Bend Sinister:
The “Inner” Problem

He that hath Wife and Children, hath given Hostages to Fortune.
Francis Bacon, “Of Marriage and Single Life”

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

. . . .

My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes!

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight”

Bend Sinister was written five or six years after Nabokov’s immigration to the United States in 1940; it was published in 1947. In the 1963 foreword, Nabokov notes that it was composed “at a particularly cloudless and vigorous period” of his life, yet he calls its main characters his “whims and megrims” (BS, v, viii). The reference to “whims” should remind the reader of the deliberate overstatement with which Emerson proclaimed his wish to write Whim “on the lintels of the doorpost.”1 “Megrims” is an ironic understatement: the time is winter and spring 1945–46; reports of the scale of recent disasters are filtering across the Atlantic. “Much as one might want to hide in one’s little ivory tower,” Nabokov will write to his sister in June 1946, “there are things that torment too deeply, e.g., the German vilenesses, the burning of children in ovens,—children as funny and as

strongly loved as our children” (PS, 41; my translation). It is not surprising that the tormented Adam Krug takes a long time to separate from the fictionalized extension of his creator. The houses that Krug sees through the hospital window in chapter 1 are those seen through the window of the “novelist’s” apartment in his dactylic “comparative paradise” (BS, 241) of the last chapter. Krug’s thoughts about time in chapter 2 seem to be so close to “the novelist’s” own thoughts that by the middle of the chapter the novelist has to remind the reader that the protagonist (“Krug—for it was still he—”: BS, 13) has already assumed a discrete identity of his own.

The world into which this Adam has been cast is a dystopia. Because of his wife’s surgery and death, Krug has failed to notice the frightening shape that the regime in his country has taken after a very recent revolution. The power has been seized by Krug’s former classmate Paduk, alias “the Toad” (the Shakespearean “paddock”). In their schooldays Krug had bullied Paduk, sat on his face, or ignored him. Now Paduk wishes to force Krug, a world famous philosopher, to collaborate with the regime. He can no longer be ignored; he arrests Krug’s friends, surrounds him with spies, and finally tries to take advantage of Krug’s love for his eight-year-old son David. Upon capture, the child is not held hostage in safety but sent, by mistake, to an institution for juvenile delinquents, where he is murdered—a human sacrifice in a grisly psychological experiment. Krug loses his sanity and his life the day after he learns about his son’s fate.

One of the rejected titles for Bend Sinister was “A Person from Porlock,” a reference to Coleridge’s famous story of having composed a long poem in his sleep; on awakening the poet started transcribing it on paper but was interrupted by a person on business from Porlock; afterward, he found he had forgotten the rest of the poem, and so “Kubla Khan” remained unfinished.

The intrusion of a person from Porlock is reenacted at the end of Bend Sinister. After a long period of grieving for his wife, Krug feels a reawakening of inspiration. He bids his son goodnight in order to pursue his “abstruser musings” but is interrupted by the lascivious maid Mariette; the lovemaking is, in its turn, interrupted by the po-

---

2 Nabokov’s younger brother Sergei was killed in a Nazi camp.
3 The subtle links between the text of Bend Sinister and Nabokov’s biography (and autobiography) are discussed, brilliantly if not always convincingly, in David I. Sheidlower, “Reading Between the Lines and the Squares,” Modern Fiction Studies, 25 (1979), 413–25.
lice, who come to arrest Krug and his son; Krug’s swan-song essay remains unwritten.

On a different level, however, the role of the person from Porlock is played not by the intruding characters but by what Nabokov calls “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (BS, xii). It is the omnipotent novelist who, time and again, cancels the illusion of reality or signals his own presence to Krug and the reader; in the end he unambiguously assumes the responsibility for the coup de grâce madness of the protagonist: “It was at that moment, just after Krug had fallen through the bottom of a confused dream and sat up on the straw with a gasp—and just before his reality, his remembered hideous misfortune could pounce upon him—it was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light—causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate” (BS, 233). The avatar of the person from Porlock in Bend Sinister thus forestalls Krug’s memories of what is, in fact, Nabokov’s own nightmare fantasy.

Why, then, did Nabokov reject a title so suitable as “A Person from Porlock”? Perhaps because it would have deemphasized the novel’s concern with Krug’s love for his son and wife and with the torment that this love causes him (see BS, 187-88: “what agony . . .”), especially when the attachment to the child proves to be the “handle” by means of which Paduk can get hold of Krug: in addition to bearing the heraldic meaning of “the wrong turn taken by life” (BS, vi), “Bend Sinister” also stands for the curvature of this handle—Krug being not only the Russian for “circle” but also the German for “pitcher”.

On his way to an interview with Paduk, Krug is shown a room where several physicians are listening to the beating of Paduk’s heart transmitted through the radio: “Thump-ah, thump-ah, thump-ah, went the machine, and every now and then there was an additional systole, causing a slight break in the rhythm” (BS, 142). The scene is a parodistic realization of the central metaphor of the novel, the beating
of a heart—not that of Paduk but that of Adam Krug. “The main theme of *Bend Sinister,*” says Nabokov in the foreword, “is the beating of Krug’s loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to—and it is for the sake of the pages about David and his father that the book was written and should be read.” Two other themes, he continues, “accompany the main one: the theme of dim-brained brutality which thwarts its own purpose by destroying the right child and keeping the wrong one; and the theme of Krug’s blessed madness when he suddenly perceives the simple reality of things and knows but cannot express in the words of his world that he and his son and his wife and everybody else are merely my whims and megrims” (*BS*, viii). Though the development of these two themes occupies a much larger textual surface space, it is the main theme—the agony of Krug’s love for Olga and David, the ebb and flow of his emotions, the fluctuations of his attention and intensity—that forms the organizing principle of the novel and accounts for its peculiar tonal iridescence. The two “accompanying themes” are subordinated to this central concern.

I

The main theme is seldom presented directly; its effect might have been shattering for both the novelist and the reader. The “beating of Krug’s loving heart” is signaled at very frequent intervals, but it is only in repeated reading that one can identify these signals and understand their meaning.

The narrative abounds in metaphorical references to the somewhat uneven systole-diastole rhythm of experience: the movement of a nurse’s face and her speech, inaudible to the grief-stricken Krug, are described as “pulsation” (*BS*, 5); trees are “pulsating rhythmically with countless fireflies” in a remote jungle (*BS*, 79); “the individual atom . . . pulsates” (*BS*, 158); the hospital in which Olga died stands beyond old tenement houses “unseen but throbbingly present” (*BS*, 189); “frames of reference pulsate with Fitz-Gerald contractions” (*BS*, 172); and among the “nocturnal sounds” of a great prison one can distinguish “the heartbeats of younger men noiselessly digging an underground passage to freedom and recapture” (*BS*, 233). Krug’s own heart “pounds” when he is frantically looking for David around a provincial police station (*BS*, 103) and “thumps” when he is trying to suppress his desire for Mariette (*BS*, 196).
The changes in the texture of *Bend Sinister* parallel the systole-diastole-pause rhythm. The narrative "pulsates" as passages conveying or signaling Krug's emotions (systole) alternate with those recording the thoughts or events that temporarily divert him (diastole) and those supplying background information and thus effecting "camera-stopping" breaks (pause) in the represented time.⁶

One of the clearest examples of a violent systole is the description of Krug's panic on losing sight of David near the police station:

"I want my little boy," said Krug (another Krug, horribly handicapped by a spasm in the throat and a pounding heart). . . . I must not lose my head, thought Adam the Ninth—for by now there were quite a number of these serial Krugs: turning this way and that like the baffled buffeted seeker in a game of blindman's buff: battering with imaginary fists a cardboard police station to pulp; running through nightmare tunnels; half-hiding together with Olga behind a tree to watch David warily tiptoe around another, his whole body ready for a little shiver of glee; searching an intricate dungeon where, somewhere, a shrieking child was being tortured by experienced hands; hugging the boots of a uniformed brute; strangling the brute amid a chaos of overturned furniture; finding a small skeleton in a dark cellar.

At this point it may be mentioned that David wore on the fourth finger of his left hand a child's enamelled ring. [BS, 103-4]

The sequence of parallel constructions reenacts the stages of the spasm: fright yields to violence, then to hope (at the thought of the happy endings in games of hide-and-seek), then to unmitigated horror. An abyss opens in the last sentence of the passage, which is, ironically, couched in dry academic language: it is left for the reader to imagine what makes Krug recollect David's ring, another circle, "at this point."

Krug's unconventional acts, like his refusal to keep his dead wife's comb and other mementos, show that his pain has not yet yielded to what Emily Dickinson called "a formal feeling." Systoles are signaled by his spasmodic weeping on the night of Olga's death and his outbursts of helpless violence on the night of David's ordeal. A systole is also registered by a metaphoric allusion to Krug's "heart" following

⁶Robert Alter uses the "camera-stopping" metaphor to describe Fielding's technique of freezing the action of a scene into a tableau and providing the narrative commentary in lieu of a legend; see *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 194. The space allotted to this commentary need not correspond to the represented time that is supposed to elapse between the interruption and the resumption of the scene.
the description of his bulky physical presence (pause) at Professor Azureus's emergency meeting (diastole):

Under this visible surface, a silk shirt enveloped his robust torso and tired hips. . . . Under this was the warm white skin. Out of the dark an ant trail, a narrow capillary caravan, went up the middle of his abdomen to end at the brink of his navel; and a blacker and denser growth was spread-eagled upon his chest.

Under this was a dead wife and a sleeping child. [BS, 47]

Among the devices that signal the systoles of the text are multilingual word games. Russian words occur at moments replete with the most intimate emotion. Thus Krug explodes with “Stop, chort [Stop, curse you]” (BS, 17) when a farcical grocer’s gyrations on the bridge remind him of his child.

The multilingual games are frequently accompanied by paronomastic translations that are probably best described as cases of “tralatition,” which, according to an eccentric writer in Transparent Things, is “a perfectly respectable synonym of the word ‘metaphor’” (TT, 69). The play of the intellect that tralatitions represent enters into a tug-of-war with the emotion whose presence they signal and whose intensity they seek to reduce. They also compensate for catachretic gaps: like the synaesthetic devices of Invitation to a Beheading, they are among the means of “effing the ineffable.” Frequently combined with cross-referential recurrent imagery, they produce branching rhetorical effects. For example, when Krug, in response to Maximov’s warnings, irresponsibly reduces political reality to word play, the word play immediately conjures up another reality, that of his inner world: “Yer un dah [stuff and nonsense],” he says. “[Paduk] will go on licking my hand in the dark. I am invulnerable. Invulnerable—the rumbling sea wave [volna] rolling the rabble of pebbles as it recedes. Nothing can happen to Krug the Rock” (BS, 89). The “average reality,” the “here and now” (hier und da in German) is “stuff and nonsense” (yerunda in Russian) for the flippant Krug. Yet as the multilingual punning continues, the Russian ghost word volna (‘wave’) is heard in “in-vulnerable”: a wave of Krug’s emotion that belies his invulnerability is ominously followed by the rolling “r” in the “rabble of pebbles”: the

7Some aspects of the use of non-English words are discussed in Antonina Filonov Gove, “Multilingualism and Ranges of Tone in Nabokov’s Bend Sinister,” Slavic Review, 32 (1973), 79–90.
"grating roar" of Matthew Arnold’s "Dover Beach." In the kind of experiment in group dynamics during which David will be killed, the torture starts with a pebble being spat into a child’s credulously opened mouth (see BS, 219).

In the capacity of defense mechanisms ("transfer" is another “respectable synonym” for metaphor), tralatitions are the only possible way of describing Krug’s reaction to the sight of his murdered child:

Tut pocherk zhizni stanovitsa kraine nerazborchivym [here the long hand of life becomes extremely illegible]. Ochevidtzy, sredi kotorykh byl i evo vnutrennie soglyadatai [witnesses among whom was his own something or other (“inner spy?” “private detective?” The sense is not at all clear)] potom govorili [afterwards said] shto evo prishlos' sviazat' [that he had to be tied]. Mezhdu tem [among the themes? (Perhaps: among the subjects of his dreamlike state)] Kristalsen, nevozmutimo dymia sigaroi [Crystalsen calmly smoking his cigar], sobral ves' shtat v aktovom zale [called a meeting of the whole staff in the assembly hall]. [BS, 225]

The conglomerate of transliteration, translation, and tralatition is a means of rendering “life out of focus”—but more about that later. Soglyadatai ("inner spy,” “private detective”) alludes to Nabokov’s short novel The Eye (Soglyadatai). The “eye” of that novel is akin to the inner “double” of Krug, the observing part of the self that maintains a distance from the acting, feeling, and erring “I” and that probably staves off Krug’s insanity.

Mezhdu tem is the Russian for “meanwhile.” Yet the word tem, apart from being the singular instrumental case of to ("that")—the meaning in which it is used in the idiom above—is also the plural genitive of tema ("theme"). The tralatition “between themes” echoes the recurrent motifs of The Eye and Invitation to a Beheading. In The Eye the protagonist convinces himself that all the events of his life following what he deems a successful suicide attempt are but dreamlike images evoked by his fancy. In Invitation to a Beheading the author wishes to convince the protagonist that all his oppressors are, in the language of Bend Sinister, his “whims and megrims.” The sense of unreality (the "dreamlike state") is another defense mechanism that staves off Krug’s insanity until the morning in prison when insanity proves to be the only possible defense against pain.

One should add that the name of the cool Crystalsen (Kristalsen in the Russian transliteration) evokes associations with Kristallnacht, the
pogrom of 1938 that gave the first unambiguous signal for massive persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany.

Whereas tralatitations signal Krug's systoles and reduce their intensity for both Krug and the reader, other devices register the pain against which Krug has no ready defense. These are "semantic transparencies yielding layers of receding or welling sense" (BS, x; my italics): that is, references to fleeting memories, conscious thoughts, and dream images of Olga, unwittingly tactless references to her made by Beuret, contact with or memory of objects associated with her. "Sense wells," for instance, when in Peter Quist's shop Krug notices a plate representing an ocellated hawk moth (see BS, 181): it is with such a moth in her carefully cupped hands that Olga seems to have first appeared to Krug, and it is in the shape of this moth that she knocks at "Nabokov's" window on the last page of the novel.

In a first reading we cannot register the flow and ebb of Krug's emotions precisely because it is impossible to recognize some of the textual details as referring to Olga. For example, when Krug accuses police agents of having stolen Ember's porcelain owl, we do not know that Olga bought this owl for Ember and, as it turns out later, never gave it to him. Repeated reading also makes it clear that Krug's pain is egotistic: it dulls his consciousness of Ember's plight. Ember is being arrested and will probably suffer mistreatment as a result of Krug's rudeness to the captors. One begins to understand the difference between Krug's imagining the word "loyalty" as "a golden fork lying in the sun on a smooth spread of pale yellow silk" (BS, 87) and Maximov's less sophisticated but more upright rejection of any but the dictionary meaning of this word.

Semantic trasparencies register rather than render moments of acute pain. Less mediated expressions of emotion are cautiously infrequent in Bend Sinister—and not only because "Nabokov" cannot "afford to suffer" with his character. The evasion is a symptom of the skepticism that Bend Sinister has carried over from "Ultima Thule": consciousness is as mysterious as outer space and transcendent reality. Courting recalcitrant inspiration, Krug wonders "what is more important to solve: the 'outer' problem (space, time, matter, the unknown without) or the 'inner' one (life, thought, love, the unknown within) or again their point of contact (death)"; and the author seems to join him in adding, self-referentially, "for we agree, do we not, that problems as problems do exist even if the world be something made of nothing within nothing made of something" (BS, 173–74).
As Nabokov stated in "Anniversary Notes," *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* are "bookends" between which all his other novels "tightly huddle" (*SO*, 287). *Invitation* deals with the "outer" problem: since human commitments fail Cincinnatus, he is free to pursue his quest of "nameless existence, intangible substance" (*IB*, 26), defy the limitations of the material world into which he is cast, and break through the weary matter to the "unknown without." *Bend Sinister* deals rather with the "inner problem," which is also, however, a problem of "nameless existence": both Nabokov and his "favorite character" Krug (*BS*, 151) recognize the impossibility of tackling the mystery of consciousness through ready-made lexical tools, and so both content themselves with model approximations: "In this preliminary report on infinite consciousness a certain scumbling of the essential outline is unavoidable. We have to discuss sight without being able to see. The knowledge we may acquire in the course of such a discussion will necessarily stand in the same relation to the truth as the black peacock spot produced intraoptically by pressure on the palpebra does in regard to a garden path brindled with genuine sunlight" (*BS*, 192). The theatrical framework over whose ruins the liberated prisoner of *Invitation to a Beheading* steps on the way toward "beings akin to him" (*IB*, 223) is an apt model for his gnostic monster world. No such model is available for approximating the "inner" problem, the problem of authentic feeling for another human being.

The narrative of *Bend Sinister* comes closest to the verbal expression of the inexpressible when Krug is shown falling asleep in prison on the day of his son's death. His love for David and an admixture of the feeling of guilt are then rendered through the use of synaesthetic imagery and lyrical undulations:

*All he felt was a slow sinking, a concentration of darkness and tenderness, a gradual growth of sweet warmth. His head and Olga's head, cheek to cheek, two heads held together by a pair of small experimenting hands which stretched up from a dim bed, were (or was—for the two heads formed one) going down, down, down towards a third point, towards a silently laughing face. There was a soft chuckle just as his and her lips reached the child's cool brow and hot cheek, but the descent did not stop there and Krug continued to sink into the heart-rending softness, into the black dazzling depths of a belated but—never mind—eternal caress. [BS, 232]*

---

*See also Hyman, "The Handle," pp. 63–64.*
The barriers of identity break down in death, and the infinite consciousness is suffused with tenderness. The passage transforms the three balls of Krug’s schooldays, the three shapes in the pattern of the stone parapet, and the three birthmarks on David’s face into three heads—of the child and of the parents—converging in love and death. The pattern of three is thus one of the “semantic transparencies” that signal the systoles of the text.

II

The relative inconspicuousness of the text’s systoles in a first reading is also the result of the novelist’s use of perspective, particularly the illusion of three-dimensionality, to monitor the attention of the reader. Unlike the settings of Kafka’s novels or that of Invitation to a Beheading, the dystopic setting of Bend Sinister possesses spatial depth, and its main characters are endowed with a strong physical presence.

The latter effect is a response to a challenge: Nabokov was facing a new audience and could not rely on characters who would be “transparent to the eye of the era” (KQK, viii). Invitation to a Beheading emphasized the elusive, spiritual, transparent quality of Cincinnatus; Bend Sinister, in which physical death plays a far more prominent part, emphasizes the sense of the main characters’ presence (or absence) in the flesh, infusing their physical bulk with very physical, mortal, vulnerable tenderness. Krug, Olga, David, and even Ember and Mariette may still be Nabokov’s “galley slaves” but unlike the characters of Sebastian Knight they are no longer ephemeral “methods of composition.”

Conversely, a method of composition is actually personified and turned into a minor character, an obscure dissident student by the name of Phokus: he is referred to twice (see BS, 95, 177). In Russian, focus has not only the familiar optical meaning but also the related meaning of “magic trick,” to which several of Nabokov’s recurrent
techniques bear an affinity; for instance, his chains of homogeneous parts of long sentences often function like a conjuror’s patter, making one crucial detail inconspicuous (the stuffed squirrel in *Pnin*, or the sanitary pads that Humbert buys for Dolly after their first night together). The prominent technique of *Bend Sinister* can be traced to the snapshot-viewing episode in *Mary*: it consists of a selective focusing (or phokusing) of the reader’s attention. “Phokus” is a method of putting things together (composing) in such a way to as to achieve (an) aesthetic distance through remoteness in space.

The world of *Bend Sinister* is presented visually with the selective focus of the camera eye. The selectiveness produces an impression of spatial depth; this becomes particularly obvious if one compares the exhaustively described cell in *Invitation to a Beheading* with Ember’s bedroom, which is never described, in *Bend Sinister*. The workings of Paduk’s regime—exemplified in the behavior of the guards on the bridge, the periodical arrivals of Linda Bachofen, the slips of Peter Quist’s tongue—burst into the foreground from the background of the fictional world with growing frequency as the spiderweb closes in on Krug. Presented scenically, these grotesque intrusions occupy much more narrative space than Krug’s feelings. The feelings, being authentic, “real,” defiant of verbal expression, are treated with wary indirectness.

The philosopher Krug is much less capable of “multilevel thinking” (G, 175) than the artist Godunov-Cherdyntsev. Like Pnin, he controls his attention by channeling it to intellectual matters and disconnecting it from the emotional substratum. The record of his experience, therefore, contains extensive passages of discourse that are free not only from roller-coaster plunges into emotion but even from the more gentle “semantic transparencies.” In one of the most brilliant episodes of the novel the narrator joins forces with Krug’s friend Ember in helping Krug “phokus” his attention away from his grief. This is the essence of the Nabokovian variety of “foregrounding.” Whereas in Gogol

11“Discussing perspective in *Bend Sinister* in terms of the camera eye is particularly appropriate because, like *Laughter in the Dark*, this novel is permeated with film imagery; see Beverly Gray Bienstock, “*Focus Pocus: Film Imagery in Bend Sinister,*” in Rivers and Nicol, *Fifth Arc*, pp. 125–38. On the relationship between cinema and Nabokov’s novels, see Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*.

12“Foregrounding” is the emphasis on the narrative itself rather than on the narrated events. Western criticism has taken over this term from Ejkhenbaum’s work on Gogol, “*Kak sdelana ‘Shinel’ Gogolia,*” and “Illiuziya Skaza.”
the manner of presentation may compete with the content for the reader's attention, here one component of the content (the play of the intellect) is moved to the fore so that it might keep another (the potentially devastating emotion) out of sight. Whatever gets said in the episode is an alibi for not talking about Olga or dwelling on other regions fraught with “emotional dangers”:

Krug will not speak of her, will not even inquire about her ashes; and Ember, who feels the shame of death too, does not know what to say. . . . Krug, semi-intentionally, keeps out of reach. He is a difficult person. Describe the bedroom. Allude to Ember’s bright brown eyes. Hot punch and a touch of fever. His strong shining blue-veined nose and the bracelet on his hairy wrist. Say something. Ask about David. Relate the horror of those rehearsals.

“David is also laid up with a cold [ist auk betterkellet] but that is not why we had to come back [zueruk]. What [shto bish] were you saying about these rehearsals [repetitia]?”

Ember gratefully adopts the subject selected. He might have asked: “why then?” He will learn the reason a little later. Vaguely he perceives emotional dangers in that dim region. So he prefers to talk shop. Last chance of describing the bedroom.

Too late. Ember gushes. He exaggerates his own gushing manner.

The tralatition repetitia (the Russian for “a rehearsal”) is here used for its connotation of “repeating.” It foreshadows the repetition of the arrests of Krug’s friends. Shto bish, an old-fashioned Russian familiar way of inquiring about something that has been mentioned, sounds like a tribute to the Maximovs, the most recognizably Russian of the novel’s characters, who have already been arrested and are to be shortly followed by Ember and Hedron.

The bits of advice to “describe the bedroom,” “allude to Ember’s bright brown eyes,” and the like, stand for the narrator’s self-conscious search for ways to fill in pauses in the characters’ conversation. The narrator likewise seems to be groping for an excuse not to talk about the things that really matter. The sentences “Say something. Ask about David. Relate the horror of those rehearsals” render the thoughts of Ember, thoughts running in the same roundabout channel as the narrator’s own. Just as Krug points Ember in the safest direction by asking about his Hamlet rehearsals, so Ember, by readily “gushing” forth, seems to provide such a direction for the narrator. The narrator’s
missing his "last chance to describe the bedroom" has a double effect: on the one hand it divides (phokus) the reader's attention between the painful scene (the undercurrent of pain is conveyed through spasmodically short sentences and "tralatitions") and the author's artistic choices in rendering it; on the other hand, it suggests that the choices are dictated by what takes place independently of the narrator, in a reality that has taken over and escaped control.

As if to relinquish his creative prerogative, the narrator bestows his ingenuity, wit, and intellectual brilliance on Ember, whose parashakespearean exercise in the main part of the scene enters into competition with the library chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* and also in a sense with its "Oxen-in-the-Sun" chapter, in which a stylistic exercise occupies the representational time spanning a difficult childbirth. Ember's language game, however, is completely free from the element of callousness that Joyce's text neglects to avoid; it is played out of sympathy, and its aim is to rechannel the flow of psychic energy that would otherwise have fueled Krug's grief.

Thus, the reason Krug's emotional fluctuations seem to occupy comparatively little space in the narrative is that they mainly take place not in the foreground but in the third dimension of the novel, along the depth axis. The method of composition (Phokus) of *Bend Sinister* offers marked contrast to that of *Invitation to a Beheading*, in which this third dimension—unlike the metaphysical fourth one—does not exist. As soon as the characters exit from the foreground of *Invitation*, they cease to exist. One cannot imagine the presence of any parts of the fictional world away from the limelight; there is nothing behind the stage except, perhaps, the theatrical props. Cincinnatus is the subject of experience rather than a fully realized character. Moreover, whereas conventional novels about political prisoners usually create an almost paranoid sense of conspiracy or of the impersonal workings of the bureaucratic machine behind the hero's back, nothing of this kind goes on behind the back of Cincinnatus. All the characters of whom Cincinnatus inquires the date of his execution are strangely disconcerted; not only do they have no answer, but the question itself is illegitimate because, there being no fictional background, no action behind the coulisses, the date of the execution is determined only by the involute author and not by somebody within the fictional world.

In *Invitation to a Beheading* very few scenes imply more information than they present. One that does so is the scene in which the prison director follows the librarian out of the cell and returns carrying the librarian's scarf and nursing a broken fingernail; M'sieur Pierre tact-
fully pretends that nothing has happened, and the reader is invited to infer that the director has tortured the librarian behind the stage. This is exactly the kind of thing that keeps happening in the world of *Bend Sinister*, where bloodstained shoes or cufflinks in the street are traces of police brutality. Martin Edelweiss is never shot in the world of *Glory*, and Cincinnatus C. is never beheaded in the world of *Invitation to a Beheading*; the former novel cancels the character and the latter cancels the setting just in time to sabotage the protagonist’s “logical fate” (*BS*, 233). By contrast, there is no doubt that David Krug is tortured to death in the world of *Bend Sinister*—not in the foreground but, mercifully, in the background of the action, between two paragraphs or, to continue Nabokov’s bilingual word play, “between themes.” Political prisoners are arrested, tortured, and killed outside the range of the camera eye; spies hover on the fringes of the picture; and Krug’s heart contracts at the thought of his wife and son in the emotional background of the text.

### III

One of Nabokov’s two “accompanying themes” in *Bend Sinister* is that of the “dim-brained brutality which thwarts its own purpose by destroying the right child and keeping the wrong one.” What is the relationship between this theme and the main theme of the novel?

The “dim-brained” inexperience of Paduk’s regime—its trial-and-error tactics—provides the interval of time necessary for a full display of Krug’s character, his grief, his recklessness, his concern for his child and Coleridgean wish to see him in “far other scenes,” his growing uneasiness, the dormancy and the awakening of inspiration. In chapter 2, Krug is caught between the obtuse illiterate soldiers on one side of the bridge and the cheerful para-academic lovers of bureaucracy on the other side—the sluggish, potentially violent *mouzhiks* and sleek careerist Nazis? This is a *mise-en-abîme* episode: suspended between legal brutality and its bungled implementation, Krug has ample time to oscillate between emotion and intellect (grief for Olga and attempts to cope with it), never completely bridging the gap.

Krug represses his emotions by maintaining a Schopenhauerian split between his active-feeling and passive-observing selves and by iden-

---

tifying with the latter, the one (in the language of "Frost at Midnight") that makes "a toy of thought":

As usual he discriminated between the throbbing one and the one that looked on: looked on with concern, with sympathy, with a sigh, or with bland surprise. This was the last stronghold of the dualism he abhorred. The square root of 1 is 1. Footnotes, forget-me-nots. The stranger quietly watching the torrents of local grief from an abstract bank. A familiar figure, albeit anonymous and aloof. He saw me crying when I was ten and led me to a looking glass in an unused room . . . so that I might study my dissolving face. He has listened to me with raised eyebrows when I said things which I had no business to say. In every mask I tried on, there were slits for his eyes. Even at the very moment when I was rocked by the convulsion men value most. My savior. My witness. [BS, 7]

This division of personality (in a sense a model of the relationship between Krug and his creator) temporarily allays Krug's heartache, yet it ultimately turns out to be his hubris. Krug tragically fails to achieve that unity of emotion and thought which Coleridge celebrates at the end of "Frost at Midnight." Reenacting the pulsation of his heart, he oscillates from the throbbing to the observing man and dissociates himself from the one as he identifies with the other. This is the essence of the dualism that he "abhors." His intellect is not attuned to his emotions and fails to foresee a possible link between the child, the object of his tenderness, and the web woven around him by Paduk. To the reader, however, the link is made clear by the "tralatition" in Paduk's speech, which Krug hears on the radio: "The most popular photograph which appeared in all capitalist newspapers of that period was a picture of two rare butterflies glittering vsemi tzvetami radugi [with all the hues of the rainbow]. But not a word about the strike of the textile workers!"(BS, 167).

In Nabokov's work, especially in Lolita and The Gift, the motif of the rainbow is associated with children and parent-child relationships. Raduga moya ("my rainbow")—instead of the more common Russian radost' moya) ("my joy")—are Krug's tender words of address to his son. Krug fails to read Paduk's random dart as a danger signal, just as in a later episode he does not see the meaning of David's stepping into a puddle:

"Didn't you have any rubbers?"
"Uh-uh."
“Then give me your hand. And if you walk into a puddle but once...”
“And if I do it by chance [nechaianno]?”
“I shall see to that. Come, raduga moya [my rainbow], give me your hand and let us be moving.”
“Billy brought a bone today. Gee whizz—some bone. I want to bring one, too.”
“Is it the dark Billy or the little fellow with the glasses?”
“The glasses. He said my mother was dead. Look, look, a woman chimney sweep.”
(These had recently appeared owing to some obscure shift or rift or sift or drift in the economics of the State—and much to the delight of the children.) Krug was silent. David went on talking.
“That was your fault, not mine. My left shoe is full of water, Daddy!”
“Yes.”
“My left shoe is full of water.”
“Yes. I’m sorry. Let’s walk a little faster. What did you answer?”
“When?”
“When Billy said that stupid thing about your mother.” [BS, 160–61]

The image of a puddle, part of both a landscape and an acoustic “inscape,” occurs in the first sentence of the novel. The puddle looks like “a fancy footprint filled to the brim with quicksilver; like a spatulate hole through which you can see the nether sky” (BS, 1). The “nether sky” is both the reflection of the sky in Cambridge, Massachusetts—the “comparative paradise” where the novel is being written—and the sky of the nether world into which Krug is about to be cast. In the last paragraph of the novel, after the nether (never?) world has been canceled, “Nabokov” catches one more glimpse of this puddle, “the one Krug had somehow perceived through the layer of his own life” (BS, 241). The puddle is thus a kind of gateway from Krug’s world to that of the novelist. Therefore, David’s stepping into the puddle foreshadows his death (his passage to another world?) at the end of the novel.

Significantly, it is Krug himself who, having lost his equanimity on hearing the allusion to Olga’s death, leads David into a puddle. “That was your fault, not mine,” says the boy: like most of Nabokov’s

---

15 See also Johnson’s discussion of the image of the puddle, Worlds in Regression, pp. 194–96.
doomed characters (including even the policeman Mac, who quite inexplicably hits upon Mariette's nickname; see BS, 207), he seems to be given a prophetic glimpse of his creator's mind. Indeed, at a crucial moment Krug is unable to reason with the people who come to arrest him. His violently emotional active self takes over; the controlling observing self is suppressed; and his irrational behavior largely leads to the "mistake" that his captors make with David. David himself, on the other hand, is heard "trying to reason with his impossible visitors" (BS, 201). Krug fails to follow his example, just as he has failed to perceive the ominous significance in the cryptic recurrences of the pattern of three, of the shoe-shaped puddles, of stains that imitate the form of Lake Malheur, and other danger signals sent him by the "anthropomorphic deity" impersonated by "Nabokov."16

More surprisingly, for a long time Krug takes no heed of Maximov's warnings, of his friends' arrests, of the badly trained spies around him, of Mariette's phone calls, and the oddities in the behavior of Peter Quist (who blushes on realizing that David is the handle by which the regime can get hold of Krug). The episodes that thus describe the workings of Paduk's regime effect the "diastoles" of the text: Krug is unable to see the connection between the sinister bend of politics and his private world, his "mirok"17 (BS, 8); therefore the encounters with Paduk and his agents divert him not only from his inner life, "turn[ing] the torrent away" (BS, 11), but also from the possibility of having to concede his child to the threatening larger world, the circle (krug) without a circle. Krug has not found a working solution for the "inner problem." Incidentally, under no circumstances is it a good idea to make a habit of sitting on anybody's face during or after one's schooldays.

The obtuseness of the regime is not an arbitrary means of retarding the climax of Krug's tragedy of errors. In Paduk's "Ekwilist" society a "little human creature" is "of no value to the community" (BS, 218); no one is irreplaceable; and the citizens are promised that their "groping individualities will become interchangeable and, instead of crouching in the prison cell on an illegal ego, the naked soul will be in

16See also Shaeffer, "Bend Sinister and the Novelist as Anthropomorphic Deity," pp. 128–35.
17Mirok, the tralatition for which is "[small pink potato]," is the diminutive of the Russian mir—"world." Asking a salesman for a soccer ball, Pnin describes with his hand a "portable world" (P, 99); proportionately, a little world, mirok, would assume the dimensions of a potato.
contact with that of every other man in this land" (BS, 97). It is quite natural, therefore, that the ideologist of practical Ekwilism should for a long time fail to realize the force of Krug’s love for a “disposable” little human creature.

It is not for a police state to understand the agony of the physical blended with the spiritual in a father’s love for a child. Discrete physical life is a “prism or prison” of finite consciousness (BS, 171) in which “infinite consciousness”—call it Shelley’s “white radiance of eternity”—is refracted into a breathtaking rainbow. In this great prison of physical life “younger men [are] noiselessly digging an underground passage to freedom and recapture” (BS, 233). So long as physical life continues, moments of transcendent freedom will be followed by recapture. Only death is the final escape into infinite consciousness, the perfect knowledge, the fulfillment of “the attempt of a point in space and time to identify itself with every other point” (BS, 175). This is a much more pleasing variant of death than that other hypothesis, the “absolute nothingness, nichts” (BS, 175); all the same, as in Shakespeare’s famous sonnet, to die is to leave one’s love alone. Whereas in Nabokov’s novels sexual love (especially the magical state of “being in love”) opens a door to transcendent reality, tenderness (especially that of parental love) promotes the acceptance of the prison of so-called material reality and fosters the love of this rainbow world despite its “endless waves of pain” (ND, 67).

It is noteworthy that Nabokov did not manage to dam the waves of pain by writing Bend Sinister; they spill into “Signs and Symbols,” written within a year after the publication of this novel. Like Bend Sinister, “Signs and Symbols” is devoted to “the incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world” and to “the fate of this tenderness, which is either crushed, or wasted, or transformed into madness” (ND, 67).

The somewhat Kafkaesque, outré treatment of the sinister regime that exposes tenderness to torture is deliberately unrealistic in Bend Sinister. The mechanical absentminded predictability of the conduct of its servants is used for comic relief, following, as it were, Bergson’s prescriptions for the creation of the laughable because the humor could not be spontaneous. As noted above, Nabokov does not have to invent a dystopia; others have done it, with different degrees of success, before him. His Padugrad is economically built of narrative de-

tails whose amount barely suffices to give “Nabokov” something to destroy by canceling the dramatic illusion in the last pages of the book: “He saw the Toad crouching at the foot of the wall, shaking, dissolving, speeding up his shrill incantations, protecting his dimming face with his transparent arm, and Krug ran towards him, and just a fraction of an instant before another and better bullet hit him, he shouted again: You, you—and the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire netting of my window” (BS, 240).

This involute cleanup (the “epilogical mopping up”: A, 528) is possible only if there exists some dystopia, at least a “hastily assembled” one (IB, 51), to remove. The theme of the totalitarian regime is thus subservient not only to the main theme of the novel but also to the second “accompanying” theme: “Krug’s blessed madness,” during which—like the hero of Borges’s “Circular Ruins”—Krug understands that he is an invention of someone else.

IV

Just as the accounts of Paduk and his regime (the first accompanying theme) do not form a political allegory as such, so the account of Krug’s madness and return to the bosom of the “anthropomorphic deity impersonated by” his maker (the second accompanying theme) does not form a full-fledged cosmogonical allegory. Krug’s madness and the “mopping up” associated with it belong to the complex of self-referential devices scattered throughout the novel. These devices remind the reader of the fictionality of the tale and function as the kind of reassurance that we offer frightened children (“There, there, this is only a story”). Yet such reassurance is not unreserved: Nabokov insists that his story is essentially true. Even after canceling the dramatic illusion by suggesting variants of Krug’s interview with Paduk, he makes a “definitive” statement: “Did Krug really glance at the prepared speech? And if he did, was it really as silly as that? He did; it was.

The self-referential aspect of Bend Sinister is exhaustively discussed in Johnson, Worlds in Regression, pp. 187–205; Patteson, “Nabokov’s Bend Sinister”; and Schaeffer, “Bend Sinister and the Novelist as Anthropomorphic Deity.”
The seedy tyrant or the president of the State, or the dictator, or whoever he was—the man Paduk in a word, the Toad in another—did hand my favorite character a mysterious batch of neatly typed pages” (BS, 151). The sentence must be read figuratively: we all know how tyrants in this or “forking” worlds (Marianne Moore’s “real toads” in real or imaginary gardens) demand that the great minds and talents of the age surrender their intellectual integrity. One may wonder which historical personages, between the collaborating Heidegger and the defiant Gumilyov, were in the back of Nabokov’s mind during his work on Bend Sinister. Nor are hostage situations like David’s an invention of Nabokov. The experience of which Krug is an exponent represents both Hawthorne’s “truth of the human heart” and the historical truth; only its outer trappings are fictional, changeable, disposable—and disposed of by the dense self-referentiality of the text.

It is not only that Nabokov, like Ember during Krug’s visit, chooses to “talk shop” in order to rechannel part of the reader’s attention from shared pain to the writer’s craft. His cavalier dismantling of the fictional world cancels not just the setting but also the plot, including, among other things, what seems to have been Krug’s major mistake. The novel discourages such reflections as “If only Krug had done this or that, David would have been saved, and everything would have been fine, you see.” When Krug is ready to take Paduk’s dictation in order to get his son back, the guards produce “the wrong child,” Arvid Krug, whom they have obviously been mistreating. This boy, to quote Nabokov’s letter to his sister, is perhaps “just as funny and as strongly loved” as David: whatever Krug does or does not do, one of these two children (and there have been at least two million of them) will suffer a terrible fate. There are no solutions to Krug’s predicament within his own world; “Nabokov,” at least, knows better than to offer one. Among the sound that Krug hears in his giant prison there is “the cautious crackling of a page which had been viciously crumpled and thrown into the wastebasket and was making a pitiful effort to uncrumple itself and live just a little longer” (BS, 233–34). This may be the sheet of paper on which “Nabokov,” in the “comparative paradise” of his workshop, wrote a provisional plot solution (different from that of the fair copy) and, feeling it inadequacy, “viciously crumpled” it and threw it out. There are no solutions—even Adam Krug’s timely choice of death would not have saved either David or Arvid Krug—in the world where even a discarded sheet of paper wishes to “live just a little longer.”
Tragic or near-tragic novels often create extreme situations in which ultimate questions can receive no solutions. One could say that in *Bend Sinister* Nabokov provides no solution (short of the wish-fulfilling cancellation of the dystopia), because the extreme situation that he has created admits of none. Yet it seems that he has created the extreme situation precisely for the purpose of denying his novel the right to propose a definite moral or political solution. In life, by contrast to tragic fiction, partial solutions are welcome: the bombing of Auschwitz would have helped and individual acts of heroism did help to save individual universes before the major dystopia of the present century was canceled by the allied armies. *Bend Sinister* is not a propagandistic call for action. It is a muted call for attention and empathy. In an imaginary dystopia it seeks out the real vulnerable tenderness that has always been caught and harassed between recurrent epidemics of brutality and never ending, beautifully sterile abstruse research.