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A Look at Nabokov's Political Views as Depicted in *Bend Sinister*

Brian T. Quinn

Bend Sinister is the first novel Vladimir Nabokov wrote in the United States while residing at Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the novel is the direct result of his experiences during his years of European exile from 1919 to 1940 where he successively studied at Cambridge University in England, and then lived precariously as a refugee writer, first in Berlin from 1922 to 1937, and then in France until 1940.

Having observed the rise of Lenin and Stalin and then seen firsthand the hysteria surrounding the Nazi's and Hitler, he well knew of the evils such totalitarian regimes were capable of. In addition, his own brother, Sergey, who had studied together with him at Cambridge, was a direct victim of Hitler's regime and died in a German concentration camp in January 1945. In fact, Nabokov began to write this his second English novel only a few months after learning about his brother's death. *Bend Sinister* therefore represents a montage of what Nabokov had experienced in Germany under the Spector of approaching Nazism and also demonstrates his acute awareness of the harsh living conditions in his lost homeland of Russia under the communists. In this sense, the overall background theme of *Bend Sinister* is the most political and social in scope of all Nabokov's works, however, this in no way implies that the resulting work of fiction is essentially different from those purely aesthetic objectives so strongly espoused in any of his other works. In this novel the primary pursuit of artistic goals remains as the author describes the plight of a maverick genius, Adam Krug, who must continue his lonely battle for individual freedom against the overwhelming power of reactionary forces.

Nabokov has always championed art, in general, and literature, in particular, as being pure pursuits and passionately rejected the idea

of fiction as a vehicle for social or moral messages. Unfortunately, by thus so thoroughly adopting the aesthetic point of view Nabokov often succeeded in alienating a large group of readers and, as a result, continues to this very day to be popular among a relatively small group of readers while remaining somewhat inaccessible to the more general reading public.

At the time Nabokov started to write *Bend Sinister* he was still struggling to make ends meet financially and was juggling two jobs, one doing research on butterflies at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, while the other was teaching Russian at Wellesley College. The book was completed during the winter and spring of 1945-1946 and, of course, was greatly influenced by the events prior to and including the Second World War which had just come to and end a few months previously. The author himself mentions in his introduction that the title suggests "a wrong turn taken by a life, a sinistral and sinister world." (Nabokov, Intro to *Bend Sinister* p.5) The novel itself is probably one of the darkest and most pessimistic of all Nabokov's works. With the abundant attacks at the evil of totalitarian regimes it is easy to draw parallels to Orwell's *1984* or Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. However, the author makes it poignantly clear that his objectives in the novel are far from didactic: "I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment (in journalistic and commercial parlance : 'great books'). I am not 'sincere,' I am not 'provocative,' I am not 'satirical.' I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer. Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of 'thaw' in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent." (Nabokov, Introduction to *Bend Sinister* p.6) In other words, Nabokov has constantly tried to define himself as 'apolitical' throughout his career. However, in Nabokov's own unique way, *Bend Sinister* is clearly his most dynamic and clear political statement of all his novels in which the reader continually encounters numerous biting sarcastic commentary on the general nature of the

political process of Central and Eastern Europe during the 1930's and 1940's. However, even in this novel, art or human consciousness wins out over mortal transience and in the end even the heroic Krug, who alone among the cast of misfits is able to stand up to the tyrannical dictator Paduk, is allowed to escape certain death when the author, out of pity, omnipotently intrudes into the novel to save his hero by making him insane and dispersing of all those around him like a collapsing deck of cards.

Normally politics as such led Nabokov to withdraw and pass personally on offering any concrete opinions, especially in print. He was always an artist first and cared little to get involved with politics, let alone be categorized as being a member of any party, group or social school. However, on rare occasions when he feared being associated with any political circles he would fight back and make his feelings known. Perhaps one of the best examples of this was in 1963 when the literary journal *L'Arc* was planning a special issue about his works. The journal had previously published an edition that demonstrated a rather left-wing leaning and support for the new communist regime in Cuba. Nabokov greatly feared that the reading public might thus construe that he too held such views. He sent the editor, Rene Micha a clear statement and asked them to print it as a disclaimer in the planned issue on Nabokov and in which he said: "It is not my custom to display my political credo. Nevertheless a certain sympathy for Castro that I believe detected in the Cuba issue of *L'Arc* forces me in this issue to make a little clarification of my principles. I do not care a fig for politics as such. I despise all force which strikes at liberty of thought. I am against any dictatorship, right or left, terrestrial or celestial, white, grey or black, pink, red or purple, Ivan the Terrible or Hitler, Lenin, Stalin or Khrushchev, Trujillo or Castro. I accept only governments that let the individual say what he likes." (Nabokov letter to Rene Micha, December 5, 1963 in Boyd, p. 475-476) Thus we see that in trying to describe Nabokov's political leanings it is frequently a lot easier to

ascertain what he detests rather than what he supports and admires. However one thing is clear, throughout his works he has always championed the supremacy of the individual over the group. This can be seen time and again in his 'favorite' characters who are almost always stoic individuals leading a cold and lonely existence.

Nabokov's praise of the individual over the tyranny of the masses is no more clearly depicted than in *Bend Sinister*. The hero, Adam Krug, demonstrates the epitome of the true individual lost in the cruel and violent modern world. Andrew Field states that: "...Adam Krug is perhaps the best portrait of the true potentiality of man in all of Nabokov's fiction." (Field, p. 251) The hero of the novel is Adam Krug, who happens to be a world famous philosopher and university professor in an unnamed country somewhere in central Europe. The language spoken is also an artificial one created by Nabokov as a kind of jumbled blend of Russian and Germanic words which helps to give a surreal and absurd atmosphere to the actions which take place. In the first few pages of the novel, the middle-aged Krug witnesses the death of his dear wife and goes home to tell his son the sad news. The country has just been taken over by a revolutionary band of thugs preaching perfect equality but employing the good old-fashioned totalitarian methods of terror under the guidance of a dictator called Paduk—whose nickname is the Toad. Paduk happens to be an old schoolmate of Krug and since Krug happens to be one of the most famous citizens of the nameless country, Paduk is anxious to have Krug conform and show his support for Paduk's government and thus hopefully improve its international image. Krug, of course wants no part of the despicable new government and thereafter the superficial plot is that of the new regime's various efforts to have him comply with their wishes. First, he is threatened by his old school "friend" (yet, Krug lets it be known that the Toad had always been loathed) . When such threats fail to work then the time-honored methods of state terror begin to follow their due course. Krug is constantly harassed, spied on, and fired from his

job, yet, it is only when his beloved son is kidnaped that Krug agrees to follow the government's bidding. However, in a perfect example of utter incompetence and total disregard for human life, his son is accidentally tortured and murdered when he is mistaken to be the son of a different professor. The novel soon after draws to a close with Krug in prison. In solitary confinement, at the exact moment he is about to awaken from a drug induced sleep and suddenly realize that all these horrible events are real and not the hoped for nightmare, the author abruptly enters the story with his own voice to save his hero:

It was at that moment, just after Krug had fallen through the bottom of a confused dream and sat upon 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. (*Bend Sinister*, pp. 193-194)

The strategy employed here is indeed Nabokov's own escape from having to deal with the implications of his own hero dying for his beliefs, so to say, in the fashion of the great moral and political statements of most socially consciousness literature. Therefore, the author conveniently avoids having to confront the moral stance his hero takes toward his tormentors while at the same time demonstrating the artificiality of his created world.

An interesting trait that is a constant in all of Nabokov's works is the way that he presents his political or philosophical beliefs. He never directly comes out and demonstrably says that he despises all totalitarian governments, instead he convincingly creates some of his most memorable characters as the embodiment of all that he loathes and hates. Therefore, rather than criticizing something he continually uses an inverted technique of ironically extolling and caustically

praising the merits of this or that creed, be it Freudianism, Communism or Pedophilia. The superficial reader is therefore often shocked to find a character like Humbert in *Lolita* to be such a deviant hero and can easily misinterpret Nabokov's intentions if he is not careful. Yet, a more careful reader cannot help but pick up the hidden remarks and implied attacks at the evil and stupidity of such beliefs. As a result, the reader must always be on guard when reading Nabokov and be ready to identify his true message from the cacophony of false hints that litter the landscape in all of his works.

Even though *Bend Sinister* is one of Nabokov's most morbid books, the author often conveys his ironic message in some strikingly hilarious ways. This is no more so true as when Nabokov demonstrates a ridiculous speech by the president of Krug's university who tries to demonstrate his "deep loyalty" to the new regime:

Whatever political opinions we hold—and during my long life I have shared most of them—it cannot be denied that government is a government and as such cannot be expected to suffer a tactless demonstration of unprovoked dissension or indifference. What seemed to us a mere trifle, the mere snowball of a transient creed gathering no moss, has assumed enormous proportions, has become a flaming banner while we were blissfully slumbering in the security of our vast libraries and expensive laboratories. (*Bend Sinister*, p.50)

We can see in this overblown statement of hollow allegiance Nabokov's deep loathing for those who go with the flow of the momentary political trends. Even when such compromising may mean saving one's livelihood or even one's life. In this regard it could basically be said that the reader must especially beware of any belief, system or creed that is highly praised by any of the characters in Nabokov's works. Such bombastic declarations always indicate the bad "isms" that the author so despised. On the other hand, readers must be even more attentive in order to pick up the soft, understated hints

or allusions that show Nabokov's true beliefs.

Since Nabokov essentially could not care less about such things as politics or social change, it is therefore not surprising to see that a politically engaged author such as Jean Paul Sartre would find little of merit in the works of Nabokov and this can dynamically be seen in Sartre's review of Nabokov's earlier novel *Despair*. "...I fear that Mr. Nabokov, like his hero, has read too much. But I see another resemblance between the author and his character. Both are victims of the war and emigration... There now exists a curious literature of Russian emigres and others who are rootless. The rootlessness of Nabokov, like that of Herman Karlovich, is total. He does not concern himself with any society, even to revolt against it, because he is not of any society." (Sartre review of *Despair* in Field, p. 167)

In Nabokov's enlightening book *Strong Opinions*, he offered a good synopsis of his opinion of literature's role in society: "A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me. I don't give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth. Although I do not care for the slogan 'art for art's sake'—because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists—there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art." (*Strong Opinions*, p. 33) Thus, in strong contrast to the highly political Sartre, Nabokov sees literature as playing a role on a totally different plane from man's daily struggle to survive in a cold and harsh world.

Another basic repeating theme in all of Nabokov's works is his aversion to groups and organizations: "I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school had any influence over me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent." (*Strong Opinions*, p. 3) Nabokov also maintains the

same philosophy in regard to religious and even academic organizations when he says: "I have never belonged to any political party but have always loathed and despised dictatorships and police states, as well as any sort of oppression. This goes for regimentation of thought, governmental censorship, racial or religious persecution, and all the rest of it. Whether or not my simple credo affects my writing does not interest me. I suppose that my indifference to religion is of the same nature as my dislike for group activities in the domain of political or civic commitments. I have allowed some of my creatures in some of my novels to be restless freethinkers but here again I do not care one bit what kind of faith or brand of non-faith my reader may assign to their maker." (*Strong Opinions*, p. 47)

This complete loathing of groups is no more clearly illustrated than in one section of *Bend Sinister* when the new government of the Ekwilists (Ekwil=equal) expounds the philosophy in a "serious" newspaper article that by joining groups all of man's modern problems can be solved:

A person who has never belonged to a Masonic Lodge or to a fraternity club, union, or the like, is an abnormal and dangerous person. Of course, some organizations used to be pretty bad and are forbidden today, but nevertheless it is better for a man to have belonged to a politically incorrect organization than not to have belonged to any organization at all. As a model that every citizen ought to sincerely admire and follow we should like to mention a neighbour of ours who confesses that nothing in the world, not even the most thrilling detective story, not even his wife's plump charms, not even the daydreams every young man has of becoming an executive someday, can vie with the weekly pleasure of foregathering with his likes and singing community songs in an atmosphere of good cheer and, let us add, good business. (*Bend Sinister*, pp. 142-3)

It is clear that here Nabokov is doing nothing more than having a rollicking good laugh at those mortals who feel continuously impelled to "belong" to some kind of group or other. His intentions are of course clear, anyone who "needs" to join such groups is by his definition a member of the lowly herd of human existence.

Among the strange series of characters and events that fill the void of Nabokov's world, the author clearly shows that it is not tyranny or physical pain and suffering which defines the meaning of human existence but, instead, Nabokov always stresses the supreme importance of human consciousness which in *Bend Sinister* he describes as:

...the only real thing in the world and the greatest mystery of all.
(*Bend Sinister*, p. 156)

For Nabokov his idea of consciousness means the ability of a human being to somehow comprehend all the possibilities of life itself, and especially the abilities to grasp those rare fleeting moments of brief ecstasy that allow us to transcend the real world around us. In Nabokov's opinion, it is only with this sense of consciousness that humans can attain new heights, and it is also this same sense of conscious which most clearly distinguishes the 'artist' from the rest of the huddling masses of hummanity. Thus it is only the select few "favorite" characters such as Krug, who indeed search for the meaning of true human consciousness, that eventually become true mouthpieces for Nabokov. As for the petty dictators and brutes that abound in his world, Nabokov considers all of them nothing more than a farce, or just a parody of absurd jokes. That is therefore the reason why so much of the novel *Bend Sinister* is portrayed in a surrealist series of absurd scenes.

To summarize Nabokov's political or social beliefs I would once again like to return to a statement he made in his book *Strong Opinions*:

“My loathings are simple: stupidity. oppression, crime, cruelty, soft music. My pleasures are the most intense known to man: writing and butterfly hunting.” (*Strong Opinions*, p. 3) Since Nabokov tends to prefer and illustrate his loathings rather than his likes it is up to the reader to extrapolate what exactly his beliefs are. First of all it is fair to say that respect for individual freedom ranks as one of the principles that he holds dearest to his heart and that is the reason he stubbornly avoided belonging to any groups or parties all his life. It is also interesting to note that during his almost 20-year academic career in the United States, Nabokov never once attended any faculty or staff meetings. For these same reasons, Nabokov always showed a complete indifference to religion.

It must be said here that *Bend Sinister*, as well as several other works, in particular his earlier Russian novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (which the author even mentions in his preface as having ‘obvious affinities’ to *Bend Sinister*), to the extent that they are concerned with politics and society, reflect an almost bottomless pessimism in regard to politics and the social process in our modern age. Whenever we read Nabokov’s books it is important to remember that he was forced into exile by a bloody and barbaric communist regime, lost his wealthy inheritance and then saw his father, who had been a leading liberal democrat politician in the ill-fated democratic Russia of February 1917, brutally murdered in cold blood while in exile in Berlin because of “politics.”

Nabokov’s eventual total retreat to absolute individualism thus seems to indicate his belief that no forces exist in the world, be they political, social, moral, religious or even historical, that can ever help undo the unbearable suffering continually inflicted on innocent and decent people by countless savage and incompetent ideologues and power brokers who he believes have only succeeded in leading mankind to new heights in evil and atrocity during the first half of this century.

In great contrast to this pessimistic view is the warm and tender

relationship of Krug and his eight-year-old son David that is so poignantly portrayed in *Bend Sinister*. In fact, it is only in the kind and loving scenes between the father and son that we can glimpse into a true release of the author's feelings. Thus we understand that while Nabokov totally rejects the politics of our world (and thus condemns those who dedicate their lives to such pursuits) he believes that all men must carry on staunchly relying on their own selves, while, at the same time, hopefully finding some solace in the simple joys of a happy and caring family. This also accurately reflects Nabokov's personal life in which the only unbending positive constant throughout his life was his complete and overwhelming devotion to his wife and son.

Of course, one of the greatest influences on Nabokov's general world view was perhaps the fact that he had to abandon his beloved homeland as a young man. Thereafter, for the next sixty years he wandered the world without ever truly settling down, never once buying a house or land, having but few personal possessions, and living his last years in a hotel room in Montreux, Switzerland.

Indeed, *Bend Sinister* has, on the surface, all the ingredients of a full blown political novel while it shows the evils of totalitarian dictatorships, however, no value judgments are ever made in the novel. The ultimate value or lack of value is only implied and judgments, either moral or political, are left completely to the reader's own discretion. In Nabokov's world it is always left up to the reader to decide on what exactly constitutes good or evil, right or wrong. The characters that populate the illusory worlds of Nabokov, at least his favorite characters, such as Krug, who show genius as well as the ability to transcend the mundane stupidity of the dull souls surrounding them, do not as a rule make any such value judgments. At the same time, it is a rare instance when Nabokov's true intentions are anything but clear. Yet, one must hasten to add that in numerous cases, Humbert Humbert's praise of pedophilia and debauchery in the novel *Lolita* is the most noted of these, many critics have

misinterpreted Nabokov's ironic statements for the author's actual own beliefs. Therefore, the reader must always be careful not to attach anything the characters say in Nabokov's fictional worlds to be any of the author's own personal tenets. However, the author's basic beliefs are easy to grasp if one only looks closely enough.

In order to avoid the problem of apparent didacticism at the close of the novel *Bend Sinister* just when the hero, Krug, is about to be executed along with his friends in a typical Stalinesque mass murder, Nabokov relies on a technical trick in order to avoid the impression that this senseless murder of innocent people like Krug may have been his main theme. In the last four paragraphs of the novel, the "all powerful author" Nabokov suddenly intrudes into the action when he shifts from describing Krug's final moments and then quite nonchalantly starts to describe himself (Nabokov) as a writer working on the novel in his room:

He (Krug) 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. (*Bend Sinister*, p. 200)

Thus, as the novel comes abruptly to a close the reader becomes acutely aware that the illusion of the novel has been broken and that the entire novel itself had been nothing more than just a fabrication, another one of Nabokov's artificial worlds. In this way Nabokov clearly and demonstrably reminds the reader that art is, in the end, only a game and that social or political value judgments remain forever inappropriate in the world of pure fiction.

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