

# Bend Sinister

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by  
Vladimir Nabokov

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*By*

**Vladimir Nabokov**



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# Nabokov's Dystopia: *Bend Sinister*, America and Mass Culture

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"I am as American as April in Arizona," Nabokov claimed in a 1966 interview. Although he repeatedly emphasized his American citizenship and the affection he held for his adopted nation, my argument is that his 1947 novel, *Bend Sinister*, offers us an opportunity to interrogate the received narrative of Nabokov's unproblematic arrival and assimilation into the United States. In examining the engagement with mass culture in this dystopian novel, my intention is to restore some of the political valence denied the novel by both Nabokov and his readers, and to suggest how it functions as a critique of American culture which reveals the author's profound ambivalence about his adopted nation in the early to mid-1940s. Drawing on unpublished archive material, as well as theoretical work by Theodor Adorno, this paper opens up a new approach to Nabokov's American work and demands a reassessment of his avowed apoliticism.

"I am as American as April in Arizona," Nabokov claimed to Herbert Gold, in an interview for the *Paris Review* in 1966.<sup>1</sup> The setting, ironically, was Nabokov's new residence, one he was to keep until his death in 1977 – a suite of rooms at the top of the Montreux Palace Hotel in Switzerland. Nabokov was consistently effusive about America during the years after he left it, and often emphasized his ongoing citizenship.<sup>2</sup> Only three of his novels were completed in the USA, however. One of them, *Lolita* (1955), was about the seduction of a young American girl with a saccharine taste for movie stars, pop songs and sodas. *Invitation to a Beheading* (1957) also presented the United States through the eyes of Europe, as an eccentric émigré academic struggles to assimilate himself into the alien world of an American university campus.

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (1973) (New York: Vintage, 1990), 98.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, this assertion from a 1969 interview: "I am an American, I feel American, and I like that feeling. I live in Europe for family reasons, and I pay a US federal income tax on every cent I earn at home or abroad." *Ibid.*, 124. Nabokov lived in America from 1940 to 1959.

Both novels refract America through popular culture in a way that, even if the operation of irony leaves room for ambivalence, seems not to contradict Nabokov's later enthusiasm for the USA. *Bend Sinister* (1947) has shared little of the scholarly attention or critical success of these other American novels.<sup>3</sup> This is Nabokov's dystopian work, one which appears to have obscure, if any, relations to the country it was written in. As Nabokov readily admitted, in writing the novel he drew heavily on his knowledge of the regimes of Hitler and Stalin.<sup>4</sup> Its setting seems unmistakably European. My argument, though, is that *Bend Sinister* offers us an opportunity to interrogate the received narrative of Nabokov's unproblematic arrival in, and assimilation into, the United States. In examining the engagement with mass culture in the novel, my intention is to restore some of the political implications denied it by both Nabokov and his readers, and to suggest how it functions as a critique of America which reveals the author's profound ambivalence about his adopted nation in the early to mid-1940s. This contention will be supported by reading Nabokov historically, alongside the intellectual immigration and the New Criticism, and by paying particular attention to formulations of history and cultural temporality within those contexts.

To introduce history and politics into the reading of Nabokov's fiction is certainly to operate against intention. In his foreword to *The Eye* in 1965, Nabokov wrote of his "indifference to community problems and to the intrusions of history,"<sup>5</sup> one of many statements which insist on his absolute aesthetic autonomy. *Bend Sinister*, though, like its Russian-language companion piece, *Invitation to a Beheading* (*Priglasenie na kazn'*, 1938), takes as its genre the political dystopia. In his polemic introduction to the 1963 edition of the novel, Nabokov testifies to the impact that these two regimes had on the work,<sup>6</sup> but in the same piece also undermines attempts at political readings by insisting that the story "in *Bend Sinister* is not really about life and death in a grotesque police state," before directing the reader towards the

<sup>3</sup> Boyd's assertion that *Bend Sinister* is "less successful than much of Nabokov's other mature fiction" is representative of the ambivalence with which both scholars and reviewers have received it. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 105–6. John Burt Foster Jr., "Bend Sinister," in Vladimir E. Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland, 1995), 25–36, 25–26, surveys these mixed responses.

<sup>4</sup> "Without those infamous models before me I could not have interlarded this fantasy with bits of Lenin's speeches, and a chunk of the Soviet constitution, and gobs of Nazist pseudo-efficiency." Nabokov, "Introduction" (1965), in *Bend Sinister* (London: Penguin, 2001), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, "Foreword" to *idem*, *The Eye*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (1965) (London: Panther, 1968), 7–10, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (1947) (London: Corgi, 1967), 6.

more overtly formal features of the novel (what he calls “stylistic distortions”) like intertextual allusion, multilingual play and recurrent patterns intimating the presence of an alternative “otherworld.”<sup>7</sup> The majority of specialist criticism on *Bend Sinister* has willingly followed Nabokov’s path in effectively divorcing the novel’s material, historical content from its stylistic virtuosity, and either has viewed the latter as a means by which to overcome and master the former, or has ignored the political implications altogether in favour of a benign commentary on formal devices.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, my approach owes more to critics such as David Rampton, Brian D. Walter and Charles Baxter, who have been willing to pursue the contradictions inhering in Nabokov’s apolitical political novel.<sup>9</sup>

In an unpublished lecture (“The Proletarian Novel”), written for his students at Wellesley College soon after his arrival in America, Nabokov wrote,

This country has produced exquisite writers. One of the best, perhaps *the* best short story in world literature has been written a hundred years ago by an American; but at the present moment this country is facing a grave danger: that danger is the best-seller, that fat healthy whale of a book that spouts high for a season and then plunges leaving not a bubble on the surface.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8–11.

<sup>8</sup> Probably the most influential work done on *Bend Sinister* is in D. Barton Johnson’s *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985). As the title suggests, Johnson is primarily interested in examining the links between Nabokov’s various created worlds, leading to metaphysical conclusions (ibid., 187–205). David Rampton, in a chapter on *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, surveys the apolitical slant on most criticism dealing with those novels, up to the publication of his book in 1984. David Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). In addition see, as examples of critical work which engages with either intertextual allusion or the discovery of hermetic textual patterns without interrogating the novel’s political or historical implications, Richard F. Patteson, “Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister*: The Narrator as God,” *Studies in American Fiction*, 5 (1977), 241–53; Michael H. Begnal, “*Bend Sinister*: Joyce, Shakespeare, Nabokov,” *Modern Language Studies*, 15, 4 (1985), 22–27; and David H. Larmour, “The Classical Allusions in *Bend Sinister*,” *Russian Literature TriQuarterly*, 24 (1991), 163–72.

<sup>9</sup> Brian D. Walter, “Two Organ Grinders: Duality and Discontent in *Bend Sinister*,” in David J. H. Larmour, ed., *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov’s Prose* (London: Routledge, 2002), 24–40; Charles Baxter, “Nabokov, Idolatry and the Police State,” *Boundary 2*, 5, 3 (1977), 813–27.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from Nabokov’s unpublished essays “The Proletarian Novel” (typescript draft (incomplete) of classroom lecture notes, with his ms. revisions, signed and undated, unpublished material from the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, consulted 20 December 2006) and “Expatriates” (typescript draft (photocopy) of class lecture notes, signed and undated, unpublished material from the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, consulted 8 December 2006.), as well as his “Correspondence with Edmund Wilson” (unpublished material from the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, consulted 13 December 2006), are given with permission from the Estate of Vladimir

It might be supposed that the “grave danger” facing the USA at this time would have something more to do with global conflict, or the threat of communism. In focussing on the American best-seller, though, Nabokov reveals something crucial about his own perspective, which encompasses all of those concerns. The title of this lecture is “The Proletarian Novel,” and there the author makes explicit his equating of American and Soviet popular fiction: “The novels of Alexis Tolstoy or Sholokhov are as blissfully and smugly second-rate as those of John Galsworthy or Jules Romain or Sinclair Lewis and Hemingway.”<sup>11</sup> This lecture, which signals Nabokov’s alarm at American popular fiction, also makes a crucial connection between his new home and the one he left – between the United States of the 1940s and the totalitarian Soviet Union – setting a precedent for his treatment of mass culture in *Bend Sinister*.

A number of references to, and parodies of, popular mass culture are embedded in the text of *Bend Sinister*. The duality arising out of the encounter between Nabokov’s high-modernist aesthetics and these elements forms the basis for the novel’s encoded cultural politics. In these instances it becomes clear that best-selling fiction, newspapers and cinema are complicit with the political hegemony of the dominant, repressive Ekwilist regime portrayed in the novel. Some of the allusions are brought to our attention in Nabokov’s introduction, but the precise function of these cultural references remains unexplained:

When in Chapter Three Ember recalls four best-selling novels, the alert commuter cannot fail to notice that the titles of three of them form, roughly, the lavatorial injunction not to Flush the Toilet when the Train Passes through Towns and Villages, while the fourth refers to Werfel’s trashy *Song of Bernadette*, half altar bread and half bonbon. Similarly, at the beginning of Chapter Six, where some other popular romances of the day are mentioned, a slight shift in the spectrum of meaning replaces the title *Gone with the Wind* (filched from Dowson’s *Cynara*) with that of *Flung Roses* (filched from the same poem) and a fusion between two cheap novels (by Remarque and Sholokhov) produces the neat *All Quiet on the Don*.<sup>12</sup>

The first passage referred to by Nabokov lists the most popular novels under the Ekwilist regime. The scatological joke about their quality conceals a semi-serious point. Nabokov does not mention here (on page 31) that *Straight*

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Nabokov. It is difficult to determine which American short story this might be, although Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), which was particularly admired by Baudelaire, fits with Nabokov’s dating and is a likely candidate.

<sup>11</sup> In the manuscript the words “Sinclair Lewis or Hemingway,” though clearly legible, have been crossed out.

<sup>12</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 9–10.

*Flush* (the first title in the sequence) is also the name of an openly anti-Semitic short story by Somerset Maugham, an author he was known to dislike.<sup>13</sup> Though British, Maugham spent most of the Second World War in the USA, having fled, like Nabokov, from Nazi-occupied France. He spent much of his time there writing his best-selling novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944), and then the screenplay, which was filmed by Twentieth Century Fox in 1946. Werfel's extraordinarily popular, "trashy" novel was published in 1941 (the year in which Nabokov started work on *Bend Sinister*), spent thirteen weeks at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list, and was filmed in America in 1943, to become one of the five top-selling films of that year. *The Song of Bernadette* tells the sentimental story of the miracles worked by St. Bernadette in Lourdes during the nineteenth century and was obviously emblematic for Nabokov of second-rate fiction. The direct association, though, with the totalitarian dictatorship of *Bend Sinister*, is indicative of a particular strain in Nabokov's ideology which saw bad art as a means of mass control. Another fact that Nabokov does not mention is that Werfel, an Austrian Jew, was another who fled Europe for America at the beginning of the Second World War. This might be dismissed as coincidence if it were not for the fact that this then unites him also with E. M. Remarque, author of the World War One novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), which is also subjected to ridicule by Nabokov. Remarque was a well-known magazine editor in Berlin in the late 1920s when his social-historical novel brought him instant fame and wealth. As a pacifist, his German citizenship was revoked under Nazism and Remarque spent the war in the USA, where his hard drinking and sexual exploits (including an affair with Marlene Dietrich) kept him in the headlines. Like Werfel, his novel was made into a sensationally successful American film.<sup>14</sup> Given the evidence, it is arguable that Nabokov responded to more than just popular culture. In this case, the real locus for

<sup>13</sup> In the story referred to by Nabokov, the main character is an old, rich Jew who conforms to anti-Semitic stereotypes, having an "ancient, emaciated body," which "looked as though it were already attacked by the corruption of the grave. The only expression he ever wore was cunning." Maugham, Somerset, "Straight Flush," in *idem, The Complete Short Stories*, Volume III (London: Heinemann, 1951), 1483–88. He has a "thin, high-pitched cackle" and "looked incredibly astute and malicious." *Ibid.*, 1488. Nabokov (*Strong Opinions*, 118) called Maugham a "mediocre performer" of "easy platitudes."

<sup>14</sup> One of the earliest "talkies," it won several Oscars on its release in 1930, earned \$100,000 for Remarque in rights alone, and, perhaps most importantly, underwent a revival in the USA during the Second World War as an emblematically pacifist story. Nabokov's impatience with pacifism during the war is suggested by his correspondence with Edmund Wilson, in which he writes (18 July 1941) of his "ardent desire that Russia, in spite of everything, may defeat or rather utterly abolish Germany – so that not a German be left in the world" ("Correspondence with Edmund Wilson").

anxiety was in two kinds of transition. One was the adaptation of popular novels into Hollywood films; the other was the transition of European culture to America. These transactions provided wild fame and success in exchange for what Nabokov saw as a cheapened version of European experience for a people who had little access to anything which might challenge it.<sup>15</sup>

The final operation described in the Nabokov introduction sharpens our focus on this question even further. The conflation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* with another work of historical realism taking war as its theme – Mikhail Sholokhov’s *Quiet Flows the Don* (*Tikhii Don*, serialized in the USSR 1928–40) – is likely a reflection of pressures exerted on Nabokov by the Russian faculty at Wellesley College, where he was teaching, to include works of socialist realism in his courses. In several letters, Nabokov expressed his reluctance to compromise on his assertion that “Communism and its totalitarian rule have prevented the development of authentic literature during these last twenty-five years,” writing to the president of Wellesley College in order to suggest Yuri Olesha and Boris Pasternak as alternatives to Konstantin Simonov and other writers (like Sholokhov) of socialist realism.<sup>16</sup> Although *Quiet Flows the Don* would doubtless have attracted Nabokov’s vitriolic contempt (particularly following Sholokhov’s acceptance of the Stalin Award in 1941) it is once again the potential for an uncritical American reception of European literature which secures its place among the most popular works under Paduk’s totalitarian regime in *Bend Sinister*.

Despite the fact that, in every other respect, Paduk’s nation seems unquestionably European, it is important that the popular culture complicit with the maintenance of his power has a distinctly American flavour. One key example of this is the cartoon strip depicting an Ekwilist “Everyman” hero, Mr. Etermon, and his wife:

The young couple were as happy as any young couple ought to be: a visit to the movies, a rise in one’s salary, a yum-yum something for dinner – life was positively crammed with these and similar delights, whereas the worst that might befall one was hitting a traditional thumb with a traditional hammer or mistaking the date of the boss’s birthday. Poster pictures of Etermon showed him smoking the brand that millions smoke, and millions could not be wrong ...<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The irony of this position is that Nabokov himself performed both of these transitions in his own lifetime, importing versions of European and Russian literary culture into America, and adapting *Lolita* for Kubrick’s film (1962). With *Bend Sinister*’s commercial failure, and his own financial worries, Nabokov’s attitude towards commercialism was to become increasingly savvy and pragmatic.

<sup>16</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 90–91.

<sup>17</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 74.

Not only is Mr. Etermon complicit in advertising a cigarette brand, but in describing his life among “cosy armchairs and all sorts of electric thingumbobs and one thing-in-itself (a car),” Nabokov evokes the American consumerist drive of the 1940s, teeming with new technologies and labour-saving gadgetry.<sup>18</sup> As John Burt Foster Jr. has noted, the clichés of American advertising are evoked by Nabokov in his description of “poshlost” in his book *Nikolay Gogol* (1944), written during the same period as *Bend Sinister*.<sup>19</sup> Nabokov’s parodic re-creations of idealized domestic life are common to both works, and while, as Foster argues,<sup>20</sup> the *poshlost*’ of the Gogol biography is intentionally internationalized by reference to German origins, the predominance of specifically American cliché in the case of *Bend Sinister* constitutes a forceful instance of cultural critique.

This example is particularly interesting because of the way Nabokov specifically links Mr. Etermon to the empty, homogeneous time which accompanies the regime. The paradox he elucidates is that while, on one hand, Mr. Etermon “represented ... a living refutation of immortality, since his whole habitus was a dead end with nothing in it capable or worthy of transcending the mortal condition,” on the other he was immortal “because not a single detail of the setting (not even his playing poker with life insurance salesmen) suggested the fact of absolutely inevitable death.”<sup>21</sup> Existing within a stagnant temporality, this character personifies precisely the meaningless of time under the regime. This particular form of temporality, characterized by Nabokov as one of the “gaps of history,” or “*terrains vagues* of time,”<sup>22</sup> is closely associated with the regime, and is often presented as mechanized or spatialized time, in opposition to the dynamic, subjectivity of the Bergsonian *durée* which both Krug and his creator hold as their ideal.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 73. Rampton, 42, also points to the critique of American middle-class consumerism in the cartoon, writing that Mr. Etermon “seems suspiciously like a vehicle for Nabokov’s attack on the American middle class, casually imported into Paduk’s distinctly European country,” and noting that “the tyranny is Fascist or Communist, but the vulgarity is American.”

<sup>19</sup> *Poshlost*’ is the actual transliteration of this Russian term, which, Nabokov explains, is suggested by such English words as “cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin’,” in bad taste.” Nabokov, *Nikolay Gogol* (1944) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 67.

<sup>20</sup> John Burt Foster Jr., “Poshlost, Culture Criticism, Adorno and Malraux,” in Julian Connolly, ed., *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 216–35, 22–27. <sup>21</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 74. <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>23</sup> Nabokov’s interest in French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) informs many of his works. In particular, Nabokov often draws on Bergson’s notion of *la durée*, a pure, unmeasurable and intuitive form of time, to be set against *le temps*, which is measurable clock time. See Leona Toker, “Nabokov and Bergson,” in Vladimir E. Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland, 1995), 367–74, for a survey of

Elsewhere in the novel, popular culture is found to inform the nature of the regime in far more alarming ways. The abduction of Krug and his son from their apartment is one of the most unsettling episodes in *Bend Sinister*, largely because of the incongruity of a parodic, throwaway style narrating such a terrifying event. Mac, the government thug who carries out the abduction, is described in a way suggesting a filmic hard-boiled cop, or even Chester Gould's comic strip hero, Dick Tracey, rather than an SS or KGB agent, with his "bushy black eyebrows, a square heavy jaw and the whitest of white teeth."<sup>24</sup> It is his speech, though, which confirms his importation from the world of American popular culture. As he mutters "Aw, for Christ's sake" and "hold it tight kiddo" while brutally disabling Krug and manhandling David,<sup>25</sup> the jarring between form and content reaches an uncomfortable pitch. This is one of the alienating stylistic devices which, in John Coleman's review,<sup>26</sup> "constitute[s] a running threat to our engagement in their [the characters'] lives." Its function here is partly to suggest how the pervasive effects of mass culture have developed the valency required to mount a violent challenge to reality, in a way not dissimilar to totalitarian regimes in Europe. It also makes a demand of the reader: to question the authority with which cinema and popular fiction lay claim to represent the world – an authority, this farcical scene implies, which is founded on false premises.

We can see, then, that *Bend Sinister* manifests a cultural dichotomy by which the European high-modernist literary texts and styles usually associated with Nabokov are directly opposed to a lowbrow American popular culture, including best-selling novels, movies, advertising and newspaper cartoons.<sup>27</sup> The connections between this culture and the totalitarian politics

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Nabokov's interaction with him. Among numerous moments of engagement with Bergsonian time philosophy in *Bend Sinister*, the "pure Krugism" which insists on the dynamic unpredictability of the future (44–45) relates to Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1910), 175–83. By contrast, the mechanized, homogeneous temporality associated with the regime is often expressed through the preponderance of watches, clocks, and hourglasses, often stopped or malfunctioning (*Bend Sinister*, 19, 38, 51, 105, 147, 203).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 186 and 188.

<sup>26</sup> John Coleman, "Style and the Man," review of *Bend Sinister* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Spectator*, 25 March 1960, 444–45, 444.

<sup>27</sup> The range of allusions to modernist texts and instances of modernist formal techniques in *Bend Sinister* is beyond the scope of this paper. The novel's indebtedness to modernist experimentalism was noted as early as 1947, when Nathan Rothman wrote in a review, "Nabokov has mastered every kind of virtuosity that has been developed in this century. Naturally he owes a great deal to Joyce; it is there to be seen in the asides and the several (and simultaneous) depths of consciousness, in the bardic phrases, in the incessant literary recalls" (see Norman Page, *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan

it maintains are to be found in its fundamentally imperialistic nature – imperialist not in the sense of territorial acquisition but in its unceasing drive to recruit individuals to its own ready-made version of reality. This expansion, the acquisition of passive consent and inhabitation of mental territory, is precisely how Nabokov depicts the totalitarian regime in “Tyrants Destroyed,” the short story written in 1938 which prefigures the themes of *Bend Sinister* before his transatlantic migration and experience of American mass culture.<sup>28</sup> It is only after this geographical and cultural shift that Nabokov found common ground between totalitarianism and mass culture, uniting them in his dystopian novel. His deployment of high-modernist aesthetics is a form of resistance against these twinned forces. As we can see from the evidence of *Bend Sinister*'s early reviews, the novel displays some formal features strongly associated with modernism's impulses towards formal innovation and aesthetic autonomy.<sup>29</sup> These include the construction of several competing temporal realms, Joycean parodies of subliterate forms, and abrupt shifts in the ambiguous narrative voice which introduce awareness of spatial dimensions in the narrative. Perhaps the most important element of this modernist trace in *Bend Sinister* is the introduction of conflict into an otherwise unchallenged discourse; in other words, a particular form of modernist difficulty.

Nabokov seems in *Bend Sinister* to be participating in an argument about the value of modernist difficulty which, although it took root in the 1920s in

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Paul, 1982), 72). Foster, “Bend Sinister,” 31–35, surveys some of the allusions to modernist writers and suggests their impact on the novel.

<sup>28</sup> Nabokov, “Tyrants Destroyed” (Istreblenie tiranov, 1938), trans. Vladimir Nabokov (1975), in *idem, The Collected Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), 438–60, also tells the story of one man's attempts to resist the incursions of a farcical totalitarian regime into his life. The ambition of the regime is to take over and control not only the physical, but also the mental, space of its subjects. The narrator, for example, “soon had the feeling that he [the leader] ... was penetrating everywhere, infecting with his presence the way of thinking and the everyday life of every person” (442). Such is the extent, in fact, to which the leader encompasses the lives of his subjects, that the narrator resolves to commit suicide in order to kill the dictator, “as he was totally inside me, fattened on the intensity of my hatred ... grown huge within me, ousting, to the last sun-bathed landscape, to the last memory of childhood, all the treasures I had collected” (458). It is this last detail, in which space is transformed into time, in the form of memory, that I wish to foreground here, because although the leader's inexorable spatial expansion is striking, it is the attempted control over *time* which stands out as Nabokov's particular concern.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to Coleman and Rothman, mentioned above, see also V. S. Naipaul, who described *Bend Sinister* as “bizarre, puzzling and difficult ... too cerebral,” and Frank Kermode, who found the novel to be overly concerned with “a kind of thinking and pleasure which most readers have no hope of understanding or experiencing.” Page, 74, 76.

Europe, was very much current in the USA during the 1940s as a crucial component of the debate surrounding the emergence of New Criticism. New Criticism is not a critical term usually associated with Nabokov, tainted as it is by the legacy of his great bugbear, T. S. Eliot.<sup>30</sup> It was with one of its foremost proponents, however, Allen Tate, that Nabokov forged an unlikely alliance in publishing his first American novel. While other American commentators like Edmund Wilson expressed doubts about the “longeurs” of *Bend Sinister’s* style,<sup>31</sup> Tate, then editor at Henry Holt, pronounced it “the only piece of first-rate writing I have had the privilege of reading as an editor.” It was the style of the novel which impressed him most, as his blurb for the edition testifies: “The mastery of English prose exhibited here has not been surpassed by any writer of our generation who was born to English.”<sup>32</sup>

The rise of New Criticism as an established school coincided with Nabokov’s arrival in America in 1940, the year before John Crowe Ransom published his seminal book *The New Criticism*. Nabokov’s early academic career inevitably brought him into contact with the central tenets of New Criticism, as well as with several of its main proponents.<sup>33</sup> Although it would be misleading to suggest too many parallels between the school and Nabokov’s aesthetics, there is nevertheless some illuminating shared ground, which goes some way towards explaining why *Bend Sinister* found such favour with Tate and launched Nabokov’s American career.<sup>34</sup> The New Critical project was responsible for maintaining the argument in support of modernist difficulty in the USA. This is principally due to the fundamental link New Critics asserted between meaning and form, a link missing from the Russian Formalist tradition with which Nabokov was already familiar. The New Critics were interested in the integration of heterogenous or opposed elements within the literary work through ambiguity, irony and paradox. In

<sup>30</sup> Nabokov, although claiming to be “indifferent” to Eliot, often criticized him, calling him, for example (*Strong Opinions*, 43), “not quite first-rate.”

<sup>31</sup> Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov–Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, revised and expanded edition, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 210. <sup>32</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to his friendship with Tate (who later introduced him to I. A. Richards), Nabokov developed a friendship with Yvor Winters in Stanford in 1941, and with John Crowe Ransom in 1949. *Ibid.*, 33, 141.

<sup>34</sup> Evidence from the Nabokov archive in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library shows that Tate, who also provided a reference for Nabokov in his successful application for a Guggenheim fellowship, eventually resigned from Henry Holt due to what he regarded as commercial, conformist pressures compromising his patronage of genuinely experimental writing. Nabokov, “Correspondence with Henry Holt and Co.,” unpublished material from the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, consulted 17 December 2006.

other words, they regarded conflict itself as inherent to literature of value, and believed, much like Nabokov, that the act of reading constituted the transformation of these heterogeneous elements into a unified form. In the words of Cleanth Brooks,<sup>35</sup> literary structure was that which “unites the like with the unlike.” *Bend Sinister* clearly conforms, then, to this aspect of New Critical aesthetics. Implicit in these assertions which attribute value to those works which cohere through ambiguity, irony and paradox is the reverse – the absence of value in artistic production which manifests only homogeneous impulses. Allen Tate accordingly saw the duty of the writer to preserve the inherent complexity of language “at a time when all languages are being debased by the techniques of mass control.”<sup>36</sup> The “techniques of mass control” remain undefined in this essay, but offer a semantic link between the mass culture of newspapers, radio and film operating in many democratic nations including his own, and the totalitarian control enforced by European dictatorships.

A second, related, and perhaps more fertile, context for the cultural politics of *Bend Sinister* may be found in the intellectual immigration which arrived in America from Europe in the years between Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the end of the Second World War. Many of those intellectual immigrants were able, like Nabokov, to find work in one of America's many higher-education institutions, often thanks to the aid of various agencies and committees such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Oberlaender Trust.<sup>37</sup> Difficulties presented themselves, however, in the confrontations that inevitably occurred between European intellectual culture and that of American academia. This clash was to become one of the most important themes of Nabokov's 1957 novel *Pnin*. It is also relevant, in a more indirect sense, to *Bend Sinister*. The experience of assimilation into American culture, which Nabokov always professed to have been no problem for him, was, according to Donald Peterson Kent, an American sociologist who wrote a book on the subject in 1953, “not a question of the immigrant's preserving the best of his culture and combining it with the best of American culture (as some refugees thought desirable), but of abandoning his culture and adopting American culture.”<sup>38</sup> It is tempting to assert that the American popular culture which lightheartedly pervades *Pnin* and *Lolita* was experienced

<sup>35</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) (London: Dennis Dobson, 1968), 159.

<sup>36</sup> Allan Tate, “The Man of Letters in the Modern World,” in *idem*, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays 1928–1955* (New York: Meridian, 1955), 11.

<sup>37</sup> Donald Peterson Kent, *The Refugee Intellectual: The Americanization of the Immigrants of 1933–1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 118. <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

differently by Nabokov during the first years of his settlement there when he wrote *Bend Sinister*; that the demand for complete submission to the cultural hegemony suggested an uncomfortable parallel with the European situation he had fled.

This parallel can only have been reinforced by the anti-Semitism which Nabokov encountered in America. Nabokov's wife was of Jewish parentage, and rampant anti-Semitism was one of the reasons they had left Berlin for Paris in 1937 and Paris for New York in 1940. In his first few years in America, though, Nabokov witnessed a peak of anti-Semitic activity which had grown during the depression. Among numerous statistics indicating high levels of anti-Semitism at this time, one opinion poll taken in August 1940 suggested that between 15 and 24 percent of the population saw Jews "as a menace to America."<sup>39</sup> To make matters worse, American immigration policy became increasingly restrictionist during the early 1940s, preventing many Jewish refugees from reaching safety.<sup>40</sup> In *Bend Sinister* the state abduction of David and his incarceration, and then murder, in an "Institute for Abnormal Children" inevitably recall Nazi Jewish policy (as well as that towards other nonconformist groups).<sup>41</sup> More overtly, Nabokov's 1945 short story "Conversation Piece, 1945" dwells on the casual anti-Semitism of American middle-class pseudo-intellectuals, who play host to a German fascist sympathizer at a drinks party.<sup>42</sup> It is left to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, though, to elucidate the connections between mass culture and anti-Semitism which are left implicit in Nabokov's 1940s work, arguing in relation to Hollywood that "in the world of mass series production,

<sup>39</sup> David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941–1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 15.

<sup>40</sup> For a survey of American anti-Semitism during the late 1930s and early 1940s see *ibid.*, 9–15. On restrictionism and the failures of American immigration policymakers to take Jewish refugees during the holocaust see Saul S. Friedman's *No Haven for the Oppressed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973).

<sup>41</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 200.

<sup>42</sup> There is considerable evidence for Nabokov's continuing to probe connections between American anti-Semitism and the Holocaust during the postwar period. See, for example, Douglas Anderson's claims ("Nabokov's Genocidal and Nuclear Holocausts in *Lolita*," *Mosaic*, 29, 2 (1996), 73–90) that Nabokov encodes images of the Holocaust into the text of *Lolita*, and Alexander N. Drescher's similar claims about the short story "Signs and Symbols," published in 1948 (see Alexander N. Drescher, "Arbitrary Signs and Symbols," *Zembla*, 23 July 2007, available at <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/forians.htm>), about a Jewish couple and their son, newly immigrated to America. See also Michael Wood's discussion of *Bend Sinister* and "Signs and Symbols" in *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 55–74, especially his arguments concerning the pervasive presence of the Holocaust in Nabokov's fiction (*ibid.*, 62).

stereotypes replace individual categories.”<sup>43</sup> This is the same logic as that behind the doctrine of *Bend Sinister*'s “Ekwilism,” which advocates “a remoulding of human individuals in conformity with a well-balanced pattern.”<sup>44</sup>

Ekwilist utopian ideals do not derive exclusively from European sources, then. While both Stalinist and Nazi ideologies were formulated in profoundly utopian terms, there is also a utopian element to the American dream, which becomes inscribed in *Bend Sinister*. The disturbing parody of Freudian psychoanalytic techniques which constitutes the “release games” performed at the “Institute for Abnormal Children” needs to be understood in relation to the large-scale popularization of Freud which occurred in the United States during the 1940s. As Nathan H. Hale Jr. explains, an adapted “Americanized” version of Freudian psychiatry (from which Freud took pains to distance himself) underwent a surge in popularity during this period, publicized in novels, newspapers, magazines and even a musical comedy.<sup>45</sup> These techniques were often associated with the achievement of “increased vocational efficiency and personal satisfaction,” as well as “normalcy and happiness.”<sup>46</sup> By the 1940s many of these ideas had filtered down to educators such as Margaret Naumberg and Caroline Zachry, who encouraged a more permissive educational environment in which to provide a release for children's libidinal energies. In this context (Nabokov himself had to consider educational options for his young son, Dmitri, at this time), the creation of “good citizens” by encouraging patients to “vent in full their repressed yearnings ... upon some little creature of no value to the community” takes on an urgent American aspect.<sup>47</sup> That Paduk's most insidious supporter, Dr. Alexander, shares his name with Franz Alexander, America's most famous Freudian in the 1940s, can only strengthen this connection.<sup>48</sup> Nabokov's vitriolic contempt for Freud is well known, and he claims in his introduction to *Bend Sinister* that “all my books should be stamped Freudians Keep

<sup>43</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung)*, 1944), trans. John Cumming (1972) (London: Verso, 1979), 200–2. For more of Adorno's writing on anti-Semitism during his American period see one of the sections he contributed to the massive work Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1950), 605–53, based on research conducted during the mid-1940s in America into potentially fascist personality types. <sup>44</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Nathan H. Hale Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 76–77.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 75, 277.

<sup>47</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 200.

<sup>48</sup> Hale, 7, 277, describes Franz Alexander as “one of the major figures in American psychoanalysis,” whose “missionary efforts” to promote Freud were hugely influential.

Out.”<sup>49</sup> In this case, however, a particularly American, and utopian, inflection on Freudianism is evident.

“Majority rule” was one of the features of American culture which struck the intellectual immigrants the most. In 1953 Henri Peyre, an admirer of Nabokov’s writing, contributed a chapter to a book named *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America*. Although noting the great value of intellectual freedom in America, Peyre also found problems with the enforced tolerance which marked the assimilation process: “Respect for the majority rule and courtesy seem so ingrained in this happy land that dissent has become a rare occurrence.” For Peyre, the connection was clear between this lack of dissent (or conflict) and intellectual slackness. He noted, “Theoretical freedom of thought becomes too little conducive to boldness of thought,” leading to “passive resistance to thinking” and a “lack of adventure in initiating new ideas, in making startling new discoveries.”<sup>50</sup> In much the same way as Nabokov, Peyre found in the acceptance of generalities a threat to creativity, and saw American democratic ideals as a kind of “levelling down.”<sup>51</sup> Significantly, he links this problem to American conceptions of time and history, criticizing historical writing for substituting myth for history, a problem “which has made the American an individualist, a pioneer, a tolerant and God-fearing democrat,” while émigré scholars are “struck by the frailty of the knowledge of, and of the sense for, history” in their adopted land.<sup>52</sup> It seems, then, that the notion of America having a different relationship with the dynamics of time than did Europe carried some currency among the intellectual immigrants. Peyre’s chapter indicates a temporally disorientated, homogeneous culture overemphasizing the value of an eternal present at the expense of a more nuanced (and potentially conflicting) temporal perspective which takes the past and potential future into account.

It is Theodor Adorno, however, who provides the most compelling correlative for Nabokov’s critique of American popular culture from the

<sup>49</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Henri Peyre, “The Study of Literature,” in W. Rex Crawford, ed., *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 27–81, 62–65.

<sup>51</sup> Nabokov often took the opportunity, especially with his American students, to discourage satisfaction with generalizations. See, for example, his polemic lecture against commonly held opinions, “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” in *idem*, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), 371–80, and his earlier Russian-language piece, “On Generalities,” ed. Alexander Dolinin, *Zvezda*, 4 (1999), 12–14.

<sup>52</sup> Peyre, “The Study of Literature,” 59.

perspective of European modernism.<sup>53</sup> Like Nabokov, Adorno found life under Nazism intolerable and went to the USA in search of an academic position, having failed to secure one in the UK.<sup>54</sup> His writings on mass culture, inspired by his American experience, provide an illuminating counterpart to Nabokov's own mediation of it. Adorno's experience of exile in the United States was characterized by observations similar to those made by Henri Peyre. He, too, was struck by the tendency of the new culture to demand complete submission. In *Prisms* for example, Adorno compares old and new types of immigrant to the USA. The former came to America in search of wealth, fortune and freedom, but now the nation no longer offered limitless opportunity but instead necessitated cultural adjustment in the European intelligentsia which arrived there: "there has arisen a civilization which absorbs all life in its system." In addition to this latent cultural expansionism, the new culture also presents a threat to individual autonomy, for "it is made unmistakably clear to the intellectual from abroad that he will have to eradicate himself as an autonomous being in order to achieve anything."<sup>55</sup> While the association with American mass culture and European totalitarianism remains implicit in these relatively late reflections, Adorno makes it very clear in his earlier writings on "the culture industry":

Participation in mass culture itself stands under the sign of terror. Enthusiasm not merely betrays an unconscious eagerness to read the commands from above but

<sup>53</sup> Two scholarly articles have previously read Adorno and Nabokov side by side. Foster, "Poshlost, Culture Criticism, Adorno and Malraux," 232–33, compares Adorno's cultural critique in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* with Nabokov's concept of "poshlost" as asserted in his book *Nikolay Gogol*, arguing that, despite superficial similarities, Nabokov "swerves away from mass culture in itself to condemn second-rate literature, especially when it mimics and usurps the first-rate." Anna Brodsky, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and the Post-war Emigré Consciousness," *Kultura Russkoi Diaspory: Vladimir Nabokov 100* (Tallinn: TPÜ Kirjastus, 2000), 371–90, argues that Nabokov should be viewed alongside Adorno, Horkheimer, Hannah Arendt and Ernest Bloch as part of an intellectual group which fled from Hitler "and made the disturbing claim that confidence, conformity, cheerfulness – qualities they found abundantly in America – lay very close to the springs of evil from which totalitarianism had sprung." She then goes on to read *Lolita* through this critical lens.

<sup>54</sup> From 1938 to 1949 he stayed in the United States, mainly on the West Coast at Max Horkheimer's Institute for Social Research, and later as codirector of a research unit at the University of California, Berkeley. The result of his collaboration with Horkheimer was *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944, revised 1947), in which the seminal notion of "the culture industry" was developed under the influence of American mass culture.

<sup>55</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Shierry and Samuel Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 97–98.

already reveals the fear of disobedience ... this anxiety is the ultimate lesson of the Fascist era.<sup>56</sup>

According to this argument, it is the uncritical acceptance of discourses offered for consumption which marks the contact point between the consumers of mass culture and those citizens who make totalitarianism possible through their submission. In *Bend Sinister* Krug makes a similar connection while walking with an enthusiastic Ekwilist:

He remembered other imbeciles he and she had studied ... Men who got drunk on beer in sloppy bars, the process of thought satisfactorily replaced by swine-toned radio music. Murderers. The respect a business magnate evokes in his home town. Literary critics praising the books of their friends or partisans. Flaubertian *farceurs*. Fraternities, mystic orders. People who are amused by trained animals. The members of reading clubs. All those who *are* because they do *not* think ...<sup>57</sup>

The undistinguished grocer, recipient of Krug's scorn, becomes symbolic of the participation in mass culture alongside authoritarian submission, a man whose "best moment of the day" is the return from work, along with "some light music," "enjoying the jokes in the evening paper." For him, "that is what we mean by true culture, true human civilization."<sup>58</sup> This man's banal tastes and apparently wholesome hobbies mask a sinister anti-intellectualism, a desire to "shoot the smart fellows who raise hell because a few dirty anti-Ekwilists at last got what was coming to them."<sup>59</sup>

The only element of mass culture missing from this episode is cinema, a medium associated elsewhere in the novel with totalitarianism. As I have already shown, most of the popular novels which Nabokov associates with the regime in *Bend Sinister* were also adapted by Hollywood. In addition, several critics have pointed out how film is aligned with mass control and manipulation in the novel.<sup>60</sup> This occurs most stikingly in the episode which has Krug (and, refracted through the text, the reader) forced to watch a "movie picture" of his vulnerable, kidnapped son, in an attempt to suggest

<sup>56</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 82–83. <sup>57</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 15–16.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. Nabokov singles out radio as a focus for his critique in both of these quotes. Adorno also refers to it repeatedly, asserting, for example, that "it turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same" (Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 121).

<sup>59</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Beverly Gray Bienstock, "Focus Pocus: Film Imagery in *Bend Sinister*," in J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life's Work* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 125–38, 126–27; Barbara Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction* (London: McFarland, 2003), 180–83.

that the child is still “healthy and happy,”<sup>61</sup> when in fact he has been tortured and murdered. For Adorno, cinema is particularly guilty of displaying an artificial and misleading formal unity which mimics the social structures propagated by Nazism. This “prearranged harmony is a mockery of what had to be striven after in the great bourgeois works of art. In Germany the graveyard stillness of the dictatorship already hung over the gayest films of the democratic era.”<sup>62</sup> Although, as Barbara Wyllie argues,<sup>63</sup> Nabokov’s perspective on cinema was often fraught with ambivalence, in *Bend Sinister* he nevertheless shares some ground with Adorno, in viewing it as epitomizing “the worst of commercially driven populist culture.” It should be noted that both Nabokov and Adorno single out *The Song of Bernadette*, with its Hollywood adaptation, for particular criticism. Adorno writes in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that “even before Zanuck acquired her, Saint Bernadette was regarded by her latter-day hagiographer as brilliant propaganda for all interested parties.”<sup>64</sup> Darryl Zanuck was the notoriously interventionist vice-president of Twentieth Century Fox throughout the 1940s, and directed the adaptation of Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* as well as *The Song of Bernadette*. In condemning both producer and author, Adorno assumes a comparable position to Nabokov, in which the equivalence of these two mass forms is established.

Adorno repeatedly emphasizes the qualities of artificial harmony and homogeneity in his writings on the culture industry. The paradox of oppressive freedom and tolerance discussed above in relation to Henri Peyre is articulated as “the freedom to choose what is always the same.”<sup>65</sup> This interchangeability of individual cultural items is precisely what is enacted by Nabokov in the amalgamated titles of the best-sellers by Remarque and others highlighted in the author’s introduction. It is not only the resemblance between items, but also their unified internal structure which renders them worthless for Adorno. As he argues in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*,<sup>66</sup> individual details become interchangeable, “ready-made clichés to be slotted in anywhere; they never do anything more than fulfill the purpose allotted them in the overall plan.” This subordination of detail to immaculately flawless plot is symptomatic of the “false identity of the general and the particular” in which “there has ceased to be the slightest tension: these concordant extremes are dismally identical.”<sup>67</sup> Given Nabokov’s repeated polemics against

<sup>61</sup> *Bend Sinister*, 203.

<sup>62</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, 126.

<sup>63</sup> Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*, 3; *idem*, “Nabokov and Cinema,” in Julian Connolly, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 215–31, 215.

<sup>64</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, 129.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 121, 130.

generalization, and in favour of attention to detail, we can see how his own aesthetic practice defines itself against these trends in popular culture.<sup>68</sup> We can also see how the numerous caricatured types in *Bend Sinister* (such as Mac, the hard-boiled cop turned secret police thug) conform to the logic of their origins in subordinating themselves entirely to their plot function. The true danger of this trend, according to Adorno, is that the falsity of the flawless surface might succeed in concealing itself, and become naturalized. Examining Nabokov's treatment of Mac in the abduction episode, we find that what appears as an unsettling contrast between plot and style performs the task which Adorno sets himself in discussing "the culture industry" – showing how "the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through."<sup>69</sup>

It should also be noted how Adorno's concerns here overlap with those of Tate and the New Critics, who regarded ambiguity and conflict within the work as inherent to its value. In this way Adorno participates in the endorsement of modernist difficulty as a means of resisting an entropic decrease in imaginative and creative activity. Adorno writes in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* of the "stunting of the mass media's consumer's powers of imagination and spontaneity,"<sup>70</sup> while insisting on the effect of popular films for which "sustained thought is out of the question." The "pleasure" attained through the consumption of mass media "must not demand any effort and therefore moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association."<sup>71</sup> If this critique, common to Adorno and the New Critics of the 1940s, is borne in mind as we approach *Bend Sinister*, then the strange jarrings and discordant styles which its reviewers found so difficult seem much less out of place. Neither should we be surprised at Nabokov consciously writing a novel which presents itself as an antidote to the mass culture products on offer at the time. As Boyd points out,<sup>72</sup> Nabokov wrote in a magazine article for Wellesley College in 1945 that best-sellers were "perhaps the worst form of propaganda, the propaganda of current ideas, easily digested brain food, fashionable worries" whereas "brains must work the hard way or lose their calling and rank." Adorno employs very similar terminology in the phrases he uses to describe mass culture: "pre-digested" and "baby-food."<sup>73</sup> The shared contempt for the homogeneous uniformity of mass culture leaves a profound mark on both *Bend Sinister* and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Adorno's critique of mass culture is also strongly tied to notions of temporality which find parallels with Nabokov's own conception of totalitarian

<sup>68</sup> See note 41 above.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–27.

<sup>73</sup> Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, 121.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>72</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 101.

time. Unlike modernist (or, using his terminology, “bourgeois”) art, mass culture “must pay tribute to time in every one of its products.”<sup>74</sup> What Adorno means by time, however, is quite specifically that which excludes past and future, for the homogeneity which characterizes all contemporary mass culture products is present in the dimension of time too:

A constant sameness governs the relationship to the past as well. What is new about the phase of mass culture compared with the late liberal stage is the exclusion of the new. The machine rotates on the same spot. While determining consumption it excludes the untried as a risk. The movie-makers distrust any manuscript which is not reassuringly backed by a bestseller. Yet for this very reason there is never-ending talk of ideas, novelty, and surprise, of what is taken for granted but has never existed. Tempo and dynamics serve this trend. Nothing remains as of old; everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving. For only the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes, and nothing unsuitable will appear.<sup>75</sup>

The similarities between Adorno’s description of the temporality of mass culture and Nabokov’s totalitarian time as it is manifested in “Tyrants Destroyed” and *Bend Sinister* are found in the limitless extension of the present which permanently defers the possibility of a dynamic shift into the future, and which effaces all traces of the past. Nabokov describes the time of Paduk’s regime as a “gap in history” – a hiatus during which the development of time is suspended. Adorno, one suspects, is more pessimistic, for a potential end to the culture industry is never articulated. Nevertheless, the stagnation in which “the machine rotates on the same spot” recalls not only the numerous references to empty, homogeneous, mechanical time in *Bend Sinister*, but also episodes in which Krug seems trapped within static events, such as his repeated traversing of the bridge or the torturously protracted wait to discover the fate of his son. It may seem that the drawing of parallels between Adorno’s cultural temporality and the narrative temporality of Nabokov’s novel is misleading, but this is only the case as long as we view (as we have been taught to) his novel as existing in a self-sufficient, isolated bubble. *Bend Sinister* is self-reflexive in some surprising ways, for Krug’s imprisonment is twofold. In addition to his oppression by a totalitarian dictatorship, he is also persecuted by the hegemonic forces of mass culture. Both of these are historically specific to the 1940s, and both are characterized primarily by their effect on temporality. As Adorno makes clear, the chief result of the relationship between mass culture and time is the stunting of innovation – the exclusion of the “untried as a risk.” Nabokov was

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>75</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 134.

dedicated to an ideal of literary evolution and innovation, something often overlooked as apparently incompatible with his public ahistoricism. *Bend Sinister* is no exception, a conscious attempt at overcoming and evolving beyond the uniform homogeneity of American mass culture. “American ... literatures are in a very poor way,” he wrote to the president of Wellesley College in 1946, suggesting that the literary malaise which he saw in Europe and which he articulated in his essay “Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable” was also present in America.<sup>76</sup> Alongside this remark, we might place his 1944 synopsis for *Bend Sinister*, which publicized “a device never yet attempted in literature,” as stark a statement as any to indicate Nabokov’s self-conscious intent to break clear of contemporary literary convention.<sup>77</sup>

Having asserted several points of contact between Nabokov and Adorno in the course of this discussion, I also wish to stress the historical specificity of this unexpected meeting of two intellectuals in the cultural territory of 1940s America. Adorno and Nabokov came from two very different intellectual traditions. Adorno’s engagement with Marx, which informed the development of his negative dialectics, distances him from Nabokov’s politics, which emerged from his father’s radical Russian liberalism, and eventually found itself at home in the context of American liberal-conservatism during the Cold War. Nabokov apparently never waived from his absolute faith in his own aesthetic autonomy, in the ability of his art to transcend mass culture and, by extension, the historical. For Adorno this was a false position, for “light art has been the shadow of autonomous art. It is the social bad conscience of serious art.”<sup>78</sup> These ideological differences should not prevent us from placing Nabokov and Adorno together. Rather, they provide the best reason for attempting a reading that does exactly that, a reading which dissents from Nabokov’s “strong opinions” and uses Adorno to bring his fraught response to the cultural–historical conditions of the intellectual immigration into relief.

<sup>76</sup> Nabokov, “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible” (Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable, 1937), trans. Dimitri Nabokov, *New York Review of Books*, 31 March 1988, 38–42. In this essay, for *Nouvelle revue française*, Nabokov voices concerns over the state of the literary scene in France – “we are floundering so far as literature is concerned” (42). Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 91.

<sup>77</sup> Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 50.

<sup>78</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 135.

By way of conclusion, I wish finally to draw attention to another unpublished passage from Nabokov's teaching notes, written during the Second World War, when he taught at Wellesley College:

With the fall of France, the free intellectual life of the Russian émigrés has practically ceased and there is no place in Europe left for them to go on with their work. Their only hope is, I know, to leave the old world for a country beyond the seas, for this country, where freedom of thought and speech is still as necessary to men as it was and is to Russian writers worthy of that appellation.<sup>79</sup>

It would be too easy, in reading this passage, to be caught up in the lexicon of American myth, in the evocations of “a land beyond the sea,” and “freedom of thought and speech.” This is obviously more optimistic than Adorno's assertion that the new immigrant must “eradicate himself as an autonomous being in order to achieve anything.”<sup>80</sup> The key word, though, is “hope,” which is predicated on the possibility of failure. That freedom of thought and speech is “necessary” does not, in the context of American cultural consumerism, guarantee its continued existence.

<sup>79</sup> Nabokov, “Expatriates,” underlining in the manuscript.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, 97–98.