

The barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on cruelty

The public-private distinction I developed throughout Part II suggests that we distinguish books which help us become autonomous from books which help us become less cruel. The first sort of book is relevant to “blind impresses,” to the idiosyncratic contingencies which produce idiosyncratic fantasies. These are the fantasies which those who attempt autonomy spend their lives reworking – hoping to trace that blind impress home and so, in Nietzsche’s phrase, become who they are. The second sort of book is relevant to our relations with others, to helping us notice the effects of our actions on other people. These are the books which are relevant to liberal hope, and to the question of how to reconcile private irony with such hope.

The books which help us become less cruel can be roughly divided into (1) books which help us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others and (2) those which help us see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others. The first sort of book is typified by books about, for example, slavery, poverty, and prejudice. These include *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and the reports of muckraking journalists and government commissions, but also novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Les Misérables*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *Black Boy*. Such books help us see how social practices which we have taken for granted have made us cruel.

The second sort of book – the sort I shall discuss in this chapter and the next – is about the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people. Sometimes works on psychology serve this function, but the most useful books of this sort are works of fiction which exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person. By identification with Mr. Causaubon in *Middlemarch* or with Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, for example, we may come to notice what we ourselves have been doing. In particular, such books show how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing. They are the books which dramatize the conflict between duties to self and duties to others.

Books relevant to the avoidance of either social or individual cruelty

are often contrasted – as books with a “moral message” – with books whose aims are, instead, “aesthetic.” Those who draw this moral-aesthetic contrast and give priority to the moral usually distinguish between an essential human faculty – conscience – and an optional extra faculty, “aesthetic taste.” Those who draw the same contrast to the advantage of “the aesthetic” often presuppose a distinction of the same sort. But for the latter the center of the self is assumed to be the ironist’s desire for autonomy, for a kind of perfection which has nothing to do with his relations to other people. This Nietzschean attitude exalts the figure of the “artist,” just as the former attitude exalts those who “live for others.” It assumes that the point of human society is not the general happiness but the provision of an opportunity for the especially gifted – those fitted to become autonomous – to achieve their goal.

In the view of selfhood offered in Chapter 2, we treat both “conscience” and “taste” as bundles of idiosyncratic beliefs and desires rather than as “faculties” which have determinate objects. So we will have little use for the moral-aesthetic contrast.¹ As traditionally employed, by both “moralists” and “aesthetes,” that distinction merely blurs the distinction I am trying to draw between relevance to autonomy and relevance to cruelty. The traditional picture of the self as divided into the cognitive quest for true belief, the moral quest for right action, and the aesthetic quest for beauty (or for the “adequate expression of feeling”) leaves little room either for irony or for the pursuit of autonomy.²

If we abandon this traditional picture, we shall stop asking questions like “Does this book aim at truth or at beauty? At promoting right conduct or at pleasure?” and instead ask, “What purposes does this book serve?” Our first, broadest, classification of purpose will be built around two distinctions. The first is that between the range of purposes present-

1 In particular, we shall not assume that the artist must be the enemy of conventional morality. Nietzsche was unable to free himself entirely from the Kantian association of “art” and the “aesthetic,” and this helped to blind him to the possibility of *liberal* ironism – a blindness sometimes shared by Bernard Shaw.

2 This Kantian-Weberian picture of three autonomous spheres is central to Habermas’s work – particularly *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. I think Habermas is right to emphasize the way in which the separateness and autonomy of three “expert cultures” – roughly, science, jurisprudence, and literary criticism – have served the purposes of liberal society (e.g., in protecting it against would-be Lysenkos and Zhadanovs). But I think that attention to this service leads him to take an oversimple view of the relation between literature and morality – both social morality and individual morality. Habermas’s classification leads him to take literature as a matter of “adequacy of the expression of feeling” and literary criticism as a matter of “judgments of taste.” These notions simply do not do justice to the role which novels, in particular, have come to play in the reform of social institutions, in the moral education of the young, and in forming the self-image of the intellectual.

ly statable within some familiar, widely used, final vocabulary and the purpose of working out a *new* final vocabulary. Applying this distinction divides books up into those whose success can be judged on the basis of familiar criteria and those which cannot. The latter class contains only a tiny fraction of all books, but it also contains the most important ones – those which make the greatest differences in the long run.

The second distinction divides this latter class into those books aimed at working out a new *private* final vocabulary and those aimed at working out a new *public* final vocabulary. The former is a vocabulary deployed to answer questions like “What shall I be? “What can I become?” “What have I been?” The latter is a vocabulary deployed to answer the question “What sorts of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?” The sort of person whom I called the “liberal ironist” in Chapter 4 needs both such vocabularies. For a few such people – Christians (and others) for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others – the two sorts of questions come together. For most such, they do not.

The closest a liberal ironist can come to reconstructing the standard moral-aesthetic distinction, as it applies to books, is to separate books which supply novel stimuli to action (including *all* the sorts of books mentioned so far) from those which simply offer relaxation. The former suggest (sometimes straightforwardly and sometimes by insinuation) that one must change one’s life (in some major or minor respect). The latter do not raise this question; they take one into a world without challenges.³ One of the unfortunate consequences of the popularity of the moral-aesthetic distinction is a confusion of the quest for autonomy

- 3 This line between the stimulating and the relaxing, obviously, separates different books for different people. Different people lead different lives, feel challenged by different situations, and require holidays from different projects. So any attempt to go through our libraries, reshelving books with this distinction in mind, is going to be relative to our special interests. Still, it is clear that this attempt usually will *not* put Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* and Wordsworth’s *Prelude* on different shelves, nor Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* and *Middlemarch*, nor *The Education of Henry Adams* and *King Lear*, nor *A Genealogy of Morals* and the New Testament, nor Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* and the poems of Baudelaire. So this distinction between the stimulating and the relaxing does not parallel the traditional lines between the cognitive and the noncognitive, the moral and the aesthetic, or the “literary” and the nonliterary. Nor does it conform to any standard distinctions of form or genre.

This distinction will nevertheless, for most people, separate *all* the books just mentioned from Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson*, Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*, Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, Runciman’s *History of the Crusades*, Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, Saint-Simon’s *Memoirs*, Ian Fleming’s *Thunderball*, Macaulay’s *Essays*, Wodehouse’s *Carry on, Jeeves!*, Harlequin romances, Sir Thomas Browne’s *Urn-Burial*, and works of uncomplicated pornography. Such books gear in with their readers’ fantasies without suggesting that there might be something wrong with those fantasies, or with the person who has them.

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

with a need for relaxation and for pleasure. This confusion is easy for those who are not ironists, and who do not understand what it is like to be an ironist – people who have never had any doubts about the final vocabulary they employ. These people – the metaphysicians – assume that books which do not supply means to the ends typically formulated in that vocabulary must be, if not immoral or useless, suitable only for private projects. Yet the only private project they can envisage is the pursuit of pleasure. They assume that a book which does supply such pleasure cannot be a serious work of philosophy, and cannot carry a “moral message.” The only connection they can see between works of fiction and morality is an “inspirational” one – such works remind one of one’s duty and encourage its fulfillment. This lack of understanding of irony is one reason why it is hard to convince liberal metaphysicians that some writers who give pleasure to the small group of readers who catch their allusions, and who have no relevance to liberal hope – for instance, Nietzsche and Derrida – might, nevertheless, be towering figures, capable of changing the direction of philosophical thought. It is also hard to convince liberal metaphysicians of the value of books which help us avoid cruelty, not by warning us against social injustice but by warning us against the tendencies to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy.

In this chapter and the next I shall discuss books of this latter kind. Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell had quite different gifts, and their self-images were quite different. But, I shall argue, their accomplishment was pretty much the same. Both of them warn the liberal ironist intellectual against temptations to be cruel. Both of them dramatize the tension between private irony and liberal hope.

In the following passage, Nabokov helped blur the distinctions which I want to draw:

... *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books. All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann.⁴

4 Nabokov, “On a book entitled *Lolita*,” in *Lolita* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 313. Where it is obvious that citations are from this book, future references will be by parenthetical page number.

NABOKOV ON CRUELTY

Orwell blurred the same distinctions when, in one of his very rare descents into rant, "The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda," he wrote exactly the sort of thing Nabokov loathed:

You cannot take a purely aesthetic interest in a disease you are dying from; you cannot feel dispassionately about a man who is about to cut your throat. In a world in which Fascism and Socialism were fighting one another, any thinking person had to take sides. . . . This period of ten years or so in which literature, even poetry, was mixed up with pamphleteering, did a great service to literary criticism, because it destroyed the illusion of pure aestheticism. . . . It debunked art for art's sake.⁵

This passage runs together two bad questions which, Nabokov rightly thought, had nothing to do with each other. The first is the question of when to take time off from private projects to resist public dangers. This question is pointless, since nobody will ever have a good *general* answer to it – although, as it happens, Orwell and Nabokov were able to agree on a particular case: Both tried vainly to enlist in the armies that were being formed to throw at the Nazis. The second question is: "Is art for the sake of art?" This is an equally bad question. It is ambiguous between "Is aesthetic bliss an intrinsic good?" and "Is aesthetic bliss the proper aim of the writer?" If the question is taken in the first sense, the answer is obviously and trivially yes. But even if we take the question in its less trivial second sense, we have to reject it. There is no such thing as "the writer," and no reason to believe that everybody who writes a book should have the same aims or be measured by the same standards.

If we firmly reject questions about the "aim of the writer" or the "nature of literature," as well as the idea that literary criticism requires taking such gawky topics seriously, we can reconcile Orwell and Nabokov in the same way I should like to reconcile Dewey and Heidegger. The pursuit of private perfection is a perfectly reasonable aim for some writers – writers like Plato, Heidegger, Proust, and Nabokov, who share certain talents. Serving human liberty is a perfectly reasonable aim for other writers – people like Dickens, Mill, Dewey, Orwell, Habermas, and Rawls, who share others. There is no point in trying to grade these different pursuits on a single scale by setting up factitious kinds called "literature" or "art" or "writing"; nor is there any point in trying to synthesize them. There is nothing called "the aim of writing" any more than there is something called "the aim of theorizing." Both Orwell and Nabokov, unfortunately, got enmeshed in attempts to excommunicate

5 George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), vol. 2, p. 152.

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

people with talents and interests different from their own. This has obscured a lot of similarities between the two men, resemblances which should not be obscured by philosophical quarrels conducted in terms of factitious and shopworn oppositions like “art versus morality” or “style versus substance.”

The main similarity on which I shall insist in this chapter and the next is that the books of both Nabokov and Orwell differ from those of the writers I discussed in Part II – Proust, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida – in that cruelty, rather than self-creation, is their central topic. Both Nabokov and Orwell were political liberals, in a broad sense of the term which can be stretched to cover Proust and Derrida (though not to cover either Nietzsche or Heidegger). They shared roughly the same political credo, and the same reactions to the same political events. More important, however, they both met Judith Shklar’s criterion of a liberal: somebody who believes that cruelty is the worst thing we do.⁶ Nabokov wrote about cruelty from the inside, helping us see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty. Orwell, for the most part, wrote about cruelty from the outside, from the point of view of the victims, thereby producing what Nabokov called “topical trash” – the kind of book which helps reduce future suffering and serves human liberty. But I shall argue in Chapter 8 that at the end of his last book, in his portrait of O’Brien, Orwell does the same as Nabokov: He helps us get *inside* cruelty, and thereby helps articulate the dimly felt connection between art and torture.

In the remainder of this chapter I shall offer a reading of Nabokov which connects three of his traits: his aestheticism, his concern with cruelty, and his belief in immortality. “We believe ourselves to be mortal,” Nabokov writes, “just as a madman believes himself to be God.”⁷

To see what Nabokov’s aestheticism looked like when he was dealing with an author whom he took seriously, consider his lecture on Dickens’s *Bleak House*. At one point he quotes at length from the chapter where Dickens describes the death of the boy Jo. This is the chapter whose coda is the famous paragraph beginning “Dead, your Majesty! Dead, my lords and gentlemen!” and ending “And dying around us every day.” That is a call to public action if anything in Dickens is. But Nabokov tells us that the chapter is “a lesson in style, not in participative emotion.”⁸

6 See Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, pp. 43–44, and Chapter 1, *passim*.

7 “Comme un fou se croit Dieu, nous nous croyons mortels” is the epigraph to *Invitation to a Bebeading*. Nabokov attributes the sentence to “the melancholy, extravagant, wise, witty, magical, and altogether delightful Pierre Delalande, whom I invented.”

8 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt

Notice that if Nabokov had said “as well as” instead of “not,” nobody would have disagreed. By saying “not” he maintains his stance as someone who is concerned with nothing but “aesthetic bliss,” someone who thinks that “the study of the sociological or political impact of literature has to be devised mainly for those who are by temperament or education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the telltale tingle between the shoulder blades” (LL, p. 64). Nabokov has to pretend, implausibly, that Dickens was not, or at least should not have been, interested in the fact that his novels were a more powerful impetus to social reform than the collected works of all the British social theorists of his day.

Why does Nabokov insist that there is some incompatibility, some antithetical relation, between Housmanian tingles and the kind of participative emotion which moved liberal statesmen, such as his own father, to agitate for the repeal of unjust laws? Why doesn't he just say that these are two distinct, noncompetitive, goods? Nabokov is quite right when he says, “That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science” (LL, p. 64). This dictum simply spells out the relevant sense of the term “pure.” But it seems quite compatible with saying that the ability to shudder with shame and indignation at the unnecessary death of a child – a child with whom we have no connection of family, tribe, or class – is the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained while evolving modern social and political institutions.

Nabokov does not try to defend his assumption that social reform does not have the same claim on our attention as “pure art and pure science.” He gives no reasons for doubting that people as gifted as Dickens have sometimes been able to do quite different things in the same book. It would have been much easier to admit that *Bleak House* aroused participative emotions which helped change the laws of England, and *also* made Dickens immortal by having been written so as to keep right on producing tingles between the shoulder blades long after the particular horrors of Dickens's century had been replaced by new ones. Yet Nabokov insists over and over again that the latter accomplishment – the effect produced by style as opposed to that produced by participative emotion – is *all* that matters.⁹ He never makes clear what scale

Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 94. Henceforth this book will be cited parenthetically as “LL.”

- 9 He never quite brings himself to say that artists should not pay attention to social evils or try to change them. But he is churlish about any given attempt to do so, and often on wildly irrelevant grounds. He says, inaccurately and pointlessly, that “the link of these poor children in *Bleak House* is not so much with social circumstances of the 1850s as with earlier times and mirrors of time.” With equal irrelevance, he dismisses the chap-

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

of importance he is using, nor why we should insist on a *single* scale. It is hardly *evident* that “pure art and pure science” matter more than absence of suffering, nor even that there is a point in asking which matters more – as if we could somehow rise above both and adjudicate their claims from a neutral standpoint.

I share Nabokov’s suspicion of general ideas when it comes to philosophers’ attempts to squeeze our moral sentiments into rules for deciding moral dilemmas. But I take the lesson of our failure to find such rules to be that we should stop talking in a quasi-metaphysical style about the “task of the writer” or “what ultimately matters,” or the “highest emotion”; stop working at the level of abstraction populated by such pallid ghosts as “human life,” “art,” and “morality”; and stay in a middle range. We should stick to questions about what works for particular purposes. So as a first stage in reconciling Orwell and Nabokov I would urge that Orwell shares some important purposes with Dickens (producing shudders of indignation, arousing revulsion and shame), and Nabokov shares others (producing tingles, aesthetic bliss).

But Nabokov does not want to be reconciled. He wants Dickens and himself to count as members of an elect from which Orwell – and other objects of his contempt, such as Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Gorki, Mann, Faulkner, and Malraux – are forever excluded. We get an important clue to his motives from a passage in which he explains why he reads Dickens as he does:

As is quite clear, the enchanter interests me more than the yarn spinner or the teacher. In the case of Dickens, this attitude seems to me to be the only way of keeping Dickens alive, above the reformer, above the penny novelette, above the sentimental trash, above the theatrical nonsense. There he shines forever on the heights of which we know the exact elevation, the outlines and the formation, and the mountain trails to get there through the fog. It is in his imagery that he is great. (LL, p. 65)

The fog in question is the one Dickens has described in the opening chapter of *Bleak House*. As Nabokov says, Dickens uses the London fog to revivify a standard trope: the legal miasma which rises from proceedings in Chancery. Nabokov wants us to treat Dickens’s attacks on the evil of the Chancery system – and more generally his portrayal of conflicts between what Nabokov, putting the words in shudder quotes, calls “good” and “evil” – as merely the “skeleton” of *Bleak House*. He congrat-

ters about Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock, considered as an “indictment of the aristocracy,” as of “no interest or importance whatsoever since our author’s knowledge and notions of that set are extremely meager and crude” (LL, pp. 64–65).

ulates Dickens on being “too much of an artist” to make this skeleton “obtrusive or obvious.” Writers without Dickens’s ability, the people who write “topical trash,” do not know how to put flesh on the “moral” skeleton of their work. So, to mix the two metaphors, heaps of such piled-up skeletons – the novels of Orwell and Mann, for example – form the fogbound, boggy foothills of literature. For lack of precise imagery, writers who can give lessons in participative emotion but not in style fail to achieve immortality.

Two things should be noticed about the passage I have just quoted. The first is that Nabokov is writing about Dickens not for the sake of the students in his class, nor for the sake of the educated public, but *solely* for Dickens’s sake. He wants to do a favor for one of his few peers. He wants him to have the immortality he deserves. When he says, for example, that Edmund Wilson’s treatment of Dickens in *The Wound and the Bow* is “brilliant” but that the “sociological side” of Dickens is “neither interesting nor important,” he is saying that literary criticism of the sort which Wilson did brilliantly creates the same kind of particularly thick fog as was created by particularly brilliant members of the Chancery Bar.¹⁰ By pointing out the mountain peak above the fog, and by tracing the trails that reach it, he is rescuing Dickens from people like Wilson, rescuing him from the creeping miasma of historical time and mortal chance.

The second thing to notice is that Nabokov’s concern with Dickens’s immortality was a corollary of his own intense, lifelong preoccupation with the question of whether he might survive death, and thereby meet his parents in another world. Such survival, and such meetings, suddenly appear, in the last lines of *Invitation to a Beheading*, as the point of that novel. They are also the topic of a canto of John Shade’s poem “Pale Fire,” and of the magnificent closing sentences of *Lolita*:

And do not pity C.Q. [Clare Quilty]. One had to choose between him and H.H. [Humbert Humbert], and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic son-

10 Nabokov must, when he read *The Wound and the Bow*, have realized how easily Wilson’s general strategy – tracing a writer’s obsession, and the shape of his career, to some early injury – could be applied to his, Nabokov’s, own case. He must have been infuriated by the realization that this application would have already occurred to Wilson. I suspect that he was also annoyed by Wilson’s quasi-Freudian interpretation of Housman. Nabokov’s talk of tingles was certainly influenced by Housman’s *Name and Nature of Poetry* (the best-known manifesto in English of what Nelson Goodman calls “the Tingle-Immersion” theory of aesthetic experience). He liked Housman’s poetry when he was an undergraduate at Trinity, although later he unkindly refers to *A Shropshire Lad* as a “little volume of verse about young males and death.”

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

nets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita (p. 307).

In this latter passage, as in many others, Nabokov is talking about immortality in the “literary” sense – the sense in which one is immortal if one’s books will be read forever. But elsewhere, especially in his autobiography, he talks about immortality in the ordinary theological and metaphysical sense – the chance of somehow surviving death, and of thus being able to meet dead loved ones in a world beyond time.¹¹ He makes no bones about his own fear of death (*SM*, p. 80):

Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. (*SM*, p. 14)

Over and over again, Nabokov tried to tie this highly unfashionable concern for metaphysical immortality together with the more respectable notion of literary immortality. He wanted to see some connection between creating tingles, creating aesthetic bliss, being an artist in the sense in which he and Joyce and Dickens were artists and Orwell and Mann were not, and freeing oneself from time, entering another state of being. He is sure that there is a connection between the immortality of the work and of the person who creates the work – between aesthetics and metaphysics, to put it crudely. But, unsurprisingly, he is never able to say what it is.

The best example of this gallant, splendid, and foredoomed effort is one of Nabokov’s few attempts to work in the uncongenial medium of general ideas. This is his essay called “The Art of Literature and Common Sense,” in which he offers the same generalized protest against general ideas which we find in Heidegger. Heidegger and Nabokov agree that common sense is a self-deceptive apologia for thoughtlessness and vulgarity. They offer the same defense of unique and idiosyncratic irony. They both reject the Platonist and democratic claim that one should only have beliefs which can be defended on the basis of widely shared premises. The theme of Nabokov’s essay is what he calls the “supremacy of the detail over the general” (*LL*, p. 373). His thesis is: “This capacity to wonder at trifles – no matter the imminent peril –

11 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York, Pyramid, 1968), pp. 14, 37, 57, 87, 103. Henceforth this book will be cited parenthetically as “*SM*.”

these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good" (*LL*, p. 374).

Here we are not told merely, and tautologously, that "pure art and pure science" culminate in such tingling trifles. We are told that these tingles are "the highest forms of consciousness." That claim is ambiguous between a moral and a metaphysical interpretation. It can mean that tingles are what is most worth striving for, or it can mean the sort of thing Plato meant, that this form of consciousness is higher in that it gets us in touch with the nontemporal, in that it gets us out of the flux and into a realm beyond time and chance. If one took the claim only in its moral sense, then one could plausibly reply that this was certainly what it behooved people like Nabokov to strive for, but that other people with other gifts – people whose brains are not wired up to produce tingles, but who are, for example, good at producing shudders of moral indignation – might reasonably strive for their own form of perfection. But Nabokov wanted to absolutize the moral claim by backing it up with the metaphysical claim. He wanted to say that idiosyncratic imagery, of the sort he was good at, rather than the kind of generalizing ideas which Plato was good at, is what opens the gates of immortality. Art, rather than mathematics, breaks through the walls of time into a world beyond contingency.

The trouble with the essay is, once again, that Nabokov runs together literary with personal immortality. If only the former is at stake, then, indeed, Plato was wrong and Nabokov, Heidegger, and Derrida are right.¹² If you want to be remembered by future generations, go in for

- 12 What we have learned since Plato is that general ideas are tools for practical purposes, purposes which are forgotten as time goes by, but that particular images survive. Nowadays we can do better in the way of moral ideals, social arrangements, and human beings than Homer imagined. As Nabokov puts it, "In the imaginary battle of [*bomo*] *americus* versus [*bomo*] *homericus*, the first wins humanity's prize." But Homer survives because his images survive. Boys who adopt Achilles' ethic ("always outdo the others") are just boring bullies, but certain Homeric epithets still make their quieter classmates tingle. Nobody knows, or much cares, whether Shakespeare wanted to get across a sociopolitical view in the Roman plays; but John Shade speaks for all us anti-Platonists when, in response to Kinbote's suggestion that he "appreciates particularly the purple passages" in *Hamlet*, he replies: "Yes, my dear Charles, I roll upon them as a grateful mongrel on a spot of turf fouled by a Great Dane." The question of retirement to a Sabine farm has gone stale, but we bow toward Horace whenever we describe a passage as purple. Plato himself, though generally wrong about general ideas, survives as the first white magus. He is the enchanter who spun the first strands of that web of metaphor which Derrida calls the West's "white mythology." His own special fire still smolders and his particular sun still blazes, long after the mathematics he admired has become a tool in the hands of bomb builders,

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

poetry rather than for mathematics. If you want your books to be read rather than respectfully shrouded in tooled leather, you should try to produce tingles rather than truth. What we call common sense – the body of widely accepted truths – is, just as Heidegger and Nabokov thought, a collection of dead metaphors. Truths are the skeletons which remain after the capacity to arouse the senses – to cause tingles – has been rubbed off by familiarity and long usage. After the scales are rubbed off a butterfly's wing, you have transparency, but not beauty – formal structure without sensuous content. Once the freshness wears off the metaphor, you have plain, literal, transparent language – the sort of language which is ascribed not to any particular person but to “common sense” or “reason” or “intuition,” ideas so clear and distinct you can look right through them. So if, like Euclid's or Newton's or J. S. Mill's, your metaphors are socially useful and become literalized, you will be honored in the abstract and forgotten in the particular. You will have become a name but ceased to be a person. But if, like Catullus, Baudelaire, Derrida, and Nabokov, your works (only, or also) produce tingles, you have a chance of surviving as more than a name. You might be, like Landor and Donne, one of the people whom some future Yeats will hope to dine with, at journey's end.

However, although all this is quite true, it has no bearing on the suggestion that literary immortality is connected with personal immortality – the claim that you will actually *be* out there, beyond the walls of time, waiting for dinner guests. As Kant pointed out, and as Nabokov ruefully admitted, nothing *could* lend plausibility to that claim. Waiting, like everything else one can imagine doing, takes time.¹³ But even if we dismiss the metaphysical claim, we still need to take seriously a further claim Nabokov makes – that it is in “this childish speculative state of mind” that “we know the world to be good.”

Nabokov thinks that “goodness” is something irrationally concrete, something to be captured by imagination rather than intellect. He inverts Plato's divided line so that *eikasia*, rather than *nous*, becomes the faculty of moral knowledge.¹⁴ He says:

and long after the moral intuitions he hoped to refine and purify have been exposed as the inconsistent proverbs of a rather primitive culture. In respect to what Whitehead called “objective immortality,” the great figures of the past are indeed, as Nabokov says of Dickens, “great in their imagery.”

13 Nabokov was as resigned as Kant to the fact that Swedenborgesque speculation will never get anywhere: “I have journeyed back in time – with thought hopelessly tapering off as I went – to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exits” (*SM*, p. 14).

14 Nabokov may have been influenced by Bergson's attempt at an inverted Platonism, and in particular by *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. See Nabokov, *Strong*

NABOKOV ON CRUELTY

From the commonsensical point of view the “goodness,” say, of some food is just as abstract as its “badness,” both being qualities that cannot be perceived by the sane judgment as tangible and complete objects. But when we perform that necessary mental twist which is like learning to swim or to make a ball break, we realize that “goodness” is something round and creamy, and beautifully flushed, something in a clean apron with warm bare arms that have nursed and comforted us. (*LL*, p. 375)

In the same essay he brings together this idea of the good as something “real and concrete” with his sense of solidarity with a “few thousand” others who share his gifts:

... the irrational belief in the goodness of man ... becomes something much more than the wobbly basis of idealistic philosophies. It becomes a solid and iridescent truth. This means that goodness becomes a central and tangible part of one's world, which world at first sight seems hard to identify with the modern one of newspaper editors and other bright pessimists, who will tell you that it is, mildly speaking, illogical to applaud the supremacy of good at a time when something called the police state, or communism, is trying to turn the globe into five million square miles of terror, stupidity, and barbed wire. ... But within the emphatically and unshakably illogical world which I am advertising as a home for the spirit, war gods are unreal not because they are conveniently remote in physical space from the reality of a reading lamp and the solidity of a fountain pen, but because I cannot imagine (and that is saying a good deal) such circumstances as might impinge upon the lovely and lovable world which quietly persists, whereas I can very well imagine that my fellow dreamers, thousands of whom roam the earth, keep to these same irrational and divine standards during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death. (*LL*, p. 373)

I interpret these two passages as making an important psychological point: that the only thing which can let a human being combine altruism and joy, the only thing that makes either heroic action or splendid speech possible, is some very specific chain of associations with some highly idiosyncratic memories.¹⁵ Freud made the same point, and Freud

Opinions (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), pp. 42, 290. Henceforth cited parenthetically as “*SO*.”

- 15 In this sense, though in no other, Nabokov is right in saying that “everybody thinks in images and not in words” (*SO*, p. 14). I would argue that if you can't use language, you can't be conscious of inner images any more than of outer objects, but this Sellarsian “psychological nominalist” thesis is compatible with agreeing that what individuates people, gives them their special flavors and their distinctive neuroses, are not different propositional attitudes but different associations of the words in their final vocabularies (including the word “good,” which occurs in almost everybody's) with particular situations. In the case of special sorts of people like Nabokov, who have specially wired brains, this means association with extremely vivid and detailed images of those

was the one person Nabokov resented in the same obsessive and intense way that Heidegger resented Nietzsche. In both cases, it was resentment of the precursor who may already have written all one's best lines. This psychological thesis binds Hume, Freud, and Nabokov and distinguishes them from Plato and Kant. But it is neither a metaphysical claim about the "nature" of "goodness" nor an epistemological claim about our "knowledge" of "goodness." Being impelled or inspired by an image is not the same as knowing a world. We do not need to postulate a world beyond time which is the home of such images in order to account for their occurrence, or for their effects on conduct.

Yet only if he could somehow have squeezed some metaphysics out of his two soundly anti-Platonic claims – the one about the nature of literary immortality and the other about the nature of moral motivation – would Nabokov have been able to hook up the utilization of his own gifts with the nature of things. Only then could he see his special gifts as putting him in an epistemologically privileged position, in a position to be aware of the secret that, as gaudily painted savages believe and as Cincinnatus C. eventually realized, time and causality are merely a vulgar hoax. Only if he can make such a hookup will he be able to defend his claim that Dickens's interest in social reform was merely a great artist's foible, and his suggestion that topical writers like Orwell deserve no thanks for their services to human liberty.

The collection of general ideas which Nabokov assembled in the hope of convincing himself that time and causality *were* hoaxes is an odd, inconsistent mixture of Platonic atemporalism and anti-Platonic sensualism. It is an attempt to combine the comforts of old-fashioned metaphysics with the up-to-date antimetaphysical polemic common to Bergson and Heidegger. Like the systems of general ideas which ironist theorists construct in order to attack the very idea of a general idea, it is what Stanley Fish calls a "self-consuming artifact." Still, such fragile and unbalanced devices, with their artful combination of dogma and irony, have the same iridescence as John Shade's poem, "Pale Fire." Like that poem, Nabokov's system is the shadow of the waxwing, just before it smashes itself against the walls of time.

Why did Nabokov want such a device? Why did he stick his neck out in this way? I think there were two reasons, neither of which had anything to do with fear of death. The first, and most important, was an oversize sense

situations. But Nabokov, of course, goes overboard when he claims that people without his special eidetic faculty lead simple and vulgar lives. There are lots of ways for a mind to be rich and interesting which do not involve imagery (e.g., music – to which Nabokov, like Yeats and unlike his own father and his own son, was almost completely insensitive).

of pity. His eccentrically large capacity for joy, his idiosyncratic ability to experience bliss so great as to seem incommensurable with the existence of suffering and cruelty, made him unable to tolerate the reality of suffering. Nabokov's capacity to pity others was as great as Proust's capacity to pity himself – a capacity which Proust was, amazingly, able to harness to his attempt at self-creation. Bliss began early for Nabokov. He had no occasion for self-pity and no need for self-creation. The difference between Proust's novel and Nabokov's novels is the difference between a bildungsroman and a crescendo of ever more fervent pledges of the same childhood faith. Nabokov seems never to have suffered a loss for which he blamed himself, never to have despised, distrusted, or doubted himself. He did not *need* to struggle for autonomy, to forge a conscience in the smithy of his soul, to seek a self-made final vocabulary. He was a hero both to his parents and to himself – a very lucky man. He would have been merely a self-satisfied bore if it were not that his brain happened to be wired up so as to make him able continually to surprise and delight himself by arranging words into iridescent patterns.

But the other side of this capacity for bliss was an inability to put up with the thought of intense pain. The intensity of his pity brought him to the novel which has aroused most protest among his admirers: *Bend Sinister*. In this novel, the eight-year-old son of Adam Krug is tortured to death by madmen because his folder has been misfiled by the inexperienced bureaucrats of a revolutionary government. Nabokov does not attempt to portray Krug's pain. More than that, he refuses to countenance the reality of a pain that great. So, as in *Invitation to a Beheading*, he translates the hero to another "realm of being." In the earlier novel, Cincinnatus rises as soon as his head has been chopped off, watches the scaffold and spectators dissolve, and then "makes his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him." In *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov saves Krug from the realization of what has happened by what he calls the "intervention of an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me."¹⁶ Nabokov says he "felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light – causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate" (pp. 193–194). Krug's author steps through "a rent in his [Krug's] world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness, and beauty" (p. 8). Nabokov's toying with general ideas about immortality, with the idea that there was a rent in his and our worlds like that in Krug's, was a further expression of the same pity which saved Cincinnatus and Krug.

16 Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 11. Henceforth cited parenthetically by page number.

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

But there is a second reason which needs to be taken into account. This is that Nabokov seems never to have allowed himself social hope. He was the son of a famous liberal statesman who was assassinated when his son was twenty-two. His father's circle – which included, for example, H. G. Wells, whom Nabokov met at his father's table – had no time for metaphysics because their hopes were centered on future generations. They exemplified the substitution of hope for future generations for hope of personal immortality which I discussed in Chapter 4. It was just this former hope that Nabokov seems to have had no trace of. Perhaps he had it once, and abandoned it as a result of his father's murder. Perhaps he never had it, having recognized early on that he and his father had antithetical, if equally great, gifts, and that he would betray himself by attempting even the slightest imitation of someone he loved so fiercely. Whatever the reason, he always repudiated any interest in political movements. In *The Gift*, Fyodor walks down the streets of Berlin in the 1920s and notices that "three kinds of flags were sticking out of the house windows: black-yellow-red, black-white-red, and plain red: each now meant something, and funniest of all, this something was able to excite pride or hatred in someone." Noticing the flags induces a meditation on Soviet Russia, which ends when Fyodor thinks:

Oh, let everything pass and be forgotten – and again in two hundred years' time an ambitious failure will vent his frustration on the simpletons dreaming of a good life (that is if there does not come *my* kingdom, where everyone keeps to himself and there is no equality and no authorities – but if you don't want it, I don't insist and don't care).¹⁷

Nabokov had no idea – who does? – about how to bring about a state with no equality and no authorities. But he also gave up on the modern liberal idea of working for a future in which cruelty will no longer be institutionalized. In this respect, he was a throwback to antiquity, to a time when such social hope was so obviously unrealistic as to be of little interest to intellectuals. His otherworldly metaphysics is what one might imagine being written by a contemporary of Plato's, writing in partial imitation of, and partial reaction against, the *Phaedo* – a contemporary who did not share Plato's need for a world in which he could not feel shame, but did need a world in which he would not have to feel pity.

If, however, Nabokov's career as a novelist had climaxed with the creation of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, Cincinnatus C., and Adam Krug, we would not read him as often as we do. The characters I just

17 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 370.

mentioned are known because they were created by the author of two others – Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote. These two are the central figures of Nabokov's books about cruelty – not the “bestly farce” common to Lenin, Hitler, Gradus, and Paduk, but the *special* sort of cruelty of which those capable of bliss are also capable. These books are reflections on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets – masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering. Nabokov's uneasiness at the unstable philosophical compromise which he had worked out, and what must have been at least occasional doubts about his refusal to think in terms of human solidarity, led him to consider the possibility that he was mistaken. Like the honest man he was, Nabokov wrote his best books to explore the possibility that his harshest critics might, after all, be right.

What his critics were suggesting was that Nabokov was really Harold Skimpole. Skimpole, the charming aesthete in *Bleak House*, brings about Jo's death – an action beautifully described by Nabokov as “the false child betraying the real one” (*LL*, p. 91). Skimpole claims the privileges of the child and of the poet. He views everyone else's life as poetry, no matter how much they suffer.¹⁸ Skimpole sees his having taken five pounds to betray Jo's whereabouts to Tulkinghorn's agent as an amusing concatenation of circumstances,¹⁹ a pleasant little poem, the sort of thing John Shade calls “some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind of correlated pattern in the game.” By claiming not to grasp concepts like “money” and “responsibility,” Skimpole tries to exonerate himself from living off the charity and the suffering of others.²⁰

It is clear from his autobiography that the only thing which could really get Nabokov down was the fear of being, or having been, cruel. More specifically, what he dreaded was simply not having *noticed* the suffering of someone with whom one had been in contact (*SM*, pp. 86–87). It hurt Nabokov horribly to remember the pain he might unthinkingly have caused to a schoolmate, or a governess. It must have terrified him to think that he might be Skimpole after all. The intensity of his fear of cruelty seems to me to show that we should read *Pale Fire* as about two of Nabokov's own personae. On the one side there is John Shade, who combines Nabokov's private virtues with a Jarndyce-like patience for his

18 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (New York: Signet, 1964), pp. 445, 529.

19 See Nabokov's discussion of this passage in *LL*, p. 90.

20 This was sometimes Edmund Wilson's view of what his friend Nabokov was doing. Wilson occasionally cast himself in the part of John Jarndyce, the patient and generous patron, opposite Nabokov as the charmingly amoral Skimpole.

monstrous friend, the false child Kinbote. On the other is Kinbote himself, whose central characteristic is his inability to notice the suffering of anyone else, especially Shade's own, *but who is a much better writer than Shade himself*.

Nabokov's greatest creations are obsessives – Kinbote, Humbert Humbert, and Van Veen – who, *although they write as well as their creator at his best*, are people whom Nabokov himself loathes – loathes as much as Dickens loathed Skimpole. Humbert is, as Nabokov said, “a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear ‘touching’” (SO, p. 94) – manages it because he can write as well as Nabokov can. Both Kinbote and Humbert are exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for their own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything that affects anyone else. These characters dramatize, as it has never before been dramatized, the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most – incuriosity.

Before giving examples from the novels of this cruel incuriosity, let me offer another sort of evidence to back up the claim I have just made. Remember Nabokov's rapid parenthetical definition of the term “art” in the passage about “aesthetic bliss” cited early in this chapter. Writing what he knew would be the most discussed passage of what he knew would become his most widely read manifesto, the Afterword to *Lolita*, he identifies art with the compresence of “curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy.” Notice that “curiosity” comes first.²¹

Nabokov is, I think, trying to jam an ad hoc and implausible moral philosophy into this parenthesis, just as he is trying to jam metaphysical immortality into the phrase “other states of being,” which he uses to define “aesthetic bliss.” If curiosity and tenderness are the marks of the artist, if both are inseparable from ecstasy – so that where they are

21 The background of this definition of art is interesting. Since Nabokov seems never to have forgotten anything, it is likely that a snide remark to Wilson about “the stale Bolshevik propaganda which you imbibed in your youth” (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. Simon Karlinsky [New York: Harper, 1979], p. 304; December 13, 1956) was an allusion to an equally snide remark Wilson had made eight years previously. In 1948, Wilson had written Nabokov as follows: “I have never been able to understand how you manage, on the one hand, to study butterflies from the point of view of their habitat and, on the other, to pretend that it is possible to write about human beings and leave out of account all question of society and environment. I have come to the conclusion that you simply took over in your youth the *fin de siècle* Art for Art's sake slogan and have never thought it out. I shall soon be sending you a book of mine [*The Triple Thinkers*] which may help you to straighten out these problems” (ibid., p. 211; November 15, 1948). Nabokov replied immediately. After dismissing Faulkner and Malraux, two of Wilson's favorites, as “popular mediocre writers,” he says, “‘Art for art's sake’ does not mean anything unless the term ‘art’ be defined. First give me your definition of it and then we can talk” (ibid., p. 214; November 21, 1948). Wilson did not take up this challenge, but Nabokov did, in the passage I have been discussing.

absent no bliss is possible – then there is, after all, no distinction between the aesthetic and the moral. The dilemma of the liberal aesthete is resolved. All that is required to act well is to do what artists are good at – noticing things that most other people do not notice, being curious about what others take for granted, seeing the momentary iridescence and not just the underlying formal structure. The curious, sensitive artist will be the paradigm of morality because he is the only one who always notices everything.

This view is, once again, an inverted Platonism: Plato was right that to know the good is to do it, but he gave exactly the wrong reason. Plato thought that “knowing the good” was a matter of grasping a general idea, but actually knowing the good is just sensing what matters to other people, what their image of the good is – noticing whether they think of it as something round and creamy and flushed, or perhaps as something prism-shaped, jewel-like, and glistening. The tender, curious artist would be the one who, like Shade and unlike Skimpole or Kinbote, has time for other people’s fantasies, not just his own. He would be a nonobsessed poet, but nonetheless one whose poems could produce ecstasy.²²

But Nabokov knew quite well that ecstasy and tenderness not only are separable but tend to preclude each other – that most nonobsessed poets are, like Shade, second rate. This is the “moral” knowledge that his novels help us acquire, and to which his aestheticist rhetoric is irrelevant. He knows quite well that the pursuit of autonomy is at odds with feelings of solidarity. His parenthetical moral philosophy would be sound only if it were true that, as Humbert says, “poets never kill.” But, of course, Humbert does kill – and, like Kinbote, Humbert is exactly as good a writer, exactly as much of an artist, capable of creating exactly as much iridescent ecstasy, as Nabokov himself. Nabokov would like the four characteristics which make up art to be inseparable, but he has to face up to the unpleasant fact that writers can obtain and produce ecstasy while failing to notice suffering, while being incurious about the people whose lives provide their material. He would like to see all the evil in the world – all the failures in tenderness and kindness – as produced by nonpoets, by generalizing, incurious vulgarians like Paduk and Gradus.²³ But he

22 Contrast Nabokov’s list of the characteristics of art with what Baudelaire tells us is the norm in Cythera, namely, “order, beauty, voluptuous luxury and calm.” This was also the norm of the country houses of Nabokov’s childhood, islands in the middle of what Nabokov says was a “to be perfectly frank, rather appalling country” (*SM*, pp. 85–86). Nabokov’s definition gives a new twist to the slogan “art for art’s sake,” and to the relation between art and morality. Baudelaire’s description of the Cytheran norm does not mention any relation to other human beings, except perhaps voluptuous enjoyment. But Nabokov’s does.

23 Nabokov might have included Lenin on this list. But he might not have, since he must

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

knows that this is not the case.²⁴ Nabokov would desperately like artistic gifts to be sufficient for moral virtue, but he knows that there is no connection between the contingent and selective curiosity of the autonomous artist and his father's political project – the creation of a world in which tenderness and kindness are the human norm. So he creates characters who are both ecstatic and cruel, noticing and heartless, poets who are only selectively curious, obsessives who are as sensitive as they are callous.²⁵ What he fears most is that one cannot have it both ways – that there is no synthesis of ecstasy and kindness.

have suspected that he and Lenin himself had more in common than either did with Paduk or Gradus. Lenin, I think, hovers in the background of Nabokov's consciousness as the terrifying O'Brien figure – the man who will rule the world because he combines Paduk's cruelty with something uncomfortably like Nabokov's brains. Nabokov's official position is that "Lenin's life differs from, say, James Joyce's as much as a handful of gravel does from a blue diamond, although both men were exiles in Switzerland and both wrote a vast number of words" (*SO*, pp. 118–119). But I doubt that he could really bring himself to believe that.

24 He knows not only that Humbert is wrong when he says that "poets never kill" but that it is pointless to say, with Kinbote, that "the one who kills is *always* his victim's inferior" (*Pale Fire*, p. 157). For "inferiority" means nothing here – it is one of those machine-made general ideas. If we could specify in what respect murderers were always inferior to their victims, in what respect, for example, Humbert is inferior to Quilty or O'Brien to Winston, then we might have said something useful. But all we can say is that they are *morally* inferior – and if that is what we mean, it would be better to say, "Thou shalt not kill," and have done with it. Nabokov's point about general ideas is that once the concrete detail is left behind, everything quickly blurs together, and the result might as well be left unsaid.

25 What makes Humbert and Kinbote such interesting people is that, although they rarely react to people in predictable ways, they are not oblivious of other people. Not only are they *intensely*, albeit selectively, curious, but their own minds find a "kind of twisted pattern in the game," a motif in the lives of others. The question of whether that pattern was really there is as bad a question as that of whether an artist "truly represents" human emotions. Once the artist has done his work, it is as much "there" as the pattern which conventional moral discourse finds in the same story of joy and suffering. Kinbote is not "making something up" when he reads the story of Zembla between the lines of Shade's poem, any more than he is "representing inaccurately." He is reacting to a stimulus, and thereby creating a new stimulus.

It is important to see that Kinbote *cares* a great deal about Shade's poem, even if for all the wrong reasons. He thinks very hard about it, even though his thought goes in utterly different directions from Shade's. This illustrates the point that a perverse, egocentric commentary – what Bloom calls a "strong reading" – is still a commentary. Just as a Heideggerian reading of Kant is still a reading of Kant, so the reaction of someone like Kinbote to the suicide of Shade's daughter is something we have to take into account. It is something we ought to be curious about, just as we ought to be curious about John Shade's reaction, which was to write "Pale Fire," or Sybil Shade's, which was to translate Donne's sermon on death and Marvell's "The Nymph on the Death of her Fawn" into French. (See Nabokov, *Pale Fire* [New York: Berkeley, 1968], pp. 33, 161–162.) People react to intolerable ecstasy or hopeless longing or intense pain as best they can, and once we leave the realm of action for that of writing, it is no service to anyone to ask whether a reaction was "appropriate." For appropri-

The two novels of his acme spell out this fear.²⁶ The remarkable thing about both novels is the sheer originality of the two central characters – Humbert and Kinbote. No one before had thought of asking what it would be like to be a Skimpole who was also a genius – one who did not simply toss the word “poetry” about but who actually *knew* what poetry was. This particular sort of genius-monster – the monster of incuriosity – is Nabokov’s contribution to our knowledge of human possibilities. I

ateness is a matter of taking up a place within a preestablished and familiar pattern. The curiosity which Nabokov thought essential to art consists in never being content with such a pattern.

- 26 I shall use a footnote to say something about why I take *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* as Nabokov’s acme. I am urging that we think of these two novels as revolving around the same theme as Nabokov’s early novel *The Gift* – namely, around the choice between tenderness and ecstasy which those gifted with artistic talent face, the necessity that they be only *selectively* curious. Compared to these two later novels, however, *The Gift* is didactic, a set of illustrations for some general ideas. The trajectory of Nabokov’s career, like that of Heidegger’s, was shaped by the attempt to avoid being didactic, to avoid the use of words which had been tarnished, reduced to near transparency, by common use. Nabokov criticized his first novel, *Mary*, by saying that “the émigré characters I had collected in that display box [*Mary*] were so transparent to the eye of the era that one could easily make out the labels behind them” (Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave* [New York: Putnam, 1968], p. viii). Heidegger suspected that all his previous work would be, or had already been, rendered pointless by the fact that the words he had invented were passing into general use, and thereby being reduced to the level of “concepts,” mere tools for accomplishing some purpose extrinsic to them. Analogously, one can imagine Nabokov realizing that his earlier work stood in considerable danger of being classified in the sort of general terms which I am offering here. These are the only sort of terms in which one can do the sort of thing I am trying to do, and which Nabokov despised people for doing – “placing” him in relation to novelists, such as Orwell, who had different gifts and different aims. Nabokov shared Heidegger’s hope of eventually coming up with words and books which were so unclassifiable, fell so clearly outside any known way of grouping resemblances and differences, that they would not suffer this sort of banalization. But – as Hegel taught us – no individual achievement of importance escapes such banalization, because “importance” is determined precisely by the degree of effort it takes to bring the particular under the universal, to synthesize the idiosyncratic with the social. The most important achievements are those which make such a synthesis extraordinarily difficult, while nevertheless not making it impossible. Heidegger achieved the perfect balance between initial maximal difficulty of synthesis and eventual transparency, and thereby his acme, in his middle period – the period in which he wrote what he called “the history of Being.” Thereafter, in his final period, he became *merely* idiosyncratic, pursuing private crochets, private resonances, private obsessions. Nabokov achieved the same sort of perfect balance in his middle period – the period of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Thereafter, in the period which begins with *Ada* and ends with *Look at the Harlequins!*, he, too, becomes *merely* idiosyncratic. Even in *Ada*, he is talking only to himself half the time. As Robert Alter has said, *Ada* is a “dazzling, but at times also exasperating, near-masterpiece that lacks the perfect selectivity and control of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*” (“*Ada*, or the Perils of Paradise,” in Peter Quennell, ed., *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute* [London: Weidenfeld, 1979], p. 104). The two great novels have a distinctively Nabokovian idiosyncrasy which the earlier novels (except perhaps for *Invitation to a Beheading*) lack, and a perfection of form which the later novels lack.

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

suspect that only someone who feared that he was executing a partial self-portrait could have made that particular contribution.²⁷

Let me offer some further evidence for this interpretation of the two novels by citing another remark from the Afterword to *Lolita*. Nabokov is listing “the nerves of the novel . . . the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinate by means of which the book is plotted” (p. 315). Among these secret points, he tells us, is “the Kasbeam barber (who cost me a month of work).”²⁸ This barber appears in only one sentence:

In Kasbeam a very old barber gave me a very mediocre haircut: he babbled of a baseball-playing son of his, and, at every explodent, spat into my neck, and every now and then wiped his glasses on my sheet-wrap, or interrupted his tremulous scissor work to produce faded newspaper clippings, and so inattentive was I that it came as a shock to realize as he pointed to an easelled photograph among the ancient gray lotions, that the moustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years. (p. 211)

27 Humbert’s nympholepsy and Kinbote’s homosexuality are made so plausible and interesting (so “charming,” to use the word that everyone in *Bleak House* uses about Skimpole) that – probably just as Nabokov intended – they arouse questions in his readers’ minds about Nabokov’s own views on sex. I take these to be just more of Nabokov’s celebrated false leads. There is certainly something of Nabokov himself in these monsters, but it has nothing in particular to do with any particular sort of sex. Sexual obsessions are just handy examples of a more general phenomenon.

28 The town of Kasbeam is described as seen from a nearby hilltop, in terms which anticipate those used at the climactic moment, just before the end of the novel, when Humbert looks down from another hill to another “toylike” town, the one from which rises the “melody of children at play.” Then Humbert realizes that “the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (p. 306). This is the moment which produces what Humbert has earlier called the “unbelievable, unbearable, and, I suspect, eternal horror that I know now” (p. 167). Humbert, writing his story as he dies of heart disease, describes that horror when he writes: “Alas I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. Unless it can be proven to me – to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction – that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. To quote an old poet:

The moral sense in mortals is the duty
We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty.” (p. 281)

The old poet is Nabokov himself. I am suggesting that he hoped that poets had to pay this duty, but was not sure, and thus not sure that life was not a joke.

I am not sure whether “cost me a month of work” means that Nabokov rewrote the sentence about the barber for a month, or that his associations with the idea of not noticing the death of another’s child kept him from writing for a month, or that some actual encounter with another’s (perhaps an actual barber’s) suffering kept him from writing for a month. It is typical of Nabokov to let his reader guess.

This sentence epitomizes Humbert's lack of curiosity – his inattentiveness to anything irrelevant to his own obsession – and his consequent inability to attain a state of being in which “art,” as Nabokov has defined it, is the norm. This failure parallels a failure described earlier in the book, one which occurs when Humbert transcribes from memory the letter in which Charlotte proposes marriage to him, and adds that he has left out at least half of it including “a lyrical passage which I more or less skipped at the time, concerning Lolita's brother who died at two when she was four, and how much I would have liked him” (p. 68).

This is one of only two passages in the book in which Lolita's dead brother is referred to. The other is one in which Humbert complains that Charlotte rarely talks about her daughter – the only subject of interest to him – and in particular that she refers to the dead boy more frequently than to the living girl (p. 80). Humbert mourns that Lolita herself never referred to her pre-Humbertian existence in Humbert's presence. But he did once overhear her talking to a girlfriend, and what she said was: “You know what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own” (p. 282). This leads Humbert to reflect that “I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind” and that “quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions.”

Continuing this meditation on possibilities which had not previously occurred to him, Humbert remembers an occasion on which Lolita may have realized that another of her girlfriends had “such a wonderful fat pink dad and a small chubby brother, and a brand-new baby sister, and a home, and two grinning dogs, and Lolita had nothing” (p. 285). It is left to the reader to make the connection – to put together Lolita's remark about death with the fact that she once had a small, chubby brother who died. This, and the further fact that Humbert does not make the connection himself, is exactly the sort of thing Nabokov expects his ideal readers – the people whom he calls “a lot of little Nabokovs” – to notice. But, ruefully and contemptuously aware that most of his readers will fall short, he tells us in his Afterword what we have missed.

Consider the impact of being told this on the reader who only then remembers that the death of a child is Nabokov's standard example of ultimate pain – the occasion for John Shade's poem “Pale Fire” as well as the central event in *Bend Sinister*. It dawns on this reader that he himself was just as inattentive to that month-long sentence, and to that dead moustached son, as Nabokov suspected he had been. The reader, suddenly revealed to himself as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious, recognizes his *semblable*, his brother, in Humbert and Kinbote. Suddenly

Lolita does have a “moral in tow.”²⁹ But the moral is not to keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering. Just insofar as one is preoccupied with building up to one’s private kind of sexual bliss, like Humbert, or one’s private aesthetic bliss, like the reader of *Lolita* who missed that sentence about the barber the first time around, people are likely to suffer still more.

Turning from *Lolita* to *Pale Fire*, we can see Shade as having been given all of Nabokov’s own tenderness and kindness and curiosity, but Kinbote as getting all the ecstasy. Shade’s poem about the death of his daughter is not nearly as good a poem as *Pale Fire* is a novel. That is because the rest of the novel, Kinbote’s commentary, gives us something Shade could not – it surrounds the ordinary suffering of an elderly mortal man with glimpses of Zembla, glimpses of what Humbert Humbert called “a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flame.”³⁰ Kinbote is a marvel of self-involvement, a man who knows himself to be (except in his dreams) utterly heartless, but who is much more imaginative than Shade. Psychotics *are*, after all, a lot more imaginative than the rest of us. In Humbert and Kinbote, Nabokov managed to create two sociopaths who, unlike most real-life psychotics, managed to write their own case histories, and to do so knowing exactly how those histories would sound to normal ears.

Kinbote is very curious indeed about anything which at all affects his own desires for boys or for glory. He is bored and annoyed by everything else. He is enraged that Shade has dared to write about his own daughter’s death and the joy of his own marriage rather than about “the glory of Zembla,” about Kinbote’s merry minions and his miserable wife. Yet Shade’s poem without Kinbote’s commentary would be merely wistful. It is the counterpoint between the poem and the commentary which makes the poem itself memorable. Shade’s tenderness and kindness are made visible by Kinbote’s remorseless pursuit of the sort of

29 Just before giving his definitions of “aesthetic bliss” and of “art” in the Afterword, Nabokov says, “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow” (p. 313).

30 In a certain horrible way, Kinbote is absolutely right when he concludes his Foreword to “*Pale Fire*” by saying, “Without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work) . . . has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word.” Nabokov likes to put truth in the mouths of those who do not realize what they are saying; the Foreword to *Lolita* (by “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.”) is another example of this.

ecstasy which necessarily excludes attention to other people. We are more likely to notice the joys or the sufferings of one person if our attention is directed to it by the surprising indifference of another person. Just as the misery of the peasantry is made visible by the conspicuous consumption of the nobles, or the hovels of the blacks by the swimming pools of the whites, so the death of Shade's daughter is made more vivid by Kinbote's dismissal of it than in Shade's own remembrance. Hegel's point was sound: The thesis will escape our notice, after a bit of time has passed, unless it catches the reflection, the pale fire, of the brand-new, shiny, antithesis.

To put the point in some of Nabokov's favorite terms of praise, Kinbote is, because crueler, cooler and dryer – and thus a better writer – than Shade. Shade's verse, by his own confession, is written above freezing point. In his poem he remarks that his own reputation, among literary critics, is always "one oozy footstep" behind Robert Frost's. Kinbote for once glosses a line with due respect to its author's interests, and speaks for Nabokov when he says, "In the temperature charts of poetry high is low, and low high, so that the degree at which perfect crystallization occurs is above that of tepid facility" (*Pale Fire*, p. 136).³¹

Kinbote understands what Shade is getting at here because, as befits two aspects of a single creator, Shade and Kinbote have a lot in common. Shade realizes this. Cruel as he may be, Kinbote is not vulgar enough to be physically brutal, and to Shade that matters a great deal (p. 145). Shade's knowledge that "without . . . Pride, Lust and Sloth, poetry might never have been born" (p. 150) lets him be indulgent about Kinbote's delusions, as he would not have been indulgent with anyone who

31 I am unsure whether Kinbote speaks for Nabokov when he goes on to praise Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and says, "With all his excellent gifts, John Shade could never make *his* snowflakes settle that way." But despite the suspicious terms which Nabokov makes Kinbote use to praise Frost ("a poem that every American boy knows by heart"), I suspect that Nabokov knew perfectly well that he himself could not write poetry as well as Frost could, and consequently that Shade could not either.

However that may be, Nabokov was very fond of the metaphor of crystallization. Crystal is a different state of being than fluidity, one in which transparency vanishes and is sometimes replaced by iridescence. But the crystals have to be artificial, and as unrepeatable as snowflakes are conventionally supposed to be. Gradus's inability to grasp any but general ideas is paralleled by his inability to like any piece of glass other than homogeneous and transparent ones – such as the "little hippopotamus made of violet glass" (*Pale Fire*, p. 169) and the "small crystal giraffe" (p. 132) which he prices in the course of his travels. Kinbote nicely describes the form Marxism takes when it becomes a state religion when he says, "Ideas in modern Russia are machine-cut blocks, coming in solid colors; the nuance is outlawed, the interval walled up, the curve grossly stepped." It seems safe to assume that what Gradus admired in the hippopotamus and the giraffe was their lifelikeness – that is, their approximation to the transparent conventional representation of these animals.

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

brought about physical harm. He treats Kinbote as a fellow artist in whom, as in Swift and Baudelaire, the mind sickened before the body collapsed (p. 111). The two men share the same view of tyrants and fools – of people like Monsieur Pierre, Gradus, and Paduk, whose brutality they take to stem from their underlying vulgarity. This vulgarity consists in being obsessed with general ideas rather than with particular butterflies, words or people.

But although Kinbote is, in a general way, aware of the danger of general ideas, he himself has some very bad ones, whereas Shade really does manage to forswear them all.³² One of Kinbote's worst ideas is aestheticism, the belief that there is something called "literary technique" or "poetic gift": a practical ability which floats free of the contingencies of an individual poet's life. This is why he thinks that all he need do to gain immortality is to find a good poet, tell the poet all about himself, and then wait to be glorified in imperishable verse. He expects Shade to "merge the glory of Zembla with the glory of his verse" (p. 144), because, as Shade tells him, he thinks that "one can harness words like performing fleas and make them drive other fleas" (p. 144). This idea that somehow language can be separated from authors, that literary technique is a godlike power operating independently of mortal contingencies, and in particular from the author's contingent notion of what goodness is, is the root of "aestheticism" in the bad sense of the term, the

- 32 This forswearing occurs at the passage in "Pale Fire" where Shade gives up his concern for the immortality of the soul, and in particular of his dead daughter's soul, as "flimsy nonsense." Having discovered that the evidence of immortality he thought he had found was based on a misprint, he writes (ll. 806–815):

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 a topsy-turvical 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. . . .

Shade decides that the artist's recognition of contingency, of the absence (or, what comes to the same thing, the utter inscrutability) of any ordering power is preferable to religion's or moral philosophy's claim to have discovered the true name and nature of such a power. By contrast, a taste for general ideas (which Kinbote is unable to realize he shares with Gradus) comes through when Kinbote asks Shade for a "password" and is offered "pity." When Shade refuses to provide a theological backup for this password, Kinbote says, "Now I have caught you, John: once we deny a Higher Intelligence that plans and administers our individual hereafters we are bound to accept the unspeakably dreadful notion of Chance reaching into eternity" (p. 151). This is precisely the notion Shade *has* accepted in the lines just quoted, a notion whose effects can only be mitigated by what Humbert calls "the very local palliative of articulate art."

sense in which the aesthetic is a matter of form and language rather than of content and life. In this sense of the term, Nabokov the novelist had no interest in being an aesthete, even if Nabokov the theorist could think of no better account of his own practice.

Nabokov has often been read as an aesthete in this sense, and in particular as someone whose work stems from, and illustrates, the weird Barthian view that language works all by itself.³³ Nabokov the theorist and generalizer encourages such a reading, but that reading ignores the point which I take to be illustrated by Nabokov's best practice: Only what is relevant to our sense of what we should do with ourselves, or for others, is aesthetically useful.

One can affirm this point while agreeing with Barthes and his fellow textualists that the point of novels or plays or poems is not to represent human emotions or situations "correctly." Literary art, the nonstandard, nonpredictable use of words, cannot, indeed, be gauged in terms of accuracy of representation. For such accuracy is a matter of conformity to convention, and the point of writing well is precisely to break the crust of convention. But the fact that literary merit is not a matter of reinforcing a widely used final vocabulary, not a matter of success in telling us what we have always known but could not express satisfactorily, should not obscure the fact that literary language is, and always will be, parasitic on ordinary language, and in particular on ordinary moral language. Further, literary interest will always be parasitic on moral interest. In particular, you cannot create a memorable character without thereby making a suggestion about how your reader should act.³⁴

I can sum up my reading of Nabokov by saying that he tried to defend himself against the charge of infidelity to his father's project by wielding some general ideas about the function of "the writer," ideas which connect this function both with his own special gifts and with his own special

33 David Rampton and Ellen Pifer both begin their excellent revisionist books on Nabokov by citing, and deploring, a lot of such readings, and by emphasizing the "moral" side of Nabokov. I learned a great deal from both of these books, and in particular from Rampton's discussion of *The Gift*. See Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

34 What makes Humbert and Kinbote so much less shadowy and so much more memorable than Cincinnatus or Van Veen is the sheer believability and homeliness of the situations in which they are involved, their interaction with sane people (like Lolita and Shade) rather than simply with their own fantasies or with other fantasists (like Monsieur Pierre or Ada). Cincinnatus is as sympathetic as Shade, and Van as loathsome as Humbert, but in less concrete – and therefore less morally useful – ways. For the concreteness of a character in a novel is a matter of being embedded in situations to which the reader can, out of his own life, imagine analogues.

CRUELTY AND SOLIDARITY

fear of death. This led him to create a private mythology about a special elite – artists who were good at imagery, who never killed, whose lives were a synthesis of tenderness and ecstasy, who were candidates for literal as well as literary immortality, and who, unlike his father, placed no faith in general ideas about general measures for the general welfare. This was the mythology in which he fruitlessly attempted to enfold Dickens and upon which he relied whenever he was asked, or asked himself, what he had done for the relief of human suffering. But Nabokov also knew perfectly well that his gifts, and artistic gifts generally, neither had any special connection with pity and kindness nor were able to “create worlds.”³⁵ He knew as well as John Shade did that all one can do with such gifts is sort out one’s relations to this world – the world in which ugly and ungifted children like Shade’s daughter and the boy Jo are humiliated and die. Nabokov’s best novels are the ones which exhibit his inability to believe his own general ideas.

- 35 Nabokov uses this notion of world-creation over and over again. See David Bromwich’s “Why Writers Do Not Create Their Own Worlds” (in *Romantic Argument* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, in press]) for an explanation of the drawbacks of this metaphor, one which goes back to Kant and is parasitic on the disastrous Kantian distinction between form and content.