
# How Can Ethics Exist in Nabokov's Fated Worlds?

Alexandrov Vladimir E.



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# How Can Ethics Exist in Nabokov's Fated Worlds?

Vladimir E. Alexandrov

Yale University

I would like to suggest that there is an unresolvable paradox in Nabokov's art and in his world view: although on a number of occasions he professed faith in freedom and contingency, he did not in fact dramatize or embody them in his fictions or his autobiography[1]. By contrast, he demonstrates remarkably well how both he and his characters are trapped in fatidic webs that abut a transcendent realm[2].

I would like to suggest in addition that this paradox is inevitable for two interrelated reasons: one is the world view that Nabokov had and that underlies all that he wrote; and the other, which is particularly interesting, is the kind of reading process that his works activate. Indeed, if one pays attention to the hermeneutic guides in his novels, which should serve as models for how to seek and construct the works' meanings, it becomes impossible to find room in Nabokov's world for freedom of any kind. The special interest of this topic lies in the theoretical questions it raises about the possible limits of representing freedom or contingency in narrative art.

Thus there is a paradox in Nabokov's ethics. On the one hand, a concern with good and evil is clearly one of the foundation stones of his thought and art. On the other hand, without freedom the possibility of dramatizing moral choice becomes more than problematic.

By now it has been demonstrated convincingly that underlying Nabokov's entire oeuvre is a *sui generis*, albeit tentative faith in a transcendent otherworld[3]. This otherworld is a mysterious, hidden, potent, and ordering force or dimension that appears to affect all that exists. One of the major forms of evidence for the otherworld's existence is patterning of various kinds. As Nabokov explains in *Speak, Memory*, both the world of nature and human life appear to be shaped by some transmundane agency[4]. Speaking of himself in a well-known passage (p. 25), he concludes that neither environment nor heredity fashioned him, and implies that whatever may have formed him transcends the material world. Nabokov acknowledged as much in an early Russian poem that uses related imagery to suggest that the lyric persona's soul is marked by an "indelible, immemorial […] design devised in paradise[5]."

It is especially noteworthy that the discovery of patterning in his life does not depress Nabokov. On the contrary, his ability to identify evidence for fatidic determinism is something that he finds bracing and inspiring; in fact, on one occasion he spoke of the "comfort one feels when one realizes that for all its blunders and boners the inner texture of life is also a matter of inspiration and precision[6]."

Nabokov's conception of life as filled with patterning extends to his view of the world of nature as "made." The most famous example of this in *Speak, Memory* is his discussion of mimicry among butterflies[7]. Nabokov's explanation of this phenomenon is resolutely anti-Darwinian, and is, in fact, a variant of the venerable "argument from design" that goes back at least as far as the Bible. The reason why Nabokov was fascinated with the mysteries of

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[1] A variant of this paper is forthcoming in a Festschrift in honor of Professor Simon Karlinsky.

[2] The remarks that follow, which are a necessary ground for this paper's conclusions, summarize a number of the arguments in my book *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991).

[3] *Nabokov's Otherworld,* see Index entries under "otherworld," "metaphysics," "life after death." See also Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), and *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991).

[4] *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam's, 1966). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

[5] "Smert'" (1924), in *Stikhi* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), p. 130.

[6] Vladimir Nabokov, "L'Envoi," in his *Lectures on Literature,* ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 381.

[7] See also *Nabokov's Otherworld,* pp. 45-46.

mimicry is that they "showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things" (pp. 124-25). He generalized further when he claimed that "All art is deception and so is nature ... from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation[8]." This conclusion about design in nature also clearly thrilled rather than upset Nabokov.

If we turn now to "man-wrought things" themselves, it must be stressed that Nabokov's conception of artistic creation also hinges on the necessary involvement of the transcendent. In *Speak, Memory,* and the seminal lecture "The Art of Literature and Commonsense", this emerges during his discussion of what he calls "cosmic synchronization" and "inspiration"[9]. In both of these texts, he describes epiphanies that grant him intimations of immortality and that concurrently plant the seeds of his future work of art in his mind. For Nabokov this was one of the peak experiences of his entire existence, even though it indicated the artist's dependence on a mysterious otherworld.

The clearest expression of Nabokov's ethics in their relation to his world view also appears in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense". He explains that the same kind of painstaking and maximally heightened attention to what lies outside him that allows the artist to experience epiphanic moments of inspiration also leads to the conclusion that the "world" is "good", and that "'goodness' is something that is irrationally concrete"; conversely, "badness" is "the lack of something rather than a noxious presence," and stems from inattention, blindness, and lack of imagination (p. 375). Thus, the lecture suggests that Nabokov's ethics are intertwined with his conception of the otherworld's relation to this world.

But despite the fact that the otherworld is omnipresent in Nabokov's discursive writings, and despite its emerging as the shaping agency behind both the world of nature and human existence and activity, he did insist on a number of occasions that he believed in free will. In the lecture "The Tragedy of Tragedy", for example, he stated that "the highest achievements in poetry, prose, painting, showmanship are characterized by the irrational and the illogical, by that spirit of free will that snaps its rainbow fingers in the face of smug causality"; and "I doubt that any strict line can be drawn between the tragic and the burlesque, fatality and chance, causal subjection and the caprice of free will." By contrast, when speaking specifically of writing for the stage, he found a middle ground and hypothesized that "a writer of genius" could "without suggesting anything like the iron laws of tragic fatality" still "express certain definite combinations that occur in life[10]." Another example of Nabokov's views appears in an unpublished document in which he refers to what he calls "the miserable idea of determinism, the prison regulation of cause and effect." But then he adds: "We know from real life that however obediently we may follow the paths of causation, some queer and beautiful force, which we call free will from want of a better expression, allows or at least appears to allow us to escape again and again from the laws of cause and effect[11]." To my mind, this quotation suggests that Nabokov's view of free will may well have been ambivalent, since he is willing to entertain the possibility that it is illusory ("at least *appears* to allow us to escape").

Another well-known aspect of Nabokov's rejection of determinism is his disbelief in the existence of a predictable future: for if it were fixed then one's sense of freedom would necessarily be a delusion. This idea appears in one of Nabokov's interviews, where he says

[8] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 11.

[9] *Lectures on Literature*, pp. 371-80. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

[10] Vladimir Nabokov, "The Tragedy of Tragedy," in his *The Man from the U.S.S.R. and Other Plays*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), pp. 326, 341.

[11] Quoted by Brian Boyd in his *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Ann Arbor, Ardis, 1985), p. 56.

bluntly that "the future does not exist," as well as in the "Texture of Time" section of Part Four of *Ada*[12].

A striking exception to this view, however, one which has not been adequately noted, is Nabokov's insistence that some very select individuals — namely, writers of genius — could glimpse at least *a part* of their future. In "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" he describes the epiphanic moment of artistic inspiration as involving all three "dimensions" of time: "it is the past and the present and the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist" (p. 378). The writer's resulting task is then, in effect, to *transcribe* this "book," which already exists even though it has not yet been written down. (Nabokov himself acknowledged the Platonic character of this schema in an interview)[13]. The resulting sense of obligation "to get it right" that the author has with regard to the future work necessarily has a coercive effect on his behavior; in short, the work determines the author's behavior, and, as Nabokov puts it in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, can lead him "unerringly towards a certain imminent goal[14]".

But what do we find when we turn to Nabokov's fiction?

Perhaps its most striking feature is the extent to which it flaunts its "madeness." We are everywhere given to feel the presence of a manipulative and crafty author or narrator writing a story. This feature of Nabokov's art has long been noted by readers, of course, who for the most part interpreted it in "metaliterary" terms — as evidence for his preoccupation with the process of literary creation, which, moreover, is understood in strictly secular narrative terms — as the manipulation of the constituents of narrative for its own sake.

But the same kinds of "coincidences" of meaning and detail in a work that seem to support a metaliterary reading (the patterns, puzzles, deceptions, alliterations, and tricks of various kinds that are some of Nabokov's stylistic signatures) can also be interpreted in a completely different way — as a literary model of fate, where the author stands in relation to the text in the way that God can be said to stand in relation to the "real" world. And it is precisely in connection with this issue that Nabokov's discursive writings are particularly illuminating because they show that he saw life and nature *outside* of literature as characterized by the same kinds of features that also dominate the representation of life and nature *within* his fictional works. A telling example of this is that Nabokov once referred to instances of mimicry, or of natural deception, as "Nature's rhymes"[15]. This is a facet of Nabokov's crucial redefinition of "nature" and "artifice" as synonyms rather than antonyms, which comes close to being the key to understanding all of his art. Thus, the metaliterary in Nabokov is not an end in itself, but emerges as a model for the metaphysical.

Not only are Nabokov's novels and stories filled with myriad patterns that subtly link details which at first glance appear to be unrelated, but his works are also filled with characters who strive to read the worlds in which they exist as if these worlds are encoded scripts: Luzhin in *The Defense* feels that the events in his life are part of a large game in which he is caught; Humbert in *Lolita* wonders if the development of his affair with Lolita was not prefigured in his love for Annabel when he was a boy; and John Shade in *Pale Fire* thinks that his ability to write poetry and recognize parodic coincidence in life may be evidence for cosmic order. Examples like these can be multiplied greatly. And because they are omnipresent in Nabokov's fictions (as they are in his discursive writings), I would argue that they have the effect of forestalling the possibility of identifying any instances of freedom or chance in his

[12] *Strong Opinions,* p. 184; Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp. 559-61.
[13] *Strong Opinions,* p. 69.
[14] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 104.
[15] Boyd, *The Russian Years,* p. 298.

works. In other words, because his fictions are very rich in details the links among which need to be discovered by the reader (and which are of course "programmed" to be discovered by the reader), and because there are everywhere characters who are engaged in trying to decipher the meanings of signs, the reader is left with no choice but to assume that there may be *no* gratuitous details in the texts he confronts. And this assumption is confirmed, amply, because the deeper one digs into a Nabokovian text — the more often one rereads it — the more telling connections among its constituent details one discovers. As a result, it is relatively easy to demonstrate plausible causal links and resonant thematic echoes among the components in his works, and impossible to prove the existence of irrelevant textual details, or of instances of freedom and contingency.

Indeed, one wonders what an instance of freely chosen action or a chance event would look like. The reader who believes that both exist in Nabokov's works would have to be able to prove that there are no links — be they semantic, thematic, acoustic, rhythmic, or structural — between any chosen textual detail and anything else in the given text. For if there were even one such link, then the free or contingent nature of the detail would be put into question by the textual association it has. Even if something is "embedded" in a text only formally or structurally, the resulting relation cannot but implicate that thing's *meaning*, because to defend the opposite view is to allow for the independence of form from content. It would seem, therefore, that all claims regarding instances of supposed freedom or chance in Nabokov's works are more expressions of individual readers' own beliefs than insights into the actual character of Nabokov's complex verbal weaves. To insist, for example, that moments of "consciousness" or "self-awareness" are examples of "freedom" in Nabokov's works is in effect to claim to know definitively *what* "consciousness" or "self-awareness" actually *are*. And leaving aside whether or not any of Nabokov's exegetes actually can or do know what these states really are, we are still left with the numerous hints in Nabokov's discursive and fictional works that non-quotidian states of being impinge on what is conveniently labeled "consciousness," and thus undermine its seeming freedom (e.g., Fyodor in *The Gift* speculates that he somehow borrows his gifts — including his very Nabokovian conception of consciousness — from his father's decidedly occult aura).

Iurii Lotman's structuralist-semiotic conception of a literary text, which is based largely on examples from poetry, is highly relevant for, and accords well with the formal features of Nabokov's *sui generis* narratives. More specifically, Lotman makes a comment about randomness or contingency in life as compared to literature that is very useful for understanding *why* freedom does not appear to be possible in Nabokov's fictional world. Lotman observes that "What is a-systemic in life is reflected in art as poly-systemic"[16]. In other words, in a highly organized literary text, the illusion of freedom from systematicness is achieved, paradoxically, via polyvalence — via the placement of a particular detail at the point of intersection of many textual series. Lotman also states that "all that is noticeable in an artistic text is inevitably perceived as meaningful, as carrying a specific semantic load" (p. 195). This is another way of saying that readers — within Lotman's theory — will inevitably search for connections among details that will allow them to fit whatever they focus on into a system of meaningful relations. Implied here is of course that we are dealing with readers of Nabokov, or of other authors who create texts that are as tightly woven as his, and as predicated on comparable beliefs in the complex meaningfulness of existence.

I do not mean to imply that the connections that the reader is led to make in Nabokov's works are necessarily easy or obvious. But the presence of at least *some* readily apparent gestures toward totalization in his works has a very coercive effect on the reader's expectations, casts a long and wide shadow over them, and guides the reader to expect more totalizations, which is

[16] *Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta* [The Structure of the Artistic Text], (Moscow, 1970; rpt. Providence, Rhode Island: Brown Univ. Press, 1971), p. 96. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

an expectation that is of course not betrayed by the texts. (Relevant here are such different but not unrelated theories of the construction of meaning as Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology of reading[17], and Eisenstein's "montage"). It is worth underscoring the obvious point, however, that Nabokov represents a particular kind of writer, and that other texts, reading procedures, and authors exist. If works thematize the *impossibility* of meaning — if, for example, they contain characters who try and fail to understand what surrounds them — then the polyvalence of textual details in such works may emerge as a form of unconnectedness, a-systematicness, and freedom, albeit quite possibly of a very unpleasant sort. Writers such as the absurdist "Oberiuty" in Soviet Russia, or perhaps Kafka and Beckett, would seem to be suitable examples. Their works are parodies of earlier literary traditions, and very determinedly overturn such familiar nineteenth-century conventions as hierarchy of meaning, unified character, and causality. And we are all sufficiently familiar with "poststructuralist" strategies of reading to know that the search for unified meanings is far from being universally seen as possible or desirable. But none of this type of literature or reading has very much to do with Nabokov's unique legacy.

I would like to conclude with an example. Even in *Transparent Things*, where the story is narrated not by a mortal but by ghosts, as Nabokov explained[18], the impossibility of proving freedom is a striking feature of the work. The argument has been advanced that the ghost narrators err when they project that Hugh Person will die from a fall rather than a fire. Thus, if ghosts — or otherworldly beings who have a consciousness that far transcends that of normal human beings — fail to predict the future accurately, it follows that the future is free and not determined[19]. But this is where the conclusion that the metaliterary in Nabokov is a model for the metaphysical is especially useful. Narrators are of course not the highest forms of consciousness in narratives — they are merely the tools of the author, implied or otherwise. And the future of any character is certainly known to him. If we extend this analogy, it emerges that there may be a transcendent consciousness that does not suffer from the limitations of the ghost narrators in *Transparent Things*[20].

Nabokov's formulations about good and evil in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" are amply borne out in his fictions in the sense that his heroes are perspicacious, intelligent, and imaginative, whereas his villains are purblind dullards. But I fail to see how the fictions dramatize the possibility of choosing between good and evil on the level of characters' actions, because all the characters appear to be fatidically determined to act in particular ways — whether via the determinism of their own personalities or through some force outside them (which may be the same thing). For example, what choice does Luzhin have *not* to become enmeshed in the enthralling and destructive depths of chess when he is shown as intuiting, without having ever even played the game, that he understands it better than a pair of classmates, and when he is presented from early childhood as a vessel waiting to be filled by something that will do justice to his sensitivity to puzzles and spatial and mathematical

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[17] See, for example, his *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Munich, 1976; trans. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).

[18] *Strong Opinions*, pp. 194-96.

[19] Boyd, *The American Years*, pp. 600-601.

[20] Boyd realizes that an authorial consciousness is hierarchically above a narrator's, but he concludes that for literary works to be successful and effective authors must "allow whatever design they want to impose on their world, however complex, to be consistent with the preservation of chance" (p. 601). In the light of my arguments above, it is not clear to me how this can be achieved, in theory or in practice. Boyd's emphasis on "design" and "chance" as equally important impulses also goes against the grain of Nabokov's "semiotic hierarchy", according to which design is the higher truth about phenomena that *appear* to be free only until one has learned their true nature. As a result, Nabokov's authentic, albeit somewhat ambivalent insistence on freedom (which is further complicated by his Platonic conception of the origin of art in *Strong Opinions*, and in such novels as *The Gift*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and *Bend Sinister*) might be better understood as part of an unresolved paradox in his thought.

relations? Similarly, can Cincinnatus choose not to be "opaque," or Fyodor not to "borrow" his artistic "wings" from his father's spirit? Can Pnin escape his fatidic squirrels and Mira Belochkina's spirit even if he escapes from his narrator? Is it even relevant to speak of ethics in relation to Gradus, with his murderous inertial trajectory toward Shade and Kinbote?

My overall conclusion is, therefore, that the freedom necessary for individuals to make ethical choices is incommensurable with the artistic form and dominant themes of Nabokov's texts. But although deterministic patterns emerge everywhere in Nabokov's works, the complexity of the resulting networks is so great that one never gets the impression of dealing with mechanical predictability. The virtual impossibility that any one reader could hold all of the permutations simultaneously in mind (much less discover all of them), when combined with the patterning that does emerge clearly from the works, provides the kind of play between clarity and vertiginous depths of meaning that appear to be one of the hallmarks of all great art.