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NABOKOV'S WRONG TURNS

The themes of history and geography, on which this issue is focused, ask us to think about Nabokov's work relationally. It is a welcome request, although the author himself seems to have advocated for a different approach. In his 1959 introduction to *Invitation to a Beheading*, he imagined the novel to be a "violin in the void," in the tradition of Flaubert's ideal work, "un livre sans attache extérieure" (Nabokov 1965, 3; Flaubert 1974, 154). There is a long tradition of reading Nabokov in precisely the way he solicited, by examining the internal forces that hold his novels together, and analysing them exclusively on their own terms. William H. Gass, one among the generation of experimental writers in the United States to be inspired by Nabokov in the 1960s and 70s, referred strikingly to his novels "as clocks, each making and marking its own sweet time" (Gass 1979, 206). On this view, the works are independent and unique systems, with their own bespoke mechanisms and craft, creating their own miniature idiosyncratic worlds. The tradition of Nabokov scholarship that takes such assumptions as axiomatic bears similarity to the literary formalisms of late Imperial Russia and the early Soviet Union, with their acute emphasis on the internal logics of literary works.¹ It also (like Nabokov himself) found a comfortable home in the Anglo-American academies of the post-World War Two era, and the New Critical practices of close reading that were institutionalized there. Unlike those critical traditions, however, with their occasionally stringent protocols for disregarding questions of authority and authorship, Nabokov studies never fully relinquished the Romantic insistence on Nabokov's authority as a creative genius who might dictate modes of hermeneutic and aesthetic response to his readership. An attention to the themes of history and geography does

¹ On Nabokov and Russian Formalism, see Glynn 2007, 23–51.

not cancel that tradition, but provides an opportunity to extend it. It does so by inviting us to think in two modes simultaneously. We must consider these literary objects as autonomous worlds in their own right, and also as co-ordinates in larger spatial and temporal fields, fragments of conversations that cannot be grasped until we place them in larger, more expansive contexts. Once we have worked in this second, relational mode, then we can return to the first, and, to use Gass's metaphor, we find that our perception of the clock has been altered and enriched by our sense of its participation in a polyrhythmic environment. It has taken on new meanings. The experience of reading his fiction suggests that Nabokov understood that clock time has significance only in relation to other human temporalities, whether social or biological.² To be clear, then, I am advocating for a relational, let us say *dialectical*, reading of Nabokov.

It is well-known that Nabokov pronounced himself indifferent to the "intrusions of history," as he called them, but a number of scholars have nevertheless seen fit to disregard his edicts by thinking historically about his work (Nabokov 1965b, n. p.). The key move they have made, and which distinguishes them as a group despite their many differences, is that they have understood Nabokov's ahistoricism to be itself a historical phenomenon.³ In my own work on Nabokov, time, and history, history was always "the other" to what Nabokov described in his autobiography *Speak, Memory* as being plunged into when he discovered his age in relation to that of his parents: "that radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure medium of time" (Norman 2012; Nabokov 1996c, 371). I tended to bundle up history with general notions of the social and the political without properly interrogating those associations, without exploring sufficiently their intellectual roots, and without asking what alternative ideas of history may have been available to Nabokov. In this essay, then, I want to ask what that term *history* really meant for Nabokov, and what it might mean for his readers.

In the first chapter of the autobiography, history is figured metaphorically as the progression of artistic representations in the drawing room Nabokov played in as a four-year-old child. "History begins," we are told, with "the promise of fair Greece," represented by a marble bust of Diana (Nabokov 1996c, 372) and it continues further along the wall with an

² In *Bend Sinister*, for example, Nabokov has Ember visualize Maximov's cottage after his abduction by the state, where his clocks "are probably still going, alone, intact, pathetically sticking to man's notion of time after man has gone" (Nabokov 1996a, 256).

³ Dolinin 1999; Straumann 2008; Dragunoiu 2012; Dematagoda, 2017; White 2017.

engraving of a Napoleonic battle scene. This little episode provides two coordinates for the present discussion, for Diana and Napoleon correspond to moments not only in history but also in historiography: on the one hand, ancient Greek philosophies and practices of historiography, and on the other a philosophy of history inaugurated in the early-nineteenth century by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who famously admired Napoleon as he entered Jena, describing him as the *Weltseele*, or “world-soul” (Pinkard 2000, 228). Nabokov, I argue, was deeply interested in both Greek and Hegelian historiography, and in their relation to one another. In *Speak, Memory*, he describes shuttling along the hollow space behind the divan in that drawing room, both between and below these two coordinates. In order to think them effectively together, however, we need a third coordinate, and that is provided by the moment of Nabokov’s writing, the mid-twentieth century. This third coordinate corresponds to the global events of totalitarianism and World War Two, which demanded a fundamental rethinking of historiographical principles: in the light of Stalinist purges, organized famine, mass-surveillance, the Nazi death camps, the advent of nuclear weapons, what *is* that chronotope that people call history, and does it any longer have meaning?⁴

Nabokov posed a version of this question as the opening to his 1940 review of John Masefield’s historical romance *Basilissa: A Tale of the Empress Theodora*. “What is history? Dreams and dust” (Nabokov 2019b, 148). The answer indicates his refusal to furnish history with a coherent logic, and a determination not to consider it in light of contemporary events, as Nazi forces swept across Europe. An attentive reading of Nabokov’s fiction, however, belies this apparently throwaway comment, suggesting instead that the dreams and dust of 1940 betokened a larger crisis in liberal historiography. This crisis in the concept of history left its mark throughout Nabokov’s oeuvre, but it is most urgently felt in the suite of works he wrote between 1937 and 1947, corresponding to his flight from Berlin and then Paris, and to his early years in the United States. It includes the second of his two novels about totalitarian dictatorships, *Bend Sinister* (1947), and a group of extraordinarily bleak and understudied short stories composed immediately before and during World War Two: “Tyrants Destroyed” (1938), “The Visit to the Museum” (1939), “That in Aleppo Once . . .” (1943) and “Double Talk” (1945), later retitled “Conversation Piece, 1945.” Nabokov had long been sanguine about the cataclysmic events of early-twentieth-century Europe and Russia, claiming as late

⁴ On the reconsideration of historical time after World War Two, see Gumbrecht 2013.

as 1937 that the pessimism of commentators was a form of lazy populist philistinism.⁵ The eruption of World War Two, however, appeared to Nabokov as a redoubling of suffering for his generation of exiles, forming a particularly cruel historical series. On arrival in the United States, appealing for financial aid for those still stuck in France, he noted that “the Russian people have been treated twice to Tyutchev’s notorious feast, where they were served not only the *okroshka* of Russian Revolution, but a second course, the German blood sausage... history has given us nothing at all” (Nabokov 2019a, 146).

In what follows, then, I want to pursue the sense in which a historical crisis produced a historiographical one, both for Nabokov’s own writing and for some of other leading liberal writers and thinkers of the mid-twentieth century. The most effective way to trace this relationship is through a reading of *Bend Sinister*, a novel which dramatizes very self-consciously the relationship we have already noted between Greek and Hegelian historiography. *Bend Sinister* offers us a particular figure which will help us to grasp its historiographical engagements. This is “the wrong turn” described by Nabokov in his 1963 introduction to the novel:

The term “bend sinister” means a heraldic bar or band drawn from the left side (and popularly, but incorrectly, supposed to denote bastardy). This choice of title was an attempt to suggest an outline broken by refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being, a wrong turn taken by life, a sinistral and sinister world. The title's drawback is that a solemn reader looking for “general ideas” or “human interest” (which is much the same thing) in a novel may be led to look for them in this one.

(Nabokov 1996a, 163)

The wrong turn is in the first instance a static spatial figure in which an image of wholeness and “being” is broken or distorted. In deploying this phrase, however, Nabokov also introduces the idea of process, and a path that has been lost in its following: life has a course, and *Bend Sinister* evokes that course being perverted. There is a right path, we must assume, but this novel depicts its mirror image, the one leading nowhere, or if the plot of *Bend Sinister* tells us anything, leading towards death. Nabokov was likely thinking, too,

⁵ “Of course the philistine may have the impression that the world is going from bad to worse... But the philosopher’s eye surveys the world and sparkles with satisfaction as it notes that the essential things do not change” (Nabokov 2019d, 131).

about *Hamlet*, the Shakespeare play that the novel obsessively alludes to and measures itself against. “The time is out of joint,” says Hamlet after meeting the ghost of his father, suggesting that the present is dislocated, a connection has been lost, the continuum has been broken (the narrator of *Bend Sinister* describes time elapsing as “the disjointed parts of a century”) (Shakespeare 1997, 1688; Nabokov 1996a, 336). Hamlet is the Prince of a rotten state and the time being out of joint is a problem of succession. A ghost has risen to disrupt the present life of the state and to remind us that its future is in doubt.

Nabokov’s term *life* seems in a direct sense to refer to his protagonist, Krug, whose fortunes deteriorate during the course of the narrative. But *life* also holds open a more generalized and abstract meaning, comparable to the ancient Greek concept of *bios*, which refers to the gift of life bestowed by the Gods on humans, with emphasis on the way that it is spent, and the means by which it is sustained. *Bios*, in modern accounts of Greek thought, has connoted a freedom and a flourishing that is both singular and collective, but which is always fragile and under threat from forces of dehumanization (Holmes 2013). These are important considerations in the context of *Bend Sinister*’s formal architecture, with its God-like author figure, to whom we will return. The wrong turn taken by life may suggest a single life wasted through infelicitous paths chosen, or it may mean that the very idea of *bios* itself as self-determined activity and becoming has been corrupted (“a distortion in the mirror of being,” in Nabokov’s odd, striking phrase). For the moment, we must note that Nabokov offers us a richly allegorical and overdetermined figure for historical time as process, one with multiple resonances in the novel. These run from the obvious association of sinister with Left politics to the echoes of *Hamlet*’s “time out of joint” and the life of the state, and to the fate of the novel’s protagonist, not to mention the issue of sexual perversion, to which we will return presently. But Nabokov then slams the door in our face. These may be, in the words of the introduction, “general ideas” or, even worse, “human interest.” We are admonished to stop thinking in such terms at all.

This is the moment to step back, then, and to consider in more detail some of the ways in which Nabokov conceived of history, and to place those ideas in context. These various ways can be organized around the basic distinction between history as chance and history as determined and coherent process. When Nabokov uses the term *history*, those references often fall into the former. For example, the essay “On Generalities” offers an important statement of his early perspective on historiography as it began to crystalize in the milieu of

émigré Berlin. Most likely written as a talk given in the mid-1920s, this essay makes clear that Nabokov then understood history to be determined through pure contingency. “History’s roulette wheel knows no laws,” he explains. “There is no system” (Nabokov 2019, 56). In contrast to this idea of history as chance, he posits the philistine notion that history might be subject to generalizations concerning the characteristic traits of an era or period. Accordingly, Nabokov contends, just as the Russian Revolution was a chance event then so will the Soviet Union pass into history with similar abruptness: “as for the whiff of revolution, it, too, having appeared by chance, will disappear by chance, as has already happened a thousand times in human history” (Nabokov 2019c, 58).

In the fiction, the distinction between history as chance and history as determined coherent process is evoked most explicitly in Nabokov’s 1930 novel *The Eye*. Here it is made clear exactly what ideological resistance is placed against the latter:

It is silly to seek a basic law, even sillier to find it. Some mean-spirited little man decides that the whole course of humanity can be explained in terms of insidiously revolving signs of the zodiac or as the struggle between an empty and a stuffed belly; he hires a punctilious Philistine to act as Clio’s clerk, and begins a wholesale trade in epochs and masses... luckily no such laws exist: a toothache will cost a battle, a drizzle cancel an insurrection. Everything is fluid, everything depends on chance, and all in vain were the efforts of that crabbed bourgeois in Victorian checkered trousers, author of *Das Kapital*, the fruit of insomnia and migraine.

(Nabokov 1965a, 37-38)

There are a number of interesting correlatives to this dichotomy in mid-century thinking, which sets history-as-chance against a Marxist-determinist model. Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, for instance, is rarely if ever invoked in relation to Nabokov, but offers a strikingly similar formulation. Its protagonist, who has been working with “the Brotherhood,” a thinly-disguised version of the Communist Party USA, meditates on the sight of a group of young black men on a subway platform, and wonders whether they are not

the stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they

themselves failed to understand it. What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge?

(Ellison 1995, 441)

Ellison, like Nabokov, was part of the highbrow literary establishment of the North-Eastern United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as strident anti-Communism became mainstream in response to the early Cold War.⁶ What we understand in their comparison is the way in which liberal authors in the modernist tradition used this historiographical dichotomy as part of their critique of the Left. Ellison deploys the metaphor of gambling, just as Nabokov did in “On Generalities,” to figure history as indeterminable. In this, both echo Immanuel Kant’s “Idea for a Universal Concept of History,” in which he decried the idea of “desolate chance” ordering historical events (Kant 2009, 109). The important difference here, however, is the sense we get from both Nabokov and Ellison that, far from “desolate chance” (Hannah Arendt’s translation has “melancholy haphazardness” [Arendt 1961, 82]) the chaotic and unpredictable nature of historical events is to be at least in part celebrated, as an aleatory counterforce to the oppressively deterministic history of the old Marxist Left. Ellison and Nabokov both perceive this Marxist view as dogmatic, rigidly deterministic, and ultimately incapable of accommodating what they both viewed in their different ways as an ethical and political imperative: the centrality of the autonomous, free-willed individual, what Dana Dragunoiu identifies in the Russian liberal context as *lichnost’* (Dragunoiu 2018, 242-244). Something of this confluence of chance and personhood can be glimpsed in Krug’s meditation on his son in *Bend Sinister*, a being created, as he says, “by a fusion which is, at the same time, a matter of choice and a matter of chance and a matter of pure enchantment,” a mystery “suffused with consciousness, which is the only real thing in the world, and the greatest mystery of all” (Nabokov 1996a, 316). The importance of this contrast between Kant’s despair at the lack of pattern in historical events in late-eighteenth-century Prussia, and Nabokov and Ellison’s identification of historical chance with freedom in early Cold War America cannot be overstated, signalling as it does the advent of a modern liberalism ready to

⁶ On Nabokov and anti-Communism, see Norman 2018; on Nabokov and liberalism, see Dragunoiu 2018; on Ellison’s shift towards anti-Communism during the writing of *Invisible Man*, see Foley 2010.

embrace the singular, the haphazard and the unpredictable, a liberalism that flourished particularly in response to the perception of a vulgar Marxism that dared to prophesy the future.⁷

These ideas were in no way unique or even distinctive in mid-century liberal thought. They were, on the contrary, one of its most consistent mainstays. Among those who launched philosophical attacks on the vulgar Marxist deterministic view of history were three Jewish émigré intellectuals: Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper and Hannah Arendt. These three all wrote at length during the 1940s and 50s about historiography, lamenting that the idea of history as a coherent process governed by absolute laws had attained such intellectual currency. Like Nabokov and Ellison, all three identified Marx as the figure responsible for this concept. Both Popper, in his *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945) and Hannah Arendt in her essay “The Concept of History” (1959) traced historiography from the ancient world to the present, in an attempt to discover, in the recognition of a crisis in historical thought, how humankind had arrived at the current confusion. Both saw Hegel as the crucial turning point in their narratives of historiography, marking a kind of origin point for the conceptualization of history as a totalizing, coherent process, what Popper calls, simply, *historicism*. If Marx had claimed to be able to predict the course of history, his mistake – his “wrong turn” – was in his reading of Hegel, whom Popper describes as “the source of all contemporary historicism.”⁸

For Popper, a large part of Marx’s mistake was made simply in taking Hegel seriously. Hegel for Popper was simply and straightforwardly a charlatan who used obfuscating and obscure prose to hide the paucity of his ideas, and to provide a craven justification for the Prussian State who patronized him and ensured his prestige in return for philosophical assurances that Prussia represented the highest development of the World Spirit. Popper’s Hegel, in other words, appears as something like the figure that Paduk’s regime wants Krug to become in his proposed new role as head of the University, a subordination and degradation of intellectual freedom in service of the state, “happy and proud to march with the masses” (Nabokov, 1996a, 287). Popper’s undisguised contempt for Hegel, we must note, is described specifically in *The Open Society* as a perversion, “...a despicable perversion of everything that is decent; a perversion not only of reason, freedom,

⁷ On chance and American critiques of Marxist determinism in Cold War fiction (including Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*), see Belletto 2012.

⁸ Popper 2011, 242. For a later, more concise version of Popper’s arguments against historical determinism, see also his *The Poverty of Historicism* (1959).

equality, and the other ideas of the open society, but also of a sincere belief in God, and even of a sincere patriotism” (Popper 2011, 262). The term *perversion* is another glimpse of that figure of the wrong turn. Its etymology takes us to the Latin *pervertere*, meaning “to turn about.” During the course of its historical use it developed a pejorative meaning, and the processes of turning about became wrong. Perversion became a wrong turn, and often (most notoriously in Freudian usage) a sexual one, a turn away from the perceived correct ends of desire. *Bend Sinister* itself is full of coded references and more-or-less explicit allusions to homosexuality, which Nabokov appears to have regarded with hostility as a perversion.⁹ Many of these references are discussed in Eric Naiman’s *Reading Nabokov Perversely*, which makes the case for a queer reading of Nabokov that attends to the interplay of sexual and hermeneutic desire (Naiman 2010). I want to emphasize, however, the sense in which the figure of the wrong turn – the perversion – brings together the sexual and the historiographical in a certain mid-century liberal discourse that both Nabokov and Popper participated in. While Popper deemed such perversion inadmissible, Nabokov, whatever his views on homosexuality, saw in the wrong turn some seductive imperative, however ambivalent, which demanded articulation and even pursuit. We are now a step closer to grasping the rich complexity of that figure, one which will require us to consider Hegel and the dialectic.

Popper’s Marx was an authentic if misguided figure, a thinker who adopted Hegel’s erroneous claims for an inner dialectic logic to history and used it to undergird his own work. Marxism, he claimed, “is a purely historical theory, a theory which aims at predicting the future course of economic and power-political developments and especially of revolutions” (Popper 2011, 295). It must be said that Popper’s accounts of Hegel and Marx in *The Open Society*, are narrowly ideological themselves, and, at times, misleadingly reductive. What they do offer us, however, is a correlative to Nabokov’s own thinking about historicism at the same time, and another coordinate in the constellation of liberal anti-Communist thought in which Nabokov’s own work can be understood. Another co-ordinate in that constellation, and one with a much more philosophically sophisticated grasp of Marx and Hegel, is the work of Hannah Arendt. Nabokov and Arendt were personally acquainted, though not friends. Arendt’s friendship with Mary McCarthy, and Nabokov’s with McCarthy’s second husband Edmund Wilson, meant that they were part of the same milieu of liberal highbrow

⁹ On Nabokov and queerness, see Bruhm 1996.

intellectuals, and they both published in the venues that milieu used to disseminate its ideas, such as *Partisan Review* and of course *The New Yorker*, who commissioned Arendt's famous account of the Eichmann trial, and which became Nabokov's venue of choice for his short fiction. Arendt wrote to McCarthy that she could not share McCarthy's enthusiasm for *Pale Fire*, and that she found Nabokov objectionably conceited.¹⁰ In any case, Arendt's long, eloquent essay "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern," published in its final form in 1961, provides, much as Popper did sixteen years earlier, a survey of historiography in which the arrival of prediction and prophecy after Hegel marks the watershed between history as event and as process. She, too, found the seeds of twentieth-century totalitarianism in the transition from Hegelian to Marxian historiography. While Hegel had been the first to look back over history, and, through its study, to establish a higher aim among the actions of men, Marx was the first to transform what had been a purely theoretical contemplation into a template for political action in the future. Arendt's Marx was responsible, then, for making history political. The result was a catastrophic confusion of the difference between means and ends, the upending reversal of a relationship which, for Arendt, provided the very heart of ethical philosophy. It was a wrong turn.

The key point for Arendt in "The Concept of History," and one which resonates with Nabokov's and Ellison's emphasis on the role of chance in the making of both individuals and history, is that actions, properly understood in contrast to work, cannot have definite ends. As she puts it:

Human action, projected into a web of relationships where many and opposing ends are pursued, almost never fulfils its original intention; no act can ever be recognized by its author as his own with the same happy certainty with which a piece of work of any kind can be recognized by its maker. Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable.

(Arendt 1961, 84-5)

¹⁰ "There is something in N. which I greatly dislike. As though he wanted to show you all the time how intelligent he is" (Brightman 1995, 135).

Here we find a position very compatible with the Nabokovian one, in which the nature of human activity is such that it cannot be subjected to prediction. Even more striking is the way in which Arendt's grounds for her claims about action and predictability are discovered, like Krug's, in the indeterminacies of human reproduction:

Human action, like all strictly political phenomena, is bound up with human plurality, which is one of the fundamental conditions of human life insofar as it rests on the fact of natality, through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions must be unknown to those who are already there and are going to leave in a short while.

(Arendt 1961, 61)

If Arendt builds her concept of history around a notion of strangeness and its constant invasion of social life in the form of new humans, then Krug's commitment to an open futurity similarly grows ideologically from his investment in the unknowable mechanics of the reproduction of consciousness, as when he thinks of his son David, "formed in some mysterious fashion (even more mysterious to us than it had been to the very first thinkers in the pale olive groves) by the fusion of two mysteries... thus formed and permitted to accumulate trillions of its own mysteries" (Nabokov 1996a, 316). We will have cause to discuss Nabokov's interest in those thinkers in the olive groves presently. For the moment, however, we can see that in reading Arendt and Nabokov together, one insight we stand to gain is that the supposedly idiosyncratic views that Nabokov held but often distributed to his characters -- his strong opinions, preferences and taboos, what I think we can safely describe as his own ideology -- exist not in a vacuum, but in a certain shared historical territory. While Dragunoiu (2012) has made a strong case for the origins of some of these views in the traditions of Russian liberalism, and in particular in the work of Nabokov's father, I want to indicate how we can also build synchronic perspectives that break down the myth of Nabokovian exceptionalism and place him in other intellectual and historical communities, in this case those of liberal, anti-Communist émigrés, especially Jewish or Philo-Semitic ones, in flight from continental Europe in the mid-twentieth century.

This is the context, of course, that is most fully engaged by *Bend Sinister's* plot, which tells of a great philosopher who refuses to go into exile. This refusal is implicitly yet

another of the wrong turns that the novel describes. It is one that Krug recognizes and wishes to revoke too late, when his path, and that of his son, seems to have been irrevocably determined. At its most fundamental level, the affective sympathy between Arendt and Krug (one hesitates to say Nabokov himself) lies in the utter despair with which both of these exiles countenance the possibility that their most cherished and deeply embedded commitments to historiographical principles, their rejections of history as process, their affirmations of chance and the unpredictable, have been cast into doubt by the material fact of totalitarianism. As Arendt admits in the epilogue to her essay, and *pace* her claims in its main body,

the totalitarian systems tend to demonstrate that action can be based on any hypothesis and that, in the course of consistently guided action, that hypothesis will become true, will become actual, factual reality . . . what began as a hypothesis, to be proved or disproved by actual facts, will in the course of consistent action always turn into a fact, never to be disproved.

(Arendt 1961, 86)

This passage takes us to the very heart of *Bend Sinister*, a novel, after all, which is concerned with the experienced reality and unreality of a totalitarian regime, with the question, in fact, of what kind of reality might be claimed for such a regime. Arendt countenances here the possibility that new realities *can* be created by consistent human action, that wrong turns in intellectual history can create and assume their own logic in concrete material ways, that a wrong turn might in fact become a spiralling abyss with such momentum that mere reason is powerless to counter it. This is the nightmare from which, to paraphrase James Joyce, Krug is trying to awake. Krug knows that Paduk's regime is simply a hastily-constructed and poorly-constructed farce, made up from the odds and ends of kitsch culture, of *poshlost*'.¹¹ Yet, as the acts unfold, each less plausible than the preceding one, what Krug cannot reconcile himself to in his own world is that the bullets might be real, that his son really is dead, that he himself will be murdered, that there are material consequences to this wrong turn. Krug is unable to grasp what we and his creator can: this narrative,

¹¹ For Nabokov's definition and discussion of *poshlost*', see Nabokov 1961, 63-74.

whatever the miraculous unpredictability of human growth and consciousness, is spiralling towards an abyss with inexorable nightmarish logic.

In the Berg Collection in New York Public Library is kept Nabokov's correspondence with Allen Tate, then editor at Henry Holt, the publisher that took on *Bend Sinister* knowing full well that it wouldn't sell. *Bend Sinister*, it transpires, was the novel that Nabokov had the most trouble agreeing a title for. "The Person from Porlock" was the working title for some time (Boyd 1991, 77). Alluding to Coleridge's account of inspiration and composition, it evokes something of the nightmare logic I have described, as well as anticipating that strange authorial interruption with which the novel ends. Less often discussed, however, is that Nabokov also suggested another title to Tate, which resonates even more clearly with our discussion: *Vortex*.¹² The vortex, of course, is what happens when a wrong turn assumes the logic of a process.

"Vortex," despite the echo of Wyndham Lewis' historical avant-garde movement, is a very apt title for the novel that became *Bend Sinister*.¹³ The word appears just twice, once at the novel's opening, referring to the ripples on a puddle, and once nearing its conclusion, when a "vortex of dust" races across the prison yard where Krug is kept.¹⁴ However, once we begin to trace *Bend Sinister*'s seemingly innumerable wrong turns and perverse reversals, they accumulate alarmingly into an accelerating and proliferating pattern that leads only back to itself. Early in the novel, Krug is trapped on a bridge between two sets of checkpoints. He is turned back by one and then again by the other, "doomed to walk back and forth on a bridge which has ceased to be one since neither bank is really attainable. Not a bridge but an hourglass which somebody keeps reversing, with me, the fluent fine sand inside" (Nabokov, 1996a, 182). While it may seem obvious to correlate the absurd logic of reversal with the totalitarian regime the novel represents, we must acknowledge the sense in which Krug himself participates willingly if unknowingly in it. *Inversion* (a close relative of the perversion we have been discussing) is the word he uses when talking to one sentry who is holding out a printed sheet of paper upside down: "Inversion," said Krug, "does not trouble

¹² New York Public Library 1999. See also Boyd 1991, 113.

¹³ Vorticism was a short-lived British avant-garde movement founded in 1914 by the writer and painter Wyndham Lewis.

¹⁴ Nabokov 1996a, 171, 353. A more frequently noted use of the word is that in *Lolita*, in which Charlotte Haze's letter to Humbert prophesizes its own fate, disposed of "in the vortex of the toilet" (Nabokov 1996d, 63). Another usage dating from Nabokov's early American years appears in his 1941 essay "The Creative Writer": "the vulgar vortex of neolithic instincts" (Nabokov 2019a, 191).

me.”¹⁵ This short episode may not reproduce the figure of the vortex in its precise spatial form, but nevertheless its series of absurd inversions and reversals encapsulates the logic upon which the entire novel is built, its internal and centripetal force.

There has been much discussion in the history of Nabokov scholarship of spirals.¹⁶ There are several well-known passages, most notably chapter fourteen of *Speak, Memory*, in which Nabokov uses the spiral, “a spritualized circle,” as a symbol for his life, as well as for his art, constantly transcending itself and reaching new heights (Nabokov 1996c, 594). Less frequently discussed is the Hegelian context from which they spring, but which Nabokov himself happily acknowledged on a number of occasions. “Hegel’s triadic series,” he tells us, was “so popular in old Russia” (Nabokov 1996c, 594). As I have argued elsewhere, Nabokov’s model of artistic evolution, as well as his hermeneutics, as processes of continual elaboration, complexity and rejuvenation, owes much to the Hegelian dialectic, of which the triad itself is but a crude representation.¹⁷ Fyodor in *The Gift* writes of a need to transcend that crude Hegelianism of old Russia in order to grasp his philosophy anew and recognize Hegel’s “vital truth: a truth that was not stagnant, like shallow water, but flowed like blood, through the very process of cognition” (Nabokov 2000b, 223). Arguably, it is here in *The Gift*, including in its extraordinary addendum, “Father’s Butterflies,” that we see the first flowering of Nabokov’s engagement with Hegel in both formal and thematic terms.¹⁸ In *Bend Sinister*, however, we find something closer to the admission Nabokov made in his 1937 essay, “Pushkin, or the True and the Seemingly True.” There, bemoaning Vissarion Belinski’s criticism of Alexander Pushkin in mid-nineteenth century Russia, Nabokov comments that “Hegelian philosophy came to no good in our parts” (Nabokov 2019d, 131). Rather than the spiral, Nabokov finds in Belinski’s crude historical materialism a stage of the vortex. The point I want to make about Nabokov’s reading of Hegel in the 1930s and 40s, then, is that it maintains a starkly bivalent force. Those same vertiginous turns that, in the aesthetic realm, stimulate the imagination and bring such pleasure in the recognition of the active mind in the process of movement, become in the historical realm a claustrophobic

¹⁵ Nabokov 1996a, 177. Nabokov’s use of *inversion* here is also suggestive of its usage to describe queer sexuality in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sexology, for example by Havelock Ellis in *Sexual Inversion* (1897).

¹⁶ For early discussions of the Nabokovian spiral, see Williams 1966; Zeller 1974. Subsequent criticism which uses the figure of the spiral in reading Nabokov includes Alexandrov 1991; Boyd 1999.

¹⁷ Norman 2012, 6-13, 155-159. On Nabokov and Hegel, see also Dematagoda 2017, 143-148, 184-5.

¹⁸ Nabokov 2000a, 198-234. On Hegel in relation to *The Gift* and “Father’s Butterflies,” see Norman 2012, 11-12.

turning in on oneself, a series of wrong turns leading only to entanglement and desperation. Nabokov's reception of Hegel, in other words, contains its own dialectic, in which the spiral and the vortex reveal their own identity of opposites. This is one meaning of Nabokov's affirmation that he is a tyrant in the world of his novels, their presiding dictator, with his characters labouring as "galley slaves."¹⁹ Aesthetic utopias and historical dystopias have, in a strange new sense, the same shape. It also helps us to comprehend that paradoxical claim, in the 1963 introduction, that *Bend Sinister* is not at all what it is, a political novel.²⁰ As Nabokov urges us to disregard what he calls "general ideas" in favour of an attention to imagery, allusion and word-play, he is telling us in a dialectical sense that it is precisely in those aesthetic particulars that the novel's political whole is to be discerned (Nabokov 1996a, 164).

We are a long way from that sanguine vision of history as playful chance described in *The Eye*, in which the toothache decides the battle and the drizzle cancels the insurrection. In the middle period of Nabokov's career, which ran from his last years in Berlin, through the flight to Paris, and then to the United States, it was far from clear that any such confidence in an open future was warranted. History in these works is indeterminate but phantasmagoric, made up, in the words of *Bend Sinister*, from the "odds and ends of torn time" (Nabokov 1996a, 336). In the short story "The Visit to the Museum," published in 1939, the narrator becomes lost and disorientated in a labyrinthine museum, unable to make sense of the curation of the historical exhibits, which take on increasingly surreal and threatening aspects the further he goes. He enters the museum in the South of France and exits into the Soviet Union, an exile stuck in a totalitarian state without a passport. Elsewhere, his work now appears painfully prophetic. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, written in Paris during the winter of 1939, the writing V. sees scrawled on the wall of a telephone box as he desperately tries to reach his dying brother reads "Death to the Jews" (Nabokov 1996b, 154).

Despite its thematizing of determinism, the plot of *Bend Sinister* gives chance its own role to play. I am thinking here of the author-figure's intercession at the eleventh hour to pluck an insane but happy Krug from the world of the regime at the point of his death. The

¹⁹ "My characters are galley slaves" (Nabokov 1990, 95). See also Nabokov's comments in a 1966 interview with Alfred Appel, Jr.: "The design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth." Nabokov 1990, 69.

²⁰ Nabokov insists in the introduction that "politics and economics . . . leave me supremely indifferent," and that "the story in *Bend Sinister* is not really about life and death in a grotesque police state" (Nabokov 1996a, 164, 165).

moth that strikes the author's window arrives as a symbol of ungovernable contingency and felicity, which Nabokov later identified with the "rosy soul" of Krug's dead wife Olga (Nabokov 1996a, 169). We have not yet addressed the first part of Nabokov's dual vision of history in *Speak, Memory* – the bust of Diana and the promise of fair Greece – and it is *Bend Sinister*'s daring metafictional conceit that Greek historiography comes back into play. In those final pages, we slip into the perspective of the novel's author, caught in the very process of writing the work, and reflecting on that process. It is the kind of conceit that thirty years later would seem almost clichéd in American postmodernist metafiction, but which in 1944 appeared radical enough for Nabokov to announce it in his prospectus for the novel as "a device never yet attempted in literature" (Brucoli 1990, 50). The author-figure, whom Nabokov describes in his introduction as an "anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me" muses on his decision to remove Krug from his fate, and thus to disrupt finally the logic of wrong turns, which has dominated the narrative (Nabokov 1996a, 169). "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" (Nabokov 1996a, 358). At the close of the novel an alternative concept of history is proposed, one preceding the Hegelian-Marxist notion of history-as-process. Nabokov turns here to the Greek practice of history-writing, not as the study of a process or continuity, but as the conferring of immortality upon the deeds of remarkable men.

In Arendt's essay "On the Concept of History," she puts heavy emphasis on the classical concept of history exemplified by Herodotus, but lost in modernity, in which the task of history is to save human deeds from oblivion, and to confer through language the gift of immortality. The subject of such a history, she explains, was the extraordinary, understood as that which interrupted the circular movement of biological life. In the sense that Krug's name coincides with the Russian word for circle, this is very precisely what Nabokov's author figure does, interrupting Krug's closed circle in order to bestow on him a different kind of existence, an immortal one (there is a foreshadowing here of the famous ending of *Lolita*: "And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" [Nabokov 1996d, 291]). A fuller discussion of the theme of immortality in Nabokov takes us beyond the limits of this essay, and I am reluctant to reopen that favoured topic of Nabokov scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s: ghosts, the "otherworld," and metaphysics. It is clear enough, however, that a reconsideration of Nabokov's evident interest in such themes as the

continuation of life in alternative forms, might be profitably be made using this lens. Those interventions that were most committed to exploring the idea of the afterlife in Nabokov's work tended to follow the author's lead in reading him using methods indifferent to the "intrusions of history."²¹ What I would like to suggest here is that we open the door to a reading of Nabokov's formal and thematic engagements with immortality, not as an escape from history, but on the contrary as a vision of what history can do as an intellectual and ethical practice.

In a similar fashion, attention to Nabokov's interest in ancient Greek historiographical practice offers us a way of reframing how we think about his commitment to style. How are we to process that perplexing and enigmatic claim made by *Bend Sinister's* author-God? "I had shown him that death is but a question of style." Following Nabokov's inheritance of the Flaubertian tradition, the easiest interpretive path is to understand literary style as a bulwark against historical contingencies. This path makes sense to us as long as we consider history as mute, violent, and directed towards death. But once we bring into consideration the notion of history as a practice of conservation through language, then suddenly style is transformed into its very substance. As Arendt reminds us, Herodotus' concept of history renders writers such as Homer as historians as well as poets, immortalizing the great warriors of the Trojan war. Nabokov uses the term *sophism* in evoking his immortalizing task, which in addition to confirming his turn to the Greek tradition at the close of the novel, also raises this question of style, for though the term has a conventionally pejorative use – *mere sophistry* – denoting a gap between the elegance of the rhetoric and the true nature of things, there may also be a perversely positive valence in Nabokov's allusion to the sophists, a defence of their role in the pre-Socratic world as bearers not only of wisdom, but also of mastery over language and argument.²² To evoke the sophism of the author at the close of this novel is, on this reading, to answer the phony speech that Paduk asks Krug to deliver as the new University President, which contains the suggestion that "the dream of Plato has come true in the hands of the Head of our State" (Nabokov 1996a, 288). Plato stands in the novel, as in Popper's *The Open Society*, as the great philosophical justification for the totalitarian state and its threat to democracy (Popper 211, 83-113). This role in *Bend Sinister* accords with Nabokov's own pronouncements on Plato, whom he associated with "a Germanic regime of militarism and

²¹ See, for example, Alexandrov 1991; Boyd 1999.

²² On the sophist thinkers of ancient Greece and the history of their reception, see Kerford 1981.

music” (Nabokov 1990, 70). But Plato was also the great critic of the Sophists, and the source of most of the negative connotations attached to the term *sophism*. The use of a slippery sophism at the close of *Bend Sinister* is also Nabokov’s blow against Plato’s ideal state, with its ruler-philosophers, and his rehabilitation of the art of contradiction as the key to immortality.

There is no one monolithic history to be grasped in Nabokov’s work, but rather a series of contradictory concepts that clash, strain and transform under the pressures exerted by the writer’s own historical conditions in mid-twentieth-century Europe and America. Indeed, one way of conceptualizing the relationship between Nabokov’s vision of history as unstoppable vortex in *Bend Sinister*, and his extensive engagements with ancient Greek thought, is simply to understand the turn to Greek philosophy as an attempt to recover the dialectic itself in some pristine form, and to trace an alternative genealogy for it that might bypass its branches in Marx, Belinsky and Lenin altogether, while doing justice to “Hegel’s vital truth” as identified by Fyodor in *The Gift*.²³ Certainly, it is now clear enough that Nabokov is a consummately dialectical writer and thinker, that is to say one who works through contradictions, transformations and conceptual leaps. The more difficult question, then, is how to respond to this in our own reading practices. My arguments here have suggested that we should learn more from his method of proceeding than from the content of his grand pronouncements, his strong opinions. Accordingly, we must listen to the strangeness of his fiction, where that method is to be found untamed, and learn to use contradictions as springboards for our understanding, rather than as impasses. We need to follow the wrong turns as well as the right ones.

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²³ Larmour 1991 surveys many of these engagements, but does not note the allusions to the sophists.

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