

Texts and Reality: Metafiction and Metaphysics in Vladimir Nabokov's Bend Sinister

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En contra de una opinión habitual mantenida por críticos y estudiosos de la obra de Vladimir Nabokov, en este ensayo intentamos demostrar que este escritor no es solamente un inteligente y calculador creador de juegos literarios y metaliterarios, cuya obra carece en cierto sentido de interés humano y está desconectada del mundo circundante. Partiendo de un análisis general de la metaficción como conexión entre literatura y “realidad”, entre texto y mundo, pasamos a concentrarnos en usos específicos de la metaficción en Vladimir Nabokov. Finalmente, mediante el estudio del uso que Nabokov hace de la metaficción en su obra *Bend Sinister* (1947), intentamos demostrar que este recurso es empleado como vehículo para las posturas metafísicas del autor. La metaficción en Nabokov forma parte de un enfoque personal sobre la vida, basado en la reflexión y la defensa del individuo contra las agresiones que sufre no sólo por parte de las sociedades totalitarias sino también de las sociedades de consumo. Es más, la metaficción supone en Nabokov una postura en sí misma, ya que al promover la reflexión sobre la literatura impulsa una postura auto-crítica hacia nuestras certidumbres sobre nuestro mundo y hacia las relaciones que existen entre éste y la literatura.

In this essay we will analyse the relationship between metafiction and metaphysics in Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* (1947). Nabokov is often considered a very intelligent writer, whose texts are somehow dehumanised because of their self-consciousness and their continuous play with literature. However, in this essay we will argue that those devices associated to self-indulgent and solipsistic forms of fiction are employed by Vladimir Nabokov not only as a way to make metaphysical statements but as stances in themselves, in order to defend very personal positions about the issues he deals with in the text. To do so, first we will examine metafiction with a wide scope, making use of Patricia Waugh's enlightening ideas on

this issue. Then we will narrow our focus to concentrate on the critics' ideas about the use of metafiction in Vladimir Nabokov's works. Finally, we will specifically deal with metafiction and metaphysics in the context of *Bend Sinister*, focusing on issues regarding the relationship of textuality and "reality". Issues of characterisation will be also addressed, as they form an important part of Nabokov's metafictional strategy.

Patricia Waugh, in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, describes metafiction in the following terms:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. (1990: 2; italics in the original)

Waugh argues that at the same time that metafictional texts analyse the conventions of fiction, they "explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2). The novels display their artificiality and lay bare the devices and conventions on which their meaning depends and readers are asked to employ their knowledge of traditional forms in order to construct a meaning for the texts (4). Therefore, Waugh maintains that metafictional novels are built "on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion" (6). That is, we find simultaneously the creation of a fiction and statements about the process of creation. Together with the examination of fictional form, metafiction also reveals that our experience of the world is mediated by "a web of interdependent semiotic systems" (9).

Language is seen as a self-contained system, and the metafictional writer explores the relationship between language and "the world to which it apparently refers" (3). The examination of language as its medium of expression has led metafictional texts to analyse also "everyday" language and its relation with social structures, propelled by the notion that "'everyday' language endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization" (11). In this way, Waugh suggests that metafiction opposes the language of the traditional realistic novels, "which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality" (11). Therefore, the metafictional novel sets its acts of resistance within the novel tradition, and so "offers both

innovation and familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions” (11-12; italics in the original).

Waugh signals how metafiction is present in any novel to some degree, but it is a tendency more relevant and explicit in fictions from the middle of the 20th-Century onwards (13). Thus, metafiction, argues Waugh, “operates through the exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels” (14). For instance, Waugh suggests that sometimes the content of the text is reflected by its form and by the existence of the text within a world seen in textual terms (15). Those contradictions are therefore ontological (they question the existence of the world as such) (McHale in Waugh, 1990: 15).

However, the daily experience does not cease to matter but it is recognised as a product of interpretation, an interpretation mediated by social and cultural codes (16). Then, “the real world” is not abandoned “for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination” and, instead, metafiction, “by showing readers how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds”, helps us to understand how daily reality is also constructed (18). Some authors –among which we find Vladimir Nabokov– signal how their works are also constructed by means of self-reflexive images that underline that their most problematic facet is the writing of text itself, sustains Waugh. The result is a problematisation of “the ways in which narrative codes [...] artificially construct apparently ‘real’ and imaginary worlds in the terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’” (22).

The mind in postmodern metafictional novels is also seen as a construct and, therefore, writing a novel is not different from creating our own “reality” (24). As a result, postmodern metafiction is more interested in exploring the “frames” of consciousness (language, ideology, etc.) than in pure consciousness (28). The interest in frames leads to focus on the frames that build the “real” world and on the frame that separates reality from fiction (28), and explicit discussions about the arbitrariness of beginnings, ends and boundaries in general often are found within novels (29).¹ Analysing frames means both the analysis of the forms that organise our experience and the analysis of the formal conventions that order the content of novels (30). In metafictional novels, frame breaks –authorial intrusions– reveal the ontological difference that exists between real and fictional worlds, and expose the conventions used to hide the difference, and so frame breaks lay bare the separation between fiction and reality (32-33). The reader of these novels, explains

Waugh, gets his sense of an everyday world reinforced, but the meanings and values of this world are questioned by showing their artificial nature (33-34).

Critics' ideas about Nabokov's use of metafiction are varied and sometimes contradictory. There is a wide group of critics who seem eager to accept the ideas given by Nabokov himself regarding his literary production –in the prefaces to the books, in interviews, etc.–, and they see Nabokov's literary interest as purely aesthetic and somehow solipsistic. We could say that they accept "Nabokov the mandarin" (Wood, 1994: 22) as the most faithful source of information. For instance, Alfred Kazin suggests that Nabokov was more interested in "art as aesthetic bliss", and in "working out unexpected combinations and patterns" than in "any 'liberating' idea" (1973: 296-297). Similarly, Simon Karlinsky points out Nabokov's desire to look for patterns, both in Nature and art, which freed Nabokov of any feeling of guilt for his lack of commitment to "greater" causes (1995: 390-391). Daniel Albright sustains that "[m]ost of Nabokov's books [...] end with some sort of disassembly of the novel" (1981: 69). Robert Alter considers that Nabokov's commitment to metafiction flaws many of his novels, because "the constructed fictional world [...] is hardly allowed sufficient vitality to give the dialectic between fiction and 'reality' the vigorous to-and-fro energy which it requires", but when the fictional worlds achieve a sufficient status, in novels such as *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*, they become self-contained (1975: 181-182).

In a middle position we find Brian Stonehill, who argues that Nabokov shared the solipsism of the great modernist writers (Joyce, Proust), but in Nabokov's case solipsism becomes "the very matter of its fiction" (1988: 73). According to Stonehill, for Nabokov "fiction without its self-depiction was incomplete" (73). Yet, this critic sees a paradox in the fact that Nabokov's novels insist upon their fictivity at the same time that they "nevertheless tell stories that touch us and move us" (73-74). Nabokov's use of "techniques of self-consciousness", says Stonehill, is typical and innovative: he uses all the devices of self-consciousness and he does it for his own purposes (74). However complex they seem, Stonehill argues that Nabokov's plots are not subordinated to the self-conscious process (83). Yet, Stonehill recognises that Nabokov sometimes uses techniques to direct attention to his own style too frivolously, such as puns or anagrams, though other times they can help characterisation (91). Finally, Stonehill concludes that Nabokov's novels defend "certain recognisably human values", while they deny "their bearing upon the 'real world' outside the fiction" (95).

Finally, some critics appreciate a relationship between metafiction and metaphysics in Nabokov's literature. Brian Boyd, for instance, argues that "[t]he true story of Nabokov's art is the story of his finding the formal and fictional inventiveness to express all the problems his philosophy poses" (1990: 292), and also that "Nabokov was not a solipsist" (294). In this sense, Maxim D. Shroyer focuses on how Nabokov was interested in conveying a sense of an otherworld –not to be confused with the hereafter of traditional religions– and, according to this critic, the metaliterary and the metaphysical work together to produce such an effect (1999: 17-70). John Burt Foster Jr is convinced of the relationship between metafiction and metaphysics in Nabokov's writing, and he concentrates in many issues of this relationship within *Bend Sinister* (1995: 25-36).

After this briefing of critical ideas about metafiction and metaphysics in Nabokov's works, we will focus on our main thesis. The basis of our essay is that, while metafictional devices in *Bend Sinister* are used to reinforce the opinions given by Nabokov about the main topics he deals with metafiction is a thesis in itself regarding each of those issues.² We will concentrate on issues directly related to the evaluation of the relationship between fiction and everyday reality: the rewriting of the world in absolute regimes, stereotypes in mass culture, and the opposition between culture/beauty and violence. Many more issues are addressed in *Bend Sinister*, such as death or language, and in each of them we would appreciate the same metafictional approach, but we consider that the ones dealt with here prove to be enlightening enough for the thesis we are defending.

As Patricia Waugh suggests, metafiction can focus on many issues regarding literature and society. The main metafictional worry of *Bend Sinister* can be located under the label "textuality and the world": issues about the relationship between "real" and textual worlds (not only literary). Fundamentally, we are interested in the strong suggestion present in the text that there is an intense communication between both worlds, what John Burt Foster Jr calls "an uncanny permeability between realms and concepts that are normally kept apart" (1995: 27). One common aspect of Nabokov's metafiction, the highlighting of the fictionality of the text, has been analysed in depth by critics. Nabokov himself signals in the preface that the puddle that Adam Krug sees from the hospital's window in the beginning of the book, and later on repeated in ink blot and stain, spilled milk, a footprint, etc., "vaguely evokes in him my link with him" (2001: 8). Foster adds to

these metafictional images the three-circle figure –first found by Adam Krug in the wall of the bridge at the beginning of the text, and then repeated in some points of the text– and the use of Russian, and argues that they are employed by Nabokov to signal his authorial presence (1995: 26).

Brian Stonehill argues that the most prominent of Nabokov's techniques of self-consciousness is "the drawing of the reader's attention to the act of writing" (1988: 74), and so we can find Nabokov's narrators choosing and discarding words (75), addressing the reader "as reader" (78; italics in the original), or even creating fictional versions of the reader within the text, as in *Bend Sinister*, when Paduk stands with "his back to the reader" (Nabokov, 2001: 123). Moreover, Stonehill considers that "in general, Nabokov's style is heavily Euphistic and draws attention to itself", and he mentions the use of acronyms, puns, word plays, puns across languages, etc. as some of the techniques employed by Nabokov to produce such an effect (1988: 88). Similarly, as we said above, Waugh argues that the self-reflexive images employed in Nabokov works underline that the most problematic aspect of his works is the writing of the text itself (1990: 18). According to Foster, in *Bend Sinister* all these metafictional devices anticipate the author's final intrusion within the fictional world in imitation of a god, a scene, says Foster, where "self-reflexivity dovetails ingeniously with ontology" (1995: 26). However, as we said above, we sustain that this complex and skilful connection between metafiction and metaphysics takes place all across the text.

By means of these metafictional devices Nabokov suggests the radical difference between fictional and "real" world or, as Waugh puts it, reveals the ontological difference that exists between real and fictional worlds and exposes the conventions used to hide the difference (1990: 32). This difference is emphasised by the fact that most of Nabokov's characters –not only in *Bend Sinister*– are mere puppets and lack depth and humanity. Foster says that Nabokov does this in order to remind readers of the fictionality and lack of depth of the characters in comparison with "real" human beings (1995: 26). Only Adam Krug, the one that ends up knowing that he is part of a fiction, is fully depicted. Nabokov himself signals that the characters in *Bend Sinister* "are only absurd mirages, illusions oppressive to Krug during his brief spell of being, but harmlessly fading away when I dismiss the cast" (2001: 7). For instance, Paduk, the dictator, is described as retaining "a sort of cartoon angularity" (74). About his revolution, we read that Paduk "had decided to make his revolution as conventional as possible" (39), and when

he and Krug meet, Paduk drums on a desk and we find that “they all drum” (127), meaning “all dictators”. According to Stonehill, the paradox between self-reflexivity and “the power to move us as events in real life do” is exposed in Nabokov’s characterisation (1988: 83). Most characters in Nabokov, says this critic, are “methods of composition”, but the protagonists of Nabokov’s books are different in quality (84). They are all artist figures to some extent, and in the course of their development they “come to realize [...] that the world in which they exist is fictional” (84-86). Characters that do not know “are dehumanized beyond recall”, whereas main characters take a death that carries them to a different fictional level (88). Here we find an example of metafiction and metaphysics going hand in hand: on the one hand, characterisation is used to remind us of the fictionality of the characters and, by extension, of the textual world; on the other, characterisation is used to create characters (main characters) who carry certain human values or whose “loving hearts are beaten”. It is important to bear in mind the emphasis upon the stereotypical and conventional aspect of Paduk, as we will focus on this issue later.

In the preface to *Bend Sinister* –added in 1963– Nabokov claimed that nobody should look for “general ideas” or “human interest” in this book, or that “the influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my books [...] on my epoch” (2001: 6). Yet, there is no doubt a great influence of historical events in *Bend Sinister*, especially of Nazi and Soviet regimes or, as Nabokov himself reluctantly recognises, “certain reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life” (6). One way these totalitarian regimes are brought into the text is by translating their practices and modes into the Ekwilist revolution (such as David Krug’s death, the unjustified arrests, the enforcement of behaviours and ideas onto the population, etc.). For our analysis, the most interesting aspect of this exposition of how terror regimes operate is the alteration of reality to fit ideas or, as Alfred Kazin explains it, “how much the state-in-complete-control must rewrite reality” (1973: 303). As reality many times does not conform to the Ekwilists’ ideas, the result is that either they enforce ideas upon people or they try to change the world or its perception in order to make the ideas fit. One such example of trying to rewrite the world is provided by the headmaster in Adam Krug’s school. He organises debates between different groups of students, convinced that they must join into teams according to their class, education, etc. Influenced by traditional Marxism –represented

by the philosophy of Skotoma, the figure that stands more or less for Marx–, the headmaster forces all his pupils to enter in this “class game”. When Krug refuses to join the debate groups, the headmaster blackmails him with the marks, for “a refusal to act in the show appeared to him as a vicious insult to his dynamic myth” (Nabokov, 2001: 68). Later on, this same idea will be repeated in the Ekwilist newspapers, when an editorial says “it is better for a man to have belonged to a politically incorrect organization than not to have belonged to any organization at all” (142). We have an example of an attempt to write the world according to a previous fiction, in this way a political one about class dynamics. The example is especially relevant for it is in these school debates that the origin of the Ekwilist revolution is found, when Paduk, the would-be-dictator, gathers around him a group of odd students. Moreover, this reveals the key metaphysical attitude of Nabokov, which is a strong defence of the individual above generalisations and conventions, as we will see along this paper.

The same situation is reproduced years later, when the Ekwilist revolution finally succeeds and Paduk tries to force Adam Krug, the only world-famous figure in the whole country, to join them. The university teachers are sent a declaration to sign of support to the new government. As Adam Krug refuses to sign anything or join the Ekwilist revolution –not that he does oppose them, though he despises them and disregards their revolution as nonsense and unimportant, but only that he does not want to become involved– he is blackmailed by having his friends arrested. When he finally has a face-to-face interview with Paduk, he is also offered a lot of material benefits, “sabbatical years, lottery tickets, a cow”, but “[h]is works would be republished in new editions, revised in the light of political events” (128). This last idea links the whole passage with Krug and Ember’s discussion “about the possibility of their having invented in toto the works of William Shakespeare” (77, italics in the original), by changing pages in encyclopaedias and critical works, inserting allusions in other authors’ works, etc. In other words, they discuss the possibility of having rewritten the world to include Shakespeare, the writer being just their own invention. Moreover, the narrator adds that “[t]he same might be true of one’s personal experience as being perceived in retrospect upon waking up”, the retrospective effect being only an illusion (77). Other examples of the State’s rewriting of the world are provided along the text, as those regarding “freedom of expression” (140-141), or the elections to the Council of the Elders (142-143).

Whereas Krug and Ember's discussion is just a game, something similar to a chess problem, the Ekwilist attempts to rewrite the world are shown to produce the laughter of the ridiculous enterprise –about the newspapers delivering the Ekwilist ideas, we read: “I will keep it, thought Krug, [...] to the eternal delight of free humorists” (142)– together with the horror of the execrable effects these produce upon the population of the country, because the ultimate rewriting of the world is the physical elimination of the obstacles for the myths to be enforced: the murder of people. They form together with the former example of the headmaster a clear trend of thought that the metafictional reflection upon Shakespeare allows to join together, because the metafictional approach opens the space for the critical review of those mechanisms employed in the rewriting. In particular, the possibility of having invented Shakespeare acts as the trigger for a whole line of thought about how the world is finally “invented” by any of us, one that includes also previous scenes that the new reflection invites the reader to reconsider. In this sense, it is important to recall Waugh's idea that many metafictional novels consider the daily experience as product of our interpretation, which is mediated by social and cultural codes (1990: 16).

Therefore, this rewriting of the world is not exclusive of totalitarian societies. Foster notes that “*Bend Sinister* also refers at times to contemporary American mass culture” (1995: 28) and, in this sense, “invites the reader to test accustomed boundaries” (29). The most wonderful example of the wider scope of Nabokov's critique is the description of Dr Alexander's speech:

[T]he innocent and well meaning, if not very intelligent, prattle of the young scientist (who quite obviously had been turned into a chatterbox by the shyness characteristic of overstrung and perhaps undernourished young folks, victims of capitalism, communism and masturbation [...]). (58)

What this fragment suggests is that both in absolute societies and in western ones there are strong “frames” that construct the way people see the world, frames that actually “construct” the world or at least the way we perceive it.

Precisely, the metafictional component is what allows Nabokov to extend the analysis of the rewriting of the world by totalitarian regimes to the probably more subtle operation of stereotypes within mass culture. It is

one of the functions of metafiction, according to Patricia Waugh, to lay bare the ways in which power structures work and are sustained by language and, “by showing readers how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds”, metafiction helps us to understand how daily reality is also constructed (1990: 18). In this sense, on his return from a travel to the United States, Krug writes: “Landscapes as yet unpolluted with conventional poetry, and life, that self-conscious stranger, being slapped on the back and told to relax” (Nabokov, 2001: 35). The suggestion here is that we look to our surroundings unavoidably through the mirror of texts. Therefore, one of the frames through which we apprehend the world is, according to the text, “conventional poetry”, and “conventional” is probably the key word here.

A more evident example is the way dreams are presented. In the first of Krug’s dreams, in chapter 5, we see that it is constructed in the fashion of a popular film, and the “dream producers” are “usually several, mostly illiterate and middle-class and pressed by time” (60). This idea of the dream as following the pattern of production of a typical film is repeated in chapter 8, and thus the same idea is suggested: examining how the dream is constructed, Nabokov is analysing how the semiotic codes that conform our reality work, at the same time that he reveals how texts can influence the way we live “reality” (or how we live our dreaming). Moreover, when Krug and Ember are discussing Ember’s translation and staging of Hamlet, Krug tells his friend the anecdote of a film producer trying to make a most bizarre film version of the play (102-105). Both Ember and Krug begin to make fun regarding how this version would be, playing with the assumed vulgarity and gross simplicity of Hollywood films. In this sense, the comments on film production are linked to the dreams, and the way these are influenced by the former underlines the degree to which mass culture can influence people’s way of seeing/constructing the world. In addition, the fact that this film discussion is inserted next to a Nazi reading of Hamlet (99) highlights again the similarities found by Nabokov between the absolute regimes’ rewritings of the world and the vulgar simplifications produced by mass culture.

The clearest example of this in *Bend Sinister* is the “Etermon” cartoon. The text within the text, the *mise-en-abîme*, is one characteristic resource of metafiction, as it creates a mirror image of the whole fictional text or of a part of it. In *Bend Sinister* we find many of those texts, like the aforementioned dreams or the Etermon cartoon. The allegoric value of this strip is shown, first, by the name of the cartoon itself that, as the text signals, means

“everyman” (2001: 72), pointing to the medieval morality play *Everyman* (c.1495) that allegorised vices and virtues and tried to represent the whole humankind in a single character. Similarly, in *Bend Sinister* we find a comic strip, published in “a blatantly bourgeois paper”, that renders a common couple and its daily life (72). We learn that during his school years, Paduk copied the sartorial style of the cartoon characters, a feature that he kept in later years (72). On the one hand, the influence of the media upon people is exposed, and on the other there is again this “rewriting” of the world to adapt it to a text (in this case by dressing as a cartoon character). Moreover, this *mise-en-abîme* also signals how both fictional and “real” world communicate and therefore allows the blurring of the borderlines between one and the other: the comic strip tries to represent elements from daily reality, and some of its elements are taken by people into the daily world and “turn” them into “real”. Therefore, the fictional and the “real” levels mirror each other and even seem to concur at some points. This shows how, according to Waugh, one interest of the metafictional novel is the exploration of the “frames” of consciousness, such as language, ideology, etc., which build the “real” world, and the frames that separate “reality” from fiction (1990: 28).

Again, the main problem of the cartoon seems to inhabit in its “conventionality” or its simplicity, as it attempts to draw generalisations, disregarding the individuality of real people. The Etermons smoke the most famous brand of cigarettes, for instance, and they do the most common things. But the critique is then extended to include Skotoma, the figure that stands for Marx in the book, because he sees the comic as an example of bourgeois society, but “his ‘petty bourgeois’ existed only as a label on an empty filing box (the iconoclast, as many of his kind, relied entirely upon generalizations [...])” (Nabokov, 2001: 73), and the narrator thinks that:

Actually, with a little perspicacity, one might learn many curious things about the Etermons, things that made them so different from one another that Etermon, except as a cartoonist’s transient character, could not be said to exist. (73)

That Paduk and his followers worship the Etermon cartoon further intermingles the critiques to both sides of the spectrum. Both in dealing with the rewriting of the world and with the operation of stereotypes, Nabokov opposes a strong sense of individuality against generalisations and attempts to reduce human beings to general ideas. The metafictional approach then

becomes an act of resistance in itself, as it reviews and exposes the codes used to produce such generalisations.

The conventionality and stereotypical quality of both the cartoon and the texts through which life is apprehended seem also opposed to culture and beauty. As has been already suggested, what the State in *Bend Sinister* fails to achieve by rewriting the world, it tries to get by means of violence. This signals another important issue within the text, not at all separated from those already mentioned here: the opposition between culture –and beauty in general– and violence. By “culture” Nabokov suggests something similar to T. S. Eliot’s concept of tradition (the bulk of great works of art produced by mankind). As a means to place itself within tradition, *Bend Sinister* directly points to an enormous quantity of intertexts that are part of it (Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Kafka, etc.) which some times are explicitly alluded, and other just implied.³ The way the intertexts are inscribed in *Bend Sinister* is completely self-conscious –many of them are even remarked by Nabokov himself in the preface– and thus their use is related to metafiction: the text asks the reader to know about previous texts as a means to complete the meaning of the work, and at the same time signals that it is set within a tradition of literary artefacts and, therefore and again, highlights its own artificial nature. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the reflection on Shakespeare opens the way for a metafictional analysis of rewriting of the world and stereotypes, but also by means of the Shakespearean discussion between Ember and Krug issues about literary levels are addressed.⁴ The text, self-consciously, asks the reader to know about similar literary discussions regarding Shakespeare present in authors such as Goethe and Joyce, as Herbert Grabes signals (1995: 498). Joyce’s discussion in *Ulysses* is a self-conscious rewriting of Goethe’s, and Nabokov’s is a reworking of both, adding far more data.⁵ The levels of character (fabula), narrator (story), implied author (text) and flesh-and-blood author (“real” world) are confused when characters in *Bend Sinister* refer to characters and texts in Shakespeare, and when the textual implications send the reader to other characters, narrators and discussions present in other texts. In this way, the text displays its own self-consciousness about self-consciousness in literature, and playfully situates itself within the western tradition.

On many occasions in this text, beauty and culture are “interrupted” or polluted by violence from the Ekwilists. For instance, when Krug and Ember are embedded in their discussion of Shakespeare’s translation, they

are interrupted by an act of violence: Ember's arrest. Shakespeare is in *Bend Sinister* a kind of emblem for beauty and this beauty is interrupted by a "mock" beauty impersonated by those that come to arrest Ember.⁶ They turn up disguised in order to result more "attractive" for Ember, but the text makes clear that this is not beautiful or artistic at all, does not have anything to do with culture and tradition. On the contrary, their appearance interrupts a discussion about a true icon of culture, Shakespeare, with an action imbued with vulgarity and conventionality (2001: 109-114). Their "mock" beauty is similar to the stupid rendering of Shakespeare intended by the American filmmaker, but much more dangerous –as it will suppose the disappearance of Ember's freedom. Even more explicitly, when Dr. Alexander is flattering Krug by diminishing the size of his university colleagues, and Krug answers in this way:

I esteem my colleagues as I do my own self, I esteem them for two things: because they are able to find perfect felicity in specialized knowledge and because they are not apt to commit physical murder (57).

Here, in spite of the bitter critiques thrown against academics at other points (especially by means of the figure of Dr Azureus, the president of the University), the text clearly states the opposition between beauty and violence. Therefore, the self-conscious use of intertextuality, which becomes metafictional as it inserts the book within literary tradition while revealing the book as an artefact, together with the reflection upon the value of literature and culture, become a defence of culture and beauty against violence. Moreover, we can appreciate how individuality is again posed against the absurd generalisation, art as individual expression against the collective violence of the State, the particularity of Shakespeare against the mass-culture of the film producer or the violence of the Ekwilists.

But it is not only cultural beauty that is interrupted by the Ekwilists. Natural beauty is also a victim of their operations, as happens when Krug and his son are walking near the Maximovs' place and the beauty of the day is interrupted by the Maximovs' arrest (90-91). Similarly, the beginning of chapter 8 describes a perfect day in Padukgrad, "one of the Painted Days peculiar to the region" (114), but "a man's rubber overshoe and a bloodstained cuff lay in the middle of the sidewalk", and the storefront of a toyshop is "starred by a bullet", what leads Krug to think of his friends' detentions (114-

115). Beauty in general is the victim of the violence and nonsense of the Ekwilists, and Stonehill has suggested that Nabokov's fictional worlds are menaced by "cruelty, madness, time's passage and death", menaces fought by other positive values such as "love, imagination, memory and art" (1988: 96-97). Finally, art's value resides in its capacity to order and immortalise all other values and threats, but Stonehill concludes that Nabokov's art "displays its own art in order to address that very art as its subject" (97). In this sense, we read that to ease the pain for the death of his parents Krug wrote "Chapter III [...] of his 'Mirokonzepsia' wherein he looked straight into the eyesockets of death and called him a dog and an abomination" (2001: 119). What we can draw from our analysis is that Nabokov's fiction displays some problems, and art is offered as the solution for them or as the opposed to the problems posed. Though according to Stonehill art is finally there in order to allow Nabokov to self-consciously reflect upon art, we consider again that the metafictional approach is also used to comment upon the problems reflected in the fiction or, more precisely, it is the metafictional approach what allows Nabokov to introduce the comments on the issues he addresses, and it finally becomes a comment on itself. In this case, Nabokov's reflections about a function of fiction –fiction as a means to fight death– or the value of culture become statements against violence in themselves.

Returning to the dreams, in the first one we find the first intrusion of the author as such within the fiction. We read that "among the producers [...] there has been one [...] a nameless, mysterious genius who took advantage of the dream to convey his own peculiar code message" (61). This message links Krug somehow "with an unfathomable mode of being [...] a kind of transcendental madness which lurks behind the corner of consciousness" (61). Moreover, "a closer inspection [...] reveals the presence of someone in the know" (62). The suggestion is that a representation of the real author, or at least a representation of part of his consciousness, has entered the fiction. At the same time, the artificiality of the work is underlined by means of showing the author that dwells behind the text, and so dispelling the illusion of realism. So, again both the separation and the likeness between "real" and fictional worlds are suggested.

The culmination of this suggestion, the permeability between both worlds and the impossibility of such a connection, is reached at the end of the novel. When Krug is in the cell, a pattern of light appears as if it were the result of a dream or "the mind behind the mirror" (193). Then, the narrator

confesses:

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. (194-95)

The next day, Krug tries to make his friends understand that they are just part of a fictional world, but they cannot understand (196). Finally, when Krug is being shot, “the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up” (200). The reader is then introduced to the narrator’s “comparative paradise” and he confesses that “the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism” (200). In this way, the narrator acknowledges the fictionality of the story that has been told and also the part of “truth” it has –the comparative paradise where he stays compared to the many people persecuted all around the world because of their ideas.⁷ And the suggestion of both radical otherness and communication between fictional and “real” worlds is further complicated at the end of the work. A moth enters the room in which Nabokov, the author-narrator is finishing the book. Moths have been associated across the work to Olga, Krug’s dead wife, and in the preface, Nabokov himself recognises that this moth is “Olga’s rosy soul” (11).

All across the text, the relationship between text and world is held in a difficult balance as part of the metafictional approach, but the metafictional reflection opened by Nabokov in *Bend Sinister* also allows him to address other issues such as the rewriting of the world operated by absolute regimes, the function of stereotypes in mass culture or the defence of beauty and culture against violence. On these issues Nabokov gives strong metaphysical opinions, opinions that are also contained in his metafictional approach to them. He defends a strong sense of individuality, and poses the individual against the general, the particularity of art against the conventionality of mass culture and the pursue of knowledge against the submission to the social convention and violence. It is not that metafiction is an excuse to produce a metaphysical stance, but that metafiction in Nabokov’s writing is a metaphysical stance in itself, part of a defence of individuality and culture, and of a self-reflective approach to those things that attack the individual, especially in its ultimate mode –by bringing death.

NOTES:

1. The extreme case would be John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant Woman* (1967), where the reader is offered three different ends to choose.
2. In this essay we will not distinguish between "narrator" and "implied author", as we consider that though they belong to different textual and ontological levels, here they cannot be actually distinguished in terms of opinion.
3. Kafka's case is the most strange, as it is explicitly rejected as an influence in the book by the author in the preface (Nabokov, 2001: 6), but it is clearly there in the form of a beetle within a bottle called Gregoire, like the protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.
4. There is also an important presence of issues of translation and identity but they are beyond the scope of this paper. For issues of language and translation, see for instance Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, "Translation and Self-Translation" and "Bilingualism" (1995), or Beatriz Penas Ibáñez, "Thinking Russian/Writing English: Textual Traces of an Émigré's Conflict" (1998). For identity issues, refer to Herbert Grabes, "Nabokov and Shakespeare: The English Works" (1995).
5. See Grabes (1995) for a more in depth analysis of this question.
6. Shakespeare is an icon of culture in *Bend Sinister* among other multiple things. As the narrator says following a similar discussion in Joyce's *Ulysses*, "[h]is name is protean" (2001: 95).
7. John Burt Foster Jr speaks of "hypothetical autobiography" to describe the technique employed by Nabokov to represent his own possible fate under Soviet and Nazi regimes (1995: 30).

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