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Morality and Amorality in Three Novels by Vladimir Nabokov

Henry ATMORE

Readers can be provoked by Nabokov's cruelty – the depths of his contempt for lesser minds, the remorselessness with which he defied the conventions of poetic justice and refused hope to those of his fictional 'puppets' he had selected for a life of pain. This is Italo Calvino on the chill he felt on contemplating Nabokov: "He truly is a great genius, one of the greatest writers of the century and one of the people with whom I identify most. Of course he is also someone of extraordinary cynicism, of formidable cruelty, but he is genuinely one of the great authors" [Calvino, 238].

Calvino's "of course" does not necessitate "but", and we might feel that these anxious lines reveal more about Calvino than they do about Nabokov. It is jejune to measure the worth of literature by moral yardsticks, or so conventional wisdom has tended to run. A reader must be brave, or indifferent to being judged conservative, to admit to feeling disgusted by a book, although there are many books published that are disgusting from any rational ethical perspective. Still, it seems worth asking: what is the *use* of gratuitous cruelty exercised within the precincts of literature. Revisiting the question of Nabokov's cruelty can help us. Some Nabokov champions have averred that his methods are redeemed by his purposes. He has been cast as a 'moralist', in the sense that Evelyn Waugh and Martin Amis – two other notable exponents of literary nastiness, one of them anticipating, the other indebted to Nabokov – are sometimes described as 'moralists'. By this is meant that they are good gaugers of horror, although we might feel that there must be more to morality than anatomizing its absence.

Nabokov's champions have established two lines of defence. The first is to say that cruelty was not a *reflex* but a central concern of Nabokov's art. *Pnin* (1957) and *Pale Fire* (1962), are cited as evidence for deep compassion. The prosecution might

reply with *Laughter in the Dark* (1933/1961), or *Bend Sinister* (1947), but those can be dismissed as follies of youth and inexperience (in writing in English) respectively. The second is to claim that in Nabokov, so many of whose faculties operated on, to ordinary folk, empyrean planes of refinement, kindliness too was raised to a superhuman pitch. This is Nabokov's son Dmitrii on a rare intrusion of the grubby world into the odd ménage Nabokov established at the Montreux Palace Hotel during the years of his pomp:

I recall his pang of pity upon seeing the grisly newsreels at the time of John Kennedy's assassination – not only for the dead president but also for a still innocent (inasmuch as only suspected) Oswald, shown bruised and black-eyed: 'If they have worked over (zamoochili) this poor little guy (chelovechka) needlessly ...,' he said, with the menacing tone he used only when defending the weak and blameless, whether animal or human. When the facts were established his attitude obviously changed. But I wonder how many people had such a first reaction [Dmitrii Nabokov, 128].

There is more to think about here than the suggestion that 'not many people' would have shared Nabokov's outrage, important as it was and has been to the construction of the Nabokov public persona that nothing he ever did, said, or felt was derivative. Dmitrii Nabokov was not a man to forget, and could count on his readers also not forgetting, that his family were no strangers to assassination. Nabokov's father died in Berlin in March 1922 from injuries sustained while thwarting an attempt on the life of Paul Milyukov, an old friend and a spokesman for liberal émigré opposition to the Bolshevik regime. The assassins, right-wing monarchists, were roughed up by the crowd, and might have suffered worse but for the arrival of the police. Unlike Oswald, they lived; one of them went on to achieve moderate eminence under the Nazis [Boyd, *Russian Years*, 190-191, 427-428].

It is impossible to doubt the keenness of Nabokov's grief at these events, but one should also note how writerly, how calculated was his response to it. He was not present at the meeting but, garbled news of the catastrophe reaching the family apartment, it fell to him to accompany his mother to the meeting hall. Here he discovered a scene of farce, nausea, and terror, described in his diary with typical cool precision. He noted that teeth, eyes, voices did strange things under the pressure of

acute embarrassment; that the Berlin police wore green uniforms; that Milyukov metamorphosed in his imagination into a Watcher of the Dead, “dry, pinkish ... fearing nothing, loving nothing”; and that his mother, denied access to her husband’s body, “in the middle of an entrance hall full of embarrassed strangers, began to sob aloud and emit a kind of strained groan” [Boyd, *Russian Years* 191-193]. Nabokov was twenty-two years old, and not yet a novelist (he would write his first, *Mary*, at twenty-five).

This account of the evening of his father’s death is extraordinary in the same way that, forty years later, his compassion for Lee Harvey Oswald was extraordinary: a Herculean striving after detachment and self-denial. We have forsaken the habitations of common humanity – where people might be scarred or vengeful or unforgiving – for a realm of myth. The burden of cruelty must now be shouldered by the reader. We are the ones left to regret that Milukov’s assassins weren’t worse-treated by the crowd; to us must fall the burden of reflecting that, given the circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Dallas police beat up Oswald. (Remember: Dmitrii comes close to *asserting* that this was the common response.) Denying godliness to Nabokov entails denying proper filial piety, not just to Nabokov, to Dmitrii as well. Nobody has the right to do that, thus nobody has a right to gainsay Nabokov. The function of this as of any mausoleum is to instil reverence, and put a stop to conversation.

In the hagiographical hush (it is not unique to Dmitrii, although he and his mother were active in encouraging it) Nabokovian arrogance is offered not in mitigation of, but as negating, the charge of cruelty. Martin Amis, on pilgrimage to Montreux – he too was inclined towards heresy, with his notion that prose style is a measure of moral worth [Amis, *War Against Cliché*] – heard in the obligation owed to Nabokov by the wife and son who had survived him the essential “tenor of their family pride”. Like the pride of the great man himself it brooked no discontent. Edmund Wilson is dismissed: “I liked him. He was very good with children. He was cuddly, playful ... Then his immense presumption – that he knew Russian!” Andrew Field, who spent whole books wrestling with the problem of Nabokov’s decency, gets even shorter shrift: “Astonishing. The *presumption* ...” [Amis, *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*, 117. His italics of course.]

That “*presumption*” is striking. It does more than prick the pretensions of literary critics who have overstepped their bounds. It is a warning to any prospective

reader of Nabokov – “little readers” as he liked to call them – to know their place and to keep to it. ‘Nabokov’ cannot be second-guessed, judged, called to task. This phenomenon – that the possibility of evaluating Nabokov’s achievement should be in doubt – is fascinating. It is related, I think, to the control with which Nabokov built his fictional worlds, and to the pose of godliness he assumed in relation to his creations and to those others, the “little readers”, who elected to inhabit them.

Albert Albinus, Charlotte Haze, Adam Krug, Hugh Person, Timofey Pnin, Hazel Shade, Lucette Veen: thus sounds the roll call of Nabokov characters in a recondite circle of hell where the condemned are subjected to apposite torments for failings they have not been granted the capacity to recognise, let alone overcome. Nabokov abjured sentiment, but he did so for a reason. He thought of his characters as “galley slaves”, in thrall to his purposes, projections of himself and others, perhaps, but emphatically not to be confused with the real thing. Questioned about his habit of “diminishing” his creations, Nabokov replied: “how can I ‘diminish’ to the level of ciphers, et cetera, characters that I have invented myself? One can diminish a biographee, but not an eidolon” [Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 94]. His cruelty, then, was not gratuitous (“Actually, I’m a mild old man who loathes cruelty” [19]). It was in a way a mark of a desire and respect for privacy (witnessed also by his irritation with John Updike for suggesting that Ada Veen was a pen-portrait of Véra [*Strong Opinions* 146]). As he said in his last ever interview, in words that have a valedictory ring to them:

The circus tiger is not obsessed by his torturer, my characters cringe as I come near with my whip. I have seen a whole avenue of imagined trees losing their leaves at the threat of my passage. If I do have any obsessions I’m careful not to reveal them in fictional form [Robinson, ‘The Last Interview’ 124-125].

The author’s responsibility for and conduct towards his fictional creations bears no relation to his responsibility for and conduct towards real – intransigently real, he might think – people. A reader should not confuse her identification with the projections she encounters in books with her personal feelings or lack thereof for people he encounters in the office or the classroom or while queuing for vegetables [Keen; Vogler: arguing against the more conventional position of Booth]. And the author has no responsibility for readers who live through him, who mistake his

inventions for the real – reassuringly real, they might think – thing. This seems a little crude, for Nabokov (both appalled and spellbound before a great deal of what counted, in America in the 1940s and 1950s, as reality). Nevertheless, one of the points of his sadistic corporal metaphor was to shock readers and critics into an understanding that they, like Nabokov, although not to the same degree, and unlike, say, wretched Albert Albinus, held the imaginative whip hand.

Commentators who enjoy the playful, puzzle-solving side of Nabokov favour rationalizations of this kind. I am not so sure. Judging works of art according to their ‘morality’ – the correct ascription to the evil of their comeuppance, to the weak of their penances, and to the good of their just rewards – is an outmoded Victorianism, yes. Identifying with characters we read about in books is naïve and can be harmful, yes. It is not the function of literature to console or to tell us how to cope with our loved and hated ones – again, yes. We all know all this, most of us don’t need Nabokov to bring it home, but how many of us can stop ourselves? And in the absence of morality or identification or consolation or relevance, what is it that literature has to offer?

In what follows I will present three episodes from Nabokov that seem to me to offer good opportunities for thinking these questions through. Two of these episodes – Timofey Pnin’s anguish at the thought of the sufferings endured by his childhood sweetheart, Mira, before she died; and the suicide of Hazel Shade in *Pale Fire* – are amongst the most beautiful, haunting, and troubling passages in Nabokov. But I want to start with something demonstrably bad – the denouement, the climax, of *Bend Sinister*, detailing the judicial murder of a small child. I use the word ‘climax’ advisedly, because what we are confronted with here is a piece of pornography. Whether the fact that Nabokov intended this mitigates the episode’s sheer nastiness is a question to which we shall return:

The ‘orphan’ or ‘little person’ was left alone and allowed to roam all over the enclosure ... After a while the patients or ‘inmates’ (eight all told) were let into the enclosure. At first, they kept to a distance, eyeing the ‘little person’. It was interesting to observe how the ‘gang’ spirit gradually asserted itself. They had been rough lawless unorganized individuals, but now something was binding them, the community spirit (positive) was conquering the individual whims (negative); for the first time in their lives they were organized; ... one felt that

... ‘something was really happening,’ or in technical language: the ego, he goes ‘ouf’ (out) and the pure ‘egg’ (common extraction of egos) ‘remains’. And then the fun begins. One of the patients ... a heavy, handsome boy of seventeen went up to the ‘little person’ and sat down beside him on the turf and said ‘open your mouth’. The ‘little person’ did what he was told and with unerring precision the youth spat a pebble into the child’s open mouth ... Sometimes the ‘squeezing game’ started at once after the ‘spitting game’ but in other cases the development from harmless pinching and poking to mild sexual investigations to limb tearing, bone breaking, deoculation etc. took a considerable time. Deaths were of course unavoidable, but quite often the ‘little person’ was afterwards patched up ... A patched up ‘little person’ provided an especially satisfactory ‘release’ [*Bend Sinister* 182-183].

The speaker is Crystelsen, Second Secretary of the Council of Elders, a cabal directing affairs from behind the authoritarian façade of the rule of Paduk, the ‘Toad’, leader of the ‘Average Man’ Party. His interlocutor is Adam Krug, a philosopher, and former schoolmate of Paduk. The ‘little person’ is and is not David, Krug’s only son. The boy has been kidnapped by two of Paduk’s goons and sent to an Institute for Abnormal Children, in which the ‘Orphans’ are “now and then used to serve as a ‘release-instrument’” for the therapeutic benefit of the criminally insane. Knowledge of David’s fate drains Krug of the last dregs of *his* sanity, and the rest of the novel unfolds in a hallucinatory blur, until Nabokov at last puts him out of his misery.

We do not need to follow Edmund Wilson and ascribe all this to *Schadenfreude* or (in a phrase Wilson calculated to offend) “the sado-masochism of the author” [Wilson, 236-237]. Nabokov is trying to do something, and it is easy enough to see what it is – to that extent the passage is a success. Three perversions are conflated; in the process Nabokov makes a serious argument about the connection between impoverishment of language and impoverishment of moral sense. *Lolita*’s infamy notwithstanding, Nabokov’s views on sexual behaviour were pretty orthodox. The disgust one can readily evince from the above was genuine. Here, though, sexual aberration is not the main point. It is subordinate to a portrayal of a political system encouraging technicians in a perversion of the notion of value. The phrase “some little human creature of no value to the community” [*Bend Sinister* 181] chills, as an indictment of the assignation of value to people in the first place, and of a mindset that,

having done so, will discern more of it in rapists, murderers and arsonists, than in children whose only crime is that their parents are out of favour with the regime. And perversion of value has led to the perversion of that which is supposed to be valueless, science. The debased ‘technical’ vocabulary, exemplified by the oeuf-egg-ego pun and the ghastly “deoculation”, both masks the Institute’s activities and condones them. If there is something to be learnt from the abuse and dismemberment of children, then it can’t be so bad, can it? But the air of detachment is spurious. Crystelsen’s language equally belongs to the world of kitsch: the “little person”, the “beautiful expanse of turf” in the enclosure, “And then the fun begins”, the spat pebble being “a wee bit against the rules”. It is the kind of language the perpetrators of horrors will use to convince themselves they are still human, or to mock expectations of anything so banal as humanity. This is the debasement Nabokov, master of language(s), most deplures, and finds most telling.

On this account, the ‘deoculation’ passage is not merely not bad, it is brilliant. So why do I dislike it? There are, first, problems with the materials out of which Nabokov has constructed his dystopia. He later enjoyed swiping at Orwell – calling him a “popular purveyor of illustrated ideas and publicistic fiction” [*Laughter in the Dark* 7] – but the *Bend Sinister* dystopia displays none of Orwell’s clarity of moral vision. The satire on the ‘Average Man Party’ is not unlike Ayn Rand (*Bend Sinister* was published in 1947; *Anthem* had been published in 1938, and *The Fountainhead* in 1943). Paduk, the dictator, is a study in humdrum, not terror. He is the bullied turned bully, a variation on the tired and inadequate aristocratic theme of professing to despise Nazism because it was ‘vulgar’. Then there is Freud. Not all of the science at the Institute is Freudian, but a number of coinages (“release-instrument”, “effundated”, “repressed yearnings”, “ego” of course) are, and so, to Nabokov’s mind, is the accommodation, at the expense of all human dignity, of sexual pathology. Nabokov’s pursuit of the “Viennese Witch Doctor” was unrelenting. It is unattractive even to those, like me, without any stake in Freud, because it is so dull – a rare adjective to have to apply to Nabokov. In *Bend Sinister*, though, the Freud-baiting is more than charmless eccentricity. Psychoanalysis is not eugenics, racial science, or Lysenkoism. It has never been a totalitarian science. Rather the opposite, which makes its conjunction here with the machinations of a shadowy ‘Council of Elders’ – calling to mind that classic of anti-Semitic paranoia, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion – unfortunate to say the least.

Nabokov lived in Nazi Germany, with a Jewish wife, for nearly four years. His politics should be excused our remonstrance. Similarly, Freud-bashing is a Nabokov tic we learn to put up with. What is inexcusable in the “little person” passage is that it is calculated to make the reader feel dirty. Science, perverted science we should say, shares with pornography an impulse towards objectification. In each case the object is stripped of intrinsic value. It exists only to gratify, the natural or functional curiosity of the scientist, the sexual imperatives of the consumer. The horror of the ‘orphans’ at the Institute for Abnormal Children is that they do both, and more. Herein lies the problem. Crystelsen, Doktor von Wytwyl, the sociopaths, are creatures of Nabokov’s imagination: but the people really being gratified, in one way or another, are his readers. Nabokov apes a (nowadays) somewhat old-fashioned form of pornography, pulling back on the cusp of climax, and paying twisted homage to the imagination of its user: hence the artful vagueness of “squeezing game”, “mild sexual investigations”, “deoculation”, which last you have to look at twice to catch the meaning of. The reader is thus made complicit. He fills in the details of what, it slowly dawns upon him, has happened to David Krug, and he must accept some share of the blame for the atrocity. Even if he *is* guilty and even if he benefits from the realization of the fact, this hardly constitutes fair dealing. For Nabokov, no one else, has made it all up; in this respect, Wilson was quite right. The film of David’s destruction ran through his head, it had to, before it could run through the heads of others. His attempt to have things otherwise is more than an evasion; it breaks a compact. Good readers will not be so naïve as to expect always to be on the same side as the writer; we applaud when our duplicities are brought to light. What Nabokov does with David Krug is different. He leads readers into evil and then, by stylistic sleight of hand, abandons them. Nabokov can hide behind Poduk, Crystelsen, and von Wytwyl, he can claim irony and detachment, he can ironize detachment, he can spurn “any satisfaction given to the moral sense” [*Bend Sinister* 7], he can pull off another of his fancy tricks with mirrors. *His* disgust and indignation are inviolate; he, the author of this particular hell. We, mere vacationers there, have no such option. I can see no artistic justification for this. My own response, on first reading, was anger. I objected to having another’s sleaziness foisted upon me. I had not been enjoying the book, and now my sense that there was something not just dislikeable but *wrong* with it was confirmed. Contempt, which is what Nabokov offers his readers here, can be countered with silence, or with contempt in return. Silence would have ceded the game to Nabokov, and on this occasion I thought it important that he didn’t win.

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Hazel Shade is the daughter of John Shade, putative author of the poem (though not the book) *Pale Fire*. Hazel is already dead at whatever point one decides to start reading the novel, even if, as Nabokov slyly hinted, you start with the Index. She comes to us at second, third, fourth or fifth-hand, depending on who we think is telling the story. Her lines are always delivered off-stage. She is heard asking her mother for help with T.S. Eliot through her father's closed study door [*Pale Fire* 41-42]; she is imagined in a Hawaiian bar, and on a bus, and amidst some cluttered machinery [40-41]; and then weeping in a haunted barn [152-153]. Here, it would appear, Nabokov has devised an object for his attentions who will *not* be made aware of the joke being played upon her, who is *always* silent, but who will not be gifted the autonomy and dignity of silence.

She is the antithesis of glamour, a blot on the corn-fed landscape of Eisenhower-era America. She commits suicide after being spurned – not, we should note, as a potential lay, but simply as somebody to be seen in public with – by a boy called ‘Pete Dean’. (How, so-named, could he be anything other than the handsomest boy in the High School Yearbook?) She has thrown her fat, frumpish body into Lake Lochanhead. There is no indication that, Ophelia-like, she floats before being pulled under. She sinks out of existence, out of notice, like a stone [43; line 500 of John Shade's 999 line poem]. Like a stone she is mute: her secrets are secret for the unasking. One trite, but nonetheless true, thing Nabokov is saying through her and about her is that the ugly (ugly women, more precisely) are never given any chance to prove themselves interesting, while our fascination with the beautiful will persist in the absence of any evidence that it is merited.

John Shade has written *Pale Fire* in an attempt to come to terms with his daughter's death, and to work through the implications of his hope that he and she might enjoy an afterlife together. But, as Michael Wood has argued, even Hazel's father can figure her as only a partial person, with all the important (sexy, glamorous, enchanting) bits left out [Wood, 194-195]. Hence the, it goes without saying, cruel irony of the Shades, their daughter packed off on her first and final blind date, settling down to an evening in front of the TV. It is while their nerves are being soothed by

some beguiling, out-of-focus starlet, “the soft form dissolving in the prism / Of corporate desire”, that Hazel makes her fatal decision and gets off the bus at Lochanhead [*Pale Fire* 42]. Even for her father she is a person pieced together out of pity, but nothing more.

And, Nabokov suggests, it is in the nature of pity not only to withhold from the person pitied her full humanity, but ultimately to ignore her altogether. Shade recalls the humiliation attendant upon an elementary school play; *whose* humiliation, we wonder. Hazel is cast as Mother Time. Her lither, prettier schoolmates appear as fairies and elves. On Hazel’s entrance, centre-stage at last, in front of all the other silently judging parents, Shade, in shame, retreats to the men’s room and begins to cry [38]. He is a good man, as far as one can tell, and one cannot doubt his love for his daughter. Still, it is difficult not to discern something self-regarding in his sobbing. A concern, perhaps, that the ugliness will be traced – by all those people! – back to its source; or alternatively a kind of triumph, that he, the poet, can penetrate the veil of appearances while they, the heedless others, are trapped in a killing conventionality. Whether humiliated or sentimental, the tears do not come for Hazel. They come for what Hazel represents in John Shade. Hazel’s reaction to her father leaving the audience in the middle of her performance, or maybe not being able to bring himself to watch her at all, is not recorded.

If Hazel is ill served by her father, she is positively brutalized by Charles Kinbote, Shade’s unwelcome exegete and the erstwhile King of Zembla. The following passage has always struck me as being one of the most hateful in Nabokov – hateful, among other reasons, for being so horrifyingly precise. Kinbote, doing a little research into the circumstances of Hazels’ death, has contacted Shade’s former secretary, Jane Provost, an embittered prematurely middle-aged woman, and also, coincidentally, Pete Dean’s cousin:

She told me ... that Peter Provost ... might have exaggerated a wee bit, but certainly did not fib, when explaining that he had to keep a promise made to one of his dearest fraternity friends, a glorious young athlete whose ‘garland’ will not, one hopes, be ‘briefer than a girls’. Such obligations are not to be treated lightly or disdainfully. Jane said she had tried to talk to the Shades after the tragedy, and later had written Sybil [Hazel’s mother] a long letter that was

never acknowledged. I said, displaying a bit of the slang I had recently started to master: ‘You are telling me!’[156]

A different glamour is being evoked here, not the fairytale glamour of beauty contests (which Hazel never entered) and Prom Queens (Hazel would have been lucky to go to the Prom at all), but its masculine counterpart: the Rock Hudson beefcake glamour of Spartan Epic, fraternity highjinks, and outdoor gymnastics, fractured through the lens of Kinbote’s winsome prose (“a wee bit”, “fib”, “dearest”). Kinbote’s homoerotic body consciousness, born of self-loathing, excludes Hazel from consideration in exactly the same way as does Pete Dean’s (born of a not unreasonable heterosexual pride in physical prowess; Kinbote likes the look of him, though not quite as much as he likes the look of his friend). Hazel just doesn’t measure up, her face and body don’t fit. She won’t be a starlet, she won’t have a Pete Dean. As Shade recognizes, wrestling with love and contempt, “a white-scarfed beau / Would never come for her; she’d never go, / A dream of gauze and jasmine, to that dance” [39]. Shade’s glamour is hackneyed, Kinbote’s tawdry, but Shade knows, and Nabokov knew, that at that time and in such a place, for a girl like Hazel Shade, its impossibility foreclosed on any hope of happiness.

Hazel’s suicide is not brought about by isolated acts of prejudice. There is a culture at play here, a culture, one might imagine, contrived to make lives such as hers not worth living. The “long letter” Jane Provost has written to Sybil Shade is thus the nastiest detail of all, because of what one can infer (from the fact it hasn’t received a reply) it must have contained. Self-justification mixed with false pity; the disguised glee with which a culture founded upon the pleasures of exclusion will register the pain of the excluded; a refusal to shoulder the burden of guilt. Not so far, in fact, from the text of John Shade’s ‘Pale Fire’, and not unrelated to the anguish Sybil must have suffered the night of the suicide and every night since. (It is not clear, syntactically, which of the Shades – John or Sybil – quells their doubts about Hazel’s well-being by proposing to “try the preview of *Remorse*”, letting a little glamour into their lives for a change.) Nabokov’s point is that Jane Provost must *know* of the terms of Sybil’s anguish – and yet she sends the letter anyway.

By making Hazel so distant Nabokov denies her and himself the saving ironies accorded his other victims. Nabokov’s worldmaking operates through the abolition of

distance; but in *Pale Fire*, most mischievous and vaulting of his novels, we encounter a character (person is, really, too strong, too concessive a word) whose distance not even love can eradicate. Love, if couched as pity, will only reinforce her quiddity. Hazel, alone of the inmates of *Pale Fire*, catches no gleam from a real or imagined semblable. She adds no plane or angle to the pattern Nabokov, with infinite pains, weaves around her. She has no place in a reality which insists that healthy American boys and girls are the only measure of value – a delusion we have yet to shake off, fifty years after the event – nor in Nabokov’s refraction of it.

What, then, are we to make of the aesthetic chasm separating Hazel not from Pete Dean and the New Wye coeds – that is obvious enough – but from Nabokov? Here is Hazel: “Spreading her swollen feet, scratching her head / With psoriatic fingernails, and ... / Murmuring dreadful words in monotone” [39]. Here is Nabokov in his dandified émigré prime (Weimar Berlin circa 1923): “He talked with great charm. He was as a young man extremely beautiful” (Véra, quoted in Amis, *Visiting Mrs Nabokov* 118). Here is Véra herself, the trophy lecture assistant: “She was beautiful, with long, thick, glossy white hair falling to her shoulders and very smooth, radiant pink-white skin” (Green, ‘Mister Nabokov’ 35). Here is Dmitrii at thirteen, as described by one of the more obsequious of the Nabokov court flatterers: “already over six feet tall, a top student, an athlete, and a youth of considerable personal poise” [Boyd, *American Years* 81]. Hardly Hazel’s semblable, for all that same flatterer’s claim that her suicide was a sublimation of Nabokov’s fears for his daredevil son’s safety on the cliff faces of Colorado and the switchbacks of the Swiss Alps [Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*]. A little like ‘Pete Dean’, in fact, right down to the gloating physicality. And here is Nabokov the portly yet still “masculine” and “aristocratic” Ithacan, with an eye for the cheerleaders and a disinclination for the bluestockings, offering a piece of avuncular advice to a student who believed in loving the person not the appearance: “Mr Keegan, Mr Keegan, that’s just a conceit we carry on with. Beauty *is* everything” [quoted in Schiff, xiii]. What can we say about the responsibility of such a man for his creation? From the man graced, the man who daily rejoiced in the good fortune of being Nabokov, to the graceless girl, her life marred by garden-variety genetic mischance – there’s too far to go, a distance no amount of platitudinizing will diminish.

Timofey Pnin, Professor of Russian at Waindell College, visits his friends the Kukolnikov's in their upstate country retreat. There is some scene-setting hilarity with a map and an unhelpful gas station attendant, and then Pnin arrives. Here, among fellow Russian exiles, he can salvage some measure of the dignity America denies him. Here he does not *have* to play the buffoon. This being Nabokov, though, he is soon to be reminded that buffoonery is one of the gentler chastisements the meek suffer in return for their meekness.

After dinner and croquet, at which he excels, his stocks of conviviality exhausted, Pnin retires to a bench. He is in the habit of sitting on benches at crucial junctures of his life. He has a kind of panic attack - "an awful feeling of sinking and melting into one's physical surroundings" [*Pnin* 109] – a foreshadowing of the book's ending, when he will do exactly that, of the likely cause of his death (coronary failure), and, this being Nabokov, a glimpse into something much, much worse. Pnin does not have long to gird himself against the recollection of what that something is. It is Mira, his first and only love, taken from him by the Russian Revolution, Mira evoked in a post-prandial conversation assuming, as in that company one would, at least nodding acquaintance with the essential horror of the twentieth century ("and, of course, you have heard of his poor sister's terrible end" [110]). Mira dead in a Nazi concentration camp. Pnin, overcome, takes himself off into the woods. What follows is one of the great Nabokov performances:

In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin – not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind ... but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past [112-113].

Michael Wood calls this "central ... to Nabokov's whole work", and other

critics have concurred [Wood, 168]. One might wonder how far this can be true of a passage so unrepresentative. Nabokov with his guard down is not what we have come to expect of Nabokov. It seems unlikely, for example, that the above is a coming to terms with the fate of his brother Sergei, who had died in Neuengamme concentration camp in 1945; that would reduce it to corniness, a literary vice to which Nabokov was immune. (Nabokov's great, unreliable memoir *Speak, Memory* is eloquent on the acute difficulty he experienced when trying to think clearly about his brother.) It would be more productive, maybe, to admire the brilliance of an illusion of sincerity than to admit the sincerity as genuine. The proof of the performance lies in where it is taking us.

Pnin's agony is notable first for its artlessness (the contrast with the death of David Krug is striking). There is a most unNabokovian lack of adornment. As Wood suggests [Wood, 169], the intercalation of generic adjective clusters ("youthful ... banal and brief", "graceful, fragile, tender") serves both to reinforce our understanding of the willed poverty of Pnin's reminiscence – he does not allow himself to remember more precisely – and to invite the reader to construct *his* Mira, from the qualities blurred and exalted in *his* past loves – and then to put *her* in the cattle truck, subject *her* to all the barely (but just) imaginable brutalities of which the strong and arrogant and murderous are capable. Similarly with "those gardens and snows in the background", a detail scarcely worthy of the name by Nabokov's normal standards; a pen-and-ink scraplet, no more than hinting at a past happiness with all the colours left to be painted in, cowed before the weight of what was to come. By leeching his prose of its iridescence Nabokov abolishes our distance from Pnin. It is no longer open to us to mock, to chuckle at, to regard him with pity, a pity that does more to uphold convictions of decency than it will ever do to help poor Timofey. Now, in the haunted New England evening, Pnin is still humdrum, but he is humdrum in the way that anyone would be humdrum if forced into a reckoning with hopelessness of such magnitude. His inner life is infused with generic banality not despite but because of the horror he contains, a horror constantly threatening to overwhelm him. Have we here, for all our reservations about Nabokov, finally found love? Love unadulterated by pity or contempt, and unmediated by irony; love not only for Pnin but for Mira, and for the whole "democracy of the dead", the still and the still-living? And is it not the more poignant for having been achieved at the expense of so much precision, so many jewelled lines?

Perhaps not. The efficient cause of Mira's death ("an injection of phenol into the heart") turns out to be another of Pnin's defence mechanisms, segueing as it does into a soft-focus cameo from a Hollywood never-never land ("the gentle heart ... dusk of the past"), reminiscent of the movie John and Sybil Shade are watching on the night their daughter drowns. In fact, Pnin does not know how Mira died:

And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive on a gasoline soaked pile of beechwood [113].

The virtues of vagueness come into relief. Pnin is now thinking clearly, and he does not want to, he doesn't want to at all. Specificity sidles into the space vacated by certainty, and there is a limit on how much more of it he can be expected to take. But what, meanwhile, has happened to Mira? She has become for Pnin, as she has always been for Nabokov, an avatar of her own extinction. Vague in life because of the manner of her death she is absent in death for the same reason. Because she died in circumstances that afforded her no human value, her death has left no trace, even in grief. She can be faded or multiplied but she cannot be seen for what she was. As a figure for the disassociation of memory from experience wrought by the various totalitarian regimes of the mid-century this cannot be faulted. Indeed, it has rarely been bettered. The problem – and it is a problem, for all that Nabokov will never permit us to find him short of solutions – is that on Nabokov's terms it doesn't matter. We are back on familiar ground. *Obviously* we have no right to expect 'reality' of Mira, any more than we have the right to expect it of Pnin – they are Nabokov's, not ours, to do with as he desires. And yet, and yet ... it is not only that we might wish Nabokov to abjure trickiness in the face of genocide, but that Nabokov appears to sense our disapproval and, for once, to respect it. For the agony does not belong solely to Pnin, or to Nabokov. The sudden recourse to the impersonal pronoun ("if one were quite sincere with oneself") opens up territory Nabokov does not commonly lay claim to; he often addresses the reader as "you", but in these cases he has someone very particular in mind. His deployment of "one" here signals a rare excursion into

universality, an insight into the real pains suffered by millions of real others, and the potential pains suffered by all of us. Mira is vague, Mira is fragmented, because her fate was, for people living at that time and in those places, such a common one.

We are again edging close to corniness, and in deference to Nabokov we should pull back. It is time for tea: Pnin, the crisis over, wanders back towards the house. On a rise, “silhouetted against the ember-red sky”, two vague young people face each other vaguely [113-114]. The chapter ends. But Mira is to make one more appearance. As “Belochkin’s sister” she is to play the part of a “little milliner” in an adaptation of Schnitzer’s *Liebelei* the haughty high-born narrator once condescended to patronize, mainly to relieve the boredom of a dreary pre-revolutionary summer vacation. ‘Nabokov’ can no more bring her to life than can Pnin – she is “pretty, slender-necked, velvet eyed” (as what girl in Old Russia was not?), she receives “the greatest ovation of the night” from a conventionally spellbound audience [149-150]. Pnin, who gets no applause, plays the cuckold (this has narrative significance, but is not my concern here). The implication is that in the course of the last night bacchanals the narrator finds the opportunity to possess the charming ‘Mizi Schlager’ (without, of course, bothering to discover her real name). One would expect Pnin’s love life to have been punctuated by episodes of this generically squalid calibre. The point is that Pnin, if not cruel ‘Nabokov’, would treat Mira’s fidelity or lack thereof as a matter of indifference. To a love that returns ever and again to the cattle truck and the concentration camp, faithlessness – tired resort of false glamour – can offer no real hindrance. And if ‘Nabokov’ had Mira, and if he too must expunge the memory in cliché (hauteur, gallantry, ‘Prince & the Showgirlish’ stuff), might that not mean that the love is ‘Nabokov’s’ too, and the anguish?

I think the main thing Nabokov is trying to tell us with Mira is that puzzles of this kind – the kind so beloved of Nabokov’s art – will take us only so far. Consider again Pnin’s itemization of the ways in which Mira might have died. We have here plenty of contingency but the absolute opposite of joy. Disbelief in time or space can do nothing for Pnin, could do nothing for Mira, and will do nothing for us. For although how Mira died is uncertain, the fact of her death is not. (The question that cannot be contemplated is: What if she survived?) Into the interstice of necessity and contingency wanders Pnin’s imagination; his efforts to keep it tethered to the land of his quotidian humiliations prove vain. The multiplication of realities – or versions of a

single ungraspable reality – is not madness, not even nightmare, but hell. Better to relinquish memory than to have to endure it. The pitiless Nabokov has stooped to ground level; we are among souls whose sanity lies in ignorance; to whom inattention, that cardinal Nabokovian sin, is balm; whose plumes are dull; for now, they are not being observed from Olympus. Nabokov had a worse self, a self unworthy of his gifts; we return to these passages in *Pnin* because, luminously, they show his better one.

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