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Between Artifice and Actuality:

The Aesthetic and Ethical Metafiction of

Vladimir Nabokov and David Mitchell

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Chapter I: Introduction: A Brief Literary History of Metafiction

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). This compact definition of metafiction pinpoints its central goal, namely that of casting doubt on the nature of the reality presented in a work of art. She continues: “Metafiction functions through the problematization rather than the destruction of the concept of ‘reality.’ It depends on the regular construction and subversion of rules and systems” (*Ibid.*. 41). Waugh emphasizes the question of aesthetics that is present in metafiction. This question is about the representation of the world in fiction. When an author problematizes the concept of reality in her fiction, the ethics of representation become essential to discussion. Traditionally critics view postmodernist metafiction as interested in escapism through aesthetics—escaping away from ethical discussions. Critics have often taken this tension between the real and the artificial and narrowly focused on the aesthetic aspects. In this thesis I contend that metafiction need not be restricted to notions of artifice *completely* disconnected from the world; by opening the question of the relationship between fiction and reality, the metafictionist asks questions, ethical and aesthetic, akin to any other sort of writer.
Metafiction is primarily associated with avant-garde postmodernist authors of the middle and late twentieth century. Indeed, the term was first applied by American novelist and philosopher William H. Gass in “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” to the works of Jorge Luis Borges, John Barth, and Flann O’Brien. These and other acclaimed postmodernist writers of the post-World War II period (e.g. John Fowles, B. S. Johnson, Thomas Pynchon), are typically singled out as practitioners of metafiction—the modernist turn inward is continued in postmodernism, but postmodernist metafiction reimagines this turning to be not only to the self but also to the page.¹

John Barth’s landmark essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) proposes that contemporary novelists must begin following the metafictional examples set by Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, and Samuel Beckett instead of following in the footsteps of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Honoré de Balzac as the latter list’s brand of realism has been exhausted. Passionately illustrating the revolutionary quality of Borges’ metafiction, Barth writes that it “disturbs us metaphysically: When the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they’re in, we’re reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence”—a sentiment echoed by Waugh (“Exhaustion” 73). This metaphysical disturbance is a breakthrough for the exhausted form of the novel. The “artistic victory” of Borges, Barth declares after a

¹ As in Virginia Woolf’s “Modern Fiction”: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (150).
discussion of the famous “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” “is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (Ibid. 70). It is crucial to remember this human aspect as like all art, metafiction is about relationships—in this case that of writer and reader.

Turning back to Gass, we find a champion of artifice that also depends on people experiencing his art and being struck by it. In a conversation between Gass and John Gardner, the former states that his goal as a writer is to create art that “is so beautiful in itself, something that exists simply to be experienced” (Conversations 48). While Gardner is critical of this point, instead preferring art with a moral message over beauty or art with a nihilistic message, Nabokov and Gass celebrate it. Gass wishes “to add something to the world which the world can then ponder the same way it ponders the world,” art in which the reader can live; his addition to the world is the fashioning of objects “worthy of love” (Ibid. 48). Gardner states that the difference in their approaches “is that my 707 [Boeing airplane] will fly and his is too encrusted with gold to get off the ground,” and Gass replies, “There is always that danger. But what I really want is to have it sit there solid as a rock and have everybody think it is flying” (Ibid. 55). Gass’ conceptualization of fiction, then, is that of an enchanting tension between his art and the world; fiction is neither a direct correspondence to nor a total disconnection from the world.
Despite his aversion to clubs, Vladimir Nabokov sits comfortably in the postmodernist movement.\textsuperscript{2} The many metafictional moments in his novels and short stories, the dark subject matter, and prioritizing of aesthetics over didactic messages are reasons among others for this seating. His employing of literary commentary in \textit{Pale Fire} (1962) illustrates one particularly original form of Nabokovian metafiction, that of annotations to a poem which have little interest in commenting on the ethical effects of literature on the outside world. This aversion to changing society does not include giving new and beautiful experiences to the readers of their works. I focus on \textit{Pale Fire} out of the many great works listed because of its wildly innovative structure of poem and commentary which allows us to see methods of interpreting fiction apolitically. I also choose \textit{Pale Fire} because of Nabokov’s place at the beginning of the postmodern metafictional movement, and for the corpus of Nabokovian criticism with its split opinion in regards to the author’s morality. I side with those who see Nabokov primarily as an amoral writer.

During the postmodern moment in literary history, authors such as Gass, Barth, and Nabokov were accused by Gardner, among others such as Linda Hutcheon,\textsuperscript{3} that their metafictional works were ethically flawed.\textsuperscript{4} In \textit{On Moral Fiction}

\textsuperscript{2} He once characterized himself as “the shuttlecock above the Atlantic” when asked about the influence of other authors on him; see also my discussion of Barth below (\textit{Strong Opinions} 117).
\textsuperscript{3} In \textit{A Poetics of Postmodernism}, Hutcheon in particular criticizes metacritics of postmodernism for the “typically paradoxical” theorizing of Jean-François Lyotard for his “obviously meta-narrative theory of postmodernism’s incredulity to metanarrative” and Michel Foucault for his “early anti-totalizing epistemic totalizations” which are “the masterful denials of mastery, the cohesive attacks on cohesion, the essentializing challenges to essences” (20).
(1979), he writes, “the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes is not properly art at all. Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy” (6). Gardner believes that Gass and company are making a moral mistake because “it shows a lack of concern” when a metafictionist tells the audience that a character is fake, that their writing is not meant to be representative of actual humans and the tales we tell (Ibid. 69). In conversation with Gass, Gardner reflected on his study:

When I wrote On Moral Fiction, I was talking about a particular kind of fiction which I think is consciously moral, fiction which tries to understand important matters by means of the best tool human beings have. Many of the most academically popular writers of our time are completely uninterested in understanding these matters. (Conversations 46)

Many acclaimed writers of the time had lost touch with Gardner’s perceived common traits of greatness—the harmony of beauty, truth, and goodness—from Homer to Geoffrey Chaucer to Italo Calvino. These “academically popular” targets of his criticism are instead interested in “understanding juxtapositions” and “making beautiful or interesting or ornate or curious objects” instead of “understanding how

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4 Gardner is an interesting case of a critic hostile to metafiction like Gass’ Willie Master’s Lonesome Wife, while adoring the early not particularly metafictional work of Gass, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Omensetter’s Luck. As evidenced by the quotes from Conversations with William H. Gass, they were friends in spite of their disparate views of fiction. Also of interest are his novels Grendel and Freddy’s Book, called metafictional by Waugh (4, 117). Seemingly he only has distaste for the metafiction of his targeted group of postmodernists.

5 Gardner is critical of Barth for this: “Barth speaks shrewdly of the problem of the artist who gets so lost in his gimmickry that he forgets the human purposes it has been invented to serve; yet in all his fiction Barth is tangled helplessly in his own writing” (Moral Fiction 96).

6 Although I would place Calvino in the metafictional canon alongside Nabokov and Gass, Gardner fetes Calvino for his beauty as a writer and for his love of the world as in his review of The Castle of Crossed Destinies (130-133).
we live,” which for Gardner is a momentous mistake *(Ibid. 46)*. To summarize, Gardner says in his *Paris Review* interview, “My argument in *Moral Fiction* is this: that immoral fiction is indifferent to the real issues. I’m saying that there’s good and evil.” The great novelist, then, must be on the side of good (for life affirmation) and fight against the side of evil (against nihilism and indifference to life). This is troublesome to writers who instead place fiction and its sentences *apart* from the world of life, like Nabokov and other literary aestheticians.

While strongly influential, Gardner’s opinion did not go completely uncontested; after the postmodernists entered the academy both as teachers and as subjects, some critics thought it important to reclaim the postmodernists for the side of morality. In the middle of his career, Richard Rorty attempted to create ethics out of Nabokov’s aesthetics in “The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty” *(1993)*. Writing about George Orwell’s similarities to Nabokov, Rorty writes that he “helps us get *inside* cruelty, and thereby helps articulate the dimly felt connection between art and torture” [emphasis in original] *(199)*. Throughout this essay, Rorty illustrates the importance of Nabokov forcing the reader to see the world through the eyes of monsters that can write beautifully—Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote. Our catching of their oversights is a moral action, Rorty argues. Although Rorty tries valiantly to do so, Nabokov cannot be removed from his self-made context of aesthetically focused art. In his attempts to read Nabokov morally, Rorty goes against authorial intention, and, the intentional fallacy notwithstanding, I see Nabokov’s
writing as mirroring his stated intentions. I do not think that almost wholly aesthetically minded writers like Nabokov should be turned to for moral judgments—but neither should all experimental writers be called amoral merely for emphasizing that a work of fiction does not exist in the same way as rocks do. My other central text of consideration is David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), a work which shares many of the so-called postmodernist qualities of Nabokov—metafiction, gamesmanship, and transnationality among them—but which I believe is an ethical work, showing a new future for metafictional literature. So while metafiction has been thought of as averse to political problems, I contend that with recent writers like Haruki Murakami and Mitchell, metafiction can be as politically engaged as it is fictionally engaged. *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates typical postmodernist devices while still being revolutionary in subject matter for the genre of metafiction and formally revolutionary for literature on the whole.

Most of the authors mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are white, European descended males, traditionally the critically overrepresented (and those most likely to misrepresent those different to themselves), and so one may conclude that the genre is sexist and Eurocentric. This assumption makes the mistake of overlooking brilliant female authors who have worked in metafiction and postmodernism; for example, Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters*, and Lydia Davis’ *The End of the Story* as well as a global tradition of metafiction including Gabriel García Márquez’s Colombian *One Hundred Years of
Solitude, Haruki Murakami’s Japanese 1Q84, and Milan Kundera’s Czech The Unbearable Lightness of Being. These works all share the trait mentioned by Waugh: an interest in exploring the boundary of fiction and fact. From its avant-garde literary roots, metafiction has grown into a sizeable body of pop culture, with standouts including the television series Arrested Development and Community.  

As metafiction continues to have relevance outside of avant-garde literature, it too remains important to contemporary writers like J. M. Coetzee (Diary of a Bad Year) and Davis and Murakami.

Aesthetics and Ethics in Literature

The discussion of aesthetics and ethics in literature is ancient—recall Plato’s Republic—and it has an important role in the discussion of the value of contemporary and postmodern literature. A working definition of postmodern literature is literature written after World War II that both departs from and extends modernist ideals of rupture, irony, commentary, skepticism, gamesmanship, and a turning away from worldly concerns and toward literary aestheticism. More recently, a number of contemporary writers including David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, and Jonathan Franzen have developed a kind of “metamodernism” that features many of these same qualities but additionally has strands of sentimentalism, and a greater concern with both characterization and ethics. An admittedly unfair reduction of these definitions would be to say that postmodernism is aesthetically focused and

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7 A detailed discussion of metafictional television and novels in the 1980s and 1990s can be found in David Foster Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction.”
metamodernism is ethically focused. In this thesis, I will treat ethics, as broad of a subject as it is, as an author’s attempts to address worldly problems, and aesthetics as the means by which they create literary worlds.

More specifically, I will follow Martha Nussbaum’s elaboration of ethics and literary attention developed in “’Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature.” In this essay on Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl*, Nussbaum argues why “the novel is itself a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art” (516). Nussbaum believes that “certain novels are, irreplaceably, works of moral philosophy” and that “the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity” (516). This point usefully demonstrates the central difference between Mitchell and Nabokov. Both novelists would agree with Nussbaum’s praise of a Jamesian image for its “sheer glimmering beauty” in addition to her needing “the full specificity of the image” for James’ “moral assessment” (521). The importance of beauty for literature cannot easily be avoided in discussions of ethical literature. While Nabokov would agree with Nussbaum and Mitchell in their views on the particularity and necessity of the beautiful image in a work of literature, he would not grant that works of art should instruct the reader on how to behave more morally; Mitchell, on the other hand, would gladly grant this point.

The “greatness” of a piece of literature—whether poem, short story, novel, or play—often comes from the beauty of its writing. Elaine Scarry movingly writes of the power of beauty in *On Beauty and Being Just*: “How one walks through the world, the
endless small adjustments of balance, is affected by the shifting weights of beautiful things” (15). She writes of the Odyssey: “The beautiful thing seems—is—incomparable, unprecedented; and that sense of being without precedent conveys a sense of the ‘newness’ or ‘newbornness’ of the entire world” (Ibid. 22). Scarry’s view is crucial to this thesis, and seems to be in agreement with Nussbaum—great fiction can and often is both beautiful and moral, even, perhaps, moral because of its beauty. The connection of the new beautiful experience to the world, showing that though there is a gap between the object of beauty and the world that produced it, one may travel between the two of them. The beauty of an author’s prose is the way in which moral messages gain importance and an audience; few readers of fiction only praise books whose messages they find agreeable.

My work clarifies that the traditional division in fiction between a work’s beautiful prose and its moral message is misguided—one must view every novel within its own self-created context and its strengths and weaknesses can be discussed following this consideration. A novel’s self-created context is comprised of its author’s intentions, ensuing criticism, and its historical moment—not only the political and moral value of it. Viewing a novel through its self-created context reveals the ethics and aesthetics divide is misguided as one should not judge a novel on criteria in which it is uninterested. To judge Frankenstein as a failure because Mary Shelley does not suitably explain its fantastical and science fiction elements is to miss the point of that novel.
Brief Histories of the Authors

A review of Nabokov’s biography will help us see why he turned to metafiction as his primary novelistic form. Indeed, Nabokov ultimately uses metafiction as he does, says that it has the qualities that he wants, because of who he is as a person. Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg in 1899 to a fairly wealthy White Russian family. He attended Trinity College in Cambridge from 1919 to 1921, studying zoology and Romantic and Slavic languages. After the Bolshevik Revolution, his family fled to Berlin, where they lived in the Russian émigré community. Under the penname V. Sirin he wrote his first works (poems, plays, fiction) in Russian. He married Vera Evseyevna Slonim in 1925. Their one son, Dmitri Vladimirovich Nabokov, was born in 1934. Because of Vera’s Jewish heritage, the family fled to Paris in 1937 and then fled again to America in 1940. In Paris Nabokov began writing in English. After settling in America, he proudly identified himself as an American author. In America he taught at Wellesley College and Cornell University and acted as curator of lepidoptera at Harvard University’s Museum of Comparative Zoology. After Lolita made Nabokov a celebrity, in 1961 the Nabokovs moved to Montreux, Switzerland, where he died in 1977. Nabokov’s legacy includes his influencing numerous authors, lasting contributions to the field of lepidoptera, the

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8 The present summary is greatly condensed from Brian Boyd’s definitive biographies of Nabokov, the memorably named Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years and Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years and Nabokov’s Strong Opinions.

9 As he puts it in an interview with Herbert Gold: “I am as American as April in Arizona. [...] I do feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers” (Strong Opinions 98).
addition of the word “nymphet” to the English language—and of course his literary
writings including fifteen novels and a fragment, three novellas, sixty-eight short
stories, four plays, numerous translations, works of criticism, and letters.

Mitchell’s interest in metafiction comes from his reading of writers like
Nabokov, Kundera, and Calvino. His biography attests to his fascination with both
Western and Eastern hemispheres, and his ethical commitment to the preservation
of the earth for the future of his children. David Stephen Mitchell was born in 1969
in Southport, England. His family moved to Malvern, Worcestershire where he
spent his childhood. Mitchell studied English and American Literature at the
University of Kent, and he then spent a large amount of time abroad. He lived in Sicily
for a year before living in Hiroshima, Japan from 1994 until 2002, teaching English.
While in Japan, Mitchell met and married his wife, Keiko Yoshida. In 2002, they
relocated to the UK as there Mitchell could financially support the family solely by
writing. As present they live in Clonakilty, Ireland with their two children. Mitchell
has written six novels, several short stories, two opera libretti, and has co-translated
a memoir with his wife.

The Argument

In this thesis I contend that contemporary metafiction has a more complex
relationship with aesthetics and ethics than critics have previously thought. A work in

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10 This is in contrast to Nabokov’s lack of interest; he is left “supremely indifferent” to “the entire
Orient” (Bend Sinister xii).
11 I will discuss the importance of Mitchell’s family on his morality in chapter III.
12 This biography comes from interviews by Mark Greaves, Adam Begley, and Wyatt Mason.
the metafictional genre is not automatically disengaged with extra-literary concerns nor is it engaged with only pure escapism. As stated by previous critics, Nabokov creates narrative-obsessed worlds and does not seek to affect the exterior world.\textsuperscript{13} Nabokov is indifferent to the exterior world in the sense that he sees art’s only value and purpose as transportation to another realm of being. As I will show, he does this because he is attempting to resist the takeover of literature through novels that engage in generalities and didacticisms. While confirming the impression of Nabokov’s metafiction as escapist, I will combat critics like Rorty and Leland de la Durantaye who misinterpret Nabokov as an instructional author. I find their line of thought troublesome as it implies that texts that deliberately eschew ethics can be made into guidelines for living, whereas I agree with Nabokov that to attach an ethical system to a work of art for the sake of making it moral is to disregard the ways that it establishes itself as an aesthetic object (The converse of this—texts with ethics having their ethics made absent—is even more troubling). With Nabokov metafiction is used to highlight our engagement with a literary and fictional world, while in Mitchell we see a different kind of metafiction. Mitchell uses game-like and story obsessed narratives to speak about ethical and political matters. With Mitchell we have an illustration of the use of metafiction as a singular aesthetic object that still has a conscience. Another way of separating the two authors: the goal of a

\textsuperscript{13} As evidenced by Page Stegner’s *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Nabokov*: “it is this escape [through art], the finding of one’s immortal soul through artistic creation, that is the central concern of Nabokov’s fiction” (59).
Nabokovian novel is to demonstrate interior escape while Mitchell’s later novels present exterior worlds that could be improved. In order to make this case, I will explore how authorial intrusion is tied to morality through an author who intervenes in order to show us that his worlds are fictions (Nabokov) and one who instead attempts to recede from sight in order to instruct us to make our own ethical decisions through his fiction (Mitchell), and how this makes a difference across these disparate examples of metafiction. An important distinction must be made between intrusion by the author and by the narrator—in Pale Fire a character named Nabokov is not acting as a narrator. He does not place himself in his work and then speak from a moralizing, privileged position—his role is much closer to a game of hide-and-seek with a literary deity than like the didactic diversions present in a work like George Eliot’s Adam Bede.¹⁴ In short, I will argue that a metafictional author like Nabokov sidelines ethics by privileging aesthetics, while Mitchell achieves ethical engagement through aesthetics.

¹⁴ I am not the first to make this distinction, as in Stegner’s Escape into Aesthetics (49).
Chapter II: Aesthetic Metafiction and Ethical Absence in Nabokov

In this chapter I explore the relationship between metafiction and didacticism. Since Nabokov writes in the afterword to Lolita, “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction,” he might seem an odd choice for this study (314). But because Nabokov is so absolute about the opposition of metafiction and didactic writing, he makes for a good subject. I have chosen to study Nabokov’s Pale Fire because it will illustrate how postmodern metafiction can be amoral.

Of course the matter of the relationship between didacticism or morality and metafiction is not settled by simply asserting that there is no connection. Nabokov’s critics have had conflicting things to say about Nabokov’s potential morality, with Richard Rorty in “The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty” writing that Nabokov “wrote about cruelty from the inside, helping us to see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss can produce cruelty” (199). Similarly, de la Durantaye in Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Nabokov reads Nabokov as a teacher of empathy: “we must read [Lolita] with the attention and intelligence we call empathy” [emphasis in original] (6). Most recently, in The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov, Andrea Pitzer alleges that Pale Fire is a supremely moral work, written for “a beautiful culture, annihilated” (287). She continues, saying that his response to the horrors of Soviet camps that he did not witness is “constructing a fantastic unbelievable fairy tale on top of unknowable events—the kind of fairy tale that

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I follow Nabokov in his criticism in using the term didacticism to almost equate with morality. Despite this, didacticism and morality are not the same.
Nabokov believed all great novels were at heart” (Ibid. 287). In addition, for Pitzer, the character of Charles Kinbote is a “tribute to the dead exiles and prisoners,” who “longs to bear witness to what he has seen” but “is too insane to tell his tale” (287). Clearly, Nabokov’s own words have not dissuaded critics from writing didactic interpretations of the author.

Not all critics create a moralist out of Nabokov. Michael Wood, in The Magician’s Doubts, proposes that “the ethical,” for Nabokov, “is the realm of the unspeakable”; Nabokov does not believe that art is the correct place for ethical discussion—art is for aesthetics alone (7). This somewhat confirms Nabokov’s statement, though Wood adds this notion of unspeakability that is not written about by Nabokov. Taking some from all of these critics, I offer a different way of approaching Nabokov and morality that emphasizes his belief in the separation of art from the world. I believe that critics who argue for a moral or ethical core in Nabokov’s work do not adequately account for the skepticism toward reality evident in Nabokovian metafiction. Accounting for this skepticism makes for a morally weak author in opposition to the Nabokov of Rorty and Pitzer. Not accounting for it makes for a weak interpretation of Nabokov’s life and art. Before further discussing his critics, more attention must be given to Nabokov and didacticism as his metafiction
challenges the ideal that novels must be political or moral, as he prefers fables to polemics, aesthetics to ethics.\textsuperscript{16}

For many critics, though, literature is inherently moral in the sense that it teaches a lesson about how we encounter the world. This lesson may be about ethics, that is, morally right behavior—or about economic, political, or social issues, but the reader will come away having gained a message. During postmodernism’s heyday, some critics thought that their particular kind of metafiction debase the world with its “immorality.” Published at a time when he saw literature as in danger of moving too far away from this perceived inherent morality, Gardner’s \textit{On Moral Fiction} condemns the worldview of Nabokov and the postmodern writers of the 1960s and 70s such as Gass, Barth, and Coover. In this work he argues: “The traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it” (\textit{Moral Fiction} 5). Not much could be further from the aesthetics of Nabokov, with his interest in emphasizing the distance from life to art through metafiction. We can as critics hold an author to a standard that he does not endorse, but there is something lost in doing so. I do not believe that fiction should always improve; this however does not mean that amoral fiction debases life. There is nothing at base wrong moral criticism, by which Gardner means the judging of an artistic work as good:

\begin{quote}
[O]nly when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} See, e.g. “Nabokov and His Successors: \textit{Pale Fire} as a Fable for Critics in the Seventies and Eighties” by Marianna Torgovnick for a study of the author’s relationship to fables.
beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destruction or indifference. *(Moral Fiction 18)*

But this implies that we ought to exclude works of undoubted beauty if they are not directed “toward life affirmation,” e. g. Nabokov’s aesthetic metafiction among others. We cannot ignore his shortcomings, but holding him to the strict and limited views of moral fiction is not a way to go about appreciating Nabokov’s virtues. The problem Gardner presents is the dividing of moral fiction and metafictional game-like literature into two camps, when there is overlap between them, as in the work of Tolstoy, an author feted by both Gardner for moral messages and by Nabokov for his detail oriented style.17 Gardner appreciates Tolstoy’s fiction while also praising *What Is Art?* for its lessons without mentioning its aesthetics: “Tolstoy conceived a transcendent goal for humanity as a whole: [...] he envisioned a world ruled not by policemen but by moral choice[.] Only through moral art, Tolstoy argued [...] can such a world be brought into existence” *(Moral Fiction 26)*. When Nabokov thinks of Tolstoy, he writes of *Anna Karenina*, glorifying trivial details: “[I] rationalize my feeling for him [...] with the flash of this or that unforgettable passage (‘... how sweetly she said: “and even very much” ’ —Vronsky recalling Kitty’s reply to some trivial question we will never know” without mentioning the didactic nature of it *(Strong Opinions 286)*. There is thus no necessary relation between an aesthetic form such as historical fiction, metafiction, or science fiction and a particular moral or

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17 John Updike writes of Nabokov instructing his students to “Caress the details [...] the divine details!” as opposed to looking for ideas in literature *(Lectures on Literature xxiii)*, and Nabokov declares “In reading, one should notice and fondle details” *(Ibid 1)*.
amoral stance. The division between didactic and purely aesthetic can never actually be achieved: Nabokov, for example, was a noted critic of anti-Semitism, as discussed by Shalon Goldman in “Nabokov’s Minyan: A Study in Philo-Semitism”: “In his life and work Nabokov moved beyond opposition to anti-Semitism to an assertively philo-Semitic stance” (1-2). And Gardner can write magnificently, as here when praising a particular postmodernist: “Beckett is an authentic genius whose compassion and comic sense sharply undercut the nihilism, but we continue about our daily business—feeding our children, counting out honest change—as if they [Beckett’s proofs of nihilism] were false” (Moral Fiction 22). But on the whole, Gardner prefers well-written didactics and Nabokov prefers spine-tingling aesthetics.

Instead of having to choose between these two factions, a third, inclusive option is presented by Zadie Smith in “Read better” as to how both Nabokov and didactic writers can be appreciated as “literature,” for she believes all readers should understand that “it is each writer’s duty to tell the truth of their conception of the world” and for us to share some common ground with these writers (21). We as critics should not engage in this binary erected roughly half a century ago. To turn to another predecessor to Nabokov and Gardner, we have the work of James Joyce, renowned for his aesthetic merit in addition to his opposition to the British colonization of the Irish. That being said, one must not grant Nabokov everything that he asks for; the personality of the reader is still present. And even if we read Nabokov in the manner he would like, our reaction to his homophobia, discussed
below, remains relevant to discussions of misrepresentation and an ethical duty of criticism. Our reaction to his homophobia, our inability to detach it from our experience of the world, is a reminder that Nabokov’s ideal of completely detached metafiction cannot actually be achieved.

*Pale Fire* is one of Nabokov’s greatest achievements: it is an important and useful text to elucidate this third option of examining an author’s particular conception of truth because of the divided critical interpretation of Nabokov as an instructor or as a debased, solipsistic aesthete. Its highly metafictional form and its unfortunate caricatures make it an ideal place to explore both the strengths and faults of Nabokov on his own terms. It is a work composed of a 999-line poem written by John Shade (titled “Pale Fire”), and with a Foreword, Commentary, and Index to the poem by his mad neighbor, Charles Kinbote.¹⁸ Needless to say, *Pale Fire* is not a story in the conventional sense. Yet there is a kind of story that ties these parts together, as throughout *Pale Fire*, Kinbote tells a fictional biography that he holds to be true: namely, that he is an exiled king, Charles Xavier Vseslav the Beloved, from a northern kingdom called Zembla, and he is being pursued by an assassin named Jakob Gradus. In his mind this somehow relates to Shade’s epic. With all of this self-invention (e.g. the many pseudonyms of Jakob Gradus such as Jack de Grey, Jack Degree, Vinogradus, etc. (307)) and deception (e.g. Kinbote’s repeated

¹⁸I will call it a novel for the sake of convenience, and other scholars do call it, without qualification, a novel, as in de la Durantaye (38). Nabokov’s attitude is seemingly that it is a “monstrous semblance of a novel” as Kinbote fails to realize that that is what his notes are (*Pale Fire* 86).
references to the fictional Zemblan crown jewels (129, 243, 306, 314) the plot of 
*Pale Fire* is perhaps impossible to unravel.\(^\text{19}\) So with this departure from storytelling 
(for Nabokov; Kinbote is obsessed with storytelling) what instead does Nabokov set 
out to do with his fiction? The fiction, and thus the metafiction, of Nabokov is an 
attempt to create “aesthetic bliss,” as he writes in the afterword to *Lolita*: “For me a 
work of fiction exists only in so far 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,” and *Pale Fire* 
reflects his ideal (313).\(^\text{20}\) Aesthetic bliss involves focusing on the physical response of 
the reader as opposed to drawing the reader’s attention to the world. 

A connected ideal of Nabokov’s is to be an author highly resistant to any sort 
of categorization, but especially as that of a moralist, as aesthetic bliss in a 
Nabokovian fictional world is far removed from morality in the physical world. For 
Nabokov, the novel acts as a device for the delivering of ecstasy, by which he means 
a physical, hair raising response to beauty, from an author perhaps to a select group 
of readers. De la Durantaye declares that Nabokov “saw himself in a very special 
relation to his readers—which is to say, no relation at all” (309). De la Durantaye 

\(^\text{19}\) These pseudonyms show Kinbote’s mental instability. He cannot comprehend his own identity, so 
he also invents several identities for Gradus. The crown jewels are a red herring. Nabokov reveals that 
the crown jewels are located at Kobaltana in an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr. (*Strong Opinions* 92). 
The *Pale Fire* Index entry for Kobaltana reads: “a once fashionable mountain resort near the ruins of 
some old barracks now a cold and desolate spot of difficult access and no importance but still 
remembered in military families and forest castles, not in the text” (310); for another example of 
Nabokov misdirecting the reader, see the Index entry for “crown jewels” and the empty, circular 
search it provides (314). 

\(^\text{20}\) While these are all positive traits of art that many writers aspire to and may be in didactic fiction, 
note that none of them are explicitly moral and all are parenthetical.
captures Nabokov’s reluctance to believe that art can impact the reader on levels (social, ethical) other than that of inducing bliss.

But what does “aesthetic bliss” mean for Nabokov? Simply pleasure? No, I argue that what Nabokov has in mind is a sort of qualia produced by art. I am here using the definition of qualia as used by philosopher Frank Jackson in his essay, “Epiphenomenal Qualia”: “certain features of the bodily sensations especially, but also of certain perceptual experiences, which no amount of purely physical information includes” (127). Nabokov writes of aesthetic bliss in “Good Readers and Good Writers”: “a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine” (Lectures on Literature 6). Art for Nabokov is not about producing a meaning; instead, he wants to produce physical feeling—one should not engage in interpretations and thinking of ways to change the world.

Nabokov is interested in form and texture; meaning is created here not to function as a lesson but instead to provide a physical response. Of course the reader must read with her brain; he is not being literal here but instead combating a sentiment as in Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious, which argues for a view of interpretation as “an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code,” with his master code being Marxist (10). In opposition to this, Nabokov’s art acts functionally, as opposed to producing meaning allegorically, inviting the reader to detach from physical reality and instead go to a new plane of reality—the fictional. Recall Nabokov’s other life as a lepidopterist—as
a scientist he is interested in how physical beings concretely experience the world, and not the large abstract systems that come from them or operate behind the scenes. The relationship of the author to his readers is not one of instructor and students; Nabokov may be a fabulist, but he is not a parabolist.

Yet Nabokov teaches a message of empathy through his adoration of details. Rorty aptly shows Nabokov’s use of Kinbote and Humbert as narrow minded narrators. The titular “Barber of Kasbeam” is a character appearing in one sentence in Lolita, who Rorty uses to illustrate Humbert’s inability to see suffering around him (215), a problem that Kinbote similarly shares (217). De La Durantaye agrees with this reading about Humbert’s and Kinbote’s empathetic failures. I concur with both critics about this inattention, but I do not agree with the fact that the reader shows empathy for these anti-empathetic monsters somehow makes Nabokov moral.21

Empathy, it seems to me, is an essential part of character creation. If one does not have a character with whom to identify, what is the motivation for reading or listening to a story? When hearing stories on the sidewalk, it is only the stories that come from far outside our own imagination that make us pause and listen to their narrators. The other stories to which we give attention are those that come from family, friends and acquaintances—characters with whom we identify. Ultimately, to show empathy does not imply any ethical relation. Sympathetic characters are

21 Leona Toker in “Liberal Ironists and the ‘Gaudily Painted Savage’” further objects to Rorty’s reading on three points: “(1) Rorty’s pointing to cruelty rather than callousness as the main target of Nabokov’s fiction, (2) the conclusions that Rorty draws from Nabokov’s remarks on aesthetic experience, and (3) his comments on Nabokov’s conjoining, as it were, literary immortality with metaphysical, or ‘literal,’ immortality” (198).
different than characters with whom the reader identifies, and Nabokov is critical of reading for identification in his “Good Readers and Good Writers” (3).

Although there is this empathetic aspect to *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, there is much cruelty in Nabokov toward his characters. The narrator of *Pnin* illustrates Nabokov’s antipathy in an aside: “Some people—and I am one of them—hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam. The avalanche stopping in its tracks a few feet above the cowering village behaves not only unnaturally but unethically” (25-26). His characters are his “puppets,” as said by Appel in the Introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* (xxxi). Nabokov’s own attitude toward his characters is that they are “galley slaves,” as he says in his interview for *The Paris Review*. In *Pale Fire*, Shade writes of aspiring to be “a fat fly” rather than forgetting his life, particularly the life centered on his family (53). In the Index to *Pale Fire*, Kinbote defines “Botkin, V.” as “an American scholar of Russian descent” and a “king-bot, maggot of extinct fly that once bred in mammoths and is thought have hastened their phylogenetic end,” and this V. Botkin is most probably himself, Charles Kinbote being an invention (306).\(^\text{22}\) At best, then, Nabokov’s characters are puppets, and at worse galley slaves or flies. A central component of de la Durantaye’s study, following Rorty and other critics like Calvino, Joyce Carol Oates, and Martin Amis, is

\[^{22}\text{Nabokov himself concurs, in an interview with Maurice Dolbier, he stated, “[T]he nasty commentator is not an ex-King of Zembla nor is he Professor Kinbote. He is Professor Botkin, or Botkine, a Russian and a madman.” Furthermore, four index entries down from “Botkin, V.” is the entry titled “Charles II,” in which his surname is listed as Vseslav—a probable answer for what the V. stands for, as “Vse-slav” is Russian for “All-Slav,” i.e. Charles being all Russian in origin despite his Zemblan tale (*Pale Fire* 306).}\]
the discussion of the theme of cruelty in Nabokov, offering a conclusion that “a kernel of hard, bright cruelty [is] at the heart of Nabokov’s person and work” (22).

This is not to say that Nabokov solely creates characters to be targets of his scorn, as there are figures of sympathy in Shade and Bend Sinister’s Adam Krug, but this also does not stop their author from violently killing them—after losing a son and a daughter, respectively—by their parent works’ ends. In Nabokov’s novels, one is more aware than elsewhere that his characters are playthings for him and are not meant to be adequate depictions of humans.

He is thus averse to sentimentality or, as he would phrase it, *poshlost* ′. *Poshlost*, as defined by Nabokov in his study Nikolai Gogol, “is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive” (70). It is a vague term, but I align it with the systematic reading that Nabokov decries. *Poshlost* ′ as a literary theme comes from Gogol, and Nabokov attacks it far more forcefully than his Ukrainian predecessor; *poshlost* ′ is probably the central target of Nabokov’s satire. Charlotte Hazel from Lolita is perhaps the best example of Nabokovian *poshlost* ′ with her poor French and overblown intellectual aspirations, but Kinbote, with his critical aspirations, is also an exemplar.

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23 As Rorty writes that Shade is “given all of Nabokov’s own tenderness and kindness and curiosity” (216), while upon Krug’s death, his creator writes, “I knew that the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism, a play upon words. But the very last leap of life had been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style” (Bend Sinister 241).

24 This is the more exact transliteration from the Russian пошлость; Nabokov sometimes wrote, punningly, of *poshlust*. 
The poshlost’ of Pale Fire is embodied in Kinbote. What is most distinct about his poshlost’ is his misreading of Shade’s poem. Kinbote repeatedly brings to the text his own (most probably invented) background as a deposed Zemblan king and makes absurd connections between text and reader. In addition to his seeing Shade’s familial poem as being about his fictional kingdom of Zembla, Kinbote writes of how he “saturated [Shade] with his vision” of Zembla “with a drunkard’s wild generosity” (Pale Fire 80). Literary tourism, the idea that a reader may learn about a culture from a novel set in a location foreign to the reader, is abhorrent to Nabokov; at the conclusion of his Nikolai Gogol, Nabokov “bluntly” states that his purpose for these notes is to repel readers who “expect to find out something about Russia” from Gogol, in addition to his usual target of those “interested in ‘ideas’ and ‘facts’ and ‘messages’” (149); he adds a forceful “Certainly not” in response to the rather moderate rhetorical question, “Can we expect to glean information about places and times from a novel?” (Lectures on Literature 1-2). Forcing subject matter onto an artist as Kinbote imparts upon Shade is also disliked by Nabokov. Kinbote’s poshlust’ critical approach, attempting to uncover his influence in the poem, appears

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25 The interpretative aspect of his Commentary has been remarked upon for its ridiculous relationship with the titular poem as in de la Durantaye (47).
26 He rather entertainingly continues to admonish this reader for some time: “Keep away, keep away. He has nothing to tell you. Keep off the tracks. High tension. Closed for the duration. Avoid, refrain, don’t. I would like to have here a full list of all possible interdictions, vetoes, and threats. Hardly necessary, of course—as the wrong sort of reader will certainly never get as far as this [in the study],” before finally welcoming “the right sort,” who will appreciate the Russian, poetic language of Gogol (Nikolai Gogol 148).
27 See, e.g. Nabokov’s recounting of a “wretched seducer” who tried to have Nabokov return to Russia, where Nabokov “could be perfectly free to choose any of the many themes Soviet Russian bountifully allows a writer to use, such as farms, factories, forests in Fakistan” (Strong Opinions 98).
most clearly when he imposes his worldview on Shade’s familial epic is an additional insult to how fiction should operate according to Nabokov.

For Nabokov this attitude toward analysis is misguided and emblematic of poshlost’: “if we want to pin down poshlost in contemporary writing we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities we all know,” all examples of misreading, as he told The Paris Review. These derided political allegorical and social commentary readings are Kinbote’s main critical tools. One may conclude that Nabokov’s satire acts as a surgeon’s scalpel—in this instance to treat the problems of his contemporary literature. While this view is not entirely disagreeable, Nabokov’s insistence on independence from any sort of literary movement makes for a difficult claim that his writing has a goal in relation to literature on the whole. Nabokov would not consider the combating of poshlost’ to be his moral duty. Instead his goal in writing is compositional; to quote the afterword to Lolita: he is “the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book” (311). This is also not entirely agreeable, as Nabokov spent so much of his career denigrating poshlost’ and authors who embody it. Perhaps his most notable target is Thomas Mann because Death in Venice “represented a personal breakthrough into the literary use of mythical material,” as
John Burt Foster, Jr. says in “Nabokov and modernism.” Nabokov’s work is a turning away from the perceived generalities of mythological re-visionings and social criticism through didactic fiction and is instead a turning toward fiction about fiction (90).

The metafiction of Nabokov is an attempt to create aesthetic bliss. This aesthetic bliss is created in Nabokovian fiction through many ways such as poetic devices or specificity of description, but I of course wish to emphasize the relationship of aesthetic bliss to metafiction: metafiction, by virtue of its distancing of fictional from actual reality, is for Nabokov the way to achieve aesthetic bliss. As previously stated, Nabokov wishes for a connection to a state where art “is the norm”—it is hard to find a genre where fiction is more “the norm” than metafiction. In *The Meaning of Metafiction* Christensen is selects Nabokov for analysis in her chapter “Nabokov’s Ada: Metafiction as Aesthetic Bliss,” and writes that what Ada and Van Veen “aspire towards in their art - and Nabokov in his” presenting “beauty itself as perceived through the there and then” [emphasis in original] (42). This shows the specificity of Nabokovian approved art because of its focus on a particular place and time and the beauty present in this and not the loathed generalities of didactic fiction. If there is a readerly consensus regarding a work of literature about how people must behave, then he will certainly criticize it, as aesthetic bliss is for private, internal consumption of the solitary reader—the test case for which is often none.

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28 As Nabokov says in *The Paris Review*, “everybody has his bête noire, his black pet” with his pets of *poshlost’* being a certain airline ad, “And, of course, *Death in Venice.*”
other than Nabokov himself. Christensen, in an attempted apologia for those that have concern for the cruelty and coldness of Nabokov, writes rather unconvincingly that “this is more than compensated for by *Ada’s* dazzling beauty” and that Nabokov’s “handling of the questions of time, eternity, and reality should indicated that *Ada*, by focusing on the narrator’s situation, deals with problems of ‘general human interest’ (56). Despite all of her great analysis of the novel and its author’s marvelous stylistics, Christensen’s view that *Ada* teaches lessons of general interest neglects Nabokov’s self-confessed antipathy toward generalities and ambivalence toward the reader. As much as Nabokov attempts to write a perfectly specific novel, this is an unachievable ideal; as a writer he must connect with a reader, whether he wants to or not. Additionally, Nabokov cannot help but write about himself in his novels: *Pnin* is narrated by a fictional Vladimir Vladimirovich, who is characterized by Pnin as an untrustworthy “dreadful inventor” who “makes up everything” (184),

Appel believes the seventh “Enchanted Hunter” to be an appearance by the author amongst others in *Annotated Lolita* (xxx); and to quote the author himself, the conclusion of *Bend Sinister* features an appearance by “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me,” (xviii), amongst many others throughout his oeuvre.

These narrative intrusions serve the purpose of constantly reminding the reader that she is

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29 Mentioned by name, with a large dose of narrational irony by Professor Chateau: “Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here[,] He would have told us all about these enchanting insects” (*Pnin* 128). “Enchanting,” a favorite adjective of Nabokov’s, combined with his passion for entomology, further connect this narrator to his creator.

30 Waugh on the subject: “Nabokov playfully introduces himself into his novels very often through anagrams of variations on his name: Vivian Badlock, Vivian Bloodmark, Vivian Darkbloom, Adam von Librikov (VVN is a pun on the author’s initials)” (132).
playing the game of Nabokov and no one else; she is not allowed to forget who is in charge of this world, as Smith writes about in “Rereading Barthes and Nabokov”:

“few writers make you feel your subjection” to an author’s own world like Nabokov does (53). The directness by which Nabokov makes his novels about himself is echoed in his novels’ repeated commentary on their fictionality.

_Pale Fire_ is not subtle about the existence of its artificial world. Mirrors and magic appear throughout, emphasizing Nabokov’s prestidigitation and the work’s fictionality. Few novels are as explicit about the fact that they are about writing. Indeed, the Foreword’s first sentence is a description of the title poem: “_Pale Fire_, a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines, divided into four cantos, was composed by John Francis Shade” (13), and he continues in this vein; the final lines of Kinbote’s commentary concern his escape from isolation perhaps into “other disguises [or] other forms” (300), possible forms including a motion picture and a stage play (301)—both adaptations of his invented life story; and the Index’s final entry is Zembla, Kinbote’s invented kingdom (315). Moreover, Kinbote and other Nabokovian characters engage in one of the most common techniques of

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31 Writing about John Fowles, Waugh argues that “the effect [of Fowles’ frame-breaks], instead of reinforcing our sense of a continuous reality, is to split it open, to expose the levels of illusion. We are forced to recall that our ‘real’ world can never be the ‘real’ world of the novel. So the frame-break, while appearing to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, in fact lays it bare” [emphasis in original] (33). This statement is easily applied to Nabokov’s frame-breaking appearances in his works.

32 As in the first line of Shade’s poem where a window acts as a mirror: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / by the false azure of the windowpane,” (Ibid. 33) Kinbote writes that “Shade’s poem is, indeed, that sudden flourish of magic: my gray-haired friend, my beloved old conjurer, put a pack of index cards into a hat—and shook out a poem” (Ibid. 28), and they even both appear together: “How magnificently those two lines can be mimed and rhymed in our magic Zemblan (‘the tongue of the mirror,’ as the great Conmal has termed it)” (Ibid. 242).
metafiction: existential commentary in which tropes of artifice and fictionality serve to question existence. Kinbote comments on the fictionality of Shade in the Foreword: “His whole being constituted a mask” (Ibid. 25) and again when imparting the belief that Shade would not exist without Kinbote’s notes (Ibid. 29). This is a sly move of Nabokov’s, acknowledging that were it not for his creation of the novel with this exact structure of a poem and notes, Shade would not exist as he does. The two leads question their own existences, e.g. Kinbote discusses the fictionality of King Charles as a character in a play or film (Ibid. 301), and in the poem’s third canto the speaker-Shade nearly dies, and he writes of finding himself in a “strange world” where “The sense behind / The scene was not our sense” (Ibid. 59). With Nabokov, when a character comes close to death in his fictional universe, they come into a new universe shared with the authorial character, thus Shade leaves the usual “scene” of his life’s play. His discovery is in part the subject of his poem—this event acts as synecdoche for the whole of Pale Fire as the theme of existential commentary is central to the novel. Nabokov employs metafiction in order to present aesthetic bliss—an attempt at severing the connection between his novelistic world and the real one. In Pale Fire, recall Kinbote’s invention of Zembla and his escape from it—this is storytelling not about escape but as escape.

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33 One should also recall that “Kinbote” is a mask for V. Botkin, as stated above.
34 This point is clearer in Bend Sinister when Krug is shot in the head, and the author relieves the character of the burden of his being; see footnote 23.
35 His life later does become a play, “The Haunted Barn,” composed by Kinbote (Pale Fire 190).
Just as his characters speculate about their realities, Nabokov often remarks on his own skepticism about reality. Indeed, he writes of reality as “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes,” (Annotated Lolita 312) and also that “all reality is a mask” (Nikolai Gogol 148). Nabokov sees his narrative intrusions into his novels as a formation of a new reality away from the quotidian and unexceptional, and de la Durantaye contends that “What we see reflected in Nabokov’s reality is a robust absence of interest in shared visions of the world” [emphasis in original], a fitting description for his metafiction as well because of its narrowed literary focus (46). As Kinbote writes, ‘‘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” (Pale Fire 130). Nabokovian approved art is individualistic and, in some ways, relativistic. Only the unique is worthy of praise. I do not think that he would permit praising of Mann’s writings by someone else as Nabokov’s opinions, while focused on individual responses, do not allow for all opinions to be equal. Individual responses to literature that are Marxist or Freudian, for example, are despised by Shade (Ibid. 155-56) as they are by Nabokov in “Good Readers and Good Writers.”36 In art there is immortality, as Kinbote says in the Foreword and Humbert says in the closing lines of Lolita: “I am thinking of […] the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (Annotated Lolita 309). To once again situate Nabokov alongside other

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36 Nabokov is not exactly apolitical as he is often hostile toward Marxism (“I despise red knaves and pink fools”; Bend Sinister has a Marxist totalitarian state) (Strong Opinions 133).
metafictionists, when Waugh writes that, “for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one’s ‘reality,’” Nabokov should come to mind (24). This skepticism toward finite reality manifests itself as a subject in Nabokov’s novels as fiction about fiction—he must write about constructed realities and the beings therein.

These constructed realities of Nabokov, with all of their puzzles and play, goes against mimetic art. If material reality is to be in quotes, then it cannot be represented in fiction; it is instead distorted as in a fun house mirror. Nabokov explicitly tells the reader to be suspicious of his own plotting by writing about the ridiculous coincidences in his plots, as when Shade writes that his near-death experience would change his life to now focus on “Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream / But topsy-turvy coincidence, / Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense” (Pale Fire 63) or when Kinbote writes about the “extraordinary coincidence (inherent perhaps in the contrapuntal nature of Shade’s art)” (Ibid. 77) of an allusion of Shade’s to Jakob Gradus. No such allusion happens, as Shade has no knowledge of his future killer, but this is an example of Nabokov satirizing critics who read too far into coincidental occurrences. As mentioned earlier, art for him is about departure from reality. This is not to say that Nabokovian art is escapist and avoids

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37 As discussed in my introduction, Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion” praises Nabokov and gives a historical reasoning for Nabokov’s departure from mimesis.
38 Although Shade’s accidental murder by Gradus is a coincidence mirrored in Nabokov’s own life, as his father was mistakenly slain by a shooter (Annotated Lolita xxiii).
conflicts—as conflicts are necessary to narratives—but instead to illustrate the fantastic nature of his novels and their lack of verisimilitude.

But Nabokov cannot escape wholly from reality. If ever there were an author who could make his own beautiful reality set apart from the physical world, it should have been Nabokov, with his constant commitment to independence.\(^39\) This reliance on independence, however, can give one a myopic and, again, relativistic view of the world. Nabokov falls prey to this in *Pale Fire*, and he misrepresents traditionally misrepresented groups of people. For all of his many aesthetic and writerly virtues, the author’s attitude toward homosexuality is elitist and shocking to a twenty-first century reader.\(^40\) When reading *Pale Fire*, this attitude is readily apparent. The young Charles, while at university, “never could decide what he enjoyed more: the study of poetry—especially English poetry—or attending parades, or dancing in masquerades with boy-girls and girl-boys” (*Pale Fire* 104). The fact that a gathering of people or something as base as sexual urges—especially possible pedophilic ones—could come between a mind and literature is an abhorrent thought for Nabokov, and he condemns Charles for it here. While this separation of physical desires with intellectual curiosity is an ideal, it seems unachievable; sexual urges do come between literature and its appreciators. Similarly, de la Durantaye writes that Kinbote “is unable to perceive things in terms other than those couched by his desire and this

\(^{39}\) I quote once again his statement that he thought of himself as “the shuttlecock above the Atlantic” in his own “private sky” (*Strong Opinions* 117).

\(^{40}\) For more on Nabokov’s highly critical attitude toward homosexuality, see Lev Grossman’s “The Gay Nabokov.”
trait is intimately linked [...] to his homosexuality” (36). When the revolution threatens to overthrow the king, he tells of how he imprisoned himself but thankfully had the view to see “with field glasses lithe youths diving into the swimming pool of a fairy tale sports club” (*Ibid.* 119). Later, experiencing his first love of sorts, Oleg, they enter a “magical closet” together where, “Both were in a manly state and moaning like doves”—here Nabokov does not write that Oleg and Charles were naked, or that they were copulating, or “making love,” but instead he uses the melodramatic, poetic language of Kinbote to emphasize Nabokov’s objections to homosexuality (*Ibid.* 127). Kinbote even wishes harm to his beloved poet: “What I would not have given for the poet’s suffering another heart attack [and to have] a resurrected Shade weeping in my arms” (*Ibid.* 96). There is also the incident of Charles’ “escape,” when he is helped by a mountain girl, Garh, who is voiceless and characterized only by lust: “Zemblan mountain girls are as a rule mere mechanisms of haphazard lust, and Garh was no exception” (*Ibid.* 142). Although Nabokov tries to escape from reality and build his own through many levels of fictionality, his attitude toward homosexuality calls the reader back to the world, where intolerance unfortunately exists; for an aesthetic object to be purely beautiful, it must not contain the ugliness of prejudice. Perhaps, as mentioned previously, it is as Wood claims, “the ethical,” for Nabokov, “is the realm of the unspeakable,” but this is not a reason to excuse Nabokov when he creates elitist representations, playing into historical misrepresentations (7). We may even say that *Pale Fire* is didactic in its presentation of reprehensible views of
homosexuality in so far as we take away disgust at homosexuality after reading the novel. It is not the fault of the genre of metafiction, though, that this misrepresentation occurs; Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* is a novel that combines aesthetics and ethics and fair representations of peoples.

None of this is to say that I disagree that Nabokov’s prose can move me to bliss, to make me more concerned beauty than with “proper conduct”—it is beautiful, some of the finest ever written (e.g. “The summer night was starless and stirless, with distant spasms of silent lightning” (*Pale Fire* 122); the opening lines to *Lolita*). But I do not think that one should approach it morally, in pursuit of a lesson, as his art falters when put under a moral lens. When Nabokov is read morally, the moral meaning of his work is on a level far lower than his style; one should point to style as his contribution to the canonical matter of literature. We are given reprehensible views, and under the criteria for moral art, Nabokov fails. I think it strange to say that every author must be moral—if one is looking for morality, one should turn to Tolstoy or Dante; to approach the writing of Nabokov and criticize it for his indifference to the turmoil of the latter half of the 20th century is odd as he is simply writing about other subjects. At least insofar as it holds Nabokov to a standard he actively rejects, reading him as a moralist against his will is a weaker interpretation than to address him on his own grounds. His body of work simply does

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41 The opening paragraph reads: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta” (9).
not offer much support for moral criticism. One should not hold a political pundit to the same standards that one holds a comedian to; they simply have different goals. But this does not mean we should allow comedians to be actually detached from reality, to ignore their shortcomings when they say reprehensible things. A fair criticism of Nabokov emphasizes his scorn toward peoples of backgrounds different than his own. And while it is true that art cannot be anything other than representative of some facet of humanity, I argue that this does not give us free reign to make Nabokov into a puppet for our opinions. When a representation fails, one must not ignore this because of its beauty; when a great work creates its own reality, we must still remember its attachment to our world.
Chapter III: Metafictional Ethics and Metamodernity in Mitchell

David Mitchell is a part of a renaissance of sentimentalism in a wide range of contemporary fiction. Metamodernism departs from postmodernism through this sentimentalism, which appears as a feeling of tenderness (especially toward characters) that can lapse into cliché or didacticism and can be found in writers as formally different as David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen, and Jennifer Egan, among others. These writers have all at times experimented with narrative frameworks, voices, and plotting, but they also create characters with depth. These characters have complexities and crises—they are not used only in order to illustrate a point about fictionality or nihilism or absurdism or racism. There may be components of this (Smith’s White Teeth condemns British racism and patriarchy; Wallace’s “The Depressed Person” condemns the selfishness of its titular character), but these modern sentimentalists do not write simply to be considered only linguistically gifted or idea driven. They treat characters as the ends themselves—they are not a means for arguments. These authors are interested in creating their own constructed beings and seeing how they can make these creations operate in new worlds. Plot may be nearly nonexistent (as in “The Depressed Person,” which is mostly composed of backstory constantly being returned to by its protagonist) or far encompassing (the plotlines of White Teeth which are nearly

42 Wallace, Chabon, and Egan have all written works of metafiction as well—“Good Old Neon,” The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, and A Visit from the Goon Squad, respectively, all employ footnotes among other devices.
impossible to summarize include fundamentalist Muslims, animal rights terrorists, a genetic engineer, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, among many others), but memorable and complex characters are at the hearts of these stories. Mitchell stands out among these other metamoderns because of his clear relationship to postmodernism (i.e. his connections to Nabokov)—though by no means is he only a postmodern writer—and because of his use of metafiction.

By contrast, in Nabokov the author himself, not the characters, takes center stage. The characters in metafictional works are often not as memorable as an Anna Karenina or a Jane Eyre, and as Gardner argues, because of their extreme focus on language, postmodernist metafictional writers depart from traditional storytelling, such as characterization (*Moral Fiction* 70-71). There are certainly memorable characters in the metafictional canon—after spending 350+ pages in the company of Humbert Humbert, it is difficult to forget him—but Nabokov is uninterested in making characters who exist outside of his influence. Characters like Pnin, Humbert, and Ada Veen are memorable, but they serve only as puppets.

With Mitchell, though, “art is about people, it’s not about experimentation,” as he says in *The New York Times*, though this seems counterintuitive given his highly experimental fiction; he continues: “The reason we love the books we love — it’s the people. It’s the human mud, the glue between us and them, the universal periodic

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43 In Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, while one may project depth onto the protagonist “You,” this comes solely from the physical reader’s shared traits with You—most centrally the attempted reading of the Calvino novel.
table of the human condition. It transcends” (4). Mitchell attempts to lessen the
sentimentality of this statement by calling it “human mud,” but he shares with
Nabokov his belief in the transcendental power of literature. But he does not treat
his characters as galley slaves; they, unlike the characters of Nabokov, are depicted
as having their own lives. Mitchell also understands that this feeling comes from
people wanting to hear stories about humans dealing with recognizable problems—
not only stories about language.

The overall goal of this chapter is to elucidate how and why Mitchell is a
distinct writer from Nabokov in spite of their many similarities. While it is incredibly
simple to point out differences between authors, the task at hand is to use this as a
way to demonstrate the differences between experimental literature in the early
twenty-first and the late twentieth centuries, that is the combining of aesthetic
experimentation with ethical situations instead of an escape by way of aesthetics. As
sentimentality is the primary difference between the two, it is the necessary
beginning of this discussion. Sentimentality toward characters and the physical world
leads to a central belief of Mitchell’s—that the fiction writer has a responsibility to
ethically represent peoples with backgrounds different than his own. In some
postmodernist writing (e.g. Calvino’s *traveler*), characterization is thrown to the
wind, and so questions of representation go either unaddressed or are answered
negatively—by showing tender feelings toward accurate representation, Mitchell
exemplifies contemporary sentimentality.
It is important to emphasize, though, that this is a representation—it is not the thing in itself. If we do not notice this, then we might make the mistake of treating linguistic constructs like characters as though they are flesh and blood humans (though there is still a connection). Mitchell is well aware of this disconnect and uses metafiction to keep us aware. The gap between language and the physical world is offered a solution by Ludwig Wittgenstein and discussed as a possible way for literature to impact the world. For Wittgenstein, language and thus storytelling are a part of the physical world and can affect it. For example, Wittgenstein writes that “the visual world is described completely by the description of the visual image” (§402).\footnote{Wittgenstein refines this point throughout the \textit{Investigations} in his many discussions of physical gestures; language is of course not entirely verbal.} This impact is central to Mitchell, as his writing about stammering (“Let Me Speak”) shows his desire to use his writing to improve the lives of others. Finally, concluding with the attitude of \textit{Cloud Atlas} toward truth, I analyze how Mitchell aims to instill an objective set of ethics in his reader—namely, one should better the world.

Adam Ewing, the protagonist of the first of six nested novellas that comprise \textit{Cloud Atlas}, is a wholly sentimental construct. Throughout his narrative, he frequently attempts to behave virtuously. He refuses to break “Sabbath in a whorehouse” when several sailors take turns with Indian women at his residency (\textit{Cloud Atlas} 7). When confronted with the brutal flogging of the enslaved Moriori, Autua, Adam swoons “under each fall of the lash” from his inability to witness
another human suffer so horribly, even while calling Autua “[t]he beaten savage,” for he cannot escape seeing Autua as something of a lesser being (Ibid. 6). He saves Autua’s life after the Moriori stows away (and his own life is in turn saved because of his kindness toward Autua) (Ibid. 506), upholds Christian values as when he says “in the eyes of God my word was my bond” (Ibid. 27), and he tries to seek justice for the youth, Rafael, who commits suicide after Boerhaave and other sailors have been tormenting him with “nightly bestiality” (Ibid. 499).

One may conclude that throughout Adam’s story, Mitchell does not take the sentimental, even romantic idealism of Ewing seriously, and he uses the noble seafaring tales of writers like Herman Melville as pastiche. Mitchell could be seen as exposing the triteness and over seriousness of Adam’s sentimentalism. Adam is placed in humorous circumstances, undercutting “serious” morality by inducing laughter at his uprightness, as when he opens the door to his cabin and finds “Mr. Boerhaave’s ursine buttocks astraddle his Blackamoor Goldilocks in [Ewing’s] bed in flagrante delicto” and following his exit receives raucous laughter and “a tankard of sheog” aimed at him [italics in original] (Ibid. 7-8). Mitchell illustrates the flaws of acting “nobly” (here meaning, “as would befit a seaman in a 19th century novel”):

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45 Indeed, Adam also speaks of converting the Maori to Christianity—he does not accept their culture on its terms.
46 One may say that 1800s Christian values are flawed, of course, but the virtue of being a man of one’s word is typically viewed as an admirable act.
47 He told The Guardian: “For mid-19th-century language I ransacked Herman Melville, in particular Moby-Dick and his superb sketches of the Galapagos Islands, The Encatadas.”
48 Perhaps from “she-oak,” a name for Australian colonial beer, it is, in any case, a liquid that is preferred to a “more obdurate missile” (Cloud Atlas 8).
49 The addition of porridge would probably have been too much.
Adam’s goodness is exploited, and he is poisoned by Dr. Henry Goose for much of his journey to San Francisco because he naïvely trusts Dr. Goose. The doctor ends their time together by robbing Adam and leaving him to his death, until he is saved by Autua because Adam saved the former slave’s life (*Ibid.* 503). Mitchell gives Ewing the final words of the novel, and these words are inspirational and undoubtedly sentimental. As the final plot point of the novel concerns his decision to become an abolitionist, *Cloud Atlas* has an optimistic conclusion, and he writes: “Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?”—something of a cliché metaphor about the importance of individuality (506).\(^5^0\) Even though this clichéd, we still come away from the novel thinking that Adam will better his world, alleviating the sufferings of others.

Mitchell presents a sentimental conclusion that is in tension with his metafictional post-apocalyptic novel in order to illustrate that our physical world does not have to share its fate; the actions of the individual affects the globe across fictional worlds. This ending also shows that the irony and nihilism often associated with postmodernist metafiction is not necessary for the contemporary metafictional novel.

Initially a figure in contrast to the heroic Adam Ewing, the anti-heroic Robert Frobisher reveals himself to also be sentimental. Instead of a surface level sentimentality, his is hidden until the end of his story. Frobisher is a self-obsessed

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\(^5^0\) This is in agreement with Nabokov: while he is hesitant to say that the artist can change the world, he was a proponent of individualism. De la Durantaye notes that Nabokov’s goal is “that of combating the individual’s tendency to merge into an undifferentiated group” (27).
composer of sizable talent who seeks escapism in art. Frobisher is a nihilistic anti-hero who steals, prostitutes himself, and preys on the Ayrs family for his livelihood.

After a somewhat tender scene between Frobisher and Vyvyan Ayrs, the composer who employs him, he writes of Ayrs’ attitude toward fame:

> How vulgar, this hankering after immortality, how vain, how false. Composers are merely scribblers of cave paintings. One writes music because winter is eternal and because, if one didn’t, the wolves and blizzards would be at one’s throat all the sooner. (*Ibid.* 81-82)

He is, to say the least, far from the morally upright and fairly admirable Ewing. His departure from this anti-heroism comes from his tragic romance with Rufus Sixsmith. Through Frobisher, Mitchell creates a far fairer portrayal of homosexuality than Nabokov. Although it is perhaps unfair to call Frobisher a homosexual character, as he is clearly bisexual based on his relations with Jocasta (Ayrs’ wife) and his supposed love for Eva (Ayrs’ daughter), it is the target of his letters, Sixsmith, who is his true love (a suspicion given credence by the depiction of Sixsmith later in life treasuring Frobisher’s letters). This is the subtext, anyway, from the concluding moments of his suicide letter to Sixsmith, a letter that contains little of his usual irony because of its subject matter. Frobisher begins this letter by announcing his suicide, and recalling Sixsmith looking for him on the town belfry, he writes, “How touched I am that you care so much!” (*Ibid.* 468). As the letter approaches its conclusion, he tells Sixsmith, “we both know in our hearts who is the sole love of my short, bright life” (*Ibid.* 470).

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51 That is, tender in spite of the circumstances of Frobisher is in bed with Ayrs’ wife during their transcription and following discussion (*Cloud Atlas* 78-81).
That these letters never make explicit how much Frobisher truly cares for Sixsmith creates an even stronger pathos for their affair; it would be far too sentimental of Mitchell to have his dour anti-hero declare his undying love right before a suicide.

Frobisher also makes an appearance in Mitchell’s later *Black Swan Green*, a bit of metafiction that shows the continued effects of poor moral choices. Eva, who also appears in the novel, takes a mentor’s role to the young would-be poet, Jason Taylor, and plays for him “The sextet of Robert Frobisher” (*Swan* 156) and describes him as “Genius, sickness, flash-flash, storm, calm, like a lighthouse. An isolated lighthouse” (*Ibid.* 159). She then mourns his suicide and tells Jason of her abhorrence of the young girl who in part brought about his suicide—herself, of course. With this discussion of past failures, connecting two of Mitchell’s fictional worlds, Frobisher becomes an object of sympathy and pathos. This intertextual reference suggests that an action have repercussions long after the fact.

Returning to *Cloud Atlas*, sentimentality’s good effects exist long after the fact as well. Because of the novel’s intertextuality, Sixsmith keeps these letters that Frobisher wrote to him, and re-reads them on the night of his murder, in the different world of *Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery*, noting that “their texture, rustle, and his friend’s faded handwriting calm his nerves” (*Cloud Atlas* 111). Because of a shared birthmark (*Ibid.* 120), in addition to other shared traits with Frobisher, Sixsmith feels that he has “known [Luisa Rey] for years, not ninety minutes” [emphasis in original] and her moral compass persuades him to tell her about the
corruption at the Swanekke power plant (Ibid. 96). Because of this homosexual romance nearly four decades previous, Sixsmith attempts to make up for the evil corporation in which he was complacent. Because of a literary artifact, a character attempts to change his world; an instance of letters causing a battle against corruption. Mitchell believes that the literary not only exists in the world but can also better it.

With all of these inter- and intratextual references, overlapping genre, separate but sewn together narratives, it is easy to think of Mitchell as a typical postmodern novels portraying sentimentalism only to undermine it with metafictional games. This is not in concert with what Mitchell says is his goal; in an interview with The New York Times, he says, “I can’t bear living in this huge beautiful world, and not try to imitate it as best I can” (“David Mitchell, the Experimentalist” 4). For Mitchell, the idea of misrepresenting the world, with all of its complexities and diversities, is abhorrent. This is not to say that he is a Naturalist like Émile Zola. Clearly he creates artificial, science fiction worlds, but that does not mean that they are populated with cartoons—these artificial worlds are filled with characters that are recognizably human. In another interview for The Spectator, Mitchell says of his wife’s contribution to his writing process, “She writes on the manuscript and points out what’s wrong with it. Especially with the female characters,” adding that it makes him “hopefully a better writer and a better person as well”—an explicit connection between aesthetics (becoming a more skilled writer) and ethics (becoming “a better
person”). The ethics of imitation in these quotes illustrate how and why he gives appropriate voice to oppressed peoples (e.g. Autua, Sonmi~451) as well as their oppressors (e.g. Cpt. Molyneux of Ewing’s Prophetess, Unanimity through the anonymous Archivist). All of the world’s beauty must be suitably depicted—Nabokov would say captured, as one of his beloved butterflies—but for Mitchell, depiction means not capture but imitation. For example, when Sonmi~451 strikingly tells the Archivist of her love of trees and how “their incremental gymnastics and noisy silence, yes, and their greenness, still mesmerize” her (Cloud Atlas 202), it demonstrates both the novel’s theme of ecological preservation and its love of beauty, but not at the expense of its terror, as when Sonmi~451 recounts the slaughter—for cannibalistic ends—of her fellow clones on Papa Song’s Golden Ark (Ibid. 343). To reiterate an earlier point, for Mitchell, characters are an end, not a means. This wish for imitation does not make his art mimetic in a strict sense—An Orison of Sonmi~451 is a science fiction that has little likelihood of actually occurring, despite its roots in contemporary culture. “Fords,” “nikes,” and “disneys”—pieces of the dialect Mitchell presents in this novella—do currently exist as cars, shoes, and movies, but they are clear indications of a disconnect from our world with the South

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52 This is another point to contrast Mitchell with Nabokov; in “Rereading Barthes and Nabokov,” Smith gives an example of Nabokov’s sexism: “Whether one quite approves of it or not, it’s a Nabokovian assumption that if you work to give him back what he has given to you, this should be reward enough (for you). [..] [Of] course Vera lived it. (The character most closely modeled on Vera—Zina from The Gift—Zine, from The Gift—is praised by the narrator for having ‘a perfect understanding . . . for everything that he himself loved.’)” (55). Nabokov thought highly of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, analyzing it in Lectures on Literature (9-62).

53 Much of this novella contains a Marxist-like critique of capitalism if capitalism was taken to its ultimate end. This is another departure from Nabokov; as previously mentioned, Nabokov strongly disapproved of Marxism.
Korea of this novella. While Michael Chabon, quoted on the book’s back cover, may say that he is “grateful to have lived, for a while, in all its many worlds, which are all one world, which is, in turn, enchanted by Mitchell’s spell-caster prose, our own,” *Cloud Atlas* remains a distorted work of artifice—and metafictional artifice at that—and is thus disconnected from the actual world.

As I have argued previously, a work of metafiction by definition must comment on and emphasize its own artificiality, and *Cloud Atlas* is no exception. In fact, metafictionists put their works in contrast with literature that purports to be realistic, where characters behave as realistically as possible. Mitchell does not return to the realism of the Victorian novel, but he instead synthesizes sentiment and metafiction. The overall metafictional structure of *Cloud Atlas* is, as often mentioned, that of a matryoshka (Russian nesting doll); five of its novellas interrupt each other and unfold chronologically until the sixth novella is told without interruption, and the novellas are finished in reverse order. Each protagonist encounters his or her predecessor in writing or film or music and discusses the documents that hold all of their lives (the overarching text, *Cloud Atlas*, is left to be unpacked by happy or dour readers and critics). Other metafictional moments include: the Archivist calling Sonmi~451’s tale a “*fake...adventure story*” [italics in original], and soon after this the clone says, “Now, my narrative is over,” with her death soon following (*Cloud Atlas* 348-49); in his final letter, as stated above, Frobisher writes that the “*Cloud Atlas Sextet* holds my life, is my life” and that he
“[w]ould rather be music” than man (470). These are in alignment with the tradition of metafictional characters commenting on their existence in relation to art. This structure in part comes from Calvino and is comparable to Nabokov’s playful forms; here an experimental structure is used to highlight the themes of causality and human errors.\(^\text{54}\) For example, because of Luisa Rey’s past life as and similarities to Frobisher, Sixsmith makes a moral decision to act against the fairly evil Swanekke plant. Sonmi\(^\text{451}\)’s acts as a revolutionary lead to an overthrowing of Unanimity by the time of *Sloosha’s Crossin’*. Yet it is unfair to say that Mitchell is writing metafiction exactly like that of his influences. In addition to Mitchell’s didacticism, the most significant way that he departs from the traditional postmodern metafiction as practiced by Nabokov, of course, but also Calvino, Barth, Kundera, etc., is in the place of the author in the text. For example, instead of Nabokovian authorial intrusions, Mitchell creates authorial distance from his creation, aiming to maintain the artifice of the creation while removing the sense of the creator’s heavy thumbprint or loud voice. He does this by making his characters the authors of their own works—Robert Frobisher writes his *Letters from Zedelghem*, *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* is the memoir of the vanity publisher, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* is perhaps the memoir of the titular character’s days in Dejima (479)—and while Nabokov also use first

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\(^{54}\) As Mitchell wrote for *The Guardian Book Club*, “I’d had an idea for a polyphonic "Russian Doll" novel ever since Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* had wowed me at uni in the late 80s. Calvino’s book is made of interrupted narratives which are never returned to – my idea was to write a novel whose narratives would be returned to, and completed in reverse order.”
person narrators, these feel more like aesthetic exercises than adequate and accurate portrayals of humanity. Nabokov may inhabit another consciousness, but he does so in order to create parodies and illustrate flaws with characters like Kinbote or Humbert; despite their dazzling construction, we never lose track of the hand of Nabokov in setting everything shimmering in their worlds. Mitchell’s protagonists have grievous flaws, too, but only Ghostwritten’s Quasar—a terrorist and member of a doomsday cult—could be called a monster along the lines of Humbert, and even he elicits some sympathy. Mitchell’s metafiction is more readerly than the writerly works of the postmoderns. By this I mean that with Mitchell, the metafiction is often buried—while his metafictional moments may occur blatantly, far more often than not he hides his metafiction in his works. It is not immediately obvious that Black Swan Green is Jason Taylor’s “confession” (261). Mitchell positively affirms the intertextual connections between fictions in Cloud Atlas and does not destruct his stories as in the ending of Ada, where it ends as though it were a blurb advertising the novel, e.g. Lucette Veen’s “tragic destiny constitutes one of the highlights of this delightful book” (588). Mitchell’s position

55 Mitchell’s most interestingly averse novel toward metafiction is The Thousand Autumns, as the possible form of it is most foregrounded here, on its final page. As a well-researched (see Mitchell’s postscript, “On Historical Fiction”) piece of historical fiction for the rest of its pages—including one instance of first person narration as the slave Weh (see below)—perhaps some metafictional moments went by unnoticed by this reader—one may conclude that with The Thousand Autumns, Mitchell has attempted to depart from his usual metafictional ways but still in some way needed to do so (Thousand Autumns 485-89). Also of note on the previous page: “Looking backward, Jacob sees pages from the months and years ahead” (Thousand Autumns 479).

56 He speaks of being bullied in high school when everyone, including his teacher, acted as though he were dead (Ghostwritten 5).

57 It would be difficult to say that his characters’ repeatedly reading about one another is a subtle touch.
seems to agree with Serena Frome, the narrator of Ian McEwan’s *Sweet Tooth*, who demands fiction, even postmodern fiction, remain solid: “No single element of an imagined world or any of its characters should be allowed to dissolve on authorial whim. The invented had to be as solid and as self-conscious as the actual” (228).

In her study of metafiction, Christensen believes that after reading the novels of Thomas Pynchon, “the metafictional element was not a major concern” for him and some other modern writers (6). One may conclude similarly about Mitchell as Christensen does about Pynchon—why all of this fussing about Mitchell’s metafiction if his metafictional moments are either so few in number in his novels or are consciously hidden? I point once again to his influence from Nabokov. In his interview for *The Paris Review*, he says, “I used to read Nabokov with an X-ray on, trying to map the circuitry of what he was doing and how he was doing it.” Because of these influences, he is ostensibly writing within the tradition of postmodernism, but his departures show him as one not content to write only aesthetically and writerly focused metafiction and instead using metafiction to highlight fictionality. Just because metafictional language is constantly concerned with itself does not mean that it cannot affect the outside world.

Wittgenstein discusses the relationship between the world and the word in the *Philosophical Investigations*.58 During a discussion about the contexts of

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58 A further defense of this choice: Nabokov and Wittgenstein were at Cambridge University at the same time (1919-21), and Nabokov, Mitchell, and Wittgenstein are all noted as creators of “language-games.”
utterances, Wittgenstein makes us recognize the insufficiency of a mental picture of choosing sentences in a language by asking, “But what does using one sentence in contrast with others consist in? Do the others, perhaps, hover before one’s mind? All of them? And while one is saying the one sentence, or before, or afterwards?” [emphasis in original] (§20). Although this is tempting, Wittgenstein believes we must resist. “Even if such an explanation rather tempts us,” Wittgenstein reminds us, “we need only think for a moment of what actually happens in order to see that we are going astray here” (§20). Wittgenstein is here illustrating how language operates in relation to the world. He debunks the idea—rather quickly—that words only occupy space in the mind. When one reads a sentence aloud—say, a line of the above quote from the *Investigations*—the other sentences around it are not contained only in the mind. They are physically present as ink on the page, data in this document, and as consonant and vowel sounds emerging from the mouth of the non-mute speaker and entering the ear of the non-deaf receiver. This debunking of the Cartesian dualist split between mind and body is of central importance to the discussion of literary metafiction as it shows that, however fanciful, the fictional worlds of literature do, in some sense, point back to the material world. When Mitchell wrote the previously quoted sentence about trees, he was working under the assumption that someone else could connect his words to an image of a tree, connecting the beauty that Sonmi~451 speaks of with the beauty of physical trees. Mitchell and Wittgenstein
agree: words do not only hover in the mind, they are used in actual situations—real and representational.

With this Wittgensteinian knowledge equipped, it is easy to see how Mitchell seeks to change the physical world with his invented ones, and with *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell reached a point in his career where he consciously decided to add more morality to his fiction. In an interview with *The Washington Post*’s Book World, in response to the question “What, in your mind, distinguishes *Cloud Atlas* from your others?” [italics in original], Mitchell replies, “It has more of a conscience. I think this is because I am now a dad. I need the world to last another century and a half, not just see me to happy old age.” This is a departure from Mitchell’s previous two novels, *Ghostwritten* and *Number9Dream*, which end on more pessimistic notes: the former returns to a gas attack on a Tokyo subway and has apocalyptic touches throughout, and the latter has an empty chapter following a Japanese earthquake. It is true that *Cloud Atlas* chronologically ends post-apocalyptically, but, as mentioned above, by circling back to Adam Ewing’s narrative *Cloud Atlas* contains a more optimistic conclusion. The final line of the novel tells us that drops in the ocean do have power. His movement away from the experimental forms of the beginning of his career is summed up by a headline from *The Guardian*: “David Mitchell: ‘I don’t want to project myself as this great experimenter.’” With this in mind, he still may be a bit of a braggadocio like Nabokov but his belief in literature’s ability to bring about

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59 Mitchell is perhaps surprisingly destructive toward his former home from 1994 to 2002.
worldly change shows him to be a writer who is not content to dwell in the ivory tower, indifferent to global problems.\textsuperscript{60}

Indeed, turning once again to Mitchell’s non-fiction, one sees a great concern for the alleviation of suffering. “Let Me Speak” is an essay that Mitchell wrote for the British Stammering Association. Published around the same time as \textit{Black Swan Green}, this essay elucidates his intended purpose in the composition of that novel:

My minor aim is to give non-stammerers an idea of what living with a speech defect is like. My major aim is to communicate what I wish someone had told me when I was a boy about handling a stammer, in the hope that it might prove helpful to anyone having to survive in a hostile schoolyard or workplace.

For an author who has addressed the apocalypse in two separate novels and the theme of predacity in all of his novels, Mitchell is surprisingly—that unavoidable word again—sentimental.\textsuperscript{61} It is at least unexpected that he followed a 509 page “Russian doll” novel in six different genres, settings, and eras with a rather slim (294 pages) semi-autobiographical novel about adolescence in 1982-83 Worcestershire, England in order to illustrate how an adolescent came to write prose. He later partially attributes his career to his stammering: “Quite probably, if I could have produced unbroken, effortless sentences like my secretly-envied class-mates, I would never have felt the need to write them down, nor become a writer” (“Let Me Speak”). This issue is obviously close to him, as is immigration, predacity, and the

\textsuperscript{60} To \textit{The Spectator}, he speaks of the thrills of his craft: “People can hate you, they can hate what you write, they can despise your very soul, but they can’t alter the fact that this sentence [that he has written] is perfect.”

\textsuperscript{61} “One of my serial-repeating themes is predacity,” he told \textit{The Paris Review}.  

other themes that one may trace throughout his novels. These are themes, though, that Mitchell undoubtedly takes a stance on—he celebrates multiplicities of peoples (especially through their various dialects) in *Ghostwritten’s* transcontinental narrative or the slave Weh, the lone first person narrator of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, and he decries predacious behavior as in *Half Lives’* Swanekke nuclear power plant or in *Black Swan Green’s* discussion of Britain’s role in the Falklands War.

The ethical and political import of Mitchell’s writing signals his commitment to a functional concept of truth. As an ethically motivated writer, *Cloud Atlas* presents the reader with truth that the world should strive toward. This is in contrast to postmodernity: truth among the postmoderns tends to be viewed with quotation marks around it, nihilistically denied, or embraced only subjectively. *Prima facie*, truth is presented perhaps subjectively, with contradictions, in *Cloud Atlas*. As a well-educated character, Sonmi’s discussion of metaphysical truth is more informed than that of other characters, and in response to the Archivist’s declaring, “Your version of the truth is the only one that matters,” she replies, “Truth is singular. Its ‘versions’ are mistruths” (*Cloud Atlas* 185). Here, in his least subjectively narrated novella, Mitchell makes explicit the novel’s attitude toward Truth.

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62 She studies, among many others, Orwell and Huxley—another bit of intertextuality, as they are two forerunners of this novella (*Cloud Atlas* 211).
63 *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing, Letters from Zedelghem, and The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* are all written after events presented have taken place solely in first person accounts; *Half Lives* is a third person novel by Hilary V. Hush (ibid. 387)—the events may have happened (and indeed Swanekke’s carelessness toward the environment foreshadow the novel’s post-apocalyptic setting); *Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After* is told by the Zachry’s (the protagonist) son from his father’s
which Unanimity has built its ruling of the still usable world are torn down by her
declaration of a singular capitalized Truth, like the Truth of Ewing. As for Adam
Ewing, following a conversation in a bar where Adam speaks of converting native
peoples while his interlocutors speak of violent instruction and genocide he writes of,
“As many truths as men” (*Ibid.* 17). This is especially troublesome to my argument as
this comes in Ewing’s *Pacific Journal*, previously characterized as based around old
fashioned and non-pluralistic sentimentality. But one must consider the sentences
following, as Adam writes, “Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect
simulacrum of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the
thorny swamp of dissent” (*Ibid.* 17). What initially seems to be an endorsement of
subjective truth is actually a criticism of man’s inability to grasp a perfect “Truth” and
not an artificial recreation of it. The plural “truths” are opinions of the bar patrons.
Adam, from a subjective voice, yes, speaks of a singular truth, as does Sonmi~451.
Finally, returning once more to the use of fiction—the constant concern of
metafiction—Frobisher writes of how “Implausible truth may serve one better than
plausible fiction” (*Ibid.* 49). This does comes from a fictional story, but it still serves to
highlight truth’s importance over fiction’s without any apparent irony. With Mitchell,
the importance of ethical Truth is foregrounded, and it is presented side-by-side with
his love of puzzles and language.

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*remembrances* (*Ibid.* 308). *An Orison of Sonmi~451* is a recorded conversation—yes, her memory may
be faulty, but the exact words that Sonmi~451 and the Archivist say have been preserved.*
Chapter IV: Conclusion: Metafiction and Literary Criticism

This thesis has, I hope, shown the diversity of metafiction and its relationship to life and literature. These are grandiose topics to be sure, but by mostly limiting this thesis to the discussion of *Cloud Atlas* and *Pale Fire*, one may see how metafiction operates. With *Cloud Atlas*, various realities overlap and change one another, and the reader’s experience with the book in spite of its many influences (Melville, Calvino, detective fiction) remains unique because of the combination of its structure, ethics, and historical research. Mitchell’s technical approach to genre does not frequently become caricatural. Instead he presents human-like characters with strengths and weakness, faults and triumphs. The fact that he remarks on their fictionality does not change their ability to drive a story. To put it differently, the metafictionality of *Cloud Atlas* does not create a fiction of frustration, but instead one of replenishment. Here I intentionally echo Barth’s “companion and correction” to “The Literature of Exhaustion”: “The Literature of Replenishment.” Written thirteen years after the first essay, postmodernism is discussed across continents, in journals, and at conferences, Barth writes of his elation that writers like Calvino and García Márquez are taking fiction in a new direction. While the world of fiction looked bleak in 1967, postmodernism is now called by Barth not “the next-best thing after modernism, but [...] the *best next thing*” [emphasis in original] (“Replenishment” 206). I too have confidence in the future of the novel is optimistic as long as we have writers such as Mitchell, whose experiments in fiction develop moral fiction and revolutionary forms
rather than resting on the laurels of their predecessors, even those as influential as Nabokov.

I have singled out Nabokov’s work as an important predecessor to Mitchell’s for its invention, beauty, and delight in art. With *Pale Fire* one sees a particularly brilliant way of viewing the world similar to Mitchell in its non-linearity and narrative games. It is a novel unlike any other with its own sorts of characters, problems, parodies, and a plot (with recreational parachuting, shaving, and ghosts as major points) that could only have come from the mind of Nabokov. His obsession with details and descriptions creates a reality that is inescapably enchanting. Kinbote’s Commentary upon Shade’s poem is a poor reading, but the dialogue in which these characters have been inserted makes for a reading experience that changes how one interprets both poetry and fiction. However, where metafiction functions in Mitchell to sharpen his (and our own) attention to ethical responsibilities, it tends to invite Nabokov into caricature. Nabokov has his shortcomings and uses characters with different sexual and ethnic backgrounds than his own as caricatures. His singular reality may be paradisiacal, but it is not without insects of intolerance. Aesthetic bliss is a powerful force upon the reader, and may make us lose sight of the plurality of things (philosophy, poetry, politics) that make up the novel. While Nabokov should never be discarded from literary study, critics, I think, should begin engaging with Nabokov with more formally, poetically (and perhaps biologically) focused criteria.
What makes the spine tingle or prompts a gag reflex in fiction is a topic that should be more explored in Nabokov.

At stake in this thesis is the question of metafiction and its place in the literary history of the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. While two novels cannot be used to adequately discuss all of literary history, I believe that I have shown that the subordination of metafiction to the standards of any other form of fiction makes the error of ignoring the beauty and morality in an important new strand of metafiction. The questions metafiction poses about aesthetics and ethics are akin to those of realist fiction, Elizabethan drama, or epic poetry. I also believe that my assertion that Nabokov is an ethically disinterested author, in spite of what later critics write about the author, opens up the topic of morality and Nabokov for new debate. My assertion that Mitchell and other contemporary writers use metafiction without forsaking the complexity of characters or ethical problems should equally elucidate a debate about metamodernism. If metamodernism is a continuation of and reaction against postmodernism, then its distinguishing characteristics are the addition of sentimentalism and ethics to fictional self-consciousness.

I think a particular place where this thesis could be expanded is in its definition of the self-created contexts of works. In my introduction, I stated that this context composed of a work’s criticism, historical period, and authorial intention, in addition to its moral and political value; each of these subjects can be studied in
depth in a lyrical poem or a novelist’s career. Achieving a balance between these subjects, though, is a rare feat. As Timothy Bewes states in “Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism,” critics can now:

Address the question of critical method without presupposing either a spatial relationship between criticism and its object, or a topographical conception of the literary text as such, or a temporal break between the critical event and the work, according to which the first task toward a critical reading of the work would be a diligent historical contextualization. (2)

This is in line with my thoughts on a work’s self-created context and in contrast with critic-created contexts. Works of fiction, particularly works of metafiction, engage in self-criticism. While critics must be mindful of one another, we must not forget the literary work at hand and how it establishes itself. If we take the steps made by critics like Bewes and Michel Chaouli in “Criticism and Style,” in addition to older critics such as Jameson, Nabokov, and Woolf—we can find new ways of commenting on texts—even those texts that already comment on themselves—and never exhaust them.
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