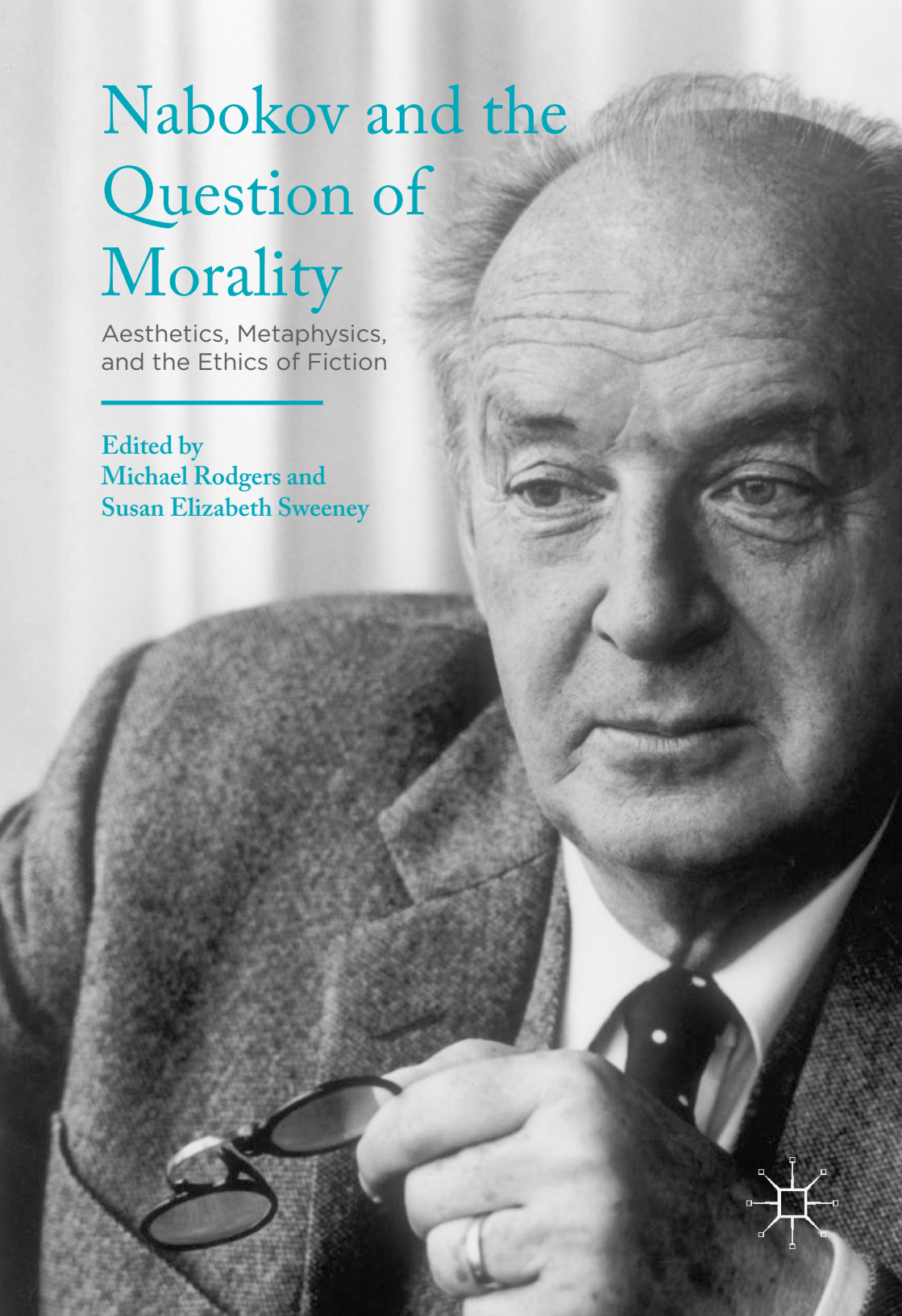
Nabokov and the Question of Morality

Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction

Edited by
Michael Rodgers and
Susan Elizabeth Sweeney



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Editors
Michael Rodgers
English Studies
University of Strathclyde
Glasgow, UK

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney
English Department
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, Massachusetts, USA

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This volume is dedicated to Samuel Schuman (1942–2014),
a friend of Nabokov studies and of Nabokovians:
"you are in that song, you are in that gleam, you are alive"
(Vladimir Nabokov, "Easter")

Contents

Abbreviations for Titles of Nabokov's Works

Ada	*Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*
AnLo	*The Annotated* Lolita
BS	*Bend Sinister*
Def	*The Defense*
Des	*Despair*
En	*The Enchanter*
Gift	*The Gift*
Glory	*Glory*
Invitation	*Invitation to a Beheading*
LATH	*Look at the Harlequins!*
Laugh	*Laughter in the Dark*
LL	*Lectures on Literature*
Lo	*Lolita*
LRL	*Lectures on Russian Literature*
LV	*Letters to Véra*
Mary	*Mary*
NB	*Nabokov's Butterflies*
NG	*Nikolai Gogol*
NWL	*Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*
PF	*Pale Fire*
Pnin	*Pnin*
PP	*Poems and Problems*
RLSK	*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*
SL	*Selected Letters, 1940–1977*
SM	*Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*
SO	*Strong Opinions*
Stikhi	*Stikhi*

Stories	*The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*
TOM	*The Tragedy of Mister Morn*

Abbreviations for Nabokov's Biography

VNAY	*Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years,* by Brian Boyd
VNRY	*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years,* by Brian Boyd

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Nabokov's Morality Play

Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

"Morality play" may seem like an odd way to describe Nabokov's oeuvre. It immediately evokes the kind of allegorical drama, popular in the late medieval period, in which assorted personifications of vice and virtue interact with a figure such as Everyman so as to teach a didactic lesson. Nabokov, of course, is neither allegorical nor didactic. He detested lessons and symbols and simplifications, anything that subordinates individual experience to general rules. Even so, this phrase strikes us as fitting because Nabokov's writing is both profoundly playful *and* inherently moral.

Critics have long noted his delight in patterns, puzzles, and performances, while recent books such as Thomas Karshan's *Nabokov and the Art of Play* (2011) or Siggy Frank's *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (2012) examine that affinity for plays and playing even more fully. Unfortunately, some of Nabokov's readers have been slower to comprehend the moral aspects of his fiction. (By *moral*, we mean those aspects relating to ethical judgments about "right" or "wrong" behavior.) His novel *Lolita*, in particular, has been labeled as "amoral, moral, or immoral art," in Eric Lemay's phrase, ever since its 1955 publication; occasionally,

M. Rodgers (✉)
English Studies, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

S.E. Sweeney
English Department, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA

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it has been banned outright by public libraries or government ministries. In early 2013, a group of self-appointed censors in Russia, condemning it as "amoral," first tried to suppress a stage adaptation with anonymous threats, then assaulted the producer, and finally vandalized St. Petersburg's Nabokov Museum in order to express their outrage against the author.[1] And yet, despite occasional controversy over *Lolita*'s moral import, and despite lingering impressions of Nabokov as interested only in art for art's sake, many scholars have explored the ethical and spiritual dimensions of not only this novel but his entire body of work.

Nabokov and the Question of Morality is the first collection to gather, evaluate, and compare these attempts to establish what Leland de la Durantaye calls "the moral art of Vladimir Nabokov."[2] It was inspired by a symposium on "Nabokov and Morality," organized by Michael Rodgers at the University of Strathclyde in 2011, that featured seven of the scholars whose work is represented here. The volume's title sums up our sense that Nabokov's fiction continually poses difficult, mischievous, serious, and lively questions about both morality and ethical behavior. Its subtitle—*Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction*—focuses more narrowly on issues relating to his definition of art; his speculations about other realms of being; and the implications of his characters' choices and fates. Admittedly, these three categories are interconnected. Vladimir Alexandrov points out that Nabokov's "metaphysics are inseparable from his ethics and his aesthetics; indeed, all three are best understood as names for a single continuum of beliefs" ("Otherworld" 568). The artistic credo expressed in Nabokov's well-known essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*"—that literary works only exist for him to the extent that they provide "a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" (314–315)—clearly reflects such interdependence.[3]

Even though the three concepts remain closely linked, this volume establishes subtle distinctions among them.[4] *Nabokov and the Question of Morality* includes detailed investigations of matters such as just or unjust reading; religious imagery; monomania; ethical dilemmas; love and sacrifice; crime and punishment; and representations of sex, violence, or moral emptiness in his work. In exploring these topics, the collection offers previously unpublished chapters by some of the world's leading Nabokov scholars on the full scope of his literary career—from his earliest short stories, plays, and poems to his most important novels in Russian and English (with some chapters focused solely on *The Gift, Lolita*, or *Pale Fire*), as

well as his other books. It also examines Nabokov's writing in the context of other thinkers—Carlyle, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Shklovsky, Wittgenstein, Lacan, and Derrida—as well as other disciplines such as anthropology, neuroscience, jurisprudence, religion, and philosophy (including, within this last category, moral sense theory, poststructuralism, and action theory).

These widely different approaches offer new insights into Nabokov's fiction, suggesting that morality itself is perpetually "in play," allowing for a range of movement as well as a number of options. Each story or novel juggles a series of philosophical, ethical, and spiritual possibilities. We might even say that Nabokov's fiction does indeed stage a kind of morality play, if by that we mean a highly stylized performance which provokes profound moral questions. He is always careful, however, to leave such questions unanswered.

Enactments of Nabokov and Morality

Up until the last two decades of the twentieth century, the terms *Nabokov* and *morality* seemed anathema to one another. From the very beginning of his career as a Russian émigré writer in Europe, Nabokov was seen as abandoning the "moralizing and didacticism" of his predecessors (Perelshin, qtd. in Dolinin 56), while instead emphasizing aesthetic splendor, displaying an apparently indifferent (some might even say cruel) attitude toward his characters' fates, and utterly refusing to engage with social or political themes. For many years, it seemed a matter of simple commonsense—which was one of his least favorite words, we should remember (*LL* 372)—that Vladimir Nabokov was uninterested in moral questions. Even after he started a second career as a writer in English, immigrated to the USA, published *Lolita,* and attained a wide audience, commercial success, and international acclaim, the first books about his work still stressed its artfulness, as their very titles indicate: *Escape into Aesthetics*; *Nabokov: His Life in Art*; *Nabokov's Deceptive World*; and *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels*.[5] One early review of his fiction even proclaimed that "as for the moral and humane dimensions—'profundities,' compassions, inner developments—it simply does not have them" (Adams 423).

With the publication of Ellen Pifer's *Nabokov and the Novel* in 1980, however, his work was for the first time explicitly considered in a moral context, rather than condemned for its apparent indifference to such matters. Questioning the calcifying view of Nabokov as a mere aesthete, Pifer

established that his fiction reveals an "abiding interest in human beings, not only as artists and dreamers, but as ethical beings subject to moral law and sanction" (iii–iv). Since then, a number of other scholars have explored his humanism as well as his representation of ethical issues. In a critical study of the Russian and English fiction, David Rampton proposed in 1984 that Nabokov's works emphasize content as much as form, invoking the figure of "the moral Nabokov" for the first time (30). In one of the earliest books devoted to a single work, *Nabokov's* Ada: *The Place of Consciousness*, Brian Boyd argued in 1985 that this novel, which some readers considered self-indulgent, offered "a demanding critique of the moral responsibilities of consciousness" (12). A few years later, in *Nabokov and the Mystery of Literary Structure* (1989), Leona Toker traced the distinctive "combination of formal refinement and poignant humanism" in many of his books (ix). The author's attitude toward the terrible suffering endured by his characters, in particular, has been a subject of debate ever since philosopher Richard Rorty published, also in 1989, a chapter on Nabokov and cruelty in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.[6]

During this same period, the notion of a spiritual Nabokov began to appear. In 1979, two years after Nabokov's death, his widow remarked in her introduction to a slender posthumous edition of his Russian poems that "*potustoronnost'*," or the hereafter, was a pervasive theme in his work which had been little noticed by critics (3–4). Over the next few decades, several scholars—particularly Vladimir Alexandrov, in *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991)—took Véra Nabokov's hint and investigated this theme in detail.[7] Consideration of the supernatural in Nabokov has led to new readings of familiar works, proposing that they embed cryptic messages from deceased characters to living ones in the form of dreams, weather, inanimate objects, or wordplay.[8] Critics have also investigated Nabokov's allusions to Judaism and Christianity as well as his use of various religious motifs, including demons, angels, saints, and the Garden of Eden. Such scholarship suggests that his works often contain hidden references to a transcendent moral realm.

A related strain of Nabokov criticism explores his novels' concern with ontological and teleological mysteries, especially in terms of narrative structure. D. Barton Johnson's *Worlds in Regression* (1985) offered an important early overview of Nabokov's imaginary worlds, while Pekka Tammi's *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics,* published the same year, showed how his self-reflexive narrative devices model his cosmology. More recently, David S. Rutledge has argued, in *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery: The Expression*

of Metaphysics in His Work (2011), that his narrative designs evoke the ineffable and unknowable. Clearly, then, to consider Nabokov within a moral context involves joining him on a quest for things not "dreamt of in [our] philosophy" (*Hamlet* 1.5.166–167).

With regard to philosophy, in fact, Nabokov once asserted, in his foreword to the English translation of *Invitation to a Beheading*, that the only author who had influenced him was Pierre Delalande—a nineteenth-century French philosopher whom he himself invented (6–7). But even if Nabokov were *sui generis*, as he claimed, he must still have encountered similarities between his insights and those of other minds. Toker suggests that his fiction evokes various schools of thought without subscribing to any particular system: "Gnostical imagination, Christian symbolism, Romantic search for wholeness, Schopenhauer's poesy, and Bergson's vision were *alternative* takes on experience—visions with which Nabokov's own intuitions had various affinities" ("Nabokov's Worldview" 238–239). Some critics have argued that this or that philosopher did influence his thinking, if only in a negative way. During the 1980s, for example, several scholars—including Phyllis Roth in "The Man behind the Mystification" (1982) and Geoffrey Green in *Nabokov and Freud* (1988)—considered his vexed relationship with "the Viennese witch doctor" (*Invitation* 9).[9] More recently, critics have examined his explicit or implicit dialogues with other important philosophers, including Kant, Bergson, and Sartre.

Interest in the humanist, otherworldly, metaphysical, and philosophical aspects of Nabokov's work leads, in turn, to another topic: his political beliefs. Robert Alter published an important essay on the author and "the art of politics" as early as 1970. In 1992, Charles Nicol observed that Nabokov "had a deep political philosophy, on which he rarely acted; when he did act, it was in a highly personal manner. It was woven from two strands that seem antithetical: a profound acceptance of the views of his articulate and politically active father, and an equally profound individualism that prevented Nabokov from joining any group—especially one of a political nature" (625). Since then, several critics have explored the connections between Nabokov's political beliefs and personal relationships,[10] while others discuss his fiction in the context of its resistance to totalitarianism.[11]

Today, some thirty years after Pifer published *Nabokov and the Novel*, it may no longer seem startling to mention such moral problems in connection with his fiction. Indeed, two subsequent books—Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts* (1994) and de la Durantaye's *Style is Matter* (2007)—

both claim, in different ways, that Nabokov's attentiveness to these issues is inherently related to, and indeed inseparable from, his aesthetic practice. As Wood succinctly explains: "Moral questions, like epistemological ones, are put to work in his fiction. Nabokov doesn't write about them; he writes them" (7).

Nevertheless, some aspects of Nabokov's thinking about morality—let alone its expression in his work—remain ambiguous or even contradictory. In the very same year that de la Durantaye extolled Nabokov's "moral art," for example, Michael Glynn expressed doubt that "there is anything deeply philosophical or moral" in his writing (156). Since then, other books have focused on his fascination with deviant behavior—Eric Naiman's *Nabokov, Perversely* (2010)—as well as his joyous affirmation of life—Lila Azam Zanganeh's *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* (2011). Certainly, one can also conceive of, and find ample textual or biographical evidence for, an agnostic, Christian, or secular Nabokov; a sardonic Nabokov as well as an idealistic one; a Nabokov who rigidly controls his characters and his readers, and another who celebrates their independence.

Nabokov himself acknowledged the complexity of his moral stances, and their oblique manifestations in his art, when he remarked in a 1971 interview:

> one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride. (*SO* 193)

Such disparate accounts of the relationship between the terms *Nabokov* and *morality*—including this ambiguous pronouncement by an imaginary future critic—indicate the extent to which his writing continually challenges readers to resolve the issue. The question haunts his prose, even at the level of individual sentences. Progressing from one clause to another, as when Humbert Humbert describes his mother's death in *Lolita*, Nabokov's words can induce both distaste at the cursory way in which Humbert treats the event—"a freak accident (picnic, lightning)"—*and* awe at the writer's evocative imagery—"you all know those redolent remnants of day suspended, with the midges, about some hedge in bloom" (*Lo* 10). Here, as in many other instances, readers are left to reconcile two contradictory responses to his work: indicting the callousness of a charac-

ter that he created, or admiring his elegant and eloquent prose. Nabokov's ambivalent remarks in prefaces, afterwords, interviews, and published correspondence further exacerbate the dilemmas confronting his readers. He calls *Lolita* a "highly moral affair" (*NWL* 298), for example, but also warns that it has "no moral in tow" ("On a Book" 314). Can we trust either of these statements? Is it possible to resolve the discrepancy between them? Given our awareness of Wimsatt and Beardsley's "intentional fallacy," should we even consider Nabokov's own remarks when appraising the moral aspects of his work?

It is only fitting, perhaps, that the final ethical problem raised by Nabokov's last piece of fiction involves the question of whether to read it at all. Nabokov had insisted that any of his works left unfinished should be destroyed after his death. Despite his wishes, however, the incomplete and inchoate manuscript of his last novel, *The Original of Laura*, was preserved in a Swiss bank vault for over three decades before being published, in 2009, by his son and literary executor. Dmitri Nabokov had agonized for many years, often in public fora, about whether or not to obey his father's wishes. By deciding at last to publish the fragmented manuscript of *The Original of Laura*, Nabokov's son forced readers to confront a similar ethical dilemma: whether to read a novel whose author had not wanted it to be read. That impossible predicament, we might say, was the end of the ingenious play staged for us by Nabokov.

Perceiving, Believing, Acting, and Portraying

Thanks to such perplexities, Nabokov's readers may still have trouble deciding whether he is "the laureate of cruelty," in Martin Amis's phrase (ix), or whether he evinces a morality that is hidden, ambiguous, or ironic, but nevertheless functions as a structuring principle in his fiction. *Nabokov and the Question of Morality* resolves this dilemma by addressing specific aspects of his aesthetics, metaphysics, and ethics. The volume is divided into four sections that emphasize, respectively, the ethics of reading and rereading; religious belief and moral condemnation; altruistic behavior and agency; and representations of cruelty, suffering, lust, or bad thinking that prompt readers' awareness of their own moral judgments.

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The first section, "Responsible Reading," focuses on the act of reading itself in order to disrupt what Tom Whalen calls the "Standard

Simplification Model" of Nabokov's critical reception: that is, the tendency to label him as a writer who privileges lapidary style over substance, moral content, and social or political issues. These chapters confront Nabokov's own literary standards (or, perhaps, double standards), including his well-known pronouncements on good and bad readers. At the same time, they compare readings of and by Nabokov in a way that reveals fecund discrepancies in his work. Consider, for example, the incongruity between his method of translating *Eugene Onegin*—a "fidelity of transposal" that emphasizes content over style (*SO* 38)—and his decision not to title his own 1938 novella *Priglashenie na otsechenie golovï,* in order to avoid the unpleasant duplication of the suffix (*Invitation* 7). By reading one text through another, these chapters view Nabokov's writing differently, especially in terms of his own emphasis on reading as a form of compassionate awareness, on the one hand, or as a site for resistance and manipulation, on the other.

Whalen's chapter, "'And So the Password Is—?': Nabokov and the Ethics of Rereading," glosses a series of passages from his works that both demand and model sensitive perusal. The "password" of the title refers obliquely to Nabokov's claim that "Beauty plus pity [...] is the closest we can get to a definition of art" (*LL* 251). By linking the appreciation of beauty to feelings of pity, Whalen argues, Nabokov shows how attentive rereading, remembering, and reimagining can lead to compassion, for inanimate objects as well as for other human beings. In "Nabokov and Dostoevsky: Good Writer, Bad Reader?" Julian Connolly offers an analysis of Nabokov's published lecture on his Russian precursor that leads to very different conclusions about his attitude toward empathy. Connolly claims that, in reading Dostoevsky, Nabokov did exactly what he advises readers *not* to do in his lectures, prefaces, and interviews. Such a discrepancy between theory and practice reveals Nabokov's disdain for the "neurotic" religious content of Dostoevsky's novels (*LRL* 101), as well as his inattentiveness to their craft. Connolly's Nabokov is indeed a bad reader—at least of Dostoevsky.

Michael Rodgers's "The Will to Disempower? Nabokov and His Readers" puts forth the benefits of imagining different ways to read Nabokov's work. Framing his argument in terms of parallels between Nietzsche's "master-slave" morality and "will to power" and Nabokov's textual practice, Rodgers argues that Nabokov eagerly engages in competition with actual readers—even as the figure of an ideal reader was necessary for him to imagine and execute his pioneering works. Rodgers uses

Nabokov's notorious puzzle story, "The Vane Sisters," to contrast a naïve reading, a sophisticated reading, and a Nietzschean reading of his fiction, showing how interrogating Nabokov's gambits can enable us to better appreciate and understand his fiction.

. . . . .

Our next section is titled "Good and Evil." When teaching *Bleak House* at Cornell, as Rorty observes, Nabokov would emphasize the conflict in Dickens's novel by using the abstract nouns "good" and "evil," complete with "shudder quotes" (148). The shuddering acknowledges, and parodies, the reductiveness of employing those binary opposites. In choosing the title "Good and Evil," however, we want to keep this opposition in play, so as to stress the challenge of contemplating such bookends as well as the benefits of exploring the fertile space between them. Chapters in this section trace Nabokov's efforts, throughout his long career, to establish subtle moral distinctions within the world of his fiction. Nabokov's memorable response when asked by an interviewer whether he believed in God—"I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more" (*SO* 45)—is typically coy about his feelings on the subject of religion. He was equally emphatic, and ambiguous, when it came to his thoughts about the afterlife, free will, or the nature of evil. Nevertheless, these three chapters help us to better understand what Nabokov believed and how it shaped his art.

In "Nabokov's God; God's Nabokov," Samuel Schuman argues that some of Nabokov's early works clearly invoke a religious perspective—and, more specifically, a theist one. Schuman explores the implications of Nabokov describing himself as an "anthropomorphic deity" (*BS* xii), with regard to his invented worlds, by carefully reading two enigmatic stories from the 1920s that have received little critical attention before now: "The Word" and "Christmas." Schuman suggests that we should not accept without question Nabokov's frequent dismissals of religion—such as the hostility toward Dostoevsky's faith that Connolly points out in his chapter—but should consider the possibility that Christianity provided solace to him, at least at the beginning of his career.

Gennady Barabtarlo, in "By Trial and Terror," takes a panoramic look at Nabokov's moral vision and contrasts it with that of Tolstoy, in particular, as representative of an earlier Russian tradition (just as Connolly, in his chapter, contrasts Nabokov with Dostoevsky). In witty imitations of

Tolstoy's dogmatic pronouncements about morality, and in an ongoing comparison of the two writers' distinct modes of first- and third-person narration, Barabtarlo argues that Nabokov's vision is much darker than Tolstoy's. He suggests, in particular, that Nabokov saw unchecked passion as a source of evil, and that all his novels can be read as variations on this theme. David Rampton's chapter, "The Aesthetics of Moral Contradiction in Some Early Nabokov Novels," provides a fascinating counterpoint to Barabtarlo's, especially because they each compare Nabokov to his Russian predecessors (here, Chekhov and Goncharov as well as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy) and consider his third novel, *The Defense*, a pivotal text. But while Barabtarlo traces Nabokov's progression from ironic, mostly third-person narratives in Russian to unreliable first-person confessions in English, Rampton examines the early fiction's increasing moral ambiguity—and in terms of narrative closure, rather than narration. The conclusions of Nabokov's first novels emphasize either poetic justice or divine retribution; halfway through his Russian period, however, he began to devise more ambiguous endings, indicating a new awareness of the complexity of moral decision-making for both protagonists and readers. As Rampton explains, Nabokov's fiction thus became more "allegorical," "using moral questions in order to ask aesthetic ones."

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If the section titled "Good and Evil" traces the development of Nabokov's moral thought, from his earliest stories and novels in Russian to his later shift into English, then our next section focuses squarely on two masterpieces: *The Gift*, Nabokov's major Russian novel, and *Pale Fire*, one of his most important works in English. And while Barabtarlo's and Rampton's chapters examine wrongdoing by Nabokov's characters and what it implies about the nature of evil, these chapters focus instead on moments of love and sacrifice in his fiction. They therefore challenge the familiar caricature of Nabokov's "jowly arrogance," "literary-patrician disdain" (*Transitional* 2), and cruelty toward his characters, his readers, or other writers whom he deems mediocre. At the same time, they continue the recurrent debate in Nabokov studies—manifested earlier in our volume by Whalen's and Connolly's chapters—about his attitude toward tenderness and compassion. We call this section "Agency and Altruism" because it places such acts of generosity within the context of social relationships, as well as constructions of the self.

Jacqueline Hamrit's chapter, "Loving and Giving in Nabokov's *The Gift,*" explores love's ethical dimensions by considering three relation-

ships that shape Nabokov's novel: the "banal triangle of tragedy," characterized by asymmetry and unrequited passion; the "virtuous triangle" of family affection, involving parents, children, and feelings of plenitude; and the productive triangle formed by a tension between romantic love and artistic creativity. Hamrit adds that the very title of Nabokov's novel evokes an inexhaustible experience of loving, creating, and being. Indeed, his concept of the gift anticipates later insights from Derrida, Barthes, and Blanchot—as well from the cultural critic Lewis Hyde, who has argued that by passing on the gift instead of keeping it, one can enjoy the sense of "abundant" possibility Nabokov describes (26). Whereas Hamrit establishes the significance of generosity and gratitude in *The Gift*, Laurence Piercy examines Nabokov's ironic depiction of a single act of self-sacrifice in *Pale Fire*. Piercy's chapter, "Kinbote's Heroism," uses both action theory and narratology to ponder the difference between Kinbote's spontaneous action, as he tries to shield Shade from a bullet, and the way that he narrates it in his commentary. How, for example, can Kinbote assume this bullet was meant for Shade and, at the same time, believe that the would-be assassin was aiming at Kinbote himself? Piercy shows how Nabokov draws upon notions of free will, automatic behavior, and the retroactive assumption of motives in order to transform this shooting—and Kinbote's response to it—into a paradox which readers can resolve only by constructing Nabokov's frame narrator as a complex and dynamic character.

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The final section of our volume is titled "The Ethics of Representation." The close relationship between art and morality in Nabokov's thinking recalls Wittgenstein's claim that "ethics and aesthetics" are one (105). Indeed, Nabokov's own dictum that "style is matter" (*SL* 116) subverts the usual notion that rhetoric must be subjugated to content and instead conflates the two modes, creating new opportunities to address a perennial debate. The chapters in this section, therefore, investigate how Nabokov presents art—and, in fact, representation itself—as a moral matter. To that end, they examine his choices when constructing a work of fiction, including which details he includes and which details he leaves out. As Rodgers demonstrates early in our volume, such decisions can lead to difficult but extremely productive negotiations between Nabokov and his readers. These four chapters consider, more specifically, how he depicts such delicate matters as punishment, suffering, sex, and even the very act of perceiving a resemblance. In narrating his stories and novels, after all, Nabokov demonstrates an acute awareness of how the human

mind perceives, recognizes, evaluates, and labels the kind of information that demands an ethical response. By depicting this mental process with remarkable subtlety and verisimilitude, Nabokov allows his readers to become more aware of it as well—and more self-conscious, therefore, regarding their own ethical decisions.

In "Whether Judgments, Sentences, and Executions Satisfy the Moral Sense in Nabokov," Susan Elizabeth Sweeney focuses on *Bend Sinister*—and, more precisely, on the author's question, in a preface, about whether this cruel and unusual novel gives "any satisfaction to the moral sense" (ix)—in order to trace the significance of trials and punishments throughout his fiction. Her chapter complements Barabtarlo's earlier account of Nabokov's criminal protagonists, as well as Rampton's and Piercy's investigations of moral decision-making in his work. Sweeney points out that although Nabokov often alludes to capital crimes, criminal trials, death sentences, and executions in his novels and stories, he never describes an actual or legitimate scene of judgment, sentencing, or punishment. Instead, he leaves it up to individual readers to decide for themselves how justice should be served.

Our next two chapters look closely at the role of representation in Nabokov's most controversial novel. In "The Art of Morality, or on *Lolita,*" Leland de la Durantaye argues that Nabokov considered morality—as opposed to "moralizing," which he detested—to be inseparable from a work of art. *Lolita,* for example, "is a moral book" because it continually alludes to the very question of whether or not Humbert's behavior *is* moral. Like Rampton, Piercy, and Sweeney, de la Durantaye identifies some of the formal strategies by which Nabokov leads his readers to ponder such questions; here, he shows how Nabokov carefully orchestrates the tension between lyricism and parody in Humbert's narration as well as the shift from blindness to insight in Humbert's understanding of himself. Elspeth Jajdelska, in "'Obnoxious Preoccupation with Sex Organs': The Ethics and Aesthetics of Representing Sex," focuses instead on Nabokov's ability to evoke aesthetic delight even when describing painful or disturbing subject matter. How does he portray sexual acts convincingly in *Lolita*, for example, without making readers feel ashamed, aroused, or indifferent? Jajdelska draws upon anthropological and historical studies of constraints governing the depiction of sex, as well as cognitive studies of the way that the mind processes information, to answer this question. Her chapter resonates, in particular, with Piercy's analysis of how Nabokov depicts complex mental states and involuntary actions in *Pale Fire.*

In the final chapter, "Modern Mimesis," Michael Wood links Nabokov's notions of ethical representation with his resistance to modernity. "Nabokov's attention to modernity is a moral concern," Wood explains, because he identifies it with whatever is fake, shallow, mindless, or phony, whatever glosses over actual reality. Nabokov's fiction proposes and demonstrates, instead, a kind of reading that allows readers to perceive the existence of something real, "something as irrefutable as distress." Although Wood cites several of Nabokov's short stories, he finds Kinbote's commentary, in *Pale Fire*, to be the best example of a character or narrator somehow experiencing reality inside an imaginary narrative. "Moral Mimesis" complements both Piercy's earlier reading of Kinbote's motives in *Pale Fire* and Jajdelska's analysis of how verbal descriptions can evoke readers' cognitive perceptions in *Lolita*. At the same time, Wood's chapter brings us back to the question that drives our entire volume: how, exactly, to read Nabokov in the context of morality?

Playing with a Live Dog

In the fourth chapter of *Despair*, that novel's brutal, calculating, and self-deceiving narrator poses a series of rhetorical questions to the reader: "What is this jest in majesty? This ass in passion? How do God and Devil combine to form a live dog?" Such quips illustrate Hermann Karlovich's ability "to make words look self-conscious and foolish, to bind them by the mock marriage of a pun, to turn them inside out, to come upon them unawares" (46). These particular puns and anagrams manage to create an interplay, at the level of thought as well as diction, between the elements of several apparent binaries. In this way, they allude to some of the very issues explored in *Nabokov and the Question of Morality*, such as the nature of power, the ethical constraints on one's attraction to another person, and the relationship between good and evil. Hermann never answers these questions, of course. As a result, their provocative juxtapositions—of the concepts of humor and gravity, foolishness and fervor, animal nature and spiritual being—remain unresolved.[12]

Such paradoxes reverberate throughout Nabokov's writing. Indeed, the contributors to *Nabokov and the Question of Morality* acknowledge the open-ended nature of any inquiry into the moral aspects of his work by asking similar questions of their own. These questions begin with a riddle about attentive reading in the title of Tom Whalen's chapter ("'And So the Password Is—?'"), and a sly insinuation about Nabokov's judgment