

"Au tombeau" with Mallarmé, Milner and Nabokov

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The padograph is a writing instrument invented by the father of Padukgrad's totalitarian leader in the novel, *Bend Sinister* - Vladimir Nabokov's thinly veiled parody of the Soviet Union published in 1947. An individualized, personalized sort of typewriter, the padograph imitates a person's handwriting with a "repellent" degree of accuracy and perfection (Nabokov 1996a, p. 222). As a writing technology, the padograph suggests a remarkable tool for forging documents, delivering the impression of a 'signature effect' through a mechanical process. "You could", explains Nabokov, have your padograph based on the handwriting of a correspondent and then play all kinds of pranks on him and his friends" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 223).

But the real value of the padograph lies elsewhere, that is, in the "luxury" it offers us "of seeing the essence of [one's] incomplex personality distilled by the magic of an elaborate instrument" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 223). The padograph flattens out one's expressive flourishes, lopping off the extremes of height and depth of character while nonetheless providing for a carefully calibrated quantum of inconsistency. Several keys, for example, might be devoted to the "minor variations" carried by individual letters. The resulting script reflects the precise "average 'tone'" of one's handwriting, punctuated by a "carefully diversified" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 222) system of commas, periods and spaces that only a very close examination would reveal as technically engineered.

Beyond its ironic use as a symbol for Paduk's totalitarian state, the padograph inscribes another history of the relation between writing and thought. In one's handwriting, that seemingly most spontaneous, expressive, indeed auratic of writing technologies, Nabokov recovers a sort of 'archetype' of individuation that recasts the entirety of these assumptions as fraudulent. What if all of our most dearly held fantasies of selfhood and of 'personality' were in fact impressions cast by a mechanical 'hand', one so nearly completely invisible that it requires an almost forensic sensitivity to detect? Peel away the enveloping layers of character and we find an unmistakable padding sound, tapping away quietly in the background as it stealthily threads together the cluster of identificatory traits that make up the backbone of the self.

The padograph thus only makes perceptible - *if only just* - another operation that lies more clandestinely hidden in the bends and folds of the linguistic weave, one that broaches an impossible question, bordering almost on madness: what operation of synthesis binds together the letters of one's

name? What hidden substrate holds one's little 'lettrinos' in place to prevent them from spinning out, forming and reforming into other combinations ad nauseum? In the eyes of fascist leader Paduk, remarked for his "irritating trick of calling his classmates by anagrams of their names," there would be no mystery, because there is no underlying adhesive: "all men consist of the same twenty-five letters variously mixed" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 222). Spoken in Paduk's "curiously smooth nasal voice", Adam Krug (the involuntary hero of Nabokov's novel) is just as efficiently referred to as Gumakrad or Dramaguk, Gurdamak, Kamerad, Madamka, or simply Drug. It turns out that the habitual seat of one's identification and individuation, one's name - a certain set of reshufflable letters - hides a 'totalitarian' tendency at odds with the very sovereignty it seems to inaugurate.

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Before launching into his dystopian vision, Nabokov slips the reader a number of intra-lingual clues in his Introduction to *Bend Sinister*. This is not unusual - Nabokov frequently helps us, his dimwitted readers, find the verbal constructions hidden in his texts. Indeed, if Mallarmé's ultimate trope is the fan, Nabokov's is the false-bottomed box, a trick container that mimics the shape of a book but in fact opens out on all sides ('бок': Russian for 'side'). Once discovered, Nabokov's бок-book-boxes unleash a signifying agency that threads through his literary output as the signature of another authorizing principle, even as it hides in plain sight as the mask of Nabokov the Godlike Creator. As is well known, a certain "Vladimir Nabokov" makes frequent cameo appearances in his novels including, famously, in *Bend Sinister* where an extra-diegetic authorial figure takes pity on his main character towards the end, and sends him mad: Adam Krug, whose son David has been tortured by Paduk's totalitarian regime, is released from his suffering by the intervention of a certain "I" who gets up from his writing table in the final scene to investigate a sound at the window. "I knew that the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism" the "I" confesses, "a play upon words". But the very last lap of his life had been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 358).

So what are these clues? They concern Stephane Mallarmé. Nabokov explains that Krug is haunted by a phrase from Mallarmé's poem, 'Afternoon of a Faun': "*sans pitié du sanglot dont j'étais encore ivre*" ("spurning the spasm with which I still was drunk" in Nabokov's translation). The author of the Introduction explains how aural echoes of this phrase reverberate throughout *Bend Sinister* as, for example, in Dr Azureus's "wail of rue" howled in the Slavic-sounding, invented language of Padukgrad: "Profsar Krug, malarma ne donje Prakhtata!" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 213). Another echo resounds in Krug's apologetic "donje te zankoriv" as he accidentally interrupts a couple kissing

(Nabokov 1996a, p. 168). After pointing out these "immortal bagatelles", Nabokov ponders if "it is really worth an author's while to devise and distribute these delicate markers whose very nature requires that they be not too conspicuous". He concludes that "in the long run [...] it is only the author's private satisfaction that counts." "I read my books rarely", he says,

[...] but when I do go through them again, what pleases me most is the wayside murmur of this or that hidden theme (Nabokov 1996a, p. 168).

Forty years earlier, Ferdinand de Saussure found himself perplexed by a literary mystery. Investigating the Saturnine verses on 3rd century BC Roman tombstones, Saussure discovered repeating patterns of phonemes in whose sounds he heard uncanny echoes of the deceased's name. These anagrams or "hypograms" appeared to pose a challenge to what later became two key laws of Saussurian linguistics, namely, the arbitrariness of the sign, and the principle of succession. For the hypogram suspends the linearity through which auditory signifiers unfold in time, exposing a name that is heard in and through its disarticulation by intervening phonemes. Normally, according to Saussure, "words acquire relations based on the linear nature of language because they are chained together" (Saussure, 1998, p. 123). However, the "dynamized tension" between *signans* and *signatum* in the hypogram invites one to entertain the possibility of what Roman Jakobson called the "direct interplay of the speech sounds with meaning" (Jakobson, 2002, p. 233).

As is well known, Saussure finally repudiated his hypothesis. Paul de Man comments that his caution "supports the assumption of a terror glimpsed" (de Man 24) and it is easy to see why: the hypogram invites serious paranoia. Was Saussure simply seeing things, attributing cause to mere coincidences that arise naturally by chance on the restricted set of letters of the alphabet? Saussure writes to the contemporary Italian poet, Giovanni Pascoli in whose work he thought discovered the same patterns, "Are certain technical details, [...] there purely by chance, or are they intended, and applied in a conscious manner?" (cited in Joseph, 2012, p. 557).

Pascoli never replied and Saussure gave up his pursuit. But his discovery lives on as a counter-memory to the structuralist hegemony of the 20th century, leaving a number of suggestive questions in its wake. Did the hypogram uncover some form of "chance" opposed to the blind contingency through which signifier and signified are aligned in the sign? And if so, would this "chance" offer something other than the compensatory routines of mourning that poetry offers to those still living? Recall how in

his "tombeau" to Edgar Allan Poe, Mallarmé erects poetry as a "calm granite block," shielding Poe from future "Blasphemies" until "eternity" should at last change the poet triumphantly back to Himself.¹

The fact that it should be a Russian novelist to guide us through the perilous passages indicated but not pursued by Saussure will not surprise Jean-Claude Milner. In the chapter "Prose redeemed" in his *Mallarmé au tombeau* (1999), Milner points to the Russians as pioneers of a "heretical" tradition which maintains, contra Mallarmé, that "something of the newspaper takes place" (Milner 2010, p. 110). What I would like to explore here is a "saving prose" that opens onto the horizon Mallarmé abandoned. Vladimir Nabokov invites a thinking of the Book as a prose form which enters the 20th century by declaring that the Revolution, the USSR and Joseph Stalin did take place, even as it does so in a language other than the language of the newspaper. Neither a dream of sanctuary, nor a poetic tomb in which to wait out the end of days, "unceasingly alert" (Milner, 2010, p. 110), Nabokov's prose, like Saussure's hypograms, goes directly into battle against Death itself. In Nabokov, as in Saussure, it is in the proper name as it persists in and through its disarticulation by Time and History that we must seek this death-defying power.

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It is, literally, around a name that *Bend Sinister*'s plot revolves. When the book opens, Adam Krug, a famous philosopher, is found leaving the hospital where his wife, Olga, has just died. Krug's former classmate, Paduk, is the leader of the Slavic country's post-revolutionary totalitarian regime, so it is to Krug that his colleagues turn in the hope of staving off the University's imminent closure. They ask him to sign a joint letter from the Faculty, which he refuses to do. Later on, brought before Paduk, Krug again refuses to attach his signature to the revolution, balking at the ghost-written speech praising "the heroism of the oppressed and exploited masses" in the new Padukian era of "Dynamic Living" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 288).

Padukgrad, the transparently disguised Leningrad where the novel takes place, is built on the philosophy of Ekwilism, whose figurehead is the cartoonlike "Mr Etermon" (Everyman). Ekwilism asserts the existence of a "universal human consciousness", which over time has become unevenly distributed among individuals. The Ekwilist state aims to rebalance this by "remolding" every individual into conformity with an Average Man. Among the many idiosyncrasies of the Padukian regime is what Nabokov calls its "paronomasia". As mentioned, one of the chief manifestations of this "verbal plague" is the habit of creating anagrams of people's names. Ironically echoing Mallarmé's

1 "Calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre obscur/Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais sa borne/Aux noirs vols du Blasphème épars dans le futur." Mallarmé, 'Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe.'

instant insight about literature,² Paduk claims, "All men consist of the same twenty-five letters variously mixed" (Nabokov 1996a, p. 222).

As the novel progresses, Paduk's operatives resort to increasingly desperate sorties to secure Krug's signature, gradually disappearing Krug's friends such as the Maximovs until, finally, they kidnap Adam's small son David. This last assault breaks Krug's resolve. He caves but it is too late. At the Institute for Abnormal Children where he has been taken, David is confused with a similarly named prisoner, Arvid Krug, the son of the former Vice-President of the Academy of Medicine, Martin Krug. Arvid is delivered up safely but David falls victim to what is perhaps one of the most horrific child deaths in literature, documented in a darkly comic film that Krug is forced to watch.

On the surface, Nabokov seems to be making a central and seemingly universally uncontroversial point here about the essentially non-fungible nature of who one is. The unusually high level of pathos in this novel seems to shore up the common misreading of him as an unrepentant humanist. Taking off from certain of Nabokov's statements, particularly in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, this reading puts him forward as a writer for whom art retains all its "mythological and sacralized dimensions," as Charles Baxter phrases it (Baxter, 1977, p. 825).³ From this perspective, it would be art, then, that guarantees the integrity of one's name and, by extension, one's irreplaceable self. Art, particularly in its instantiation as the stylistic signature of an exemplary original, is what breaks with the monotone of language's equalizing protocols and restores the expressive flourishes and idiosyncrasies of 'character' that one's forced entry into the universally signifying Symbolic system had flattened off. The singularity of artistic style thus performs as the supra-adhesive that fixes the letters of our name in place, ensuring the difference between Arvid and David, or Martin and Adam.

Except there are complications with this. Nabokov is perhaps best known for his metafictional gesture of the authorial hand which makes parabasitic intrusions into his narrative realities. And in fact the most famous of these interventions occurs in *Bend Sinister* where an authorial "I", feeling "a pang of pity" for his character at the end, sends Adam mad, thus "saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate" (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 352). This is often read as evidence of Nabokov's adherence to the artist's role as Godlike Creator, "an omniscient consciousness existing outside time which has 'already' prepared a design to unfold within it" (Norman, 2012, p. 11). Nabokov himself has lent numerous

2 Friedrich Kittler recalls how, upon seeing the typewriter, Mallarmé declared, "literature is made up of no more and no less than twenty-six letters" (Kittler, 1999, p. 14).

3 The other camp takes the opposite view, accusing him with what Will Norman condenses as the charge of "gratuitous formalism". For more on these competing readings of Nabokov, see Will Norman (2012), 111, 131.

supports to this reading. In a letter to his editor at Doubleday outlining *Bend Sinister*'s basic plot, Nabokov explains that the end of the novel accomplishes something as yet unprecedented in literature:

[Krug] realizes suddenly the presence of the Author of things, the Author of him and of his life and all the lives round him, - the Author is *myself*, the man who writes the book of his life. This singular apotheosis (a device never yet attempted in literature) is, if you like, a kind of symbol of the Divine power. (Nabokov, 1990, pp. 49-50)

Yet one must tread warily when it comes to Nabokov's self-explanations (and all the more when they are aimed at editors of the literary profession). A more convincing clue comes from the novel's original title (as Nabokov was still calling it in the letter cited above). Before settling on *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov intended it to be titled *The Person from Porlock*, so named after Coleridge's famous bill-collecting visitor who fatally interrupted the scene of one of poetry's greatest hymns to the transcendent and creative power of Art. Instead of confirming a 'first cause' in the form of an all-powerful Godlike Creator dictating the show behind the scenes, Nabokov's intra- and extra-diegetic interventions in this and his other novels are therefore better read perhaps as similarly Porlocking interruptions, ones that bracket the idea of the artist as, precisely, artifice: a stage prop or figure that can be exhibited or discarded at will.

Accordingly, this Coleridgean connection calls forth another Mallarméan theme, which arguably exerts a still more powerful hold over *Bend Sinister* than the trace echoes of 'Afternoon of a Faun.' For if Coleridge immediately solicits the image of an Ancient Mariner inexplicably extinguishing the soaring white bird of virgin verse, he also simultaneously summons the figure of a shipwreck: it is the post-crisis Mallarmé, in other words, the Mallarmé of the negativity of poetry's sunset as it goes down with its full battery of seductive ruses in 'Un coup de dés.' In this poem, Mallarmé poses an undecidable question: did Hamlet, bitter "prince of the reef", mysteriously emerge from the outlines of a feather, or was it merely a spray of foam? Did we see an image of a shipwreck, or was this merely an illusion formed by a play of light over the Abyss?

As Thomas Karshan has noted, what Nabokov will take from *this* Mallarmé is, precisely, what the French Symbolist calls "this region/of vagueness/in which all reality dissolves" ("*dans ces parages du vague, en quoi toute réalité se dissout*"). The novel's Klein bottle-like structure, which seems to formally register Krug's philosophical image of the world as a stocking being turned inside out, seems to point at a fundamental Mallarméan nothingness at its heart, leading Karshan to suggest that the novel raises the question whether it is merely a nightmare "conjured up out of the trivial surroundings of a

person sitting in his room" (Karshan, 2009/2011, p. 17). In support of his reading, Karshan draws attention to a sequence of Mallarméan art objects in the novel, small boxes in the shape of books, which he likens to Mallarmé's salutary cup, a form designated only by the foam of the verse it holds.⁴ But what is most relevant about these deceptive books is that, rather than "empty", as Karshan rather misleadingly describes them, they are *tricks*, fronts for a secret operation that uses the great French poet as its façade.

One such book appears in Krug's dream where, a school-child again, he finds himself writing an exam on the topic of "an afternoon with Mallarmé, an uncle of his mother". "Somebody on his left", we read,

asked him to pass a book to [...] his right-hand neighbour [...]. The book, he noticed, was in reality a rosewood box shaped and painted to look like a volume of verse and Krug understood that it contained some secret commentaries that would assist an unprepared student's panic-stricken mind. (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 232)

In Nabokov, Mallarmé's poetry is enlisted for a cheating operation. What will it enable Nabokov to "cheat"? *Chance* of course.

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In *Bend Sinister*, chance appears as the hand-maiden of Paduk's regime. It is by chance that Adam's colleague is also named Krug; it is just tremendously bad luck that David is mistaken for another child whose name, by chance, is nearly exactly the same. Chance in Nabokov's novel becomes synonymous with death, which is itself linked with a radical, "totalitarian" equality of language towards the objects it names. Chance, in this sense, permits a rephrase of Mallarmé's pivotal sentences from 'Un coup de dés' in the following way:

"Death (i.e. a throw of the dice) will never abolish death (chance)"

"Every thought emits death (a throw of the dice)".

By way of these "synonymic substitutions" as Milner would call them (Milner, 2015, p. 106), Mallarmé's message seems clear: poetry's epitaphic language is no match for death. Death is the absolute Master from which no-one can ever escape. However, Nabokov clearly does not concur,

⁴ "Rien, cette écume, vierge vers / À ne designer que la coupe;" ("Nothing, this foam, virgin verse / Only to designate the cup:").

choosing a figure, precisely, of a drowning "Master" for his literary gamble. While poetry cannot "save" us from death, a certain prosaic crib-sheet, secreted within the Book of poetry, potentially can.

To explain this, we can turn to Mallarmé's "Crisis of verse" essay where he famously muses upon the chance that obtains in the sound of a word and its relation to what it signifies. "What a disappointment" he laments, that "Beside the opaque *ombre* [shade], *ténèbres* [shadows] is not very dark" (cited Milner, 2015, p. 86). Yet as Milner notes in his discussion of Mallarmé's essay, even if one's expectation that language should sound like what it refers to is largely dashed in everyday use, a promise remains that "the term retains some property of the thing". It is poetry that keeps this promise for, "working with the sonorities of words, combining them and opposing them, poetry can make it so that in a line, *nuit* becomes dark and *jour* bright, *tenebres* darker than *ombre*" (Milner, 2015, p. 90). Prose, on the other hand, "even in the hands of the greatest [...] writers, can never make *jour* bright and *nuit* dark." That privilege, Milner explains, "is reserved for the versified line" (Milner, 2015, p. 93-4).⁵

Now, according to Mallarmé's logic, nowhere should this "disappointment" be greater than at the point of one's proper name. For there is little sense in which one's name reflects one's character. Nothing is more "prosaic" than a name. A name "names" nothing more than the sheer contingency through which one enters language - in the West at least, one typically has no say over what one is called. Saussure's ruling on the arbitrary nature of the sign would seem to have its most perfect exemplar in one's name. And yet Nabokov, via Mallarmé, will insist that a name can after all "abolish chance." A name versified - which is to say, *styled* - breaks with the maxim that never will a roll of the dice abolish chance, as we will now see.

In the novel, Krug goes to visit his friend the playwright Ember. In an attempt to cheer themselves up over the Maximovs's disappearance, Krug tells Ember about a "curious character" he had met on a train in the United States who was hoping to make a film adaptation of *Hamlet*. Krug recites how the film would open:

"We'd begin", he had said, "with
Ghostly apes swathed in sheets
haunting the shuddering Roman streets,
And the mobled moon..." (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 257)

⁵ Milner clarifies that if poetic prose offers itself as an exception to Mallarmé's rule, it is "only because it makes use of fragments of verse" (Milner, 2015, p. 90).

As the screenplay's "pictorial possibilities" develop, we also start to hear more about Krug's interlocutor: "a hawkfaced shabby man whose academic career had been suddenly brought to a close by an awkwardly timed love affair" (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 258). His scene sketching an image of "lusty old King Hamlet" is suddenly broken with an unexpected outburst: after inviting Krug to a draught from his hip flask, the man turns from the Shakespearean drama to his own: "He added he had thought she was eighteen at least, judging by her bust, but, in fact, she was hardly fifteen, the little bitch" (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 258).

When Krug is rescued from the nightmare of his tragic life by the magic of an authorial hand, his past is erased by a "Vladimir Nabokov" whose intervention interrupts the logic of narrative time and causality. But here something from the future "slides" along its own moonbeam as the replay or repetition with a difference of Nabokov's trademark meta-fictional gesture. For in the shabby figure of the disgraced academic, Nabokov appears to suggest a post-*Lolita*, alcoholic Humbert Humbert who, released from his own "well-heated, albeit tombal, seclusion" at the end of *Lolita* (Nabokov 1996b, p. 290), now cruises the "men's lounge" of America's Amtrak trains, accosting anyone, ancient Mariner-like, who will listen to his rambling self-defense following Lolita's death in childbirth. That is to say, we have a vision of the afterlife of a possible Humbert Humbert *after* the close of the novel *Lolita*, and yet appearing in *Bend Sinister* *before* the later novel has been written.

As they continue their conversation, Ember and Krug begin to play with the possibilities suggested by a cinematic *Hamlet*:

Yes, [Ophelia] was found by a shepherd. In fact her name can be derived from that of an amorous shepherd in Arcadia. Or quite possibly it is an anagram of Alpheios, with the "S" lost in the damp grass - Alpheus the rivergod, who pursued a long-legged nymph until Artemis changed her into a stream, which of course suited his liquidity to a tee [...]. Or again we can base it on the Greek rendering of an old Danske serpent name. Lithe, lithping, thin-lipped Ophelia, Amleth's wet dream, a mermaid of Lethe, a rare water serpent, *Russalka letheana* of science [...]. (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 259)

Orpheus, the "amorous" "liberal shepherd", the "father of songs", could sing so beautifully he could divert the course of rivers, but even he could not bring his beloved Eurydice back from the dead. But Ophelia, figure of a fatal miscarriage of sexual justice, avenges what turn out to be the murderous effects of her namesake Orpheus's song, as well as that of his "forty thousand brothers", all unwitting "pupils of Lamord" (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 260). She does so not with the erotic seductions of the siren's song but with a droning that penetrates even the most carefully beeswax-stopped ears.

...we see her [continues Krug], on her back in the brook (which table-forks further on to form eventually the Rhine, the Dnepr and the Cottonwood Canyon or Nova Avon) in a dim ectoplastic cloud of soaked, bulging bombast-quilted garments and dreamily droning hey nonny nonny or any other old laud. This is transformed into a tinkling of bells, and now we are shown a liberal shepherd on marshy ground where *Orchis mascula* grows [...]. (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 258-9)

Where Orpheus merely redirects the rivers of song, passive Ophelia "on her back in the brook" drowns out, pulls down, and sucks back into herself the very principle of poetry itself. A lethal nymph who mimes the tropes of romance - (a quick internet search reveals that the *Orchis mascula* has no nectar but attracts pollinating insects by *mimicking* flowers of other species) - Ophelia slips from the unwanted embraces of poetry's rivergods by transforming into the *nonsensical* stream of letters itself. We thus recognize her affinity with another of Nabokov's "slim slimy ophidian" nymphs, "both hotly hysterical and hopelessly frigid" (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 259). If a traumatized Humbert Humbert cruises through *Bend Sinister* as a sort of advance "memory" of a book that has yet to be written, Lolita herself now makes her ghostly proto-appearance in the form of Ophelia's "quick gray-blue eyes, the sudden laugh, the small even teeth" (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 260). Ophelia, Olethia, Lolethia, Lolita. A *lethal* logic sees a dead Lolita re-turn in *Bend Sinister* as a sort of advance cinematic trailor of herself, heralding her future existence as the chimeric mother of "Lithe, lithping, thin-lipped Ophelia" (259). Where, in an earlier novel, Nabokov invoked the paradox of "twins" born at different times in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, here, Ophelia and Lolita engage in an "awkwardly timed" *philiation* process that cancels causal logic altogether, a "mother" arriving *after* a "daughter" who effectively "killed" her in childbirth. Poetry is gagged by a "blank" verse so 'pure' it erases the very concept of beginning, advancing in its place a "mobled moon" (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 257): two intertwining Moebial "mothers" who envelop or "muffle" the other's chance at life.

As a result, with Ophelia/Lolita, the name's analytic of ordering is irrevocably severed from the Creator model of representation as the external first cause. In Lo-Lethia (and with a watery wave to the future twin mothers, Aqua and Marina of *Ada*), Nabokov invokes not one but *two* causes, each immanently cancelling the other out. In this it recalls the undecidable feather-foam of 'Un coup de des'. But if Mallarmé continues to hesitate, Hamlet-like, over the ontological status of his representations, Nabokov has no such qualms. A vanishing progenitor, Lo-Lethia decisively goes down, but in so doing fatally drags down with her the logic of all representational systems founded on an inaugurating original and transcendent One.

Thus if, in *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov proposes an alternative model of literary creation to the representational fantasy of poetic genius he hides behind, it reveals itself as an operation internal to language, in excess of the "totalitarian" rule of the Symbolic - and its poetic hitmen, Alpheus and his army of forty-thousand Alpha-male rivergods. A name "versified", that is to say, "sounded" by its "virgin" blanks by-passes the temporal sequence through which meaning arises in language and events take shape in history. A wormhole in the space-time of representation, the prosaic name succeeds where poetry has failed. For if Nabokov agrees with Mallarmé that thought can only speak in prose and thus, inevitably, emits the chance that is death, to the extent that the prosaic name *does not think*, it is victorious over the absolute Master, who drowns in its nonsensical "soundings".

Paduk's totalitarian state reads as an allegory of the violence by which the signifier is arbitrarily attached to a signified. But Nabokov also suggests another relation - non-contingent, real - obtains in the name. A styled name, versified by its sonorous properties, is one that has been subjectified, transformed into what has the power to overleap the boundaries separating languages, temporalities and histories. Concealed in the styled name, a trait telegraphs through the switchboards of the Symbolic, not as a signified but a "sense" that short-circuits the pathways of thought. Irreducible, resistant to any meaning, the "sense" ported in one's name offers itself not through the will of an all-powerful Creator but from the nominal roll of the dice that shaped one's singular destiny.

Nabokov's nominal destiny found him transforming his name into a concept - the book-without-sides - setting off an uncanny letteration that, like a runaway nucleating process, traverses every point of the signifying system at once. Everything gets caught up into the shock-wave of its field: every text, not only those already written, but all possible writings - past and future - now disclose themselves as unwitting hypograms of this other "VN"'s letterating inscription which erases the mimetic logic of representation - and the spatial and temporal model it implies - altogether.

In this way, the subterfuge of the authorizing subject that upholds a certain model of Literature is unmasked, revealed as a front for a flagrant literary heist as breath-taking as it is audacious. Writing prose in the style of a French poet, Nabokov achieves Mallarmé's vision, abolishing the chance of which he, as a speaking being, is a product. A one-man constellation no matter how dispersed, however fragmented by the universe of discourse that serves as its unwitting frame, his signature style electrifies the Symbolic with a Real insurgency that overwrites the limit we know as death. By the end of the novel, the world of *Bend Sinister* sinks beneath the weight of its made-up language. A Babeling brook of phonemes storms the Institute for Abnormal Children, burning it down:

Tut pocherk zhizni stanovitsa kraïne nerazborchivym [here the long hand of life becomes extremely illegible]. *Ochevidtzy, sredi kotorykh byl i evo vnutrennii sogliadatai* [witness among whom was his own something or other ("inner spy"? "private detective"? The sense is not at all clear)]. (Nabokov, 1996a, p. 345)

And now Krug's deceased wife Olga returns, driving the car that transports Krug and Ember (and a delicate little cameo of Henri Bergson) across the "wild mountains" at sunset. A "saving" prose style does not promise a future redemption. Charged by the glow of sound, the homophony of a Mallarméan *son-glow*, it cheats the death all thought emits.

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