

## Article

# The Bridge and Narrativization of Vision: Ambrose Bierce and Vladimir Nabokov

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**Abstract:** The article contains a comparative study of the visual poetics observed in the literary texts of American writer Ambrose Bierce and Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov. In particular, the study focuses on Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and Nabokov's three short stories "Details of a Sunset", "Aurelian", and "Perfection", in all three of which a number of narrative tools, images, and motifs borrowed from Bierce's text can be found. The representation of the bridge and the narrativization of mystical insight are regarded as the principal features of the correlative imagery systems. These features are analyzed in order to discover Bierce's and Nabokov's understandings of the artist, visual imagination, and the freedom of will.

**Keywords:** Bierce; Nabokov; narrative; visual image; painting; poetics; determinism

American writer Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914?) and Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) belonged to different generations and possessed different life experiences. Bierce was born in a small town in the State of Ohio. Nabokov was born in Saint Petersburg, a European capital. Bierce came from a poor family, whereas Nabokov belonged to a famous wealthy family with a long lineage of nobility; in fact, his grandfather was the Minister of Justice. Bierce did not receive any systematic education, while Nabokov attended the Tenishev School (Tenishevskoye Uchilische), famous for its intellectual atmosphere, and he later graduated from Cambridge University. It is interesting that the early years of both writers coincided with periods of civil war. Bierce took an active part in the American Civil War (1861–1865), supporting the Northerners; he was wounded and later promoted into the officer rank. Nabokov, with his family, fled from the turmoil of the October Revolution to Crimea. Later, when the Civil War in Russia was at its height, Nabokov emigrated to Europe.

Bierce made a living as a journalist. Nabokov concentrated on literary texts, also giving private lessons, and after moving to the United States from Europe he delivered lectures at American universities. The lives of the two writers ended very differently. In 1913 Ambrose Bierce went to Mexico, where the Revolution was raging, and joined the Army of Pancho Villa, soon becoming M.I.A. The circumstances of his death remain unknown. Nabokov spent the last days of his life in prosperous Switzerland where he moved in 1961 from the United States, and where he concentrated entirely on literary texts and entomology.

Such contrasting biographies of the two writers reveal differences in their occupations, interests, and, most importantly, temperaments. Bierce was a cartographer, a warrior, and a journalist actively involved in the political and economic events of the USA (O'Brien 1976), whereas Nabokov was a professional writer who was occupied with his own literary texts, teaching, and entomology.

In this context, it is extremely interesting to reveal and observe strong connections between these two writers that have been often pointed out by scholars (Teletova 1997, pp. 782–85; Dolinin 2004, p. 37) and find several important similarities and differences in their short story fiction. As far as is known, there has been no concerted effort to conduct a comparative study of their shorter fiction, especially in relation to the visual poetics of both writers. Usually, critics do not venture beyond noting that Nabokov, in his stories "Details



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of a Sunset" (1924), "The Aurelian" (1930), and "Perfection" (1932) utilized the literary tool of false narrative development, which he borrowed from Ambrose Bierce's famous story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890). The connection between Nabokov's three stories and Bierce's "Occurrence", however, is not limited to the aforementioned literary tool: it also manifests itself in the implicit and explicit references to the images, motifs, and concepts that constitute Bierce's text. A thorough comparative study of Nabokov's and Bierce's poetics inevitably reveals more similarities than differences; the latter primarily appear on the levels of personal outlook and philosophical meaning.

As we have already noted, scholars unanimously affirm that Nabokov's literary texts contain numerous examples of poetic tools, images, and motifs borrowed from Bierce's fiction. However, there exists no exact information on the circumstances that led to Nabokov's acquaintance with Bierce's prose. It seems to be a likely assumption that Nabokov read "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" in the early 1920s, his attention being drawn to it by the general interest in Bierce's fiction characteristic of the postwar European and American cultures. Bierce and Nabokov developed their own visual poetics (Ames 1987, p. 5; Grishakova 2002; Trubetskova 2010, pp. 63–70), enabling the readers to observe their literary texts as they would observe paintings or theatrical performances. This peculiarity to be discussed in detail is related to the natural acuteness which both writers fostered since their early years. During the war, Bierce was a scout and a topographer; he drew maps of territories where military action took place (Conlogue 1999, pp. 265–66). His keen vision and acuteness often determined the success of military maneuvers. This work stimulated his visual imagination, and eventually led to the development of his visual narratives. Among Bierce's characters one often finds professional scouts carefully observe their surrounding environment and are perceptive of the tiniest details ("Chickamauga", "A Horseman in the Sky", "One of the Missing"). The visual poetics of Nabokov developed from his interest in painting, which had vividly manifested itself during his childhood. As a child, Nabokov was a keen painter, and his parents believed that one day he would become a professional artist. For two years he received lessons from the famous Russian painter Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875–1957), who developed the writer's visual memory and visual imagination, and who "made young Nabokov depict from memory" (De Vries and Barton Johnson 2006, p. 13). Nabokov's characters, especially the ones with whom he sympathizes, for instance, the character of Dryer in the novel "King, Queen, Knave", are endowed with keen vision and perceptiveness—the traits that they share with the characters of Bierce's stories.

Bierce and Nabokov attempt to overcome traditional linear narration by adding extra narrative dimensions that function as inconspicuous storylines which can only be disclosed through very attentive reading. These additional narrative levels are constructed by means of recurrent motifs, images, and isomorphic scenes. Unfolding alongside the main narration and interweaving with each other, they produce layers of hidden meanings and act as keys to deeper interpretation. Organized as patterns of horizontal and vertical connections, the texts appear as three-dimensional puzzles—visible constructions which require both reading and observation to be grasped.

Both writers challenged any ideology and ideological rhetoric, any holistic view of life ambitious enough to represent the absolute truth. They opposed knowledge and theories with observation, anticipating to some extent the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who would later separate reason and perception in his text "Eye and Mind" (1964). In his stories "Chickamauga", "A Horseman in the Sky", and "One of the Missing", Ambrose Bierce criticized both the ideology of the South and the rhetoric of the Southern Confederacy (Cheatem 1985, p. 220), which believed Southern Army soldiers to be heroes. He opposed this rhetoric (which, according to Bierce, produced only inane clichés) with precise narrative (Davidson 1974, p. 265) containing vivid visible images. Nabokov, who in his understanding of fiction attached more importance to imagery than to ideas (De Vries and Barton Johnson 2006, p. 11), and thus compared a literary text to a painting, also opposed ideology with visual experience (Trubetskova 2010, p. 63) and contraposed the gift of discerning

the manifestations of the transcendent in the mundane reality to ideological reasoning. Similarly to Bierce, Nabokov created patterns of vivid visual images. Whenever Bierce or Nabokov address an idea or a concept, they always present it as a visual image (sometimes rather trivial), while an ordinary object perceived by a character with keen vision always gains in their texts the importance of a philosophical concept (De Vries and Barton Johnson 2006, p. 17).

The eye is always the focus of both writers' attention. It is integrated into their texts as an organ of vision which perceives reality while also functioning as a metaphor. Bierce and Nabokov pay close attention to the problems of vision, its acuity and its weakness, its relation to the imagination and the ability to see the realm of the transcendent. They were interested in the process of vision itself, the emerging relationship between the observer and the observed, the situation when a vague visual impression gives birth to an object. That is why both writers often describe various optical effects.

Analyzing Nabokov's visual poetics, scholars note the technique of ekphrasis which Nabokov actively utilized in his earliest texts, narrativizing paintings of European and Russian masters (De Vries and Barton Johnson 2006, p. 19). Practicing visual poetics, Nabokov often used art terminology to assess reality aesthetically. Viewing reality through the prism of art, he turned it into paintings. Bierce did not utilize such techniques, but it is noteworthy that both writers applied the optics and the rhetoric of a topographers and geographers, creating narratives of maps (Shrayer 1999, pp. 71–72).

Having outlined this circle of circumstances, we may now turn to the analysis of the problem of the visuality of the early texts of Nabokov and Bierce, which are united by common techniques, visual poetics, common images, scenes and motifs. However, it is first necessary to briefly present these texts in their relation to the worldview of both authors.

In Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", planter Peyton Farquhar, sentenced by the Northerners to be hanged for his attempt to set the bridge on fire, stands on this very bridge which has become a scaffold for him, with a noose around his neck and his hands tied behind his back. Before his death, he attempts to focus his thoughts on his wife and children and thinks about salvation. At the moment of execution, when the sentence is carried out, and the executioners remove the board from under the feet of Peyton Farquhar, the rope breaks, and the character falls into the water. A fierce struggle for life begins. Now in the water, Farquhar frees his hands and neck with great effort, then evades the shots of his executioners. He dives, is pulled into the whirlpool, and soon finds himself on the saving shore. He then heads home through the woods. Night falls, and the forest through which he walks appears uninhabited. Finally, in the morning (or so it seems), he finds himself at the gate of his own house. His wife, about whom he has been thinking all this time, comes out to meet him. Just then, a furious blow falls on him, everything becomes drowned in darkness, and the reader observes the body of Peyton Farquhar hanging under the bridge. The heroic fight with death and the escape are revealed to have been just the play of imagination.

Bierce very skillfully manipulates the naive reader (Ames 1987, p. 54) who is unaware that a false narrative development is unfolding in the story. Yet, the tragic finale is prepared by the use of a large number of hints, including hidden ones. These hints undermine the reliability of the narrative and inform the reader that Peyton Farquhar did not escape, but rather died of suffocation.

Nabokov, in his three stories "Details of a Sunset", "The Aurelian", and "Perfection", uses techniques and images from Bierce's story. In "Details of a Sunset", Mark Standfuss, a salesman, returns home in the evening, immersed in romantic dreams about his fiancée Klara. He does not know that Klara has left him and returned to her former lover. Sitting in the tram and thinking about Klara, about his happiness, about his love for everything he sees, Mark Standfuss misses his stop. He jumps off the moving tram and feels a sharp pain, realizing that he was almost hit by a bus. He approaches his house and, just like Peyton Farquhar, sees his beloved at the gate. Then, reality gradually acquires a dream-like character and turns into a fantasy that is interrupted by a short flash of what is really

happening—a picture of Mark lying on the operating table. Mark dies, but, unlike Peyton Farquhar, does not lose himself in darkness—he becomes immersed into the realm of magical dreams instead.

Nabokov, like Bierce, consistently places signs of death appearing in Mark's fantasies and in reality. Nabokov's narrative is filled with quotations and allusions. He refers not only to the text of Bierce, but also to the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Through the latter reference, Mark is associated with King Mark, while Klara, who is unable to resist her love to a certain foreigner (Tristan), correlates with Isolde. In addition, endowing the enamored Mark with immeasurable love for all things, Nabokov hints at his resemblance to Mark the Evangelist and even to Christ himself, offering a motif of spiritual resurrection. The sparkler running off the wires at the beginning of the story is associated with the Christmas Star. When Mark's friend Adolf jokingly pokes him in the rib with his finger, he thereby acts as the Roman warrior Longinus, who plunged the spear into the body of Christ (John 19:34).

In the story "The Aurelian", the technique of a false narrative development is not used—it is only briefly indicated in the final episode. Nevertheless, the story contains explicit references to "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Pilgram lives as an unremarkable shopkeeper, but by vocation he is a born entomologist who dreams of going to exotic countries in search of butterflies. He often observes geographical maps for a long time, trying to imagine landscapes in which butterflies frolic. The surrounding reality irritates him and is perceived by him as an obstacle to the realization of his cherished dream. Pilgram appears to the reader as a hero of the early Romantic texts, experiencing longing, i.e., the desire to search for the infinite, the transcendent in finite forms of life, the spirit in earthly matter. A fluttering butterfly becomes a sign of this spirit, a new version of the blue flower imagined by Novalis in "Ofterdingen". However, mundane life hinders Pilgram from fulfilling his dream—his plans are inevitably disrupted. Finally, he finds a buyer for his collection of rare butterflies, hoping that the profit will allow him to go on a journey and fulfill his dream. Having received the money, he, keeping the plan a secret from his wife, prepares for a trip and suddenly dies. Nevertheless, the narrator states that Pilgram has gone on a trip and suggests that the reader should not attach importance to the fact that his wife found him dead in the morning.

In "Perfection", we can observe an instance of false narrative development which, however, is not expansive, being represented only by a few sentences. Here, as in the two previous stories, there are references to Bierce. Russian emigrant Ivanov, a geographer by profession, gives lessons to a teenager named David. Ivanov is naturally endowed with observational skills and strong imagination, while David is naive and stupid. Ivanov has a weak heart, while David is a great athlete. The two of them travel to a sunny Baltic resort where the heat causes Ivanov to have heart attack. The climax comes when Ivanov sees David drowning. Ivanov rushes into the water to save David, but his feeble efforts are in vain. He comes out on an empty shore, full of guilt and remorse, sees signs of death around him, and suddenly realizes that David is not dead. The reader, in turn, understands that it is Ivanov who has died, not David. Beyond the threshold of life, Ivanov's imagination awakens, revealing to him the beauty of the otherworldly, while in the real world, vacationers on the beach are trying to find his body.

"Perfection" contains an obvious reference to the Biblical story of David and Goliath. The role of David, who killed Goliath, is assigned to the boy named David, who becomes the involuntary killer of Ivanov-Goliath. An interesting scene in this regard is the one in which Ivanov tries to show David how to throw stones into the sea so that they bounce on the water. Ivanov fails to perform this feat, and David shows him how to throw correctly. Like the Biblical David who killed Goliath with a stone, Nabokov's David knows how to handle stones. Ivanov plays the role of Goliath. The narrator emphasizes his tall stature, and when Ivanov rides in the elevator to give a lesson to David, it seems to him that he is growing.

The obvious correlations between Bierce's story and Nabokov's three texts, such as the use of identical techniques, similar symbols, and visual effects, serve different purposes for

both writers which are related to the fundamental differences between Bierce and Nabokov in their understandings of man, free will, and imagination.

Ambrose Bierce's political and social views, as noted by John Brazil, changed throughout his life (Brazil 1980, pp. 230–33), but his understanding of human nature, formed under the influence of his Calvinist heritage (Brazil 1980, p. 232) and social Darwinism, persisted. Man, Bierce believed, is inherently vicious. His desires, no matter how diverse they might be, are subordinated to the desire to survive in the general war for existence, which, according to Bierce, is the natural state of human society. This means that a person is fundamentally a warrior and a killer. Such is Peyton Farquhar from "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", who, forced during the war to lead a lifestyle of a peaceful planter, dreams instead of military valor. This idea of man leads Bierce to the denial of free will, which combines the idea of the fate expressed in the ancient Greek tragedy and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. The character of Bierce is always shown as an experiencer of some universal evil destructive will, diffused in nature, which acts through him and always leads him to death. He makes every effort to avoid death, but such efforts always turn out to be in vain. Peyton Farquhar seems to be taking some initiative, performing actions, running somewhere, but eventually he is standing still, bound hand and foot by the logic of fate which will inevitably actualize.

Nabokov, unlike Bierce, denied any form of determinism (Trubetskova 2010, p. 63) (Boyd 1990, p. 283) and refuted the indispensable attachment of a person to time and mundane reality. He advocated the idea of chance, unpredictability, and unexpected turns of events. The relationship of a person with the transcendent, with the otherworldly, is not tragic in his texts. The transcendent for Nabokov is not hostile to man (Alexandrov 1991, p. 54); rather, it is characterized by love and regarded as something that is disposed towards human beings. For Nabokov's character, it is the highest happiness to achieve unity with the other world, a state that Nabokov called "cosmic synchronization" (Shrayer 1999, pp. 18, 40, 42, 68–69). Nabokov translates the problem of predestination from the ontological sphere to the aesthetic one, not discussing people, but characters. The author acts as the supreme force, while for the characters predestination, as Khasin notes (Khasin 2001, p. 36), takes the form of a freely chosen and lived fate. Nabokov advocates free creative imagination that creates aesthetic reality.

The Bierce's and Nabokov's characters are endowed with visual imagination. They dream, fantasize, compose. Both authors present their narratives as close to visible images as possible. In the stories of Bierce and Nabokov, visual imagination always tends to transcend and substitute empirical reality. For both Bierce and Nabokov, such imagination opens the door to the transcendent world independent of the mundane reality, a terra incognita. However, even here there exists some differences in the authors' assessments of the imaginations of their characters and the worlds that they create. For Bierce, who tends not to trust a person, to see a man as a vicious being, Peyton Farquhar's consciousness, subordinated to the desire to survive, is always enthralled by propaganda clichés and inane rhetoric in peacetime. When the moment of execution approaches, his visual imagination begins to function, to produce images in accordance with primitive literary clichés. Bierce is openly ironic and satirical. His Peyton Farquhar is a poor storyteller; he composes an explicitly poor text. He cannot overcome the empirical reality. It invades his fantasies, pointing out that he is hanging in a noose and suffocating. His fate reminds him of itself with ominous symbols that tell the reader that the character is on his way to the world of death. In Bierce's fiction, there is nothing beyond the boundaries of life but darkness and emptiness.

Nabokov's sphere of imagination is associated with the idea of inner freedom. Visual imagination connects the past, present, and future in the mind of the character. It overcomes the empirical, presenting it as a manifestation of the transcendent (Rutledge 2011, p. 184). The empirical world declares itself, but it cannot destroy the world pictured by the imagination, as it happens in Bierce's texts. The transcendent world revealed to Mark Standfuss, Ivanov, and Pilgram does not conceal anything sinister and hostile. On

the contrary, for these characters it turns out to be the highest happiness to achieve unity with this world, i.e., to reach “cosmic synchronization.” While Bierce’s character is profane, Nabokov’s characters are talented and inspired artists.

The eye is the most important, most frequently occurring image in the stories of Bierce and Nabokov, and the problem of visual perception is one of the key themes of these stories. The eye appears in all four texts as a living optical device, an intermediary between the external world and the consciousness of the subject, as well as a sensitive recorder on which the objective reality leaves its traces. The eye, when properly adjusted, captures not only the visible and material, but also the possible, the transcendent. It is able to catch the light that gives life to every visible form. At the same time, the eye is a special symbol for Bierce and Nabokov.

The European Romantic tradition that formed Bierce and Nabokov (Dolinin 2004, p. 34) associates the eye with the spirit, understanding the eye as a metaphor for the soul. The loss of the character’s soul, along with the ability to imagine, in many Romantic texts results in the weakening or even the complete loss of vision. In E.T.A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman”, the abduction of Nathanael’s soul by the devil-Coppelius is accompanied by the clouding of Nathanael’s eyes. Charles Baudelaire describes the blind (poem “The Blind”) like soulless automaton dolls.

Ambrose Bierce and Vladimir Nabokov both focus their attentions on the eyes of the characters and on the process of visual perception. For Bierce’s character, who is involved in the general struggle for existence which takes the form of war between all human beings, eyes serve primarily as a weapon. They often look “through the sights of the rifle” (Bierce 1909, p. 14). Vigilance and observation in Bierce’s stories are a property of good warriors, excellent killers. The ability to see well in his world is crucial for survival. This vigilance is combined in Bierce’s characters with a kind of blindness, an inability to distinguish the signs of fate in the surrounding world. For Bierce’s character, these signs are obscured by illusions and therefore are not clear to him. It is up to Providence to gradually remove the veil of illusions and enable the character to see the essence of things before his eyes are closed forever.

In Nabokov’s stories, visual acuity of the characters is their positive property. It is inextricably linked with creative imagination and even clairvoyance, the ability to discern the transcendent—the invisible area from which objects are born. Nabokov endows his truly creative characters (Mark Standfuss, Pilgram, and Ivanov) with such visual acuity. At the same time, their antagonists often suffer from poor eyesight (Trubetskova 2010, p. 59). Thus, in Nabokov’s early novel “King, Queen, Knave”, the main character Dreyer has amazing visual acuity, the observational skill of a genuine artist (Dolinin 2004, p. 50), while the unimaginative Franz, who enters into an implicit confrontation with him, suffers from myopia and wears glasses.

The differences in ethical assessments of the eye and the ability to see, found in the stories of Bierce and Nabokov, paradoxically highlight some important parallels in their texts. Nabokov uses several characteristics of the eye and vision that also appear in Bierce’s writing.

Bierce and Nabokov, directing the vision of their characters to the world around them, tend to periodically interrupt this vision. Their characters frequently open and close their eyes, turn blind for a moment and instantly regain the ability to see. These trivial physiological actions and transitions have symbolic meaning. In “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, Peyton Farquhar stands on the bridge with his eyes open. The narrator specifically emphasizes that the executioners have not blindfolded their captive. He looks down at the water moving under his feet. He is symbolically forced to see his inescapable fate in the image of the river flowing under his feet. Peyton Farquhar closes his eyes, trying to focus his thoughts on his wife and children, and thinks about salvation. Having turned off his vision and detached himself from the visible, closing his eyes to reality (Linkin 1988, p. 141), he makes a symbolic escape into the world of illusions, at the end of which his wife should meet him.

This very first scene of Bierce's story is parodied by Nabokov in "The Aurelian." Both Bierce and Nabokov integrate the images of closed eyes and a wife in their respective episodes. Peyton Farquhar's wife is far away from him, and Pilgram's wife is nearby. Peyton Farquhar, closing his eyes, dreams of being next to his wife, and Pilgram, who has closed his eyes, dreams of disposing of his wife: "He refused his supper, and for several minutes, with his eyes closed, nagged his wife, thinking she was still standing near; then he heard her sobbing softly in the kitchen, and toyed with the idea of taking an axe and splitting her pale-haired head" (Nabokov 2002, p. 256). Pilgram symbolically closes his eyes to his boring empirical reality in which there are no signs of genuine life.

In Bierce's story and Nabokov's related stories, the characters periodically lose their sight. Bierce's Peyton Farquhar goes blind three times: first from the light of the sun, then due to the water, and for a third time when he dies and drowns in darkness. These moments of blindness have symbolic meaning: they signify the character's inability to discern the Plan of God. In "Perfection", Ivanov, like Bierce's character, goes blind in the water. However, the motif of blindness is initiated in this story a little earlier, when Ivanov tells David about imagination and visual memory: "But the point is that with a bit of imagination—if, God forbid, you were someday to go blind or be imprisoned, or were merely to perform, in appalling poverty, some hopeless, distasteful task; you might remember this walk we are taking today in an ordinary forest as if it had been—how shall I say?—fairy-tale ecstasy" (Nabokov 2002, p. 345). Physical blindness, closed eyes, and the darkness of the prison do not hinder imagination and the inner vision which allows one to see the innermost secret of objects.

Weakness of vision, as we have already noted, is one of the most important motifs in Nabokov's texts. Nabokov presents poor eyesight, which makes it necessary for the character to wear glasses, as symbolic of the character's lack of imagination. In "Perfection", Ivanov puts on David's sunglasses: "Before leaving the house, he put on David's dark-yellow sunglasses—and the sun swooned amid a sky dying a turquoise death, and the morning light upon the porch steps acquired a sunset tinge" (Nabokov 2002, p. 345) The world seen through glasses loses its brightness, becomes dim, and appears as though dying. At the same time, Ivanov's imagination is weakened—he cannot concentrate on visual memory and evoke vivid images in his own mind. When Ivanov dies and passes into the other world, the glasses are removed. His imagination awakens, and reality regains its brightness and clarity: "Only then were the clouded glasses removed. The dull mist immediately broke, blossomed with marvelous colors, all kind of sounds burst forth . . ." (Nabokov 2002, p. 347). Weak eyesight is mentioned in the story once again when a woman in pince-nez (the one who takes a frightened David away) appears on the shore. This woman belongs to the vacuous beach crowd—the very crowd of people who, devoid of imagination and thus disconnected from the otherworldly reality, are futilely searching for Ivanov.

Bierce's and Nabokov's characters tend to observe, and they often become the objects of their own observation. Both writers create situations in which observation itself is observed. Nabokov's characters often imagine themselves as objects of someone else's observation (Connolly 1992, pp. 3–4). In "Details of a Sunset", Mark reflects on how Klara sees him, believing that she has fallen in love with him because of his tag. It is not for his internal properties, but for a visually accessible feature of appearance that Klara loves Mark. Similarly, in "Perfection", Ivanov adopts David's perspective, as well as the perspective of the people around him, trying to imagine his own appearance as it is seen by others.

In this context, a direct parallel arises between the texts of Bierce and Nabokov. In Bierce's story, Peyton Farquhar notices the shooter's gaze directed at him. Peyton Farquhar, catching this look, sees himself as an object of aggression and a victim: "The man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle" (Bierce 1909, p. 14). Nabokov, in the story "Details of a Sunset", offers a similar scene—the doctor looks at the pupils of dying Mark: "Mark was lying supine, mutilated and bandaged, and the lamp was not swinging any longer. The familiar fat man with the

mustache, now a doctor in a white gown, made worried growling small noises as he peered into the pupils of Mark's eyes" (Nabokov 2002, p. 85). The character's eyes turn out to be the eyes of the victim again, but in Bierce's story they are looked at by an unfortunate killer, while in "Details of a Sunset" it is an unfortunate savior who is looking. This intersection of looks is not the only coincidence; it can also be observed in the shift of focalization. The aforementioned scenes mark the points in the respective stories of both writers when the reader is no longer forced to see the reality through the eyes of the characters, but may assume a third point of view which becomes possible through the intersection of looks.

The problem of visuality in the texts of Bierce and Nabokov, as noted, should be considered in the context of the desire of both authors to present concepts and motifs in the form of vivid visual images. In this regard, the concept of fate is a key feature for both writers. Bierce, creating a character determined by physiology, heredity, and circumstances, denies free will and demonstrates the irresistibility of fate. Peyton Farquhar dreams of escaping from the place of execution, invents another narrative, but fate holds him tight and does not let him go. Peyton Farquhar is bound and motionless, a toy of fate. The visual correlates of this idea are the noose around Peyton Farquhar's neck and the rope binding his hands behind his back.

Nabokov, marking the presence of fate, uses similar images, apparently responding to Bierce's text. Mark Standfuss, who dreams of returning home to his beloved, lies on the operating table, and his body is bound with bandages: "Mark was lying supine, mutilated and bandaged, and the lamp was not swinging any longer" (Nabokov 2002, p. 85). In "Perfection", the character's binding by fate is also conveyed by a visual metaphor when Ivanov goes into the water to save David: "He felt enclosed in a tight painfully cold sack, his heart was straining unbearably" (Nabokov 2002, p. 346). It is notable that Ivanov is described not so much as a swimmer, but as a hanged man. The character suffocates, he is shackled, and a bag, which is usually put on the head of a condemned man on the gallows, appears in this description.

The motif of temptation is connected with the concept of fate in the texts of Bierce and Nabokov. Peyton Farquhar, standing tied up on the bridge, dreams of being next to his beautiful wife. She is a source of temptation for him. In the second episode of the story, it is revealed that Peyton Farquhar dreamed of being at war while he was living a peaceful life with his wife and children. He wanted to play theatrically the role of a warrior, as Peter Morrone notes (Morrone 2013, p. 317). At that moment, the war was a temptation for him, while the spy of the Northerners acted as an insidious tempter, seducing him with the prospect of a heroic death on the gallows.

This combination of two motifs, fate (boundness, stranglehold, rope) and temptation, also occurs in "Details of a Sunset." The temptation here comes not only from Klara, but also from Mark himself, who seduces the buyer with a beautiful tie in the store: "He knotted the tie on his hand, and turned it this way and that, enticing the customer" (Nabokov 2002, p. 81). The tie is a version of the noose from Bierce's story, and the hand tied with a tie is a reminder of Peyton Farquhar's tied hands. Thus, a rather mundane clothing item is revealed to be a visual correlate of the temptation and fate that binds the character.

The tie is not Nabokov's only reference to the noose. His stories contain multiple other images that resemble garrotes. For instance, Mark Standfuss grabs a hanging belt when he loses his balance in the swaying tram. When he lies on the operating table, his dream about Klara is interrupted by a vision of reality in which, instead of the beloved's dress, a lamp appears swinging on a cord: "He writhed, and Klara's green dress floated away, diminished, and turned into the green shade of a lamp" (Nabokov 2002, p. 84).

In "Perfection", the feelings of tightness and stiffness that Ivanov experiences on the train are complemented by an important detail: "The train was crowded, and his new, soft collar (a slight compromise, a summer treat) turned gradually into a tight clammy compress" (Nabokov 2002, p. 342). The collar presses on Ivanov's neck like a noose. In the same story, there is an optical effect that refers to the gallows of Bierce's text. In Ivanov's eyes, a moment before he jumps into the water and dies, "knots" appear that represent



opacities in the vitreous body of the eye: “His shoes were already full of sand, he took them off with slow hands, then was again lost in thought, and again those evasive little knots began to swim across his field of vision—and how he longed, how he longed to recall . . .” (Nabokov 2002, p. 346). The narrator calls the opacities “knots”, seeking an association with a noose and, accordingly, a fate ready to happen. It is important that the knots are a part of the character; they represent an element of his physiology, marking its indissoluble connection with fate. Fate leaves a symbolic mark on the vitreous body of Ivanov’s eye, like the noose leaving a mark on Peyton Farquhar’s neck.

The concept of fate in texts by Bierce and Nabokov is also realized as an audio-visual complex, combining both visual and audial images. In “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, Peyton Farquhar hears a sound resembling a hammer blow, which prevents him from concentrating on the thoughts about his wife and children:

And now he became conscious of a new disturbance. Striking through the thought of his dear ones was a sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil; it had the same ringing quality. He wondered what it was, and whether immeasurably distant or near by—it seemed both. Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell. He awaited each stroke with impatience and—he knew not why—apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer; the delays became maddening. With their greater infrequency the sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch. (Bierce 1909, p. 10)

Peyton Farquhar’s thoughts are symbolically interrupted by the blows of fate, by the inexorable clock (Ames 1987, p. 63), predicting the imminent death of the character. Then, Peyton Farquhar falls off a bridge and swings like a pendulum, hanging on a rope: “Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum” (Bierce 1909, p. 12). The audial image of time and destiny turns into a visual one. Peyton Farquhar himself confluences with time and finally connects with his destiny.

Nabokov uses the same audiovisual complex in his stories, somewhat reworking it. Doomed by fate, Mark Standfuss drops his cane while he is climbing the stairs, and it jumps down the steps with a rhythmic sound. Mark listens to the wooden knocking, which fades after a while. The knocking of the wooden cane against the steps represents the earthly time allotted to Mark, which is about to end.

In “Perfection”, time is symbolically represented by tapping in the very first description of David:

Fair-haired and thin, wearing a yellow sleeveless jersey held close by a leather belt, with scarred naked knees and wristwatch whose crystal was protected by a prison-window grating, David sat at the table in a most uncomfortable position, and kept tapping his teeth with the blunt end of his fountain pen. (Nabokov 2002, p. 338)

In this mundane, meticulous description, there is once again the familiar audiovisual complex. The sound, tapping, unites with the visible and tangible figure of a boy with a watch on his left hand. The tapping and the watch seem to be meaningless details, as they do not represent anything that could be regarded as crucial for the narrative at this point. However, fate has already assigned David the role of the involuntary killer of Ivanov-Goliath. He has a watch on his hand, and by tapping his teeth with a pen, he unconsciously counts down the time allotted to the teacher. This episode is recalled in the scene in which Ivanov’s visual memory recreates a picture of Russian men running out of the water, their teeth chattering from the cold: “Muzhiks came running out of the water, frog-legged, hands crossed over their private parts: pudor agrestis. Their teeth chattered as the pulled on their shirts over their wet bodies” (Nabokov 2002, p. 341). The

audiovisual complex is also preserved here, but now it is altered. Water (a reference to future drowning) and cold (an anticipation of the cold of death) are combined here with the sounds of chattering teeth.

An audiovisual complex that conveys the concept of fate appears in the story when Ivanov sees flapping flags on the beach before his death. They are mentioned twice in the text: "The dusky flags flapped excitedly, pointing all in the same direction, though nothing was happening there yet. Here is the sand, here is the dull splash of the sea." (Nabokov 2002, p. 345). The flapping flags beat time and reveal the direction of the character's fate. They point towards the sea where nothing has happened yet, but where the character will soon die. One more manifestation of the concept of fate can be observed in the fact that throughout the story Ivanov hears the loud pounding of his sick heart, which foreshadows his death. This manifestation is purely audial, as the source of the sound (which is Ivanov's heart) cannot be seen.

As can be observed, Nabokov, in his recreation of the concept of fate through the audiovisual complex, explicitly refers to Bierce. However, unlike Bierce, he arranges many miscellaneous objects of the mundane world as signs of fate. In Nabokov's stories, Bierce's noose turns into a cord of an electric lamp, a tie, a hanging belt, a collar, and even into opacities of the vitreous body. At the same time, the audiovisual complex of fate that appears in Bierce's story and which is expressed by the sound of the character's watch is transformed in Nabokov's stories into the knocking of a falling cane, the tapping of a self-writing pen, the flapping of flags, and the pounding of a sick heart.

The journey of Bierce's and Nabokov's characters into the transcendent world and the visualization of the works of their imaginations begins with a geographical map. The map is a projection of reality onto a plane, a schematization of the visible world. It translates three-dimensional, visible objects into signs, which represents a case when observation of the world turns into generalized knowledge about the world. Nevertheless, the map appeals to the eye and contains the potential of three-dimensional reality in the signs applied to it. In the texts of Bierce and Nabokov, we observe a transition from the map to the visible empirical reality, and then to the transcendent reality, i.e., from the generalized knowledge, the representation of the world, to its sensory perception, and then to the perception that reveals the supersensible.

Bierce, as aforementioned, was a professional cartographer and thus a skilled drawer of maps. The beginning of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is characterized by scholars as a kind of narrative map (Conlogue 1999, p. 264), on which the bridge is designated as the center from which the lines diverge in different directions: "Beyond one of the sentinels nobody was in sight; the railroad ran straight away into a forest for a hundred yards, then, curving, was lost to view. Doubtless there was an outpost farther along. The other bank of the stream was open ground—a gentle acclivity topped with a stockade of vertical tree trunks, loop-holed for rifles, with a single embrasure through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon commanding the bridge" (Bierce 1909, p. 8).

By creating a visual map, Bierce appeals to the reader's vision. He paints an objective picture, relying on his knowledge of military affairs and choosing the dry intonation of a military report. The second part of the story contains the episode with the spy. The third part, which introduces the escape scene imagined by Peyton Farquhar, is filled with sensual, visual images. However, as the narrative develops, the imaginary character of Peyton Farquhar's experience is exposed, and the visible, three-dimensional world gradually becomes flat, turning into a scheme and resembling a map again: "At last he found a road which led him in what he knew to be the right direction. It was as wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untraveled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective" (Bierce 1909, pp. 16–17). Knowledge is replaced by vision, and then vision becomes knowledge again.

Nabokov, as M. Schroyer rightly notes (Schroyer 1999, pp. 81–86), uses the techniques of a cartographer, as geographical maps appear in his stories “The Aurelian” and “Perfection.” Ivanov in “Perfection” is a geographer by education. The story begins with Ivanov drawing two parallel lines during the lesson he gives David. Further in the story there is introduced an enthusiastic commentary about the map, which is regarded as a form of primary knowledge with the potential to stimulate visual imagination that creates an imaginary three-dimensional world:

How beautiful, for instance, are ancient charts! Viatic maps of the Romans, elongated, ornate, with snakelike marginal stripes representing canal-shaped seas; or those drawn in ancient Alexandria, with England and Ireland looking like two little sausages; or again, maps of medieval Christendom, crimson-and-grass-colored, with the paradisiacal Orient at the top and Jerusalem—the world’s golden navel—in the center. Accounts of marvelous pilgrimages: that traveling monk comparing the Jordan to a little river in his native Chernigov, that envoy of the Tsar reaching a country where people strolled under yellow parasols, that merchant from Tver picking his way through a dense “zhengel”, his Russian for “jungle”, full of monkeys, to a torrid land ruled by a naked prince. (Nabokov 2002, p. 338)

The reality of the map is the beginning of the mystical journey that Ivanov is taking. Schematic reality gradually acquires visibility and three-dimensional properties, and knowledge is replaced by imagination.

The image of the map also appears in “The Aurelian.” The narrator names some geographical locations which Pilgram transforms in his imagination into visible pictures of a three-dimensional world imbued with spirit. Each location is reigned by a butterfly which is seen as the soul of the place: “Out of localities cited in entomological works he had built up a special world of his own, to which his science was a most detailed guidebook. In that world there were no casinos, no old churches, nothing that might attract a normal tourist. Digne in southern France, Ragusa in Dalmatia, Sarepta on the Volga, Abisko in Lapland—those were the famous sites dear to butterfly collectors, and this is where they had poked about, on and off, since the fifties of the last century (always greatly perplexing the local inhabitants)” (Nabokov 2002, p. 253).

Shortly before the trip, Pilgram constantly turns his gaze to the map: “He spent several hours examining a map, choosing a route, estimating the time of appearance of this or that species, and suddenly something black and blinding welled before his eyes, and he stumbled about his shop for quite a while before he felt better” (Nabokov 2002, p. 256). As in “Perfection”, the map is not only a schematic image of the world; it is a representation that must be transformed into an imaginary world in order to elevate flat reality into three-dimensional existence.

As observed, Bierce and Nabokov both create narratives of maps. The only difference is that Bierce returns his narrative back to the map, while Nabokov takes it to another world where there is no place for rational knowledge or calculation.

The most important image that visualizes the character’s transition to another world in the stories of Bierce and Nabokov is the bridge. By the end of the 19th century, the image of the bridge had become extremely popular in Western European painting. The bridge appears in the paintings of Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, and many others, as a form that organizes the composition of the work and sets it a certain rhythm. Bierce uses the bridge as an image that represents a peculiar theatrical stage. It is on this stage that the last act of the tragedy is to be played. In Nabokov’s “Details of a Sunset”, the bridge is a direct reference to Bierce’s story. It is used as if as a secondary image but is mentioned twice. The first time it occurs is when Mark Standfuss comes out of the pub: “When, half an hour later, he came out of the pub and said goodbye to his friend, the flush of a fiery sunset filled the vista of the canal, and a rain-streaked bridge in the distance was margined by a narrow rim of gold along which passed tiny black figures” (Nabokov 2002, p. 82). The second time, the bridge is referred to

implicitly. In the final scene, in the imaginary world just before his death, Mark addresses his imaginary audience and utters a phrase: “The foreigner is offering the aforementioned prayers on the river. . . .” (Nabokov 2002, p. 84). When Mark mentions a foreigner, he means both Klara’s lover and the American (foreigner) from Bierce’s story, who does not pray in the literal sense of the word, but appeals to Providence, hoping for justice and salvation. There is no explicit image of the bridge here, but it is hidden in the subtext.

Bierce and Nabokov depict their bridges in slightly different ways, focusing on different painting traditions. First of all, Bierce’s narrator sees the bridge up close; he fixes on the most insignificant details, working out the figures of the officer and the soldiers who stand on the bridge. Nabokov’s narrator sees the bridge from a great distance, the bridge is “far away”. The people on this bridge are barely distinguishable, dark figures seen from afar. Another difference is the angles from which the bridges are viewed. Bierce’s narrator observes the bridge from above and from the side: he sees all the participants of the action on the bridge, as well as boards under their feet and the railway rails. Nabokov’s narrator observes the bridge not from above, but from below. This is how the bridges of Vincent Van Gogh (*Langlois Bridge at Arles*) (Figure 1) and Cézanne (*Bridge over the Marne*) (Figure 2) are shown in the paintings with which Nabokov was well acquainted (De Vries and Barton Johnson 2006, pp. 50–51, 59–61, 55, 178). Drawing analogies with painting, Bierce undoubtedly adheres to the classical tradition of depicting the bridge, and shows a picture in which, in addition to the bridge, there exists a whole panorama. The bridge functions as a horizontal compositional link in the painting, drawn according to the classical tradition. M. Yampolsky notes: “The bridge creates a horizontal thrust, connecting the banks and ‘taking away’ the body residing in it into the forest, into the invisible. Below, the river sets a different direction of horizontal movement, orienting its dynamic energy along the banks (Yampolsky 1996, p. 11). Bierce thoroughly reveals all the details, buildings, and elements of the landscape, and even describes in detail the poses of the military men standing on the bridge. The bridge is revealed to be an image that serves as the uniting element of all the details of this composition.

Nabokov includes no panorama in his text. The bridge is represented as an object set apart from the rest of the imagery, its only compositional relation being the channel on which the fiery sunset is reflected. Nabokov introduces the bridge as an image referring to Bierce’s story and as a detail of the overall picture which splits into colors and lines that are related to other colors and lines integrated in the text. In this sense, Nabokov is a direct heir to the traditions of William Turner and the Impressionists.

Explaining the semantics of Bierce’s bridge, M. Yampolsky, developing the ideas of M. Heidegger, describes the bridge as a “place” that unites space and creates its boundaries (Yampolsky 1996, pp. 8–9). Bierce’s bridge indeed functions in this manner. It connects several elements: the earth, the shores of which it attracts to each other; the water (a stream flows under the bridge); the sky, to which it aspires; and the fire (falling from the bridge, Peyton Farquhar feels that streams seem to pass through his body and that he has turned into “a fiery heart” of a “luminous cloud” (Bierce 1909, p. 12)). The man on the bridge is placed at the intersection of these elements, i.e., in the center of the universe.

Nabokov also uses the image of a bridge as a place connecting the elements. The water, the earth, the sky, and the fire are present here, as in Bierce’s text. The fire is reflected in the water of the canal: . . . the flush of a fiery sunset filled the vista of the canal” (Nabokov 2002, p. 82). On Nabokov’s bridge, like Bierce’s images, people are at the center of the intersection of the elements, but they are more dehumanized, reduced to color and form: these are not characters with faces and external differences, but identical black figures.

The bridge in Bierce’s story is described not only as a place collecting the elements, but also as a primitive execution machine. Bierce’s narrator explains in detail how the execution will be put into action. Nabokov does not use the semantics of the image, but instead reinforces its metaphysical significance, describing it as a place where prayers are performed, i.e., as a version of a sacred center or a temple where a link to the transcendent world opens.

Finally, in Bierce's and Nabokov's prose, the bridge acts as a traditional symbol of transition to the other world. It is a place from which Peyton Farquhar goes to the world of visions and to the realm of the dead. Nabokov's bridge scene involves figures that are marked in black, i.e., the color of death.



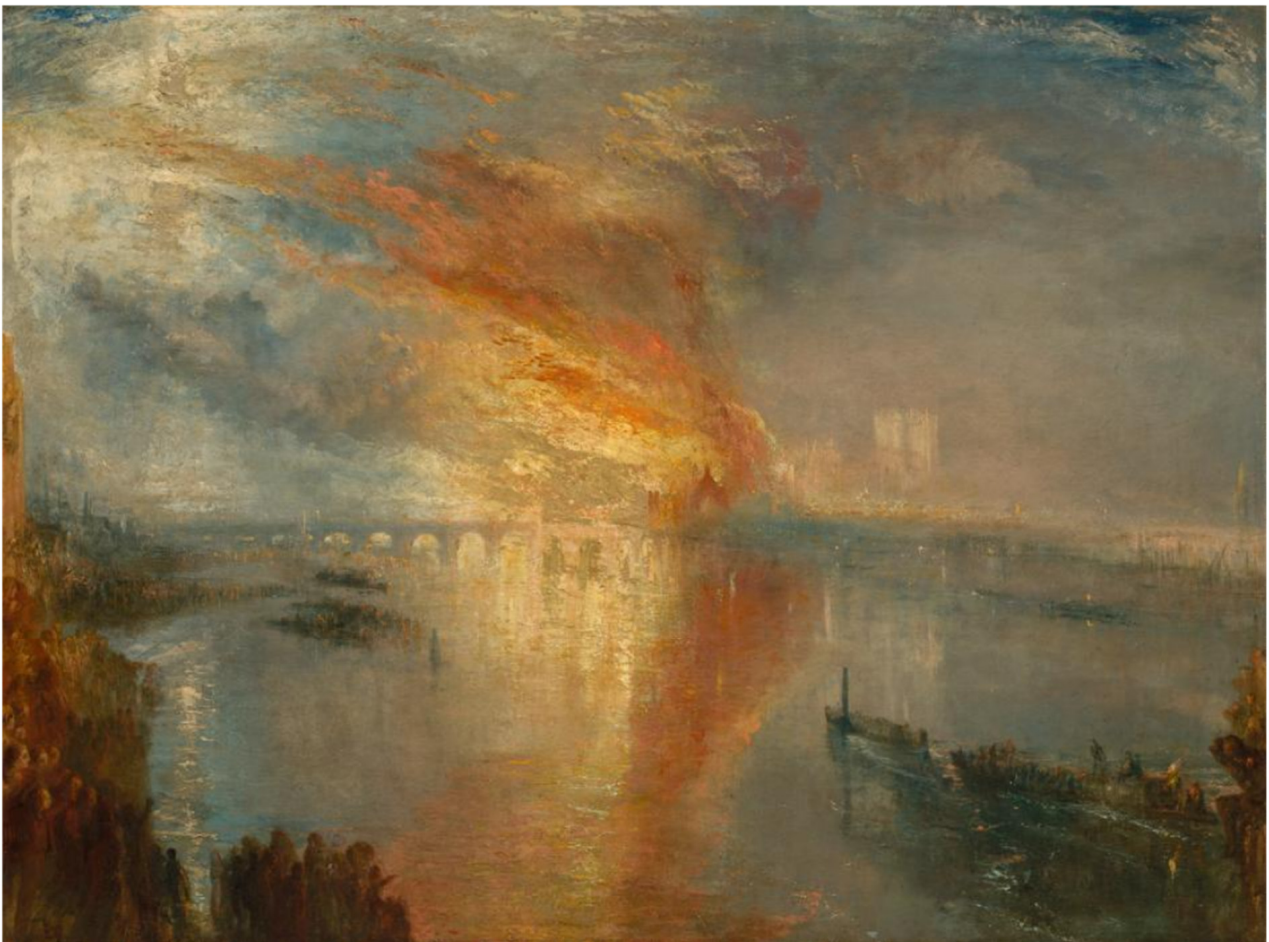
**Figure 1.** Vincent Van Gogh, *Langlois Bridge at Arles* (1888).



**Figure 2.** Paul Cézanne, *Bridge over the Marne* (1888).

However, Nabokov accumulates additional meaning in the image of the bridge and involves it in an interesting associative game in which sunset and fire appear. This game of repetitive images forms an additional line in the story, capturing the central characters, their feelings, elements, and symbolic time of action. It may be assumed that Nabokov, who knew and loved the paintings of William Turner ([De Vries and Barton Johnson 2006](#), pp. 20, 23), in his description of the bridge narrativizes Turner's famous painting *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1834) ([Figure 3](#)), namely the second version of this painting, which was presented at the Royal Academy's summer exhibition in 1835 and acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1942. The motifs, details, images, and colors of Turner and Nabokov coincide. Both present disastrous situations and include in their compositions a water element, a bridge, and a fire (Nabokov's sunset is fiery), as well as figures of people. It is essential that both Turner and Nabokov move the bridge a considerable distance from the observer, placing it in the distance. Turner's flames engulfing the buildings and the bridge are painted in gold. The golden color is also present in Nabokov's image of the bridge: the bridge is "margined by a narrow rim of gold" ([Nabokov 2002](#), p. 82). Here, in addition to the possible reference to Turner, there is a reference to the golden stars from Bierce's story, as well as to the alchemical tradition. In the case of Nabokov, it seems to us that the narrative picture is not localized in one description. Spread across the text, its elements are gradually collected to produce the whole image. The fire is referred to in the story as the "red blaze" (ryzhij pozhar) of Klara's hair ([Nabokov 2002](#), p. 79), a metaphor involving

amorous passion and possible death. When Klara decides to leave Mark, Nabokov shows the reader a burnt match as a visual correlate for extinguished passion and loneliness: “A two-dimensional wooden pig hung on the wall, and half-open matchbox with one burnt match lay on the stove” (Nabokov 2002, p. 81). Then, in the episode where the bridge appears (a symbol of the transition to another world), the fire correlates with sunset, the symbolic time of the transition from the day world to the night world, from life to death, from the realm of reason to the realm of imagination. Finally, in Mark’s vision the sunset covers half the sky, just like the golden fire in Turner’s painting. Winged statues also appear in Mark’s vision “lifted skyward golden” (Nabokov 2002, p. 83). Gold converges with fire, alchemically producing a single motif complex. This convergence correlates with Turner’s golden fire.



**Figure 3.** William Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1834).

Thus, the bridge, for Nabokov and for Bierce, becomes an important motif node and a visual correlate of many overlapping concepts and motifs.

The characters’ transitions into the fantasy world, which allows them to see the terra incognita of the transcendent world, is accompanied by a painful shock, followed by death. Lightning becomes a visual emblem that conveys pain and near-death convulsions. Peyton Farquhar, at the moment when he falls off the bridge, feels as if fiery streams are passing through his body: “These pains appeared to flash along well-defined lines of ramification and to beat with an inconceivably rapid periodicity. They seemed like streams of pulsating fire heating him to an intolerable temperature” (Bierce 1909, p. 12). Peyton Farquhar feels that he himself becomes a flame enclosed in a cloud, i.e., an electric lightning: “Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum”

(Bierce 1909, p. 12). Bierce, as we see, objectifies the inner feelings of the character, making them visible and symbolic.

In “Details of a Sunset”, Nabokov uses the image of a lightning several times: first as a mundane technical phenomenon, then as a design element, and finally as a visualization of the protagonist’s shock. At the very beginning of the text, lightning appears as an electric discharge running along tram wires and is associated with the Christmas Star and with anticipation of spiritual resurrection. Then, Mark sees the “arrow of bright copper” (Nabokov 2002, p. 82) on the dapper shoe as a design element, as a flat visual sign: “An arrow of bright copper struck the lacquered shoe of a fop jumping out of a car” (Nabokov 2002, p. 82). And finally, when Mark jumps off the tram, he feels as if stricken by lightning: “He felt as if a thick thunderbolt had gone through him from head to toe, and then nothing” (Nabokov 2002, p. 83). Visualizing the pain shock, Nabokov resorts to the same emblem as Bierce. Lightning marks the transition of Mark Standfuss into a borderline state, into the world between life and death, into the reality of his imagination. At the same time, Nabokov creates a visual image of a character struck by lightning, referring the reader to the famous Greek myth of Phaeton.

In “Perfection”, Nabokov also mentions lightning, a “flash of fingers” (molnievidnyj perebor pal’cev). When Ivanov plunges into the water, he experiences a strange sensation: “All at once a rapid something passed through him, a flash of fingers rippling over piano keys—and this was the very thing he had been trying to recall throughout the morning” (Nabokov 2002, p. 346). This lightning-like movement of the fingers visualizes the pain shock, but more importantly, Ivanov’s transition from the real world to the borderline world.

For Bierce’s and Nabokov’s characters, mystical insight happens upon crossing the boundary between life and death, liberating their souls and their imagination from the confinement of the empirical reality (Babikov 2019, pp. 81–82). In Bierce’s text, however, this liberation is shown as deceptive and illusory, while Nabokov presents it as genuine spiritual experience.

Bierce and Nabokov lead their characters to mystical insight and a vision of the transcendent. In this case, both are heirs of traditional Western European Romanticism, whose representatives (Novalis, Ludwig Tieck, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, etc.) sought to convey the mystical experiences of their characters who journeyed (externally and internally) with a purpose to overcome the material plane and reach the domain of spirit in which all life forms are united. Experiencing a mystical feeling, a vision of the transcendent, discovering the realm of spirit, the Romantic hero discovers this spirit in his own self. He experiences belonging, closeness to all things. He gains the ability to hear music which pervades the world, and, like a fairytale hero, begins to distinguish the secret language of plants and animals. In this way the subject becomes indistinguishable from the object.

In Bierce’s story, Peyton Farquhar experiences a mystical vision. At the beginning, it appears as a vague anticipation of the transcendent experience which is the first stage of the “journey”:

He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragon-flies’ wings, the strokes of the waterspiders’ legs, like oars which had lifted their boat—all these made audible music. A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water”. (Bierce 1909, pp. 13–14)

In Romantic poetry (William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, etc.), and painting (Caspar David Friedrich, etc.), reality usually appears vague, blurred, almost immaterial, seen as if through fog. Bierce, describing a mystical anticipation and placing the character at the border of the transcendent, focuses on the visual poetics of Henry Thoreau, who



in *Walden* sought to show things not as they are revealed to man, but as God sees them. In Bierce's text, reality is seen by a person, but by a person whose reason is disabled and whose visual perception is extremely enhanced. While in the first part of the story he shows reality as a map, as a system of visual signs marked on a plane, in the aforementioned passage he presents reality as it is. He appeals not to the reader's consciousness, but rather to their vision. Objects appear to be three-dimensional, material, vivid forms, because Bierce reduces the distance between the observer and the observed to the point where the opposition is hardly distinguishable, and therefore Peyton Farquhar sees the smallest details. This approach to objects and the convergence of the subject and the object ironically make it clear to the reader that Peyton Farquhar is dying; that his reason, which has always distanced the subject from reality, is fading.

However, this episode contains only an anticipation of the transcendent experience. A mystical insight comes later when Peyton Farquhar reaches the land:

The sudden arrest of his motion, the abrasion of one of his hands on the gravel, restored him, and he wept with delight. He dug his fingers into the sand, threw it over himself in handfuls and audibly blessed it. It looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds; he could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble. The trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he noted a definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange, roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of Aeolian harps. He had no wish to perfect his escape—was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken. (Bierce 1909, p. 16)

Bierce, as seen above, conveys mystical revelation through concrete visible images and even through a vivid gesture. Peyton Farquhar's imagination reaches the realm of the transcendent and creates an allegorical image of Paradise. The salvation from death, i.e., the salvation of the body, is presented as the salvation of the soul. Bierce visualizes the experience of the impossible, unattainable in earthly life—the vision of Paradise and heavenly bliss (Linkin 1988, p. 148). However, it is not difficult to notice the hidden bitter irony of Bierce here. By creating a picture of paradise life, he makes the reader understand that the character has not escaped physically—on the contrary, he has died and gone to the afterworld. The paradise picture itself, which serves as a symbol of mystical insight, is deliberately constructed by Bierce as a compilation of literary clichés. Bierce borrows the image of shining grains of sand from Blake's poem "Auguris of Innocence"—"to see a world in a grain of Sand" (Blake 2005, p. 88). The Aeolian harp, which conveys the transcendent music of life and symbolizes the unity of man and nature, as well as "creative imagination" (Ames 1987, p. 64), appears in the Romantic poems of Coleridge ("The Aeolian Harp") and P.B. Shelley ("Ode to the West Wind"). The Romantic clichés also include pink light—the light of mystical illumination. Thus, Peyton Farquhar's imagination turns out to be formulaic, and his mystical vision of Paradise is a parody. Later in Bierce's story, Peyton Farquhar moves through the abode of death (the forest) to darkness and nothingness.

Nabokov, visualizing mystical insight in the stories "Details of a Sunset" and "Perfection", is not parodic, like Bierce, but, on the contrary, extremely serious. In his case, mystical insight and ascension into the realm of the transcendent is the coveted goal of imagination, which is the main quality of a genuine, i.e., creative personality. Nabokov, unlike Bierce, presents imagination as a free and unpredictable productive force which originates from the inner freedom of an individual. Another difference is in their choices of the imagery patterns. Bierce, verbalizing and visualizing mystical insight, uses images of nature, while Nabokov uses elements of urban space.

Unintentionally debating with Bierce in "Details of a Sunset", Nabokov borrows from Bierce several images and techniques. Bierce, as aforementioned, demonstrates two versions of the visual narrative: the verbalization of a geographical map which produces visible signs, and the verbalization of mystical insight which produces material, vivid forms permeated with light. Nabokov also offers the reader two versions of the visual narrative. However, unlike Bierce, who presents his versions with an interval of several pages, he

arranges them in close sequence and applies them to the same material, deliberately forcing the reader to see two different ways of its representation. In the first case, Mark Standfuss sees reality in a state of happiness or delight, being on this side of life. In the second case, he sees the same thing again, but in a moment of mystical insight, being on the threshold of life and death, on the border between the earthly world and the transcendent world. In the first case, reality appears quite earthly, concrete and visible:

The houses were as gray as ever; yet the roofs, the moldings above the upper floors, the gilt-edged lightning rods, the stone cupolas, the colonnettes—which nobody notices during the day, for day people seldom look up—were now bathed in rich ochre, the sunset’s airy warmth, and thus they seemed unexpected and magical, those upper protrusions, balconies, cornices, pillars, contrasting sharply, because of their tawny brilliance, with the drab façades beneath”. (Nabokov 2002, p. 82)

This is not yet a mystical insight, but a certain approach to it: the pleasure of contemplating earthly beauty. Nabokov verbalizes the visible, utilizing the definitions of an art critic. He seems to be describing a painting instead of reality, as Theophile Gautier and Anatole France would do. The visible forms located above—that is, in the direction where people do not habitually look—are closer to the sky, to the realm of spirit, but at this point they are not yet recognized as spiritual by the character. Such recognition occurs at the moment of the mystical insight of Mark Standfuss. Nabokov once again presents the same Berlin houses to the reader:

The colors of the sunset had invaded half of the sky. Upper stories and roofs were bathed in glorious light. Up there, Mark could discern translucent porticoes, friezes and frescoes, trellises covered with orange roses, winged statues that lifted skyward golden, unbearably blazing lyres. In bright undulations, ethereally, festively, these architectonic enchantments were receding into the heavenly distance, and Mark could not understand how he had never noticed before those galleries, those temples suspended on high. (Nabokov 2002, p. 83)

Nabokov again turns his character (and with him, the reader) into an observer. However, this time the inner vision opens in Mark Standfuss. He sees not just images, but earthly forms imbued with heavenly light. Reality is presented as a visible embodiment of spirit—it rises to the sky. Here Nabokov, like Bierce, visualizes the heavenly bliss experienced by the character. Visible forms are associated with the heavenly host.

In this episode, Nabokov borrows a number of images from Bierce. The Aeolian harp that appears in Peyton Farquhar’s vision is manifested in his text in the images of blazing lyres. The sentries standing on the Owl Creek bridge like statues turn into winged statues of heavenly warriors in Mark’s mystical insight. The phrase “Half the sky was covered by sunset” (Polneba ohvatil zakat) is an altered quotation from Feodor Tyutchev’s poem “Last Love”: “Half the sky was wrapped in a shadow . . . ” (Polneba ohvatila ten’) (Tutchev 2003, p. 59). Tyutchev’s poem is about love which has come at the end of life and brought a feeling of bliss and hopelessness. These motifs are also present in Nabokov’s “Details of a Sunset:” Mark Standfuss experiences love on the eve of death, and this love is unrequited and hopeless, although the character does not know about it. The domes and the temples hanging in the air refer to Coleridge’s famous fragment “Kubla Khan Or a Vision in a Dream”, where the mystical artist builds domes in the air.

Coleridge’s fragment, like the fragment of Nabokov’s story, is a visualization of mystical insight. When the epiphany fades, the characters of Bierce and Nabokov move into the realm of death. This experience is also visualized by a chain of visual images and actions. However, Bierce and Nabokov visualize this transition differently. Peyton Farquhar, as we remember, walks through a gloomy forest without signs of life, contemplating the ominous stars. Meanwhile, Mark Standfuss enters an empty van, a kind of portal to another world (Suslov 2012, p. 38–42), which appears at the very beginning of the story as a furnished domain of death:

On the other side of the fence, in a gap between the buildings, was a rectangular vacant lot. Several moving vans stood there like enormous coffins. They were bloated from their loads. Heaven knows what was piled inside them. Oakwood trunks, probably, and chandeliers like iron spiders, and the heavy skeleton of a double bed. The moon cast a hard glare on the vans. (Nabokov 2002, p. 80)

When Mark, having experienced the disaster, enters the van, it turns out to be empty. In the finale scenes of both stories, Peyton Farquhar and Mark Standfuss are met by the women the characters have been yearning for. Peyton Farquhar pushes the gate and sees his wife coming down to meet him. Nabokov paints a similar picture with the only minor difference that the gate is opened not by the character himself, but by his beloved Klara.

In Nabokov's "Perfection", there is also a visualization of a mystical insight and a scene where the character appears in the abode of death. This time Nabokov changes the sequence that is present in Bierce's text and in "Details of a Sunset." Ivanov passes through the abode of death first, and then experiences a mystical insight. It is essential that this time Nabokov specifically focuses on the appearance of the character in the abode of death, while the insight is conveyed only in two phrases.

Nabokov visualizes the experience of death in the style of Romanticism by using vague, blurred visual correlates:

He came out on a stretch of sand. Sand, sea, and air were of an odd, faded, opaque tint, and everything was perfectly still. Vaguely he reflected that twilight must have come, and that David had perished a long time ago, and he felt what he knew from earthly life—the poignant heat of tears. Trembling and bending toward the ashen sand, he wrapped himself tighter in the black cloak with the snake-shaped brass fastening that he had seen on a student friend, a long, long time ago, on an autumn day—and he felt so sorry for David's mother, and wondered what would he tell her. It is not my fault, I did all I could to save him, but I am a poor swimmer, and I have a bad heart, and he drowned. (Nabokov 2002, pp. 346–47)

This indistinctness and dimness of the world is symptomatic of the weakness of the inner vision, which is not yet able to distinguish light in the surrounding reality. The stiffness of the character's confined imagination is visualized in the following action: Ivanov wraps himself in a black cloak with snake clasps. Snake clasps refer to the beginning of the story, where the road maps of the Romans are likened to snakeskin, as well as to Bierce's story, where the rope that tied Peyton Farquhar's hands is identified with a snake:

The cord fell away; his arms parted and floated upward, the hands dimly seen on each side in the growing light. He watched them with a new interest as first one and then the other pounced upon the noose at his neck. They tore it away and thrust it fiercely aside, its undulations resembling those of a water-snake. (Bierce 1909, p. 13)

It is essential that Peyton Farquhar is freed from the rope, while Ivanov, on the contrary, wraps himself in a cloak, thereby making his boundness and lack of freedom visible to the reader. The vagueness of visible forms, the absence of light, and deafness also have a mundane, physiological explanation which discloses the false narrative and Ivanov's delusion: the character is underwater. That is why he does not hear anything, and his vision is blurred. Ashen sand is another visual correlate of death that the character encounters when he (as it seems to him) comes out of the water. Nabokov once again uses an episode from Bierce's story—the one in which Peyton Farquhar, as it seems to him, gets out of the water onto the sand. Nabokov's sand, unlike Bierce's, does not sparkle in the sun, but resembles ash. Ashen sand is a visual correlate not only of death, but also of remorse: Ivanov feels guilty for being unable to save David. A mystical insight occurs later in "Perfection", and the visual correlates of death are replaced by the correlates of the awakened visual imagination: "Only then were the clouded glasses removed. The dull mist immediately broke, blossomed with marvelous colors, all kinds of sounds burst forth—the rote of the sea, the clapping of the wind, human cries . . ." (Nabokov 2002, p. 347).

Nabokov uses a visual metaphor, complementing it with sound effects and creating an audiovisual complex that conveys the ascension into the transcendent realm through imagination.

Thus, Bierce and Nabokov, using visual poetics, present to the reader the experience of the transcendent with the help of a clearly constructed system of images. At the same time, Bierce, focusing on the Romantic tradition, parodies it, while Nabokov, using the images of Bierce and the Romantics, reasserts it.

This exploration is a comparative study of a story by Ambrose Bierce and three stories by Vladimir Nabokov, written under the direct influence of Bierce. This influence is reflected not only in Nabokov's borrowing of Bierce's narrative strategy or individual images, but also in the visual poetics that both authors carefully developed. In this regard, the goal that both authors pursued became especially important—to visualize an experience that transcends the empirical and can be understood as a mystical vision. As demonstrated, the approaches of both authors are similar in certain aspects, but they manifest essential differences that stem from Bierce's and Nabokov's conflicting understandings of man, the freedom of will, and the imagination.

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