

Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts

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Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts

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To my family

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Note on Editions, Translations, and Transliteration

This book follows a modified Library of Congress transliteration system. To make the body of the main text more readable to a general audience, first and last names ending in *-ii* have been changed to *-y*, such as Anatoly or Belinsky rather than Anatolii or Belinskii. I have also, for the sake of readability, collapsed *-iia* endings to *-ia*. For the same reason, names beginning with *ia-* or *iu-*, such as Iurii and Iazykov, have been changed to Yuriy and Yazykov. Names are given in their standard English form when one exists. Bibliographic references, including the notes, follow the standard Library of Congress transliteration system. Unless otherwise noted, I am responsible for the translations offered in this text.

Translations from Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain* are mine. For quotations from *Perceval*, I have used William W. Kibler's translation (Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li Contes del Graal), or Perceval*, ed. Rupert T. Pickens [New York: Garland, 1990]). Quotations from the original texts are identified by verse number. They are drawn from the following Old French manuscripts collected by Michel Zink in Chrétien de Troyes, *Romans suivis des "Chansons," avec, en appendice, "Philomena"*: for *Erec et Enide*, BN fr. 1376; for *Le Chevalier de la charrette (Lancelot)*, BN fr. 794; for *Le Chevalier au lion (Yvain)*, BN fr. 1433; for *Le Conte du Graal (Perceval)*, the Berne Manuscript 354.

For citations from *Aucassin et Nicolette*, I have used Roger Pensom's translation. Citations from the Old French are identified by chapter and verse number.

For quotations from *La Chanson de Roland*, I have used D. D. R. Owen's translation (*The Song of Roland: The Oxford Text* [London: Allen and Unwin, 1972]). Citations from the Old French are identified by chapter and verse number.

For quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I cite the line number of the Middle English text and use James Winny's modern English translation.

With the exception of references to Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, parenthetical references to Kant's work follow conventional practice by referring to volume and page numbers of the standard German edition of Kant's works, *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer, later Walter deGruyter & Co., 1900—).

Shakespeare's plays are cited by act, scene, and line numbers from the editions mentioned in the Bibliography.

Quotations from Nabokov's four-volume translation and commentary to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* are identified by volume and page numbers.

Russian-language citations from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* are taken from *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* in ninety volumes published in Moscow by Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1935–58. These come after references to the English translation by Rosemary Edmonds in two volumes.

Unless otherwise noted, English-language citations of Proust's novel are given first and refer to the six-volume edition of *In Search of Lost Time (SLT)* translated by C. K. S. Moncrieff, T. Kilmartin, and A. Mayor, and revised by D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003). French citations from Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu (RTP)* refer to the second Pléiade edition published in four volumes under the direction of Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89). In-text references to these editions identify citations by volume and page number. References to the French text are further cross-referenced with the *Nouvelle Revue Française* edition (NRF) that Nabokov read before the publication in 1954 of the revised three-volume Pléiade edition edited by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré. The in-text references to the NRF volumes are identified by NRF's classification system as it appears on the flyleaf of its volumes:

<i>Du côté de chez Swann</i>	Tome I, 2 volumes
<i>À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs</i>	Tome II, 3 volumes
<i>Le Côté de Guermantes I</i>	Tome III, 1 volume
<i>Le Côté de Guermantes II, Sodome et Gomorrhe I</i>	Tome IV, 1 volume
<i>Sodome et Gomorrhe II</i>	Tome V, 3 volumes

Note on Editions, Translations, and Transliteration

La Prisonnière

Tome VI, 2 volumes

Albertine disparue

Tome VII, 2 volumes

Le Temps retrouvé

Tome VIII, 2 volumes

References to the NRF editions come immediately *after* the references to the 1987–89 Pléiade edition and are identified by three numbers in the following sequence: tome, volume, page. Thus, the first reference to a citation from the NRF edition in the introduction is cited as follows: 8.2.38 (that is, Tome VIII, volume 2, page 38).

Abbreviations

- A Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), in *Vladimir Nabokov: Novels 1969–1974*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1–485.
- “AG” Vladimir Nabokov, “Abram Gannibal,” in *Notes on Prosody and Abram Gannibal: From the Commentary to the Author’s Translation of Pushkin’s “Eugene Onegin”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 107–68.
- Anth* Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell, rev. and ed. Hans H. Rudnick (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).
- Besedy* Yury M. Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul’ture* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 1994).
- “Bor’ba” Sergey I. Hessen [Gessen], “Bor’ba utopii i avtonomii dobra v mirovozzrenii F. M. Dostoevskogo i Vl. Solov’eva” [“The Struggle between Utopia and the Autonomy of the Good in the Worldview of F. M. Dostoevskii and Vl. Soloviev”], in *Izbrannye sochineniia*, ed. Andrzej Walicki and N. Chistiakova (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999), 609–77.
- BS Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (1947), in *Vladimir Nabokov: Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 161–358.
- C Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006).
- Ch* *La Chanson de Roland*, trans. and ed. Léon Gautier, 5th ed. (Tours: Alfred Mame), 1875.
- CPJ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- “CT” Gordon Teskey, “‘And Therefore as a Stranger Give It Welcome’: Courtesy and Thinking,” *Spenser Studies* 18 (2003): 343–59.
- DBDV Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, rev. and ex-

Abbreviations

- panded edition, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- Def* Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense* (1930), trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage, 1990).
- Des* Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (1936; revised 1965) (New York: Vintage, 1989).
- “DiUZ” V. D. [Vladimir Dmitrievich] Nabokov, “Duel’ i ugovolnyi zakon” [“The Duel and Criminal Law”], *Pravo* 50 (December 13, 1909): 2729–44; 51 (December 20, 1909): 2833–47.
- DP* *Duel’ Pushkina s Dantesom-Gekkernom: Podlinnoe voenno-sudnoe delo 1837 Goda* [Pushkin’s *Duel with d’Anthès-Heeckeren: The True Account of a Military-Legal Event 1837*] (Moscow: Belyi gorod, 2012).
- Duel* François Billacois, *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*, ed. and trans. Trista Selous (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). Translation of *Le Duel*, 1986.
- EO* Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov, 4 vols., Bollingen Series 72 (New York: Bollingen, 1964).
- Erec* Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, in *Romans suivis des “Chansons,” avec en appendice, “Philomena,”* ed. Michel Zink (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994), 55–283.
- Essai* Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).
- FAR* Ad Putter, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” and *French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).
- FQ* Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Tshiyuki Suzuki (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001).
- Gift* Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (1963), trans. Michael Scammell with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage, 1991).
- Gl* Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).
- GMM* Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37–108.
- H* Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- HC* Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: Norton, 2010).
- IA* Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Last Years, 1855–1867* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015).
- IB* Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959), trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage, 1989).

Abbreviations

- L* Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955), in *Vladimir Nabokov: Novels 1955–1962*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1–298.
- Lancelot* Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot, ou Le chevalier de la charrette*, in *Romans suivis des “Chansons,” avec en appendice, “Philomena,”* ed. Michel Zink (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994), 495–704.
- LE* Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- LL* Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego, CA: Harvest, Harcourt, Brucoli Clark, 1980).
- LRL* Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego, CA: Harvest, Harcourt, Brucoli Clark, 1981).
- LV* Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, ed. and trans. Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).
- M* Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary* (1970), trans. Michael Glenny with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage, 1989).
- MM* Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 363–603.
- Must* Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- NB* Vladimir Nabokov, *Nabokov’s Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings*, ed. Brian Boyd and Michael Pyle (Boston: Beacon, 2000).
- NG* Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (1944) (New York: New Directions, 1961).
- NRF* Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 8 vols., Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française (Paris: Gallimard, 1919–27).
- NTI* Siggy Frank, *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- Othello* William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Edward Pechter (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).
- PAS* Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
- Per* Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval*, in *Romans suivis des “Chansons,” avec en appendice, “Philomena,”* ed. Michel Zink (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994), 937–1211.
- PF* Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962), in *Vladimir Nabokov: Novels 1955–1962*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 437–667.

Abbreviations

- Pnin* Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (1957), in *Vladimir Nabokov: Novels 1955–1962*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 299–435.
- PSS* Lev Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 90 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1935–58).
- PTB* Lev Tolstoy, “Perepiska L. N. Tolstogo s V. P. Botkinym,” in vol. 4 of *Tolstoi: Pamiatniki tvorchestva i zhizni*, ed. V. I. Sreznevskii (Moscow: Kooperativnoe t-vo, 1923), 9–87.
- RL* Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 217–42.
- RLSK* Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), in *Vladimir Nabokov: Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1–160.
- RTP* Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 4 vols., ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89).
- RV* Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- SGGK* *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Paul Battles (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2012).
- SGGK* *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. and trans. James Winny (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1992).
- SL* Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940–1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).
- SLT* Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols., trans. C. K. S. Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003).
- SM* Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1967), in *Vladimir Nabokov: Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 359–635.
- SO* Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974).
- SVN* Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage International, 1997).
- VNAP* Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- VNAY* Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- VNRY* Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Abbreviations

- WP Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 2 vols., trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1978).
- Yvain* Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain, ou Le chevalier au lion*, in *Romans suivis des "Chansons," avec en appendice, "Philomena,"* ed. Michel Zink (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994), 705–936.
- ZA Leonid Grossman, *Zapiski d'Arshiaka* (1931) (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990).

Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts

Introduction

Thus the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it and so too does not lie in any principle of action that needs to borrow its motive from this expected effect. For, all these effects (agreeableness of one's condition, indeed even promotion of others' happiness) could have been also brought about by other causes, so that there would have been no need, for this, of the will of a rational being, in which, however, the highest and unconditional good alone can be found.

—Immanuel Kant

PASCAL DENIED THE existence of free will when he asserted that “*La coutume est notre nature*,”¹ but custom had taught Vladimir Nabokov that his nature was free. As the son of a man who, having been born into great privilege, devoted his life's work to dismantling the structures which had sustained that privilege, Nabokov was suspicious of theories that treated human conduct as an extension of class interests. Later, as a father himself, Nabokov would regard his own son's fascination with toy cars and other movable objects as evidence for “the essentially human urge to reshape the earth.” This urge, he insisted, is shared by every child “unless he is a born Marxist or a corpse and meekly waits for the environment to fashion *him*” (*SM* 621; emphasis in original).

Statements of this kind abound in Nabokov's writings from the beginning to the very end of his career. He saw himself as a self-fashioning subject whose personal freedom clashed not only with Marxist conceptions of human identity, but with all theories that understood the self to be externally determined. “There are two kinds of ‘come what may,’” he writes in an early love letter to the woman who would become his wife, “involuntary and deliberate. Forgive me—but I live by the second one” (*LV* 8). Searching decades later for the signs of the forces that shaped his destiny, he declared that “neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument

that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap" (*SM* 374). Philip Wild, one of the protagonists of the unfinished novel *The Original of Laura*, is caught up in an obsessive effort to reach the condition captured in the term Sophrosyne, which he defines as "a platonic term for ideal self-control stemming from man's rational core."²

This is a book about Nabokov's faith in freedom and the way in which his work expresses this faith through a constellation of problems that radiate from his conception of courtesy as the supreme testament of that freedom. The book argues that Nabokov's belief in the freedom of the will sits at the center of his thinking about ethics, and, by extension, that several striking (and sometimes counterintuitive) features of his moral philosophy are tied to this core belief. Studying these matters from the vantage point of courtesy makes visible Nabokov's attachment to anti-consequentialist moral paradigms and (what I will be referring to as) an ethics of inutility.

Accordingly, the book studies the ethical stakes of what might, at first glance, appear to be gestures and exchanges of limited moral significance: a pause to share a cold drink with family friends, a hand extended to receive a gentleman's kiss, a soccer ball discarded before it can cause awkwardness to a teenage boy who does not like sports. Scenes of this kind are charged ground for Nabokov for two interrelated reasons: first, because they provide him with an opportunity to resist deterministic narratives of human motivation and consequentialist ethical models; and second, because they enable him to make a case for the freedom of the will. These scenes stand as emblems of a moral vision that is, for Nabokov, every bit as demanding as it is in the writings of Immanuel Kant.

COURTESY AND KANT

Nabokov's insistence that courtesy bears witness to the will's freedom recalls Kant's courtesy to his physician as reported by Kant's friend, amanuensis, and the last of his three "official" biographers. E. A. C. Wasianski's recollection is repeated by Kant's subsequent biographers, but it is Erwin Panofsky's rendition of this event that aligns with Nabokov's understanding of courtesy most closely:

Nine days before his death Immanuel Kant was visited by his physician. Old, ill and nearly blind, he rose from his chair and stood trembling with weakness and muttering unintelligible words. Finally his faithful companion realized that he would not sit down again until the visitor had taken a seat. This he

did, and Kant then permitted himself to be helped to his chair and, after having regained some of his strength, said, “*Das Gefühl für Humanität hat mich noch nicht verlassen*”—“The sense of humanity has not yet left me.” The two men were moved almost to tears. For, though the word *Humanität* had come, in the eighteenth century, to mean little more than politeness or civility, it had, for Kant, a much deeper significance, which the circumstances of the moment served to emphasize: man’s proud and tragic consciousness of self-approved and self-imposed principles, contrasting with his utter subjection to illness, decay and all that is implied in the word “mortality.”³

Kant’s legendary gesture of courtesy serves as a heuristic for the four acts of courtesy in Nabokov’s fiction that have inspired the writing of this book. In each of these cases, courtesy becomes a signifier of freedom understood as a quintessentially human capacity to replace the tyranny of nature with a freely chosen tyranny of duty.

As chapter 1 shows, my book singles out for attention four scenes in which images of courtesy are presented in near-identical terms from the early novel *The Defense* (*Zashchita Luzhina*, 1930) to the late *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969). Mrs. Luzhin, Helene Grinstein, Disa, and Lucette showcase moral excellence through heroic acts of courtesy that border on self-sacrifice. In each case, the courteous act is disinterested, has no utilitarian benefits, and is directed at unlikable or superfluous people. A fifth instance—alluded to parenthetically in *Invitation of a Small Guest* (1957)—suggests that Mira Belochkin may have performed similar acts of courtesy before being killed at Buchenwald. The chapter argues that courtesy is a supreme virtue in Nabokov’s ethics because it affirms Kant’s claim that the capacity to do what is *right* (sometimes even in opposition to what appears to be consequentially *good*) is a testament of the will’s freedom.⁴ Unlike love and pity (the other two supreme values in Nabokov’s moral universe), courtesy is subject not to the passions, but to moral obligation. In the case of courtesy, this moral obligation finds its most tangible expression in acts that treat the other with dignity and respect even when such acts collide with justified concerns about utility and interest.

Nabokov’s understanding of courtesy as non-instrumental and divorced from considerations of utility is profoundly at odds with canonical conceptions of courtesy. In chapter 2, I trace the evolution of courtesy (as *courtoisie*) from both the chivalric texts of the French Middle Ages that Nabokov studied for his Modern and Medieval Languages tripos at Cambridge and the Renaissance texts that he references in his fiction, to its modern instantiations that Norbert Elias locates under the rubric *humanité*. These literary, historical, and theoretical contexts show—either by way of kinship or contrast—that Nabokov’s conception of courtesy belongs to the same un-

derstanding of *Humanität* that Kant is said to have invoked in the presence of his physician. This understanding stands in sharp contrast to more conventional accounts of human behavior that see courtesy as an interested and utility-driven means of interpersonal exchange.

Nabokov's revisionist, counterintuitive conception of courtesy becomes especially vivid when we juxtapose the scene of the dying Kant with Adam Smith's figure of the "man on the rack" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. According to Smith, stoicism in the face of suffering is no Kantian demonstration of the human capacity to rise above the vicissitudes of nature, but a means of soliciting the spectator's sympathy and approval. "Magnanimity amidst great distress appears always so divinely graceful," Smith writes, because we "wonder with surprise and astonishment at that strength of mind which is capable of so noble and generous an effort." The suffering individual is rewarded by the "applause and admiration which he is about to deserve by the heroic magnanimity of his behaviour."⁵ Kant's gesture of courtesy to his physician and the four scenes of courtesy that anchor my book pit themselves against this transactional and self-interested account of human conduct.

Nabokov's Kantian understanding of moral value makes him see courtesy as a supererogatory act that signals the performer's capacity to ignore the kinds of calculation that, according to Smith, weigh the *effect* of one act over another and, by doing so, bury human agency under the detritus of utilitarian calculations of benefit. Kant's gesture of courtesy bespeaks a *humanity* defined—to invoke Panofsky's terms again—by "self-approved and self-imposed principles" that belie our "utter subjection" to illness, decay, and death. In the story about the dying Kant and in the four scenes of courtesy I single out from Nabokov's fiction, the human individual's heteronomous nature is made to yield to an autonomous will. This situates Nabokov's conception of selfhood at the antipodes of Smith's psychologically egoist view of the moral sentiments.

NABOKOV AND KANT

Nabokov was drawn to what Charles Taylor calls "the exciting kernel" of Kant's philosophy—namely, Kant's "radical notion of freedom."⁶ Though the idea that an action must be voluntary to count as "moral" can be found at least as early as Aristotle, it is Kant who articulated the most compelling argument for the existence of a pure, moral will that makes voluntary acts possible. As the most influential proponent of human autonomy, Kant provides this book with a set of interpretive tools that make visible and intelligible aspects of Nabokov's ethics that would otherwise remain obscure or embedded in contradiction.

As the presiding spirit over Nabokov's ethics, Kant helps account for the "single continuum of beliefs" that, as Vladimir Alexandrov has argued, connects Nabokov's ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics.⁷ The coordination of beliefs drawn from these sister disciplines is a chief feature of Kant's philosophy. As Allen Wood reminds us, "the real significance of beauty and taste" for Kant "is chiefly a moral significance."⁸ Kant's metaphysical conception of the self justifies this conflation by making possible both disinterested aesthetic appreciation and disinterested moral conduct.

In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant argues that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good" (*CPJ* 5:353) because the faculty that enables us to derive universally binding moral laws also enables us to make aesthetic judgments that we can also assume to be universally valid. The connection originates in a process of abstraction that insulates the mind from private concerns such as inclination, desire, and ambition: "*Taste* is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction *without any interest*. The object of such a satisfaction is called *beautiful*" (*CPJ* 5:211; emphasis in original). Kant's claim that detachment is at once a moral and an aesthetic condition sets a precedent for Nabokov's insistence that good reading must combine "an artist's passion" with "a scientist's patience." Nabokov's argument also turns on the idea of detachment: "The enthusiastic artist alone is apt to be too subjective in his attitude toward a book, and so a scientific coolness of judgment will temper the intuitive heat" (*LL* 5). For both Kant and Nabokov, aesthetic impartiality derives from a moral commitment to that which is other.⁹ Roger Scruton glosses this central premise of Kant's aesthetics in terms that are eminently suited to Nabokov: "Disinterested contemplation is a recognition that the object matters—matters so much that our interests have no bearing on our judgment."¹⁰

KANT IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

The Kantian claim that free will is the wedge that pries open the door for other metaphysical possibilities was a cornerstone of Russian idealist philosophy during the Russian Silver Age. As a self-proclaimed child of that Silver Age,¹¹ Nabokov shared the view articulated by Russia's idealist philosophers that free will is a miracle that paves the way for other miracles such as God and immortality.¹² As I have argued in *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*, Nabokov's continuum of beliefs also extended to his politics. Kant's twofold claim that rational individuals are autonomous and endowed with the right to self-determination was mobilized by Russia's liberal-idealist philosophers and political activists as a powerful weapon in their struggle against tsarist autocracy. Nabokov's assertion that he was

an “old-fashioned liberal” like his father, the distinguished statesman and “liberationist” V. D. (Vladimir Dmitrievich) Nabokov (1870–1922),¹³ was an attempt to lay claim to a cluster of Kantian principles that structured his father’s jurisprudence and political activism (SO 96; see also SO 113).

The Russian idealist philosophers whose writings constituted the philosophical background of the Russian Silver Age readily acknowledged their debt to Kant. Some were political activists who, together with V. D. Nabokov, played key roles in Russia’s Union of Liberation and the Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) Party. These “liberationists” frequently identified Kant as the standard bearer of their struggles against tsarist autocracy. “There can be no sharper antithesis than that between Marx and Kant and idealist philosophy in general,” wrote Peter (Pyotr) Struve (1870–1944), the leading theorist of the Union of Liberation and a prominent founding member of the Kadet Party.¹⁴ Paul (Pavel) Novgorodtsev (1866–1924), another high-ranking liberationist and a close acquaintance of V. D. Nabokov, borrows Kant’s definition of the human individual in a landmark document of the Russian Silver Age: “The person is the border between the kingdom of necessity and the kingdom of freedom, and it is in the moral calling of personhood that man first discovers his infinite tasks and his participation in the world of freedom.”¹⁵

There are several routes by which Nabokov could have arrived at his knowledge of Kant. The strongest evidence comes from the extended research into nineteenth-century Russian intellectual history that he conducted for the fourth chapter of *The Gift* (*Dar*, 1937–38). In this chapter, the novel’s protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, writes a biography of the nineteenth-century Russian radical publicist Nikolay Chernyshevsky. As Fyodor notes in the biography, Kantian thought had penetrated deeply into Russian journalistic and philosophical writing by the time Chernyshevsky and his confrères supplanted German idealism with “rational egoism” as the guiding ideology of the Russian intelligentsia (*Gift* 202).

But there were also earlier opportunities for Nabokov to become familiar with Kant. Russian translations of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Critique of Pure Reason* appear as items 2198 and 2199 in the section titled “Religion, Philosophy, Psychology, Ethics” of his father’s library catalog.¹⁶ And though there is no proof that Nabokov read these particular volumes, scholars agree that he was intimately acquainted with his father’s St. Petersburg library. Certainly, by the time he completed *Ada*, Nabokov could allude to Kant in a way that was contextually appropriate and thematically resonant.¹⁷

While it is most likely that Nabokov encountered Kant’s first two critiques in his father’s library, his encounter with Kant’s third critique—*Critique of Judgment*—may have been mediated by Vladimir Solovyov, Rus-

sia's most respected and influential idealist philosopher. In his essay "Beauty in Nature," Solovyov defines beauty in Kantian terms. Moreover, the passage in question provides a significant precedent for Nabokov's own views:

Formal beauty always shows itself as pure uselessness, whatever its material elements . . . And if [formal beauty] cannot be valued as a means for the satisfaction of one or another daily or physiological requirement, then this means it is valued as a goal in itself. In beauty—even with the most simple and primary of its manifestations—we meet up with something *absolute* that exists not for the sake of another but for its own sake, so that, by its very existence, it gladdens and satisfies our soul, which, resting on beauty, becomes tranquil and is liberated from life's strivings and labors.¹⁸

In conceptualizing courtesy as a proof of autonomy, Nabokov pitches his moral philosophy on the same nonutilitarian foundation that supports Kant's, Solovyov's, and his own aesthetics.

Kantian ideas also figured prominently in the work of at least one Russian intellectual of Nabokov's own generation. The Kantian philosopher Sergey Hessen (1887–1950) was the half-brother of George Hessen, Nabokov's best friend in the emigration. In his letters to Véra written from Prague between April 7 and April 11, 1932, Nabokov alludes to intending to visit Sergey Hessen (*LV* 173, 175). In my *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*, I document Nabokov's engagement with Hessen's contributions to Russian émigré philosophy and the extent to which V. D. Nabokov's jurisprudence was influenced by the same Kantian intellectual traditions that inspired Hessen's work.¹⁹

COURTESY, INUTILITY, AND NATURAL MIMICRY

Kant's systematic assault on consequentialism and its most popular variant, utilitarianism, would have appealed to Nabokov's own passionate anti-utilitarianism. As the father of modern deontology, Kant argued that the moral worth of an act cannot be determined by "the purpose to be attained by it" but only by "the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon" (*GMM* 4:399). Kant's insistence that outcome cannot serve as a benchmark for judging moral value has made him unpopular with many moral philosophers. Nabokov, however, would have been invigorated by the idea that utilitarian motivations strip actions of their moral worth. Like Kant, he associated moral excellence with a fidelity to formal principles of conduct motivated by duty. Though the actions he holds up for approval in his fiction may strike his readers as insufficient and ineffectual, these actions pay homage

to a code of ethics that Nabokov associated with the refinements of his own upbringing and with his cherished view of personal identity as self-driven and self-fashioning.

As a testament to human autonomy, courtesy sits at the center of Nabokov's polemical anti-utilitarianism in matters of art, science, history, politics, and ethics. I argue that courtesy is a cardinal virtue in Nabokov's ethics because he understood it in the same terms as he understood art and natural mimicry—that is, as a refutation of deterministic accounts of human identity. By seeing courtesy as gratuitous, disinterested, and often dependent upon artful deception, Nabokov regarded it as proof of the human capacity to act in ways that are irreducible to deterministic accounts of behavior such as those postulated by Smith, Chernyshevsky, Darwin, Marx, and Freud. “We know the world to be good,” he writes in “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” whenever we bear witness to our capacity to “wonder at trifles—no matter the imminent peril” (LL 374). Such examples of indifference to peril include “the hero who dashes into a burning house” and risks “squandering a precious five seconds to find and save, together with the child, its favorite toy,” and a chimney sweep (depicted in a cartoon) “falling from the roof of a tall building and noticing on the way that a sign-board had one word spelled wrong, and wondering in his headlong flight why nobody had thought of correcting it” (LL 373). Nabokov insists that “these asides of the spirit” constitute “the highest forms of consciousness” and prove “the world to be good” (LL 374).

There are good reasons for agreeing with David Rampton when he observes that Nabokov prioritizes liberty above all else because, as an aristocrat, that is what he had known and felt necessary to defend.²⁰ Still, it remains important to note that Nabokov would have rejected and perhaps even felt wounded by the suggestion that his most cherished principles were refractions of class bias. Like Proust, he firmly believed that people's actions and beliefs are determined by the *intellectual* class to which they belong and that these classes of the intellect take no account of birth or social position (SLT 6.61; RTP 4.311; NRF 8.1.58). Proust's *ouvriers électriciens*, who possess far more learning and culture than “*les véritables illettrés*” of the Faubourg Saint-Germain (RTP 4.467; NRF 8.2.38), find their correlative in Nabokov's retired hot-dog stand operator who turns out to be the greatest poet of his generation (L 249).

FRA I MAESTRI DI COLOR CHE SANNO

As J. E. Rivers noted as early as 1977, Nabokov's work is “an achievement of literary synthesis.” “To read a novel by Nabokov,” he elaborates, “is to be exposed to a wide spectrum of allusions to and parodies of other authors,

and occasionally to passages of explicit literary criticism.”²¹ Commentators have tended to agree with this assessment. Robert Alter has remarked that Nabokov’s work is “sharply focused on a continuing critical recapitulation of a whole literary tradition,”²² and John Burt Foster Jr. has observed that Nabokov’s work is characterized by an “unusual skill in choosing details from writers in several traditions and synthesizing them to serve his special artistic purposes.”²³

My book’s methodology is anchored in this insight. Chapters 3 through 6 show how Nabokov’s lifelong interest in courtesy inflected his engagement with the writers he came to love best. Questions convening under the rubric of *courtoisie* in the medieval texts Nabokov studied at Cambridge provide a point of entry into scenes collected from his writings and some of the writers that Nabokov admired most intensely. As the book proceeds, it establishes constant points of reference to Pushkin, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Proust as part of an implied argument that Nabokov is in constant dialogue with these masters of his imagination, and that he returns again and again to problems and topics that he finds worked out in a relatively small collection of masterpieces.

Though Pushkin, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Proust are certainly not the only writers Nabokov loved or admired, these are the writers whom he read and reread throughout his life, and who thus became the most vocal interlocutors for his own fiction. By locating Nabokov’s nodes of moral concern within the works of these four writers, my book situates Nabokov “*fra i maestri di color che sanno* [among the masters of those who know]” in a way that recalls Aristotle’s pride of place in Dante’s *La Divina Commedia* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or Dante’s own pride of place in Pound’s *Cantos*. These comparative analyses are grounded in textual allusions even as they focus on the broader affinities and contrasts that make these *maestri* the constant companions of Nabokov’s literary journey. Given that this journey begins with the chivalric literature that his mother read to him as a young boy and which Nabokov studied as an undergraduate at Cambridge, my book concerns itself with the medieval legacies that anchor Nabokov’s conversations with the constant companions of his imagination.

THE ART OF MORAL ACTS

This book builds upon three decades of scholarship devoted to the figure that Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney call (in their introduction to *Nabokov and the Question of Morality*) “the moral Nabokov.”²⁴ My book’s understanding of the term “moral” is identical to theirs: that is, I use it to refer to ethical judgments about right and wrong behavior. The pioneering studies of Brian Boyd, Ellen Pifer, David Rampton, Richard Rorty,

Leona Toker, and Michael Wood have been extended by scholars such as Leland de la Durantaye, Michael Glynn, and Roy Groen. Eric Naiman's deliberately "perverse" (as he calls it) reading of Nabokov (a reading that rests on the claim that Nabokov's poetics is to be understood as an erotics) shows that "the moral Nabokov" has become an orthodoxy that no longer requires defense.²⁵ The following chapters, therefore, take for granted that Nabokov was, to quote Pifer, a writer who shows an "abiding interest in human beings, not only as artists and dreamers, but as ethical beings subject to moral law and sanction."²⁶

Additionally, existing scholarship on Nabokov's ethics has consistently and conclusively challenged the false dichotomy between Nabokov the master stylist and Nabokov the humanist. In *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels*, Rampton articulates the flaws of this dichotomy with particular force.²⁷ Boyd, Pifer, Rampton, Rorty, Wood, de la Durantaye, and Paul D. Morris have each, in their own way, glossed Nabokov's maxim "style is matter" (*SL* 116; emphasis in original) as a claim that extends Nabokov's aesthetic commitments into the ethical domain. According to these arguments, Nabokov draws a series of analogies between the attentiveness to detail involved in the apprehension of beauty and the attentiveness to suffering that instigates a moral response.

The chapters that follow radicalize these claims by arguing that Nabokov's assertions about art's kinship to ethics are much more literal than previously acknowledged and that Nabokov measures moral worth by criteria that are generally identified with the aesthetic. As a virtue dependent on the *manner* of its expression, courtesy weds the ethical and the aesthetic in a way that obviates the analogy-based interpretations of existing scholarship in favor of a relationship grounded in identity. I depart from critical consensus on this subject by insisting that Nabokov's habit of conflating the moral with the aesthetic is no mere analogy, and that Nabokov's ethics is, startlingly, an aesthetics. His well-known dictum that "style is matter" loses the metaphorical and didactic dimensions that previous studies have ascribed to it and becomes as boldly direct as Nabokov's pithy phrase suggests. As an ideal that depends upon *how* an act is performed and not merely on *what* an act seeks to accomplish, courtesy makes it possible to say that this book's central subject is the *art* of moral acts.

CRUELTY AND RESPECT

My argument that Nabokov thought about ethics in Kantian terms sheds light on the long-standing debate about Nabokov's cruelty as a writer. The perception that Nabokov was cruel both in the fates he dealt his characters

and in his elitist pronouncements of indifference toward the general reader have been summarized by de la Durantaye.²⁸ I argue in the following chapters that the cruelty (Martin Amis, Italo Calvino), sadism (Carl Proffer), and loathing (Joyce Carol Oates) readers have detected in his work²⁹ are consequences of his painful acknowledgment that lives *are* causally determined and that emotions which he considered to be involuntary (such as love and pity) cannot always be relied upon to do the work of ethics. As in Kant, however, this vision is balanced by the will's capacity to resist the pull of Darwinian competitiveness and Hobbesian brutality. Only decisions taken, and acts performed, by a moral will can break the grip of determinism and orient human conduct toward virtue. Nabokov's world is dark not because it has suffered a decline from a happier prelapsarian state, but because the moral will has not advanced it far enough from its original, savage condition. "Our hideous reversions to the wild state"—the memorable formula he invokes in his lectures on *Bleak House* (LL 87)—occur when the will slackens and the darkness is allowed to prevail.

Unlike Amis, Calvino, Proffer, and Oates, a number of Nabokov's readers have seen more light than darkness in his work. Foremost among such readers is Brian Boyd, the author of the magisterial two-volume biography of Nabokov and several monographs and essay collections on Nabokov's fiction. Boyd has consistently argued that Nabokov is a quintessentially generous writer who patterns his fiction in such a way as to enable his readers to experience the same thrill of discovery that Nabokov himself experienced when pursuing butterflies or contemplating the patterns that had shaped his life (VNRV 315). According to Boyd, Nabokov's work seeks to expose the suffering caused by cruelty, especially when such cruelty risks being occluded by the eloquence of silver-tongued narrators like *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert or *Ada's* Van Veen.

My book argues that the debate about Nabokov's cruelty or generosity as a writer is a consequence of his Kantian double vision. Nabokov's fictional worlds are battlegrounds between an autonomous will and heteronomous passions, and genuinely moral acts occur when the will triumphs over the passions by answering the call of duty. Such occurrences are rare, but they are all the more admirable for being so. Though Nabokov cherished and celebrated virtues such as love and pity (Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's antidotes to the world's darkness), he also saw them as emotions that cannot be governed by the will and which, consequently, fall outside the precincts of the moral.

The claim that Nabokov portrays courteous acts as examples of moral excellence in no way suggests that Nabokov himself was a paragon of courteous conduct. (Writing in Nabokov's lifetime, Page Stegner observes that "for a man with such aristocratic and intellectual background, he demonstrates on occasion surprisingly bad manners.")³⁰ The assumption that Nabokov's

moral philosophy might have a bearing on his personal conduct must confront two main objections. First, there is Nabokov's own protest against "Tom-peeping over the fence" of "the precious lives of great writers" (*LRL* 138). This particular objection has been raised by many a writer. In a letter to Edmond de Goncourt dated December 17, 1891, Oscar Wilde protests against the impulse to seek the writer in the work of art, or to assume "that to create Hamlet one must be a little melancholy, to imagine Lear, completely mad."³¹ Lurking in these protests is the legitimate fear that literary criticism might devolve into literary gossip, or what Nabokov calls "the rustle of skirts and giggles in the corridors of time" (*LRL* 138).

The second objection against judging Nabokov's personal conduct against the moral ideals expressed in his fiction has to do with the disparity between theory and practice that animates both life and art. Medea's confession that she sees and approves the "better track" but follows "the worse" is a lament over the weakness of the will to direct action.³² Indeed, it can be argued that moral ideals exist precisely because they are so hard to attain. Nietzsche argued that Kant "believed in morality, not because it is demonstrated in nature and history, but in spite of the fact that nature and history continually contradict it."³³ The same is true of Nabokov's insistence on the supreme value of courtesy in a world in which courtesy is frequently absent.

This disparity between facts and ideals is frequently underscored in the medieval and Renaissance writers Nabokov studied for his tripos and referenced in his work. As Morton W. Bloomfield notes, the heroes of the Arthurian corpus—Arthur, Gawain, Lancelot, and others—"were both worthy and ridiculous figures. They were to be taken seriously and admired and at the same time to be laughed at for their childishness."³⁴ It is telling in this context that Calidore, the Knight of Courtesy in *The Faerie Queene*, is absent from much of the book in which Spenser studies that virtue. Elizabeth Jane Bellamy's observation that Calidore might be "the most truant protagonist in epic literary history"³⁵ is fitting given the short distance between moral aspiration and disillusion.

MORAL ART AND DELIBERATE MORALIZING

A Kantian approach to Nabokov's ethics also sheds light on the perennial problem regarding the apparent contradiction between Nabokov's various statements about the relationship between art and morality. As many scholars have noted, Nabokov's claim to Edmund Wilson that *Lolita* (1955) is "a highly moral affair" (*DBDV* 331) sits oddly with his claim in his afterword to the novel that *Lolita* has "no moral in tow" (*L* 296). The distinction he draws in a letter from 1945 has also generated debate: "I never meant to deny the

moral impact of art which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art,” he wrote to George Noyes on the subject of Gogol. “What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralizing which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skilfully written” (SL 56).

The cornerstone of Kant’s moral philosophy is the idea that human persons are bearers of a special dignity that demands respect. Placing respect at the center of Nabokov’s ethics makes it possible to square Nabokov’s insistence that all genuine art contains a moral dimension with his equally insistent claim that “deliberate moralizing” is incompatible with art. The first claim acknowledges that what is covered by the rubric of the *moral* is not culturally or temporally contingent, but universally and unconditionally binding. At the same time, however, the existence of moral norms does not give writers the license to adopt a militant approach toward the moral. As the second claim suggests, art that engages in “deliberate moralizing” does not show a proper respect for the reader’s own moral convictions and personal adventure in the act of reading. Seeing Nabokov’s assertions about the moral nature of art through the lens of respect dissolves any contradictions that might lurk in, for example, observations such as Sweeney’s when she notes that in spite of his obsessive probing of moral questions, Nabokov is always careful to leave such questions unanswered.³⁶

Such respect for the reader’s own convictions and investment in the reading act is a version of the “extreme courtesy” that James Merrill sees as the bond between art and manners in Proust’s magnum opus:

Manners for me are the touch of nature, an artifice in the very bloodstream. Someone who does not take them seriously is making a serious mistake. They are as vital as all appearances, and if they deceive us they do so by mutual consent. . . . Manners aren’t merely descriptions of social behaviour. The real triumph of manners in Proust is the extreme courtesy toward the reader, the voice explaining at once formally and intimately. Though it can be heard, of course, as megalomania, there is something wonderful in the reasonableness, the long-windedness of that voice, in its desire to be understood, in its treatment of *every* phenomenon (whether the way someone pronounces a word, or the article of clothing worn, or the color of a flower) as having ultimate importance. Proust says to us in effect, “I will not patronize you by treating these delicate matters with less than total, patient, sparkling seriousness.”³⁷

As chapter 5 will show, *Pale Fire* bears the burden of Merrill’s observation that courtesy is vital to human life, and that courtesy’s deceptions are life-giving because they deceive by mutual consent. Chapter 6 argues that Nabokov ultimately recoiled from a key aspect of Proust’s “extreme courtesy” when he was writing—in the years following the Holocaust—the dark-

est novels of his corpus: *Lolita* and *Invitation of a Small Creature*. In the epilogue, I argue that courtesy recovers its innocence by the time Nabokov writes *Invitation of a Small Creature*, a work that draws a moral equivalence between the duties of the “artist” and those of the “gentleman” (A 393–94). As in the medieval conceptions of *courtoisie* that Nabokov studied at Cambridge, *Invitation of a Small Creature* shows that it is a *moral duty* to be courteous to those one does not love and an *art* to pretend delight in its performance.