reminds one of Sebald's interview remarks that one of the main noble motives of writing is to be self-analytical, and that such self-analysis can be made through narratives about others as well as narratives about oneself (see Sections 6.1 and 7.2). These observations prompt us to explore how Sebald uses – and self-consciously foregrounds – narrative writing as a means of self-analysis in his works, even though they are not primarily about his own experiences. Taking *The Emigrants* as my main case, I will demonstrate how Sebald self-consciously highlights the self-analytical power of narrative writing through the narrator's reflections on the geneses and after-effects of his accounts of others' past; these reflections invite readers to perceive Sebald's prose works as situated acts of self-presentation, self-exploration, and self-transformation.[1]

In each of the four parts of *The Emigrants*, the narrator's selective disclosure of his own past provides the immediate context for his contacts with the emigrant in question, either through personal encounters or through chance discoveries of texts or images about them. These encounters in turn open windows into the individuals' past, disclosed by the emigrants themselves and/or diligently pieced together by the narrator based on fragmentary clues supplied by informants. In Part I, for example,

1. To avoid overcomplicating my discussions, I will set aside questions of fictionality in this section and address it separately in Section 9.2. However, I will consistently distinguish between the author Sebald and his represented narrators. The necessity of doing so, and the theoretical implications of this distinction, are elaborated in Section 7.2.

the narrator's account of his search with his partner Clara for a place to live in Norwich sets the scene for his first encounter with Dr Selwyn, who lived the life of a recluse in his own backyard, and who became their landlord shortly after (Sebald, *Emigrants* 3-8). Similarly, the narrator's highly selective account of his subsequent life in Norwich leads up to the two occasions – a dinner with Dr Selwyn and his friend Edwin Elliott, and later, a visit by Dr Selwyn to the narrator's new house after he and Clara had moved out from the Selwyns' (12-13, 18) – during which Dr Selwyn disclosed traumatic memories of his early years. At these moments, with a shift of focus, the narrative about the narrator turns into a narrative about the emigrant, with the narrator acting as an attentive, empathetic listener.

Not only do these introductory or transitional passages about the narrator's past illustrate the physical circumstances under which the emigrants' life stories were revealed, but they also suggest the emotional bonds between the narrator and the emigrants which stimulated the revelation of the latter's past. Towards the end of Part I, the narrator notes that Dr Selwyn's heart-rending account of his family's exodus from a Lithuanian village to England when he was seven (Sebald, *Emigrants* 18-21), told during one of his last visits to the narrator's new home, was prompted by his question about the narrator's experiences as an emigrant: "Dr Selwyn and I had a long talk prompted by his asking whether I was ever homesick. I could not think of any adequate reply, but Dr Selwyn, after a pause for thought, confessed (no other word will do) that in recent years he had been beset with homesickness more and more" (18). While Dr Selwyn's visits to the narrator's new home – exceptional for the old man, who had severed almost all social contacts for decades – indicate his fondness for the narrator, his question suggests a potential reason for this special bond, namely, that he regarded the narrator as a fellow emigrant who may have had similar experiences and therefore might be able to understand his feelings to some extent. Several pages later, reading the narrator's description of how Dr Selwyn took leave, one notices how the latter's storytelling had further strengthened this bond: "[R]ising, he made a gesture that was most unusual for him. He offered me his hand in farewell" (21). The implicit revelation of emotional bonds can also be perceived between the narrator and his great uncle Ambros Adelwarth, the protagonist of Part III. In this case, it is the narrator who felt attached. The part opens with the narrator's recollection of a family gathering when he was seven, at which he had his first and

only direct impressions of Great-Uncle Adelwarth (67). The narrator notes that, despite not knowing anything about Adelwarth's past and not fully understanding his formal address to the whole family, he intuitively held him in respect due to his demeanour and way of speaking (67-68). He also felt that Adelwarth was different from the rest of the family, that all the other relatives "seemed out-classed compared with this man" (68). These special feelings towards Adelwarth may partly explain why the narrator ends up focusing so much on Adelwarth's past during his 1981 trip to America, although his initial purpose was to learn more about the part of his family that emigrated to America during the Weimar years (71).[2]

These physical contacts and emotional connections constitute what Sebald calls the "credentials" of his narrators (Lubow 169). In this context, I suggest, the word "credentials" should not be narrowly understood as proofs of the narrator's credibility and his entitlement to telling the stories of these emigrants; rather, they should be understood in a broad sense as the full complexities of the relationship between the narrator and the represented individuals, including indicators of emotional proximity as well as distance, that readers should consider when reading the accounts of these individuals' past. In other words, the passages about the narrator's own past foreground the subject-object relation underlying every narrative act, which endows the narrating subject with what Walsh calls "perspectival attributes" ("Centre" 395).

The narrator's self-conscious negotiation of his credentials is further complicated by the fact that each part of *The Emigrants* contains not one but several narratives about the emigrant's past, as new information about these individuals becomes accessible to the narrator over months, years, or even decades, and as the emotional connections between the narrator and the respective emigrants shift over time. With the exception of Dr Selwyn, who voluntarily discloses the most devastating episodes of his personal past as his friendship with the narrator deepens, it is the narrator who takes the initiative to investigate the emigrants' past. On the most obvious level, each inquiry is triggered by the chance discovery of some verbal or visual representation(s) of the emigrant in question: in Paul Bereyter's case, the

2. Adelwarth, as is revealed later in this part, had arrived in America before the Weimar years. Also, the photograph shown by the narrator (Sebald, *Emigrants* 71), which he claims to have directly prompted his trip to America, does not feature Adelwarth. It is not self-explanatory, therefore, that the narrator becomes so invested in Adelwarth's past during his trip.

news of Paul's suicide and his obituary in the local paper (Sebald, *Emigrants* 27); in Adelwarth's case, a photo album showing some of the emigrant relatives in the narrator's family (71); and in Max Ferber's case, a painting by Ferber in the Tate and a magazine article about him (177-78). The material(s) point to aspects of each emigrant's past that the narrator's own recollections of him fail to account for. Take Paul's case for example. Looking back on the beginning of his investigation, the narrator suggests that it was less the news of Paul's death per se than the "violent manner of his death" that motivated him to inquire into Paul's past (27). The news of Paul's suicide on the railway had left the narrator shocked and deeply disturbed, for he could not reconcile it with his "very fond memories" of Paul as an inspiring, caring, and much beloved teacher (28). The intuition that significant gaps existed in his long-held recollections of Paul was reinforced when he found that Paul's obituary did not mention the manner of Paul's death; moreover, it stated "[a]lmost by way of an aside" and "with no further explanation" that "during the Third Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practising his chosen profession", a piece of information which the narrator had been unaware of and could not fully comprehend (27). All these factors, the narrator notes, "led me in the years that followed to think more and more about Paul Bereyter, until, in the end, I had to get beyond my own very fond memories of him and discover the story I did not know" (27-28).

Following this statement, the rest of this part falls roughly into two sections: first, the narrator gives a detailed account of his childhood memories about Paul, who taught him in primary school in the early 1950s (Sebald, *Emigrants* 29-42); he then moves on to relate his visit to his main informant Mme Lucy Landau and the stories of Paul's early and late years that gradually emerged from their exchanges (42-63). At first glance, the second section goes beyond the first simply because it concerns periods of Paul's life of which the narrator knew nothing before. Upon a closer look, however, one may perceive how the narrator's later investigation helps him "get beyond" his personal recollections in a more profound way: it gives new meanings to old memories, re-casting them in a broader narrative framework. The narrator highlights this transformation through his own reflections. For instance, following his recollection of an incident in which Paul was moved to tears by music, the narrator notes that, despite his cheerful appearance, Paul was often surrounded by an air of desolation all of a sudden (41-42). He then reflects, "It was not until I was

able to fit my own fragmentary recollections into what Lucy Landau told me that I was able to understand that desolation even in part" (42). The narrator points out that what he later learnt from Mme Laudau sheds new light on his understanding of Paul's desolation. While he may have regarded it as the manifestation of a sensitive mind or merely as an unresolved mystery, he has now come to perceive it as an indication of Paul's mental devastation caused by his early life as a quarter-Jew under the Third Reich, which saw the death of his parents, the deportation of his lover, the suspension of his own teaching career, and ironically, his service in the German army. In this light, Paul's desolation takes on a greater significance and a darker meaning: what was merely a side note in the narrative of a beloved teacher is now seen as key evidence in the narrative of a victim of the profound structural violence leading up to the Holocaust.

The narrator's reconsideration of his long-held memories of Paul leads to what Mark Freeman calls a "better" interpretation (142), not because it has superior qualities in itself, but because the transformation from the older to the newer interpretation brings about a sense of illumination. As Freeman puts it, "'Now,' you might say, 'I have a more adequate – comprehensive, complex, differentiated, aware, integrated, whatever – understanding of this thing before me'" (143). In the case above, the narrator's investigation gives rise to a more distinct, sophisticated, and integrated understanding of Paul's sudden mood changes, namely, that Paul was torn between the love for his home region and his profession on the one hand, and the intense, long-lasting suffering from the cruelties he and his loved ones experienced during the Third Reich on the other. The signalling of such illuminating moments of re-interpretation also appears in Part IV of *The Emigrants*: the narrator remarks that, after learning about the deportation of Ferber's parents, he "tried, at least with *hindsight*", to understand Ferber's inhibition about sharing his past when they got to know each other more than twenty years ago (178; my emphasis).

The narrator's explicit reflections on changes in his narrative interpretations of the emigrants further prompt readers to wonder which other parts of his memories may have also been altered in meaning or significance over time. In Paul's case, for instance, readers are invited to imagine how the narrator's recollections of Paul's fragile-sounding voice (Sebald, *Emigrants* 34-35), his disdain for "Catholic sanctimoniousness" (35-37), his loathing of the hypocritical textbooks (37), and his

succinct introduction to the children's first French lesson (38) may have all taken on a darker meaning in light of the narrator's later findings about Pauls' experiences during the Third Reich; one may even wonder if these very memories re-emerged during or after the narrator's investigation. Readers are made aware that each new story we tell about someone does not simply add to our existent stories about them; instead, it necessarily shifts our perspective upon the person, altering the emphasis, meaning, and tone of our previous accounts. In other words, narrative acts cumulatively shape the relation between the narrating subject and the narrated object.

As I have shown above, the narrator's belated investigations of the four emigrants' past are triggered by chance discoveries of intriguing texts and images. On a deeper level, however, the investigations are enabled by the narrator's mental readiness to explore these individuals' past, his personality, values, knowledge, and interests cultivated over years and decades. This may explain, for instance, why the narrator broods over the news of Paul's suicide and the obituary for a few years before he is finally compelled to investigate his past (Sebald, *Emigrants* 28). This link is illustrated in more detail in Part IV, where the narrator describes his reunion with Ferber after twenty years:

> Following this late reunion, which neither of us had expected, we talked for three whole days far into the night, and a great many more things were said than I shall be able to write down here: concerning our exile in England, the immigrant city of Manchester and its irreversible decline, the Wadi Halfa (which had long ceased to exist), the flugelhorn player Gracie Irlam, my year as a schoolteacher in Switzerland, and my subsequent attempt, also aborted, to settle in Munich, in a German cultural institute. Ferber commented that, purely in terms of time, I was now as far removed from Germany as he had been in 1966; but time, he went on, is an unreliable way of gauging these things, indeed it is nothing but a disquiet of the soul. (180-81)[3]

Time, indeed, is not an absolute measurement of experiences or mental development. For Ferber, who lives in the aftermath of the traumatic experiences of his last-minute

3. Wadi Halfa was a café owned by a family of Kenyan emigrants which Ferber and the narrator had frequented in the 1960s. Gracie Irlam was the owner of Hotel Arosa in Manchester, which had accommodated the narrator in the first months of his emigration.

escape from Germany in 1939 and the subsequent deportation of his parents, time is largely occupied by haunting memories and seems to have stopped flowing forward. For the narrator, however, the past two decades have been characterised by important experiences that have reshaped his worldview and self-understanding, as he suggests in the passage above. The conversation topics listed in the quote are all related to the narrator's own life as an emigrant – the first few months of his stay in Manchester, a period characterised by isolation and depression, which marks the beginning of his emigrant life; his casual links with other emigrants such as the Kenyan café owners; and his failed attempt to resettle in his home country. This observation prompts readers to consider how these experiences may have contributed to the narrator's self-identity as a fellow emigrant, which in turn provides an essential cognitive and emotional basis that makes his belated investigation possible. Readers may wonder how over twenty years of emigrant life have increased the narrator's emotional proximity with Ferber, his sensitivity towards others' sufferings, his awareness of the profound aftermath of the Holocaust, and his determination to bear witness, all of which supply the motivation for him to painstakingly inquire into Ferber's earlier years and family history when the crucial hint appears.

Not only do the narrator's personal experiences and self-understanding provide the conditions for his investigation and narration, but his narration of others' past also shifts his self-perception. This countereffect is also implicitly depicted in the part on Ferber. After a visit to the gravely ill Ferber at Withington Hospital in the winter of 1990-91, the narrator withdraws to a room in the Midland Hotel. As he is sitting alone by the window, memories of his first year in Manchester (1966-67) start to unfold. He imagines hearing the songs sung by voluntary performers to a drunken audience on the casual stage of Liston's Music Hall, and he recalls two pieces in particular. One was "the favourite of the winter season of 1966 to 1967", which begins with the lines "*The old home town looks the same as I step down from the train*" / "*And there to greet me are my Mama and Papa*" (Sebald, *Emigrants* 234). He also remembers a tenor named Siegfried, who used to sing "long extracts from *Parsifal* in German": "He would sing *O weh, des Höchsten Schmerzenstag* or *Wie dünkt mich doch die Aue heut so schön* or some other impressive arioso, not hesitating to act out stage directions such as 'Parsifal is on the point of fainting' with the required theatricality" (234-35). This passage seems to be a quite common

observation of how revisiting an old place triggers distant memories; however, by strategically referring to these memories towards the end of the part, the narrator invites readers to imagine how, after his inquiries into Ferber's traumatic past, he must now see these personal memories in a different light. While he may have long associated the memories of the extracts from Wagner's opera and the country song "Green, Green Grass of Home" with his own alienation and homesickness as a new emigrant, now he may *also* perceive heavy resonances between these memories and Ferber's past experiences. "Green, Green Grass of Home", a song which depicts a prisoner's reverie about homecoming on the day of his execution (Wagoner), has thematic correspondences with Ferber's despairing longings for a home forever lost and with his parents' deportation (see the train imagery in the lyrics above). The reference to the extracts from Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* reminds one of how Ferber was forced into exile (like the cursed Parsifal), and of the pains ('*Schmerzen*') he suffered; it also prompts one to ask whether these sufferings really serve a greater purpose, paving the road to repentance and rejoicing, as Gurnemanz tells Parsifal in the quoted scene of the opera (act 3, scene 1). Moreover, as the opera has long faced charges of anti-Semitism,[4] the reference to *Parsifal* again points to the dark centre behind Ferber's loss, sufferings, and despair. Through the strategic use of analepsis, the narrator encourages readers to infer his hindsight and recognise how these seemingly innocent memories must now assume darker meanings and carry almost unbearable emotions; these meanings and emotions situate his personal past within broader historical frameworks such as the collective experiences of emigration, the long and far-reaching history of anti-Semitism, the profound impacts of the Holocaust, and the personal losses and traumas incurred by two world wars.

Through his narrator's self-reflexive depictions of the complex dynamics between the subject and object of narrative, Sebald foregrounds the self-analytical, self-transformative capacity of narrative acts, even when the self is not the object of narrative. This in turn helps us understand why Sebald sees his works of narrative prose as self-analysis: just as each attempt to account for an emigrant's past both reflects and reshapes the narrator's sense of self, the composition of each prose work can also be considered as a situated act of narrative sense-making that not only reveals but also contributes to the author's self-understanding. Consistent with his

4. See Hektor Yan's "The Jewish Question Revisited" for an elaboration of this criticism.

interview remarks, Sebald suggests that a complete, stable author-image does not exist even for the author himself; it is therefore futile for readers to seek a stable, transparent author-image from his literary works. Rather, he encourages readers to join the author on his journey of self-exploration through narrative writing in context. Instead of asking "How much does this work of narrative reveal about the *real* author?", readers are invited to ask, "How may this work of narrative reinforce, alter, or add to the author's perception of his own personality, beliefs, values, goals, interests, and past experiences, as well as our perception of him?"[5]

This understanding of the self-shaping power of narrative writing requires readers to pay more attention to intertextual resonances and dissonances, either between several literary works or between literary and non-literary texts. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Sebald revisits in his interviews some personal experiences that he has referred to in his prose works. At the beginning of *Rings*, the narrator gives a brief account of his hospitalisation shortly after he finished a long walk in Suffolk:

> At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. *Perhaps it was because of this that*, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. (3; my emphasis)

Sebald revisits this experience later in an interview. He states that, contrary to some readers' inference from the passage above, he was not hospitalised due to a nervous breakdown (Sebald, "In Conversation 158"). He goes on to give a more detailed account of the experience, stating that a fractured disc was the direct culprit:

> The journey which is described in that book was down the east coast of Suffolk. If you walk along the seashore for several days in the same direction your frame gets lopsided. I never had any back problems before, but after that journey, *and perhaps also occasioned by other things that*

5. See my critique of James Phelan's and Marie-Laure Ryan's discussions about the notion of the implied author in Section 7.2.

> *crashed onto me*, I suddenly developed quite severe back pain. The condition eventually led to a fractured disc, the bits of which had to be dug out of the nerves that run down the spinal column. (158-59; my emphasis)

This account is perceptibly different from the one in *Rings.* However, there is no need for the author or the readers to choose between the two versions; nor do we need to construct one coherent, definitive narrative out of these two accounts and fully subscribe to it. Sebald's account in the interview emphasises the physiological ground for his hospitalisation, which also happens to be the most obvious and provable reason. Nonetheless, Sebald raises the suspicion that the back pain which instigated the fractured disc was caused not only by the uneven coastal paths but also by "other things that crashed onto me", which suggests a psychological dimension of the incident. It is this latter aspect that Sebald highlights in the opening passage of *Rings* while still indicating the tentativeness of this narrative interpretation. Rather than a distortion of the 'true story', the account in *Rings* is one creative, valid, and necessarily selective (re)interpretation of the possible connections between the walk and the author's hospitalisation. Foregrounding the severe psychological impacts of the walk and the author's susceptibility to the omnipresent, far-reaching "traces of destruction", this narrative interpretation sets the thematic framework for the whole book and may reinforce Sebald's perception of himself (as well as readers' perception of him) as a sensitive, contemplative, and melancholic person.

As Sebald claims in his interviews, his first-person narrators serve as "banister[s]" for his self-analysis "by proxy" ("Lost" 362; Atlas 291): they provide selective representations of the author's personal past, highlight his emotional bonds with the narrated individuals, and enable his self-conscious negotiation of the self-shaping capacity of narrative writing. Yet this perception omits a crucial and challenging aspect of Sebald's prose works, namely his use of fictionality. Although the "other lives" (Atlas 291) represented in Sebald's works draw heavily on the experiences of real individuals, the fact that he rewrites others' past through fictionalisation raises questions about the author's communicative intentions and ethical commitments. In Section 9.2, I will explore how Sebald's prose works provide further clues about his employment of fictionality; I will then analyse two

cases – the narrative about ‘Dr K.’ in *Vertigo* and the account of *Lager Austerlitz* in *Austerlitz*.

9.2. Narrating Subject Foregrounded: Confabulation, Speculation, and Fictionality

As I have discussed in Section 7.1, Sebald claims that his creative reworking of nonfictive sources is an attempt to generate “the sense of fiction”, a shift of focus which foregrounds implicatures that are often marginalised in nonfictive narratives (Hulse 198). He further suggests two aspects of this “sense of fiction”: first, through his openly unfaithful accounts, he aims to increase readers’ awareness of the inevitable existence of confabulation, fabrication, and narrative artificiality in nonfictive representations of the past, thus bringing out a self-reflexive distancing from nonfictive narratives; second, he considers his use of fictionality as a kind of speculation that is oriented less towards potential truthfulness than towards the facilitation of an empathic relationship. Sebald’s observation of the proximity between fictionality, confabulation, and speculation in his critical remarks suggests a line of inquiry that may further illuminate his use of fictionality: although Sebald’s prose works do not contain self-conscious discussions of fictionality per se, they do feature narrators’ and characters’ reflections on confabulation and speculation; a close analysis of these reflections, I suggest, may shed light on Sebald’s perception of the purposes, potential effects, and risks of fictionality, which may in turn guide our understanding of his use of fictionality in specific passages of his prose work.

As an unintentional breach of memory’s commitment to literal truthfulness, confabulation can sometimes be detected retrospectively through reasoning or the emergence of new evidence. These moments highlight the fallibility of memory and reveal its tricks. The identification of and reflection on confabulation is a key theme in Part I of *Vertigo*. The narrator notes that Marie Henri Beyle’s retrospective writings about his early life in the French army “afford eloquent proof of the various difficulties entailed in the act of recollection” (Sebald, *Vertigo* 5). In particular, Beyle observes that “even when the images supplied by memory are true to life one can place little confidence in them” (7). For instance, he is aware that his vivid ‘memory’ of General Marmont in Martigny “clad in the royal- and sky-blue robes of a Councillor of State”, despite its “extraordinary clarity”, must have been made up, for “Marmont must have been wearing his general’s uniform and not the blue robes

of state" (5). Similarly, Beyle confesses how his "indelible impression" of the town of Ivrea in fading sunlight later proved to be a misplaced memory of an engraving entitled *Prospetto d'Ivrea* (7-8).

According to the narrator, Beyle is deeply troubled by the irresistible corruption of his memory by confabulation: he talks about his "severe disappointment" when some of his most cherished memories turned out to be his own inventions, and, half-jokingly, he even advises his readers "not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one's travels, since before very long they will displace our memories completely, indeed one might say they destroy them" (Sebald, *Vertigo* 8). However, Beyle also points to another perception of confabulation: he observes that his confused memories may have partly derived from his extreme sensitivity cultivated by "a wholly misdirected education", followed by the trauma caused by witnessing violence, death, and vast destruction during his military career (5-6). Beyle's tentative probing into the mental inclinations and environmental factors that may have contributed to his memory errors emphasises confabulation as a coping mechanism that shapes one's perception of her/his own past in a way acceptable to her/himself – as Sebald puts it, we "make [our knowledge] fit our desires and anxieties" and "invent a straight line of a trail in order to calm ourselves down" (Interview by Wood). Therefore, the exact ways in which our confabulation deviates from historical truths may say something about our fears, needs, and desires. As memory failures, confabulation may be frustrating, but as a common phenomenon in our narrative sense-making, it indirectly adds to our understanding of the narrating subject.

Unlike confabulation, speculation is intentional and is usually signalled grammatically by modal verbs such as 'may have' or adverbs such as 'perhaps'. Sebald's narrators often use speculation in a specific way, namely, to add details about experiences, thoughts, and feelings to the rather vague accounts of others' past that can be accessed or constructed from historical sources. In Part III of *Vertigo*, for example, the narrator goes beyond the scanty information about Dr K.'s 1913 trip to northern Italy to speculate about what he might have seen and felt. He imagines that, while lingering "on the threshold between the dark interior and the brightness outside" in the porch of the Church of Sant'Anastasia in Verona, Dr K. might have "felt for a moment as if the selfsame church were replicated before him, its entrance

fitting directly with that of the church he had just left, a mirroring effect he was familiar with from his dreams, in which everything was forever splitting and multiplying, over and again, in the most terrifying manner" (Sebald, *Vertigo* 149). Shortly after, the narrator again speculates about the cinema experience that Dr K. only mentioned cursorily in his diary. The location, the narrator surmises, was "probably the Cinema Pathé di San Sebastiano", and the film may have been "a story that ran with some success in the cinemas of Austria in 1913, the story of the unfortunate Student of Prague, who cut himself off from love and life when . . . he sold his soul to a certain Scapinelli" (150-51). He further remarks that the "extraordinary exterior shots" of Prague, the *doppelgänger* theme of the film, and the close resemblance of the protagonist to Dr K. himself "would doubtless have sufficed to move Dr K. deeply" (151).

As I have argued in Section 7.1, speculation about detailed experiences, thoughts, and feelings of deceased individuals, though still subject to the criterion of (potential) literal truthfulness, is concerned less with the prospect of being proven true than with its affective impacts on the speculator. In the case above, I suggest that the narrator's primary aim is not to add to existent biographical knowledge about Dr K. but to make the historical records speak to him personally: by detailing Dr K's potential experiences during his stay in Verona, he strives to empathise with Dr K., seeing and feeling Verona from the latter's perspective. Indeed, when the narrator notes that the light effect of the church porch might have generated the illusion of things forever splitting and multiplying "in the most terrifying manner", it is hard to tell whether the word "terrifying" refers to its effect on Dr K. or the narrator himself. This power of speculation to stir emotions and induce empathy is articulated more explicitly in Part IV of *The Emigrants.* Standing in the Jewish cemetery in Bad Kissingen, the narrator notices the grave of a writer called Friederike Halbleib, whose tombstone is decorated with "the symbol of the writer's quill" – a detail which stirred his imagination (Sebald, *Emigrants* 224). He writes, "I imagined her pen in hand, all by herself, bent with bated breath over her work; and now, as I write these lines, it feels as if *I* had lost her, and as if *I* could not get over the loss despite the many years that have passed since her departure" (224-25). Through the meticulous visualisation of a mundane scene in her life, the narrator makes a stranger's death relevant to himself: instead of regarding it as a mere

historical fact, he is now able to mourn over it personally and be moved by the writer's fight against her deteriorating health in the final stage of her life. He also invites readers to stand alongside him and feel Halbleib's death as their own loss.

Yet the capacity of speculation to forge emotional bonds also gives rise to an ethical risk: deployed carelessly, it can easily lapse into the appropriation of others' past for one's own gratification. Sebald's narrator reflects on this risk in Part II of *The Emigrants*. Knowing very little about Paul's late years leading up to his suicide, the narrator at first "tried to get closer to him" by picturing scenes of Paul's later life in S.: "I imagined him lying in the open air on his balcony where he would often sleep in the summer, his face canopied by the hosts of the stars. I imagined him skating in winter, alone on the fish ponds at Moosbach; and I imagined him stretched out on the track" (Sebald, *Emigrants* 29). However, he soon realised that these speculations not only failed to grant him insight into Paul's inner world but were also ethically problematic: "Such endeavours to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me" (29). He eventually decides to avoid such "wrongful trespass" by writing down his memories of Paul in detail and through diligent inquiries into his past (29). The narrator's self-conscious negotiation of the thin line between empathy and appropriation suggests that the speculation of others' experiences, especially the experiences of victimised or vulnerable individuals, must be deployed with ethical sensitivity. One must ask: is this speculation a final leap of imagination based on solid research, which adds to one's understanding of others by rendering historical records more palpable, or is it a fanciful presumption that exposes one's ignorance of and indifference to others' experiences? One should also ask: where does the ethical boundary of speculation lie? When is the moment to say, 'I cannot imagine'? Indeed, as Lewis Ward points out, empathy has "a dual structure, a movement both towards and away, which forms a simultaneous gesture of proximity (identification, subjectivity) and distance (objectivity, critical understanding)" (3).

These self-conscious discussions of confabulation and speculation in Sebald's prose works provide several clues for us to understand Sebald's perception of fictionality. First, these discussions highlight the significance of confabulation and speculation for the psyche of the narrating subject: they reflect one's deepest needs

and desires, contribute to one's mental equilibrium, and facilitate one's emotional connections with others. This emphasis points to a perception of fictionality along the same line, namely, that it is the contextual assumption that the meaning of a certain narrative orientates primarily towards *the author's* beliefs, thoughts, and emotions rather than those of the represented characters, no matter how heavily they draw from real individuals. This means that, compared to nonfictive narratives, the author's thoughts and feelings are a more essential concern for our interpretation of fictive narratives. Second, the self-conscious discussions emphasise the contextual nature of confabulation and speculation; in particular, Sebald illustrates how they draw from, expand on, illuminate, and/or disrupt nonfictive narratives such as personal memories and historical writings. This in turn draws attention to the situatedness of fictive discourses, especially their relations with nonfictive narratives. Third, the narrator's reflections on the ethical risks of speculation may also be applied to fictionality. Sebald points out in his interviews that, like speculation, fictionality may be abused to serve the author's self-gratification at the cost of appropriating others' experiences; in contrast to this unethical practice, Sebald strives to observe the "dual structure" of empathy (Ward 3) through his employment of fictionality, strengthening his emotional bonds with obscure individuals on the one hand and keeping a respectful distance from victimised individuals on the other (see Section 7.1).

These clues, along with Sebald's critical remarks on his use of fictionality, may add to existent critical interpretations of specific cases of his fictionalisation of non-fictive sources in prose works. In *Three Sons: Franz Kafka and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, and W. G. Sebald*, Daniel L. Medin devotes a chapter to the analysis of Sebald's literary "transformations" (145) of Franz Kafka in *Vertigo*. He argues that Sebald's strongly biased interpretation of Kafka's works can be traced back to his 1972 essay "Undiscover'd Country: The Death Motif in Kafka's *Castle*", in which he "accentuate[s] the bleakness" of the novel by over-emphasising the death motif and strategically omitting textual details that do not fit into his interpretation (Medin 82-91). Medin goes on to illustrate how Sebald's highly personal reading of Kafka finds freer expression through the medium of fiction; he does so by identifying Sebald's references or allusions to Kafka's writings in each part of *Vertigo* and meticulously delineating Sebald's deviations from the original

sources (92-145). Yet Medin fails to point out a fundamental difference between Sebald's allusions to Kafka in Part III, "Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva", and those in all other sections of *Vertigo*. While most of Sebald's borrowings of motifs, symbols, and images from Kafka's writings in the other parts are common cases of literary allusions, in Part III he draws from Kafka's fiction, diaries, and letters and reworks them to create a narrative of a trip to northern Italy undertaken by 'Dr K.'. This design goes beyond literary allusion in the usual sense and should be more accurately described as a fictionalisation of the writer Kafka and his trip to Italy. It should be noted, however, that the name 'Dr K.' is ambiguous. On the one hand, it indicates a deliberate distancing from the historical figure of Kafka, emphasising the author's fictionalisation of historical sources. Also, as Medin notes, the name signals fictionality as it alludes to 'K.', the fictional protagonist in *The Castle* (122). On the other hand, in accordance with the long-held tradition in nonfiction writing of using initials to refer to real persons whose full names cannot be revealed, the name 'Dr K.' also highlights the historical figure of Kafka that looms large behind this fictive narrative.

In his analysis of this part, Medin pinpoints Sebald's subtle yet significant revisions of specific passages in Kafka's writings. Medin shows that Sebald sometimes adds details of his own devising. Dr K.'s thoughts that Otto Pick and Albert Ehrenstein were "[a]s like as two eggs" and that they "might just as well have struck him dead with an oar", for instance, do not appear in Kafka's own writings (Medin 124). Other times Sebald omits some aspects of the passages he draws on. For example, he borrows Kafka's confession about his aversion to Pick from a letter but leaves out Kafka's apologetic statement in the same letter that Pick is a very good man in general (123-24). Besides, some details about Dr K.'s experiences during the trip are closely inspired by, but not faithful to, Kafka's writings. His vision of Franz Grillparzer's ghost sitting beside him at the dining table in Hotel Matschakerhof, for instance, is a creative extension of Kafka's metaphorical description of his own ghost-like presence at obligatory social meals in Vienna; this invention may also be based on Kafka's appreciation of Grillparzer and the fact that Grillparzer used to lunch at Hotel Matschakerhof (122-23). Other alterations include shifting the sequence of events (130) and transposing a later diary entry to an earlier context (125).

These observations raise questions about Sebald's communicative intents: Why does he borrow heavily from Kafka's writings on the one hand and fabricate details on the other? How are we to understand Dr K. in relation to Kafka? Medin suggests that some of Sebald's creative reworkings of Kafka's writings, especially those that do not contradict ascertained historical facts, can be seen as a means for the former to "advance arguments begun in academic circles" (131). More specifically, Medin shows throughout his analysis of *Vertigo* that, consistent with his arguments in the 1972 essay, Sebald's subtle alterations of Kafka's writings in "Dr K. Takes the Waters to Riva" amplify certain aspects of Kafka such as his obsession with the death motif, often portrayed as ceaseless wandering, and his fascination with doubles; meanwhile, it downplays other sides of the writer such as his sense of humour and self-irony. I believe, however, that although the consistencies between Sebald's critical and creative works are rightly perceived, it is problematic to consider most of his reworkings of Kafka's writings as a creative way to rearticulate and develop academic arguments. Even if the implied ideas about Kafka were tenable, their value as academic arguments would be discredited by the means of argumentation – fabricated details, altered quotes, and distorted historical facts.

Medin suggests a more promising perception when he quotes J. M. Coetzee's remark that Sebald's "aims . . . are not biographical or historical in any ordinary sense. Though the scholarship behind them is thorough . . . [it] takes second place to what he *intuits* about his subjects and perhaps *projects* upon them" (qtd. in Medin 133; my emphases). This claim, I suggest, captures the distinct value of Sebald's chapter in *Vertigo* as well as how fictionality, as a communicative orientation, invites readers to construe specific types of meanings from a work of narrative. To read the chapter as Sebald's *intuitions about* and *projections upon* Kafka is to perceive an essentially different kind of meaning from what we usually expect from academic writings. This kind of meaning is not primarily about Kafka; rather, it assigns an equal, if not higher, importance to Sebald's complex inner experiences. Instead of asking "How does Sebald add to our understanding of Kafka's life and writings?", it asks, "What personal significance does Kafka have for Sebald? What fascination do Kafka's writings hold for him, what emotions do they arouse, what associations do they evoke, what sentiments do they fuel, and what fantasies do they serve?" Sebald's responses to Kafka in these respects can be seen as his 'interpretation' of

the latter, but only in the broadest sense of the word. It is perhaps more illuminating to see the chapter as 'conscious confabulation' or 'empathetic speculation', with the invented details being the most suggestive of Sebald's intellectual and emotional bonds with Kafka.

The second case I consider is Sebald's subtle reworking of historical literatures about *Lager Austerlitz* in *Austerlitz*, which James L. Cowan scrupulously illustrates in his two-part article "W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and the Great Library". Towards the end of *Austerlitz*, Austerlitz tells the narrator during one of their meetings in Paris that he has been informed by Henri Lemoine, a member of staff at the new Bibliothéque nationale de France, that "on the waste land between the marshalling yard of the Gare d'Austerlitz and the Pont Tolbiac where this Babylonian library now rises, there stood until the end of the war an extensive warehousing complex to which the Germans brought all the loot they had taken from the homes of the Jews of Paris" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 401). Austerlitz goes on to relate Lemoine's detailed description of the massive looting, the fastidious categorisation of the looted objects, and the known or unknown destiny of these goods (401-403).

Cowan points out that, through the telling and retelling of the story of a specific place between several characters, Sebald brings to light historical information that "was only gradually becoming public during the time Sebald was writing *Austerlitz* and was solidly established only two years after its publication" (68). This information concerns *Möbel-Aktion* (or *M-Aktion*), the Nazi looting of household goods from Jews in Paris and the storage of these goods in three special camps in Paris worked by Jewish prisoners, including the *Lager Austerlitz* mentioned by Lemoine (68). However, through a close comparison between the passage in *Austerlitz* and Alexander Smoltczyk's article "Die Türme des Schweigens", the source that Sebald most probably draws on, Cowan shows that Sebald not only rewrites his source for the sake of brevity and rhetorical effects, but he also adds a few details that are not mentioned in Smoltczyk's article (72-74). One such detail is a former internee's report that "there were even special cardboard cartons set aside to hold the rosin removed, for the sake of greater cleanliness, from confiscated violin cases" (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 402). These fabrications are accompanied by two more remarkable alterations. First, Sebald moves the location of *Lager Austerlitz* by a few hundred metres "from the rue Watt (south of the rue

Tolbiac) to the Gare d'Austerlitz (to the north); from the 'immediate vicinity' of the library to the site of the library itself" (Cowen 75). Second, not only does he omit the destruction of the *Lager* "in a desperate bombing raid conducted by the Germans on 26 August 1944, while Paris was celebrating its liberation" (68), but he also shifts the termination of the *Lager* to "the end of the war", which was nine months later than the actual date (75).

Cowan's appraisal of Sebald's creative reworking of his potential nonfictive source is predominantly positive: he argues that Sebald's subtle fabrication and alteration of historical details give this passage in *Austerlitz* the combined effects – and advantages – of both fiction and nonfiction. Cowan claims that, by incorporating emergent historical findings in a popular genre, Sebald raises public awareness of the long-suppressed history of *M-Aktion* (201-202) and prompts "historically curious" readers to further inform themselves about *M-Aktion* and the camps (193). Meanwhile, Cowan argues that Sebald's subtle deviation from historical facts about the location and demolition of the camp shifts the kind of meanings to be drawn from the passage: "what turns out to be the fiction of the library burying the site of the camp reinforces the *metaphorical reality* of how the modern warehousing of information threatens to destroy the traces of the site of human suffering" (76; my emphasis). What Cowan calls "metaphorical reality" is, in other words, the *relevance* of a historical narrative for modern readers (including Sebald himself) and its potential *effects* on them – in this case, the hair-raising horror of the highly organised violence manifested in the operation of the *Lager*, the bone-chilling realisation that post-war cultural life is built upon the suppression of public memories about the profound human sufferings caused by the Holocaust and the two world wars, and an enhanced sense of responsibility towards the remembrance of, reflection on, and (partial) redress of these sufferings. Sebald's reworking of historical writing thus invokes the contextual assumption of fictionality: it shifts the focus of the narrative from the depiction of historical truths to the illustration of the author's perceived and felt connections with the past.

Yet Cowan also acknowledges that Sebald's practice of fictionalisation is not without moral hazards, especially when it concerns topics like *M-Aktion*. He refers to Claudia Öhlschläger's essay, in which she shows similar concerns to Michael Hulse (see Section 7.1), namely, "that the documentary character of Sebald's texts is

shaken by deformations – fictional, imaginary, or optical. These images . . . turn the historical material needing analysis and evaluation into something vague and indistinct" (quoted in German original in Cowan 193; translation by Cowan). Öhlschläger argues that the deviation from historical truths disqualifies Sebald's works as nonfiction; in the meantime, she suggests that it is ethically problematic to craft historical sources into fiction, as it risks turning representations of real individuals' lived experiences into "something vague and indistinct" – metaphors, symbols, and artefacts. My view is that, although Cowan's imagination of the "historically curious" reader may be a bit too idealistic, and although Öhlschläger's concern is reasonable, the latter's criticism is too severe and simplistic for two reasons. First, it underestimates readers' ability to oscillate between fictionality and nonfictionality within a single work, to relish the uncertainty of straddling two communicative orientations, and to reflect on the ambiguity of textual meanings that results; as I have shown in Section 7.1, it is exactly these abilities that Sebald aims to cultivate among his readers. Second, it ignores the varying strategies and degrees of Sebald's fictionlisation in different parts of his works. For example, compared to his reworkings of Kafka's writings in "Dr K. Takes the Waters to Riva", his use of invention in the passage on *Lager Austerlitz* is much more light-handed. This difference may indicate his consideration for the historical weight and ethical sensitivity of the latter topic as well as the public's unfamiliarity with relevant historical narratives.

In this chapter, I have explored two remarkable aspects of Sebald's creative practices, discussing their implications for our conceptions of authorship. Following clues from his interviews, I have illustrated in Section 9.1 how, through his reflective first-person narrator in *The Emigrants,* Sebald foregrounds narrative writing as a means of self-presentation, self-analysis, and self-transformation, even when the narrative is not primarily about the self. In all four parts of *The Emigrants*, the narrator gives brief accounts of the circumstances in which he became acquainted with the respective emigrants and the situations in which he began to inquire into their personal past. These accounts highlight the perspectival relation between the narrating subject and the narrated object. Another observation is that, in all four cases, the narrator's investigations into the emigrants' past are belated. On the most

obvious level, the belated investigations are triggered by chance discoveries of new clues about the emigrants; on a deeper level, they are enabled by the narrator's mental readiness to embark on these journeys, a conglomeration of personality, values, passions, thoughts, and emotions that have been cultivated over years and decades. The investigations not only deepen the narrator's understanding of the emigrants, but they also reshape his sense of self, shifting the light in which he perceives some of his own personal memories. Sebald's self-conscious illustrations and discussions of the self-analytical power of narrative acts guide our reading of his prose works as self-analysis "by proxy" (Atlas 291); more generally, they foreground literary narrative as the author's situated act of self-presentation and self-exploration rather than the selective revelation of a pre-existing, stable image of the 'real author'.

Inspired by Sebald's comparisons of fictionality to confabulation and speculation in his interviews, I have explored the self-conscious depictions and discussions of confabulation and speculation in his prose works in Section 9.2. Through his character's reflections, Sebald suggests that confabulation is not just disappointing memory errors; it is also an important coping mechanism, and as such it reflects one's feelings towards certain past experiences. Speculation, as Sebald's narrators observe, may serve as a way to strengthen one's emotional connections with others; however, just as it may facilitate empathy, it may also lead to the appropriation of others' experiences when applied without ample research and for one's self-gratification. Drawing from these discussions, I suggest that fictionality can be perceived as an intertextually situated, ethically charged communicative orientation that prioritises implicatures about the author's beliefs, thoughts, and emotions over implicatures about the represented characters and events. I have further demonstrated how this notion of fictionality illuminates Sebald's creative reworking of nonfictive sources in specific parts of his works: rather than (or apart from) the truthful representation of real individuals or historical events, these passages are primarily (or also) orientated towards the depiction of their intellectual and emotional impacts on the author.

Conclusion: In Defence of Theories of Authorship

Let us now return to Burke's concern, mentioned in the introduction, that "a concerted programme of authorial reinscription may well be inconceivable under the banner of literary theory" (*Death* 183); that the notion of authorship may be too complex, flexible, and diverse to be assimilated by theory. Analysing ideas and practices of authorship in Nabokov's and Sebald's critical reflections and literary works, my dissertation responds to Burke's concern on two levels. On the local level, I have discussed how the two writers' critical ideas and creative practices illustrate, complicate, and/or challenge existent theories of authorship such as author as medium, author as biographical subject, the concept of the implied author, as well as various ideas about the notion of authorial intention. These discussions showcase and add to recent efforts in the field of literary theory to reconsider the concept of authorship in more positive terms. On the global level, my dissertation develops an approach to authorship that is at once more comprehensive and more flexible. I have shown that the complex concept of authorship can be divided into several interconnected themes or dimensions, each of which poses a wide and variable range of questions. Whereas the themes reflect major functions, values, and concerns that have been rather consistently associated with the notion of authorship across historical periods, cultural contexts, and literary genres, the questions raised under each theme, as well as the answers to each question, may vary significantly depending on literary traditions and individual authors' interests. Therefore, it is futile for theories of authorship to seek a universal set of principles that determine the author's role in the production and interpretation of literary texts; rather, theorists should recognise the inherent situatedness of authorship and individual differences in authorial undertakings and, based on this realisation, formulate theories of authorship that account for the dynamic roles of multiple contextual factors and accommodate idiosyncrasies.

Three common themes can be identified through my analysis of Nabokov's and Sebald's ideas and practices of authorship: creativity, communication, and self-presentation. These three dimensions roughly correspond with three important sets of relation – the relation between author and text, between author and reader, and between an author and her/his embodied experiences. All three themes have long

been associated with the notion of authorship and, as I have illustrated in the introduction, have served as key topics for recent theories of authorship. Under each theme, the two writers raise partially overlapping questions and provide distinct answers through their critical reflections and creative practices.

Both Nabokov and Sebald reflect on how authorial creativity is manifested in literary works and how it can be achieved in the writing process. For both writers, the self-conscious pursuit of originality is a major incentive for their literary creation. Influenced by Russian Formalism, Nabokov declares that an author's mission is to revitalise readers' perceptions of the material world by replacing conventionalised, automatised assumptions of reality with more original and self-reflexive constructs of reality; he further notes that the latter inevitably degenerate into the former in due time, which in turn calls for new creative attempts (Chapter II). Sebald claims that one of his main incentives for turning to literary writing is to create a form of meaning that is difficult to attain through academic writing; he also remarks on how he deliberately deviates from the prevalent conventions of modern English and French novels, which he deems to be constricting and contrived, by drawing upon the (internationally) less-known tradition of nineteenth-century German prose (Chapter VI). Notably, both writers take care to situate authorial creativity in context, seeing it as a time-bound reaction to particular literary or cultural conventions. When it comes to specific literary devices, Nabokov and Sebald both emphasise the rendering of minute details, the construction of elaborate textual patterns, and stylistic complexity in general as manifestations of authorial creativity (Chapters I, VI, and VIII). As they suggest with the 'chess problem' and the 'silk weaving' metaphor, these stylistic features foreground literary texts as verbal artefacts (rather than the representation of real or fictional 'worlds'), thus drawing attention to the author as artificer.

A classic question about authorial creativity, much discussed by theorists and writers alike, is the role of authorial agency in the creative process – in other words, to what extent are literary works products of authors' conscious design? Nabokov and Sebald both address this question, though with slightly different focuses. Nabokov reflects on how his conscious mind facilitates and channels the various intuitions and impulses he calls 'inspiration' at each stage of his writing process (Chapter I). Seeing himself as a bricoleur, Sebald describes how he consciously

cultivates and responds to contingencies, using disparate materials collected from 'unsystematic searching' as sources of inspiration or challenges for imagination (Chapter VI). These reflections provide ways for us to go beyond the "polarized image of the author as either creative God or passive scribe" (Helle 113) and conceive of authorial creativity as the negotiation between authorial agency and various other factors, both internal and external, that may serve as creative resources.

Under the theme of authorial communication, both writers consider a more general and a more specific question. The broader question is: how should we conceive of the relation between author and reader? This question in turn points to debates about the relation between literary and everyday communication as well as the relevance of authorial intention to literary interpretation. Comparing the writing and reading of literary texts to wrestling, mountain climbing, and riddle making/solving, Nabokov highlights literary communication as a rule-based game which requires readers to actively engage with the text – visualising details, reconstructing textual patterns, and exercising their aesthetic sensitivity – in order to fully appreciate the author's creative efforts. Well aware of how the meanings of literary texts can go beyond the author's conscious intentions, he both invites and channels such multiplication of meanings through his responses to critics (Chapter I). In comparison, Sebald perceives more continuities between literary and everyday communication. Seeing his works as parts of a long conversation with a more or less tangible readership, he takes note of the reception of his works, draws ideas for future writings from readers' letters, and feels obliged to continue writing after his initial success (Chapter VI). Nabokov's and Sebald's reflections demonstrate different ways to account for authorial communication without losing sight of the complexity of literary texts or the openness of literary interpretation; they also suggest that a writer's perception of author-reader relations may influence his textual and paratextual performances, which in turn prompts us to ask how the increasing convenience of direct exchanges between writers and readers due to digital media may shift our conception of authorial communication over time.

The more specific question about authorial communication addressed by both writers is the role fictionality plays in the process. Although Nabokov often describes fiction writing as the construction of imaginary 'worlds', he also makes it clear through both reflections and practices that such 'world-making' is but a flexible

strategy that serves the communication of meanings and effects. By refusing to let imaginations of 'worlds' from his novels settle into clear, stable shapes, he reminds readers that so-called 'fictional worlds' are not the deep structures of fictional reference (as is claimed by fictional worlds theory) but are flexible tools that serve the interpretation of complex, potentially ambiguous verbal texts. He also demonstrates that fictive texts can generate aesthetic pleasure and convey meanings through the interruption, destabilisation, and cancellation of 'fictional worlds' as much as through their construction. Nabokov thus foregrounds fiction as a means of real-world communication (Chapters II and IV). Reworking a variety of nonfictive sources with the tool of invention, Sebald produces unconventional prose works that do not fit comfortably into the category of embellished nonfiction, historical fiction, or historiographic metafiction. A close look at the writer's remarks on why these works should be read as fiction as well as his rationale behind writing this particular kind of fiction suggests that fictionality should be primarily seen as a communicative orientation – that it is more about the types of relevance conveyed through a certain work than about how much and which parts of the work is/are invented. Moreover, by inviting readers to self-consciously oscillate between fictionality and nonfictionality, Sebald emphasises that the two contextual assumptions often coexist in a hierarchical relation which can be easily flipped (Chapters VII and IX). The conception of fiction as a means of real-world communication and fictionality as a communicative orientation foregrounds the importance of the notion of authorial intention to our interpretation of fictions: instead of asking 'What kind of fictional world does this work construct?' or 'Which parts of the text are invented?', we should give more attention to such questions as 'What contextual assumptions do we adopt when reading this text? What effects and meanings does the author intend to convey?'

The third theme that both writers consider attentively is how authorship serves as a means of self-presentation, self-exploration, and self-transformation. In his autobiography, interviews, and novels, Nabokov observes and self-consciously depicts a dialogic relation between personal memory and fiction writing: personal memories provide materials and urges for fictive creation; meanwhile, fiction writing offers opportunities for the author to cast her/his personal recollections in different lights, foregrounding aspects that may have remained peripheral in autobiographical

storytelling, thus renewing the author's understanding of his/her personal past. This perception in turn provides a lens for us to read autobiographical allusions in Nabokov's novels (Chapters III and V). Regarding self-analysis as a main purpose for his literary composition, Sebald reflects on how narrative writing contributes to the author's sense of self. Not only does he emphasise that an author's self-presentation through narrative writing is necessarily selective, but he also suggests that a work of narrative is a situated act of self-interpretation and not simply a partial revelation of a 'true self' readily possessed by the author. Moreover, through his first-person narrators, Sebald self-consciously illustrates how the perspectival relation between subject and object implicated in every narrative act enables the author to perform self-analysis through narrative writing, even when the narrative is not primarily about her/his own experiences (Chapters VII and IX). These ideas highlight the necessity as well as possibility of ending the separation between life and work which, from the methodological concerns of Formalism and New Criticism to the still widely upheld distinction between the implied and the real author, runs deep throughout modern literary theory. Nabokov and Sebald show that an author has no ready access to a complete, stable, and authoritative 'true self'; instead, she/he is engaged in a continual process of self-(re)construction, forming tentative interpretations of her/his past acts and thoughts, which in turn inform her/his future interactions with the material world. They further demonstrate how literary creation provides opportunities for an author to renew her/his sense of self by readjusting her/his relations with certain experiences, knowledge, thoughts, emotions, values, and attitudes. It follows that our knowledge of a writer's extraliterary life enriches (rather than contaminates) our understanding of her/his literary works, for our inferences of her/his image from her/his works gain in significance when put in relation to other interpretations and self-interpretations of the person.

Besides its implications for recent theories of authorship, my exploration of the two writers' ideas and practices of authorship also sheds light on some of the most fascinating, challenging, and frequently discussed features of their works – the radical indeterminacy of fictional representation and the heavy presence of autobiographical allusions in Nabokov's novels, the unconventional play with fictionality and the periscopic style of narration in Sebald's prose works, as well as the attention to detail, rich textual patterns, and carefully crafted language in both. I

have shown how these intriguing and difficult aspects of their literary styles can be understood as part of their respective attempts to emphasise and specify the role of the author as a creative medium, communicative agent, and (auto)biographical subject. This observation suggests that conceptions of authorship infiltrate the process of literary creation, actively informing or even directly motivating the development of innovative literary practices, especially in the case of self-reflexive writers. Meanwhile, the ability of these creative practices to engage readers' interest prompts us to reconsider the role the concept of authorship plays in the interpretation and evaluation of literary works. It suggests that ideas of authorship not only serve as basic assumptions upon which our textual interpretations are built, but they also provide some key incentives for our consumption of literature in general; in other words, we read literature not least *because* we want to appreciate the author's creativity, grapple with her/his communicative intentions, and catch glimpses of her/his dispositions, values, and beliefs. In this sense, the author is not only a function but also an objective of literary interpretation; consequently, shifts in ideas of authorship have impacts on both how and why we read literature. This is probably why, contrary to Foucault's anticipation (138), the recognition of authorship as a social construct has not led to the cancellation of this concept, and most probably will not in the foreseeable future; rather, it has prompted – and may continue to stimulate – increasing endeavours in the field of literary theory to reformulate this concept in more positive *and* relativised terms.

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