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PERFORMING TYRANNY, PURLOINING AUTHORITY:
NABOKOV'S DICTATORS

In a 1940 letter to a communist-sympathizing friend – the eminent literary critic Edmund Wilson – Vladimir Nabokov returns to his familiar argument against Marxist revolution: that it does not reflect the collective will of a beleaguered underclass majority but instead the brutish simplemindedness of individual leaders. While Nabokov had voiced this strong opinion to Wilson on several previous occasions, he adds a new inflection in this letter by coding it in the language of the literati:

Without its obscurities and abracadabra, without its pernicious reticences, shamanic incantations and magnetic trash, Marxism is not Marxism. The paradox which explodes Marxism and other dreams of the Ideal State is that the first author is potentially the first tyrant of the state.... The individual whims of a ruler tell deeper truths about a corresponding period than the vulgar generalisation of class war etc.; and the peculiar mathematical and historical howlers, in the *Capital* and capitaloids, are transfigured by the synthesis of Revolution into the beastly cruel stupidities it commits. (*Dear Bunny* 36)

Here, Nabokov seems to be testing the thesis that, if the aesthete Wilson is not swayed by political and moral arguments, perhaps cogent literary analysis might do the trick. He dismisses Marx's own belief in the inevitability of violent dialectic as a "vulgar generalization" spit-shined to a marginal convincingness by chunks of jargon-laden prose – a critique that begins at the level of aesthetics and proceeds quickly to that of ethics. But Nabokov's most compelling gesture is his equivocation of "author" and "tyrant." By contrasting utopian visions in the prose of Marxist leaders with the dystopian environments conjured in the real world by their "whims," Nabokov correlates authorship and authoritarianism in an appeal designed to link Wilson's political and literary sensibilities.

Subsequent correspondence shows that it did not work. Wilson would remain a stubborn socialist despite Nabokov's canny attempts to convince him otherwise, whether through literary appeals or firsthand narratives. Effectiveness aside, this particular strategy reveals that early in Nabokov's professional engagement with the English language he was pondering the connections (both figurative and real) between creative control and political tyranny. Nabokov recognized that the dictatorial powers heading modern totalitarian states often doubled as authors (of political tracts, creative autobiographies, and legal decrees); his own writings seem to investigate the ramifications of reversing that relationship by permitting authors to role-play as dictatorial powers. In this respect, his themes and vocabulary reflect the subject matter of American print culture in the late Depression, World War II, and immediately post-WWII eras. From the mid-1930s through the early 1950s, popular magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Time* sought to establish, define, and critique the terms of tyranny, often finding the words to be nebulous in meaning and sometimes frighteningly applicable to allies as well as enemies. Eager to label Hitler and Mussolini "dictators," "tyrants," and the heads of "authoritarian," "totalitarian" regimes, writers for these publications reluctantly conceded that this same set of terms might equally apply to the US-friendly government of Guatemalan leader Jorge Ubico or to the Polish aristocratic class. A handful of editorialists even adopted the unpopular approach of examining these tyrannical characteristics in forms of American culture and government infected by exposure to volatile international politics. Nabokov himself was enacting a similar inquiry by toying with the notion of an authoritarian author wielding total dictator-like control over his creations.

With that in mind, the subject of this essay is the cold authority exerted by the specter of Nabokov over his characters, readers, and critics within the WWII and Cold War contexts. The author, a political refugee from totalitarian regimes in Russia and Germany, became in exile arguably as much authoritarian as author, fascinated with his own power over the people inside and outside of his stories. Aside from the cruelty inflicted upon his characters, the scorn he directed at critics, theorists, and philosophers evidences a desire to exercise absolute power over his work. Nabokov sought to control readers to keep them from misinterpreting the classically liberal, individualistic, and essentially humane worldview espoused in his books. He did not want his profound reflections on existence and experience reduced to phallic symbols or economic tropes, and for that one can hardly blame him. Yet, though most writers desire their works to be read as intelligently and “accurately” as possible, few are as successful as Nabokov was in aiding readers and intimidating critics. The discursive control of interpretation that Nabokov practiced in his lifetime (by actively seeking to discredit Freudians, New Critics, and Marxists) has continued to impact Nabokov studies long after his death. The ghost of the old draconian regime haunts the demarcated terrain of the author’s works, despite the Barthesian assumption that the death of the author, in either the literal or theoretical senses, signifies the democratization of the text. Unlike other fields of criticism which have wrested control of the text away from the author (a good example is how the study of Hemingway has been revolutionized by queer theory), Nabokov’s writings have remained authoritative works instead of de-authorized texts. Even the most ingenious treatments of Nabokov’s fiction, such as Brian Boyd’s superb book-length explications of *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, are ultimately concerned with the unanswerable, if tantalizing, question of what the author really meant.

This essay is not a critique of Nabokov studies, for the field has hardly suffered from its disinterest in theory. The fertile conservatism exhibited by such intensely biographical readings as Michael Wood’s *The Magician’s Doubts* and Dana Dragunoiu’s more recent *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* proves that work in opposition to critical trends will thankfully continue to be profitable. Dragunoiu’s book in particular argues convincingly that Nabokov’s corpus adheres to the eminently humane pre-Soviet Russian liberalism of his father – that Nabokov’s body of work struggles successfully to balance the sanctity of the individual with his responsibility to society. Though I wholeheartedly agree with Dragunoiu, the problems of Nabokovian ultra-violence and deity-like narrative control complicate matters, for here we have

an author who illustrated the spirit of the individual by debasing and bridling it at virtually every turn. My goal, then, is simply to explore these complexities by evaluating Nabokov's "authority" as one might interpret a text. I believe there is something highly significant in its persistent functionality, a performance signifying the author's fictional response to political authority. I propose a relatively wide reading of the authoritarian element in Nabokov's life and works, regarding the following: his depiction of tyrannical characters; the dictatorial quality of his narrators and authorial impersonations; and, lastly, the ultimate authority asserted by the actual Nabokov over his works. I will argue that these pseudo-authoritarian traits contribute paradoxically to an anti-authoritarian end. By mimicking the heartless machinations of authoritarian violence, Nabokov parodies and burlesques it in Chaplin-esque fashion. Whereas real authoritarian discourse seeks to reduce a human being, through eugenic science and rhetorical scapegoating, to the subhuman state termed "homo sacer" by philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Nabokov's simulated authoritarian discourse strives to redeem a human being by examining his/her dignity in the face of such reduction. Moreover, the author portrays the figure of the dictator as clownish; despite the political authoritarian's desire to dehumanize and inflict pain, his creative counterpart posits that it is the clumsy inhumanity of the tyrant which illuminates the tender pathos of the tyrannized. Finally, Nabokov's insistence upon readerly obedience is not to be viewed as the author's self-referential citation of his own authority but instead, as the moralist's concern for the accurate reception of his work: *Noli me tangere, Nabokovis sum*.

I anticipate two distinct arguments resisting this approach. The first is that my analysis hinges upon a misreading of purported "cruelty" in Nabokov's life and letters, when in actuality the writer was a kind man who used his art as a vehicle for stressing the importance of empathy over antipathy. The second is that, contrary to the claims of his apologists, Nabokov could occasionally be petty, and my rosy analysis of his authoritarian traits is but an effort to explain away the unimportant character flaws of an irrepressible genius. That both retorts seem equally plausible speaks to the necessity of an investigation such as I am undertaking. The numerous Nabokov biographies, letter collections, and interview compilations all attest to the disturbing truth that the author was utterly human, capable of kind turns and mean streaks, magnanimous expressions of devotion and irritated airings of petty grievances. Some of his most powerful thoughts were binary combinations of detestation and admiration, such as his pronouncement

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 118-19). Nabokovian fiction is similarly rich in dynamic contradictions; *Lolita* cannot, for example, succeed at capturing beauty without first harnessing Humbert’s repulsiveness. Thus, the question of whether the author was a “good” or “bad” person is inapplicable to my analysis, since he was, like most human objects of scholarly scrutiny, both and neither. What matters is that, despite Nabokov’s social amiability, he could be dictatorial, even tyrannical, in matters related to his literary career. He abruptly ended his warm friendship with the aforementioned Edmund Wilson not because of a private personal slight but because Wilson publicly panned Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin* translation in a review, accusing Nabokov of communicating in “a bald and awkward language” and “flattening Pushkin” (AY 321). He jokingly referred to editors as “proofreader[s]” (*Lolita: A Casebook* 108), and Boyd recounts an instance in which Nabokov tussled with editors at the *New Yorker* over a lengthy list of changes he felt would ruin the story. Boyd argues that Nabokov’s point-by-point, erudite refutation of their suggestions “reveal his passion for exactitude, his diligence in research, and his good-humored patience at so much fussy interference” (AY 208-09). While I agree with the spirit of this interpretation, I find Nabokov’s faith in his singular authorial vision more evidence of his concerted effort to control meaning and restrict interpretation. The later example of Nabokov’s harsh retort to William Woodin Rowe’s critical writings shows the author willing to take punitive measures against dissenting pundits. Responding to Rowe’s *Nabokov’s Deceptive World*, Nabokov published his own review of the critical text in *The New York Review of Books*, thereby inculcating in critics the fear of “laughter from Montreux.”

If Vladimir Nabokov was, in life, a great controller of discourse, he was, in fiction, positively authoritarian. Hence my central defense of this investigation into Nabokov’s authority: the theme is already present and puissant in the works themselves. One of the most frequently recurring figures in the author’s fiction is that of the authoritarian, in either its political or interpersonal varieties. Rodrig of *Invitation to a Beheading*, the unnamed dictator of “Tyrants Destroyed,” Paduk of *Bend Sinister*, Humbert of *Lolita*, and Kinbote of *Pale Fire* are all different faces of the same trope—the hapless, albeit dangerous, dictator. The narratives surrounding these men attest that their authority is illegitimate and their regimes laughable, though neither factor makes their violence any less abhorrent. In the case of *Pnin*, the tyrant terrorizing the text is none

other than Hitler himself, whose historical example underscores the threat of his fictional corollaries. There remains, however, the ultimate authority to be examined in Nabokov's work: that of the author. The reflexive gesture present in much of the writer's fiction invites the reader to observe the creator's presence inside the creation. On a metafictional level, such narrative showmanship performatively enacts the author's mastery of the text by re-inscribing his aura therein. Yet the authorial entity who peeks out from behind the pages of the Nabokovian text is a self-conscious creator who problematizes that mastery, pondering what artistic ethos authorizes him to torture his pitiful characters. When the narrator of *Bend Sinister* attempts to save the book's tortured protagonist by first making Adam Krug insane and then by refusing to write his inevitable death, the creator unconvincingly absolves himself, arguing,

I knew that the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism, a play upon words. But the very last lap of his life had been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style. (241)

This comment, embedded in a work that otherwise illustrates the unbearable, unavoidable meaningfulness of death (even a staged demise in literature), strikes one as profoundly unsatisfying—designedly so. The reduction of death to a stylistic concern evokes the formalistic murder conditions of the torture chamber and concentration camp, sites Agamben notes are designed to strip individuals of their political value and redefine them by their ability to be slaughtered with impunity. Here, Nabokov mimics the circular and self-satisfying logic of the police state, a surprisingly common mimetic gesture in his fiction. As a result, Nabokov draws a parallel between the creative writer and the political tyrant, interrogating the legitimacy of both while also sublimating the unjust deaths of characters/citizens into forms of existential protest art that allow the individual to outlast tyranny.

I. Authorship and Authority

The link that Nabokov establishes between statesman and author is not a new one. As Michel Foucault's work reminds us, the production of discourse is intimately related to the

distribution of political power. Writers – of political manifestos, legal documents, scientific studies, business contracts, creative stories, or lyrical poems – have the ability to alter their environments by authoring texts of dissent or consent. Nabokov’s reflections on Lenin (one of which I quoted earlier) suggest that he understood how much the revolutionist’s authority stemmed from his capacity to produce discourse. The October Revolution which threw the young Nabokov’s life into turmoil had its origin, in part, in provocative texts by Marx, Lenin, and others. Likewise, the Nazi regime that later trailed the Nabokov family from Germany to France proved to be a formidable machine for assimilating and disseminating discourse. The spam-level distribution of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (sold in numerous editions and frequently available for free) was but one facet of the Nazi party’s plot to usurp language for its own nationalistic purposes. National Socialism’s success at incorporating cutting edge philosophical and scientific discourses into its propaganda canon seems in retrospect an effort towards intellectual checkmate. These examples concern instances in which politicians have practiced authorship as a means of establishing authority, but one can just as easily find cases in which authors have effected political change through their writings. Perhaps the most politically efficacious figure in literary history is John Milton, whose antimonarchical polemics helped convince his English readership to support the execution of King Charles I. Milton’s agenda may seem less relevant than Lenin’s or Hitler’s to a discussion of authority as a theme in Nabokov, until one considers that *Pale Fire* is the story of another King Charles facing the prospect of regicide.

Nabokov’s fiction illustrates the impossibility of separating political discourse from literary texts. The author painted himself as a Swiss-style proponent of political neutrality – claiming in his introduction to *Bend Sinister*, “Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of ‘thaw’ in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent” – but the pervasiveness of tyrants and tyranny in his writings argues otherwise (vi). In the same introduction, he betrays his unavoidable partisanship by confessing that he “interlarded this fantasy with bits of Lenin’s speeches, and a chunk of the Soviet constitution, and gobs of Nazi pseudo-efficiency” (vii). Besides such blatant contradiction, what otherwise undermines the illusory dream of “neutral” fiction is its absurdity; great writers have historically competed with the political and religious ideologues of their era, battling for control of the public’s imagination. Shakespeare, Dickens, and Joyce – authors for whom Nabokov frequently conceded his utmost respect – did not

consider themselves above addressing matters of the state. Nabokov's consistent refutation of both communism and fascism speaks to his own immersion in politics, despite his protestations otherwise. Moreover, his concern for the figure of the twentieth-century dictator exemplifies the fascination writers generally hold for whatever human locus embodies political meaning in their time. The Renaissance discourses of Shakespeare and Milton revolve around the character of the monarch, from whom all power emanated. The dissolution of monarchical authority produced as a result literary investigations examining subsequent manifestations of political power, such as Poe's terrified response to Jacksonian "mob rule" and Melville's numerous explorations of democratic plurality. As one might expect, living authors continue to exhibit interest in the political bodies affecting their lives today. Margaret Scanlan notes in *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction* that postmodern writers such as Don DeLillo have tended to identify with the terrorist figure, a nebulous political entity which has proven surprisingly adept at controlling the news media (14-15). Interestingly, Scanlan's study proposes that writers empathize with the political subjects of their art, envying their power so much that they perform the role of the political figure inside their fictions. "Within contemporary fiction," she writes, "we find terrorists as rivals and as doubles of the novelist" (6). Thus, DeLillo's narrative fascination with extremist philosophies finds him sometimes adopting the literary persona of the terrorist. Applying Scanlan's insight retrospectively to works by Shakespeare and Milton, we see that tales related from the perspective of kings, queens, princes, dukes, and divine royalty might reflect their creator's empathy toward and envy of monarchical authority.

Enter Nabokov. We can situate his obsession with the authoritarian, a transitional tyrant bridging the monarch's divine authority and the terrorist's unauthorized thuggery, appropriately in-between these two historical poles. It seems that the author held fast to the democratic ideal, which he may have seen as a corrective response to the totalitarian state. He commented in a 1941 panel discussion at Wellesley:

Democracy is humanity at its best, not because we happen to think that a republic is greater than a king and a king is better than nothing and nothing is better than a dictator, but because it is the natural condition of every man ever since the human mind became conscious not only of the

world but of itself. Morally, democracy is invincible. (*American Years* 41)

If in our time these statements reek of jingoism (a definitively un-Nabokovian scent), they may perhaps need to be restored to their historical context. Documents from late Depression and early WWII-era popular print culture assure us that Nabokov's pro-democratic sentiments were in fact a little more gung-ho than those held by many American editorialists prior to the US's entry into the conflict. As had been the case before 1917, many US journalists were once again concerned with keeping their citizens out of the international conflict, so there was much editorial hand-wringing on the topic of maintaining neutrality while keeping a clean conscience. In one 1934 *Time* article on clashes between the Catholic church and Nazi Germany, the author takes a little too much pleasure in Hitler's revolt against Catholicism, summing up the players as "an authoritarian, international Church in an authoritarian, nationalist State, the two being bound together by their common distrust of freedom and liberalism" ("Total Church v. Total State"). The writer strongly implies that these two "evils" should hammer one another into submission while the US takes a breather. In a 1936 issue of *Time*, a review of John Spivak's *Europe Under The Terror* (a study of the serious threats posed by dictators to their people and to US citizens) warns readers to take Spivak's reporting "with a little salt" ("Dictators Dissected"). Writers critical of American nationalism found different ways to articulate similarly anti-interventionist positions. One 1939 editorial in the generally conservative, pro-democratic *Saturday Evening Post* finds its author "not so sure about the democratic tradition in this country," having "seen too much of Klans and Citizens' Committees and Protective Leagues and Associated Farmers" (Mayer 97). He goes on to confess his concern that, in a new war against Germany, Americans may reluctantly adopt the methods of fascists and totalitarians; they risk, in short, becoming the tyrants they set out to destroy.

This is a nuanced idea that Nabokov would explore in his fiction, but his panel speech at Wellesley finds him in the odd role of a hawk. Of course, as an exile several times uprooted by tyrants, he had stakes in the conflict that native (and perhaps nativist) US writers did not. Outside of his brief experiment in punditry, however, Nabokov tended to adopt the literary persona of his political subject, much like the writers before and after him. As Shakespeare impersonated royal authority in his plays and DeLillo continues to simulate terroristic subversion

in his novels, Nabokov plays at being a tyrannical dictator in his writings – even in his translations. Likening the process of translating rhymed diction to allying unwillingly with a dictatorial regime, he punned in a 1949 letter to Wilson that he was “not going to do any *rhymed* translations anymore – their dictatorship is absurd and impossible to reconcile with exactitude” (254). Groan-inducing puns aside, the dissonance between Nabokov’s humanitarian intentions and his authoritarian performance is wonderfully provocative. Despite his hope that a future critical “reappraiser” might evaluate his fiction as the work of “a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel – and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride,” his writings depict a world in which violence, exploitation, and prejudice are woefully normal (*SO* 193). So frequently does the writer snuff out tenderness that one hardly wonders why some labeled him a misanthrope during his lifetime. If his characters and critics had their day in court, we might imagine the author posthumously brought up on the following charges: multiple counts of incestuous rape and one count of offstage death in the case of *Lolita*’s Dolores Haze; one count of accidental assassination in the case of *Pale Fire*’s John Shade; multiple counts of antagonizing the reader in the elitist snobbery of *Ada*’s allusions; and numerous counts of prejudice against psychoanalytic theory in works such as *Pale Fire* (in which Kinbote wonders if Freudian “clowns really *believe* what they teach” [271]). Yet each of these “crimes” pales in comparison with the unrelenting cruelty described and practiced by the narrator of Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister*. In this text, a totalitarian regime (combining elements of Hitler’s fascism and Stalin’s communism) terrorizes the citizens of Padukgrad. Characters in the novel are casually whisked away to secret prisons or merely shot dead in their homes. One female character, herself an agent of the administration, is raped by soldiers until she bleeds to death. Most horrible of all, a young boy (David Krug, the son of the novel’s protagonist) is molested, tortured, possibly “deoculat[ed],” and torn to bits in a sort of concentration camp for wayward kids (220). Towards the end of the book, the narrator reveals himself to be the author and inventor of these cruel scenarios as he quite literally stands up and walks away from his creations. The narrator’s self-awareness and apparent disregard for his characters draws unusual attention to the fact that he authored these atrocities. One would hardly think to blame George Orwell for the torture that takes place in *1984* or Aldous Huxley for the caste consciousness of *Brave New World*, but the case of *Bend Sinister* is unique. By acknowledging his invention of this particular dystopia, the narrator-author-character becomes complicit in its iniquity.

The novel's cold authoritarianism and black humor have posed considerable problems for Nabokov's critics, who tend to view the author as an eminently humane advocate of kindness. Both Michael Wood and Zoran Kuzmanovich have reflected upon the book's antithetical effort to denounce violence by relishing in it. Wood views the novel as an analysis of evil "beyond words," part of Nabokov's effort to offer "a range of images and narratives of brutality and horror" (64-65). Kuzmanovich likens the experience of reading *Bend Sinister* to being a participant in one of Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments. "Imagine their reactions on being told that what the experiment measured was their willingness to obey orders to torture," he writes, "and then you will have some notion of why I am troubled not so much by the finality of David's death as by its instrumentality" (53). Obviously, Nabokov uses the book to render the referential dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin wholly unpalatable, but the authoritarian control practiced by the narrator of the text (who acknowledges that he is scripting the actions of the regime and controlling the fate of his pitiful protagonist) is the strange exception that proves the Nabokovian rule. On the surface, *Bend Sinister* seems like a malicious outlier. However, when compared with the cruelties that pepper Nabokov's collected works – including a juvenile body count rivaled only by Charles Dickens and Edward Gorey – the book's menacing tyranny proves but slightly more pronounced in this text than in others.

Why, then, did the author who fled with his family from two murderous regimes return stylistically to the scene of the crime? Nabokov's father was murdered in an assassination attempt tangentially related to Russia's communist revolution. His brother Sergey died in the Neuengamme concentration camp. His Jewish wife and child would likely have been sent to one as well had they not fled Paris in the nick of time. As Kuzmanovich notes, the novel's tortured child could easily have been Nabokov's own if his personal history had taken a turn for the worse, a more sinister bend. How, why, and for what purpose did Vladimir Nabokov internalize the dangerous authoritarianism he had survived? The nature of these questions may well imply their answer. Theodor Adorno, who fled from the Nazis as Nabokov did, famously remarked, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Cultural Criticism" 34), suggesting that historical terror had irrevocably altered the aesthetics of language. The mixture of subtlety and brutality operating in Nabokov's fiction may, then, serve as a testament to how terribly the experience affected him. In this light, we might view his refusal to dismiss such violence from his work as a sobering act of intellectual honesty. Regardless, identifying the source of tyrannical cruelty in

Nabokov's fiction does not explain away its significance. To cease our investigation at the site of psychological causation would be a disservice to the author's anti-totalitarian project, which simulates totalitarian discourse for the purpose of deconstructing it. Its purpose, then, is inextricably linked to its performance.

II. Performing Tyranny

We can trace Nabokov's burlesquing of tyranny as far back as *Invitation to a Beheading*, but it is not until the 1938 short story "Tyrants Destroyed" that the author invents a situation in which artistic representation explicitly entails political resistance. In an era in which two-word titles such as "Dictators Dissected" and "Totalitarians Rampant" (*Time*, the cover of which Nabokov would later grace, supplies these examples) regularly headed current events articles on tyrannical foreign leaders, the title of "Tyrants Destroyed" sounds as though it were literally torn from the headlines in an act of media pastiche. Its plot concerns an intellectual in an imaginary police state. He wrestles with his desire to assassinate the country's dictator, but such a violent act seems impossible to the hesitating academic, who describes himself as "dull and fat, like Prince Hamlet" (447). In the manner of Shakespeare's creation, he entertains the notion of killing himself; waxing solipsistic, he reasons, "By killing myself I would kill him, as he was totally inside me, fattened on the intensity of my hatred" (457). Yet he finally rejects this ultimate act of interiority in favor of the exteriority facilitated by the creative act. The story's concluding paragraph posits that a work of prose might function as a weapon to be wielded against the authoritarian. Through the medium of language, the tyrant may be rendered impotent in spite of his real capacity for violence. The plan, simple though it is, permits the narrator to transport his interior realization of the tyrant's evil into the world through fiction. The dictator's cruelty, captured in the form of a story, will necessarily reveal itself as petty and absurd, so egregious as to negate its own rationale. The narrator explains:

Laughter, actually, saved me.... I see that, in my efforts to make him terrifying, I have only made him ridiculous, thereby destroying him— an old, proven method.... This is an incantation, an exorcism, so that henceforth any man can exorcise bondage.... And who knows— I may be

right not to rule out the thought that my chance labor may prove immortal, and may accompany the ages, now persecuted, now exalted, often dangerous, and always useful. While I, a “boneless shadow,” *un fantôme sans os*, will be content if the fruit of my forgotten insomniac nights serves for a long time as a kind of secret remedy against future tyrants, tigroid monsters, half-witted torturers of man. (459-60)

What the character hopes to pronounce is the victory of the writer’s creative intellect over the dictator’s dull physicality. His description of authoritarian figures as “tigroid” and “half-witted” emphasizes their animalistic stupidity in contrast to his own humane intelligence.

The production of genuine artistic discourse functions for the narrator as a signifier of the human empathy so lacking in the tyrant. He draws a sharp distinction between his own literary pretensions and the dictator’s uncouth butchering of Latin in his speeches. As the narrator observes, the tyrant’s voice is idiotic but pervasive: “...you have the impression that he accompanies you... quacking in a caricature of human speech, and you have no place to hide from the Voice...” (455). The ubiquitous authoritarian “Voice” – omnipresent and seemingly omnipotent—drowns out the suppressed voice of the intellectual. Its mindless style infects the country’s writers; the tale contains a few examples of the regime’s nationalistic poetry, which are as aesthetically awful as they are devoid of meaning. Opposing such thoughtlessness is the artistic voice. In the narrator’s analysis, a mind rich enough to compose emotive poetry, write powerful fiction, or craft sharp parody will be, by virtue of its empathetic capacity, opposed to raw violence. Thus the narrator’s (and, by connection, Nabokov’s) art rages against the utilitarian discourse of the Soviets and the eugenic discourse of the Nazis, both of which are susceptible to being employed in the justification of cruelty. Scanning the conclusion’s keywords yields a convenient paraphrase of his mission statement: the storyteller wishes to exploit the narrative medium to destroy tyrannical forms of authority via ridicule, saving their victims with laughter. Prose fiction, able to contain and critique competing discourses through parody, manages to burlesque their excesses, resulting in revelations of totalitarian impotence and revolutions of thought.

There are heaps of assumption and idealism hitched to an approach like this, but the general conceit of creative protest as an artistic means of resisting restrictive authority is sound.

Certainly, the constraints placed on free speech in authoritarian states signify that tyrants recognize the potential threat of voiced dissent; during Nabokov's lifetime, all of his novels and stories were banned in Russia, so one assumes that the Soviet officials gleaned a sort of menacing mockery from the texts. Based on the author's personal experience with suppression and his love for the consequences of parody – he remarks in one interview that “a good laugh is the best pesticide” – we might say that Nabokov sides with the story's narrator (*SO* 117). Indeed, the model of subversive parody outlined in “Tyrants Destroyed” quickly becomes a paradigm for the future of political elements in Nabokov's fiction. The idea of performing the role of the tyrant on the comedic stage of parodic fiction subsequently courses through *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*.

The nearest analog to the totalitarian burlesque practiced in these fictions is found in Charlie Chaplin's highly regarded 1940 comedy, *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin plays two characters in the film: Adenoid Hynkel (an obvious caricature of Adolf Hitler) and an unnamed Jewish barber (who bears a comedic resemblance to the dictator). Though the actor-director clearly acknowledges the Nazi threat by showing the fictional regime subjugating Jews, he also lampoons their leader, rendering him as ridiculous as Nabokov's paradigmatic tyrant. Chaplin's first “talkie,” the movie seems in part a commentary on the role of discourse in Hitler's assumption of authority. Describing Hynkel's rise to power, the narrator comments, “Free speech was suppressed and only the voice of Hynkel was heard.” At the film's conclusion, Chaplin's Jewish barber inadvertently wrests control of discourse away from the dictator, effectively replacing him. Asked to give a speech, he addresses the audience with a rousing lecture on political responsibility, saying, “More than machinery we need humanity; more than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness.... The hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people.” In this way, Chaplin destroys a tyrant à la Nabokov.

Aside from offering us the opportunity to see a strategy similar to Nabokov's operating in another medium, the example of *The Great Dictator* serves to remind us of the relationship between discourse and power. In the film, there is no authority without mediation. When Hynkel is in control of discourse, he controls everything. Once Hynkel is silenced, however, the formerly suppressed barber is able to speak, and he uses the opportunity to destroy the dictator by voicing his dissent. The barber's role-playing as the dictator and his subsequent anti-authoritarian speech

comprise a discursive event which mirrors, metafictionally, Chaplin's use of film as a means of critical discourse. In the manner of the barber playing at being Hynkel to usurp his authority, Chaplin assumes the persona of Hitler in a scheme to upset the tyrant's propaganda machine and dominate political discourse through parody. In the authoritarian state, the figure of the dictator is sacrosanct and his discourse is privileged over all others. Therefore, any attempt to drown out his voice is a political threat. Chaplin's satiric effort is interesting because, while it allows the tyrant's cruelty to speak for itself through the performance, it compounds the performance's critique with the addition of the barber's lengthy moralistic speech.

One way we can understand the anti-authoritarian critique in Nabokov's fiction is by considering how his works are different from *The Great Dictator*. Though many of the same elements are present in the novels as in the film (the burlesquing of tyranny, the representation of violence, the reinforcement of humanistic values), Nabokov never stoops to include a lecture on morals. Few of his characters, aside from the narrator of "Tyrants Destroyed," are readily identifiable as vocal avatars of the liberal, humane philosophy with which he aligned himself in interviews. More commonly, it is his moths and butterflies, mute floaters who appear at moments of great crisis in the Nabokovian text, that intimate the presence of an inscrutable author figure behind the fourth wall. Mostly what we get are refractions of "an" author instead of recognizable reflections of "the" author. These imperfect shades appear, for example, in the form of the mock-Nabokov narrating *Bend Sinister* or the morally repugnant Humbert Humbert. Sometimes, as in the case of *Pale Fire*'s Charles Kinbote, the narrator deliberately misrepresents his creator's views—an artistic choice Nabokov found himself explaining over and over again in interviews. There is no obvious ethical polestar to guide us through these fictional worlds. If we are to regard a novel like *Bend Sinister* in relation to a film like *The Great Dictator*, then the absence of explicitly moralistic discourse from the former work must strike us as significant.

Bend Sinister is pure performance sans social comment. To analyze this aspect of the book, we might logically apply Wood's observation about the non-didactic nature of *Lolita* (that it is "obtuse" to seek a "produceable, paraphrasable moral" therein) to *Bend Sinister* specifically and to the rest of Nabokov's work in general. Wood notes that the morals project of *Lolita* entails the presentation of "instances rather than propositions or arguments" (64-65), and I would argue that this holds true for most of Nabokov's oeuvre. In presenting the "instance" of violence that inspires *Bend Sinister*, then, Nabokov adopts the persona of the tyrant, using the fictional stand-

in of an authoritarian character to wreck Adam Krug's life, kill his child, break his friends, and ruin his country. The text ends with the nation's dictator, Paduk, still alive, still in charge, and, aside from some childish mockery directed at him by an insane Krug, still unpunished. No Jewish barber shows up to take his place and preach the value of kindness. Nabokov addresses the novel's refusal to administer justice in his introduction, matching hard questions with dodgy answers:

Is there any judgment on my part carried out, any sentence pronounced, any satisfaction given to the moral sense? If imbeciles and brutes can punish other brutes and imbeciles, and if crime still retains an objective meaning in the meaningless world of Paduk (all of which is doubtful), we may affirm that crime *is* punished at the end of the book when the uniformed waxworks are really hurt, and the dummies are at last in quite dreadful pain, and pretty Mariette gently bleeds, staked and torn by the lust of forty soldiers. (viii)

So, no. The book opts not to destroy any tyrants in the literal sense of the verb. However, the fiction pulls off a performative trick in the manner outlined by the narrator of "Tyrants Destroyed." The author's parodic efforts do not replicate the function of totalitarian control so much as they burlesque it, breaking it under its own weight. Nabokov's style reflexively refers its own artifice, frequently reminding the reader that the author is the creator of this fictional environment, the cartographer that maps its borders, the dictator of its narrative, and the governing body that exercises control over its invented people. By performing the machinations of political tyranny (through the practice of authorial cruelty and the impersonation of real tyrants via fictional characters), the author adopts the persona of a totalitarian dictator for the purpose of exposing the "dim-brained brutality" rattling around inside the skulls of such figures (*BS* viii).

Nabokov's most frequent means of doing so involves the reduction of dictators to schoolyard bullies. In "Tyrants Destroyed," *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*, the authoritarian's impulse to control finds its origin in childhood trauma. In the first two works, the suppressed narrators reveal that they knew their respective tyrants as awkward, bullied adolescents. As a result, they are unable to regard these authoritarians as anything more than

troubled thugs responding to mistreatment by their peers, despite their potential for large scale violence. The death of the individual character in such a dystopia is absurd but not pointless; it becomes a political martyrdom against a variety of petty barbarism not far removed from the arbitrary cruelty of a children's playground. In the final scene of *Bend Sinister*, for instance, a mad Adam Krug realizes that the prison yard he paces is the renovated version of his old schoolyard. The recognition leads him to tussle playfully with the administration's officials, who shoot at him. Thus, Nabokov implies the persistence of a puerile component to authoritarian violence, remnants of juvenile harrying. Certainly, there is something disturbingly childish in the tyrant's desire to shush his opposition—and to crush them if they refuse to be silent. To dominate discourse instead of encouraging dialogue is the bully's unsophisticated response to dissent. Nabokov captures this in his narrative performances. The authoritarian characters carrying out his authorial orders prove themselves to be both emotionally stunted and empathetically inferior to the objects of their torture. Humbert Humbert, traumatized by adolescent heartbreak and eager to denigrate Dolores Haze, functions as one of Nabokov's models of authoritarianism, despite the character's lack of political power.

We have accounted for one type of authoritarian performance in Nabokov's life and works, but there remain some troubling metafictional varieties of tyranny to address. For instance, I discussed earlier the problem of the malicious arranger lurking behind Nabokov's works, who chooses to place characters in hopeless, horrible situations and to exclude explicit moral commentary from the texts. This authorial tyrant is decidedly metafictional in nature, as opposed to tyrants like Paduk who are circumscribed entirely within the text. The arranger, on the other hand, appears to be an in-between entity: half in the text, half out. One of Nabokov's common reflexive gestures is to allude to this ambiguous person, the author figure who is not quite Nabokov. In *Bend Sinister*, a writer-figure – “someone in the know” (64) – enters the text in Chapter Five to deliberately stage a dream sequence for Krug. He returns near the novel's conclusion to inflict poor Krug with merciful madness, and then at the very end this author walks away without finishing the manuscript. In the book's introduction, however, Nabokov warns readers that the character is not quite him. The figure is, he explains, “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me... [who] experiences a pang of pity for his creature and hastens to take over” (xii).

This persona allows Nabokov to participate in another experiment in performativity, which we may best understand by contrasting the goals of the author's simulated authoritarian discourse with those of actual authoritarian discourse. Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the discursive sustainability of the concentration camp may prove helpful for establishing such a contrast. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben examines how the biopolitical evaluation of life has become a concern for political systems after World War I. He posits the concentration camp of the totalitarian state as a paradigm for the crisis of legitimacy faced by the governments of many nations, especially those led by dictators and totalitarian regimes. All sovereign authorities, Agamben states, rely on establishing a state of exception for themselves and their officials. A jailor, for example, must be exempted from the charges of kidnapping if he is to house dangerous prisoners on behalf of the state. The rare state of exception complements the related and more common state of application, through which the penal code applies to criminals and traitors, depriving them of their rights as free citizens. In the authoritarian nation and its resultant concentration camps, however, both states are employed abusively, becoming nebulous and dangerous:

The camp is thus the structure in which the state of exception—the possibility of deciding on which founds sovereign power—is realized *normally*. The sovereign no longer limits himself... to deciding on the exception on the basis of recognizing a given factual situation (danger to public safety): laying bare the inner structure of the ban that characterizes his power, he now de facto produces the situation as a consequence of his decision on the exception. This is why in the camp the *quaestio iuris* is, if we look carefully, no longer distinguishable from the *quaestio facti*, and in this sense every question concerning the legality or illegality of what happened there makes no sense. *The camp is a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable.* (170)

In the concentration camp, every prisoner is reduced to the status of “homo sacer,” meaning that he or she has no rights whatsoever and may be slain without legal consequences to the murderer. In the authoritarian state writ large, every citizen has the potential to be reduced to such a status,

since the law has become its own self-justifying fact. As Agamben notes, eugenic discourse and persuasive propaganda helped rewrite the rationale for the state of exception in Nazi Germany. And, ultimately, Hitler's word became inextricable from functional fact. This is the goal of authoritarian discourse: to occlude real conditions with propagandistic rhetoric, frequently for the purpose of reducing a group of undesirables to a subhuman level. The rhetoric is self-sustaining; its dictatorial source is, on penalty of death, irrefutable.

Nabokov's textual tyrants do not engage in the production of these sorts of discourse; the narratives they weave operate in opposition to actual authoritarianism. Doubtless, the author's vilest dictators (in the political and rhetorical senses of the word) do attempt to reduce the characters in their fictions to subhuman status. The author-narrator-deity of *Bend Sinister* treats his creations as little more than lifeless puppets he acts on from the "comparative paradise" of his comfortable home (241). If he can convince himself and his readers that death really is "but a question of style," then he can exempt himself from the responsibility of having torn a child to shreds and driven a father mad with grief (241). Humbert Humbert, the slick dictator of *Lolita*, spends the bulk of his narrative attempting unsuccessfully but artfully to explain his many crimes. By keeping Dolores Haze at the story's periphery and by misrepresenting her as both mentally dim and sexually permissive, he hopes to persuade his jurors and himself that his transgressions are understandable and ultimately meaningful. Like their real counterparts, these fictional dictators try to use discourse to normalize the state of exception so that it will apply to their particular situations.

In Nabokov's textual worlds, however, such efforts almost always fail. His narrators and writers generally find themselves ethically unabsolved and rhetorically unsatisfied. The objects of their oppression fly out of their control and into the sympathies of the reader. Thus, the tyrants are wholly unable to reduce such characters to the status of "homo sacer;" inversely, the characters evolve into martyrs whose deaths are not insignificant but incredibly significant. The twofold effect is that the author/authoritarian is disempowered and the exploited character is empowered. The tyrant's discourse, instead of being promoted to fact (as in the case of the concentration camp), is demoted to confession. Nabokov's fiction is highly moral and anti-authoritarian in this regard. The author disallows the totalitarian transmutation of word into fact, forcing his dictators to face up to the empirical consequences of their actions. Their victims emerge as more humane (and therefore more human) than they do.

III. Purloined Authority

One last tyrant remains to be destroyed: the humbug Nabokov who sometimes surfaces in letters, articles, and biographical accounts. We must come to terms with the real life interpersonal dictator the author could occasionally be. In all fairness, he seems to have been a kind man with a few idiosyncratic quirks, but that makes his attempts to control responses to his work no less significant. Earlier, I mentioned Nabokov's tendency to respond to editorial rejection with angry, protracted letters assuring the publishers that they had woefully and stupidly misread his work. A particularly riotous instance is his letter to the *New Yorker* in regard to their acceptance – with reservations – of “Lance.” Nabokov responded with a list nearly thirty items long protesting their suggested changes (*American Years* 208-09). His fidelity to his fiction is entirely admirable; in the battle between nitpicking editors and valiant authors, one prefers to see writers win the day. But the occasion certainly reflects Nabokov's desire to exert absolute authority over his own work, especially in light of the beneficial partnerships many authors shared with their editors. Nabokov, however, was the sole dictator of his fictions.

His many responses to his many critics further illustrate his desire for creative control. Following Edmund Wilson's public attack on his *Eugene Onegin* translation, Nabokov went on to publish what amounted to the implosion of their friendship in *Encounter* magazine, ending his response to the review with a sharp barb: “His article, entirely consisting, as I have shown, of quibbles and blunders, can be damaging only to his own reputation – and that is the last look I shall ever take at the dismal scene” (*SO* 266). Nabokov slighted Wilson for misreading the volume and sharing his opinions in print. He seems to have viewed Wilson's assault on the translation's credibility as a betrayal. Likewise, when the original publisher of *Lolita* began to lament very publicly that Nabokov had taken advantage of him, the author printed his contract in versified form within the pages of *Evergreen Review*, asserting his ownership of the text due to the publisher's inability to pay him (*SO* 275). But perhaps the most famous – and funniest – example of Nabokov's asserting his textual control is to be found in his article for *The New York Review* evaluating William Woodin Rowe's critical text *Nabokov's Deceptive World*. Repulsed by the critic's interpretations of his novels, Nabokov responded by mocking Rowe's book for its perceived failures. The short essay is positively venomous:

...what I find unpardonable, and indeed unworthy of a scholar, is Mr. Rowe's twisting my discussion of prosody... into a torrent of Freudian drivel, which allows him to construe "metrical length" as an erection and "rhyme" as a sexual climax. No less ludicrous is his examination of *Lolita's* tennis and his claim that the tennis balls represent testicles (those of a giant albino, no doubt). (*SO* 306)

Nabokov fought fiercely in the publishing world for control of his texts. He viewed his detractors as barbaric philistines and his creative authority as inviolably sacred.

As such, there exists the temptation to link the author to the authoritarians he treats and impersonates in his fictions. Indeed, this is what I have been doing to some extent throughout the essay, but, as in the previous cases, we must consider how Nabokov's authority differs from that of the tyrants he seeks to destroy. What the author exhibits in his efforts to control the critical discourse responding to his creative discourse is the simple but powerful concern that his works might be misconstrued, misused. To be sure, this observation risks sounding positively reductive, but I believe it is accurate. It is also a bit more complex than it might seem at face value. Nabokov's dictatorial treatment of his critics does resemble the speech suppression of the totalitarian state – for good reason. In writing from the point of view of the tyrant (as he so often does), Nabokov adopts the manners and methods of the authoritarian. Lacan describes a similar discursive situation in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter.'" The control of discourse calls into being a structure headed by the authority figure who authorizes the production of discourse. In Lacan's analysis of the Dupin story, the "pure signifier" embodied by the purloined letter functions as this organizing factor. Lacan outlines a power structure arranged in terms of language and knowledge; the possession of the letter entails the possession of power. Different characters manage to "purloin" the letter, but the system itself does not change – only the position of its participants changes. The character who steals the letter today temporarily occupies the head of the structure, but the letter – and the character's position – may be stolen from him/her tomorrow. Thus, the organization remains intact, an unavoidable "repetition automatism" fostered by signification and language.

Nabokov's usurpation of discursive authority from the tyrannical regimes he fled repeats the discursive cycle described by Lacan. By parodying the authoritarian voices of Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler, Nabokov "purloins" their authority, thereby developing the capacity to destroy them in his fictions. But, as Lacan suggests, the shape of a discourse maps in advance the possible positions an entrant may occupy. Nabokov, in accepting his role as authoritative novelist, moved into a position of control from which a sort of tyranny was possible. The control he exerted by humiliating his critics is petty and relatively harmless, but it bizarrely reflects, in miniature, actual authoritarian efforts to stifle open discourse. Nevertheless, it has the added benefit of supporting the anti-authoritarian gestures performed by Nabokov's writings, which risk being defused by Freudian interpretations as misguided as Rowe's or by assaults on the author's credibility such as those mounted by Wilson. As I suggested earlier, Nabokov's effort to control critical discourse is, on the one hand, simply his attempt to preserve the fidelity of his anti-authoritarian message; on the other hand, it is the result of a discursive cycle forced to replicate the structure of authoritarian discourse.

Thus Nabokov's creative appropriation of tyrannical power for the purpose of undermining political tyranny appears, on the surface, woefully counterintuitive. We see in his fiction a redistribution of authority through which the practice of tyranny becomes the domain of the author. But the disempowered tyrants seldom receive their comeuppance in the narratives, while other characters – the innocent citizens of Nabokovian textual territories – suffer terribly under the author's dictatorial reign. Yet despite their suffering, they remain powerfully human – a testament to what Dragunoui calls "Nabokov's unwillingness to forget history and its victims" (31). Besides recognizing this depressing state of affairs as a gesture towards an accurate if undesirable realism, we might also regard it as an inoculation against sympathy for autocrats. Nabokov implicates readers in fictive genocide so that the imagined blood on the hands that turn the page will contribute to a personal awareness of tyrannical horror: the act of reading is thus seen as the conditioning of the liberal conscience. One wonders if something akin to this intent lurked in the back of Milton's mind as he wrote his theodicy from a divinely authoritative perspective with the blood of regicide still caked on his hands. Indeed, Milton's double consciousness – his detestation of the satanic revolt unreconciled with his support of Cromwell in the English Civil War, his celebration of heaven's king unmitigated by his disdain for England's monarch – provides a tantalizing parallel to Nabokov's complex relationship with

communist and fascist tyranny. But, more importantly, an appreciation of Nabokov's rhetorical strategy helps us contextualize the present phenomenon of contemporary novelists writing from the terrorist perspective. Roth, Updike, and DeLillo's half-sympathetic, half-censorious appraisals of religious extremism have now troubled critics for two decades. After the monarch and the dictator, it is the terrorist whose political discourse now intrudes upon our conceptualization literature. We must ponder how a novel like DeLillo's *Falling Man* can terrorize characters and readers alike while nevertheless rejecting the barbarity of terror; Nabokov's similar appropriation and rejection of tyranny can help us frame new inquiries. In his time, Nabokov managed to do more than merely mime the political discourse that saturated his historical context; he successfully harnessed and satirized the discourse of tyranny while promoting a classically liberal worldview. Whether the writers of our time can achieve similar success with the guttural language of terror remains to be seen.

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