

PART 1

CHRONIC CONDITION

DREAM, MEMORY

Time is . . . —but this book is about that.

—J. W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time*

ON OCTOBER 14, 1964, in a grand Swiss hotel in Montreux where he had been living for three years, Vladimir Nabokov started a private experiment that lasted till January 3 of the following year, just before his wife's birthday (he had engaged her to join him in the experiment and they compared notes). Every morning, immediately upon awakening, he would write down what he could rescue of his dreams. During the following day or two he was on the lookout for anything that seemed to do with the recorded dream. One hundred and eighteen handwritten Oxford cards, now held in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, bear sixty-four such records, many with relevant daytime episodes.

The point of that experiment was to test a theory according to which dreams can be precognitive as well as related to the past. That theory is based on the premise that images and situations in our dreams are not merely kaleidoscoping shards, jumbled, and mislabeled fragments of past impressions, but may also be a proleptic view of an event to come—which offers, as a pleasant side bonus, a satisfactory explanation of the well-known *déjà vu* phenomenon. Dreams may

also be a fanciful convolution of both past and future events. This is possible because, according to this proposition, time's progress is not unidirectional but recursive: the reason we do not notice the backflow is that we are not paying attention. Dreamland is the best proving ground.

Thirteen years prior, on January 25, 1951, Nabokov had a heart-tweaking dream about his father at the piano in their old St. Petersburg home, playing some notes of a Mozart sonata with one hand, looking sad and baffled at his son's attempted literary joke: Turgenev calls, somewhere, a forty-five-year-old man an old man, whereas he, Vladimir Nabokov, is already fifty-two. On waking up and recording it, Nabokov inserts "almost" before "fifty-two," then writes that his father was killed when he was fifty-two as well. The coincidence is indeed astounding: when Nabokov had that dream, he was *exactly* the same age as his father was on the day of his death, give or take two days.

Next he outlines a plan for what appears to be a sequel to his book of memoirs that was soon to be published.

This is another thing I ought to write, with especial stress on the sloppy production—any old backdrop will do etc.—of dreams.

1. The Three Tenses
2. Dreams
3. The one about the central European professor looking for a job.

The first item—a hull of a short story about one man's present, past, and future love affairs—he sketched in the same notebook the day before. The third item was to become his third American novel, *Pnin*: this is its first heartbeat. The item in between reflects his enduring desire to prepare his dream

visions for publication, a project never realized as such, even though versions of his dreams appear in many of his writings (collected in part 4).

On February 14, 1951, his memoir *Conclusive Evidence* (of his “having existed,” as he explains in the preface to the definitive 1966 edition, retitled *Speak, Memory*) is published. Four days later, he makes notes for a prospective sequel, now boldly letting the cooperative work of memory and imagination share the table of contents:

I see quite clearly now another book, “More Evidence”—something like that—“American Part”¹

1. Criticism and addenda of “Conclusive Evidence”
2. Three Tenses
3. Dreams
4. MCZ and collecting (merge back into Russia)²
5. St Mark’s (with full details)³
6. Story I am doing now⁴
7. Double Talk (enlarged)⁵
8. Edmund W.⁶

1. Nabokov wrote parts for a sequel book tentatively entitled *Speak On, Memory*, about his life in America, but never completed it.

2. In the 1940s Nabokov worked at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology as a curator of their lepidoptera collections.

3. Nabokov’s son, Dmitri, went to St. Mark’s, a prep school in Southborough, Massachusetts; it served as a model for “St Bartholomew’s” school in *Pnin* (1957). In her notes of 1958, Véra Nabokov recalled that the school was “very disappointing, inferior teachers, headmaster vulgar cad, good adjustment [at Dexter, Dmitri’s previous school] destroyed by unfair ludicrous treatment” (Berg Collection of the New York Public Library).

4. “The Vane Sisters,” an episode for which (“Exam”) was set down in this notebook on January 26, with an addition jotted on facing page eight years later, when Nabokov was revising the story for publication.

5. A 1945 short story, later retitled (but not enlarged) “Conversation Piece, 1945.”

6. The writer and critic Edmund Wilson, who at the time was Nabokov’s good friend.

February 18

to see quite clearly now another book
"More Evidence" — something like that —
"American" part

- 1 Criticism and addenda of "Conclusive Evidence"
2. Three Texts
3. Dreams
4. M.C. 2 and collecting (merge back into Russia)
- 5 St. Mark's (with full details)
- 6 Story I am doing now
- 7 Double Talk (enlarged)
- 8 Edmund W.
- 9 The assistant-professor who was never found out
(Cross, Fairbanks)
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15 Criticism and addenda to this

FIGURE 2. In a 1951 diary, Nabokov made notes for the projected continuation of his memoir, *Conclusive Evidence*. The third listed item reads "Dreams."

9. *The assistant professor* who was *never* found out
(Cross, Fairbanks)⁷
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
15. Criticism and addenda to this.

It is very likely that Nabokov meant to mold his later dream experiment into a literary form as well, perhaps with a view to incorporating excerpts into his second book of autobiography.

DUNNE AND HIS THEORY

1.

The hypothesis behind Nabokov's experiment was advanced by John W. Dunne, a pioneering early twentieth-century British aeronautical engineer, eccentric writer, and original thinker. Between 1901 and 1914 Dunne invented and constructed a "heavier-than-air" flying apparatus for military reconnaissance, which went through ten iterations, both mono- and biplanes, from the D.[unne]₁ to D.10. It had an arrowhead body, with wings swept back as in the modern delta designs, and had no tail, which, paradoxically, lent the plane

7. Nabokov was highly critical of the way the Russian language was taught in America in general and at Cornell in particular; one can catch reflection of this dissatisfaction in *Pnin*. Professor Samuel Hazzard Cross (1891–1946) was a Slavic scholar at Harvard, "who knows only the middle of Russian words and completely ignores prefixes and endings" (VN's letter to Roman Grynberg of December 25, 1943; see Boyd-1991, 69). Associate professor Gordon H. Fairbanks, whose grasp of the language was even weaker, was nevertheless in charge of Russian-language instruction at Cornell, much to Nabokov's chagrin (Boyd-1991, 196–97).

an amazing stability. Dunne could control it by applying throttle alone by foot, his hands free to take notes in flight.

The trends in aircraft construction before World War I were veering sharply away from his design, and, beset by congenital heart illness, Dunne abandoned aviation. After a period spent devising new and improved ways of dry-fly fishing (Dunne published, in 1924, an influential book on the subject of making artificial flies “translucent,” the way fish would see the real flies through sunlight), he turned to research that would allow him to explain to his satisfaction a strange series of dreams that he had had since his youth and that, as he discovered, others had experienced, too. He studied contemporary theories of Time, from C. H. Hinton’s *What Is the Fourth Dimension?* (1887) to Bergson and Freud, on one hand, and to Planck and Einstein, on the other. Encouraged by H. G. Wells, an old friend of his, he came up with a detailed general theory, which he published in 1927 as *An Experiment with Time* (by a curious coincidence, the same year that Heidegger published *Sein und Zeit*, perhaps his most profound work). Dunne’s book has gone through numerous editions, the best being the revised third, published in 1934 with numerous reprints, of which Nabokov owned one. The book caused considerable stir in scholarly philosophical circles and had an ideological influence on a number of contemporary anglophone writers, notably Aldous Huxley and J. B. Priestley, and perhaps less obviously on James Joyce, Walter de la Mare, and T. S. Eliot.⁸

Dunne developed and honed his theory of serial Time in several later books, some with titles that could have caught

8. A curious passage in Eugene Jolas’s memoirs refers to Dunne. Jolas writes that he read to Joyce, in Paris, after one of Joyce’s eye surgeries, the “brilliant *Experiment with Time* which Joyce regarded highly.” Jolas goes on to relate two remarkable dreams that Joyce remembered, the first of which confirms Dunne’s proposition much too literally to be above the suspicion of a leg-pull. See Eugene Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 167.

Nabokov's attention, although there is no evidence that Nabokov read them: *The New Immortality* (1938) and especially *Nothing Dies*, published in 1940, the year Nabokov with his wife and son migrated to America from Europe, in which violent death became as ordinary and predictable as foul weather.⁹

2.

Dunne's *Experiment with Time* is peculiar on all sides. It is utterly original in premise, composition, and style, the latter owing in part to the fact that the author is not a professional *litteratus* bound by conventions. He puts the practical application of his hypothesis before the hypothesis. He sprinkles his narration with rhetorical questions of the type "Can we now be certain that [yclept] be true?", and answers them with an immediate and firm "Yes, we can," dispensing even with customary qualifiers. He uses italics with annoying frequency, as if always suspecting that the reader's attention is flagging and every now and then tugging at his sleeve ("... the argument is *based* upon the hypothesis . . ."; "... a three-dimensional *observer* . . ."). He dismisses competitive theories for which he has no use—that is, almost all of them. Nevertheless, his slim book makes for fascinating reading.

The introduction is doubtless one of the most idiosyncratic ever written. "The general reader will find the book demands from him no previous knowledge of science, mathematics, philosophy, or psychology," Dunne writes. "It is considerably easier to understand than are, say, the rules of Contract Bridge. The exception is the remainder of this Introduction." The real exception for this reader, however, is the second,

9. That book led Borges to write a remarkably concise and lucid summary of Dunne's theory of infinite regression and its origins, "Time and J. W. Dunne" (1940). See Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 217–19.

theoretical, part of the book filled with baffling figures, some distinguishable only by an addition of an arrow point to what was just a line in the previous diagram.

Dunne straddles a curiously uncomfortable ridge, clear of both physics and metaphysics. Of the former he says, shrewdly: “Physics is . . . a science which has been expressly designed to study, not the universe, but the things which would supposedly remain in that universe if we were to abstract therefrom every effect of a purely sensory character.” In other words, physical science principally ignores the subjective observer, the word Dunne likes to emphasize.¹⁰ Physics is not interested in sensory perceptions, including the *sense* of time. The observer must be removed, for he is “a permanent obstacle in the path of our search for external reality.” For Dunne, the human observer is a cardinal element of the entire system.

On the other hand, Dunne states in the introduction that his theory is decidedly free of mysticism, clairvoyance, or prophecy, that it is not “a book about ‘occultism’ and not a book about what is called ‘psycho-analysis,’” after which he nonchalantly announces that “incidentally, it contains the first scientific argument for human immortality. This, I may say, was entirely unexpected.” Forsooth.

This philosophical ambiguity informs the entire exposition, which does not seem to trouble Dunne in the least. He presents a long string of dreams, astonishing in their exact precognition of a subsequent event or situation, then proceeds to show, in mathematical terms, that this wonder is universal and perfectly logical. There is a dreamlike quality to his explanations. He admits that “the incidents in question mimicked to perfection many classical examples of ‘clairvoyance,’

10. In any event, it ignored the observer at the time of Dunne’s writing, for in later years physical science has had to reckon with the act of observation interfering with what is being observed, as in quantum demolition measurements.

‘astral-wandering,’ and ‘messages from the dead’” (his mention of the latter must have caught Nabokov’s eye, since a much subtler version of the spiritual interference was the subject of many of Nabokov’s metaphysical plots.)¹¹ Early on, Dunne proposes that “the idea of a soul must have first arisen in the mind of primitive man as the result of observation of his dreams. Ignorant as he was, he could have come to no other conclusion but that, in dreams, he left his sleeping body in one universe and went wandering off into another.”

It is not unreasonable to assume that Nabokov turned the pages of the book’s second, theoretical, part faster. The chapters that follow the dream puzzles and the experiment précis are written in a quaint, hard-boiled yet lively, even blithe, diction, but what started as a promisingly great detective story now turns into a complex of applied algebraic formulas that use up much of the Latin alphabet and are illustrated by drab diagrams. Here is a good example—a sentence Proustian in length, Carrollian in its calm desultoriness:

If, then, $G'G''$ represents that state of the cerebrum where it first (in Time I) becomes sufficiently developed to allow the ultimate observer to perceive psychological effects, and if $H'H''$ represents the place where (in Time I) that cerebrum ceases its useful activity and disintegrates, we may say that observer 2 can observe the *whole* of his ordinary, waking, Time I life, from birth to death, but that, for some reason to be determined, he allows his *attention* to follow observer 1 in that individual’s journey from left to right (from birth to death) along field 2.

Even an earnest reader might feel, halfway through this serpentine sentence, that his “cerebrum ceases its useful activity and disintegrates”—a marked difference from the previous

11. See Boyd-1991, Alexandrov-1993, Barabtarlo-1993 and 2011.

mode of narration, especially the brisk and engaging description of his strange dreams.

3.

Dunne recounts that his first unusual dream of the series took place at a Sussex hotel at 3:30 a.m. in 1899. It is hard to imagine that Nabokov, born that year, could hold back a smile at the coincidence when he read that. That first dream, notably, had to do with time: Dunne dreamed that his watch had stopped, then awoke to discover that his watch lying on the chest of drawers had stopped at precisely the same time, to the minute, as the watch in his dream. The second episode took place in Sorrento, when in a semiwaking state he saw a mental projection of the clock face that he could not see physically, showing the exact time. There is a curious analogy to both of these episodes in Nabokov's 1937 short story "Cloud, Castle, Lake," in which the main character "slept badly the night before the departure. And why? Because he had to get up unusually early, and hence took along into his dreams the delicate face of the watch ticking on his night table" (*Stories*, 430).

Three ever more striking and inexplicable incidents of precognitive dreaming followed, causing Dunne to suspect that his case was what was known as *identifying paramnesia*: unwittingly making up a preceding dream to match a later waking experience. Starting with the fifth, in 1904—in which he saw a devastating fire of a building in singular detail, then read, in the evening paper, a report of a big fire at a rubber factory near Paris with an uncanny number of the same dreadful details as in his dream—he began to set down such dreams right upon awakening, which was to become the chief requirement of his experiment, to make certain that no "identifying paramnesia" was at work.

Dunne's sixth perplexing dream occurred also in 1904, in an Austrian hotel with the curious name *Scholastika*. (It may be worth noting that most of these dreams happened while the dreamer was sleeping in hotel beds; during *his* experiment, and for the rest of his life, Nabokov held residence in Montreux Palace hotel.) At that point Dunne realized that these dreams would have "exhibited nothing in the smallest degree unusual" had they happened on the nights "*after the corresponding events*," but they occurred on the "*wrong*," i.e., preceding, nights (all italics are Dunne's). Thus he understands that the events he sees in the dreamland are displaced in time.

The seventh installment had to do with a 1912 monoplane crash in which his friend perished near Oxford: at the same time that very morning, in Paris, Dunne saw that very man wrecking his plane in a field but walking away from the crash. He thought that this new striking evidence could be, if one were so inclined, taken for a message from the "spirit-world" or a "phantasm of the dying"; the quotation marks are Dunne's, to signify that he himself did not believe in any of these concepts—unlike Nabokov, who did, and who likely ticked the phrases in the margins of his copy.

The last item Dunne records occurred in the autumn of 1913, when he saw in a dream a train wreck, again in precise detail. Half a year later, on April 14, 1914, the mail train *Flying Scotsman* jumped the parapet.

The descriptions of the dreams are meticulous, methodical, level-headed; they appear reliable, although unexplained oddities crop up here and there. It is unclear, for instance, why all eight dreams reported in the book were "carefully memorized" and not written down at once. Instead of the exact dates on which they occurred, Dunne usually gives seasons or just the year, which stands in strange disagreement with the general precision of the presentation.

Dunne realized very early on that he might be able to discover some entirely new aspect of the structure of Time. The dreams themselves were not out of the ordinary, but he saw that “large blocks of otherwise perfectly normal personal experience [were] displaced from their proper positions in Time.”

4.

The experiment proper is laid out methodically in part 3 of Dunne’s book. He was looking for evidence that his predictive dreams were neither abnormal nor peculiar to him alone, but pointed to the previously overlooked aspect of Time and thus must be common to all. People, he noted, tend to forget their dreams upon awakening or else “fail to notice the connection with the subsequent, related event.” Occasionally snatches of old dreams surface: there may lurk a plausible explanation of what is known as a *déjà vu*, a sequence of events seen in a dream but utterly forgotten until the event happens in waking life, sometimes years later.

Dunne therefore concludes that dreams generally are composed of “images of past experience and images of future experience blended together in approximately equal proportions.” His prime argument is that the world is stretched out in time but we have a curiously distorted notion of it, “a view with the ‘future’ part unaccountably missing, cut off from the growing ‘past’ part by a travelling ‘present moment,’” a habitual fallacy owing to a “purely mentally imposed barrier which existed only when we were awake.”

It was at that point that Dunne devised his singular experiment in order to test whether what he himself experienced was not idiosyncratic but common to all. He engaged three other persons to try it, following his meticulous instructions—with spectacular results, some better than his own.

He developed the technical side with a view to overcoming two chief impediments that do not let us track time in more than one direction: the difficulty of retaining the memory of a dream and the greater difficulty of relating it to a subsequent event, of making plausible the connection between the events presented themselves in the dream world and in the waking world. Most people remember some of their dreams, a good number have recorded some of them, yet “not one in a thousand through all the past centuries seems to have *noticed* that he dreams of the future” (italics are Dunne’s, of course).

Nabokov must have read the instructions with attention because he seems to have followed most of them carefully, at least at the beginning of his experiment. They are, says Dunne, “one and all, of extreme importance. Indeed, it may be safely said that, unless the reader follows them in every detail, he will be reducing his chances of getting results almost to vanishing point.” In the third edition Dunne added several pages of clarifications and additional instructions, after having received confused reports from the readers of the first two editions.

5.

To a pre-twentieth-century consciousness, the phenomenon Dunne describes would seem flatly opposed to the conventional view of time legislated by the unassailable structure of physics. “In these circumstances, our hypothetical dreamer would have had to take refuge in Mysticism. He would have had to accept the existence of two disconnected worlds, the one rational, the other irrational,” says Dunne. But what if the two worlds are not disconnected? Deep inside, Nabokov was a mystic after a fashion, and the notion of metaphysical interfusion with, even intervention into, one’s life was very close to him, a translucent backdrop in most of his fiction.

Neither Nabokov nor Dunne was aware of an extraordinary study undertaken at the time of Dunne's experiment, both parallel and contrastive to Dunne's proposition: Pavel Florensky's *Iconostasis* (1919–22, first published posthumously, as were most of his works).¹² Florensky (1882–1937), a Russian priest, profound theologian, and philosopher of genius,¹³ begins his now-famous essay on the theology of the icon by considering time dynamics in dreams. Florensky's departure point is the same as Dunne's: dreams occur in the realm that may hold the key to the fundamental truth about the world we inhabit and its chief structural condition and dimension, Time. He lists classical experiments with dreams, but his premise and conclusions are different: "The Creed names God 'the Creator of things visible and invisible.' [. . .] The two worlds—visible and invisible—are contagious. However, their difference is so great that the question of the *border* of their contact arises inevitably. It divides them whilst also uniting them."¹⁴

Both Dunne and Florensky employed mathematical methods to reckon the mystery of timeflow in dreams and describe the puzzle of proleptic dreaming; in contrast to modern physicists, both understood the central importance to physical science of a human observer's perception and psychology. The deep philosophical difference between the two is that while Dunne attempts to explain the baffling phenomenon within the constraints of natural science, Florensky's thought

12. My rendition of that part of Florensky's tract follows closely the definitive Russian edition (Florensky-1996, vol. 2, 419–526). An imperfect English translation by D. Sheehan and Olga Andrejev was published in 1996: Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*.

13. There is a recent English biography of Florensky by Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius. The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Russia's Unknown da Vinci* (2010). The subtitle is curiously inappropriate since Florensky's worldview stood in principal opposition to what is known as Renaissance culture in general and to Leonardo da Vinci especially.

14. Florensky-1996, 419, my translation.

transcends the limits of science and probes metaphysical possibilities. A world inaccessible to our five senses is not merely real—more real perhaps than the one sensually perceived—but the two worlds are contiguous, even imbricated, and dreams are the twilight zone of their overlap.

Dunne's working hypothesis is that Time should be perceived as a series of new dimensions, or layers, ever unfolding before the mind of an observer into a receding mental vista: time that *times* the passage of Time, measures it to infinity. The system resembles the Chinese-boxes principle: every "time" is contained in a larger time that times its progress. The old notion of Time serving as a fourth dimension of the universe, which Einstein and other relativists developed into a theory of pliable space-time, receives here what Dunne calls "a sensory centre" of observation, and the number of dimensions multiplies aoristically—a direction that physical and mathematical thought took up for study much later. His dream theory is situated somewhere between two extreme contemporary positions: it dismisses Freud's proposition—with a shrug rather than the scorn that Nabokov held for it—that dreams are a reflection of one's base self, stirring up unconscious motions and images; yet it does not reach into the spiritual realm of Florensky's view that dreams are the zone of contact of the two worlds. For Dunne, dreams present reasonable evidence of time's regression. His rational consciousness argument thus sits neatly above Freud's subconscious and Florensky's superconscious one, both non-rational at their diametrically opposite planes, each contrary to Dunne's stance in its own way. What is a contradiction to Dunne is an antinomy for Florensky: one is a "wrong way" sign while the other is a warning to proceed with great caution, if at all.

"Dream is the first and simplest—in the sense of our being completely accustomed to it—stage of the life in the invisible

[world],” says Florensky. “Allowing that this stage is the lowest one, at least it is most often the lowest, dream, even in its coarse condition, even unschooled, exalts the soul into the invisible and grants even to the least sensitive of us a foretaste of something that differs from what we tend to consider life. We know that on the threshold of dreaming and wakefulness, as we pass the interim area—the border of their contact—our soul becomes surrounded by dreams” (419). De la Mare, one of the young Nabokov’s favorite English poets, was well aware of Dunne’s work and almost certainly unaware of Florensky’s very existence, yet he echoes the latter rather than the former when he calls the dream zone “the borderland.”¹⁵

It is generally accepted that vivid dream images occur during that momentary passage from one realm into the other, verifiably just before waking. The transition is timeless, or vanishingly short, but when we emerge on the other side, we install our memory of the dream in the temporal condition of our sensory world, adjusting it to fit the familiar timeflow. Nabokov, as a lifelong sufferer of severe insomnia that grew progressively worse toward the end of his life, must have been in that time zone of the so-called “rapid eye movement” longer than most, and his dreams could be more protracted and vivid and memorable. Here is Florensky’s startling observation, in a compact paraphrase.

We all know that in a short dream one can live for hours, months, even years: a dreamer acquires a different means of sensing time. Above and beyond the principle of time relativity, postulating that time may pass with different speed in different closed systems (a phenomenon Nabokov detected in *Anna Karenin* and described both in his Cornell lectures

15. Walter de la Mare, *Behold, This Dreamer!*, 5–6.

and in *Pnin*), there is a theory that it may pass with an *infinite* speed, as it were turning itself inside-out like a sock, at which point it may acquire an *inverted* sense of its flow. In other words, this is Time directed from the future to the past, from effects to causes.

Sometimes a detectable outside disturbance wakes us from a dream, yet few pay attention to the *composition* of the dream's plot that the waking cause set in motion. A dream concludes on an event x , which occurred because of an earlier event t , which happened because still earlier an event s took place, caused by an r , etc. The dreamer recognizes the etiology as plausible, and it can be thus retraced all the way to the event *alpha*, perhaps insignificant by itself but one that started the entire chain. But we know that the actual cause for the whole dream was an event of circumstance (sound, smell, dropped blanket) external to the closed system of the dreamer. Florensky designates this "waking call" event by an omega. This omega causes both the dream and the alarm that arouses one from that dream. Thus x is a translation of the external cause "omega" into the depictive language of the dream world.

But the event alpha that had set off the etiological linkage within the dream has nothing to do with the omega! In other words, if at the end of a dream we see a patch of fragrant flowers (final event x) while someone in the daytime world puts a cotton ball touched with perfume to our nose (omega), then how can we explain a string of events started with the initial cause alpha that has led us to that patch? That alpha was not in any way caused by the omega. And yet without that alpha there would have been no x , that is, no dream at all, that is, we would not have been awakened by the external cause omega.

Florensky then gives a few classical examples, of which two have particular relevance to Dunne's experiment with

Time. In one, the dreamer goes on an outing in the country and comes to the neighboring village. The villagers go to church, holding their hymnals. It's a Sunday, and a service is about to begin. He wants to go there, too, but at first he takes a short rest in the churchyard. Reading inscriptions on tombstones, he takes note of the bell-ringer, who climbs to the belfry. The dreamer sees a small bell about to ring at the beginning of the mass. Soon it starts swaying, and he can hear its loud, piercing chimes, so loud, in fact, that he wakes up. The alarm clock is the cause.¹⁶

A much more elaborate example of the cause-effect reversal is the famous report of a dream that was felt to last a whole year.¹⁷ The dreamer stated that he saw the beginning of the French Revolution, took part in all sorts of adventures, witnessed the terror and the execution of the King; he was jailed, interrogated, brought before the tribunal, convicted and sentenced to capital punishment, taken to the public square, put up on the block, and when the axe hit him on the neck—he awoke in horror, only to discover that the headboard of his iron cot had collapsed and struck him. From the beginning of the revolution (a) to the guillotine (x) the string is logically correct. The collapsing of the bed (the waking event ω) and the guillotine (the waking event x) are one and the same cause, interpreted differently by two states of consciousness belonging to two different planes of existence. In other words, by the daytime logic, the dénouement event x would lead to *alpha* (that is, be the initial cause of it), not the other way round.

16. F. W. Hildebrandt, *Der Traum und seine Verwertung für Leben*, 37ff. Freud often quotes from this book, approvingly, in his *Deutung*, although he cannot, of course, accept Hildebrandt's moral imperative.

17. Alfred Maury, *Le sommeil et les rêves*, 161. Freud recounts this dream as well, but in less detail.

NABOKOV'S EXPERIMENT

*. . . one little push
and down the white and handless face
of time—oh, lightly—down the side
of chimeless time and slimeless space,
oh, lightly shall we slide.*

(from Nabokov's diary)¹⁸

1.

No matter its philosophical merits, Dunne's conception of "serial Time"—time that multiplies, as it were, upon itself in perpetuity—is in certain peculiar accord with Nabokov's own treatment of time in his compositions. Nabokov's experiment opened his last series of fictions, all written in Montreux; indeed, his very next novel, *Ada* (1968)—whose clockwork mechanism resides in the seminal part 4, "The Texture of Time," drafted in 1959—was likely set in motion by that "dream" experiment; it "started to flow," as he put it in his pocket diary about a year after the end of the experiment. And in the last part of the book Nabokov touches upon the question of the time vector in dreamland, cracking in passing at Freud's hollow symbolism (" . . . a very amusing anti-Signy pamphlet on Time in Dreams").¹⁹

In later years, Nabokov would occasionally write down his dreams upon awakening, usually in his annual agenda books, even if he woke up in the middle of the night, more or less abiding by the "experiment" conditions as set by Dunne.

Nabokov's records show clearly that at the beginning of the experiment he dutifully followed those rules, minding that the record be unaffected by interpretation, something that he might have particularly liked about the

18. Note under March 3, 1952. In Manuscript Box: "Notes for Work in Progress," Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

19. *Ada*, 579.

whole thing, given that he held nothing but contempt for Freud's crude oneirology. Instead, he followed Dunne's advice that one should concentrate upon the happenings in the following day or two, trying to discern the trace of the preceding dream episode. This is a most difficult task because, Dunne warns, "the waking mind refuses point-blank to accept the association between the dream and the subsequent event."

The other difficulty, that of recalling and retaining the dream, can be removed relatively simply: "A notebook and pencil is kept under the pillow and, immediately on waking, before you even open your eyes, you set yourself to remember the rapidly vanishing dream," Dunne instructs. Nabokov jotted down his dreams the way he did his novels—on small, lined Oxford cards whose growing stack he rubber-banded; it is therefore highly unlikely that this lifelong insomniac kept that stack of A6 cards under his pillow. On several occasions he seems to have taken up Dunne's very helpful prescription of not attempting to recollect the entire dream, nor yet a large chunk of it, but rather a single episode, but in as much detail as one can, or even just one detail, and larger parts will unfold obligingly, not unlike small chips of an eggshell first crumbling off under the peeling thumb, causing ever larger ones to come off next.

Dunne advises that one should pay close attention to minutiae that appear particularly outlandish to the waking eye. He further enjoins his readers not to think of anything else until the dream has been recorded. At the end of each day, he adds, one is to reread all the records since the beginning of the experiment. Obviously those rules (and there are many more) place high demands even on the eager dreamer, challenging his diligence. No wonder Nabokov's zeal slackens as the experiment wears on, and we see more blank-dream days. By mid-November his experiment is losing some of its

steam and much of its original purpose: he is just recording, often not noticing the connections with earlier or subsequent events. In December, several days go unrecorded altogether, and as 1964 draws to a close so does the experiment.

2.

What can a Nabokov reader glean or learn from these records half a century later? On reading the batch, one publisher, a good Freudian by his own admission, remarked that he was disappointed—evidently by the dearth of material suitable for standard psycho-interpretation, something that Nabokov surely would not fail to double-underline if he were to publish the dreams himself (and there are strong indications that he at least toyed with the idea). Since for every good Freudian there must be a hundred bad ones, a few flinders will doubtless be spotted and put to analytical deciphering, in spite—or perhaps because—of the fact that Nabokov made it a point to spray prefaces to his English books with strong anti-Freudian repellent.

The most interesting aspects of Nabokov's experiment have less to do with proving Dunne's theory right, for it seems inconclusive in this regard, than with certain threads that an accustomed eye can detect but which, paradoxically, escaped the dreamer, either because he could not recognize a past event or because he could not make out a future one. Unlike the people who attempted the experiment on Dunne's bidding and his precise instructions—unlike his sister, for example—here was a man of a prodigiously strong, well-trained memory, who could recollect the shade of a color of a shadow that an apple cast on the white tablecloth fifty years earlier, an artist of an astonishing acuity of perception, a peerless collector of detail, gifted with an unmatched faculty for expressing what he remembered and observed in

vivid images of utmost clarity: Dunne, who stresses that “a short record, full of details, would be of more value than a long one drafted in vaguer terms” (65), could not wish for a better-suited subject than Nabokov, whose dream records are often compact but filled with precise and astoundingly fresh details.

Yet, most remarkably, even Nabokov would often fail to make connections between what seems to the reader a startling resemblance to an event in his past life or fiction, let alone a future occurrence.

In one particularly striking instance, already on the second day of the experiment, Nabokov’s dream produces a Russian woman who asks him how he “like[s] it here, in St-Martin.” He corrects her, “Mentone not Martin,”²⁰ and in his note upon awakening jots down that “Mentone” was a “dream substitute for Montreux,” where he had lived since 1961. He goes on to recall his stay in Menton in the late 1930s, and his old mistake of calling the nearby Cap Martin “St-Martin,” then immediately allows a fresh slip by placing Mont St-Michel in Menton (it is about eight hundred miles away, in Normandy) while surely meaning the local Basilique Saint-Michel.

Two days later he records what he will call his “first incontestable success in the Dunne experiment” because he has “the absolutely clear feeling” that a film he watched on television three days after a certain dream was the *source* of that dream—“had the latter followed the former,” he hastens to explain. What he fails to register is that his dream distinctly and closely followed two scenes in his 1939 short story “The Visit to the Museum”: the dreamlike encounter of the narrator with the museum’s director in his office, and the odd exhibits in the local museum that looked like spherical soil samples, the chief subject of his dream.

20. Nabokov usually spelled “Menton” the Italian way.

Now, the museum in that story is apparently the municipal museum in *Menton*, which Nabokov had visited twenty-five years prior to his dream. The *St-Martin Centre funéraire* in Vevey, above the Russian church of St. Barbara, is where Nabokov's body was to be cremated less than thirteen years later.

“His slips of the tongue are oracular,” remarks an American professor about his Russian colleague in *Pnin*. As noted earlier, Dunne in principle allows only a day or two for a dream to forecast the actual event (so as to anticipate an objection stemming from probability theory); later he accedes that “this might be extended in ration to the oddity and unusualness of the incident.” He cites his dream of the 1916 bombardment of Lowestoft preceding the event by a year, and one clear case of a dream-image relating beyond all possibility of doubt to an event that happened some twenty years later: as a twelve-year-old boy Dunne had a dream affected by reading Jules Verne's *Clipper of the Clouds*. In that dream the flying apparatus had no wings, just small propellers. He remembered it only in 1910, when he piloted his ardis-shaped airplane “which possessed complete inherent stability.” It soared over the aerodrome, “steady as a rock” (the engine gave out three minutes later, a usual mishap at the time).

But while Dunne's serial Time theory makes some room for a dream to come true sometimes years later, it certainly pays no heed to a postmortem possibility—something that Nabokov, on the other hand, would be thrilled to consider. It is utterly difficult for the dreamer to connect a dream, even a recorded one, to a later event in life, but extending a dream pointer beyond life's terminus seems impossible. Nabokov could recall, however vaguely, his “experimental” dream, then check the written record of it, eight years later, when Anna Feigin, his wife's cousin and a close friend, in the care

of the Nabokovs in her twilight years, died and was cremated at St-Martin's funeral facility.²¹ He might ponder, on that occasion, the likely possibility of his own body's future visit there. He left no trace of either in his diary, although in at least one instance he did go back to his records and added a later comment (Dream 2). It is somewhat harder to understand Nabokov's failing to see a connection, sometimes direct, to his past life and writing. In a record of an earlier dream (Jan. 11, 1951; see part 3) he writes that he can't explain its setting—Rumania, revolution, the Queen—inexplicably failing to recall that his grandmother went to Bucharest on an invitation by the Queen of Rumania.

3.

In an experiment done upon oneself, one is at once the object and the subject of it: both a character (dreamer) and the author (dream writer and translator). Nabokov tries this sort of thing in his very last and unfinished novel, *The Origin of Laura*, in which a psychology professor takes up an experiment that entails the gradual erasing of himself by corradicated mental energy, all the while setting down its stages (and much more). In that sense Dunne's experiment proved, in one philosophical aspect, to be quite similar to the premise and condition of Nabokov's fiction, for it was, like one of his novels, a life experiment on a small scale, in which the experimenter turns into a *persona dramatis* for whom it is extremely

21. Nabokov notes in his diary for January 10, 1973: "*Inhumation des cendres de M. Anna Feigin dans la concession cinéraire no. 1232, piquet c. 317. Echéance de la concession 10 Janvier 2003 (that figure fait rêver).*" [Interment of the ashes of Miss Anna Feigin in the cinerarium plot no. 1232, marker 317. Expiration 10 January 2003 (a dreamlike figure)]. See p. 70, note 58. By a curious, if absurd, coincidence, a different combination of the same numbers 0-1-2-3 in the plot number and the next century year of the concession's expiration, so hard to picture in 1973, was in Nabokov sister's Geneva address: 1203, 32 rue des Charmilles.

difficult to go back and reread his life, let alone to leap ahead. And much as the reader of his fiction can leaf back scores of pages to find an earlier forking episode in the character's life path, so the reader of Nabokov's dream records can easily move back and forth in time, with no temporal constraints, recalling this or that scene in his prior or future life or book. This is precisely the relation of the author-reader, on the one plane, and characters, on another, that Nabokov invented and cultivated.²² The dream experiment of this sort offers an instructive analogy, sometimes affording an observer the privilege of seeing more than even the dreamer of Nabokov's prodigious memory and phenomenal imagination could.

Nabokov certainly did believe in predictive dreams prior to reading Dunne's book or undertaking his "experiment," and left records of some of his dreams in diaries and letters. They usually had to do with persons close to him. His parents, especially his father, were familiar visitors, and the reader of his "experiment" dream (no. 38), and of a similar earlier one (see part 3, Dream II), will recall dreams of similar tone and mood that the hero of *The Gift* has of his father, who in many ways is an expeditionary version of Nabokov's statesman father, exploring the world's deepest mysteries with butterfly net in hand.

Nabokov could not avoid translating his vaguely previsionary dreams into the hyperobjective language of waking life. Some records are verbal wonders, the most amazing of which came in two installments separated by decades; Dunne would gladly publish a new edition of his *Experiment* just to include them. In a 1916 dream, the seventeen-year-old Nabokov saw his uncle, who had died very shortly before leaving him a large fortune (swept away a year later in the revolutionary

22. For more on this important aspect of Nabokov's fiction, see Gennady Barabtarlo, "Nabokov's Trinity: On the Movement of a Nabokov Theme," 109–38.

maelstrom). In a matter-of-fact mutter, Uncle Basil said what sounded like typically lucid somnolent nonsense: “I shall come back to you as Harry and Kuvyrkin.”²³ Forty-two years thereafter that dormant image gave off a flash of perfect sense when Harris and Kubrick Pictures approached Nabokov with an attractive offer of a handsome sum to buy the film rights to *Lolita*, at once restoring much of his lost fortune half a century later, half a world away. This is an inconceivable example of what may be termed, adapting Florensky’s bold proposition, a reverse perspective of time-space wherein causality is reversed, so that Nabokov’s dream was, in that dimension of sense, not the cause but the *effect* of Kubrick’s “later” episode, in perfect agreement with Dunne’s serialism. Furthermore, the sheer functionality of this very verbal dream is stupendous, and if it did not come from a diary entry one might suspect that it was fabricated to fit artistic application. Not only does this dream display an exceedingly rare triple convergence (the overall meaning and the similar shape of *both* pairs of names), not only does *kuvyrok* mean somersault in Russian, but it has an additional linguistic twist: the “Kuvyrkin to Kubrick” transformation proceeds with the correct sound shift from the Slavonic to the Latin.²⁴

In 1939 Nabokov writes to his wife (from London to Paris): “This morning I was awoken by an unusually vivid dream: Il’usha (I think it was he)²⁵ walks in and says that he has been informed by phone call that Khodasevich has ‘ended his earthly existence’—word for word.”²⁶ This was written on

23. Boyd-1991, 366.

24. The Latin bilabial *beta* stands for the Byzantine, and thus Slavonic, labiodental “v” (as in Barbara–Varvara, Basil–Vasily etc.).

25. Ilya Fondaminsky (1880–1942), Nabokov’s close friend, a former member of the Russian Socialist-Revolutionary party; after the Bolshevik coup d’état he emigrated to Paris.

26. Vladislav Khodasevich (1886–1939), Russian poet, also a friend of Nabokov’s; *Letters to Véra*, 434; translation slightly edited.

June 9; Khodasevich died on the 14th, and even though he had been ill for some time and in a hospital since late May, there was no indication of a rapidly approaching end until the surgery four days after Nabokov had seen him in that dream, hundreds of miles away.

On December 8, 1945, he writes to Mark Aldanov, a fellow writer and friend, concerning his brother Sergey: “. . . Just before I received word that he perished,²⁷ I had seen him in a terrible dream, lying on the bunk and gasping for air, convulsing in agony.”²⁸ Twenty years later Nabokov would ponder the exciting possibility that time could turn itself inside-out—that the October 1945 letter from his sister, telling him of their brother’s death, informed his *preceding* dream, rather than the more common explanation of the dream forestalling the terrible news.

4.

Nabokov’s experiment had a peculiar complication that Dunne did not foresee. All his life he struggled with insomnia that required, especially during the last period in Montreux, nightly use of strong medication. As his Swiss doctors prescribed increasingly more powerful sleeping pills, Nabokov covered the pages of his pocket agenda books with the names, potency, dosages, even shape and color of the pills. As we know, dreams occur during the so-called rapid eye movement stage, in transition from the deep to the shallow stages of sleep (“paradoxical sleep”), near the surface.

27. In January 1945, in the German Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg. See Dieter Zimmer’s definitive account, “What Happened to Sergey Nabokov?” (2015).

28. The Bachmetev Archive, New York. Aldanov Papers, Box 6. Quoted, in my translation, from Galina Glushanok’s article in *Vladimir Nabokov: Pro et Contra* (St. Petersburg: Russian Christian Institute for the Humanities, 2001), 112.

Nabokov typically remembered having his dreams at dawn, right before awakening after a sleepless night, with much tossing and frequent getting up.

How does the fact that an elderly subject of a dream experiment—suffering as Nabokov did from sleeplessness and an enlarged prostate gland (it had to be removed ten years later)—who wakes up many times during the night, thereby frequently interrupting the sleep cycle, work on the character of his dreams? Does a strong chemical intervention affect their content? And above all, how do these factors bear upon the main purpose of Dunne's experiment—to prove that Time, like other dimensions of our universe, is not bound by the forward direction alone? In a chance ditty Nabokov jotted down in his pocket book on November 21, 1972, a wan smile overlays the pain:

*Вставалъ, ложился опять.
Заря какъ смерть приближалась.
Если дальше не буду спать,
Я пожалуюсь.*

[Got up, lay down, got up again.
Daybreak, like death, drew nearer, creeping.
If I'll keep going on without sleeping,
I shall complain.]

In the remaining five years of his life such notes filled the pages of his agenda, in the last year crowding out most other items.

April 20 [1973] For the first time *in years* (since 1955? 1960?): Had this night a six-hour stretch of uninterrupted sleep (12–6). My usual extent of sleep (apart from periodical insomnias), even if induced by more or less

potent pills (at least thrice daily) is a 3+2+1 or at best 4+2+2 or at frequent worst 2+1+1+2+1-hour affair with intervals (+) of hopelessness and nervous urination. This night I took an innocuous “mogadon” pill.²⁹

Getting up just once is an extreme rarity, secured by a strong drug:

September 11 [1974] Motolon seems to work.³⁰

September 12 9–12, 1–9, 1 WC. Best night in my life.

But once a habit was formed, a new medication had to be found. Sleep disorder is a mild professional euphemism for his condition. A year later he makes this account of his nightly ordeal:

August 21 [1975]: Sample of “good” night. Fell asleep around 8.45 slept till 8.45 with the following toilet interruptions at

10.05 PM

11.05

12.35

1.40 AM

2.20

3.45

5.35

6.20

8.45

Ten days later:

29. Known also as Insomin or nitrazepam—a pretty potent hypnotic, hardly innocuous.

30. Methaqualone, “a nonbarbiturate compound formerly used as a sedative and hypnotic, now found only as a drug of abuse” (*Miller-Keane Encyclopedia of Medicine*, 2003).

September 1 [1975]: First really good night
Bed 9, WC 11, 12. Slept. 4.45 WC. 7 up

How odd to compare these torments with his early years, when sleeplessness might look poetically enticing:

. . . какъ прекрасно, какъ лучезарно порой прерывается мировое однообразие книгой гения, кометой, преступлениемъ или даже просто одной ночью безъ сна.

[how splendidly, how radiantly the world's monotony is interrupted now and then by the book of a genius, a comet, a crime, or even simply by a single sleepless night.] ("La Veneziana")³¹

The situation was further complicated by Nabokov's efforts not to disturb his wife in the adjacent bedroom—yet sometimes the fear of “death creeping up close” overwhelmed him. On April 24, 1976, the day after his seventy-seventh birthday, he “woke up at 1 AM in panic of the this-is-it sort, discreetly screaming so as not to wake up her and yet to wake her up.”

Nabokov's eighty-night experiment in the fall of 1964 was a sustained effort to study his fragmented, ungraspable dream-life under the daylight supposition that time is reversible. This supposition undergirds a number of Nabokov's fictional writings, including, perhaps not so paradoxically, his memoirs. It reaches its climax in his last complete novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, whose hero takes his inability to spatialize time by reversing it for a form of insanity. Part 5 of this book puts to study some interesting aspects of Nabokov's singular treatment of time in his fiction.

31. *Stories*, 105.

In a sense, Nabokov conducted a lifelong nightly experiment with Time, under a condition where the term “chronic” reclaims its original meaning and extends Time into and beyond the philosophical realm, into the hereafter, which Nabokov studied in life and fiction, day and night, and where “there should be time no longer.”