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# The Figure in the Crypt

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A character in Henry James' story "The Figure in the Carpet" answers a friend who is sceptical about his pursuit of an author's hidden meaning by saying that "if we had had Shakespeare's own word for his being cryptic he would at once have accepted it". We do have Nabokov's word for his being cryptic, notably in "The Vane Sisters". And even without his word, his fiction is haunted by a sense of riddle and game, of the 'problem' as we understand it in the context of chess. What are we to do with this haunting? Do we seek to solve the riddle or do we see the unsolved riddle as a literary form in its own right? Is the author cryptic or chronically absent? What difference does it make? This paper will explore both possibilities, and ask what the consequences are for reading and commentary of our accepting either view. The obvious test case is *Pale Fire*, and I do not wish to ignore the wonderful ongoing discussion of this novel. But in the hope of being a little less obvious, or not only obvious, I shall concentrate mainly on *Bend Sinister*.

"We can easily imagine people in 3000 A D sneering at our naive nonsense and replacing it with some nonsense of their own"
Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*

I want to return to some old questions about *Bend Sinister* in spite of the clear warning in my epigraph, and in spite of the fact that so many scholars and critics have alread written extraordinarily well about the book. Chief among the questions that interest me is Brian Boyd's "Why does Nabokov so often interrupt the political urgency of his straightforward story?" "In fact", Boyd says, "he admits politics into *Bend Sinister* only to argue that politics should be kept out of people's lives".[1] I also share Zoran Kuzmanovich's concern that "Nabokov is

[1] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: the American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp.95, 96-97. Zoran Kuzmanovich, "Suffer the Little

in essence asking readers first to imagine fully, then to nullify, the logic of Krug's suffering". John Burt Foster's idea of "hypothetical autobiography" plays a role for me here, and my conclusion is very close to that of Kuzmanovich: "In the end, such torture cannot make sense in the world of *Bend Sinister* or in any other world. It cannot because it must not". I am trying to arrive by another road at what the words "must not" mean in such a sentence, and how they are put to work.

## Three ways of looking at a crypt

My title, "The Figure in the Crypt" is meant to glance swiftly at a small complex of connections that I can't unravel now but can lay on the table for you to look at. The little mass includes the material of Henry James' short story "The Figure in the Carpet"; the argument of Maurice Couturier's book *La Figure de l'auteur*; and more generally the notion of the crypt, whether we are thinking of cryptography and the making and cracking of codes or of the ecclesiastical crypt so dear to Gothic fiction and a certain branch of psychoanalysis, the place where horrible things are hidden and yet still manage to be seen. I'm hoping to distinguish between the cryptic and the allusive or suggestive or merely mysterious, and I want to start by recalling–as if we needed reminding–that not everything that looks cryptic is cryptic.

> In James' "Figure in the carpet" two critics try to crack the code of their favourite writer's works, to find its secret, the figure, the string, as the writer himself says, on which his pearls are strung. It wasn't supposed to be a secret.
> If my great affair's a secret, that's only because it's a secret in spite of itself–the amazing event has made it one. I not only never took the smallest precaution to keep it so, but never dreamed of any such accident. If I had I shouldn't in advance have had the heart to go on. As it was, I only became aware little by little, and meanwhile I had done my work.

The narrator, one of the critics, never does find this secret, and thinks perhaps the very idea of such a secret is a hoax, a game the writer is

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Children", in Gavriel Shapiro, ed, *Nabokov at Cornel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP; 2003), pp.51, 57. John Burt Foster, "*Bend Sinister"*, in Vladimir Alexandrov, *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland; 1995).

playing with him. Many readers have felt this is the point of the story. There is no secret; there couldn't be a secret. Or rather, the secret is that there is no secret. A more interesting reading is Couturier's: there is a secret but it is diffused throughout the work "The figure in the carpet" is the figure of the author: "n'est autre que celle de l'auteur inscrite en filigrane dans toutes les pages sous les multiples formes du desir". I think this is one of the readings James was looking for, but there is one curious moment in the story when things become different. When the narrator suggests the whole idea of a secret is a hoax, he tells his friend who insists on still seeking the secret, that "He was like nothing but the maniacs who embrace some bedlamitical theory of the cryptic character of Shakespeare." "To this he replied", the narrator continues, perhaps not really understanding the puzzling reach of his friend's remark, "that if we had had Shakespeare's own word for his being cryptic he would at once have accepted it".[2]

Even Shakespeare's word would be subject to the usual hazards of such utterances: he could be joking or lying or he could change his mind. Still, we wouldn't ignore Shakespeare's word for his being cryptic if we had it. But we don't have it. This is in part no doubt why the cryptographic reading of Shakespeare does not dominate the field of Shakespeare studies, or popular readings and productions of the plays.

So already we have three relations to the cryptic, represented by:

- One: the author in James's story who admits he's cryptic, but didn't mean to be;
- Two: the silent Shakespeare (and thousands of others writers) for whom the question of being cryptic may not even come up;
- Three: Nabokov, an avowedly cryptic writer, although there is a question about how consistently and intricately cryptic he is.

The rest of this essay is an attempt to sort out what I think is a particular version of the cryptic in *Bend Sinister*, namely Nabokov's invitation to understand what he calls 'the simple reality of things'[3]

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[2] Henry James, 'The Figure in the Carpet', in *In the Cage and Other Tales*. (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 143, 151. Maurice Couturier, *La Figure de l'auteur* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p.17.

[3] Vladimir Nabokv, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p.xiv. Further quotations from this work are indicated by page numbers in the text of the essay.

and then to do something about it in terms of things that are far from simple. What I'm doing here is not quite interpretation, I think, since I'm just laying out the materials; internal annotation, perhaps, or explication without the element of explanation.

## The Mind behind the Mirror

The simple reality of things is that Adam Krug and his dead wife and tortured child are characters in a novel, that they are, as Nabokov himself rather archly says 'merely my whims and megrims' (xiv). Krug is allowed almost to perceive this fact - in our world it is a fact - about his ontological condition, but only as a form of 'blessed madness' (xiv). Krug has had 'a brief spell of being' (xiv), but only of the kind conceded to fictional characters by a historical author. There are distinct advantages to this perspective. First, Krug doesn't have to die, even within the world of the fiction, because the author can (and does) stop the narrative before a fatal bullet gets him. He has already been struck by a bullet that takes off part of his ear, and the second bullet is actually on its way:

> just a fraction of a second 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 (240).

A second advantage of this perspective is that none of the ghastly business of the totalitarian world of the novel, none of its politics or its history or its nonsense, none of the thugs or bullies or spies or murderers, and of course not the dead wife and not the tortured son, will have even lived, and so can't die either, since they are only 'mirages, illusions' (xiv), and can leave no trace in the world we share with Nabokov, the world represented by the man getting up from his table and going to investigate what turns out to be the arrival of a moth on the netting of his window.

So what is the difficulty, and where is the secret? We can see that this move of Nabokov's is tricky and extraordinarily clever, but what is cryptic about it? Is there anything cryptic about it?

Let's look briefly at the two uses of the word 'cryptic' in the text. The second is very dramatic, and concerns the intimations of Krug's

madness, something like the aura perceived by an epileptic, as he glimpses what he can't possibly know: that he is a character in a novel:

> Imagine a sign that warns you of an explosion in such cryptic or childish language that you wonder whether everything–the sign, the frozen explosion under the window sill and your quivering soul–has not been reproduced artificially, there and then, by special arrangement with the mind behind the mirror (233).

In the next paragraph Nabokov, or the person who says I, the figure of the author, slides towards Krug "along an inclined beam of pale light" and causes "instantaneous madness" in him. Krug lies back with "a smile of infinite relief on his tear-stained face... amazed and happy" (233). The context makes clear that this "happiness" is the author-narrator's ascription rather than anything Krug can claim for himself, and that it is entirely relative. What it means is that he is unable to remember his "hideous misfortune" and that he has no working reason left to register "the senseless agony of his logical fate" (233). This is precisely what we remember for him, and this is precisely why some of us are unpersuaded by the author-narrator's claim that "the last lap" of Krug's life has been "happy", and that "it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style" (241). Nabokov takes up this phrase in his Introduction, along with the phrase "anthopomorphic deity", which appears elsewhere in the text (xviii, 147). We know there is something wrong with all this–we are on the trail of the crypt–because we are given a picture of Krug's own representation of the insight his benevolent author has almost given him.

> What does it all matter (he says to the crowd in the prison yard before his projected execution)? Ridiculous! Same as those infantile pleasures–Olga and the boy taking part in some silly theatricals, she getting drowned, he losing his life or something in a railway accident.
> What on earth does it matter (236)?

This is not an expression of the understanding that life is a novel, and that none of its characters can come to harm. It is a failure to understand the reality of the world Krug still lives in, and what he calls "theatricals" are scrambled memories of his pain, still floating somewhere in his madness. Olga getting drowned must have something to do with the puddle Krug observed while she was dying;

and the railway accident comes, I think, from the fact that the wrong child, the person the torturers thought was David Krug, was supposed to have hit his head on a model of Stephenson's Rocket. This is not happiness or rescue, it is troubled idiocy. The notion that David has lost "his life or something" is particularly painful. And when Krug tells his friend Ember, also about to be killed, that there is nothing to fear because he, Krug, has had a dream or a hallucination, Ember is not deceived. He knows there is everything to fear, and he is ready to die.

Our author himself tells us that "the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow (Krug) was a slippery sophism, a play upon words" (241). What he doesn't tell us is that death, which is indeed a question of style for him as a writer and for us as readers, can't be a question of style for Krug, who has only one life, even if it is fictional. What the cryptic sign says to Krug, and to us, is that the reigning truth on one floor of the house, to borrow a metaphor from Gennady Barabtarlo[4], can't help us on another, even though it may look for a moment as if it might; and that madness is not a solution to pain, either for fictional or for historical people. As Krug himself writes, "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" (174). Krug was in better shape before his author took pity on him than he was after.

The other mention of the word "cryptic" involves a speech that doesn't happen. Krug says he will "sign anything" (212) if David is returned to him, and thereby puts an end to "the general procedure" (212) the state had planned, a sort of macabre work of vicious fiction. Krug was supposed to have filled out a questionnaire then been taken to his cell. In the following quotation a man called Konkordii Filadelfovich Kolokololiteishchikov is speaking:

> There you have a heart-to-heart talk with a fellow prisoner who is really one of our agents. Then, around two in the morning, you are roused from a fitful sleep and I start to question you again. It was thought by competent people that you would break down between six-forty and seven-fifteen. Our meteorologist predicted a particularly cheerless dawn. Dr Alexander, a colleague of yours, agreed to translate into everyday language

[4] Used in his paper at the Nice conference, June 2006.

> your cryptic utterances, for no one could have predicted this bluntness, this... I suppose, I may also add that a child's voice would have been relayed to you emitting moans of artificial pain. I had been rehearsing it with my own little children–they will be bitterly disappointed (212-213).

Fitful sleep, cheerless dawn, bitterly disappointed–this is the language of a bad novel, but it's within the novel, rather than the novel itself turned inside out. Krug's utterances may have been expected to be cryptic and removed from "everyday language" because he is a philosopher, but the context suggests rather that the scenario calls for elliptical or indirect submission, something more broken and dramatic, something painfully elicited, rather than the "blunt" "I will sign anything". "Cryptic" in the instance we looked at a moment ago meant suspect, too obviously unreadable on its own terms, giving the effect of a warning that wasn't working, or of something other than the supposed warning. Here cryptic means according to the script, readable by experts, the style of a world dominated by specialists in getting secrets out of people. Where would their jobs be if people stopped being cryptic?

Suspect, not working; secretive according to plan. Can we do anything with these meanings when we turn back to Nabokov's cryptic claims in *Bend Sinister*? I think we can. I think we already have, since if we have read Nabokov we have learned to pay special attention to signs that don't work in the way they are supposed to; and we have learned to distrust signs that behave too well, that run along the rails, so to speak.

# Bend Dexter

Krug is wrong to imagine his world doesn't matter. The author-narrator is mistaken in believing that Krug is happy or that death is only a matter of style. But these very errors are themselves cryptic; suspect signals but still signals; marks of a truth not immediately available. It's not that Krug's world is not real, or not real enough, or not all too real, it's that there are other worlds just as real if not more real. But what are those worlds, and what sort of existence do they have? Here are three such worlds, I think, although others may count more.

There is first the world that Krug can't quite see but that contains his creator, "another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty" (xv). I'm not sure why Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1940s would be such a place; but clearly the paradox of suggesting that the historical world is a moral improvement on a fictional one is very striking. Secondly, there is an identifiable sense in which Cambridge, Massachusetts does distinctly offer another world, at least for Nabokov, "the laboratorial paradise of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology" (xi). The image here announces the third alternative world evoked in *Bend Sinister*. Much irony and mischief surrounds its evocation, but it does seem real enough, historical enough; and like Nabokov's utopia of tenderness, brightness and beauty, although more ambiguously, it is an improvement on Krug's own world. However, it does exist, or did exist, in Krug's own country. We may call it the world of the ancien regime, the world before the revolution. This is the world the philosopher of ekwilism fails to understand, because he can't see, or can't accept, that there are people "for whom this world was a paradise in itself" (76). Who are these people? "Men of bizarre genius, big game hunters, chess players, prodigiously robust and versatile lovers, the radiant woman taking off her necklace after the ball" (76). A lucky group, and probably class-based; but easily imaginable, and in one sense thoroughly historical. The same world, if not the same class, is evoked in a later passage about the "comfortable murders, marriages, and boxing matches of happier and more flippant times" (169). There is plenty of irony there too; but both the ancien regime and what we might think of as mere rough normality are genuine alternatives to the totalitarian nightmare of Krug's world. Or they were alternatives; what there was before there is what there is. And in 1947, what there is after, if you were lucky.

We have an answer to our lurking question. These three worlds–utopia, privacy, old days–have a key feature in common. They are the Bend Dexter, or the world more or less without a bend. And here we come upon one of Nabokov's most important cryptic moves. When he says we are not to look for general ideas he doesn't mean we are not to look for general ideas. He means we are not to look for what other people call general ideas, only for the general ideas he doesn't

call general ideas. We are going to get nowhere if we don't understand this one.

> The term "bend sinister" means a heraldic bar or band drawn from the left side... This choice of title was an attempt to suggest an outline broken by refraction, a distortion in the mirror of being, a wrong turn taken by life, a sinister and sinistrak world (xii)

This is the mirror we have already seen, and the mind behind that mirror is profoundly interested in the "wrong turn" life has taken, which itself represents a very substantial general idea and a topic of serious human interest. The mind has angled the mirror to reflect the historical world, but as a travesty, as its own parody, if you like, what Nabokov refers to as "certain reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know" (xiii). "Caused by" gives history a good deal more credit than Nabokov usually allows that disreputable agency. And when he says the jackboots of the dictator in the novel "smelled of dung and glistened with innumerable teardrops" (232) the image is fully allegorical, but also fully historical, an eloquent response to an absolutely specific, contingent history.

But how does one represent a wrong turn, if one wants to insist without respite on how wrong it was? The short answer is that it can't be represented without complicity, without making it look more normal or acceptable, less tyrannically wrong, than it was. The longer answer is that one will need to write, or constantly allude to, a bad fiction within a pretty good fiction, and that one's very failure to represent anything really resembling the world of Stalin or Hitler will itself be a sign of not perfect but still sturdy moral health. This is how Kuzmanovich's "it cannot because it must not", plays out in the register of novelistic representation.

I don't think this strategy is perfectly developed in *Bend Sinister,* but I do think it's clear how the experiment is supposed to go. The novel–this novel, any novel–is repeatedly marked as pure fiction, a deal between writer and reader, cutting out the middle folks, the mere characters, those whims and megrims. There are dozens of moments like this in *Bend Sinister*. Let me just point to the scene where the tyrant Paduk stands with "his back to the reader" (142), or the claim by an official–the same one we have seen detailing the methods for driving Krug to the appropriate "cryptic utterances"–that he is only an

underling and that "as a matter of fact, I deplore everything that has happened in Russian literature" (212). That's half the strategy: nothing but fiction here, make no mistake. The other half says precisely the opposite: that no fiction, once set in motion, can easily be recalled, even by its author. You will remember the passage about Krug's narrative being interrupted before the "better bullet" hit him. The author-narrator didn't stop or cancel the bullet, which will hit Krug if the narrative is ever resumed, just as certain coins, dropped through the hole in a beggar's hat, are "still falling" (38). But here's a more elaborate example in the same line. A long description of the dictator–shaven head, blotched complexion, lots of blackheads, scar on his chin, soiled bandaid here and there–ends with a protest. "In a word, he was a little too repulsive to be credible" (143) So let's do the description again. No. Let's ring a bell and a mortician will come in and fix him:

> Now the skin is thoroughly cleansed and has assumed a smooth marchpane colour. A glossy wig with auburn and pink tresses artistically intermixed covers his head. Pink paint has dealt with the unseemly scar. Indeed, it would be an admirable face, were we able to close his eyes for him. But no matter what pressure we exert upon the lids, they snap open again (143).

The tyrant, the interesting logic goes, was too repulsive to be credible. But he didn't have to be credible, because he was already real. The fiction, to its credit, can't do him justice; and by the same token, can't close his eyes or make him go away.

Most of the novel's gags about representation work in this way and make the same suggestion. Did the tyrant and Krug have the conversation that has been reported in the last three or more pages? "No, it did not go quite like that. In the first place Paduk was silent during most of the interview... To be sure, he did do some drumming on the desk (they all drum)..." (147). They all drum. All dictators? All dictators in novels? All dictators in a certain kind of novel? In the pages following the drumming image the narrator twice pretends that his parodically historical scene is some sort of draft or discursive account of a play. "It is not a difficult part but still the actor must be careful what Graaf somewhere calls 'villainous deliberation"' (148); "The actor playing the recipient should be taught not to look at his hand while he takes the papers *very slowly*..." (151).

History itself has become a bad play, and the novel itself at this point is a ludicrous bending of an already existent bend sinister. When Nabokov says (twice) that death is but a question of style, he means, most simply and also most cryptically, that he wishes it was. But he also means that style is a question of ethics, and that is a point of honour to resist death and all its narratives as a chain of ugly absurdities. Denial? Yes. The world of *Bend Sinister* is the world of Mira Beloshkin, the world Pnin has taught himself to forget.[5] Except that Pnin hasn't quite taught himself to forget and neither has Nabokov. What Nabokov is apparently doing in *Bend Sinister* is to travesty the historical world and then to refuse it as a mere fiction. He refuses, we might say, to subordinate his own fiction to the grisly fictions of history. But the cryptic message, sadder and in a way nobler than this, is that history cannot be refused. The best we can do, and here I return to Kuzmanovich's point, is to refuse to understand it.

[5] cf Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp.112-113.