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CIRCLING AROUND HEGEL:
PENS AND PROBLEMS
IN NABOKOV'S *BEND SINISTER*

NABOKOV AND HEGEL

The explicit presence of Hegelian vocabulary in some of Nabokov's works has led various commentators, from the 1960s up until today, to believe that Nabokov's "system of metaphysics is essentially Hegelian"¹, and that detailed readings of certain novels would reveal a sympathetic stance towards Hegelian dialectics on Nabokov's part.² Taking into account the biographical material at hand, we have, indeed, good reasons to assume that Nabokov was familiar with Hegel's thought. Simon Karlinsky points out that "Nabokov had occasion to study in depth... Hegel, Feuerbach, Fourier, Saint-Simon and Marx" while working on the biographical section on Chernyshevsky that was to become a substantial part of his last Russian novel, *The Gift*.³ In his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov puts this familiarity on display:

¹ Boyd, Brian. *Stalking Nabokov*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 59-60. See also, Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 294-295.

² Carol T. Williams, "Nabokov's Dialectical Structure," in: *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2, Spring 1967, pp. 250-267.

³ Karlinsky, Simon (ed.). *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya. The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p. 14.

The Spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this up when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel's triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time. Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call "thetic" the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; "antithetic" the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and "synthetic" the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on.⁴

The same familiarity with Hegel and the tradition of the German idealism resurfaces multiple times in Nabokov's commentary to his *Eugene Onegin* translation,⁵ and is visibly drawn from in an epistolary discussion with fellow writer (and at that time still friend) Edmund Wilson concerning the latter's *To The Finland Station*.⁶

Given the presence of all these biographical clues, it is not strange that the critics I mentioned have seen reflections of Nabokov's familiarity with Hegel in a number of his novels.⁷ And yet, as even Williams, who convincingly reveals a Hegelian presence in almost all of

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov. *Speak Memory, An Autobiography Revisited*, in: *Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951*. New York: Library of America, 1996, p. 594.

⁵ Aleksandr Pushkin. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel In Verse, translated from the Russian, with a commentary by Vladimir Nabokov*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975 (rev. ed.): "A somewhat Lenskian figure, the minor poet Dmitri Venevetinov (he committed suicide in 1827, at the age of twenty-one) had, I think, more talent than Lenski, but the same naïve urge to seek spiritual guides and masters. With other young men, he ardently flocked to the altars of German "romantic philosophy" (whose fumes were to mingle so paradoxically with those of Slavophilism, one of the most tedious creeds ever thought of), adoring Schelling and Kant, as the young men of the next generation were to adore Hegel, sinking thence to Feuerbach" (vol. II, p. 230). Also: "Poets begin with this [a panpipe] Arcadian instrument, graduate to the lyre or lute, and end by relying on the free reeds of their own vocal cords – which closes the circle with a Hegelian clasp" (Vol. II, p. 275). Cf.: "...Germanic mists of idealistic philosophic thought" (Vol. III, p. 119).

⁶ *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*. Op. cit., p. 36. The part on Hegel runs: "Your [i.e. Wilson's] criticism of Marxism is so ferocious that you kick out the Marxism stool from under the feet of Lenin, who is left dangling in midair. Incidentally, you are quite wrong about Hegel's triad being based upon the triangle (with a phallic implication which reminds me of a solemn Freudian contention that children like playing ball because balls remind boys of their mother's breast and girls of their father's balls). The triad (for what it's worth) is really the idea of a circle; to give a rough example: you come back (synthesis) to your starting point (thesis) after visiting the antipodes (antithesis) with the accumulated impressions of the globe enlarging your initial conception of your home town."

⁷ To Boyd's and Williams' remarks can be added a third account, by Nabokov's own son Dmitri, who briefly discusses the supposed Hegelian structure of a variety of Nabokov's novels and plays. See his *Nabokov and the Theatre*, in: Vladimir Nabokov. *The man from the USSR and Other Plays. Introductions and translations by Dmitri Nabokov*. New York: Harcourt, 1984, p. 15.

Nabokov's novels, is forced to admit, there is one Nabokov novel that seems to offer a resistance to Hegel, or at least, to certain interpretations of Hegel's views: *Bend Sinister*. Williams, who is reluctant to give up her overall interpretation, solves this problem by positing that "Nabokov does not in fact criticize the idealist [i.e. Hegel] so much as those after him who implanted their own notions in his philosophy" and by stressing that "like an Artist, Hegel ignores his own theory."⁸ These affirmations strike me as problematic and I think Williams passes over this little bump in her Hegelian reading of Nabokov's oeuvre too quickly when she concludes, on the next page of her article, that, even though Nabokov may not agree with the historicist tendencies in Hegel's philosophy, he still appears to be sympathetic to what she calls the "vital truth" of Hegel's system, which is taken to be his dialectic.⁹

Such a conclusion may be rash. What I want to do in this article is attempt to show how a closer reading of *Bend Sinister* may reveal a more persistent criticism, not only of the political and historicizing strands of Hegel's philosophy, but also, more fundamentally, of certain aspects of his metaphysics that touch at the very heart of the dialectic. I do not want to argue that critics like Boyd and Williams are mistaken when they speak of Nabokov as influenced by Hegelian thought. What I do want to suggest however, is that we might, on the basis of *Bend Sinister*, want to reconsider his final evaluation of Hegel's philosophy as a purely positive one. Nonetheless, my main point will not concern the problematic of influence. Rather, I want to show that once we start looking closer to the problem of dialectics in *Bend Sinister*, the book may offer us something broader, namely, an interesting way of entering a philosophical discussion of Hegel's work that goes back to Hegel's own lifetime, and has stretched all the way down to the 21st century. This discussion, which in the history of philosophy has been framed as the discussion concerning the relationship between the "particular" and the "whole" (or "totality"), can be of interest to both Nabokov scholars and philosophers, and one of my overarching intentions is to try and bring these two creeds somewhat closer together.

⁸ Williams, op. cit., p. 251.

⁹ Williams, p. 252.

PARTS AND (W)HOLES

The philosophical discussion concerning particulars and the way they relate to a totality or whole can be formulated in multiple ways, and has resurfaced in many different forms over the course of time. In its purely metaphysical form, it centers on the value of the single object amidst the totality of nature or the world. In its epistemological form, it dwells on the relationship between the “I” and what is “Other” to this “I”. In its social form, it focuses on the status and role of the individual in society, or, in modern political terms, the relationship between the freedom of the individual and the power of the state. In its historical form, it analyzes the role of the single event against the background of the totality of History.

In Hegel’s philosophy, especially in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, these different formulations frequently overlap. Given the famous contentions in its preface that “the true is the whole” and that “the whole is nothing other than the essence of consummating itself through its development,”¹⁰ this is of course to be expected: if thought develops dialectically into truth, then the *structure* of all these truths – yet not necessarily their contents – must be formally alike. The structural unity of each and every truth is embodied by and in the pervasiveness of Hegel’s notion of dialectics.¹¹

There are many views on how best to explain the inner workings of the dialectical process, and there are indeed many ways of entering into the (sometimes sibylline) sphere of the dialectic. One of the most common ways is to start from Hegel’s analysis of Being and Nothingness in the *Logic*,¹² but for my purposes here, it seems better to start from a different point, i.e., from Hegel’s famous analysis of Sense Certainty that constitutes the opening pages of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Our initial relationship to the world around us is what Hegel calls an “immediate” relationship. We have knowledge of what immediately appears before us, *as it simply appears*

¹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 11.

¹¹ Note that I do not mean to turn Hegel here into a banal one-trick pony by reducing the many-sidedness of his different works to one sole principle. Also, I do not want to imply, as some commentators have done in the past, that *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is social philosophy masquerading as metaphysics, or, inversely, that the *Philosophy of History* is metaphysics masquerading as political philosophy. I only want to point out that the overarching truth of dialectics implies certain structural analogies on the formal level of reasoning. Cf. Yirmiyahu Novel’s introduction to *Hegel’s Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 13-14.

¹² See, for a short discussion of this issue: Wallace Matson, *A New History of Philosophy, Volume two: From Descartes to Searle*. Harcourt Publishers, 2000 (2nd. ed.), p. 475.

before us. This knowledge, which Hegel calls the knowledge of sense-certainty, appears to us at first as a very rich and noble form of knowledge, because it lets, so to speak, its object simply be: through it the subject “has the object before it in its perfect entirety.”¹³ If we were to give the matter only a little reflection though, this richest form of knowledge will soon reveal itself as the poorest form of knowledge. For this form of knowledge has *only* one thing to say, namely, that an object ‘is’. The object, for this form of knowledge, is “a pure This,” and stays only this. However, it soon becomes evident to us that sense-certainty implies two *different* “Thises,” one This being the I, the other This being the object. From this point onwards, many epistemological options present themselves, and Hegel describes these options. Ultimately, however, Hegel will say that the self, within this relationship of sense-certainty, is fundamentally unable to *actually* grasp any particular This. Those who think they do are either fooling themselves, or have simply not yet reached the end of the dialectical road, and hence are unlikely to possess an adequate comprehension of the whole. The object, which, to point out its particularity, might be described to constitute a ‘this here now’, in fact can never be just this. This thought can be brought home to us if only we consider the fact that ‘this,’ ‘here,’ and ‘now’ are themselves universal terms. The particular object (this particular “This”) reveals itself to be always already tainted by universality. Thus the dialectical method reveals particularity to be invested by its negation, universality.

However, Hegel does not want to stop here. This negation (or negative mediation) of particularity leads him to envision the possibility of a positive mediation, which has us turn back from the universal to particular in a way that takes into account this negativity and brings it back home to the self. Hegel uses the example of a piece of paper. When I wish to ground the particularity of this piece of paper by stressing that it is *this* piece of paper, I am merely pointing out the most banal and general fact about it: that it is a This (“the divine nature” of language reversing the meaning of what I want to say).¹⁴ This piece of paper, as a “This”, has no actual existence for Hegel. Regardless, that does not mean it cannot have actuality at all. It only means that we have to follow the curve where language leads us, and become conscious of the fact that *this* piece of paper can only be said to meaningfully exist by acknowledging the fact that it only *is* as part of a larger whole, that its ‘thisness’ depends on its being a part of a larger, and

¹³ *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Op. cit. p. 58.

¹⁴ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 66.

eventually, *the* larger whole. For if we just keep following the sequence of spiraling curves, our endpoint will be the whole as (what Hegel calls) “Absolute Spirit”. The final whole, then, is the ultimate synthesis, where all differences are sublated, or, more precisely, where division and unity are absolutely reunited. The younger Hegel formulates it very succinctly when he writes: “The Absolute is the identity of identity and non-identity; opposition and unity are both together in it.”¹⁵

The reason I have turned to Hegel’s example of the piece of paper is that this object seems to have a mysteriously close relationship to another object which has become famous amongst many of Hegel’s detractors. The object I am referring to is a pen. A pen, indeed, and not just anyone’s pen – Krug’s Pen. The name “Krug,” will sound familiar to both readers of Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister*, who will recognize in it the last name of its main character, Adam Krug, and to Hegelians, who will recognize in it the name of one of Hegel’s contemporaries, Wilhelm Traugott Krug. The word ‘Krug,’ in Russian, means ‘circle,’ and many Nabokovians have incorporated this fact into their interpretation in one way or another.¹⁶ Although this has yielded some very interesting and convincing results, I think it may have also caused them to refrain from looking beyond the linguistic dimension of the name of *Bend Sinister*’s protagonist to explore the ‘historic’ dimension of his name. For it might be asked: between the historical Krug of Hegel’s time and Nabokov’s fictional Krug, could certain family resemblances be discerned? Before I can start to answer that question, a quick word about the “historical” philosopher needs to be said.

Wilhelm Traugott Krug (1770-1842), was a contemporary and, as a Neo-Kantian philosopher, one of Hegel’s earliest critics. Being a prolific philosopher himself, Krug was a widely published author during his lifetime. Unfortunately, the course of time has reduced his importance in the history of philosophy to not much more than a modest supporting role as the protagonist in the single (but rather famous) footnote the later Hegel devoted to him in his *Naturphilosophie*:

¹⁵ Hegel, *Differenz des Fichte’schen und Schelling’schen Systems der Philosophie*, Leipzig, 1928 (1801), p.77. I cite from Charles Taylor’s English translation of this fragment in: *Hegel and Modern Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 14.

¹⁶ See, for example: Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 104. Cf. also note 37 below.

Hr. Krug hat in diesem und zugleich nach anderer Seite hin ganz naiven Sinne einst die Naturphilosophie aufgefordert, das Kunststück zu machen, *nur* seine Schreibfeder zu deduzieren. – Man hätte ihm etwa zu dieser Leistung und respektiven Verherrlichung *seiner* Schreibfeder Hoffnung machen können, wenn der einst die Wissenschaft so weit vorgeschritten und mit allem Wichtigern im Himmel und auf Erden in der Gegenwart und vergangenheit im Reinen sei, daß es nichts Wichtigeres mehr zu begreifen gebe.¹⁷

(Related to this, Mr. Krug has naïvely challenged the philosophy of nature to accomplish the daring feat of *just* deducing his pen. – Only when Science should be so far advanced that all the more important matters of heaven and earth, past and present, would be solved already, when nothing of greater importance asks for our understanding, only then can we start to offer him hope with regard to the achievement he desires to see realized, and the adulation of *his* pen.)¹⁸

This note was appended by Hegel to his *Naturphilosophie* in 1830. Krug is being sarcastically treated as some dimwitted philosopher who has deigned to challenge the great Hegel, as an idealist philosopher, to pull off the “Kunststück” of deducing his own pen from the absolute system of natural philosophy. The “challenge” Krug has posed to Hegel does not even strike Hegel as a real challenge – Krug’s pen, a mere trifle in Hegel’s eyes, is not even worthy of the philosopher’s attention, at least, not for philosophy in its present state. Hegel, it seems, is reacting in this note to a statement Krug made in a polemic piece written in 1801, where Krug had remarked:

Die übrigen Wissenschaftslehrer sitzen auch noch größtentheils in und um ihre Wissenschaftesstadt herum und devoriren ihre Schreibfedern, weil sie weder diese noch sich selbst mit den Schreibfedern deduciren können <...>.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hegel, *Naturphilosophie*, par. 250, in: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*. 1830, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1969, p. 203n.

¹⁸ My translation. I use the word “pen” to translate the German word “Schreibfeder,” which, in a strictly literal translation of Hegel’s note should be translated as “writing quill.” In opting for “pen,” I am following many twentieth century commentators and text books on the subject of the philosophy of history, all of them commonly referring to the Krug-Hegel debate and the metaphysical questions it entails as the problematic of “Krug’s pen.” I will make a brief remark on the pen/quill question later on in the text.

¹⁹ Wilhelm Traugott Krug, *Wie der ungememe Menschenverstand die Philosophie nehme; an dem kritisch-philosophischen Journale der Herren Schelling und Hegel*, Leipzig: Buxtehude, 1802, p. 32.

(The other teachers of science are spending most of their time in and around their cities of science and are devouring their pens, whilst in fact, they cannot deduce these nor themselves using a pen [i.e. from what they write with their pens] <...>).²⁰

Hegel had already countered Krug's article in the same year it appeared,²¹ but Krug's challenge, even though considered to be outrageously naïve by Hegel, does seem to have left some impression (there has to be some reason he chooses to take it up again almost 28 years later). Moreover, ironically, however Hegel may have felt about Krug and his naïve challenge, the problem of "Krug's pen" did go down into philosophical history, and is, even today, still being discussed amongst contemporary Hegelians and other philosophers. Thus, in his evaluation of Hegel's section on sense-certainty I referred to above, William Desmond compares Krug's pen to Parmenides' dirt, which Socrates was at a loss to reunite with the platonic theory of Ideas. "Why not explode Hegel's dialectics of sense-certainty with the mystery of a rat's being – or for that matter, Krug's pen?", Desmond asks, and goes on to argue that "Hegel runs away from the dirt of Krug's pen."²²

"Krug's pen" has come to embody one of the oldest critiques of the Hegelian system as an absolute system. It questions the absoluteness of the final synthesis where identity and non-

²⁰ My translation.

²¹ See: *Wie der gemeine Menschenverstand die Philosophie nehme, - dargestellt an Werken des Herrn Krug*, in: Hegel, *Werke Band II*, 1979, pp.194-195. Here Hegel is much more explicit in his dismissal of Krug as a philosopher. He writes: "Die zweite Inkonsequenz, die Herrn Krug auffällt, ist, daß versprochen sei, das ganze System unserer Vorstellungen solle deduziert werden; und ob er schon selbst eine Stelle im transzendentalen Idealismus gefunden hat, worin der Sinn dieses Versprechens ausdrücklich erläutert ist, so kann er sich doch nicht enthalten, wieder überhaupt zu vergessen, daß hier von Philosophie die Rede ist. Herr Krug kann sich nicht enthalten, die Sache wie der gemeinste Plebs zu verstehen und zu fordern, es solle jeder Hund und Katze, ja sogar Herrn Krugs Schreibfeder deduziert werden, und da dies nicht geschieht, so meint er, es müsse seinem Freunde der kreißende Berg und das kleine, kleine Mäuschen einfallen; *man hätte* sich nicht sollen das Ansehen geben, als ob man das ganze System der Vorstellungen deduzieren wolle [...] Komisch ist es, wie Herr Krug denn doch so gnädig ist, den Philosophen, der sich das Ansehen eines Meisters in der Philosophie gebe, jedoch nicht so scharf beim Worte nehmen zu wollen; sondern er verlangt nur *etwas Weniges*, nur die Deduktion von einer bestimmten Vorstellung, z.B. *dem Monde* mit allen seinen Merkmalen, oder einer Rose, einem Pferd, einem Hunde oder Holz, Eisen, Ton, einer Eiche oder auch nur von seiner Schreibfeder. Es sieht aus, als ob Herr Krug den Idealisten mit solchen Forderungen die Sache leicht habe machen wollen, daß er vom Sonnensystem nur einen untergeordneten Punkt, den Mond, oder als etwas noch viel Leichteres seine Schreibfeder aufgegeben hat. Begreift denn aber Herr Krug nicht, daß die Bestimmtheiten, die im transzendentalen Idealismus unbegreiflich sind, der Naturphilosophie, von deren Unterschied von dem transzendentalen Idealismus er gar nichts zu wissen scheint, soweit von ihnen – wie von Herrn Krugs Schreibfeder nicht – in der Philosophie die Rede sein kann, angehören? In derselben kann er eine Deduktion (ein Wort, dessen Bedeutung hier sowenig taugt als seine Orthographie) von einem derjenigen Dinge, die er vorschlägt, vom Eisen finden."

²² William Desmond. *Perplexity and Ultimacy: Metaphysical Thoughts from the Middle*. New York: SUNY Press, 1995, p. 54.

identity are reunited by asking: “but what of the original identity?”. Something seems to get irrevocably lost in the process of dialectics, and this something is exactly the first “This” that Hegel deems to be an immature, or, if we want to be more severe in our judgment, valueless “This”. While Krug’s pen puts this question to Hegel from the side of the particular object in its simplicity, we can easily conceive how the criticism can be extended and posed from the side of the subject. In fact, this is exactly what someone like Kierkegaard will do, in reproaching Hegel that the system of speculative philosophy cannot satisfactorily *think* the existential I (or “empirical ego”), and pointing out that the speculative philosopher “in a sort of World-historical absent-mindedness” has forgotten

what it means to be a human being. Not indeed, what it means to be a human being in general; for this is the sort of thing that one might even induce a speculative philosopher to agree to; but what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself.²³

Kierkegaard’s *critique* of Hegel takes us into the domain of ethics and morality. Elsewhere, he specifies that “... the immorality of our age is perhaps not to be found in particular cases of lust or sensuous desires, but more in a totalitarian disconcern for individual existence.”²⁴ Is Kierkegaard right to do so? Given that this moral discussion will be of some interest in connection with Nabokov, too, let me briefly review Hegel’s stance on the matter using his own vocabulary.

Hegel makes a distinction between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*. *Sittlichkeit* is the term Hegel reserves for the idea of a set of ethical and moral imperatives that are in effect in a society in the form of customs and regulations. The domain of *Sittlichkeit* is that of general laws, in its “house” (as Hegel speaks of it in relation to the unity of the family), regulations apply not to individual beings (“not to *this Man*, or to *this Child*”) but to individuals in general (“Ein Mann, Kinder”). The whole of these regulations, rules and customs as they regulate an actual society together form the ethical truth of its time, or as Hegel puts it: “The *living ethical* [sittlich] world is Spirit in its truth.”²⁵

²³ Søren Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 203. Cf., also, p. 206.: “Being an individual man is a thing that has been abolished, and every speculative philosopher confuses himself with humanity at large, whereby he become something infinitely great – and at the same time nothing at all.”

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, in: *Writings*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, vol. VII, p. 355.

²⁵ *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Op. cit. p. 265.

The term *Sittlichkeit* is opposed to that of *Moralität*. At the pure level of *Sittlichkeit*, there is no discrepancy between the hypothetical domain of what “ought to be,” and actual moral reality. On the level of *Moralität*, *per contra*, such a discrepancy does exist. Morality points to the freedom of the will and the possibility to heed *Sittlichkeit*’s call or ignore it.²⁶ This means that the discrepancy between the two has to exist on some level, in order to make freedom for the individual at all possible. It is only on the level of the fulfilled liberal society that *Moralität* can retrieve its original unity with *Sittlichkeit* through an ultimate sublation of the discrepancy in the notion of free will (that is, for Hegel, a moral will recognizing itself in the will of *Sittlichkeit*, thus turning it into a will that wills itself).²⁷

I interpret Kierkegaard’s argument as directed partly against Hegel’s ontology, but more essentially against this ethical part of Hegel’s philosophy. The fear Kierkegaard expresses, what he calls “the individual existence” (what in Hegelian terms would be called “moral existence”), does not *effectively* survive the moment of its synthesis with *Sittlichkeit*. In Kierkegaard’s eyes, the synthesis can only be violent towards the individual because it will eventually lead to the self being subjected to something other than itself. This, at least, is how the phrase “totalitarian disconcert for individual existence” can be read in relation to the indictment of “immorality.”

How fair is this to Hegel? Hegel has, of course, completely different aims: his reason to refuse to bestow any serious value on what he calls the “pure I” is because he thinks it is empty. His quarrel is not with Kierkegaard (whose work he never read) but with Kant and the liberal tradition. And yet Kierkegaard’s concern is to be taken seriously, if only because it points to a potential weakness or blind spot of the dialectical method: Hegel’s dialectics, because of the ultimate rationality of its logic, always runs the risk of forgetting the original and simple thisness of the individual. The aforementioned William Desmond succinctly formulates the point as follows: “Hegel is blind to this truth of the idiotic “this”. He has no patience with it.”²⁸

More questions can be asked. What is the pertinence of these criticisms of Hegel? Do his dialectical method and his idea of the ultimate oneness of all reality as Absolute Spirit really wreak havoc on the particularity of a pen or an individual? Does Hegel really forget about the first thisness of the piece of paper after it has been sublated in the whole of mediated experience?

²⁶ Cf. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Op. cit. pp. 390-391.

²⁷ Cf. Charles Taylor’s comparison of the two concepts from the point of view of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. Taylor, Op. Cit. pp. 82-83.

²⁸ *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, p.60. For reasons I will return to below, I do not think this is completely honest to Hegel. Hegel does seem to show significant awareness of the problem at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

And if so, does this allow us to go as far as someone like Karl Popper, who takes Hegel's epistemology and ontology as the bases for Hegel's historicism,²⁹ which in turn is taken to be the fundament of German nationalism and Soviet communism,³⁰ identifying Hegel's philosophy with "the philosophy of modern totalitarianism"?³¹ And even if these critics are right, does this mean we have to conclude that Hegel's disregard for the particular in its primal particularity strikes a fatal hole into his magisterial Whole? Is the This-here-now the first of a series of holes that will force us to sink the whole ship of Absolute Spirit? If so, should not this purported "world-historical absent-mindedness" perplex us? At the same time: does a philosopher as sophisticated as Hegel strike us as the kind of man who would take his ship to sea without inspecting the solidity of the hull?

Before I attempt to answer these and other questions, I will now first turn to the other Krug I mentioned in passing, the fictional philosopher Adam Krug, who takes up the lead role in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*.

ANOTHER KRUG, ANOTHER PEN

Bend Sinister presents a dystopian universe; its social setting is a totalitarian regime headed by a dictator called Paduk, who seems to combine traits of three of the most truculent totalitarian leaders the historical twentieth century has known: Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler. In the introduction to the novel (appended in 1963), Nabokov admits that "there can be distinguished, no doubt, certain reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of

²⁹ Karl Popper. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. II, pp. 42-44.

³⁰ Popper, Op. Cit., pp. 49-58.

³¹ Popper, Op. Cit. p. 78. In full, Popper writes: "I have tried to show the identity of Hegelian historicism with the philosophy of modern totalitarianism." If, after the harshness of his remarks we may still doubt about what the formula "identity of ... with" exactly means for the degree to which Popper holds Hegel personally responsible, the addendum Popper adds to a later edition of his books is very clear: "Hegel's identity philosophy, by contributing to historicism and to an identification of might and right, encouraged totalitarian modes of thought." Popper, Op. Cit., p. 395. Popper offers many biographical reasons that suggest evil political intentions on Hegel's side. It does not seem right to me to suggest that Hegel would have endorsed any totalitarian use of his philosophy. The least one can say, is that if indeed Minerva's owl only spread her wings at the coming of dusk, Popper's interpretation would seem to completely pass over Hegel's thoughts concerning the *place* philosophical thought takes up in the chronology of reality.

Fascist and Bolsheviks, of Philistine thinkers and jack-booted baboons.”³² At the same time he stresses that “the influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my works...upon my epoch,”³³ thereby answering to his own criterion that true art does not imitate historical worlds or epochs, but rather creates its own independent world.³⁴

At the center of this fictional world, where a strange and intricate blend of Russian and German is spoken, stands Adam Krug, a highly individual philosopher said to be the “most original thinker of our times.”³⁵ The novel starts with the elaboration of a double interruption that has just taken place in Krug’s life: the death of his wife, Olga, and the unraveling of the (supposedly relatively) free society into a totalitarian state ruled by one of Krug’s former school mates, Paduk (nicknamed “Toad”³⁶) according to the principles of “Ekwilism,” a philosophical system showing obvious links to Marxist philosophies, thought up by a thinker named Fradrik Skotoma. Over the course of the novel, Krug’s fate under this regime grows grimmer. Paduk’s regime, aware of the fact that Krug is something of a philosophical celebrity, decides it wants to have him on their Ekwilist side; but Krug, being Krug, refuses to give in to these solicitations. So Paduk (and his farcical henchmen) start looking for the “handle” that could coax Krug into servility. His friends are being captured and imprisoned one after the other. This affects Krug, but not to the point of giving in. It does lead him to the decision to flee Paduk’s police state by crossing the border to another country. When he discusses the possibility of this escape with (unbeknownst to him) one of Paduk’s spies, the regime is reminded of the fact that Krug has an eight year old son, David. David will prove to be the “handle” Paduk’s regime was looking for,

³² Vladimir Nabokov. *Bend Sinister*, in: *Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951*. New York: Library of America, 1996, p. 164.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ If I am still drawn to make the comparison between *Bend Sinister*’s Paduk and the three dictators I mentioned, this is not only because I think it provides a handy means of conveying a first glimpse of the sort of character he is, but also because I think Nabokov’s assertion of the ultimate non-importance of these historical figures for his novel seems to me at least doubtful. Some twelve years later, in the introduction to *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*, Nabokov himself makes the same historical comparison: “Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin dispute my tyrant’s throne in this [i.e. “Tyrants Destroyed”] story – and meet again in *Bend Sinister*, 1947, with a fifth toad.” For a more detailed discussion of the possible biographical sources of *Bend Sinister*, see John Burt Foster Jr.’s article on the novel in the *Garland Companion*, pp. 25-35, and also Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, pp. 93-97.

³⁵ *Bend Sinister*, p. 194.

³⁶ Ostensibly a play on the Shakespearean word “Paddock,” meaning Toad.

and after David's abduction, Krug cracks and offers to surrender, but on the exclusive condition that ("if, and only if"³⁷), his son will be returned to him.

Unfortunately for both Krug and the regime, a mistake has been made by Paduk's lackeys: Krug's child has been mixed up with another child bearing the same last name, Arvid Krug, son of Martin Krug, "former vice-president of the Academy of Medicine."³⁸ David Krug, it will soon be found out, died a horrible death in one of the regime's social experiments at the "Institute for Abnormal Children". The end of the novel portrays Adam Krug's own death – "saved" by his madness, he is shot by a member of the regime.

I want to start my analysis of the events leading up to Krug's death by stressing that it is not at all my intention to apply to them a Popperian kind of reduction, where Hegel's ontology is directly linked to political totalitarianism. I do think, however, that beneath the surface of the events that I have just described lies a philosophical problem that is very similar to the one that has become known in philosophical history as Krug's pen; the relation of this complication to Hegel, his political philosophy and *its* relation to Marxism remains to be discussed. Let me also remark that, not wanting to risk Paduk's mistake, it is neither my aim to confuse here the identities of the two Krugs, Adam and Wilhelm Traugott. That being said, I do think the text of *Bend Sinister* offers certain clues that show us Nabokov was aware of the historical Krug and his pen, and it makes sense to assume that if Nabokov's knowledge of Hegel was as extensive as the biographical material suggests, he must have come across Krug's name at least in the footnote to the *Philosophy of Nature* cited above. Eventually though, it is not these biographical matters I intend to settle. Rather, I want to try and show how the philosophical question of Krug's pen (as set out above) can form a fruitful way of entering into Nabokov's text, and how, once this way taken, can also constructively lead us out of the text and back to the philosophical context we started from.

The first scene I want to take a closer look at is one that takes place not too far from the beginning of the novel. In this scene we find Krug and his academic colleagues in a meeting concerning the fate of their university. The regime has threatened to shut down the university,

³⁷ *Bend Sinister*, p. 340. For an interesting interpretation connecting the "bend" in the title with both the "curve in the handle" that is David, and the meaning of Krug's name in Russian (i.e. circle), see: Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Handle: *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*," in: *TriQuarterly*, no.17, 1970 (winter), pp. 69-70.

³⁸ *Bend Sinister*, p. 338.

and its president, Azureus, has convoked its most important staff members with the aim of their signing a certain declaration expressing their agreement with Paduk's regime. After a notably farcical speech ("a short memorandum, a manifesto if you wish"³⁹) reminding one of Leninism in its vilest form, Azureus asks his colleagues to sign a declaration:

Dr. Azureus, whose oratorical zest seemed to have waned, briefly informed his audience that the declaration which all had to read and sign, had been typed in the same number of copies as there would be signatures. He had been given to understand, he said, that this would lend a dash of individuality to every copy. What was the real object of this arrangement he did not explain, and, let us hope, did not know, but Krug thought he recognized in the apparent imbecility of the procedure the eerie ways of the toad.⁴⁰

The members' signatures are taken to be the expression of their individuality, and by appending them to the documents they have received, they are to communicate "a dash" of this "individuality" to the signed declaration. Thus the academics' ritual of signing the copies begins, and the narrator provides us with an extensive description. First up is the zoologist, who

did not bother to read his, signed it with a borrowed pen, returned the pen over his shoulder and became engrossed again in the only inspectable stuff he had found so far – and old Baedeker with views of Egypt and ships of the desert in silhouette.⁴¹

More interestingly, there is Dr. Alexander, who

sat down at the rosewood desk, unbuttoned his jacket, shot out his cuffs, tuned the chair proximally, checked its position as pianist does; then produced from his vest pocket a beautiful glittering instrument made of crystal and gold; looked at its nib; tested it on a bit of paper; and, holding his breath, slowly unfolded the convolutions of his name. Having complemented the ornamentation of its complex tail, he raised his pen and surveyed the glamour he had wrought. Unfortunately, at this precise moment, his golden wand (perhaps resentful of the concussions that

³⁹ *Bend Sinister*, p. 207.

⁴⁰ *Bend Sinister*, p. 210.

⁴¹ *Bend Sinister*, p. 211.

its master's various exertions had been transmitting to it throughout the evening) shed a big black tear on the valuable typescript.⁴²

The description of Alexander's struggle with his ornate pen may strike us as unexpectedly elaborate. Reminding ourselves, however, of the earlier passage where the signatures were linked to the individuality of their bearers, this fragment, especially the "big black tear" at the end, reveals the possibility of a deeper meaning. If we take the signature to be the marker of individuality, and the pen as the instrument that is used to append it to the generality of the form, can we interpret the silence of the tear as expressing a sadness related to the individuality that is being relinquished? Possibly. I read on.

After zooming in on Dr. Alexander, the narrator focuses only briefly on professors Gleeman who absentmindedly "affixed his dainty but strangely illegible signature", and Beuret, who "... seeing that others signed, signed."⁴³ Also mentioned are the professors of Economics and history, who "appended their signatures in unison and then noticed with dismay that while comparing notes they had somehow swapped copies, for each copy had the name and address of the potential undersigned typed out in the left-hand corner."

The description of the historical-economical duo signing "in unison" seems to me a sly play on Marxian vocabulary where the separate individuals representing "economics" and "history" merge shortly into a dialectical unity. Of course one thinks of the Marxist (not necessarily endorsed by Karl Marx himself) dogma concerning the determination of history by the laws of economy. I interpret this fragment as a play on just this concept. But, through its interconnection with the first fragment I cited and the following descriptions of the other signings, I also read more in it. To explain what I mean by that, I turn to the final person up for signing: Krug.

Adam Krug too, he too, he too, unclipped his rusty wobbly fountain pen. The telephone rang in the adjacent study. [...] Dr. Azureus stopped hovering and felt his old heart stumble as it went upstairs (metaphorically) with its guttering candle when Krug nearing the end of the manifesto

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

(three pages and a half, sewn) pulled at the pen in his breast pocket. A sweet aura of intense relief made the candle rear its flame as old Azureus saw Krug spread the last page on the flat wooden arm of his cretonned armchair and unscrew the muzzle part of his pen, turning it into a cap. With a quick flip-like delicately precise stroke quite out of keeping with his burly constitution, Krug inserted a comma in the fourth line. Then (*chmok*) he remuzzled, recliped his pen (*chmok*) and handed the document to the distracted President. ... “Legal documents excepted”, answered Krug, “and not all of them at that, I never have signed, nor ever shall sign, anything not written by myself.”⁴⁴

Brusquely breaking the rhythm of logical expectation and of Azureus’ desire, Krug, just when he seems on the point of fulfilling the latter’s wish, does not sign the declaration, but instead, *his* attention being drawn by what to Azureus must look like a negligible detail – the faltering rhythm of a phrase – inserts a comma. With this comma, Krug not only interrupts the rhythm of the phrase in which he asserts it, he also interrupts the rhythm of Azureus’ and the reader’s expectation. Until the very last moment, the inadvertent reader is led to believe that Krug will sign the document with “a quick flip-like delicately precise stroke”. Still, just at this moment, the pen stroke is revealed to express the very opposite of a personal signature: the insertion of a simple comma. And yet his comma, this unexpected break, this negligible detail, usurping the place of the signature Paduk wanted, comes to express something of intimate importance, comes to express an act of individual resistance. The comma *is* Krug’s refusal, *is* the moment where the rhythm of a certain logic that had been set in motion during the signing of the declaration by the different academics is disrupted.

It was Paduk’s intention to have the academics lend a dash of their individuality to a declaration that has them agreeing to relinquish part of their particular identities to the communal project of the State. In fact, looking closely at the vocabulary used, it does not seem too far-fetched to say the mysterious “arrangement” in which Krug recognizes “the eerie ways of the Toad”, is constituted by a sort of dialectical process. The individual professors are to append to the manifesto (embodying the communal philosophy of the state) their signature, which is said to express their individuality. What we have here, is what can be said to be the most idiosyncratic element of a man’s authorship (his signature), being given over to what is most radically other to

⁴⁴ *Bend Sinister*, p. 212.

this highly individual element of authorship (a declaration/manifesto written by someone else); Paduk's attempt to have the professors sign this document can thus be seen as an attempt to dialectically reunite these two opposites, and turn the two products (signature and document) into the synthesis of the signed document.

Dr. Alexander, who, as we later learn, will become a faithful servant of Paduk, does sign, and his physically ornate pen (not insignificantly described as an "instrument") weeps. Krug, taking out his "rusty wobbly fountain pen", refuses to take part in the ritual, bluntly refuses to give up what is supposed to define him in his individuality and states never to have signed "anything not written by myself."⁴⁵ Krug uses his pen instead to insert what appears to be, as a simple sign, the merest of trifles. At the same time this comma, in its rigid and robust this, here, and nowness, is what irrevocably breaks up both the rhythm of the document and the logic of the scene, and we are strangely reminded of the historical Krug, who, more than a century earlier, launched *his* pen in an attempt to call a halt to what he conceived to be the inconsiderate absoluteness of Hegel's speculative logic. Thus, Krug eventually actualizes a fear expressed by the words Azureus speaks to him before the signing ritual took place: "You are a dreamer. A thinker. You do not realize the circumstances... you are jeopardizing the – everything ..."⁴⁶

Could it be that the rustiness of Krug's fountain pen is due to the fact that this pen is a hundred and fifty years old? All I dare to affirm is that both "Krug's" make use of their pens in remarkably similar ways, and that knowledge of the historical philosopher's pen seems to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of the fictional philosopher's pen in the scene just discussed. One might object here that in the historical Krug's argumentation the pen figures as "an end", whereas for the fictional Krug, it figures as "a means to an end". Or that the first Krug's pen was, if we want to be very precise about it, a *Feder (quill)*, and not a fountain pen. But that is beside the point I wish to make. I'm focusing here on what these pens, as singular objects, represent, on the question of their representational value and the disruptive implications this entails for the philosophical and fictional logic whose absorption they are meant to resist.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Even after a later plea from his colleague Hedron, insisting Krug be pragmatic ("What on earth does it matter? Affix your commercially valuable scrawl. Come on! Nobody can touch our circles – but we must have some place to draw them."), the philosopher stands firm ("Not in the mud, sir, not in the mud," said Krug, smiling his first smile of the evening."). *Bend Sinister*, p. 213.

⁴⁶ *Bend Sinister*, p. 209.

⁴⁷ In the chapter following the one we discussed, and which tells of Krug's boyhood and of his school time spent together with the Toad confirms this thought. A mysterious device is presented in this chapter: the "padograph". The

Earlier I explained how a thinker like Kierkegaard can be seen as someone who takes the argument of Krug's pen into the realm of subjectivity by trying to secure for the existential subject a position somewhat similar to that of Krug's pen. The particularity of the pen becomes the individuality of the I. In Nabokov's novel, the two are always already linked up in the way they are in the signing scene, where the particularity of the pen and the comma are linked to the individuality of the signature and the individual who is to yield it.

Nabokov's play on the dialectical method in chapter 4 of *Bend Sinister* may be the most elaborate one, but it is still only one of many. Degrading references to dialectics are made throughout the novel: The "individualistic behavior"⁴⁸ in Krug's boyhood is contrasted to that of his fellow students, and it is said that the headmaster "... felt justified in pointing out to teachers that if Adam Krug passed the final examinations with honors, his success would be dialectically unfair in regard to those of Krug's schoolmates who had less brains but were better citizens."⁴⁹ When one of Krug's friends, Maximov, tries to warn the mature Krug that this "individualistic behavior" will certainly get him into trouble, Krug feels no need to heed the message: "'They will arrest you' – Non-sense, said Krug. 'Precisely. Let us call this hypothetical occurrence an utterly nonsensical thing. But the utterly nonsensical is a natural and logical part of Paduk's rule.'"⁵⁰ Maximov tries to point out to Krug that the kind of State ruled by Paduk is one that will strive to incorporate – *naturally* and *logically* – that which opposes it. Krug, a rugged individualist, does not even imagine the possibility: "Nothing can happen to Krug the Rock." "I am invulnerable. Invulnerable."⁵¹

Unfortunately, as the reader will soon find out, Krug is far from invulnerable. Krug's vulnerability has already been intimated to the reader through snatches of interior monologue revealing the dim gloom of a consciousness overpowered by disruptive musings on his lost wife who "refuse[s] to be forgotten,"⁵² and its sense will be considerably deepened by the death of his son in the chapters leading up to the end of *Bend Sinister*. This death, following an oversight of

padograph, invented by Paduk's father, is a species of typing machine that can be used to reproduce an individual's handwriting once a sample of this has been provided to it. Boyd opposes this device to a translation of *Hamlet* made by one of Krug's friends Ember, I would oppose it to Krug's recalcitrant penmanship in the preceding chapter. Compare: Boyd, *American Years*. "Against the padograph's claim to replicate anyone's signature by means of a few levers, Nabokov sets Ember's translation of *Hamlet*...." (p. 100).

⁴⁸ *Bend Sinister*, p. 225.

⁴⁹ *Bend Sinister*, p. 226.

⁵⁰ *Bend Sinister*, p. 238.

⁵¹ *Bend Sinister*, p. 239.

⁵² *Bend Sinister*, p. 277.

Paduk and his regime of ruffians (who, it is repeatedly stressed throughout the novel, have no concern at all for detail), is cruelly presented to Krug on a video screen. In this, the most cruel chapter of the book, Adam Krug's son David has been mixed up with Arvid Krug, son of Martin Krug, and brought to the "Institute for Abnormal Children", where "so-called "Orphans"" are "used to serve as a "release instrument" for the benefit of the most interesting inmates with a so-called "criminal" record..."⁵³ Before Krug is presented with the video material, Crystalsen, a government official, explains the idea to Krug:

The theory – and we are not here to discuss its worth, and you shall pay for my cuff if you tear it – was that if once a week the really difficult patients could enjoy the possibility of venting in full their repressed yearnings (the exaggerated urge to hurt, destroy, etc.) upon some little creature of no value to the community, then by degrees, the evil in them would be allowed to escape, so to say, "effundated," and eventually they would become good citizens.⁵⁴

Of course, it is clear that what is being ridiculed here has no connection to Hegel or any possible interpretation of his philosophy. It is rather a particularly utilitarian interpretation of a series of ideas historically attributed to Freud that is vised here. Yet, when we read on, and come to Crystalsen's description of the concrete realization of "the theory", our Hegelian problematic does seem to resurge:

A nurse led the "orphan" down the marble steps. The enclosure was a beautiful expanse of turf, and the whole place, especially in summer, looked extremely attractive, reminding one of some of those open-air theaters that were so dear to the Greeks. The "orphan" or "little person" was left alone and allowed to roam all over the enclosure. One of the photographs showed him lying disconsolately on his stomach and uprooting a bit of turf with listless fingers (the nurse reappeared on the garden steps and clapped her hands to make him stop. He stopped). After a while the patients or "inmates" (eight all told) were let into the enclosure. At first, they kept at 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*; Doktor von Wytwyl used to say that this was

⁵³ *Bend Sinister*, p. 340.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

a wonderful moment: one felt that, as she quaintly put it, “something was really happening,” or in technical language: the “ego,” he goes “out” (out) and the pure “egg” (common extract of egos) “remains.” And then the fun began.⁵⁵

The vocabulary the narrator chooses to describe this cruel experiment is striking. We have a little person who is facing a “gang” of eight inmates, whose “spirit” is said to be “gradually assert[ing] itself” as they are reducing the “individual whims” of the “little person” to nothingness. Moreover, this organization of “community spirit” is described in explicitly dialectical terms. There is a “positive” community spirit, which incorporates the negativity of the individual that opposes it. The result is an “organized” community. In derisive philosophical vocabulary spoken with a Germanic accent, the process is summarized as the disappearance of the ego into the purity of a newly formed elliptical “egg.”

When we add to this last fragment the play on “science” and “silence”⁵⁶ that occurs just before the actual airing of the film, it is hard to resist the temptation and not see certain reverberations of the end of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* where the “pure I” disappears into the comprehending knowledge (*begreifendes Wissen*) of systematic Science, which, in turn, must be mediated into the totality of the Absolute knowing of Spirit arrived at the end of its development as absolute Spirit.⁵⁷ The choice of vocabulary in the scene of David’s death appears to point to something that science, in its striving to become spiritual, lacks attention to. Science in this absolutist form remains icily silent about something, or, as in the cruel experiment of the passage above, about *someone*; for absolute science has no attention for the individual I in its most simple individuality. If we are to take the critique (the historical) Krug and Kierkegaard put to the absolutist strain of Hegel’s systematic thought and take it to its ultimate limit, Nabokov’s description of the scene of David’s death – where the personal pangs and warm sobs of the young child’s actual suffering are surreptitiously buried beneath a cold and impersonal dialectical vocabulary – is the shape the anti-Hegelian critique would take in its most cruel form.

However, should we really want to make a similar step in our interpretation? Would it not put us at risk to slide into a Popperian position, the sort of position where the dialectical structure of Hegel’s metaphysical system is directly equated to the crude thoughts and ideas that were at

⁵⁵ *Bend Sinister*, pp. 340-341.

⁵⁶ *Bend Sinister*, p. 343. Also pointed out by Nabokov himself in the 1963 preface: *Bend Sinister*, p. 166.

⁵⁷ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 490-491.

the base of certain well-known social and moral evil events of the twentieth century? If we were to do that, a problem of a philosophical nature would present itself. For this interpretation would demand we pass over the fact that *even* at the end of the development of Hegel's Spirit, *even* when we reach the phase of Absolute Spirit, Spirit in this form is still said to have some consideration, for Spirit must return to itself *in time*. Absolute Knowledge will always be forced back to the realm of the concrete and tangible, *because* it forms a whole with it.⁵⁸

In that case, the essential question seems to be: *which* exact forms of history or time are still receptive of such a "return" for Hegel's Spirit? Can Spirit, at the point of wholeness and absoluteness, still effectually do justice to the smallest elements it has absorbed on its way up? Hegel seems to have been well aware of the dangers and the difficulties when he writes that Spirit is not a "'*tertium quid*' that casts the differences back into the abyss of the Absolute and declares that therein they are all the same."⁵⁹ Hegel's Spirit is no transcendent God, and I interpret his stress on its permanent immanent presence as a sign that he was well aware of the danger of losing the elemental individual *this* somewhere in the darker nooks at the bottom of his system. But the question remains: if Hegel was aware of the difficulty, did he do enough practical justice to it in the effectual working out of his system?

It is, I think, exactly to this crucial difficulty in dialectical thinking that a text like *Bend Sinister* takes us. Not by equating Hegelianism to totalitarianism or *vice versa*, as we saw Popper do,⁶⁰ but by intimately combining elements of tragic and comic fiction to stress (and restress) the fundamental difficulties of dialectical thought, which is to do more with it than simply to dismiss it altogether. To read *Bend Sinister* in this way also means to do more than excluding Hegel from its parameters by hiding him behind Marx or Lenin, as, possibly, Williams does. Some of the richness of the problematic philosophy that underlies *Bend Sinister* seems to get lost when we try to analyze it in socio-political terms alone.

Here I agree with Brian Boyd, who has remarked that *Bend Sinister* "[...] is not really a political novel at all; it is a philosophical one that aims to set out a certain philosophy of consciousness – which to be sure, has political consequences."⁶¹ This philosophy of consciousness, according to Boyd, consists in a view that stresses the untrammelled primacy of

⁵⁸ See *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 489-491.

⁵⁹ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 490.

⁶⁰ See note 30 above.

⁶¹ Boyd, *American Years*, p. 97.

individual consciousness over anything that might impeach upon it: be it a totalitarian state, a random group of others, a collection of general ideas. As a biographer, Boyd is very much aware of Nabokov's personal liberalist views in this matter, and indeed, Nabokov repeatedly stressed the independence of the individual consciousness over against any form of collective consciousness: "True art deals not with the genus, and not even with the species, but with an aberrant individual of the species," he once said in an interview.⁶²

This view of *Bend Sinister* as an essentially philosophical novel, can also be backed up by a detailed reading of its ending. Here, Krug, who now knows that his son has died has decided he will not comply with the regime, is unexpectedly "saved" by the narrator of the story: "It was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light – causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate."⁶³ The prominent (though somewhat unexpected) presence of the adjective "logical" in this fragment suggests that the course of Krug's tragic fate was never a matter of politics, but one of logic, and, as I have tried to show, this logical struggle can be said to be one with dialectical logic. After all acts of rugged individualist opposition on Krug's side have failed to release him from his tragic fate, this "instantaneous madness" bestowed upon him by the narrator will provide our tragic hero with a way out, and his first reaction to it leads us to assume he is conscious of it: "With a smile of infinite relief on his tear-stained face, Krug lay back on the straw."⁶⁴

In the final pages of the book we read how Krug is cut down by the bullets of Paduk's bodyguards as he hurls himself towards the latter, presumably in an attempt to revive an old school game where Krug used to sit on the Toad's slippery head. "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."⁶⁵ Madness in the form of a *deus ex machina* and death as a matter of style provide Krug's way out of his personal tragedy. Death proves to be the ultimate spoke in the machinery of a system that cannot be dialectically sublated. Krug's death, *this* death, constitutes a negativity that is so absolute in its tragedy, that no synthesis of it could possibly ensue. No more wife, no more son, no more Krug – this is the end of the line. Nabokov's own spirals may be of the sort where "every

⁶² *Strong Opinions*, p. 155.

⁶³ *Bend Sinister*, pp. 351-352.

⁶⁴ *Bend Sinister*, p. 352.

⁶⁵ *Bend Sinister*, p. 358.

synthesis is the thesis of the next series,”⁶⁶ but Krug’s personal spiral, and *Bend Sinister*’s, end with a period.

And yet, and yet.

METAXOLOGICAL METAPHYSICS

We may, as some philosophers are wont to, call Hegel a clown and “prove” that he is crook, so that we may be done with him – but this would be to miss out on some of the more potent possibilities his thought offers. What I want to do in these last sections is to take a closer look at a contemporary philosopher who tries to follow up on the potencies of dialectical thought in his own way, to see if the case of Nabokov’s Krug might have something to offer to a further discussion of the different forms of dialectical thought in Hegel’s wake. This philosopher, whom I have already briefly mentioned earlier, is William Desmond.

Desmond is very much aware of the flaws in Hegel’s system of dialectics, some of which have already been intimated in my discussion of Krug’s pen. However, like other contemporary Hegelians such as Charles Taylor, this does not mean he thinks Hegel’s thought has nothing left to say to us. Desmond rejects any atomistic approach of reality, be it socially, ethically, or (meta)physically. Trying to steer clear of the two extreme positions in the debate concerning atomism and holism, individualism and collectivism, particularity and universality, he seeks to maintain a more nuanced middle position. Although he is careful to avoid what he calls “the flattenings of atomism and social holism”⁶⁷, he does want to keep some notion of ‘universality’ (or wholeness) alive – just not a dialectical one: “We need, then, another idea of the universal... This other universal is not one term of a logical or ontological antithesis. It is the happening of the between.”⁶⁸

To see what Desmond means by this “between,” we have to turn to his *Being and The Between*. Desmond differs from a thinker like Taylor in that he does not necessarily think dialectics constitutes a faulty form of reasoning,⁶⁹ but rather, just thinks Hegel’s particular version of it is unsatisfactory. What is unsatisfactory about it to Desmond is not that dialectics in

⁶⁶ Cf. note 4 above.

⁶⁷ William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, op. cit., p. 61.

⁶⁸ William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, p. 63.

⁶⁹ Cf. Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, pp. 66-68.

its absolute form reaches a wholeness which is not logically viable, but that the absolute immanence of the process leaves no room for transcendence, no room for a between where what is other to the self-determining system of the whole can effectively breathe. This is how he puts it:

The process [i.e. Hegel's dialectics] passes all the way to complete self-determining intelligibility. It completes itself in the overcoming of the negative, which is the complete internalizing of otherness and transcendence. Put otherwise, self-transcendence, in dialectical interplay with what is other, ultimately circles around itself on the way to absolute wholeness. Or, put otherwise again, the whole becomes an absolutely self-mediating circle of transcendence within which all otherness is sublated. Then the real result is that there is no between; there is no transcendence finally; there is the absolute as thought thinking itself in its other; but the other is thought again thinking itself, hence in the end there is no real otherness either. The excess of plenitude that gives the beginning, that sustains the between, and that outlives every completion in the middle and every closed circle of concepts, is occluded.⁷⁰

This is why Desmond wants to direct more of reason's reflection to the potential doubleness of dialectics: "We must open dialectic to the doubleness implied by its own *dia*."⁷¹ If Taylor wants to pare down Hegel's dialectics, Desmond means to double it. Why? Because he thinks of the world and our being in it as situated in what he calls the "between": "The world as between is inhabited by a plurality of determinate entities that deserve the greatest attention, just in their astonishing determinate particularity."⁷² This may fondle our desire for a determinate (i.e. modern scientific) approach of the world, but Desmond insists that authentic human mindfulness should not lose itself in this determinate approach. For human consciousness, although drawn to determinate things, is itself indeterminate. "Being between," in this sense, means dwelling in the concavity between what is determinate and what is not. Desmond thinks the absolutist tendencies in Hegel's dialectic make it so that it cannot do justice to this fact, and his own metaphysics, which he calls "metaxological" (from the Greek *metaxu*, between) tries to amend Hegel's dialectics on precisely this point:

⁷⁰ William Desmond. *Being and the Between*. New York: SUNY Press, 1995, p. 31.

⁷¹ *Being and the Between*, p. 34.

⁷² *Ibid*.

[...] metaxological metaphysics calls for what I call a *second perplexity*, beyond all determinate knowing. Astonishment before being-other is renewed, but thinking also finds itself perplexing to itself. Thought may try to think itself in this perplexity but, contra Kant and especially Hegel, it finds itself *escaping itself* again and again, escaping its own comprehensive grasp in this effort to think itself. When it thinks itself, its thinking of itself again escapes its just accomplished thought of itself. Something other to itself is at work in itself.... In this second perplexity, thought thinks itself as other to itself.⁷³

A “second perplexity” is being introduced in order to protect the final moment in the dialectic (where the original selfness and its negative other are united in a mediated selfness), against the risk of losing the particular thisness of the original self/this. Desmond’s aim, by adding this second moment of perplexity to the dialectical circle, is to create a space where the particular thisness of both subject and object is safe, whilst at the same time keeping them from degrading into mere atomicity by keeping open the possibility for them to be related to the notion of wholeness.

ULTIMATE PERPLEXITIES: LOVE, MADNESS, DEATH

Desmond’s way of dealing with the difficulty of Hegelian dialectics through a reconfiguration of the inner body of its ontology, thereby changing essential parts of its vocabulary, is interesting in its own right. Yet the question that I must ask here is, of course: what does it have to offer to us in relation to my proposed interpretation of Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister*?

I think Desmond provides us with the kind of vocabulary that is able to deepen our understanding of what Nabokov himself, and with him many of his commentators, have called the main theme of his novel: “...the beating of Krug’s loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to...”⁷⁴

Adam Krug’s tragedy is not simply the tragedy of a repressed individual condemned to live in a totalitarian state but, more specifically, that of an I who is related to a particular group of others (David, Olga, to a lesser degree, his friends), whilst at the same time holding strong individualistic principles against a second group of others, embodied by a totalitarian state.

⁷³ *Being and the Between*, p. 35.

⁷⁴ *Bend Sinister*, p. 165.

The idea of thought “thinking itself as other to itself” seems to open up an insightful way of talking and thinking about the above-mentioned relation between Krug and his dead wife, for it seems the narrator’s device of shifting focalization from Krug’s sensual experiences to his indirect musings can be thought of in just these terms. Krug’s thought keeps breaking in upon itself in a way that is not directly related to sense-experience. The thought of his wife’s death takes the form of an otherness, not outside, but right in the middle of consciousness itself. This otherness is not related to any concrete object in the world presenting itself as opposed to/over against consciousness. It is not the Proustian spasm of involuntary memory set in motion by the encounter with a *Madeleine*. Recall the beginning of *Bend Sinister*’s tenth chapter:

He got rid of her furs, of all her photographs, of her huge English sponge and supply of lavender soap, of her umbrella, of her napkin ring, of the little porcelain owl she had bought for Ember and never given him – but she refused to be forgotten.⁷⁵

Krug’s relation to his dead wife, and the way the narrator chooses to present it, is complex. It is not the matter of a simple dress of a loved one reminding us of her disappeared presence. Olga’s absence keeps imposing itself on Krug *in its absence*, but the fact that it imposes itself on Krug’s consciousness in its absence makes up for its particular violence. This absence finds ways to introduce itself into the presence of consciousness, and the way Nabokov manages to artistically portray the tragedy of this phenomenon is nothing short of magisterial. Let me try to explain what I mean a little more concretely, by citing in relation to the fragment I just cited, one last piece of text from *Bend Sinister*, this one taken from the end of chapter seventeen:

[...] the soldiers carried Krug to the car. They drove back to the capital across the wild mountains. Beyond Lagodan Pass the valleys were already brimming with dusk. Night took over among the great fir trees near the famous falls. Olga was at the wheel, Krug, a nondriver, sat beside her, his gloved hands folded in his lap; behind sat Ember and an American professor of philosophy, a gaunt hollow-cheeked, white-haired man who had come all the way from his remote country to discuss with Krug the illusion of substance [...] Ember was trying to recall the American name

⁷⁵ *Bend Sinister*, p. 277.

for a similar kind of fir tree in the Rocky Mountains. Two things happened together: Ember said “Douglas” and a dazzled doe plunged into the blaze of our lights.⁷⁶

These lines are placed after the scene where Krug has been confronted with his son’s horrible death. The first couple of phrases seem to be in line with the description of the events that have just taken place. But then something strange happens. In the third phrase, Olga is introduced. The reader is confronted with a chronological impossibility: she knows Krug’s wife to be dead; then how can Olga be sitting next to Krug in the car? As the text continues, however, we gradually start to suspect what is going on: Krug’s consciousness dwells somewhere else, i.e. is not experiencing this drive, but one that took place in the past. In the last phrase the reader’s suspicion is confirmed when the auctorial voice shifts focus and adjusts itself to Krug’s consciousness: “a dazzled doe plunged into the blaze of our lights”, i.e., into the lights of the car Krug and Olga *were* driving, during what we must suppose had been the night of the fatal accident that led to her being hospitalized and her subsequent death due to kidney problems. Thus, this fragment shows how Nabokov makes use of a certain narrative strategy to overcome the problem of adequately having to express the experience of a loss that imposes itself upon consciousness as both something radically other to it, but at the same time as taking place at the most intimate interior of the self.

Thought breaking in upon itself, as it is presented here, in the form of a loss that imposes itself, does not entail only for Krug a moment of “second perplexity”. Nabokov’s strategy aims to transpose part of the experience to the mind of the reader. This is how I see it: as described in Desmond’s notion of “metaxological metaphysics,” there are two moments of perplexity. First, we have the breaking in on the other as other. This is what I have called, in Krug’s case, thought breaking in upon itself. In the scene cited above, it is constituted by the implicit focal shift of consciousness as it sets in and gradually develops over the course of the phrases describing the car drive(s). However, once the reader has grasped this, a moment of “second perplexity” presents itself: we catch Krug’s thought intruding upon itself, but at the same time, we catch ourselves, as readers, intruding upon this intrusion.

Krug is tricked by his consciousness, the reader has been tricked by Nabokov’s narrative strategy, the mindful reader, “wonder-wounded hearer”, is left musing in between tricks. Krug

⁷⁶ *Bend Sinister*, p. 346.

never *actually* shows any concrete signs of suffering in this scene – yet we are wondering if he *is*, reflecting on the thoughts playing in his consciousness in their relation to the series of tragic events that have unfolded. It is in this judgment, that Krug's/our second perplexity can be situated. The presence of a second perplexity in this form is continuously intimated with Krug's consciousness as presented in the text, but it is only fully realized in the interaction between Krug's consciousness and ours, between what is there in the text and what is going on in the reader's mind. To put it differently: the second perplexity is in this case not one either we or Krug fully possess, it is one that can only be experienced as a form of shared consciousness. To put it in Desmondian terms: this is a perplexity that is not only twice perplexed, but actually metaxological in the *locus* of its event.

What does the insight that Krug's vulnerability is intimately linked to the vulnerability of consciousness in its connection to what is other to itself entail for our earlier discussion concerning the precarious situation of the individual in relation to a whole that seeks to incorporate it? It reminds us that Krug is not the "invincible" "rock" he thought himself to be. Krug is no atom. He is taken up into the circle of his loved ones, and intimates awareness of this in the unfinished treatise on "infinite consciousness" he undertook to write. If consciousness is infinite, this implies a necessary link to what is other to it – and this is what makes up for Krug's tragedy. I think of Emerson's lamentable lines in *Each and All*: "All are needed by each one; / Nothing is good or fair alone."⁷⁷ The Sage of Concord seeks to express by this a feeling of frustration: the sounds, images and objects that used to please him in the past do not please him anymore: they have lost their particular charm, because they are now severed off from that past. *These* sounds do not please the singer anymore, for being *these* sounds, they cannot be *those* sounds. In its linkage to the whole logic of a human life, memory reveals its fragility. It starts to show crumpled marks of venation, like the yellowing pages in an old book that has been read too many times. This frightens us and for fear of losing what is still left of it, we tell ourselves that we will let it be. But when it comes to our most intimate and important relations, what is other to consciousness will not accept to be left to rest, not even in consciousness' attempt of seeking refuge from this obtrusive otherness by turning into itself. In these relations, even the most rigid form of self-consciousness remains obsessed with the other it seeks to occlude.

⁷⁷ See: *The Portable Emerson*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987, p. 631.

So there *is* a whole of which Krug, even in his very rockiness, is undeniably a part: the whole constituted by the relation between consciousness and time. The fractures this unity has been fraught with constitute an essential part of his tragedy, perhaps an even more essential part of his tragedy than his fraught relation to that other, more tangible whole constituted by the totalitarian state we looked at earlier.

A final consideration of Krug's relation to the violent otherness of the state must lead one to conclude that in the case of Krug's death, even Desmond's vocabulary does not offer us any means to make philosophical sense of it, at least not from the point of view of Krug. We may find a vocabulary to come to terms with the death of the other, but the I cannot possibly come to terms with its own death. For the I, as I, death is absolutely irrevocable. It is the limit where logic must hit upon itself without even the possibility of bouncing back.

Thus Nabokov's narrator's decision to meekly bestow upon Krug an "instantaneous madness," tragic as it sounds, might have been the only solution to avert a more absolute sort of tragedy. By taking the conscious I out of the dialectical equation altogether, Nabokov manages to liberate Krug from his tragedy up to a certain extent. We may even read the narrator's gesture here as a definite rejection of any dialectical conception of suffering – placing the stress on the adjective "logical" in the narrator's contention that he saves Krug from his "logical fate," seems to allow for such an interpretation.

Ultimately, however, this would not do full justice to Nabokov's sometimes playful, sometimes serious treatment of the problem of dialectics in *Bend Sinister*, a treatment that, as I hope to have shown, is neither completely dismissive of it, nor blindly supportive. If anything, *Bend Sinister* only deepens the sense of moral and metaphysical wonder we keep experiencing when confronting ourselves to the endlessly elusive ambiguities that are at the heart of Hegel's dialectical universe, by posing several pertinent questions to the many variegated followers who have chosen to inhabit it. All the main themes of *Bend Sinister* – love, loss, madness, and the death of consciousness – transcend the scope of any particular philosopher or writer, and we would be shortsighted to try and reduce Nabokov's way of treating these themes to one definite philosophical vocabulary. Arguments do not cling to these ultimate perplexities and we cannot hope to claim them through conclusions. And yet – although dialectical reconciliation with loss and death may not be possible, we *can* hope to find ever new strategies to confront them. What

makes Nabokov's art so exceptional is that it offers us both such strategies, as the kind of confrontations that negate them.

