

NABOKOV: THE CYNICAL CREATOR (CONCLUSION)

CONCLUSION

The crux of Nabokov's fiction is his method: "Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy."¹ Whether he composes a novel or a chess problem, the main goal of Nabokov is to create a competitive situation between the author and the world. Nabokov has deliberately written books that will involve the reader in competition with the author. The reader is somehow forced to see the enchanting and deceptive game that Nabokov offers him as either a trap to be avoided, or a magical delight that must be looked into. Many readers (I am one of them) approach Nabokov at first with caution, especially after learning that he can pull the rug out from under one's feet. Here is the cynical creator whom I have attempted to picture in this thesis. To catch the elusive Proteus that Nabokov is has left many critics discouraged, even distraught.

Perhaps the only way to approach Nabokov is with an appreciation of design. That, I believe, is the final key to understanding Nabokov. The unique design of intricate magic and innate harmony permeates Nabokov's novels. It is as if the minute "insignificant" things in art and in nature were suddenly thrust into focus. To conclude, I

¹Nabokov, Conclusive Evidence, p. 219.

would like to focus on what seems to be an insignificant matter which illustrates the intricate design in a unique manner--the chess problem that Nabokov creates in Conclusive Evidence.

Here is the game as Nabokov sets it up in Conclusive Evidence:²

I have before me the sheet of paper upon which, that night in Paris, I drew the diagram of the problem's position. White: King on a7 (meaning first file, seventh rank), Queen on b6, Rooks on f4 and h5, Bishops on e4 and h8, Knights on d8 and e6, Pawns on b7 and g3; Black: King on e5, Rook on g7, Bishop on h6, Knights on e2 and g5, Pawns on c3, c6 and d7. White begins and mates in two moves.

After the board is set up, a preliminary recount of the game is necessary in order to know how the pieces arrived at their present position. The perspective of looking back is half the fun of playing out the problem that Nabokov presents. The most obvious observation as to what happened before is that Black has lost his Queen.³ Since

²Conclusive Evidence, p. 223. Also, Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited (revised ed.; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 293. Nabokov uses the German notational system of setting up the board. Set the chess pieces on the chessboard in the following manner: alphabetical characters, a,b,c,d,e,f,g,h, proceeding from left to right, and the numerals, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8, running upwards, these being always calculated from the white side of the board. The alphabetical characters are the files; the numerals are the ranks. See Appendix.

³Humbert loses his Queen, Lolita, when he is not looking. During his game with Gaston, Humbert notices "through the film of my general distress that he could collect my queen" (*Lolita*, p. 205). Gaston takes the queen, just as later Quilty takes Lolita.

White King is on the left side of the board, White has most probably castled on the Queen's side of the board.⁴ Black has one Rook missing,⁵ and Black is also missing one Bishop.⁶ White has all of its major pieces; in other words, White lost only six pawns, while Black lost the Queen, a Rook, and a Bishop. It should also be noted that the proximity of White King and Queen gives Black Knight the prospect of a forked check⁷ (if it can ever get to c8). Another observation: Black's Bishop has somehow moved itself into a trapped position.⁸ The position of being trapped or pinned can drive one mad: this happens to Nabokov's greatest chess player, Luzhin.⁹ Finally, the position of

⁴Krug, in Bend Sinister, makes the following move: ". . . for the present the only move I care to make is to rook my King the long side" (p. 80).

⁵Dr. Pavel Antonovich Pnin, Timofey Pnin's father, "takes a rook" (Pnin, p. 132).

⁶In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Sebastian's girl friend Clare Bishop slips out of Sebastian's life to marry a man named Mr. Bishop. (pp. 71-80).

⁷In King, Queen, Knave, White is warned unwittingly by Dreyer that "Black's Knight was planning to attack White's King and Queen with a forked check" (p. 241). Dreyer's nephew, Franz, is the Black Knight.

⁸In King, Queen, Knave, Franz and Martha are related to the movements in chess: "Thus a chess player playing blind feels his trapped bishop and his opponent's versatile queen move in relentless relation to each other" (p. 142).

⁹Concerning Luzhin's madness, Andrew Field says in his book Nabokov: His Life in Art: "the title of the 1934 French translation is The Course of a Madman, the French word madman also signifying the chess bishop" (p. 176).

Black King should be noted. It seems that Black King has played foolishly by moving into the center of the board, and thus exposing himself from all sides. The theme of the king as a solus rex figure runs throughout Nabokov's fiction and is relevant to the chess problem. In Pale Fire, Charles Kinbote, who imagines himself to be the exiled King of Zembla, signs a plan of his with a "black chess-king crown after 'Kinbote'" (p. 107). The "real" King of Zembla, Charles Xavier, or Charles II, finds himself in a curious situation of "being the only black piece in what a composer of chess problems might term a king-in-the-corner waiter of the solus rex type" (pp. 118-119). Charles Kinbote suggests the title of Solus Rex for John Shade's poem. In Invitation of a Small Evening, Timofey Prin's son, Victor, thinks of his father as the King--"solus rex (as chess problem makers term royal solitude)." (p. 86). In The Defense, Luzhin is the grandmaster of chess, "the game of the gods" (p. 43). But he is the most helpless of all solus rex figures, for not only is he "an exposed helpless King" (p. 55), but in his sleep Luzhin sees himself in the middle of a gigantic board as "trembling and stark-naked . . . the size of a pawn" (p. 236).

One more thing should be considered before Nabokov's chess problem is to be solved. Nabokov suggests that the would-be solver move White Pawn and make a Knight out of it. Of course, the suggestion is deceptive, because Black

would frustrate the whole scheme by not checking White; Black can be mated in two moves only if Black falls for the illusory pattern of play and checks White. Nabokov says: "The false scent, the irresistible 'try' is: Pawn to b8, becoming a knight, with three beautiful mates following in answer to disclosed checks by Black; but Black can defeat the whole brilliant affair by not checking White and making instead a modest dilatory move elsewhere on the board."¹⁰ The "modest dilatory move" will be discussed later, but first a close look should be given to the irresistible try. If the Pawn at b7 is knighted, then here are the three beautiful mates that follow in "answer to disclosed checks" by Black:

	White	Black
1.	P-b8 P (Kt)-d7 mate	P-d6 check
2.	P-b8 Q-c7 mate	P-d5 check
3.	P-b8 Kt-f7 mate	PxKt check

If Nabokov's deceptive suggestion is not followed, several other moves are possible. One would be to check the Black King, which has also been set as a trap--"a conventional move," Nabokov calls it. But to check the King with the Queen wouldn't give the proper results: Q-c5 check, P-d5 prevents check. The pawns prevent the Queen from performing a checkmate on that side of the board. On

the right-hand side of the board, on the other hand, is what is known as a stalemate between pieces: Black Rook and Knight cannot move to help or protect the King, since that would put the King in check (the rule being that a player cannot put his King in check) by White Bishop (on h8) and White Rook (on h5), respectively. And White cannot take Black Rook or Knight because Bishop is guarding both pieces, and a checkmate in two moves would not result from a sacrifice of pieces on that side. It would seem that those four pieces are set up merely for the design (and to create a distracting theme), since there is a certain pleasure achieved in a chess position where chess pieces are pinned.

There are other tries that prove futile. If White Rook moves to f5-check, King can take Bishop or move out of the center into d6; if King takes Bishop, Knight can move to c5 to check King but King can move to e3, whereas if King moves into d6 and out of the center, the Queen can check from c7, whereupon the King will proceed to move between the Knights, into e7. So the Rook-check is futile. To move the Knights to achieve a checkmate is also futile. And the Queen has already been tried. So there is only one more "lever" to pull, one more series of moves to try.

The Bishop on e4 must then be the key to the problem. The Bishop (in French it is called "le Fou"--the jester or the madman), can be moved to any position below its present

position--it cannot go to the higher (upper right-hand) as will become evident in further analysis. So the Bishop must move to the lower left-hand part of the board, either b1, c2, or d3. Moving the Bishop to d3 might make the Knight panic and jump on the Rook whereby the Queen would glide to d4 and checkmate. But if the Knight doesn't panic then Black will have to make another move. The King can't move because d5 and d6 are the only possible moves (Rook guards the 4th rank now, also); if King moves to d5 or to d6, Queen merely steps down one square to c5 and checkmate. So it has to be a pawn that makes the move. If Pawn moves to c5 to blunt Queen's move to checkmate the King (if QxP, P-d5 prevents mate in two moves), Rook can move to f5 and checkmate. If Pawn moves to d6, Rook can still produce the same result, checkmate; and if the same Pawn moves one more square down to d5, since it is entitled two squares on its first move, then Queen can slip into c7 to manage a checkmate there. But, there is one more pawn left. The Pawn on c3 can move to c2. So Bishop to d3 is not the solution, neither would Bishop to b1 be a solution either since Pawn would still move to c2.¹⁰

The simple key to the problem, then, is Bishop to

¹⁰The mating move is to be Q-d4, and for this purpose the Knight covering d4 must be dislodged at all costs. White dislodges him by the simple expedient of making the moving any other piece--as it happens, "any other piece" means the unencumbered pawn on c3--impossible.

c2. That move prevents the Pawn from making any move at all. Since it was established earlier that if Knight takes Rook then Queen moves to d4 and checkmate, and since it is also clear that if either pawn moves, the Rook can maneuver into f5 to perform a checkmate (except if Pawn makes a leap into d5, then the Queen must perform the checkmate from c7), then it is quite evident that the problem has been solved; the only loose end (and it is quite a trivial one at that since it is only a matter of style) is the manner of death (or checkmate) that is chosen for solus rex-- whether it will be the frantic Knight making a leap at the Rook only to have the Queen pay compliments to the King for a game nicely played, or whether it will be the pawns harassing the Queen and forcing the Rook to do the honors. I have faith that the Knight¹¹ will make a futile move to

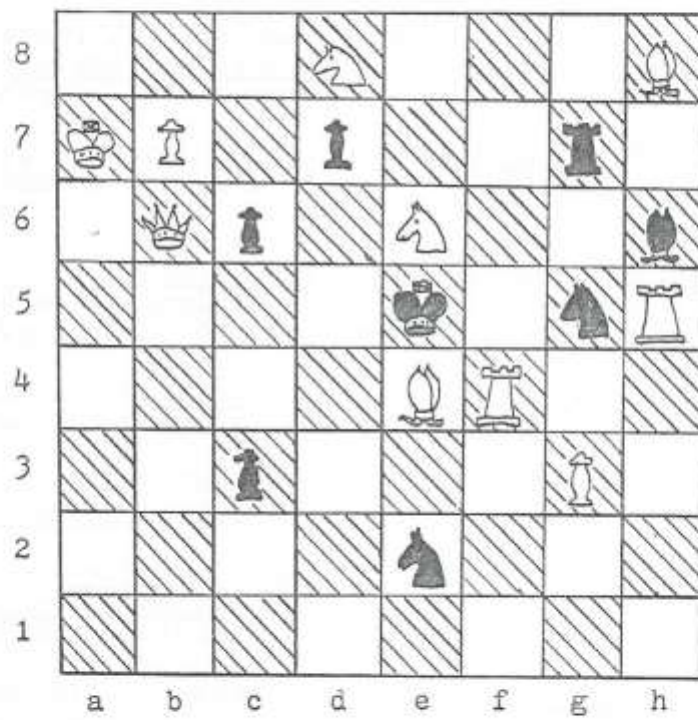
¹¹The move of the Knight is a subtle impersonation by Nabokov. It usually signifies Nabokov's hand in the game: "Actually, of course, any genuinely new trend is a knight's move, a change of shadows, a shift that displaces the mirror" (The Gift, p. 251). In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Sebastian has a peculiar way of signing his name: "the signature under each poem was a little black chess-knight drawn in ink" (p. 17). In Conclusive Evidence, Nabokov's chess piece, the king's knight, has a "small crimson crown" painted on the brow (p. 222). In Lolita, Kenneth Knight's name is on the Ramsdale school list (p. 54); his name appears almost beside the name of Dolores Haze (one name below Rosaline Honeck). In Invitation to a Beheading, Cincinnatus C. is seen "pensively picking at a knight" (p. 146) after he beats M'sieur Pierre in a chess game. In Pale Fire, the moves of Gradus are compared to the "fanning out of . . . a chess knight" (p. 276).

eliminate the Rook so as to stand by its King whereupon the Queen will be able to checkmate the King in close proximity. The two move mate is thus as follows:

White	Black
B-c2	Kt x R
Q-d4 mate	

The theme of the entire combination is that White Bishop leaves the center (the four center squares of the board), leaving the King alone (solus rex). The move that the Bishop makes is like a jest, for the King previously thought he had someone sharing the center with him--it was an opposing Bishop (jester), of course, and the move of the Bishop reinforces the fact that the King is truly alone. Even if the Knight moves up beside the King, the Knight will only occupy a square outside the center. And when the Queen comes down to occupy the center with the King in a diagonal position--well, there you have a perfect expression of the theme of the spiral within a circle in the chess problem that Nabokov has presented. The King is the thesis, the Queen is the antithesis, checkmate is the synthesis, and the center that the two pieces occupy is the square (or prison) within which the play is enacted.

APPENDIX



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Videos about Vladimir Nabokov (YouTube)

[Added on Jan. 6, 2020]

https://youtu.be/35_PBHsfqIU

Vladimir Nabokov discusses Lolita part 1 of 2

Vladimir Nabokov discusses his brilliant novel "Lolita" on "Close Up", a circa 1950's CBC program.

<https://youtu.be/EPQShQGfhDk> (Russian)

Документальный фильм 'Владимир Набоков. Русские корни'

<https://youtu.be/l6woPKpgvCI> (Russian)

В. НАБОКОВ, Рассказы: Рождество, Гроза, Красавица, Ужас. Читает Вера Енютина

<https://youtu.be/QzOt0bMmXiY> Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Poems and Prose | 92Y Readings

<https://youtu.be/mnywEPdkzEI> Vladimir Nabokov Tribute featuring Martin Amis - Books, Quotes, Writing (1998)