Nabokov

Toker, Leona

Published by Cornell University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47555
The Defense:
Secret Asymmetries

What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
William Blake, “The Tyger”

God moves the player and he, the piece.
What god behind God originates the scheme
Of dust and time and dream and agony?
Jorge Luis Borges, “The Game of Chess”

The human “warmth” (D, 10) that was largely kept out of
King, Queen, Knave erupted in Nabokov’s so-called “chess novel,” The Defense (Zashchita Luzhina, 1929), a novel that deals more directly than any other of Nabokov’s works with the problem of balance between intellectual pursuit and human commitment.

It would be an oversimplification to say that the major conflict of The Defense is between art and life. Chess is a game that explores the infinite potentialities of its own medium, whereas a truly great work of art explores its medium in order to reveal insufficiencies in the existing patterns of thought about the world.¹ The Defense is an example of such a work of art. Its chess patterns stand for all the patterns and systems that prove tragically inadequate when preferred to or violently superimposed on the natural flow of life. Yet the game of

¹Nabokov would, it seems, agree with Wolfgang Iser’s view that a literary text refers not to a contingent world but to “the ordered pattern of systems,” or models of reality, through which the mind attempts to organize this world. The literary text “represents a reaction to the thought systems which it has chosen and incorporated in its own repertoire”(The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response [Baltimore, 1978], p. 72).
chess is not used allegorically. The chess imagery and the human situations related to the game lend the novel its peculiar coloration without forcing it into a constrictive structural pattern.

In other words, the analogies between chess concepts and the features of The Defense are loosely general. The most salient of these analogies is the paradoxical symmetry (a chess phenomenon) of the plot and the structure of the novel: the protagonist’s life only seems to submit to the rules of a chess game, and the novel itself only seems to be structured as a chess problem. Both the reality of Luzhin’s predicament and the shape of the novel present too great a complexity to be described in terms of chess.

I

In his 1963 foreword Nabokov mentions that The Defense is endowed with some features of chess problems (see D, 10). A chess problem contains the semblance of a competition between the hypothetical White and Black; in reality, however, it is a competition between the composer and the solver—“just as in a first-rate work of fiction,” Nabokov points out in Speak, Memory, “the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world” (SM, 290). The “world” here should stand not only for the audience that must solve the problem but also for chaotic contemporary reality and the various systems of thought that attempt to reduce it to organized patterns. The novel not merely rivals these systems of thought but also highlights the insufficiency of any man-made model that seeks either to mimic or to replace the contingent actuality that defies predetermination.

The Defense indirectly reflects the intellectual confusion into which Europe and, in particular, its Russian population were cast by World War I and the revolution. In Europe the war seemed to put an end to the lingering nineteenth century; in Russia it joined forces with the revolution to put an end to a cultural world. The Russia of liberal intellectuals ceased to exist; for them, exile proved to be the least of the possible evils. The Defense mentions, en passant, the approaches of various social and cultural groups to the “science of exile” (D, 222): the standard bragging lies of Soviet newspapers and tourists, the occasional “viperous hostility” (D, 226) of the émigré press, gaudy fake-Russian decor in the apartment of Mrs. Luzhin’s wealthy parents, fashionable theosophy (see D, 129), and so on. Paradoxically, the protagonist of the novel, the chess player Luzhin, is minimally affected by
the irreversible changes in his fatherland: had the revolution never taken place, he would most probably still have spent the greater part of his life shuttling between the chess cafés of middle and western Europe. And yet Luzhin is the kind of person whose fate literalizes the fate of his generation. His image is similar to that of the mad Jewish boy in Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols" (1948): even though the boy's family has escaped from Germany to America, his acute paranoia, his sense of the systematic hostility of the world, is a morbidly condensed literalization of the Jewish experience in Europe at the time of the Holocaust.

Thanks to his touch of genius and, perhaps, prophetic madness, Luzhin likewise responds, unconsciously but accurately, to the period in which he lives. In his pampered prerevolutionary preschool days his fear of the "unknown and therefore hideous" (D, 22) outside world is far more intense than that of an ordinarily sensitive child; he senses the frightening confusion of the contemporary world long before the cataclysm breaks upon the consciousness of the ordinary people around him. In his thirties Luzhin maintains an ostrichlike defense against reality; symptomatically, he walks "half closing his eyes so that [a former schoolmate] would not notice him" (D, 200). He is not averse to accepting an invitation from Stalinist Russia and has no idea of what is happening there (a minimal knowledge of history allows the contemporary reader to imagine his fate had he, indeed, returned). His incompetence concerning everything except chess is, in fact, only a more pronounced form of the semivoluntary ignorance in which millions of people on both sides of the iron curtain have lived for at least four decades of the present century.

Luzhin's emotional and intellectual limitations stem from that "escape into aesthetics" of which his author was unjustly accused in early critical responses. The use of art as a compensation for the inadequacies of reality and the current systems of thought is an experience that this chess player shares with his novelist father, Ivan Luzhin. It is, moreover, precisely the theme that Ivan Luzhin vainly seeks for his would-be swansong. He never finds the theme, perhaps because it lies so close to him—in the circumstances under which he conceives the idea of his book, in his manner of sifting his material. In the empty conference room of a Berlin coffeehouse Luzhin senior mistakes a strident mixture of pleasure and pain for the return of literary inspiration (see D, 75–77). The delicate balance between sadness and pleasurable sensations and memories is disrupted by a painful thought about his estranged son, the "taciturn person who sometimes called upon him in Berlin, replied to questions monosyllabically, sat there
with his eyes half closed, and then went away leaving an envelope with
money in it on the windowsill" (D, 78). As if to exorcise the dishar­
monious intrusion, Ivan Luzhin decides to write a novel about a
young chess player who would remain the angelic genius of his father’s
dreams. From this novel he would expunge all the jarring notes, dis­
miss such uncouth stumbling blocks as war and revolution, and drive
out the “purely personal; unbidden recollections, of no use to him—
starvation, arrest, and so forth” (D, 80–81). He fails to see, however,
that, still indulging in the daydreams of his past, he is endowing his
son “with the features of a musical rather than a chess-playing prodi­
igy” (D, 78). The absence of harmony between the atmosphere and
the contents of the projected book is one of the reasons it never gets
written.

Luzhin senior never discovers the main theme of his hero’s experi­
ence because, like his son, he refuses to grapple with confusing real­
ities. According to the truncated dialogue between two intellectuals in
a later part of the novel, he is not an untalented writer, yet his talent is
vitiates by the didactic tendency of his “oleographic tales for young­
sters” (D, 231), in which schoolboys feed their sandwiches to scruffy
dogs and come to appreciate kind young stepmothers who nurse them
through functional fevers. The elder Luzhin’s sentimental species of
humanism (chelovekolyubiye) is a widespread thought system with no
provision for the violent fermentations of the prerevolutionary years
or for the harsh realities of war and revolution. His wish-fulfilling tales
seek to make up for the deficiency of this thought system by putting
together a world to which it would apply. 2

For old Luzhin, the writing of fiction is a defense against pain, a
palliative for ills and wrongs. For his son, chess becomes a similar
defense: if a telegraph pole is an eyesore, Luzhin junior imagines how
it could be removed by “a Knight’s move of this lime tree standing on
a sunlit slope” (D, 99); while his future mother-in-law is scolding him,
his attention is engrossed by an imaginary chess configuration on the
squares of her drawing room floor (D, 127–28). 3 The form that his

2The function of didactic literature as represented by old Luzhin’s books is “not
to produce an aesthetic object that will rival the thought system of the social world,
but to offer a compensation for specific deficiencies in specific thought systems” (Iser,

3Despite his inbred culture, Luzhin becomes as limited (and as expressively inartic­
ulate as Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich, the master calligrapher of “The Overcoat,” who
sees the neat lines of his handwriting superimposed on the less satisfactory objects in
madness takes at the end of the novel is a fantastic transformation of the theme of attempts to replace genuine life by an artificially harmonious system.

*The Defense* is thus an appropriate yet very oblique response to the inner agenda of its period. This obliqueness is caused by the novel’s centering upon the experience of the nonrepresentative individual. Paradoxically, preoccupation with the unique rather than the typical broadens the significance of the issues involved beyond the specific cultural-historical situation.

II

Returning to the émigré background of *Mary*, *The Defense* develops the idea expressed by the disillusioned poet Podtyagin: “I put everything into my poetry that I should have put into my life” (*M*, 42). The chessplayer Luzhin goes further than Podtyagin: obsessed with his sterile art he turns it into a defense against unmanageable reality. The symbolism and structure of the novel, however, show that such a defense is both unnecessary and ineffective.

The title refers to the theme of defense against life as well as to a specific element of the plot: grand master Luzhin has painstakingly prepared a response to the famous opening of his opponent Turati, but Turati surprises him by not launching the expected attack; thus the defense proves unnecessary. This event has wider implications. Whereas Luzhin has concentrated entirely on his chess homework, Turati has also taken into account the psychology of their confrontation; he has thought not only about the game but also about the player, foreseeing that Luzhin would not come to the match unprepared. In the end, other things being equal, it is the attention to human reality that wins the day; chess is not as “supremely abstract” as it “is supposed to be” (*D*, 10). The elaborate defense that Luzhin has constructed in his mind is a wild-goose chase: Turati’s opening proves to be not merely a successful strategy used in previous games but also a diversionary device.

The motif of diversion is of crucial importance in the novel. In his 1963 foreword Nabokov cryptically remarks: “Rereading this novel today, replaying the moves of its plot, I feel rather like Anderssen
fondly recalling his sacrifice of both Rooks to the unfortunate and noble Kieseritsky—who is doomed to accept it over and over again through an infinity of textbooks, with a question mark for monument” (D, 8).

The double-rook sacrifice is, in fact, a diversion, a chess equivalent of a conjuror’s patter. D. B. Johnson explains: “Rooks are not what double-rook sacrifices are about. Rooks can be sacrificed in various ways, but when chess players speak of double-rook sacrifices they have in mind the particular case when the opposing Queen is permitted to capture both Rooks stationed in their own back rank. The immediate purpose of the Rook sacrifice is the diversion of the opposing Queen far from the real scene of the action. The Rooks are simply irresistible decoys to trap and neutralize the opposing Queen, thus depriving the King of its strongest defender.”

Thus the double-rook sacrifice is a metaphor for whatever decoy diverts attention from the central issues of the moment. There are several such diversions in the novel’s plot: for instance, humdrum events divert Mrs. Luzhin’s attention from her husband at the time when he is fighting insanity; a love affair and a wish to have a Wunderkind divert Luzhin senior from seeing that chess has come to occupy an unnatural place in his son’s life. But the major diversion proves to be the game itself. Instead of enriching Luzhin’s life, chess impoverishes it by channeling his mental energies away from almost all other aspects of reality.

Luzhin, like Cincinnatus in Invitation to a Beheading, is different from most people even in his earliest days. His streak of genius enables him to feel something that is hidden from others and produces an almost unbearable “itch of being” (Gl, xiii). A sensitive and undisciplined child “who at the slightest provocation would throw himself flat on the floor, screaming and drumming his feet” (D, 74), he would always walk through the same St. Petersburg streets, taking care to be at the farthest possible spot from the cannon of the Peter and Paul fortress when it was fired. In his fear of suffering he is preoccupied with staving off various kinds of torment. The dictation that his father gives him in the 1964 English version of the novel contains the quasi-Schopenhauerian phrase: “Being born in this world is hardly to be

*Johnson, Worlds in Regression, p. 90. Johnson presents, among other things, a very interesting account of the connotations of Turati’s name and of the relevance of the actual Anderssen-Kieseritsky story for the motifs and the rhetoric of Nabokov’s novel.

*See ibid.
borne" (D, 17). Subverting the exercise and, as it were, rejecting its concepts, Luzhin leaves blank spaces for the words "born" and "borne."

In the Russian original the dictation contains a different sentence: "It's a lie that there are no boxes in the theatre" (ZL, 25)—in Russian the words "lie" and "boxes" are homophones but not homographs. Whereas the English pun initiates the metaphysical theme of the novel, the Russian pun hints at the element of falsehood and theatricality in Luzhin's early home life. His father, a landowner and author of didactic books for children, a kindly and well-meaning person, is insincere with himself. He has keen insights but profanes them by stereotyped expressions; instead of living authentically, he identifies with standard roles. The child instinctively feels the falseness and withdraws into himself.

Luzhin's preschool days are sketched economically, but it is made clear that he uses the pattern of his daily routine to shield himself from the world (see D, 21–22). School disrupts his orderly pattern and exposes him to the collective malevolence of the Average Man, a phenomenon extensively treated in Invitation to a Beheading and Bend Sinister. Whether because he is introduced as the son of a well-known writer or because his classmates feel in him the "secret stir of talent" also recognized by his father (D, 25), young Luzhin is surrounded with "such hatred and derisive curiosity" that a "burning mist" confuses his senses, blurring his vision and making the teacher's voice "hollow and incomprehensible" (D, 29). This confusion is a concentrated expression of Luzhin's experience of incomprehensible reality. He seems to be seeking a solution that would be no less than an eschatological formula. In his early days he likes arithmetic because it simulates the discovery of solution: there is "mysterious sweetness in the fact that a long number, arrived at with difficulty, would at the decisive moment, after many adventures, be divided by nineteen without any remainder" (D, 17). For a similar reason he likes detective fiction, magic tricks, and cardboard puzzles—until he finds a model of harmony that can provide him with an escape: chess, the game of "infinite possibilities" (D, 43), a faked yet boundless world within a world. "Escape" here overlaps with "asylum"; Nabokov explores the double meaning of the latter in the preface to the English version of Glory, where he writes that an "escape" is "only a cleaner cell on a quieter floor" (Gl, xiii). Chess could have provided Luzhin not with an escape but with "relief from the itch of being" (Gl, xiii); mishandled, the gift turns into Pandora's box. It is not insignificant that the most
recurrent class of "things" in this novel's world (compare the doors of *King, Queen, Knave*) is an assortment of boxes, chests, suitcases, and other containers of pseudomysteries.

Symptomatically, Luzhin is not interested in composing chess problems. As a competitive game chess gives him the sense of having a "militant, charging, bright force" (*D*, 68). He is equal to challenges during the game but does not develop courage away from the chessboard. Chess diverts him from his family, from the void in his emotional life, from the war and the revolution. In the game he finds his "sole harmony, for what else exists in the world beside chess? Fog, the unknown, non-being" (*D*, 139). The moves of his match with Turati are described in terms of melodies—Luzhin's version of the music of the spheres.

The space that life among people occupies in young Luzhin's consciousness steadily dwindles. He shirks duties, cuts classes, turns his back on the best of his classmates, ignores the unhappiness and appeals of his parents and his aunt. Leafing through old magazines in search of chess sections, he pays no attention to the pictures of starving Indian children (see *D*, 54). Because of his father's oversight and the impresario Valentinov's deliberate neglect, he learns nothing about personal and business relationships. Caught in a vicious circle, he escapes into chess because he cannot deal with his environment, but the escape increases his social inadequacies. Here, however, lies one of the secrets of his charm for his fiancée: despite the jumble of acquired formulations that make up his speech, she recognizes the childlike authenticity of his conduct and feelings.

A similar narrowing takes place in Luzhin's contacts with material reality. He grows fond of the taxing blind play, not because it is lucrative but because it frees him from "the palpable pieces whose quaint shape and wooden materiality [have] always disturbed him and [have] always seemed to him but the crude, mortal shape of exquisite, invisible chess forces" (*D*, 91). The cities where he plays become "as much a habitual and unnecessary integument as the wooden pieces and the black and white board, and he accept[s] this external life as something inevitable but completely uninteresting" (*D*, 95). He has a similar unconcern for his own body, leaving it uncouth, unwashed, unexercised, until it reminds him of itself by panting and pain.

It is at the time when the body starts to take its revenge that Luzhin is given a chance to rally. He meets and falls in love with one of those women we find in books of Russian history, women who are phil-
anthropic, ready for self-sacrifice, and often powerfully attracted to superior intellects (Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot were authorities on the subject; Nabokov is one of the very few male writers to treat it sensitively and subtly). Luzhin recognizes her as someone he has been dimly expecting all his life. Her voice bursts through "the usual murk" (D, 99) of his rare intervals spent away from the chessboard, creating a clarity that for a long time only chess could give him.

A lover of harmonies, he accepts the fact that she is "not quite as good looking as she might have been" (D, 99) because, as the narrator suggests, her face is an invitation to a quest for a harmony that is constantly promised and withheld: "She was not particularly pretty, there was something lacking in her small regular features, as if the last decisive jog that would have made her beautiful—leaving her features the same but endowing them with an ineffable significance—had not been given them by nature. But she was twenty-five, her fashionably bobbed hair was neat and lovely and she had one turn of the head which betrayed a hint of possible harmony, a promise of real beauty that at the last moment remained unfulfilled (D, 85).

Luzhin does not know that her features lack "ineffable significance" because her emotional development is incomplete. The "mysterious ability of her soul to apprehend in life only that which had once attracted and tormented her in childhood, the time when the soul's instinct is infallible; to seek out the amusing and the touching; to feel constantly an intolerable, tender pity for the creature whose life is helpless and unhappy" (D, 105), is presented as both the most "captivating" thing about her and (as the word "only" suggests) a limitation. It is partly due to this limitation that the relationship which seems to possess the attributes of a protective castling turns out to be the second diversion of the double-rook sacrifice.

There is a chesslike symmetry between the two diversions. Now it is happy married life, which should have been cherished for its own sake, that is used to divert Luzhin from chess. Mrs. Luzhin is guided by pity rather than by understanding; therefore, after her husband breaks down, she takes the advice of a psychiatrist to keep him away from chess. She does not realize that it is not his mind but his body that has failed to withstand the combined strain of courtship and tournament; not his spirit but his physical brain that, as at the match with

---

Turati, has “wilted from hitherto unprecedented weariness” (D, 139). Her defense against chess is as unnecessary and ineffectual as Luzhin’s defense against life; instead of placing the game in proper perspective, she turns it into a lurking, destructive monster.

Luzhin’s experience after his breakdown is thus characterized not by an about-face but by a symmetrical reversal, as though he were again heading to the brink of a breakdown but this time from the lines of a former opponent. The ban on chess creates a void that his bride can “adorn” (D, 176) but not fill. And since nature abhors a vacuum, the emptiness is filled by incipient madness. Accustomed as he is to blind play, Luzhin imagines himself pitted against an invisible competitor as soon as a chess pattern seems to transpire through his experience: “Just as some combination, known from chess problems, can be indistinctly repeated on the board in actual play—so now the consecutive repetition of a familiar pattern was becoming noticeable in his present life” (D, 213–14).

Luzhin’s madness is a disease of memory. In the hospital he keeps recollecting his preschool days on his father’s estate; on leaving the hospital he seems to reenact his return to St. Petersburg at the end of summer; an encounter with a former classmate evokes troubling memories of school; and a remark of a visitor from Leningrad conjures up the image of his aunt. The tissue that connects these separate moments of the past is part of the “luggage” that Luzhin has lost during his breakdown and that he does not “bother to restore” (D, 160). His whole past seems to have congealed into the moves that make up a chess problem, and when the sequence of memories corresponds to the sequence of the remembered events, he feels as though his present experience is a new chess game. He is pleased when the void in his life is replaced by the sense of harmony so dear to artists and chess players but is then overcome with horror at the thought of the stakes of the game. When he had forgotten to extinguish a match during his competition with Turati, the pain of the burn seemed to reveal “the full horror of the abysmal depths of chess” (D, 139). Now he feels as if blind play were luring him to this abyss.

The game with Turati has another aftermath as well. One of the most common “professional dreams” (A, 359) is that of coming to a crucial test or confrontation unprepared, with one’s homework undone. On the eve of his breakdown Luzhin decides that all the unwonted happiness of his love is but a pleasant dream (see D, 132–33); after the breakdown he transfers the features of a professional night-
mare to the reality that he takes for this dream of happiness. Having worked hard to construct a defense against Turati's opening, he suddenly feels that he does not have an adequate defense against a blindplay opponent. This feeling contains an element of moral truth: he has indeed failed to do his homework because he has neglected to develop courage and responsibility, the mature qualities that would have rendered him adequate to the strains of adult life.

A madman, it is often believed, can perceive the inner nature of things yet is unable to establish relationships between them. What Luzhin takes for the abyss of chess is, in fact, the revenge of "average reality" for his refusal to give it its due attention.

The abyss is a recurrent motif of Luzhin's life. One of the drawings that he makes after his breakdown represents "a train on a bridge spanning an abyss" (D, 208) A picture in Valentinov's office shows a man "hanging by his hands from the ledge of a skyscraper—just about to fall off into the abyss" (D, 247). Having decided to "drop out of the game" by committing suicide, Luzhin thrusts himself out of a fifth-story window, coming as close as he can to a plunge over a precipice: "Before letting go he looked down. Some kind of hasty preparations were under way there: the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him" (D, 255–56). In the text of the novel, however, Luzhin never lands on the pavement of Berlin. It seems that the sheet of paper that is supposed to seal his fate becomes transparent and vanishes from the chessboard-patterned tablecloth (the "average reality" of another world) on which Nabokov is writing his chess novel.

7 The possible symbolism of this drawing is indirectly commented on by the little girl's philosophy in Ada: "An individual's life consisted of certain classified things: 'real things' which were unfrequent and priceless, simply 'things' which formed the routine stuff of life; and 'ghost things,' also called 'fogs,' such as fever, toothache, dreadful disappointments, and death. Three or more things occurring at the same time formed a 'tower,' or, if they came in immediate succession, they made a 'bridge'" (A, 74). The beginning of Luzhin's married life forms a bridge—over a perilous abyss. The train that moves over this bridge may be associated with (in the order of decreasing probability) Nabokov's toy trains that fell through the ice into the puddles at the Hotel Oranien (SM, 27), Anna Karenin's suicide, or the vision of the universe as a steam engine that depresses Carlyle's German scholar in Sartor Resartus.

8 See the photograph following p. 256 of Speak, Memory.
The motif of the abyss may be regarded as a thematic reflection of the *en abîme* structure of the novel: "a game of skill" (*D*, 8) seems to be played in a story which itself is a game of skill. 9 Both games are played for very serious stakes, but neither the novelist's game with the reader nor fate's game with Luzhin is a structured chess match. When the reader tries to distill definite chess patterns from the texture of *The Defense*, he reenacts Luzhin's own mistake of seeking chess patterns where they do not exist. In the foreword Nabokov does mention that "chess effects" can be found "in the basic structure of this attractive novel" (*D*, 9), yet an analysis devoted solely to the discovery of these effects would be tantamount to accepting Nabokov's double-rook sacrifice: superficial chess patterns would divert the reader from the psychological subtlety of the novel and from the complexity of its texture. 10 According to the painter Ardalion in Nabokov's *Despair*, "what the artist perceives is, primarily, the difference between things. It is the vulgar who note their resemblance" (*Dp*, 51). The analogies between chess moves and the techniques of *The Defense* are either too esoteric to be understood by the general public or deliberately loose.

9 The term *mise-en-abîme* for a narrative enclave that reproduces the features of the whole work that contains it was first suggested by André Gide in *Journal 1889–1939* (Paris, 1948), p. 41. In 1929, while writing *The Defense*, Nabokov may already have read Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs*, which contains clear examples of this technique. The term *mise-en-abîme* is taken from heraldry (in which Nabokov was well versed): a blazon is usually divided into four parts by a cross; the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal lines of the cross is called *l'abîme*, the abyss. Sometimes a miniature of the blazon appears in lieu of this intersection; it is then said to be placed *en abîme* and, presupposing a miniature of itself in its own abyss, etc., it suggests infinite regression. There is no critical consensus as to the limits of the applicability of the term *mise-en-abîme*. Different approaches to the problem are reflected in Lucien Dallenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: Essay sur le mise en abîme* (Paris, 1977); Mieke Bal, "Mise en abîme et iconicité," *Littérature*, 29 (1978), 116–28.

10 A similar point has been made by Fred Moody, who notes that hostile reviewers quote the foreword yet do not notice that some scenes mentioned there do not actually exist in the novel ("Nabokov’s Gambit," *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 14 [1976], 67–70); and by Johnson, who notes that the chess allusions of the foreword are deceptive and send "the reader off on a wild-goose chase looking for castles in the air" (*Worlds in Regression*, p. 91). Thus, this early novel contains reader-entrapment techniques that are more fully developed in Nabokov's subsequent work. A side effect of the wild-goose chase may be found in complaints that the chess content of *The Defense* is not sufficiently interesting: see, e.g., Updike, "Grandmaster Nabokov," p. 326. In hostile criticism—e.g., Strother B. Purdy, "Solus Rex: Nabokov and the Chess Novel," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 14 (Winter 1968–69), 379–95—these complaints turn into the very *Schadenfreude* of which it unfairly accuses Nabokov himself.
My knowledge of chess is, I confess, rudimentary; I read the chess analogies of *The Defense* as a basis for emphasizing the distinction between a chess game and an aesthetic object. *The Defense* mimics separate features of both a chess match and a chess problem—this alone is enough to suggest a deliberate inconsistency of its quasi-chesslike structure. Moreover, its chess analogies pertain to the strategies and the psychological reality of the game rather than to specific moves of chess pieces.

### III

The features of a chess problem in *The Defense* explore the metaphysical ramifications of the novel's major conflict. They also bear upon the legitimacy with which one can discuss Luzhin's tragedy as the outcome of moral error.

The foreword compares chapters 4, 5, and 6 to a chess problem (*D*, 9–10). Within a chess problem there is a match between the winning White and the doomed Black. These contestants are apt embodiments of Nabokov's notion of characters as "galley slaves" (*SO*, 95), where "galley" means "the printer's proof of a manuscript" as well as "an ancient rowing vessel." They move the chessmen in accordance with the logic of the game and the exigencies of the situations, yet all the decisions they seem to be making of their own free will are predetermined by the composer of the problem.

Chess problems of the sort referred to in the foreword are to be solved by "retrograde analysis," which is a "back-cast study" (*D*, 10): that is, "the reconstruction of some part of the hypothetical game that has resulted in the present board position." This relationship between the illusion of free will and retrospective analysis can be regarded as an allegory of the human predicament as described by

---


12 Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, p. 87. Johnson suggests that the reader is invited to reconstruct the events of Luzhin's life between his boyhood and his reappearance, a decade and a half later, in chapter 4. He notes that since these events are practically reconstructed in the subsequent narrative, the reference to chess problems is one of the booby traps laid for the reader in the foreword. I believe, however, that what the reader is invited to reconstruct is not a part of the plot so much as the nature of Luzhin's error, the attitude that would be marked by a disapproving question mark if it were translated into a chess move.
Schopenhauer: "Everyone considers himself a priori (i.e., according to his original feeling) free, even in his particular actions, in the sense that in every given case any action is possible to him, and only a posteriori, from experience and reflection thereon, does he recognize that his conduct follows with absolute necessity from the coincidence of the character with the motives." Character, according to Novalis, is fate: being what he is, Luzhin cannot escape the sort of tragedy that is tailor-made to fit him. And yet the novel contains references to mistakes and to the ways one "should have played in order to avert disaster" (D, 56). The mistakes are, of course, made not by the chessmen but by the players, and though the rules of the game forbid the retraction of a move, players do frequently allow each other to reconsider obviously wrong moves; this happens in at least two unofficial chess games in the novel. Life allows Luzhin such a second chance for happiness, gives him an opportunity to reshape his course after he meets his wife. What the plot of the novel proves to imitate here is not a chess pattern but a human action that could be related to any game of skill: a deliberate breaking of the rules, either in order to allow one's opponent to learn more successful strategies or in order to reject an easy victory in favor of a more challenging confrontation.

If the characters are "galley slaves," their fate is inescapable; yet on rereading the novel one has an experience similar to that of a child who watches the same movie again and again, always hoping that this time the hero will avoid perishing in the end. The hero perishes nevertheless, but the experience of the audience incorporates the knowledge that he never attains. It is thus within the interaction of the movie and the viewer, the book and the reader, that this knowledge is, in principle, attainable and that mistakes are, in principle, avoidable: an analysis of the hero's mistakes as mistakes is not a message-hunting fallacy but a duty of the reader. The final words of the novel, "But there was no Aleksandr Ivanovich" (D, 256), refer to more than Luzhin's absence from the fifth-floor bathroom through whose window he has made his awkward way to death; as in Pnin, they remind the reader that the character is fictional but his experience is real. Freed from the "galley," this experience admits different ways (Borges's "forking paths") of solving the conflict between human commitments and intellectual pursuits.

13Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, 1:289.
Luzhin never learns to resolve this conflict. Strictly speaking, as a character in the novel he has no power over his fate, but that is not due to the formula of Novalis. The destiny of Nabokov’s characters is determined not only by what they are but also by the manner in which they are treated by contingent reality. And if contingent reality had a determinacy of its own, that would not be the determinacy of a chess problem.

In the foreword Nabokov recalls how he “enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a fatal pattern into Luzhin’s life and to endow the description of a garden, a journey, a sequence of humdrum events, with the semblance of a game of skill, and, especially in the final chapters, with that of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellow’s sanity” (D, 8). The key word here is “semblance”: it is Luzhin who takes the random events of his life for a mysteriously planned chess attack. The nonexistent match that the final chapters resemble is, one should bear in mind, not a match between Nabokov and Luzhin; Luzhin’s opponent is neither his creator nor even another character—it is a method of composition. In the novels of Sebastian Knight characters are “methods of composition” (RLSK, 95) but not all methods of composition can be personified and turned into characters; it is the deranged Luzhin who flatters a technique by elevating it to the status of a mysterious chess opponent.15

It would be too easy to say that what Luzhin takes for a chess attack is in reality a random flow of events. Few things are random in the novelist-reader communication. The seemingly random plot events are actually determined by a specific literary “method of composition.” The nature of this method is suggested by a shift in the point of view which takes place only in the English version of the novel and which should be read as an allusion to Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (on which Nabokov had lectured at Cornell before revising the translation of The Defense). The narrator of The Defense is omniscient, yet on one occasion he uses the first-person plural, placing himself within the fictional world. As in Madame Bovary,16 this deviation from the general narrative stance occurs in a classroom scene: “When five minutes had

---

15The Defense thus initiates a theme that will be of central importance to Invitation to a Beheading. Luzhin commits the error into which Cincinnatus C. lapses in his darkest moments: thinking of one’s adversaries as real and thus granting them anthropomorphic existence.

16Nabokov mentions Flaubert’s experimentation with the point of view (see LL, 151).
passed after the bell and still no one had come in, there ensued such a premonition of happiness that it seemed the heart would not hold out should the glass door nonetheless now open and the geography teacher, as was his habit, come dashing almost at a run into the room. . . . Our bliss, it seemed, was bound to be realized” (D, 47–48).

In his lecture on Madame Bovary Nabokov notes that in addition to heredity and environment, the development of a character is also determined by the “unknown agent X” (LL, 126). This agent X is the equivalent of the Aubrey McFate who appears in the middle of Lolita’s Ramsdale class list. The game of “Aubrey McFate” is an exploration of the “everything that rises must converge” principle for the staging of coincidences. Thus a dog and a driver mentioned earlier in Lolita converge in one spot at the moment when Charlotte is frantically running across the street, and they cause an accident that takes the plot out of a blind alley. Were the dog and the car planted in previous episodes by “McFate’s” foresight (like the Fatum Insurance Company in King, Queen, Knave) in order to soften the impression that Charlotte’s accident is a deus ex machina device? Or are the fates of Charlotte, Humbert, and Dolly mere side effects of the life of the images? (“On top of everything, I am a slave of images,” thinks Nabokov’s Krug in another connection: BS, 174). In Lolita the former is probably the case; yet the latter is largely true in The Defense, where the game of skill consists of monitoring recurrent imagery. The development of recurrent imagery is disguised as coincidence, and coincidence is disguised as the intervention of agent X. Luzhin mistakes this intervention for a chess game.

The purpose of the novelist’s game of skill is to goad Luzhin into an optimal realization of his potentialities as a character. Agent X seems to intervene when heredity and environment are insufficient to give full play to the tendencies of Luzhin’s mind; he enters the story in order to adjust the conditions for the eventual grotesque heightening of the action. However, what looks like an arbitrary or random intervention is always, in fact, part of the network of cross-references formed by the recurrent imagery of the novel. Thus, agent X contrives the funeral of the aunt’s old suitor at precisely the moment when the young runaway Luzhin seeks asylum in his aunt’s home. Young Luzhin does not attend the funeral (later he will miss the funeral of his father and by the end of the novel will refuse to visit his grave); instead, the boy spends several hours in the cold streets and comes down with a fever. His illness gets the plot out of an impasse, yet it also turns out to be a
real-life counterpart of the functional fever that leads to a happy ending in one of his father's sentimental tales. His parents take him to Germany to convalesce, and agent X arranges a chess tournament at their kurort (health resort) immediately upon their arrival—which not merely frustrates his parents' wish to keep him away from chess but also initiates the theme of European chess cafes as a setting for Luzhin's life.

As if to reveal a new aspect of Luzhin's character, agent X makes another sort of match for him: in the capacity of a dating service, agent X proves to be a worthy relative of the apprentice fate who, after several miscalculations, brings Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev to meet Zina Mertz in The Gift. First, agent X gives Luzhin and his future wife the same geography teacher, the herald of exile (the motif of poorly learned geography is further developed by Luzhin's blind transits through European capitals; by the bright travel folders, too beautiful to be true, that he examines with his wife; and by the fictive "travel tales" of his former classmate Petrishchev). Then agent X sends the girl to play tennis with Luzhin's quiet chess-playing classmate, the one who will eventually lose his arm on a battlefield (in a real-life display of the "militant charging bright force" that Luzhin controls only at the chessboard). Yet these encounters do not lead to Luzhin's meeting the girl, because he keeps aloof from his teachers and fellow students. Finally, X "sends" the heroine to the same kurort where Luzhin had once been taken by his parents. This move is successful: when prescribed a vacation where "there is greenery all around" (D, 98), Luzhin automatically chooses the familiar location. By now a skillful player (of a game that does not resemble chess), agent X foresees, as it were, Luzhin's in-character move, just as Mr. Sluch anticipates the characteristic moves of Martha at the crisis point of King, Queen, Knave.

Now, agent X can let the relationship between the lovers develop its own logic. Disguised as statistical plausibility, he must only arrange the next chess tournament in Berlin, where Luzhin can continue his courtship. After Luzhin's marriage, agent X arranges a few more coincidences: the encounter with a former classmate, the visit of the

---

17This is an element of the "sources" (Roots III) technique discussed earlier. An interesting variant of this technique, involving an interpenetration of narrative levels (and the movement of images from fictional "reality" to "fiction within fiction" and vice versa) can be found in Nabokov's Real Life of Sebastian Knight. It is discussed, along with other aspects of the novel, in Rimmon, "Problems of Voice," pp. 109-29.
Soviet woman who knows Luzhin’s aunt, the reappearance of the ex-impressario Valentinov, the suggestive picture in his office, and his timely exit that permits Luzhin to escape. All these seemingly random moves are in fact links in the strands of imagery that have been woven into the texture of the novel.

Recurrent imagery baffles Luzhin’s random defense: as he walks into a store in order to “confuse his opponent,” the store turns out to be a ladies’ hairdressing salon, a replica of the one in which he had once hidden from the geography teacher. Here again, the development of an image is disguised as coincidence; Luzhin, however, takes it for his opponent’s uncannily smart move. Convinced of imminent defeat, he makes his way to the frosted (matovoye in Russian, a pun on “check-mating”) fifth-story window that has also been duly mentioned in a previous episode. Awkwardly and painfully thrusting himself through its narrow frame, he makes his exit from the world (where “to be born is hardly to be borne”) in a manner that makes the image of the abyss converge with the motif of birth; “the Viennese delegation” (D, 10), however, is not invited.

Since the hero’s first name is not mentioned until the penultimate sentence of the book, and since the heroine is never named at all, it is only natural that X, “the villain,” should also remain incognito. Yet the main reason agent X is neither named nor explicitly referred to is that, unlike Luzhin, he is not only fictional but also nonexistent. Within the world of The Defense the moves of agent X are events in the life of the imagery that intertwines with the life of the characters. From the characters’ perspective the events are cases of the “chance that mimics choice” (TD, 230); from the perspective of the novelist they are a “game of skill,” choices that mimic chance. Upon the onset of madness, Luzhin, like Krug of Bend Sinister, appears to be given a glimpse of his creator’s mind. There is, after all, a game of skill in which he is inextricably involved.

IV

Luzhin cannot know that the novelist’s “game of skill” is played not against him but against (in both senses of the word) “the world.” As noted above, a chess problem contains only a semblance of competition between two “galley slaves,” the hypothetical White and Black; the real competition is between the composer and the solver. In
the case of a novel that borrows the features of a chess problem, the main competition is between the novelist and the reader.

More specifically, the competition is between the reader's search for meaning and the devices through which this search is frustrated. In chess, as Luzhin explains to his prospective father-in-law, there are "strong moves" and "quiet moves": a strong move immediately gives the player an undoubted advantage; a quiet move "implies trickery, subversion, complication" (D, 121). The novelist's major "strong move" is the already mentioned complex of deceptive chess allusions that establish loose analogies (like this one) between narrative elements and chess strategies. A quiet move in this game is the handling of repetition.

The "coincidences" of the plot are elements in the patterns of recurrent imagery. A pattern is based on repetition, which, like redundancy in information theory, ensures the perception of meaning. In the final chapters of the novel Luzhin is intensely preoccupied with the search for the "secret meaning" (D, 200) of the recent events in his life but can project a meaning on them only when he discovers similar moments in his past; the symmetry, the seeming repetition, helps him to establish a pattern. Luzhin's search for patterns and harmonies is, of course, based on a childishly solipsistic feeling that everything in the surrounding world refers to him. It is not accidental that in "Signs and Symbols" the cousin of the mad boy is a famous chess player; the name of the boy's disease is "referential mania."

The novelist's handling of repetition encourages the reader to conduct his own search for meaning. Pondering repetitions may yield psychological insights. For instance, Luzhin's repeated toying with his fiancée's handbag—the lock shuts badly; she will soon spill everything out (D, 73, 83)—turns out to be related to his love of symmetric repetitions: their acquaintance started with the girl's picking up things that had spilled out of Luzhin's pocket; afterward, "dimly and almost unconsciously, he constantly watched to see whether she would drop anything—as if trying to reestablish some secret symmetry" (D, 87). But she never does drop anything, so the symmetry is not reestablished.

The relationship is indeed asymmetrical: the childlike Luzhin always remains on the accepting side. Such a symbolic reinterpretation of episodes is another activity in which the novel expects to engage the reader, and again, Luzhin sets the example. Having been vexed by a little boy, probably a beggar, who followed him from the railway
station and threw a pebble at him (D, 102), Luzhin suddenly perceives the “secret meaning” of that event. “Consider this footpath,” he says to his future mother-in-law. “I was walking along. And just imagine whom I met. Whom did I meet? Out of the myths. Cupid. But not with an arrow—with a pebble. I was struck” (D, 114). It is not made clear whether Luzhin fails to see the analogy between the pebble and the projectiles that in his childhood a group of boys had fired at him from toy pistols, thus heralding his torments at school (see D, 22). Nor can one decide what is more meaningful, the repetition of the pattern (the little boy’s pebble likewise announces a new phase in Luzhin’s life) or the symbolic reinterpretation of the isolated event. In any case, the “secret meaning” should not eclipse the awkward yet touchingly authentic way in which Luzhin explains that he is in love.

A great number of narrative details in The Defense, however, do not seem either to enter the patterns of recurrent imagery or to submit to symbolic reinterpretation. Here and there a loose chess analogy (in a taxi, for instance, people keep coming into “involuntary contact” like pieces in a closed chessbox: D, 147) or a self-referential pattern (such as the discussion of a novel that seems to be The Defense itself at Mrs. Luzhin’s tea table; see D, 232) seems to emerge, yet the incipient patterns soon peter out; scenes from Luzhin’s childhood and glimpses of different groups of Russian émigrés in Berlin are, in fact, just what they are—deftly and economically evoked slices of contingent reality. Despite Nabokov’s public overstatements of his impatience with “human interest,” it is largely for human interest—and for the delicacy with which it is conjured up—that these episodes have to be read. The reader is not supposed to repeat Luzhin’s error and turn away from human reality in his pursuit of abstract harmonies and meanings.

And yet the reader’s controlled alertness to the possibility of such harmonies, symmetries, and meanings in The Defense has a value of its own. It reenacts the eschatological alertness of Nabokov and of his “favorite character[s]” (BS, 151), the suspicion that there may after all be a cryptographic pattern in what looks like a humdrum flow of events combining novelty with repetition. The novel does not solve the problem of free will versus predetermination, nor does it contain a message about the presence or absence of a pattern of thought that could accommodate the whole of the entropic reality. It suggests, however, that if such a pattern does exist, it is not of human creation and cannot be adequately approximated by what Alfred Tennyson called “our little systems.” The search for this pattern, or the pursuit of any
intellectual activity that simulates this search, should not divert one's attention from "average reality" and from care for one's neighbor. The name Graalsky, derived from the Russian for Grail, is in this novel given to an old actor, a pleasant but petty, mean, and essentially inconsiderate minor character. The quest for the Holy Grail is often as egotistic as it is beautiful.

The novel also suggests that an unambiguous solution of either metaphysical or ideological problems is not imperative. Mrs. Luzhin is disappointed in both Soviet and émigré newspapers. She eventually relinquishes her search for "a formula, the official embodiment of feeling" in the Soviet press as well as her wish to understand "the complicated struggle between hazy opinions" in émigré newspapers: "If all this was too complex for the mind, then the heart began to grasp one thing quite distinctly: both here and in Russia people tortured, or desired to torture, other people, but there the torture and the desire to torture were a hundred times greater than here and therefore here was better" (D, 225-26). With the delicate intuitiveness that adds to the "warmth" of the novel, Mrs. Luzhin understands that ethical conclusions need not be affected by ideological ambiguities. Nor, the book seems to suggest, need they depend on the solution of metaphysical or epistemological mysteries. The complex treatment of the chess patterns in The Defense simulates the ambivalence inherent in eschatological alertness, yet this ambivalence brings into relief the novel's insistence on the need for a balance between intellectual pursuits and human commitments. The ethical conclusion is inseparable from an aesthetical one: art and life are not defenses against one another; life enters into the exercise of art, and art is a part of life.