THE REFERENTIAL MANIA OF "SIGNS AND SYMBOLS": READING NABOKOV'S SHORT STORY

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Life is a message scribbled in the dark
Anonymous
Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

I

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov often expressed his feeling of intense confinement within the cell of artistic imagination:

> The type of the artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish is a well-known biographical figure with whom I feel some affinity. (quoted in Tanner 1971: 35) [1]

This remark engages with a whole gallery of characters and narrative developments in Nabokov's fiction which write and rewrite the same claustrophobic obsession of the individuals who experience intense isolation of consciousness: either the mad artist like Cincinnatus, Fyodor, Sineosov, Van and Ada, Hugh Person or Krug, or else the criminal artist like Alex, Rex, Hermann, Humbert Humbert or Van Veen. Consciousness and subjectivity are for Nabokov the fundamental dimension of existence, the greatest and ultimate mystery, at the same time the scenario for both freedom and exile.[2] Nabokov's fiction writes and rewrites the solipsistic struggle for liberation from the constraints of consciousness through imagination, through art as the only means of catching a glimpse of transcendence. His belief in the primacy and universality of subjective experience involves, in turn, a concomitant belief in the individual imagination (especially through art) as a primal source of truth; in an interview he declared:

> Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture (Tanner 1971: 33).

The metaphors underpinning this statement are extremely revealing of Nabokov's conception, or rather fiction, of the artistic performance. Such fiction, as I read it, presupposes a double division of experience. The objects of average reality are separated from the transcendental purifying realities they signify, and the individual consciousness is separated both from average reality and from the transcendental realm of uncorrupted truth. The act of individual creation based on these assumptions is an act that brings about a change in man's relation to the world of average reality. It animates an otherwise inanimate texture, as it were, without *anima,* without life, that incurably rots and stinks —these words posit the need for a healing and purifying creation as an ethical imperative. Thus the subjective process of creation animates, gives true life to a reality doomed otherwise to inertia and putrefaction in virtue of its averageness, its standardness, a coinage debased in the daily exchange. Such a perception of reality results from the enactment of a struggle which may take the artist to the very brink of truth. The individual creator must avoid at all costs a perception which is average and must become sensitive to a texture that is not commonly accepted or standardized —but which in fact is more real or true than average reality:

> I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered on my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be safe from the intrusion of the artist. Houses have crumbled in my memory as soundlessly as they did in the mute films of yore, and the portrait of my old French governess, whom I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast, now that it is engulfed in the description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own. The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle. (Nabokov 1960b: 95)

The figure of the artist who partakes of some aristocratic disdain for the masses labouring heavily in more constricted and straitened versions of reality matches the solipsistic consciousness in the works of Pound, Eliot, Woolf, Joyce or Faulkner. Nabokov's characters have their peculiar features and inscribe peculiar sets of assumptions in his work, but if any background is needed for or against them, it is within this tradition that they fall. In fact, "Signs and Symbols" —signed "Boston 1948"— is permeated by some features of the non-totalizable topography of classical modernism.[3] This short narrative presents a decadent family: they are a sterile old couple of Chekhovian exiles whose son is "incurably deranged in his mind"; their economical situation has brought about his internment in a sanatorium which is "miserably understaffed"; this damaged family make ends meet thanks to the charity of a rich relative, the husband's brother, presumably another Jewish emigrant who has been able to buy his way into the American society and become a "real American." However, the situation of this family has not always been so distressing and arduous: in the old country, in Leipzig, he had been a "fairly successful businessman" and they enjoyed a comfortable life, for they even had a "German maid." If I were to qualify this depiction of a family with one word —something which, of course, is unpermissible— an apt epithet might be "Faulknerian," or "Chekhovian": an elderly couple (the "silvery" bearded husband needs a dental plate, suffers from a stomach disease and eats "pale victuals," his wife's "tired old heart" "trudges heavily upstairs"), too old to be able to procreate any longer, whose phobic only son is driven to suicide by the claustrophobia of his obsession, present a landscape of hopeless sterility; they cling haggardly to their golden past: he has not been able to learn to speak fluently the language of his new country; he has

created a defence, as it were, against the corruption of his relief-giving memory: he reads "his Russian language newspaper" and wears over his nightgown "the old overcoat with astrakhan collar" which he much prefers to his new bathrobe; she unsleeps the night examining old photographs. There is something Eliotic, I feel, about the celebration of a life-returning spring in a world already enjoying death and avoiding natural regeneration: the mother does not wear any makeup, unlike her neighbour, who rebels against the poignancy of the "fault-finding light of spring days" with an awkward pink and mauve embalment and artificial flowers. The narrative sequentiality of "Signs and Symbols" is also inhabited by the structures of Faulkner's, Woolf's or Joyce's novels: the narrator, the open ending, the topography of narrative "clues." I will return to this when discussing the assumptions about the reading process which sustain "Signs and Symbols."

However, the critical readings of Nabokov do not seem to agree as to the presence of Anglo-Saxon modernist writing in Nabokov's text: it seems there is an uncanny tension in the pathos of his solipsistic characters. The writing of solipsism and of its transcendence through artistic imagination, through the animation of a subjectively perceived texture, is divided in "Signs and Symbols" —into signs and symbols. Nabokov's story inscribes the affirmation of artistic "creative" language in a general economy that prevents its affirmation.

II

The pathos of "Signs and Symbols" depends on and is constituted by the dramatization of the clash between different modes of perception and interpretation of reality and their hierarchization, that is, between two ways of reading: the "average" reading and the "subjective" reading.[4]

The exile couple's son is secluded in a sanatorium because of his strange "system of delusions": "referential mania."

> "Referential mania," Herman Brink had called it. In these very rare cases the patient *imagines* that everything happening around him is a *veiled reference* to his personality and existence. (Nabokov, SS 54. My emphasis.)

This boy is trapped in "a dense tangle of logically interacting illusions" whereby he considers the movement of trees, the sounds of the mountain, the

surfaces of still pools and store windows to be the activity of an awful conspiracy threatening his personality and existence. For him, "[e]verything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme"; for him, "phenomenal nature" is a huge coded message which, within the folds of its coding, carries information regarding him; natural phenomena such as clouds, firs, rivers, pools, are veiled references, they are relational objects intertwined through a strange hidden logic which withdraws them from their literality in the realm of phenomenality in order to name what does not belong to this realm, to name this boy's ultimate truth. They are ciphers, that is, messages whose referent is another message; they are figures of his personality and existence. His reading of the world around him is —as I read it— *figural,* as opposed to the average literal one, the one shared by, among others, his mother, scholars like Herman Brink who write papers "in a scientific monthly," and us, that is, the people who are not incurably deranged in their minds. But we shall soon realize how these assumptions or illusions are inmediately outplayed by this narrative —particularly the latter.

The dramatization of the binary opposition real/fictional is to be found at all levels: the son is caught by means of a dense tangle of illusions, of fictional objects imagined *by* figural language; he inhabits a fictional realm he has brought about around him by subjectively animating average reality. Such dramatization leads logically to a consideration of figural language and fiction as derivative activities that depend for their existence on the literal and real ones. Moreover, their beauty and existence is threatened by literality, in much the same way that beautiful weeds are menaced and mangled by the farmer:

> She thought of the endless waves of pain that for some reason or other she and her husband had to endure; of the invisible giants hurting her boy in some unimaginable fashion; of the incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world; of the fate of this tenderness, which is either crushed, or wasted, or transformed into madness; of neglected children humming to themselves in unswept corners; of beautiful weeds that cannot hide from the farmer and helplessly have to watch the shadow of his simian stoop leave mangled flowers in its wake as the monstrous darkness approaches. (SS 57)

Creative imagination, fiction, figurality, are thought of by average minds as beautiful weeds, parasitical, suspect, pernicious, secondary.

Nabokov, then, has been often read as privileging —in the aristocratic hierarchy-producing fashion referred to above— the second term in these op-

positions (figural and fictional), identifying them with the special gifts of creative imagination whereby the human mind may catch a glimpse of the ultimate truth of his being, of transcendence. However, the pathos of "Signs and Symbols," as I read it, is somehow distanced, biased, is the echo of the pathos of the romantic isolation of a young imaginative mind bent on self-destruction — a recurrent theme in Nabokov's short stories (Boyd 1992: 550).[5] Some statements produce a quaint weaving of meanings in the sorrowful portrayal of the son: he is a "prodigiously gifted child" who "considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men." The hierarchization of this character, isolated, creative, pathetic, the type of the Chekhovian decadent romantic artist, physically weak (he had suffered from pneumonia and insomnia), is disrupted at source, not only by those mocking (remarkable) remarks, but by the pointing out of, and obedience to, a linguistic necessity: "Signs and Symbols" displaces and undoes the oppositions literal/figural and real/fictional which sustain the given order of priorities of logocentrism. The deviations of the son's deranged consciousness are repeated by his mother: her son painfully elaborates fictional patterns derived from the real ones around him —*outside* him, *outside* language— and whose theme is his own personality and existence. But she is already trapped in the overwhelming law of the *veiled reference* :

> [I]t gave her a kind of soft shock, a mixture of compassion and wonder, to notice that one of the passengers, a girl with dark hair and grubby red toenails, was weeping on the shoulder of an older woman. *Whom did that woman resemble? She resembled Rebecca Borisovna, whose daughter had married one of the Soloveichiks —in Minsk, years ago.* (SS 56. My emphasis.)

Her perception of the features of the woman who is sitting in front of her in the bus leads her mind to "hook on" to a presence that is not part of her immediate environment "[d]uring the long ride": the presence of Rebecca Borisovna, of her daughter, of a marriage, of the Soloveichiks, of long gone Minsk. It is the presence of an absence, it is a fictional presence; it is a story unleashed by the veiled reference to the physical appearance of a woman within a bus.

The same logic which relates physical objects to a narrative account —to her past, to the clues of the existence to which her husband stubbornly clings— of "incredibly detailed information regarding" her, is at work when she is examining the photographs from her old albums —in a situation of

longed for isolation at night, alone in the living-room where she has pulled the blinds down. The coordination of the two activities in the sentence "She pulled the blind down and examined the photographs," creates an intimate link between these two modes of action, isolating herself from outside activity to interpret the messages coded in and by her photographs; in Nabokov's tale, isolation is somehow the condition of introspection —which much resembles her son's mania:

> From a fold in the album, a German maid they had had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiancé fell out. Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin, Leipzig, a slanting house badly out of focus. Four years old, in a park: moodily, shyly, with puckered forehead, looking away from an eager squirrel as he would from any other stranger. Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths —until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about. Aged six —that was when he drew wonderful birds with human hands and feet, and suffered from insomnia like a grown-up man. His cousin, now a famous chess player. He again, aged about eight, already difficult to understand, afraid of the wallpaper in the passage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a leafless tree. Aged ten: the year they left Europe. The shame, the pity, the humiliating difficulties, the ugly, vicious, backward children he was with in that special school. (SS 56)

The echoes, "silhouettes," or rather —to extend Nabokov in a Nabokovian way— the ghosts of modernist experimental stream (extreme?) of consciousness narrative devices "flit over" and within this quote. The grammatical structure of this paragraph creates —but also, by this very same move, destroys— immediacy of experience by obliterating the terms usually sustaining the rendering of experience, by this detour of language called zeugma. There are no verbs designating the physical activity of this woman while she examines each photo, her movements, nor is there any (literal) mention of the objects, of each fold in the album, each photo. Instead, the narrator's omnipresent words overlap, blur, embody the old woman's language —almost completely, for there is still the ironic distance marked by "they"—, trying to efface the presence of outside reality in order to release the contents of this mother's consciousness —by now, a set up familiar to us: the obliteration of phenomenality as a condition for introspection and imagi-

nation— the activity of this special form of imagination called memory. The law of the referential mania spreads its implications at every moment in this paragraph. The photographs, physical objects, "man-made" objects which copy —and distort dimensionally— physical objects, reveal incredibly detailed information regarding her. Moreover, she does not name these man-made objects by means of (supposedly) literal terms: she does not design them using the terms "a photograph of ...." Instead, she names them directing her language backwards to the resources of memory, of imagination. It is not a photograph of a woman and a man that falls out of the album: it is a "German maid they had had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiancé"; such a reading repeats the features of her son's mania, for the woman in the photograph (later we know her literal name, Elsa) is read only in terms of her past relationship to the family: a German *maid they had had* in Leipzig; a maid, in Leipzig, terms —like any other— which designate and depend on a relation, the professional engagement of that woman with the family, with the past of the family. Furthermore, the man who appears in the photograph is read only in relation to the family, for he is *her fiancé,* another relational term : this man is the boyfriend of a German maid of the family when they lived in Leipzig. Moreover, the qualifier "fat-faced" (later "bestial") testifies to the inevitability of a subjective "slanting" in any reading or interpretation of the world: probably we could not properly locate these words within Elsa's mind —if we were allowed to do so, which we are not.

The dictatorial partiality of subjectivity describes a picture of "rocks on a hillside and *an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a leafless tree* " as an "*idyllic* landscape" [my emphasis]. The imprisoning and devouring nature of subjectivity inhabits the following sequence: "The shame, the pity, the humiliating difficulties, the ugly vicious backward children he was with in that special school." This loving mother's words for the sanatorium —"special school"— are euphemisms for (and used by) institutions that treat mental deviation, and have the effect of creating an opaque screen over what would otherwise be dangerously unsettling definitions. She applies to her son's former fellow-patients a group of terms which easily apply to her own beloved child: his son's "poor face" is "ill shaven," "blotched with acne," words the reader readily relates to terms like ugly or vicious; besides, the other children are depicted as "backward," a word which is at odds with the description of her son as being "totally inaccessible to normal minds," falling in the region of the institutional euphemistic strategy above mentioned.

The (non)logic of the veiled reference is also at work when the photograph of the "wild-eyed old lady" directs the mother's consciousness to a nar-

rative of "bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths," the German invasion and the Soah; this woman is called *Aunt* Rosa. The photograph of a boy, "*his* cousin "[my emphasis] —again relational terms—, reveals a glimpse of a brilliant career as chess player. A photograph of her six-year-old son brings about —and around— the story of his quaint drawings and his distressing insomnia.

The overwhelming pointing-to-something-else of both readings problematizes the ontological status of reality. In the first section of "Signs and Symbols" referential mania was named in —by— a non-manic reading, in a reading that denominated natural phenomena by their literal average name. The link between an object and his name was safe there, stable, this stability being (institutionally) guaranteed by the capacity to detect deviations from literal reading, from the perception of things as they really are, the capacity to perceive and name, or rather, to both name and perceive a fir as a fir, a mountain as a mountain, a store window as a store window, and not "sullenly confuse" them with anything else. Her son's behaviour is "a very rare case," which sets him apart from average models of conduct. It is a "system of delusions," "a dense tangle of logically interacting illusions." The words *illusion* and *delusion* de-nominate difficulties, mistakes, deviations from average perception which, nevertheless, by their relational and derived (and derivative) nature, involve average straightforward perception. They are produced, according to literal reading, by the impossibility of reading literally, that is, they are produced by figural reading. Literal terms are disfigured, drawn away from their realm and thrown aside —de-ranged— into a different realm: the objects of phenomenal nature are displaced from their natural location in the ordered system of average reality to designate such things as giants, conspiracies or spies. This displacement, which feeds on the firm ground of literality, is nothing but a momentary —as the semantic play field suggested by "illusion" and "delusion" indicates— swoon of language, a fainting fit, a sudden malaise which feeds on the texture of literality and deranges this healthy system. The illusions and delusions of figurality and fictionality are —I am echoing J. Hillis Miller (Hartman 1979: 271-273)— something of a parasite, like "beautiful weeds" that uncomfortably appear in the tidy rows of crops within the economy of the farm. However, these weeds are sometimes indistinguishable from the flowers of crops. Weeds and crops grow entwined in a mutual invasion because both have the same natural drive, to the same beating energy which fights bravely to emerge everywhere, menacing and squeezing in the stability of the farmer's caring selection or animation of a specific vegetal texture within the manifold realm of nature.

Literality and figurality somehow blur the frontiers of their opposition, and even reverse its terms, when objects of phenomenal nature, such as photographs, are thrown beyond their realm to designate the objects of this peculiar form of fiction we call memory —in Nabokov's works, memory requires the animation of creative imagination (Clark 1986: 108-109). Thus, reality and fiction subjectively intermingle in the dense tangle of levels of meaning deployed by the term "imagination." There is no way out of figurality, nor is there a way out of fiction. We —I, the reader, Nabokov, the mother, the son— are plotting beings (proleptically and analeptically), and also plotted beings, for we inhabit the plots of other beings. In "Signs and Symbols" the metaphorical denomination "the Prince," which carries with it the seed of the fictional milieu inhabited by the now depending husband, becomes later the usual name for his brother:

> ". . . We will have the doctor see him at least twice a week. It does not matter what the Prince says. He won't have to say much anyway because it will come out cheaper." (SS 58)

Yet there is a contradiction —one among many— in what I have said so far about Nabokov's emphasis and aristocratic affirmation of imagination as the only means to prevent reality from rotting away, since imagination, figurality, fictionality, appear to be not the means but the condition of any reading of reality, that is, of reality. The inscription and reversal of the logocentric hierarchization literal/figural and real/fictional in "Signs and Symbols" produce a double, paradoxical logic: if average reality, the reality of normal minds is also the product of imagination, resulting from the animation of a subjectively perceived texture, governed by the deferring strategy of the veiled reference, then any attempt to (pathetically) favour subjectivity and imagination over normal reality is smashed, "crushed." The pathos of this story urges the reader to grant a privilege to solipisistic imagination while the possibility of such granting is eliminated.

III

The animation of a subjectively perceived texture is for Nabokov a matter of finding unexpected relationships and patterns between and within unnoticed details. In one of his first poems the Apostles are disgusted by the vision of worms leaking from the swollen corpse of a dog, but Christ is the only one

who marvels about the pure whiteness of the corpse's teeth (Boyd 1992: 318-319). The narrators of *Transparent Things* recognize in a pencil the presence of the tree and, furthermore, the moment of its falling on. Nabokov luxuriated in the perception of the unforeseen qualities and coincidences in the geometry of snow, in a pothook, in the wing of a butterfly, in the chink between the inner shutters:

> On a summer morning, in the legendary Russia of my boyhood, my first glance upon awakening was for the chink between the inner shutters. If it disclosed a watery pallor, one had better not open them at all, and so be spared the sight of a sullen day sitting for its picture in a puddle. How resentfully one would deduce, from a line of dull light, the leaden sky, the sodden sand, the gruel-like mess of broken blossoms under the lilacs —and that flat, fallow leaf (the first casualty of the season) pasted upon a wet garden bench.
>
> But if the chink was a long glint of dewy brilliancy, then I made haste to have the window yield its treasure. With one blow, the room would be cleft into light and shade. The foliage of birches moving in the sun had the translucent green of tone grapes, and in contrast to this was the dark velvet of trees against a blue of extraordinary intensity, the like of which I rediscovered only many years later, in the montane zone of Colorado.
>
> From the age of seven, everything I felt in connection with a rectangle of framed sunlight was dominated by a single passion. If my first glance of the morning was for the sun, my first thought was for the butterflies it would engender. (Nabokov 1960b: 119-120)[6]

The watery pallor of a line of light is also a veiled reference to a "sullen" future. The brilliancy of the glinting chink is the embryo of myriads of butterflies. A choir of sounds becomes related backwards over a past time span to some paragraphs within a book, and forward to a future delightful experience:

> After making my way to some pine groves and alder scrub I came to the bog. No sooner had my ear caught the hum of diptera around me, the guttural cry of a snipe overhead, the gulping sound of the morass under my foot, than I knew I would find here quite special Arctic butterflies, whose pictures, or, still better, nonillustrated descriptions I had worshipped for several seasons (Nabokov 1960b: 138).

Patterns that relate elements from different regions of experience are inherent in, and created by, figurality as a mode of perceiving relationships, of finding parallels, of sending alternatives. The experiencing of patterns cannot escape from figural language.

The perception of patterns of Nabokov's characters is also displayed by the narrator of "Signs and Symbols." This narrator, whose consciousness is almost always married to the consciousness of the character of the mother and speaks for it without ever using "I," also uses figures to render the existence of unexpected patterns. The modernist new sense of the spatial dimension, which was a reading of the New Science and of Bergsonian relativism, is thematized in "the last dregs of the day were mixed with the street lights" or "he removed his hopelessly uncomfortable dental plate and severed the long tusks of saliva connecting him to it." The characterization of the father as a pathetically decadent figure is powerfully inscribed in the following figural (metaphorical and metonymical) sequence:

> A few feet away, under a swaying and dipping tree, a tiny half dead unfledged bird was *helplessly twitching* in a puddle.
>
> During the long ride to the Underground station, she and her husband did not exchange a word; and every time she glanced at his old hands (swollen veins, brown-spotted skin), clasped and *twitching* upon the handle of his umbrella, she felt the pressure of mounting tears. (SS 54. My emphasis)

For Nabokov —if we allow ourselves another (the same) swoon into generalization— the perception of patterns is not just a ludic investigation. It is not a merely hedonistic practice, but the way to avoid putrefaction:

> I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness —in a landscape selected at random— is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern —to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humouring a lucky mortal. (Nabokov 1960b: 139)

This densely figural fragment has something of the account of a mystical experience. The observation of patterns is the "hard to explain" interpretation

of the veiled reference to this "something else" which stands behind aesthetic joy and ecstasy, which secures a contact with either "the contrapuntal genius of human fate" or with "tender ghosts humouring a lucky mortal," that is, a glimpse of transcendence, of true reality. As my epigraph puts it, "Life is a message scribbled in the dark" (Cooper 1983: 17). The attempt to transcend solipsism is one of Nabokov's major themes and constantly writes the beating existence of *something else,* of transcendental existence. The narrator in *The Gift* :

> The unfortunate image of a "road," to which the human mind has become accustomed (life as a kind of journey) is a stupid illusion: we are not going anywhere, we are sitting at home. The other world surrounds us always and is not at all the end of some pilgrimage. In our earthly house, windows are replaced by mirrors; the door, until a given time, is closed; but air comes in through the cracks. (Nabokov 1979: 549)

This quote metaphorizes the possibility of transcendence. Transcendence both permeates and tautens the texture of reality and the fabric of fancy. This possibility is in fact the *logos* which organizes and hierarchizes the whole network of presuppositions sustaining Nabokov's assumptions about language and existence. The affirmation of ontological transcendence is so involved with the basic concepts of logocentrism that it is very difficult for me to get rid of even if I wish to. The tradition of writers such as Woolf, Faulkner, Joyce or Eliot, explores and inscribes the epistemological possibility of transcendental truth in an *intolerable wrestle with words and meanings*— although other possibilities are reworked and redramatized in Nabokov's fiction against and within the modernist pathos of frustration, like the failure through sexual union of Ada and Van in *Ada* or Humbert and Lolita in *Lolita,* or through friendship, as thematized in the narrative of Kinbote and Shade's experience in *Pale Fire,* or even through liaison with ghosts, as Fyodor and his father in *The Gift* or Krug and his wife in *Bend Sinister*. The interpretation of the texture of reality thus becomes a vital — transcendental— experience. "Signs and Symbols" provides us with a family obsessively devoted to this task. The son is constantly absorbed in the deciphering of the dense tangle of references to the patterns he perceives. The mother "examines" the photographs of the album and interprets their hidden messages; she compulsively asks herself for patterns ("Whom did that woman resemble?") dwelling on the resemblance of phenomenal nature with

her past experience. "[S]he and her husband" sadly "puzzled out" the eccentric behaviour of their "prodigiously gifted child." The silvery bristled father "re-examined with pleasure" the little jars, reading aloud "his clumsy moist lips spelled out their eloquent labels" (which in fact do not name, again, the jelly they actually contain, but the fruit it is made of). Reading is the only true life:

> This, and much more she accepted —for after all living did mean accepting the loss of one joy after another, not even joys in her case —mere possibilities of improvement. (SS 57)

In "Signs and Symbols" living does have a meaning, that is, it is the veiled reference to something else. But its meaning is precisely the intolerable search for this meaning which always surrounds us and, paradoxically, is always deferred. The acceptance of the constant frustration of the meaning envisaged in mere possibilities of improvement joins Nabokov's thematization of the reading process. He assures that the novelist, like the chess player, poses "problems," and

> a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of tries — *delusive* or punning moves, *false* scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver *astray*. (Nabokov 1960b: 290; my emphasis)

The accumulation of punning moves, false scents, specious lines of play, in other words, of interpretive clues (false or not), problematizes, twists, rugates, sublimates, and at once affirms the texture of classical modernist texts. In this tradition, whereby texts were conceived of as epistemological quests for truth, according to certain conventions, readers faced enormous difficulties in their attempt to understand those writings by determining their thematical and rhetorical modes. Those works —like much post-modern production— were (are) offered structurally (and institutionally) both as problems for interpretation and as epistemological speculations on the truth of human existence. The unveiling of meaning thus inscribes the possibility of the transcendence of solipsism.

However, the *story* of such an eager reading process is by no means simple. The complexity of modernist texts derives to a great extent from their exhausting intertextuality. They encapsulate echoes of and references to long series of texts which may belong to Western and even to Eastern tradition. In a sense, classical modernist texts postulate a very *learned* type of reader,

either a reader already familiar with the intricate textual inscriptions and evasions through integrative mythical patterns, through religious patterns and symbology, through the so-called experimental techniques feeding on the New Science and Bergsonian epistemology, through Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytical structures, or else a reader forced, by the above mentioned difficulty, to read and *learn* by heart the texts of Jessie Weston, Jung, Freud, or Bergson, and to constantly check out her or his knowledge of previous major texts from both Western and Eastern traditions, in order to discover truth-revealing verbal treasures within the texture of the work. T. S. Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* ironically played on both types of reader.

Nabokov's fictions abound in imaginative games, patterns of suggestion, allusion, reflection and wordplay, which problematizes the very act of reading learned in a modernist context. His texts exploit the compulsive tendency we have as human beings to look at phenomena and try to discern meaningful patterns which seem to exist (according to the terms of his own formulation, since they can be "false" or "delusive"). The reader is inveigled into a difficult quest for gradually emerging patterns and interlocking clues. Nabokov designates the reader with the term "solver": he or she must not only solve verbal puzzles and pursue cryptogrammic paper chases, but also recognize parodies and unravel the complex existence of reality and fiction through a series of interpretive attempts, which are "metaphoric approximations of the shifting kaleidoscope" in Nabokov´s work (Clark 1986: 83).

Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols" presents itself ironically eager for analysis. Its very title overtly declares what this story is about. This narrative is not a devoted account of the illness of an artistically-gifted imaginative young boy and his parents, but a game of signs and symbols —or rather, signs *or* symbols[7]— which turns out to be the illness of any imaginative mind, including the reader's. "Signs and Symbols" is also a message scribbled in the dark by some transcendental law of signification, by a true meaning, by a *logos*. The assumption of the existence of a true meaning governs Nabokov's statements about the reading experience as a game of possibilities. If the reader is to discover that her or his assumption is just a "delusive" or "false" one leading her or him "astray," there must be a move or scent which is not delusive or false, a true meaning which permeates and gives sense to all the texture, which sustains and redirects the game of "moves" and of "tries" towards itself.

Thus the reader is inveigled into mimicking Nabokov's characters, isolated by their pattern-governed epistemological quest for true patterns, for a true meaning which always surrounds us and comes in through the cracks of our earthly door. One possible way of crossing the frontiers of solipsism is through death. The ironic distancing of the narrator's simple past tense powerfully inscribes the presence of death in Nabokov's short story: the open ending of the phone call which inevitably directs the reader's attention to the son's suicide, where this narrative unfolds backwards, is also the moment of the narrating act. The narrator uncannily speaks its existence beyond death (the simple past generates the irony of this privileged information from beyond). The presence of death is assured also in the disturbing presence of the zero: the girl's confusion is produced by the contingent typographical or material connection (though the number is given here its name "zero," playing again on the inevitability of figuration in fiction which depends on haphazard relational features of the signifier); this confusion also plays figurally on the son's tearing open a hole to escape from his isolation. Depending on the narrator's irony, the zero (nought, but also the origin of the endless series of numbers, the knot where both coordinate and ordinate axes intersect, the note —like the notes framing this paper— where the text acknowledges the presence of absence) is the possibility of communication —though at the same time the girl's dialling of the zero opens the ending and the possibility of suicide. The threat of the son's death permeates and tautens, so to speak, the pathetic texture of "Signs and Symbols":

> The last time their son had tried to take his life, his method had been, in the doctor's words, a masterpiece of inventiveness; he would have succeeded, had not an envious fellow patient thought he was learning to fly —and stopped him. What he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape. (SS 54)

The metaphor of the hole engages Nabokov's autobiographical depiction of a moment of transcendental, almost mystical experience of a "vacuum into which rushes all I love." Both, death or suicide and combinational or pattern perceiving joy, are sustained by the above mentioned confidence in a founding *logos*.

IV

"Signs and Symbols" offers itself as a veiled reference for the learned reader engaged suspiciously in a quest for signs and symbols which refer to a hidden and true meaning. This short story abounds in what this would-be solver, me, is entitled to consider to be scents or clues —including the narrator's metaphors mentioned above—: punning names, such as Her-man Brink; the *mise en abyme* echoes of the three phone calls and the three sections of the narrative; the enigmatic figurative possibilities of such different elements as the birthday present consisting of a basket with ten different fruit jellies in ten different jars, the sequence of labels, the Underground train, the bus crammed with garrulous school children, the letter O, the zero; the open ended structure which redirects the whole narrative backwards, eager for a rereading that (de)signs a huge question mark, so to speak, which coincides with the upper edge of the text. The ending or lower edge of this narrative was already contained in the very title, in the upper edge. An open ending always sets itself up as a veiled reference to a meaning only attained after a rereading of the narrative; yet in "Signs and Symbols," this constant inquisitive rereading is the condition of any reading of the narrative —in fact, the condition of life. This vacuum-like title inveigles the reader into a constant searching for and checking of patterns, a constant attempt to decide whether they are *signs* or *symbols*.

The word *signs* is mentioned in the narrative:

> Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. (SS 55)

These gestures or motions of the clouds are figurally read by the deranged boy as signs. Through a staring prosopopoeia, they are the veiled references to signs which in turn are veiled references to himself. Still, to mention the word "signs" is, so to speak, to unveil this hidden meaning, to read this message scribbled in the sky. In addition to this, the word "symbols" is not mentioned by the text (with the exception of the title which inveigles the reader into a quest for symbols) maybe —I seek support for my reading and thereby run the risk of becoming a referential maniac—, because they cannot be mentioned *as symbols,* they need to remain as *veiled, hidden, unmentioned* references to the meaning that governs the text, of the *logos* of which the old couple, the maniac son, the jars, the zero, the echoes *en abyme,* the ending, and therefore the whole narrative, are veiled references.

Nevertheless, the confidence in the existence of a founding meaning which tautens the figural texture of the story and validates true readings has no solid ontological grounds. This *logos* is nothing other than the product of figuration and combinational creation of meaning. The writing of the groundlessness of such a foundation is deployed by the ambiguity inherent in the "puzzling out" of the referential mania, squeezing into the figural system like weeds in a farm:

> Pebbles or stains or sun flecks represent in some awful way messages which he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. Some of the spies are detached observers, such as glass surfaces and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows, are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart; others again (running water, storms) are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him and grotesquely misinterpret his actions. . . . The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away. If the only interest he provokes were limited to his immediate surroundings —but alas, it is not! With distance the torrents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility. The silhouettes of his blood corpuscles, magnified a million times, flit over vast plains; and still farther, great mountains of unbearable solidity and height sum up in terms of granite and groaning firs the ultimate truth of his being. (SS 55)

Everything in phenomenal nature, stains, pebbles, sun flecks, is a veiled reference or cipher of himself. However, this veiled reference reveals (rather reveils) that he is a cipher himself for phenomenal nature, that he is the veiled reference to a meaning which nature distortedly and grotesquely misinterprets. Clear surfaces such as still pools and glasses are detached observers: they do not misinterpret him because they offer a true and clear reflection of himself, a bidimensional figure in which he recognizes the ultimate truth of his being, which is always already a cipher. Problems begin for him when these surfaces offer a figure where he cannot recognize himself: the shadowing presence of coats behind and within his clear reflection in a store window, distorting it, is read as the menacing presence of lynchers; objects in which he cannot find an image in which he can recognize himself are hysterical to the point of insanity. Store windows are distorted images of himself, they are veiled references to himself; but this *himself*, the true undistorted one, is another image, the one reflected on a still pool, another cipher. Moreover, still pools, glasses, are already ciphers, for they are read *as* spies, observers, readers belonging to some staring conspiracy. Readers

become the reading of other readers who, in turn, are already some reader's reading. Everything is a cipher of something else: there are nothing but references and references to references, everywhere.

The weeds of referential mania invade any reading so that the inescapable moment of literality is postponed by granting this moment a figural essence. The narrator's puzzling out of the boy's referential mania, in what seems to be something of an elaborate paper in a scientific monthly, is also affected by the blight of these beautiful weeds. In this paragraph, the narrator completely marries the consciousness of the mother abolishing any ironic distance; it mimicks, word by word, it *is* word by word, the language of the mother: there is no use of the word "she" and the verbs are in the present tense (suspending the distance of the more frequent simple past tense). The abolition of the narrating irony presents the paragraph as the literal reading of the son's behaviour. However, this literality is illusory since we have no evidence of verbal activity in the son's conduct capable of explaining such a system of delusions. This paragraph is nothing but the figural reading of a wordless performance: the boy's movements, gestures, glances, phobias, are nothing but veiled references to this system of figural delusions.

In addition to this, the narrator never mentions the characters literally. The narrator does not use their proper names, but purely relational terms: "mother," "wife," "husband," "son"; even the pronouns "he" and "she" sanction the ironic distance and relation of narrator and characters. The narrator presents the figural extensions of such subjects, being itself a figural construct, a grammatical subject whose properties are transferred from contiguous predicates.

"Signs and Symbols" wonderfully inscribes by means of metonymy the vacuum of the deferring and differential essence of the referential mania:

> Bending with difficulty, she retrieved some playing cards and a photograph or two that had slipped from the couch to the floor: knave of hearts, nine of spades, ace of spades. Elsa and her bestial beau. (SS 57)

Cards are purely relational elements, whose meaning in the game depends solely on their relation to the rest of the pack. And it is here, among sheer relational elements, that the German maid they had had in Leipzig is given a literal name: Elsa.

Yet there is still another weed in "Signs and Symbols." My reading of this last quote as metonymy is the figural expression of my referential mania. It narrates my de Manian (or rather demonic) failure to read modernist reading conventions. Any attempt within my reading to generate meaningful patterns by random relational patterning of signifiers rather than by the constraints of meaning is forbidden by the constraint of my attempt. My essay narrates the impossibility of affirming the non-existence of a founding meaning without affirming the existence of the founding meaning of this affirmation. It also narrates the impossibility of my writing out the distinction between naming and reading, between perceiving and creating patterns, between Eliot's two learned readers, which is already inherent in the textual game of signs and symbols, and therefore of "Signs and Symbols."

My reading of the way we have meaning in "Signs and Symbols," that is, my reading of signs *or* symbols, also tells the short story of an impossible historical sequence: London, 1971; London, 1982; New Haven, 1979; Yale, 10 November 1977; Boston, 1948. My reading cannot avoid the compulsion of a reference to an unquestioned meaning that it denounces. I cannot do otherwise, which leaves me with something of a de Manian "suspended ignorance."[8a]

NOTES

1. This reference turns out to be highly suitable here, for Tanner's book was my first contact with Nabokov's fiction. I had not read anything either *by* or *on* Nabokov before my former *liaison* with Thomas S. Pynchon's work —particularly with *The Crying of Lot 49* and *V.*— *City of Words* being then an invaluable procurer. Hence it is that my reading of "Signs and Symbols" is essentially shaped by my biased knowledge of the postmodern condition, since the totality of the critical work devoted to Nabokov's long narratives and short stories considers "him" to be highly and decisively influential in the work of writers like Pynchon, Heller, Burroughs or Mailer. However, since this paper started as an attempt to read "Signs and Symbols" *à la* Yale School —no longer in Yale and never a school— for a post-graduate seminar in a Spanish university, I am not at all sure that terms like "postmodern" or "influence" prove to be "suitable here." Moreover, the very nature of the writings of Derrida, de Man, Miller or Hartman makes it impossible to write in a deconstructive way without betraying the deconstructive skeptic pull and thereby becoming impossibly deconstructive, therefore inscribing my attempt within a general economy —even in the institutional sense— that prevents its fulfilment, thus *making it* always impossible. Nevertheless, I would like to write in a *deconstructivistic fashion,* to try and write without and within some of the borders of the

postmodern shaping of my (mis)reading of "Signs and Symbols" that dramatize some of the oppositions governing deconstructive texts. Although the odds are against, it may "work."

2. Since I started from —and eventually reached— a state of complete ignorance in order to describe Nabokov's (non)concept of the relationships of consciousness, reality, and fiction, I must acknowledge the sources of my paper: Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: Los años rusos* (1992); Laurie Clancy's *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (1986); Beverly Lyon Clark's *Reflections on Fantasy* (1986); Peter L. Cooper's *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World* (1983). Equally important to my reading are the texts produced by the *soi-disant* Yale School: Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1977); Geoffrey H. Hartman's (ed.) *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979) and *Lectura y creación* (1992); Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1983) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979); J. Hillis Miller's, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin* (1990). However, these misreadings are nothing but my precarious trying-to-find-and-simply-agreeing-to some of the notions and themes suggestively posited in, within and around Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* (1983); Christopher Norris's *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (1982) and William Ray's *Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction* (1984). In fact, these last three books cooperated with my assumptions about modernism and postmodernism and about Nabokov's fiction in my reading of "Signs and Symbols"; actually, these two "groups" of readings co-operated *on* me while I was reading. The textually oriented nature of both the postmodern condition and the hermeneutic philosophical readings of deconstruction urged me to look eagerly for passages which commented directly on symbolic relations, textual patterns and interpretive speculations, and passages whose discussion of the philosophical oppositions on which they depend have an indirect bearing on problems of figurality and reading. However, this reading was, and still at this moment is to be, rejected as biased: it is nothing other than a faithful response to Culler's demands for deconstructive criticism, and therefore a reading governed by a teleological aim or meaning, thus tutoring any uncanny deconstructive truce away. Therefore I wonder whether the more accurate reading *à la* Yale is to be produced here; by now it is clear that the most skeptically rigorous —if indeed there is some skepticism—, or al least sincere, statements written *on* this paper appear *here,* in the remark about the way my reading is but an echo of the cannibal dialogue maintained by the titles above mentioned. It is, it may be, as if the other *section* had something of a parergonal character, of a commentary, glose or illustration of this *section*. But *this* —you may argue, and not without justification— runs the risk of becoming a tempting signature.

3. The term usually applied to this intertextual activity by many critics concerned with postmodern theory and literature is Hutcheon's *parody* (Hutcheon 1985). Nabokov's narratives have often been portrayed by critical papers —if we consciously permit our committment to seeking some pervasive unity of tone or theme in the whole work of an author, which is un-permissible— as essentially *parodic* —see Gass's remarks on Nabokov's parody of romance (Gass 1974: 139-142, 144-146), Clancy's statements on *Dar* as parody of Cherenyshevsky's *What is to be done?* (Clancy 1986: 15) or Tanner's commentaries on Nabokov's factual accu-mulation as a parodic device upon realism and naturalism (Tanner 1971: 37-38). However, I am not sure whether the word *parody* finds any appropriate place in a deconstructivistic reading, because the borders or limits of any text are much more problematic for me since I misread Culler's profitable *account* of the Derridadaic *Glas* (Culler 1983: 134-156) and Derrida's "Living On: Border Lines" (Hartman 1979: 75-176).

4. The basis of this affirmation rests on the effects of the sustaining figural implications of the metaphors of light and eyesight which permeate the texts of Western culture (Norris 1982: 81-83). Reading and visual perception are figurally related in my reading —as well as in "Signs and Symbols"— and underpin any (illusory) liability *exhibited* by this paper.

My intention in this re-mark is to sincerely acknowledge one of the tautening holes of my reading. However, to put all my argument under this note (or knot, and even nought), or under Tanner's quotes, or under this paraphrase of J. Hillis Miller, as if my contradictions were to be acknowledged and somehow exonerated here, is so far from innocent that it involves my argument and me at once in a dense tangle of assumptions and complicities, whether I want them or not, which will require an interminable disentangling.

5. Nabokov overtly exposed the recurrence of these themes in his brief introduction to the short story "Breaking the News" (Nabokov, 1975): "'Breaking the News' appeared under the title of "Opoveschenie" ("Notification") in an émigré periodical around 1935 and was included in my collection *Soglyadatay* (*Russika Zapiski*, Paris 1938)./ The milieu and the theme both correspond to those of 'Signs and Symbols', written ten years later in English (see *The New Yorker*, 15 May 1948, and *Nabokov's Dozen*, Doubleday 1958)."

6. This autobiography is shot through by similar passages reworking the dramatization of Nabokov's delight in and compulsion for observation; the paragraphs which recount his passionate activity as an entomologist (1960b: 123-139) are remarkable, particularly the ones *narrating* his fondness for the specificity and concrete detail of microscopic observation (1960b: 166-167).

7. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers —among others— the following meanings of these two nouns:

> **Sign**
> 1a .- A gesture or motion of the hand, head, etc. serving to convey an intimation or to communicate some idea.
> 1b .- A show or pretence *of* something.
> 1c .- A signal.
> 2.- A mark or device having some special meaning or import specially attached to it, or serving to distinguish the thing on which it is put.
> 2b .- A bookmark.
> 2c .- A conventional mark, device, or symbol, used technically (as in music, algebra, botany, etc.) in place of words or names written in ordinary letters.
> 3.- A mark of attestation (or ownership) written or stamped upon a document, seal, etc.
> 4 .- A figure or image; a statue or effigy; an imprint.
> 5a .- A device born on a banner, shield, etc.; a cognizance or badge.
> 5b.- Something displayed as an emblem token; *esp.* an ensign, banner, standard.
> 5c .- A pilgrim's token.
> 5d .- Insignia.
> 6.- A characteristic device attached to, or placed in front of, an inn or shop, as a means of distinguishing it from others or directing attention to it; in later use

commonly a board bearing a name or other inscriptions, with or without some ornament or picture.
7.- A token or indication (visible or otherwise) *of* some fact, quality, etc.
7d .- Trail or trace of wild animals, etc.
8 .- A trace or indication *of* something; a vestige (chiefly in negative phrases).
8b .- A mere resemblance *of* something.
9.- An indication of some coming event; *spec.* an omen or portent.
10a.- An act of a miraculous nature, serving to demonstrate the divine power or authority.
10b .- A marvel or wonder.
11a .- *Astr.* One or other of the twelve divisions of the zodiac.
11b .- A constellation.

Symbol
1.- A formal authoritative statement or summary of the Religious belief in the Christian Church, or of a particular church or sect; a creed or confession of faith, *spec.* the Apostles' creed.
1b.- A brief or sententious statement; a formula, a motto, a maxim; *occas.* a summary, synopsis.
2a.- Something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental and conventional relation); *esp.* a material object representing or taken to represent something immaterial or abstract, as a being, ideal, quality or condition; a representation or typical figure, sign or token, *occas.* a type (of some quality).
2b.- An object representing something sacred, *spec.* (*absol.*) either of the elements in the Eucharist, as representing the body and blood of Christ. (EVELYN *Letter to Father Patrick* : The symbols become changed into the body and blood of Christ, after a sacramental, spiritual and real manner).
2c.- *Numism.* A small device in a coin, additional to and usually independent of the main device or type.
2d.- Symbols collectively; symbolism.
3.- A written character or mark used to represent something; a letter, figure or sign conventionally standing for some object, process, etc. *e.g.* the figures denoting the plants, signs of the Zodiac, etc., in Astronomy; the letters and other characters denoting elements, etc., in chemistry; quantities, operations, etc., in mathematics, the faces of crystal in crystallography.

These definitions unfold a complex span of criss-crossing references. Each one is contained within the other, which is to say that none contains the others. A sign is defined as symbol in 2c, and a symbol as sign in 3. These definitions run really close together, since they define signs and symbols as *conventional* (that is, whose use is agreed upon and common among a group, but which has no other basis for its existence but this agreement and communal character) *marks,* that is, writing, "scribbling." However there is some disparity within this apparent coincidence. On the one hand, a sign is used technically (as in music, algebra, botany, etc.) *in place of words and names written in ordinary letters*, in place of other conventional marks. A sign is a symbol used specifically (and conventionally) to replace other ordinary or average marks that belong to the whole community by means of conventional marks which are specific to a group, that is ordinary or average within this group. This (un)definition —which is nothing

other than the attempt to translate one word into a sequence formed of any terms other than itself— unfolds itself through a series of repetitions brought about by the tyranny of the term *conventional* : any conventional mark is always already a conventional mark which replaces conventional marks. In addition to this, symbol is equated by SIGN 2c with mark and device (this last term, as I read it, contains the narrative of the use of the mark). On the other hand, symbol in 3 is a written character or letter used to *represent* something; *a letter, figure or sign conventionally standing for some object, process, etc*. The referential scope is strikingly (even transcendentally) different there; symbols are signs (no longer signs; signs forced to an estrangement) or conventional marks standing for objects, processes, etc., and no longer in place of other ordinary conventional marks. The terms "represent" and "stand for" (*instead of* "used technically in place of") point to the basic disparate feature: symbols are, as it were, performers, delegates of some utterly different mode of existence —whereas signs were conventional replacements among equally conventional modes of existence. Signs were caught up in an endless process of self-reference, while symbols are veiled references to something other, something immaterial or abstract, as a being, idea, quality or condition. This sense is essential in all the meanings *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers for symbol: symbols usually refer religious dogma, *truths*, they are reflections or expressions of the *logos* (*vgr.*, 1,1a, 2a); on one occasion (2b), these symbols are intimately connected with transcendence, becoming changed into the body and blood of Christ.

There remain also, as I conceive it, some other basic (seemingly) distinctive features. All the meanings offered for the word *sign* share the notion of a mark attached for technical uses, as a result of a deliberate act of stamping, printing or imprinting in order to distinguish the object or referent from the others, basically through the inscription of one's relation to this object. As for the word *symbol*, this relationship seems to be given (and not deliberately attached), dictated by some utterly different design, by the obedience to a founding *logos* which can only present itself through representation by symbols — which is definitely complicated by the fictional character pointed to by the sequences "formal authoritative statement or *summary*" and "a formula, a motto, a maxim; *occas.* a *summary*, a synopsis."

This divergence vanishes, or rather becomes unreadable, when we read in SIGN 9, 10a and 10b, that the intimacy with some transcendental otherness also inhabits the nooks and noughts (and notes) of the word "sign," or when we read in SIGN 11 how this conventional mark, when born on a banner or a flag also stands for something inmaterial or abstract, as a being, idea or quality, or else when we read in SYMBOL 3 that this conventional mark is also conventionally used among disciplines (including and included in SIGN 2c, 11a and 11b). The apparent disparity between these two terms appears to be groundless in "Signs and Symbols," though neither "Signs and Symbols" nor my reading can avoid its constant inscription. The words *sign* and *symbol* form (without forming) a dense tangle of allusions which is at once tangled and disentangled by their definitions in a dictionary, whose expression is, it may be, the odd relationship they maintain in the title "Signs and Symbols," where they are linked by "and," and at the same time separated by this "and" which abolishes any identity between the two.

8. Which, tempted by a "referential de Mania" for contingent riddling phonetic associations and considering who this "me" is —a Spanish student writing his essay for an English graduate seminar— foreshadows a rather gloomy future for me. This somehow affirms in "Signs and Symbols" the (un)definition of life as the constant loss of mere possibilities of improvement, or as J. Hillis Miller reads this: "To live is to read, or rather to commit again and again the failure which is the human lot" (1986: 67).

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