The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov

Leland de la Durantaye

I. Cruelty

FEW OF NABOKOV’S READERS have begrudged him their admiration, but many their affection. Asked in 1959 whether he felt that the novel was then traversing a ‘crisis’, Italo Calvino responded that it was not, and pointed to the recently published Lolita as proof.1 Many years later, Calvino was to restate his admiration, but this time accompanied by an aside. He remarked that Nabokov was ‘truly a genius, one of the greatest writers of the century and one of the people in whom I most recognise myself’, and that, ‘if I had to name the author who has most influenced me these last years and who I’ve preferred above all others, I would answer: Vladimir Nabokov’ Calvino goes so far as to credit Nabokov with having, ‘invented an English of extraordinary richness’. Despite this highest of praise, however, Calvino appends to his appreciation that, as a writer, Nabokov possessed ‘an extraordinary cynicism and a formidable cruelty’.2

1 ‘Ecco una nostra lettura recente: Lolita. La virtù di questo libro è che può esser letto contemporaneamente su molti piani: storia lirica, poema allegorico dell’America, divertimento linguistico, divagazione saggistica su un tema-pretesto, ecc... [Calvino’s ellipses] Per questo Lolita è un bel libro: per il suo esser tante cose insieme, il suo riuscire a muovere la nostra attenzione in infinite direzioni contemporaneamente.’ Italo Calvino, Saggi 1945–1985, ed. Mario Barenghi, 2 vols (Milan 1995) i. 1524.

2 ‘veramente un grande genio, uno dei più grandi scrittori del secolo e una delle persone in cui mi riconosco di più... si devessi dire chi è l’autore di questi anni che preferisco, e che mi ha anche in qualche modo influenzato, dire che è Vladimir Nabokov... si è inventato una lingua inglese di una ricchezza straordinaria... un personaggio di uno straordinario cinismo, di una crudeltà formidabile’. Ibid. ii. 2908.
Calvino was not the first or the only reader to remark upon a cynicism and a cruelty in Nabokov’s writing. Simon Karlinsky summarised the tenor of much of the Russian criticism of Nabokov in the European émigré communities of the 1930s by stating that Nabokov’s ‘originality and novelty’ were often seen as ‘a mask covering up his indifference to his fellow humans’.³ In Nabokov’s country of adoption, Joyce Carol Oates was to write of him that he ‘exhibits the most amazing capacity for loathing that one is likely to find in serious literature’.⁴ This note of ‘cruelty’, ‘indifference’, and ‘loathing’ is heard with equal regularity from Nabokov’s professional critics. ‘Being a character in one of the Vladimir Nabokov fictions is evidently not much fun’, wrote critic William Carroll.⁵ Pioneering critic and friend Carl Proffer referred to Nabokov as, ‘a somewhat sadistic author’.⁶ And the consternation of Nabokov’s most insightful and sensitive contemporary critic, Michael Wood, at Nabokov’s literary character was such that he delimited four different and distinct facets of it in his study The Magician’s Doubts, amongst which there is ‘Nabokov the mandarin’, whom he does not like, as well as the private, diffident, sensitive, observant Nabokov whom he likes very much.⁷ In his essay on Nabokov, Richard Rorty contends that the ‘central topic’ of Nabokov’s books is ‘cruelty’.⁸ Martin Amis was still more lapidary in his estimation that ‘Nabokov is the laureate of cruelty.’⁹ Just as did Calvino and a host of Nabokov’s other most perceptive readers, Rorty and Amis find a kernel of hard, bright cruelty at the heart of Nabokov’s person and work.

This cruel streak did not escape Nabokov. In 1954, then at work on Pnin, Nabokov wrote to Katharine White, ‘let me say merely that the “unpleasant” quality of Chapter 2 [of Pnin] is a special trait of my work in general’.¹⁰ This ‘unpleasant’ quality was thus not accidental, not expugnable, and not simply to be found in the work in question. His acknowledgement that there was a method to the madnesses of his characters does not, however,

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⁶ Carl Proffer, Keys to Lolita (Bloomington 1968) p. 4.
⁸ ‘Nabokov wrote about cruelty from the inside’, says Rorty, ‘helping us see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty’: Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity (Cambridge 1989) p. 146.
explain *why* he incorporated them into his work. Why, then, did Nabokov paint – and with such strange relish – the portraits of such unpleasant characters?

In an unsigned article entitled ‘Vladimir Nabokov-Sirin,11 Lover of Life’ from a 1931 issue of *Le Mois* (a Parisian periodical which also contained in that same issue an essay of Nabokov’s), one finds a laudatory and artful essay on Nabokov. Amidst the praise therein is the following reserve: ‘It is a strange and paradoxical fact that this young man – healthy, balanced, active and brimming with vitality, enjoys depicting perverse, sickly, even pathological figures. There is scarce a single likable character in any of his novels’.12 This insightful observation dates from years before the appearance of a new and dazzling generation of villains in such works as *Laughter in the Dark* (1938), where the unjust are punished by nothing more than the loss of their cash cow, *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), and *Ada* (1969). In all these cases, Nabokov’s readers are confronted with a cruelty which is difficult to reconcile with the kindly, if mischievous, figure the author cut.

To understand what cruelty might lurk in his works, we should recall that it is not only that Nabokov’s characters are cruel to other characters; Nabokov is also cruel to them. While many a character in his works lives and breathes with surprising life, they do so in absolute servitude to their author. In his descriptions of the process of his creation, he treats his characters with a tyrannical stringency recalling Michelangelo’s boast that marble trembled at his approach. Early in his career, in a letter to his mother, the then 26-year-old writer tells of how the characters in what would become his first novel, *Mary* (1926), had become, ‘real people, not characters invented by me’.13 It seems, however, that after this first work Nabokov began to keep his characters more carefully in line. In *Strong Opinions*

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11 ‘Sirin’ was Nabokov’s Russian pen name (his reason for selecting a pen name being principally that he shared his father’s name and at the time of his first publications his father was a very well-known man and prolific contributor to the émigré press).

12 ‘Chose bizarre et paradoxale: ce jeune homme sain, équilibré, sportif, chez qui la joie de vivre éclate, se plaît à peindre des êtres pervers, maladifs, voir pathologiques. Il n’y a pas un seul personnage sympathique dans ses romans, ou peu s’en faut’: ‘Vladimir Nabokoff-Sirine, L’amoureux de la vie’, *Le Mois: Synthèse de l’activité mondiale* (Paris), 6 (June/July 1931) p. 141. Given the general atmosphere of hoaxing that Nabokov surrounded his literary self with, all such artful and anonymous moments connected with the reception of his works excite suspicion. As far as this essay, it is less likely that Nabokov wrote it himself than that it was written by Nabokov’s close friend Gleb Struve. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton 1990) p. 364.

Nabokov proclaims, ‘my characters are galley slaves’. In response to a question about the experience of having ‘a character take hold of [the writer] and in a sense dictate the course of the action’, Nabokov replied: ‘I have never experienced this. What a preposterous experience! Writers who have had it must be very minor or insane’ (SO, p. 69).

Novelists not usually considered minor or insane have, however, often offered such professions de foi in their characters. Though one might find Balzac’s calling on his deathbed for a doctor from his work rather than his life – Dr Bianchon, from La Comédie humaine – as beyond the bounds of a healthy relation to one’s creations, it is not difficult to understand and appreciate the position of his countryman André Gide some hundred years later declaring towards the end of his own life that ‘no sooner have I conceived of the work than I am completely at its mercy, and my every energy dedicated to its composition. I then have no more personality than that which is appropriate to the work in question’. One finds, moreover, remarks in a similar vein under the pen of one of the few novelists in English (or any language) whom Nabokov genuinely treasured. In the preface to the first edition of David Copperfield, Dickens writes of ‘how an Author feels as if he were dismissing some portion of himself into the shadowy world’, after the completion of a work, ‘when a crowd of the creatures of his brain are going from him forever’. For him, whatever the reader’s engagement with his story, ‘no one can ever believe this Narrative, in the reading, more than I have believed in the writing’. Though Nabokov would say, in the closing lines of his lecture on a different work of Dickens (Bleak House), that ‘a great writer’s world’ is ‘a magic democracy . . . where even some very minor character, even the most incidental character like the person who tosses the twopence, has the right to live and breed’, the writer himself, as Nabokov sees him, is an absolute monarch.

In relegating such experiences of characters taking control of the course of a book to the ‘minor’ and ‘insane’, Nabokov was perhaps thinking of an author

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14 Strong Opinions (1973; repr. New York 1990) p. 95. In this they fared better than his butterflies. Nabokov’s responses to the propriety of killing the butterflies he so ardently studied are indignant (see for one example, his long response to the question in the Apostrophes interview: Apostrophes: Bernard Pivot rencontre Vladimir Nabokov, May 30, 1975; Live broadcast by Antenne 2, Paris. Video version (VHS SECAM); Visions Senil, Paris. LoC shelf no: VAB 3408. On another note, though Nabokov claims absolute authorial control over his worlds, the work has its occasional, if slight, revenge. In the opening lines of chapter 5 of Speak, Memory (p. 95), Nabokov talks of the weakening of his memories of his French governess after having loaned her to a character in one of his books.

15 ‘le livre, sitôt conçu, dispose de moi tout entier, et que pour lui, tout en moi, jusqu’au plus profond de moi s’instrumente. Je n’ai plus d’autre personnalité que celle qui convient à cette œuvre’: from a journal entry dated July 1922, cited in Maurice Blanchot, L’Espace littéraire (Paris 1955) p. 88 n. 1.


whom he considered, in fact, to be both: Henry James. A few years earlier, Nabokov had debated with his choleric correspondent Edmund Wilson the value of Henry James’s writing and found James sorely wanting (James had a certain ‘charm . . . but that’s about all’). As the celebrated prefaces to the New York edition of James’s works bear ample witness, James experienced, half-appalled, half-enthralled, what he called that ‘happiest season of surrender to the invoked muse and the projected fable’, when his characters resolutely took the upper hand and dictated to him the rhythm of the work.

Nabokov’s literary calendar knows no such season of happy surrender. To make sure his galley slaves are rowing in unison, he goes so far as to penetrate the confines of his fictional worlds, appearing as a cross between a character and a god in his fictions. He and his wife briefly stop in for a dance and a quick round of inspection in Nabokov’s early work *King, Queen, Knave*. In a passage omitted from the second edition of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov says of Sirin that ‘his best works are those in which he condemns his people to the solitary confinement of their souls’. In *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Defense* are perfect instances of such, and in both works Nabokov the creator – an ‘anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me’, as he would later call himself – offers encoded tips as to how to break out of such confinement (*Cincinnatus* from *Invitation to a Beheading* succeeds, and Luzhin from *The Defense* tragically fails). In the early Russian novels, the trapped character is dimly aware of his creator but powerless to obtain a greater share of knowledge or control. ‘How cruel’, wrote Nabokov of himself, ‘to prevent him from finding in art – not an “escape” (which is only a cleaner cell on a quieter floor), but relief from the itch of being.’ In the foreword to *Bend Sinister* Nabokov evokes how the story’s main character (a philosopher by calling), ‘suddenly perceives the simple reality of things and knows but cannot express in the words of his world that he and his son and his wife and everybody else are merely my whims and megrims’ (*BS*, p. xiv). To his readers he confesses that he, ‘the Author, take Krug to my bosom and the horrors of the life he has been experiencing turn out to be the artistic invention of the Author’. More sedately, Nabokov appears, butterfly

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23 Selected Letters, p. 50.
net in hand, in a late addition to his screenplay for Lolita (Kubrick cut the scene from his shooting script). In Edward Albee’s lamentable theatrical adaptation of Lolita (the play, an unconditional flop, premiered in New York in 1981), Albee reflects precisely this tendency in Nabokov’s work by introducing a character named ‘A Certain Gentleman’ who is none other than the author himself.

In Nabokov’s lecture on Joyce, he claims to identify, as no other Joyce scholar that I know of has contended before or since, the recurrent man in the brown mackintosh as ‘no other than the author himself. Bloom glimpses his maker!’ (LL, p. 320). In a notebook entry Coleridge once wrote, ‘When a man is attempting to describe another’s character, he may be right or he may be wrong – but in one thing he will always succeed, in describing himself.’24 A more apt motto for Nabokov’s lectures would be difficult to find. Nabokov’s assertion about Bloom glimpsing his maker finds little support in Joyce’s text. Its principal interest is, however, in describing Nabokov himself. And as ‘anthropomorphic deity’, Nabokov often shows a fingernail-paring indifference to his creations like the one that Joyce dreamt of in Portrait of the Artist.25 But Nabokov’s visits to his created worlds should not be taken as mere acts of postmodern pedagogy whereby the author reminds his naive readers that what they are entering is a book and not a world. His autocratic control of character and his forays into his fictional worlds go hand in hand with a formal artifice found everywhere in his writing – a formal artifice which finds profit and pleasure in concealment and deception.

This harshness extended beyond Nabokov’s attitude to his characters – it reached his readers as well. Writers haughtily unconcerned for who will follow the densities and intricacies of their work were not rare in the twentieth century. One need only think of the dense arcane of Pound and Eliot, both of whom Nabokov detested, or the kaleidoscopic allusiveness of Joyce, whom Nabokov adored. James Mercanton recalled having once visited Joyce and found him and Stuart Gilbert at work on the then Work-in-Progress (which became Finnegans Wake), ‘gleefully’ inserting words taken from a Samoyed dictionary so as to make it more ‘obscure’.26

25 ‘The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails’. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York 1992) p. 223 (ch. 5).
Nabokov never exhibited quite this level of insouciance as to who was to follow the forking paths of his subtleties, but he showed, nevertheless, extraordinarily little concern for his readership. He was not simply joking when he quoted, as he was fond of doing, Pushkin’s dictum: ‘I write for pleasure and I publish for money.’\textsuperscript{27} The gifted and enigmatic Sebastian Knight expresses the pleasure principle of his prose in similar, if more strident, terms: ‘no imminent punishment can be violent enough to make me abandon the pursuit of my pleasure’.\textsuperscript{28} Cicero relates the anecdote of a disconsolate young flautist told by his teacher after a less than rousing response from a Roman audience to forget the masses and ‘play for me and the Muses’.\textsuperscript{29} For Nabokov, this is, however, this audience is already too large. In place of Gertrude Stein’s ‘I write for myself . . . and for strangers’, Nabokov writes, ‘for myself in multiplicate’ (\textit{SO}, pp. 114–15). What is more, he states: ‘I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask’ (\textit{SO}, p. 18).\textsuperscript{30}

This is a position Nabokov would hold until the end of his life – witnessed by his remarks in the final interview he gave, where he reminded his readers that

the writer’s task is the purely subjective one of reproducing as closely as possible the image of the book he has in his mind. The reader need not know, or, indeed, cannot know, what the image is, and so cannot tell how closely the book has conformed to the author’s intentions, nor has the author any business trying to learn whether the consumer likes what he consumes . . . the author is perfectly indifferent to the capacity and condition of the reader’s brain.\textsuperscript{31}

Or more tersely expressed: ‘I have no purpose at all when composing my stuff except to compose it’ (\textit{SO}, pp. 114–15).

\textsuperscript{27} Nabokov quotes this remark in a French documentary entitled \textit{Vladimir Nabokov est un joueur d’échecs} (‘Vladimir Nabokov: Chess Player’), directed by Bernard Cwagenbaum.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{The Real Life of Sebastian Knight} (1941; repr. New York 1992) p. 53.


\textsuperscript{30} This polemic is anchored not simply in well-known Western debates on ‘engaged’ literature, but also in a particularly Russian context.

\textsuperscript{31} Interview with Robert Robinson. ‘The Last Interview’, in Peter Quennell (ed.) \textit{Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute} (New York 1980) pp. 119–25, p. 122. Nabokov’s indifference to readers in general did not prevent him from remarking to Katharine White after the latter’s rejection of ‘The Vane Sisters’ – what Nabokov felt to be his best short story – ‘what matters most is the fact that people whom I so much like and admire have completely failed me as readers in the present case’ (\textit{Selected Letters}, p. 117). One hears a similar note in a letter to Edmund Wilson from 1955, this time regarding Lolita, noting that, ‘I realize that even you neither understand nor wish to understand the texture of this intricate and unusual production’ (\textit{Nabokov–Wilson Letters}, 296).
As to questions of social, moral, or political utility Nabokov was particularly pointed. In the introduction to *Bend Sinister* he stated, ‘I am not “sincere”, I am not “provocative”, I am not “satirical.” I am neither a didacticist nor an allegoriser. Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of “thaw” in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent’ (*BS*, p. xii). Anything that treats ‘Ideas’, anything general, was, for him, without importance or interest.

There is indeed a large element of histrionic bluster in these statements, and Nabokov is indeed amusing himself at his interviewers’ expense. Nevertheless, these remarks are not limited to the interviews, and Nabokov is not simply amusing himself. He notes of Dickens’s *Bleak House* that ‘the sociological side . . . is neither interesting nor important’; hitting close to home (his and ours), he enjoins his readers to ‘remember that literature is of no practical value whatsoever, except in the very special case of somebody’s wishing to become, of all things, a professor of literature’ (*LL*, pp. 68, 125). Unsurprisingly, the biographical approach to literature is granted the same opprobrium. Again of *Bleak House*, Nabokov epigrammatically says, ‘so let us be thankful of the web and ignore the spider’ (*LL*, p. 65). Of studying an author (qua something other than author) via the work, Nabokov closes his circle with the announcement that ‘it is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author’ (*AL*, p. 316). In his attack on the utilitarian view of literature Nabokov has an American precedent: Edgar Allan Poe, with whose work – including Poe’s polemic against what he called ‘the heresy of *The Didactic*’ – Nabokov was amply familiar. Nabokov’s compatriots, however, were not on the same page. Solzhenitsyn, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1970, remarked that, ‘literature can convey the life experience of one whole nation to another’. A conception of literature’s province and power more foreign to Nabokov’s would be difficult to find.

It bears noting here that Nabokov wrote two works which have all the earmarks of political novels: *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938) and *Bend Sinister* (1947). The degree to which he saw the latter as a political work can be seen in a letter written by his wife Véra (who conducted the lion’s share of his correspondence), but with his imprimatur (‘at this point my husband thinks it essential to submit to you’), that though one of the main ‘themes’

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32 It should come as no great surprise, then, that as a professor Nabokov appears not to have been overly concerned with student response. He blithely notes in *Strong Opinions* that ‘my method of teaching precluded any genuine contact with my students’ (p. 104). Boyd cites Nabokov regarding his lecture course at Cornell: ‘I had not much contact with the students. This is something I liked.’ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton 1991) p. 172.
of the book was ‘a rather vehement incrimination of a dictatorship’, ‘the dictatorship actually represented in the book is imaginary, it deliberately displays features peculiar a) to nazism, b) to communism, c) to any dictatorial trends in an otherwise non-dictatorial order’. More directly to the point, and more directly flowing from Nabokov’s pen, in *Strong Opinions* Nabokov claims of *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* that they offer ‘absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism’ (*SO*, p. 156). Nevertheless, in the foreword to the English edition of *Invitation to a Beheading* he states: ‘I composed the Russian original . . . some fifteen years after escaping from the Bolshevist regime, and just before the Nazi regime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether or not my seeing both in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book, should concern the good reader as little as it does me’ – thus making his wife’s statement, and his own earlier statement into something of the order of a marketing ploy. In his published and public statements, Nabokov seems to say that the public need not be consulted – whether for political, moral, aesthetic, or other reasons.

Nabokov saw himself in a very special relation to his readers – which is to say, no relation at all. By his own account their opinion was not of the slightest importance to him. He had repeated conflicts with the editorial staff

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33 *Selected Letters*, p. 80.

34 *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (1959; repr. New York 1989) p. 5. It is for this reason particularly interesting to note that the US government initially requested Nabokov’s permission to publish a German translation of *Bend Sinister* as a part of the re-education programme after the Second World War. See Nassim Balestrini, ‘Nabokov Criticism in German-Speaking Countries: A Survey’, *Nabokov Studies*, 5 (1998/9) pp. 185–234: 217. Edmund Wilson once wrote to Nabokov precisely on the question of political significance, after reading *Bend Sinister* (in 1947):

You aren’t good at this kind of subject, which involves questions of politics and social change, because you are totally uninterested in these matters and have never taken the trouble to understand them. For you, a dictator like the Toad [in *Bend Sinister*] is simply a vulgar and odious person who bullies serious and superior people like Krug. You have no idea why or how the Toad was able to put himself over, or what his revolution implies. And this makes your picture of such happenings rather unsatisfactory. Now don’t tell me that the real artist has nothing to do with the issues of politics. An artist may not take politics seriously, but, if he deals with such matters at all, he ought to know what it is all about (*Nabokov–Wilson Letters*, p. 183).

Wilson goes on to make the even more acute observation that ‘what you are left with on your hands is a satire on events so terrible that they really can’t be satirized – because in order to satirize anything you have to make it worse than it is’ (ibid.).
of *The New Yorker* about the implementation of editorial changes to accommodate the ‘average reader’. But this was precisely the entity Nabokov’s campaign was waged against. In the lectures on playwriting he gave at Stanford in 1940 Nabokov kept a hidden agenda, which he enumerated in a notebook and which included ‘exploding the myth of the average audience’. In a letter to Wilson in 1956 he wrote: ‘I . . . think that at a time when American readers are taught from high school on to seek in books “general ideas” a critic’s duty should be to draw their attention to the specific detail, to the unique image, without which . . . there can be no art, no genius, no Chekhov, no terror, no tenderness, and no surprise’. Nabokov’s goal was not simply the snobbish one of morally annihilating the uncultured reader and reducing him or her to a state of wide-eyed, wide-mouthed ineffectuality, but rather that of de-massing the audience, of combating the individual’s tendency to react as an undifferentiated member of an undifferentiated group.

Umberto Eco claimed that, ‘So as not to disturb the text’s travels, the author should die after having written it.’ Like Eco, Nabokov does not approve of the author coaxing and correcting his readers, though not because he wants to allow his text and its readers a maximum of freedom, as did Eco; it was simply because their welfare is a point, if we take him at his word, of no importance.

John Stuart Mill described the reading of poetry as less hearing the poet than overhearing him. It seems that Nabokov envisioned something similar for his prose. And the real addressee (beyond the dedicatee of all his works, his wife Véra), or the real way in which he should be heard or overhead, is an open question. An artist seeking maximum independence and freedom for his art is an understandable thing. Given the fate of so many Russian artists of Nabokov’s generation, that this was an especially sensitive issue for him is still easier to understand. Nevertheless, his remarks on the question not only sound somewhat callous, they have a disingenuous ring. Nabokov’s works were, after all, not prised from his unwilling arms, and he

This intuition, like that which Adorno was formulating at around the same time, is a decisive one for literature which wishes to pose, present, or represent political problems. It is indeed Beckett, unmentioned in Wilson’s correspondence with Nabokov, and hardly an international figure in 1947, who would be the writer of their generation, better able to rise, or sink, to this occasion.

had energetically sought to find as wide a readership for them as possible. When confronted with the complexity of competing demands from his readers, however, he dismissed them all – or pretended to. Some of this is indeed wry and playful, but certainly not all of it. Calculating how serious or how facetious he was on the matter will help today’s reader little. More important for understanding his work, and the responses of its wide variety of readers, is all that should incline us not to take Nabokov at his word on the matter. As critics such as Brian Boyd, Vladimir Alexandrov, Michael Wood, D. Barton Johnson, and others have stressed in a series of highly pertinent studies, much inclines us to look elsewhere than in his programmatic statements for open or hidden invitations to participate in his works of art. The question for the next section is then: what if these invitations cast his cruelty in a far different light?

II. Patterns

Nabokov was famous for weaving complicated patterns into his works. Were these patterns meant to disclose a hidden meaning or message to the careful reader? Or were they just one aspect of an impish wish to keep literary critics busy and befuddled, as Joyce proclaimed that he wished to do, for at least 300 years? In *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov writes that ‘the glory of god is to hide a thing, and the glory of man is to find it’ (*BS*, p. 106). How are we to understand this glorious hiding and finding? What is hidden and what is there to find under the surface of Nabokov’s texts? Does this hiding and finding simply involve the solving of a puzzle or a riddle engaged in for its own sake and designed only to exercise the agility, dexterity, and erudition of the reader? Or does it belong to a larger system or sphere of speculations?

The encrypting of a parallel content in a work of art has a rich and long tradition. Before we place Nabokov in this context we should recall that there are few things which he railed against with more vehemence than, precisely, this tradition. *Allegory* is in a very real sense a method of reading where the work is read not merely for its more or less simple story but as a vessel for the expression of another story running alongside it, full of social, political, religious, and metaphysical meaning. Nabokov loathed allegory and was eager to tell his readers so. If we are to believe Nabokov, then, the patterns he weaves into his works are not allegories in the sense of being signs pointing towards another story or sense lying beyond them, and for which they would merely be ciphers.

Nabokov felt so strongly about this point that he actually went to the trouble of sprinkling his stories with reminders. One finds in his works various mocking invitations to read allegorically. To name just a single member of this family, we might think of the weird insertions of sexualised objects in his works, such as *Ada*’s ‘enormous purple pink plums, one with a wet
yellow burst split’. These details seem to be placed along the reader’s way principally to dissuade him or her through their crass excess from seeking a meaning for the work elsewhere than in the work (i.e. in this case, in systems of sexual symbolism of a more or less psychoanalytical sort). One of the types of patterning included in Nabokov’s works, then, is patterning that reminds the reader not to go seeking meanings in symbolic signs or systems. But there are many more.

Nabokov saw life as rich, varied, alive, and fantastically important in every one of its moments. For him, every moment in every place offered something for the gifted and dedicated observer to observe and cherish. A writer with such a belief coupled with an exceptionally retentive memory must thus find some criterion of selection, some means or method by which to uncover a pattern and progression in the multiform heterogeneity of what he or she perceives. Without such a pattern, all experience would swim before one’s eyes, would dissolve into an unceasing, senseless series, a concatenation of the unconnected.

In his first novel, Nabokov’s protagonist talks in a moment of depression of how, ‘the whole of life seemed like a piece of film-making where heedless extras knew nothing of the picture in which they were taking part’. Later in that same work we read:

And as he [Ganin] stared at the sky and listened to a cow mooing almost dreamily in a distant village, he tried to understand what it all meant – that sky, and the fields, and the humming telegraph pole; he felt that he was just on the point of understanding it when suddenly his head would start to spin and the lucid languor of the moment became intolerable. (Mary, p. 47)

This entrancing and nearly intolerable moment where a blessed instant seems so rich in promise that it cannot but reveal its secret – and then that secret slips away – is a telling one. Nabokov was familiar with the passage in Proust’s Recherche where young Marcel, the narrator, relates, in a similar setting, how he was suddenly gripped in the midst of a seemingly unexceptional adventure by a sense of importance and meaning, of a riddle about to unveil itself – and which then recedes from view. This pattern, about to resolve itself, is what the young narrator of Proust’s novel will follow until its very end – and the riddle turns out to be nothing more or less than the

42 A la recherche du temps perdu, 4 vols (Paris 1987–9) i. 177–9.
creation of a work of art and the pattern proper to that work. For Nabokov, from his first work to his last, nothing less is at stake.

In the final section of Nabokov’s final Russian novel, *The Gift*, we read of that work’s protagonist (like Ganin, closely related to his creator), Fyodor:

He was in a troubled and obscured state of mind which was incomprehensible to him, just as everything was incomprehensible, from the sky to that yellow tram rumbling along the clear track of the Hohenzollerndamm . . . but gradually his annoyance with himself passed and with a kind of relief – as if the responsibility for his soul belonged not to him but to someone who knew what it all meant – he felt that all this skein of random thoughts, like everything else as well – the seams and the sleaziness of the spring day, the ruffle of the air, the coarse, variously intercrossing threads of confused sounds – was but the reverse side of a magnificent fabric, on the front of which there gradually formed and became alive images invisible to him.43

Just when the teeming and disparate world is too much with him, Fyodor finds in it the promise of a pattern, a magnificent fabric which begins gradually to reveal the images and forms which it concealed.

Just as we find such a moment in Nabokov’s final Russian novel, we find one in his final English one. In *Look at the Harlequins!* we read of the narrator’s waking nightmares. Once, in the dark of night, the narrator observes points of light:

Those dots corresponded, perhaps, to my rapid heartbeats or were connected optically with the blinking of wet eyelashes but the rationale of it is inessential; its dreadful part was my realising in helpless panic that the event had been stupidly unforeseen, yet had been bound to happen and was the representation of a fatidic problem which had to be solved lest I perish and indeed might have been solved now if I had given it some forethought or had been less sleepy and weak-witted at this all-important moment. The problem itself was of a calculatory order: certain relations between the twinkling points had to be measured or, in my case, guessed, since my torpor prevented me from counting them properly, let alone recalling what the safe number should be. Error meant instant retribution – beheading by a giant or worse; the right guess, per contra, would allow me to escape into an enchanting region situated just beyond the gap I had to wriggle through in the thorny riddle, a region resembling in its idyllic abstraction

those little landscapes engraved as suggestive vignettes – a brook, a *bosquet* – next to capital letters of weird, ferocious shape such as the Gothic *B* beginning a chapter in old books for easily frightened children. But how could I know in my torpor and panic that this was the simple solution, and the brook and the boughs and the beauty of the Beyond all began with the initial of Being.\(^{44}\)

Finding a pattern is that which is able to forestall the anxiety caused by the strangeness, suddenness, and disparateness of perception. Finding such a pattern is the way out of the labyrinth of fear, the thread which will lead to ‘the simple solution’ of life’s language: ‘and the brook and the boughs and the beauty of the Beyond all began with the initial of Being’. For Nabokov and his creations, the tracing of patterns combats anxiety – from the rationalised anxiety engendered by a sense that the world lacks an intrinsic order, to the irrational anxieties of sleepless nights and their whirling images.

The search for a pattern presents a danger, however, of which Nabokov was well aware. In Nabokov’s early novel *The Defense*, Luzhin, the young chess genius at the heart of the story, is hiding in the attic of his house: ‘After a few minutes Luzhin grew bored, as when one’s throat is wrapped in flannel and one is forbidden to go out. He touched the gray dusty books in the open box, leaving black imprints on them. Besides books there was a shuttlecock with one feather, a large photograph (of a military band), a cracked chessboard, and some other not very interesting things.’\(^{45}\) Both for the reader and for Luzhin, one of those things does prove rather interesting (not the shuttlecock). The military band has no *suite* in the story, but the cracked chessboard does, as the gifted player runs aground on his obsessive reliance on the forms and patterns of the game which has become his life. Luzhin’s ‘chess obsession’ consists precisely in the ultimately annihilating search for a certain type of pattern – patterns in life like those found in chess – which spread out ever further across the spaces of his life. The trick of the novel is that, though within its world Luzhin is quite mad (it seems to the reader that he hallucinates the chess pattern he finds), in the world of the reader’s perception of patterns, he is not mad at all, as those patterns are to be found in the novel. As Nabokov himself made clear in the preface to the English translation of the work, the novel unfolds following the rules and form of a game of chess ending in the baroque *sui-mate* situation whose correlation in the world of the novel is nothing less than Luzhin’s suicide. Nabokov is frank that Luzhin’s life contains a ‘fatal pattern’ (*Defense*, p. 8).


In his introduction to *Bend Sinister* Nabokov points out to his reader a ‘peculiar code message’ transmitted to the protagonist by ‘an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me’ (*BS*, p. xviii). ‘In the last chapter of the book’, says Nabokov, ‘this deity experiences a pang of pity for his creature and hastens to take over. Krug, in a sudden moonburst of madness, understands that he is in good hands: nothing on earth really matters, there is nothing to fear, and death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution’ (pp. xviii–xix). This coded message takes the form of a recurrent pattern: a puddle. ‘The puddle thus kindled and rekindled in Krug’s mind’, says Nabokov, ‘remains linked up with the image of his wife not only because he had contemplated the inset sunset from her death-bedside, but also because this little puddle vaguely evokes in him my link with him: a rent in his world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty’ (p. xv). Nabokov’s better-known novel *Pnin* proceeds along similar lines, where similar signs and wonders are announced in the unprepossessing form of a curious squirrel.

Luzhin, Krug, and Pnin are confronted with similar patterns – patterns which are the signs of their maker. The difference is that the chess genius is not able to see beyond them, while the philosopher, Krug, is – if only faintly. Luzhin’s unique but fatal error is in believing that the opposing force wishes to beat him. That he is wrong can be seen in the book’s last lines: ‘the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him’ (*Defense*, p. 256).

Let us turn to a more personal instance – what Nabokov has to say about the patterns he has been able to trace in his own existence. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov refers to ‘the supreme achievement of memory’, which is ‘the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past’ (*SM*, p. 170). Memory’s ‘supreme achievement’ is the ordering of the chaotic richness of perception, full of loose ends and half-sketched movements (‘the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past’), into a form which allows the ‘innate harmony’ underlying those ‘suspended and wandering tonalities’ to be heard. In a proposed sixteenth and last chapter of his memoir (which took the playful form of a review of the preceding fifteen chapters) a disguised Nabokov says the following: ‘Nabokov’s method is to explore the remotest regions of his past life for what may be termed thematic trails or currents.’

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seemingly chance connections between the matches with which his father’s friend General Kuropatkin performed a trick for Nabokov as a child, and the match a disguised Kuropatkin later asked of Nabokov’s father on a railway platform – and which in turn links up with a theme of trains relating to his toys and to the war between the Japanese and the Russians in which Kuropatkin led the Russian forces – Nabokov remarks that ‘the following of such thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography’ (SM, p. 27). This searching for ‘thematic design’ in life ceases here to be a method which Nabokov observes in his writing and becomes a vocation – the ‘true purpose of autobiography’.47

When one examines Speak, Memory with an attentive eye, one finds a rich array of such patterns. The memoir begins with a ‘cradle’ and ends with a ‘coffin’ – indicating in a luminous abbreviation the path every life must follow. And yet this, like the match–train–war theme or pattern noted above, never tells a larger, overarching story, never amounts to another story – never takes on the form of allegory – but instead reflects the principal theme of the story itself. In the final lines of Speak, Memory, Nabokov, his wife, and his young son are walking towards the boat which is to take them to America as they see, at last, ‘a splendid ship’s funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture – Find What the Sailor Has Hidden – that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen’ (SM, p. 310). Here we at last see, and cannot then unsee, that the structure of the book is an evocation of, and farewell to, the Europe, and the Russia, of Nabokov’s life up to that point – the hidden rebus of exile – but what that rebus discloses is nothing other than the same theme which had been seen in more wandering and disparate form from the memoir’s opening pages.

In the Apostrophes interview with Bernard Pivot (see note 14), Nabokov speaks openly of employing such a technique for his novels:

My best novels do not have one, but instead several specially interwoven stories. My Pale Fire employs this counterpoint technique, as does Ada. I like to see the principal theme not simply radiate throughout the novel, but to also develop small secondary themes. Sometimes it is a digression become dramatic in an out of the way corner of the story,

47 Nabokov confides precisely this same task to drama, which method he conceived, in the Stanford lecture notes from 1940, as ‘the selective and harmonious intensification of the loose patterns of chance and destiny, character and action, thought and emotion, existing in the reality of human life’ (cited in Boyd, Nabokov: The American Years, p. 31).
or the metaphors from a developed discourse linking up to form a new story. 48

This patterning, or as Nabokov calls it here ‘counterpoint technique’, does not tell a separate story, but instead allows ‘the principal theme’ to radiate more fully through the book – and to shape it. ‘The glory of god’, as we saw, ‘is to hide a thing, and the glory of man is to find it.’ But in Nabokov’s works, what is hidden is not another meaning, but that same meaning more artfully signed. 

*Lolita* is particularly rich in such signatures. Therein we find an excerpted passage from a ‘Who’s Who in the Limelight’ from 1946 which wryly evokes, far in advance, the various ravelling and unravelling thematic threads one will later find in the work (*AL*, pp. 31–2). A similar usage of a seemingly innocuous detail offered only to give the narrative something of the disparate flow and feel of life can be found in Lolita’s class list, which contains many a wink and nod for the attentive rereader – not least in the person of the pupil Aubrey McFate (*AL*, pp. 51–2). The principal instance in this work, however, of such patterning seems surely to be the one that shrouds Clare the Obscure – Lolita’s lover and abductor whom the narrative carefully cloaks and then reveals – and in so revealing shows that many a seemingly unimportant detail provided earlier was pointing precisely to Mr Quilty. 49 Of the moment when Humbert at last learns from Lolita’s lips who his rival and vanquisher is, we read:

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48 ‘Mes meilleurs romans n’ont pas une mais plusieurs histoires qui s’entrelacent d’une certaine façon. Mon *Feu pale* possède ce contrepoint et Ada de même. J’aime voir le thème principal non seulement rayonner à travers le roman mais encore développer des petits thèmes secondaires. Quelquefois c’est une digestion qui tourne au drame dans un coin du récit, ou bien les métaphores d’un discours soutenu se joignent pour former une nouvelle histoire.’ Nabokov himself offers no examples in the interview in question. In *Ada, or Ardor* we find, however, a diamond necklace theme which not only follows Nabokov’s description, but functions in a similar way to the match theme of *Speak, Memory* which we saw above. In *Ada*, we find first a real diamond necklace, then a citation from Chekhov about diamonds which segues into a story which is a transmogrification of Maupassant’s diamond necklace tragedy, ‘La Parure’, which story then suggests the violent breaking of this initial necklace to follow – and which concludes in Demon’s ‘demented diamonds’ of the latter half of the book (see *Ada*, pp. 189, 193, 509). In the self-critique cited above, the disguised Nabokov says of *Speak, Memory*: ‘The reader will surely enjoy finding for himself the convolutions, the stepping stones, the various smiling disguises of this or that thematic line running through the book’ – and clearly did not mean that book alone (‘Conclusive Evidence’ p. 124).

49 To cite a single instance, one might think of the strange letter that Lolita’s friend and partner in deception Mona Dahl writes to her in which she reminds Lolita: ‘Ne manque pas de dire à ton amant, Chimène, comme le lac est beau car il faut qu’il t’y mène. Lucky beau! Qu’il t’y – What a tongue-twister!’ (*AL*, p. 223). It would require a very patient reader (with a knowledge of French) to find Quilty’s name nestled in that strange twist of Mona’s grammar ‘il faut qu’il t’y mène’,
Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment; yes, with express and perverse purpose of rendering . . . that golden and monstrous peace through the satisfaction of logical recognition, which my most inimical reader should experience now. (AL, p. 272)

For Humbert, even the reader most strongly disposed against him must credit him with the formal discipline and craftsmanship involved in reproducing the stations of his discovery. Dozens of details in his narrative show how this face and form flickered at the edges of Humbert’s consciousness over a period of years without his ever being able to resolve it into a single, recognisable image – and when it does, following Humbert, it does not fail to produce a ‘golden and monstrous peace’.

This instance of dissimulation and discovery evokes one of the passages in Speak, Memory which tells us most about Nabokov’s veneration of deception and discovery: ‘It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind’s birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realises that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird’ (SM, p. 298). Deceptive pattern and its revelation mimics nothing less than the initial movements of consciousness, nothing less than the ‘mind’s birth’. Nabokov notes elsewhere in Speak, Memory that ‘coincidence of pattern is one of the wonders of nature’ (p. 157). As a young man, Nabokov began to look very closely, as his remarkable gifts allowed him to do, into the book of Nature. Therein he began to see something akin to signs and symbols of a Creator in the created world – in, to choose the example he chooses, the excessively, extravagantly elaborate markings on the wings of butterflies. Mirroring nature then, for him, means mirroring the patterns she reveals to the careful observer. By doing so, he reproduces an experience like that which he claims to have had of the world. What is most singular about this revelation is that what is revealed when the deception is discerned and deciphered is not a hidden message or meaning, but, so to speak, the process of discovery itself. That which is revealed is not another story, but a deeper interconnection of elements in that same story – all its hidden winks, nods, clues, and codes tell the same story more finely perceived. Many of the signs encoded in Nabokov’s works could be best called signatures, denoting principally the conscious and willed fact of their signing. Many can be traced to their signifying lair, many cannot, and still more wander between the two regions. ‘Among entries that arrested my attention as undoubtable clues per se’, says Humbert of Quilty’s paper trail,
'baffled me in respect to their finer points I do not care to mention many since I feel I am groping in a border-land mist with verbal phantoms turning, perhaps, into living vacationists' (AL, pp. 250–1).

III. A Divinity thatShapes our Ends

In *The Gift* we read:

Beyond the bridge, near the small public garden, two elderly postal workers, having completed their check of a stamp machine and grown suddenly playful, were stealing up from behind the jasmine, one behind the other, one imitating the other’s gestures, toward a third – who with eyes closed was humbly and briefly relaxing on a bench before his working day – in order to tickle his nose with a flower. Where shall I put all these gifts with which the summer morning rewards me – and only me? Save them up for future books? Use them immediately for a practical handbook: *How to Be Happy*? Or getting deeper, to the bottom of things: understand what is concealed behind all this, behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green greasepaint of the foliage? For there really is something, there is something! And one wants to offer thanks but there is no one to thank. The list of donations already made: 10,000 days – from Person Unknown. (p. 328)

One does not know who to thank for the donation of the gift of works and days, but the tracing of patterns is a way of ordering one’s gifts, and this ordering is called for because, for Nabokov, there is ‘something’ ‘concealed behind all this’. As Nabokov’s son noted, from the date of Nabokov’s father’s assassination in Berlin in 1922, the word God disappeared from his poetry. He was not a member of any organised religion, nor did he show any faith in one (as he remarks in *Speak, Memory*: ‘Since, in my metaphysics, I am a confirmed non-unionist and have no use for organised tours through anthropomorphic paradises, I am left to my own, not negligible devices when I think of the best things in life’: SM, p. 297). Nevertheless, in chapter 2 of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov says of his mother:

her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending

50 See as well Nabokov's statement that his ‘highest enjoyment of timelessness’ was ‘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 humoring a lucky mortal’ (SM, p. 139).

51 Dmitri Nabokov in an interview with the Spanish journal *Joyce*, submitted (in English) to the NABOKOV-L Listerve by Dmitri Nabokov, Sunday, 12 Oct. 2003.
it in terms of earthly life. All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour. (p. 39)

This chapter of Nabokov’s memoir is written under the sign of motherly love (it was originally entitled ‘Portrait of my Mother’), and orchestrates a symmetry between the discovery of this world and life (in childhood) and the intuition, the intimation, of some other form of life beyond this one. The chapter treats of first and last things, and ends in artistic lucidity. Nabokov tells us that it is not in dreams, ‘but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the past, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction’ (SM, p. 50). At this point we should reconsider the judgement of one of Nabokov’s most perceptive critics, Savely Senderovich, who wrote that the concealment and revelation of patterns – of order – in Nabokov was a voyage into the unconscious. What seems to be apparent now is a pattern discernible not through the unconscious but from this ‘highest terrace of consciousness’. This terrace, this robust joy and achievement, seems to be none other than that of creation – the creation of a work of art.

Earlier in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov tells us that ‘neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolscap’ (SM, p. 25). For Nabokov, this ‘intricate watermark’ stamped upon our life becomes visible first with the aid of ‘the lamp of art’. It is through the specific form of creation which is art that he is able to first glimpse the sign and signature of his own creation. The watermarks he so carefully stamps on the pages of his works are not just the means through which he discovers his own ‘intricate watermark’, but are also reflections of the ones he himself saw in creation – the signs and signatures he saw shining through the translucent wings of the butterflies – and through himself. The work of art, for him, was then a means not just to shine a light into the darkness of his origins, but to pay homage to the greater creation of which he felt himself a part.

Senderovich, ‘Dickens in Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading: A Figure of Concealment’, *Nabokov Studies*, 3 (1996) pp. 13–32.
Nabokov’s lover Irina Guadanini related a remark he made in 1937 (a remark which brought tears to her eyes): ‘the novelist [is] God’s translator’.\footnote{Stacy Schiff, \textit{Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)} (New York 1999) p. 87.} In Nabokov’s \textit{Lectures on Literature}, we read of ‘the real writer’ that he ‘sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper’s rib’ (\textit{LL}, p. 2). In \textit{Bend Sinister}, he wrote, as we saw, of ‘an anthropomorphic deity’ which he ‘impersonated’. In an interview in 1963 he told his readers that ‘a creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty’ (\textit{SO}, p. 32). As that Almighty deceptively signed his works, left a luminous ‘watermark’ in his Creation, so too must the creator who would be his translator. A watermark, however, does not communicate a message – it signs and seals a sheet’s authenticity and provenance. Do Nabokov’s patterns not function in precisely this way? Do they not, instead of communicating a message, sign and seal a provenance? Nabokov’s Creator was, without question, a \textit{Deus absconditus}. As his translator, what could be more appropriate than that the author become, in his wake, a \textit{scriptor absconditus}?\footnote{Complete Tales of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel, vol. ix (Philadelphia 1964) p. 289.}

IV. The Figure in the Magic Carpet

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. (Vladimir Nabokov, \textit{Speak, Memory})

In ‘The Figure in the Carpet’, Henry James tells the story of a writer who speaks deceptively of his works. He does this by speaking quite openly about them. In James’s tale, the mysterious and acclaimed author Hugh Vereker allures and perplexes the story’s protagonist by giving him more and less cryptic clues as to the nature of his carefully wrought works. Vereker tells his avid reader of how the meaning of his works lies therein like a ‘complex figure in a Persian carpet’.\footnote{Complete Tales of Henry James, ed. Leon Edel, vol. ix (Philadelphia 1964) p. 289.} Of this figure in the carpet, Vereker tells him that ‘it’s exactly as palpable as the marble of this chimney . . . the thing’s as concretely there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap’ (pp. 282–4). Vereker’s string of teasing and tantalising metaphors points in a single direction. This ‘\textit{thing}’, this meaning to and in his works, ‘as palpable as the marble of this chimney’, is nothing more nor less than the textured text of Vereker’s works themselves. Considered in themselves, they could not be more evident, could not be more ‘concrete’. But for the reader who seeks a meaning beyond or above this concrete one, Vereker’s texts deepen into something dizzying and dangerous. They
become lures (‘a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap’) and, once the reader in search of a meaning *beyond* the work bites down, they hold him or her fast (‘a bird in the cage’).

Though, as we saw, Nabokov did not favour James, he did favour a metaphor in the carpet. ‘I like to fold my magic carpet, after use’, he tells us, ‘in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip’ (*SM*, p. 139). In *Ada, or Ardor* we find a less metaphorical magic carpet, and in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus talks of an imaginative realm where ‘time takes shape according to one’s pleasure, like a figured rug whose folds can be gathered in such a way that two designs will meet—and the rug is once again smoothed out, and you live on, or else superimpose the next image on the last, endlessly, endlessly . . .’ (*IB*, p. 94).

*Pale Fire* is Nabokov’s work which most concerns itself with patterns. It is not only itself densely and intricately patterned, it graphically portrays characters in search of patterns both earthly and divine. In Shade’s poem ‘Pale Fire’, the poet relates his search for such patterns and how the decision to seek out patterns of the most varied sort in his own experience is a response to his frustrated attempts to locate clear signs of a Beyond (he is tricked by a misprint in a newspaper article into believing that he has shared a vision of the afterlife—or at least of its forecourt—with a stranger). He writes:

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But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;  
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvy coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.55
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Like Nabokov in his autobiographical writings, Shade finds his vocation in locating and lyricising patterns of ‘coincidence’. These patterns are his reassurance and his proof that all is not ‘flimsy nonsense’, but woven instead into ‘a web of sense’. They are, however, of a peculiar character: intricate, imbricated, but nonetheless recognisable. That recognition does not lead, however, to their simple translation or transformation into a message. The

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'real point' is ‘not text, but texture’. The patterns found by Shade and his peers are signs of provenance, signatures of intent, but a blunt summary of that intent is not to be had. To create, however, analogous patterns is what gives Shade at least a ‘faint hope’ (PF, p. 63). In the final canto of ‘Pale Fire’, he writes:

Maybe my sensual love for the *consonne D’appui*, Echo’s fey child, is based upon
A feeling of fantastically planned,
Richly rhymed life.
I feel I understand
Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of combinatorial delight;
And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine . . .

(PF, pp. 68–9)

Nabokov’s Shade calls the patterns he sees ‘richly rhym[ing] life’. The poet’s ‘private universe scans right’ through his creating of his own patterns.56

This is an idea which is far from exclusive to Shade (who ranks, however, amongst those of Nabokov’s creations with whom he shares the most positions and perceptions). In Nabokov’s preface to *The Eye* he notes that ‘the texture of the tale mimics that of detective fiction’, but that, ‘the stress is not on the mystery but on the pattern’.57 In the foreword to *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov notes that his initial choice of title for that work was ‘The

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56 In *Ada* Van notes that ‘some law of logic should fix the number of coincidences, in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of a new truth’ (p. 361). Nabokov was much concerned with the fixing of this number. Both as a writer and a man, he was fascinated, and – at times – haunted, by coincidences. He was extremely sensitive to recurrent images, fatidic dates, chance optical or auditory hallucinations (which he was particularly subject to), mnemonic trails or tracings, signs and wonders seen in dreams, and any other perception which seemed to promise a pattern leading beyond the limits of consciousness. He went about trying to follow those perceptions beyond consciousness by cataloguing his dreams, and kept a dream diary to this end, in which he endeavoured to glimpse a space beyond time through a rent in sleep (inspired in this by the eccentric British scientist J. W. Dunne – whose theories on time’s illusory nature are reflected in *Ada*). Goethe once wrote: ‘Der Aberglaube ist die Poesie des Lebens; deswegen schadet’s dem Dichter nicht, abergläubisch zu sein’ (*Werke*, 14 vols. (Hamburg 1999) xii. 494). In Nabokov’s case, not only did his superstition not harm his poetry, it gave specific shape to his prose.

Anthemion’: ‘which is the name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters, but nobody liked it’ (SM, p. 11). Doubtless with this passage in mind, Alfred Appel Jr. wrote in one of his proposed annotations for The Annotated Lolita: ‘A grand anthemion has been laid across Humbert’s narrative, like some vast authorial watermark.’ When Appel submitted his notes to Nabokov for counsel and approval, the latter pencilled in a correction: ‘has been laid into’.\(^{58}\) Nabokov’s correction is slight but decisive. As it reflects, Nabokov envisioned the patterning in his texts not as something which would be writ large over them, not a template or a palimpsest which would be ‘laid across’ them, but one which would instead be embedded in their very fibre and substance – which would be ‘laid into’ them. They would not be separate text, but integral texture. In Strong Opinions Nabokov remarks, ‘in my memoirs, quotable ideas are merely passing visions, suggestions, mirages of the mind. They lose their colors or explode like football fish when lifted out of the context of their tropical sea’ (SO, p. 147).\(^ {59}\)

This, as well as many things besides, is not visible at first glance. And both the complexity of his compositions and the sorrow they portray have led a number of Nabokov’s readers to call him ‘cruel’. This charge had much to do with Nabokov’s relation to his readers. He made no secret of his relative indifference to them. What is more, the presence of cruelty in his work may have well been in part a justification for him of the cruelty he saw in his world. In an interview in 1962, Nabokov noted of the early part of his career that he then ‘saw the world as cruel’.\(^ {60}\) In the penultimate chapter of King Queen Knave the narrator describes himself as ‘contemptuous of everything on earth but her’.\(^ {61}\) ‘The ‘her’, of course, is his dancing partner. But this is only part of the story.

While Nabokov was indeed not especially dependent upon outside approval, his remarks on the subject are playful, provocative, and, as more private communications show, not entirely what he meant. Though they were not to influence the work in its inception and composition, he did envision at least a restricted group of readers for his works. But these readers were anything but pampered. One risks much when one asks much of a reader, and Nabokov does not appear to have relished contemplating this risk. In a preface to Speak, Memory, he wrote, ‘reviewers read the first version

\(^{58}\) Photostat, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, 26; my italics.

\(^{59}\) Interestingly enough, the image Nabokov chooses here is one which he silently lifts out of the sea of an earlier work, Invitation to a Beheading (p. 94).

\(^{60}\) The Listener (22 Nov. 1962) p. 68.

more carelessly than they will this new edition: only one of them noticed my “vicious snap” at Freud in the first paragraph of Chapter Eight, section 2 and none discovered the name of a great cartoonist and a tribute to him in the last sentence of section 2, Chapter Eleven. It is most embarrassing for a writer to have to point out such things himself” (SM, p. 15). For reasons that doubtless extend well beyond embarrassment, he chose to point such things out only rarely. The rest of the time, the message he seemed to be sending to his readers was that whatever difficulties, problems, or perplexities they had were their affair. Whatever remained was the reader’s problem – with the devil taking the hindmost.

As has escaped none of his readers, Nabokov’s works abound in the thematic treatment of cruelty, from Hermann in Despair to Axel in Laughter in the Dark to Humbert in Lolita, and well beyond. But while it is clear that this is something that Calvino, Oates, Wood, Rorty, Amis, and others were responding to when they found him cruel, it was not the only thing. It is equally clear that these were not merely responses to cruel stories, but also to something like cruel storytelling – to the dismissive attitude Nabokov displayed as to who was to follow his subtleties and trace his intricate patterns. On occasion, Nabokov left a narrow margin for certain readers to be directly embraced by the aesthetic experience. ‘Up a trackless slope’, he wrote, ‘climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever’ (LL, p. 2). While this is a meeting of reader and writer, it is also two gifted minds meeting on a narrow ridge, far from the massing crowd, far removed from the writer greeting a prairie full of readers. This trackless slope is meant to be a difficult one to ascend.

The point of such considerations lies not in deciding whether Nabokov was elitist or demanding, whether he was cruel, kind, or cruel to be kind. Phrased differently, the point is not only in tracing the patterns of cruelty in his work, but also the cruelty of pattern. The perception Nabokov had of the world and that he endeavoured to reflect in the creation of his fictional worlds was one where no precepts or prescriptions could prevail, where one needed to perceive with fantastic energy and attention even – and especially – the finest details in nature and art, and to study these details with insight, intelligence, and imagination. The anthropomorphic deity he claimed to impersonate reproduced this experience, dissimulating signs, signals, and signatures in the details of his works. The difficulty and complexity of the hidden patterns these ‘lovingly assembled’ details formed, and his insistence that these patterns were not of the order of a moral or allegorical message, brought the charge from certain readers of a gratuitousness verging on the cruel. What shaped Nabokov’s novelistic patterns more than
anything else was his belief in the inviolability of the particular, and what he professed to loathe above all else in art and life was the loose-fitting generality. If ethics is the province of the individual, and that individual must effect an unceasing jurisprudence without the benefit of an overarching law, the judgements arrived at cannot be expressed in the generalising form of a precept or prescription. Such a morality would be inexpressible in the form of a proposition that would confine, in the tiny coffin of a prescriptive phrase, the manifold morality of life.

Nabokov says of his lectures on literature that he envisioned them as ‘a kind of detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures’ (LL, p. 89). The passage proves an enigmatic one if one does not look to where, in that same lecture, Nabokov defines what he means by the term ‘structure’: it is ‘the planned pattern of a work of art’ (LL, p. 113). To express in art a morality other than a prescriptive one, and to signal the existence of a creator, required a density and a complexity that became Nabokov’s passion – and that required of his readers a patience and a persistence that to many of them seemed too great. And thus the charge of cruelty.