

Chapter 2

Queen Sacrifice

The Feminine Figure of Power and Nabokov's Strategy of Loss

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It's a great huge game of chess that's being played—all over the world—if this *is* the world at all, you know. Oh, what fun it is! How I wish I was one of them! I wouldn't mind being a Pawn, if only I might join—though of course I should like to be a Queen, best.

—Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*

To a person who loves, is not absence the most certain, the most effective the most durable, the most indestructible, the most faithful of presences?

—Marcel Proust, *Pleasures and Days*

Vladimir Nabokov's love for composing chess problems and the relationship of this interest to his fiction has long been the subject of rich critical commentary.¹ After Nabokov's devotion to lepidopterology, chess came a close second as his favorite pastime,² and one of the titles that Nabokov considered for his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, involved a chess term—*Nabokov's Opening* (Nabokov, *Selected Letters* 119). Given Nabokov's intellectual interest in and passion for chess, it should come as no surprise that female characters in Nabokov are often compared to the figure of the Queen in chess—by Nabokov's male characters (e.g., when Humbert draws a parallel between Lolita and his “formidable Queen” on the chessboard, or when Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, the aspiring writer and chess composer of *The Gift*, calls his first love Queen Tamara) and by critics alike. In the 1964 issue of *L'Arc*, Edmund Bernhard compares Charlotte and Lolita to the figure of the Queen in chess and comments on Charlotte's death as a kind of necessary

sacrifice for the movement of the plot and for the promotion of Pawn-Lolita to Queen (44). And D. Barton Johnson has noted that the double-Rook sacrifice in chess involves the Queen going on “a wild-geese chase” and may thus echo the moves of Luzhin’s wife in *The Luzhin Defense* (286). Yet amid the attentive commentary on chess in Nabokov, little has been written about Nabokov’s ubiquitous employment of “the queen sacrifice” strategy and how this strategy might shed light on Nabokov’s overall use of and attitude toward his female characters. Since, chess, for Nabokov, is often a metaphor for artistic creation, the figure of the Queen captures the contradictory position that women occupy in relation to the craft of his artistically gifted male protagonists and to Nabokov’s own art. On the one hand, the Queen is such a powerful figure that her power must often be checked and at times even eliminated. This rein on the Queen echoes the desire for authorial control at work in Nabokov’s fiction and expresses the anxiety that women have a disruptive effect on artistic concentration in general and on the male act of artistic creation in particular. In his essay exploring the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the early fiction of Nabokov, David Larmour notes that the absent woman is often “kept in the realm of the dead, voiceless and invisible in the daylight” to remain a “symbol of the infinite” and a source of “inspiration” for the male artist (12).

On the other hand, the loss of the Queen in chess is never without its risks. There is always a question of whether the sacrifice of the Queen had not been a mistake. The corresponding question that lingers in Nabokov’s fiction is whether the completed work of art is worth the sacrifices in life that it entails, sacrifices that often involve women. Nabokov’s text thus reveals two conflicting anxieties: the first anxiety is about the chaos that the woman as an object of love and of sex may stir in the male protagonist’s regime of artistic discipline and the second one paradoxically is about the loss and sacrifice of that distracting woman. In her Introduction to this volume, Elena Rakhimova-Sommers argues that Nabokov’s narratives radiate anxiety, the kind that simultaneously seems to both destroy and nurture. Rakhimova-Sommers points out that Nabokov seems to set “a failed engagement with the feminine [as a] rite of passage in the male character’s quest for authenticity.”

The present chapter explores the ethical role of the reader in navigating the narrative anxieties of Nabokov’s texts concerning the feminine. In other words, if Nabokov’s woman is absent or becomes, as Larmour puts it, “a typical Nabokovian appendage to the male subject” (11), then Nabokov’s text also betrays doubts and asks questions about her status as such an absent or marginal figure, which the attentive and ethical reader can then take on.

CHESS PROBLEMS AND ARTISTIC COMPOSITION

In the Introduction to *Poems and Problems*, Nabokov notes that the composition of chess problems requires “the same virtues that characterize all worthwhile art: originality, invention, conciseness, harmony, complexity, and splendid insincerity” (15). And, in a 1959 interview for the French *Arts*, Nabokov admitted to composing novels in the manner of chess problems.³ Although Nabokov emphasized that the composition of his novels was more akin to that of chess problems than to chess games, the latter appear frequently in his fiction. More interesting still, is that whenever characters play chess in Nabokov, the reader witnesses a queen sacrifice take place. One need not be an expert at chess to discern this pattern or to make sense of its metaphorical significance. More often than not, such queen sacrifices signal the looming loss or soon-to-be absence of a key female character. Yet while the female character might seemingly become absent from the narrative, her very absence has the power to move and transform the other characters, the reader, and even the author himself.

Simply put, a queen sacrifice is a chess strategy that involves giving up the most powerful figure (the King’s strongest defender) in return for tactical or positional advantage. Indeed, Nabokov’s male protagonists who are interested in chess often comment on the astounding power of the Queen. One of the first observations that little Luzhin makes about chess is that “the Queen is the most mobile” (*Luzhin Defense* 46), and Fyodor, when composing his elegant chess problems, makes sure to check and balance the Queen’s power so that the overall theme of his chess composition can come through in the most daring fashion:

Little by little the pieces and squares began to come to life and exchange impressions. The crude might of the queen was transformed into refined power, restrained and directed by a system of sparkling levers; the pawns grew cleverer; the knights stepped forth with a Spanish caracole. Everything had acquired sense and at the same time everything was concealed. Every creator is a plotter; and all the pieces impersonating his ideas on the board were here as conspirators and sorcerers. Only in the final instant was their secret spectacularly exposed. (*The Gift* 201)

Here Fyodor’s approach toward the composition of chess problems, which Nabokov called “the poetry of chess” and the terminology of which includes expressions such as “constraint,” “theme,” “deception,” “economy in construction,” and “aesthetic value,” echoes Nabokov’s own method of writing fiction (*Poems and Problems* 15). Since Nabokov maintained that his characters never got out of hand and were his “galley slaves,” it is understandable that the power of his queens—his female characters—too had to be carefully levered

for the sake of the whole composition (*Strong Opinions* 95). Accordingly, it is the organizing principle of the male authorial consciousness that transforms what Fyodor refers to as “the crude might of the queen” into “refined power.” Fyodor’s tone here is unmistakably condescending. He shares this manner of patronizing the female characters, even when expressing tenderness and warmth toward them, with his creator, as we will soon see. Paradoxically, it seems that in Nabokov’s fictional universe, the very power of the feminine figure (in moving and transforming both other characters and the readers) makes her the perfect candidate for a sacrifice. In this manner, the position of the Queen in chess echoes the ambivalent predicament of Nabokov’s woman. Her power is most useful to the author in her absence, particularly in the way that this absence structures the narrative or galvanizes the desires of the male characters. Yet just like the sacrifice of the Queen in chess entails considerable risks both for the chess player and for the solver, so too the sacrifice of the female character comes with its own risks for the novelist. This is especially poignant in the case of *Lolita*, where the near absence of the victim’s narrative voice has led some critics to become complicit with Humbert’s solipsistic view of her.⁴ Moreover, chess enthusiasts, who refer to sacrifice in chess as an “art,” are known to develop a fondness for the most powerful figure who can move any number of squares vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. The “parting with the lady,” as it is nicknamed lovingly in chess circles, does not come easy to players who must make sure that the benefits derived from the sacrifice outweigh the loss. In a similar vein, while Nabokov called his characters his “galley slaves” (*Strong Opinions* 95), he also at times expressed a certain tenderness and warmth toward his favorite creatures, including Luzhin’s wife (“a dear girl in her own right”) and most notably Dolly Schiller, for whom both Vera and he solicited the reader’s sympathy after the novel’s publication and first wave of reception (*The Luzhin Defense* 10).

That Nabokov was interested in the art of sacrifice in chess is not surprising given that he came of age in the wake of legendary games played in the sacrificial style. The London Tournament of 1851 launched the era of great chess tournaments where German chess master Adolf Anderssen won the “Immortal Game” by sacrificing a Bishop, both Rooks, and his Queen against Lionel Kieseritzky, who only lost three pawns. Anderssen thus showed that what mattered most was not the quantity of pieces on the chessboard but how well they collaborated (Vuković, 44–45). In the Foreword to the English version of *The Luzhin Defense*, Nabokov compares his authorial moves to those of Anderssen: “Rereading this novel today, replaying the moves of the plot, I feel rather like Anderssen fondly recalling his sacrifice of both Rooks to the unfortunate and noble Kieseritsky—who is doomed to accept it over and over again through an infinity of textbooks, with a question mark for monument” (8).

REAL AND SHAM SACRIFICES

In the *Art of Sacrifice in Chess*, Rudolf Spielmann, a lionized artist of the chess sacrifice and a contemporary of Nabokov, explains that the aim of the sacrifice in chess is to galvanize “the effectiveness of other pieces outside the normal routine,” to “gain time,” and to expose “a weak point in the enemy lines” (2). In his book *The Chess Sacrifice*, Vladimir Vuković notes that “a sacrifice of the Queen without any material return” bears the greatest risk (10). According to Spielmann, there are real and sham sacrifices, or as Vuković dubs them, “pseudo-sacrifices.” A sham sacrifice entails no risk and offers an immediate benefit. A sham queen sacrifice, or a queen trap, usually results in a quick checkmate. Real sacrifices, according to Spielmann, are those where the compensation is not immediate, but more positional in nature. In short, while sham sacrifices are seductive tricks to lure the opponent, real sacrifices are daring and risky maneuvers that make for a long match. Tellingly, Vuković considers most pseudo-sacrifices a sacrificial technique, while he places real sacrifices under the banner of sacrificial art.

Most of Nabokov’s creatures that play chess engage in the sacrificial style whether sham or real. The minor chess moves made in these games mimic the major moves made by grandmaster Nabokov in his fiction. A sham queen sacrifice, for example, takes place in a chess game played in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*:

Pahl Pahlich made a lightning swoop and took the queen with his bishop. Then he roared with laughter. “And now,” said Black calmly, when White had stopped roaring, “now you are in the soup. Check, my dove.” (131)

This match takes place right before V. meets Nina, Sebastian’s former lover and Pahl Pahlich’s ex-wife, a woman described as possessing “a sham mystery” (137). In her turn, unfaithful Nina stages a kind of sham absence of “Helene von Graun,” leading V. on a wild-goose chase in hopes of seducing him as well. The first chess game that young Luzhin witnesses is a match between two of his schoolmates, which also involves a sham queen sacrifice:

“Check,” said Krebs, “check” (and the stung King leaped to one side); “you can’t go here and you can’t go here either. Check, I’m taking your Queen, check.” At this point he lost a piece himself and began insisting he should replay his move. (49)

By contrast, a “real sacrifice” (albeit one committed by mistake) takes place during the last chess game played between Humbert Humbert and Gaston Grodin in *Lolita*. Humbert makes a mistake and exposes his Queen. Gaston at

first suspects that “it might be a trap on the part of his tricky opponent” (i.e., a sham sacrifice), but eventually pounces upon his “juicy queen” (*Annotated Lolita* 203). Humbert then has to play a challenging game and spends “a dreary hour in achieving a draw” (203). This scene happens not long before Dolly leaves Humbert and the novel unfolds in her absence. And, as we will later see, Nabokov’s own authorial endeavor is a risky and challenging one in *Lolita*. In *Pale Fire*, a novel that Mary McCarthy famously described as a chess problem “played on a board of green and red squares” (23), it is only after forsaking Queen Disa that the last king of Zembla becomes a *solus rex* who has lost his kingdom and entourage. It is only in Disa’s absence that the king begins to dream of his casually and heartlessly neglected wife “more often, and with incomparably more poignancy” (*Pale Fire* 209). What is more, “his dream love for her exceeded in emotional tone, in spiritual passion and depth, anything he had experienced in his surface existence” (210).

Then there are characters that try their hand at chess sacrifices, but are not quite up to the task. The gauche and sympathetic Professor Pnin plays chess from time to time, but is not a good player, as he is “addicted to spectacular but quite unsound sacrifices of pieces” (*Pnin* 48). Most significant perhaps for understanding Nabokov’s attitude toward artistic creation and women is his description of Ada’s chess game:

Ada did manage, now and then, to conjure up a combinational sacrifice, offering, say, her queen—with a subtle win after two or three moves if the piece were taken; but she saw only one side of the question, preferring to ignore, in the queer lassitude of clogged cogitation, the obvious counter combination that would lead inevitably to her defeat if the grand sacrifice were *not* accepted. (*Ada, or Ardor* 224)

In other words, Ada offers a *passive* sacrifice—a queen trap that the other party is not forced to accept—and does not plan ahead in case such a sacrifice is declined (Spielmann 3). Ada is, in fact, one of the few female protagonists in Nabokov who plays chess. Yet, like Luzhin’s aunt (who knows only the basics of the game), she is not particularly good at it. Van, her paramour, on the other hand, is “a first-rate chess player” who wins an important tournament in 1887. In a macho quip, Van is “puzzled by Ada’s inability to raise the standard of her, so to speak, damsel-errant game above that of a young lady in an old novel or in one of those anti-dandruff color-photo ads that shows a beautiful model (made for other games than chess)” (224). Nabokov bestows upon Ada many gifts: wit, erudition, an encyclopedic knowledge of the names of flora and fauna. “On the Scrabble board,” Ada “would greatly surpass baffled Van in acumen, foresight and exploitation of chance”; yet, alas, her creator bars her from mastering the “game of the Gods”—chess

(225). Just as the figure of the artist is predominately male in Nabokov, so too is the grandmaster or expert chess problem composer.⁵ As Susan Elizabeth Sweeney points out in her essay for this collection, Nabokov “characterizes [significant] authorship as masculine.” Indeed, at her best, Ada is described as “a sort of graceful computing machine,” but never as a true, independent artist on par with the male artists.

THE TWO QUEENS

In Nabokov’s novels, the metaphor of chess stands for a sexually charged, masculine territory where a female figure appears either as the seductive and deceiving queen of the opposing party who lures the male protagonist into a dangerous trap, or as his strongest and most trustworthy defender, the unforeseen loss or intended sacrifice of whom risks leading to a pyrrhic victory and regret. The tension and the unstable boundary between these two kinds of queens (the femme fatale and the faithful ally) are foregrounded in Nabokov’s great chess novel *The Luzhin Defense*, which explores the notion of sacrifice and loss. Although Nabokov would not write another novel where chess played such a significant role both in form and content, the chess pattern, and with it the queen sacrifice motif, returns as a faint echo in many of his subsequent novels, shedding light on the kinds of relationships that male artists form with the women in their lives and on the anxieties about artistic control that these women provoke.

In the Foreword to *The Luzhin Defense*, Nabokov not only notes that chess effects “can be found in the basic structure of this attractive novel,” but also reflects on the potential appeal of the chess pattern to his readers:

Of all my Russian books, *The Luzhin Defense* contains and diffuses the greatest “warmth”—which may seem odd seeing how supremely abstract chess is supposed to be. In point of fact, Luzhin has been found lovable even by those who understand nothing about chess and/or detest all my other books. He is uncouth, unwashed, uncomely—but as my gentle young lady (a dear girl in her own right) so quickly notices, there is something in him that transcends both the coarseness of his gray flesh and the sterility of his recondite genius. (10)

Nabokov’s Foreword signals to the reader that the story of *The Luzhin Defense* will focus largely on the “lovable” genius Luzhin, while patronizing Luzhin’s fiancée who exists to support the male genius both emotionally and financially. Many critics have remarked that Luzhin represents the figure of the artist, albeit in its most obsessive and dangerous form. Thomas Karshan, for instance, argues that Luzhin is an “image of the artist, or at least

of one artistic imperative, the instinct to create structures in which to hide oneself" (105). The grandmaster's tragic predicament lies in the obsessive and extreme way that he handles his talent. Tellingly, unlike Fyodor of *The Gift*, who is a brilliant chess problem composer, Luzhin is not enticed by "the notion of composing problems himself" (*Luzhin Defense* 68). Instead, he believes that this "would be a pointless waste of the militant, charging, bright force he sensed within him" (68). Needless to say, Fyodor is the more socially adjusted and mentally aware artist of the two, as Fyodor learns to lever his artistic gift, whereas Luzhin goes insane under the burden of his.

According to Leona Toker, the chess patterns in *The Luzhin Defense* "stand for all the patterns and systems that prove tragically inadequate when preferred to or violently superimposed on the natural flow of life" (67). In contrast to the irrevocability of loss in life, sacrifice in chess offers Luzhin a coping mechanism—a defense—that not only makes sense of loss but can also turn loss into future gain. Indeed, one of the most salient features of Luzhin's style of play is his reliance on daring and deceptive sacrifices: "Some of his games at the Berlin tournament had been even then termed immortal by connoisseurs. He had won one after sacrificing in succession his Queen, a Rook, and Knight" (*Luzhin Defense* 134). That Luzhin's games are deemed "immortal" is a reference to the Immortal Game played by Anderssen and Kieseritzky. Moreover, at one point, Luzhin's fiancée describes her future husband as "a little idol [. . .], sitting in the middle while sacrificial gifts are brought to him" (130). Luzhin's predilection for the sacrificial style of play makes sense in the light of his past, a past punctuated by painful losses. When Luzhin's future wife meets Luzhin, he is a broken man in a precarious situation. Not only is he an uncouth man steadily losing the contents of his pockets, but he is also an orphan, an émigré who has lost his motherland, and a former chess protégé abandoned by his shabby manager, Valentinov, because the latter suspects Luzhin may have lost his chess gift as well. Alone and forsaken by Valentinov, Luzhin turns to a woman, his future fiancée, as a refuge.

The female characters in *The Luzhin Defense* serve to destabilize Luzhin's artificial chess system by reminding him of the messy outside world to which they as well as he belong, a world that is no doubt full of cruelty, but also of kindness. When Luzhin becomes torn between his married life and his passion for chess, he tragically sees this dilemma in terms of sacrifice in chess. Toward the end of the novel, the sacrifice of the Queen that is necessary for his victory in chess (as it is in the last steps of the Immortal Game) becomes associated in his demented mind with the actual sacrifice of his real wife. That he is dangerously confusing the two worlds—chess and real life—is evident when, awaking from one of his chess daydreams, he notices his fiancée and asks: "Are you real?" (130). To which she answers, "Of course I'm real," and

gives him the ultimatum that he must either give up chess or lose her. In a way, Luzhin betrays the anxiety that family life with his wife is incompatible with the art of chess, which requires of him all of his attention. Furthermore, the potential of biological reproduction with a woman looms as a dangerous distraction threatening the male hero's process of artistic creation.

As Luzhin descends deeper into his chess-patterned madness, he believes that the only way to avert disaster—the loss of his wife—is to “drop out of the game,” that is to commit suicide (252). To be sure, Luzhin is unstable; yet, on another level, his complete withdrawal into the world of chess is an extreme form of an artist's temporary withdrawal from the outside world necessary for concentration and the act of creation. Luzhin no doubt takes it too far, but this impulse to retreat into one's inner world would not be alien to any artist, including Nabokov. It is not by accident that what Luzhin finds most irritating during his tournament with Turati is “a pair of women's feet in gleaming gray stockings and bluish shoes” that he spots among the bystanders: “These feet obviously understood nothing of the game, one wondered why they had come . . .” (122). Again, in this instance, the world of chess is rendered as a man's world where women do not figure as serious competitors but as distractions “made for other games.” In order to regain his concentration, Luzhin has to imagine “the pointed shoes” walking “as far away as possible from here” (122). Only after he secures a win, stands up, and realizes that those lovely legs belong to his fiancée does he experience “a keen sense of happiness” and the irresistible urge “to caress her” (123). Later, at her family's apartment, Luzhin repeatedly begs his fiancée to go with her to her room. In this comic episode, sexual desire and the mayhem that it has the potential to stir are rendered as disrupting artistic control and concentration.

In an early review of the novel, John Updike pointed out the fraught relationship between chess and sex in Nabokov's novel when he noted that “the squares on the board can also be construed as chess vs. sex” (325). In this respect, Updike considers Luzhin's marriage as “a kind of defensive castling undertaken too late, for the black forces that have put him in check press on irresistibly, past his impotent Queen, toward certain mate” (325). Several other critics have commented on the role that Luzhin's wife plays in trying to help Luzhin adapt to the outside world and find solace in family life. Toker compares her to “one of those women we find in books of Russian history, women who are philanthropic, ready for self-sacrifice, and often powerfully attracted to superior intellects” (74–75). Indeed, the first time the young woman meets Luzhin she is most enticed by the fact that he is “a great artist” of “a mysterious art equal to all the recognized arts” (*Luzhin Defense* 88). D. Barton Johnson compares Luzhin's wife, who is distracted by her visiting guests from Russia, to a chess Queen who goes on “wild-geese chase,” leaving her king in a vulnerable position (286).

Yet there is another woman whose influence on Luzhin's life and on the novel's overall unfolding pattern is at once more devious and subtle, as it happens mainly through her absence—Luzhin's aunt. The maneuvers of this “silent nomad,” to borrow the term that Rakhimova-Sommers uses in the Introduction to this volume, are so sly and deceptive that she may sneak unnoticed under the reader's radar, echoing the secrecy of her illicit affair with Luzhin senior. If Luzhin's wife appears to act as his defender, then his “young [. . .] gay, tender, red-haired aunt” figures as the seductive Queen of the sham sacrifice (38). Although absent and silent for most of the narrative, like the most mobile figure in chess, she peregrinates throughout the texture of the novel, stealthily crosses international borders like a spy, and provides an important key to the combination that so frightens Luzhin—“the intricate repetition of all the moves that had been taken down in his childhood” (216). The repetition that Luzhin discerns in his life and for which he so desperately seeks a defense begins with his aunt (214). The first move of a chess problem's solution is called the key, and Luzhin's aunt provides such a key both in the chess-patterned, deranged reality of Luzhin's mind and in the novel's elegant construction.

It is Luzhin's aunt, “with which he had fallen in love for his whole life,” who gives Luzhin when he is still a child the things that he will most cherish as an adult (33). These include two books (a Sherlock Holmes novel and Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*), jigsaw puzzles in which he finds “an illusory relief,” and finally chess (34, 37). Most important, Luzhin's aunt teaches him how to play chess as a way to divert his attention from the confrontation that takes place between his father and mother when the latter suspects Luzhin senior's infidelity. In this curious moment of reversal, chess figures as a distraction from the messiness of romantic entanglements just as romantic entanglements often figure as dangerous distractions from artistic composition. It is to his aunt's home that Luzhin goes to play chess instead of going to class in a manner that echoes the sexual attraction of his father to “the sweet copper-haired aunt” (44). And, the first time Luzhin makes up his mind to go to his aunt's place happens right after he witnesses the aforementioned chess game between his schoolmates, involving a sham queen sacrifice. When Luzhin's ailing mother learns that her son has been skipping school, she laments that he cheats just like his father. Like the seductive Queen of the sham sacrifice, Luzhin's aunt figures as the epicenter of temptation in the novel. Not only does she incite Luzhin senior and junior to move toward her respectively for sex and for chess, but she also provokes the reader to trace her footsteps in order to solve the novel's would-be chess puzzle.

In the Foreword to *The Luzhin Defense*, Nabokov mentions that his authorial moves from Chapter Four to Chapter Six “should remind one—of a

certain type of chess problem where the point is not merely the finding of a mate in so many moves, but what is termed ‘retrograde analysis,’ the solver being required to prove from a back-cast study of the diagram position that Black’s last move *could not* have been castling or *must* have been the capture of white Pawn *en passant*” (10). While D. Barton Johnson dismisses this remark as “irrelevant” and as one of the many traps that Nabokov plants for his reader to send her on a wild-goose chase, a closer look at these chapters reveals that the reader has to retrace the aunt’s deceptive maneuvers in Luzhin’s past to understand Luzhin’s quandary at the end of the novel. While it is easy to miss the aunt’s trajectory, as she remains silent for most of the novel, she exerts a powerful and seductive force by her very absence. Chapter Four opens with young Luzhin back at his parents’ country house, sorely missing his aunt and “the old gentleman with the bunch of flowers” with whom he plays chess (55). He is not the only one pining away. Luzhin senior briefly leaves for business, or as it is later revealed, for an “illicit day in St. Petersburg,” and comes back not only with feelings of guilt but also with the new knowledge that his son is a gifted chess player (65). Like a detective, the reader is sure to put two and two together and deduce who (and in what intimate circumstances) informed Luzhin senior of his son’s newfound hobby. Young Luzhin, however, at least at this point in the narrative, misses the connection that is so obvious to the attentive reader: “Luzhin tried to figure out whether it was by accident his father had mentioned chess or whether he had noticed something—the most obvious explanation did not occur to him, just as sometimes in solving a problem its key turns out to be a move that seemed barred, impossible, excluded quite naturally from the range of possible moves” (63). The impossible move in question for Luzhin is “whether his aunt [is] capable of betrayal” (53). As a young boy Luzhin does not believe this to be a possibility. The move of Luzhin’s aunt to tell Luzhin senior about his son’s gift is significant as it essentially launches Luzhin’s career as a professional chess player and the tragic losses that accompany it. This string of events is replicated by the authorial moves within Chapter Four that skips ahead sixteen years. We next find Luzhin at a German resort with his soon-to-be fiancée, just one month after his father’s death.⁶ While Luzhin is absorbed in the preparation for his upcoming chess tournament, the new lady in his life tries to bring him back to the outside world by mentioning his father’s death, which immediately conjures up in Luzhin painful memories of the past. In these memories, the family is together in Germany where Luzhin is competing as a chess prodigy. But Luzhin’s mother is “insanely homesick for the Russian countryside” and leaves her husband and son (73). In her absence, Luzhin spots his father “with a lady,” and that lady is no one other than “his young red-haired aunt from St. Petersburg” (74). In other words, Luzhin’s aunt crosses international borders to be with his father. Soon after, Luzhin’s

father receives a telegraph with the news of his wife's death, an event that is rendered implicitly in the narrative by Luzhin senior's "sobs and gasps" (63).

The next time Luzhin hears about his aunt is in Chapter Thirteen, and news about her has the effect of catalyzing his descent into madness, as he begins to suspect that "now the consecutive repetition of a familiar pattern [is] becoming noticeable in his present life" (214). The familiar pattern is a family pattern. All this occurs when the guest of Luzhin's wife, who is visiting from Soviet Russia, mentions to her that she knows Luzhin's aunt, "a good acquaintance in Leningrad" (211). Again, Luzhin's aunt does not speak directly, but rather moves stealthily across borders and even shares information about Luzhin that he deemed sacred and secret. Apparently, Luzhin's aunt had recounted to the guest "how she had taught her little nephew to play chess and how he later became a remarkable . . ." (212). This seemingly casual remark pushes Luzhin's over the edge of sanity. But why? First, it reveals that Luzhin's aunt cannot keep a secret and is, indeed, capable of betrayal. Second, the repetition that Luzhin begins to detect in his life is that the conflict between his married life and his passion for chess mimics his father's situation earlier in the novel—being torn between his family and the attraction he feels for Luzhin's aunt. The first time Luzhin's aunt shares with Luzhin's father the secret of his interest in chess, it brings havoc to his family, resulting in his mother's death. It is not by accident that the day of Luzhin's wedding is superimposed in his mind with his mother's funeral ("the last time Luzhin had been in church") (178). Fearing that the second time his aunt shares his secret (this time with the Soviet guest) will also lead to the loss of a woman (his wife), Luzhin commits suicide in order to "stop the clock of life" in the manner that one pauses the clock in chess (214). In his deranged mind, the strategic sacrifice of the Queen and the potential death of his wife become blurred, as do chess and love:

There were combinations, pure and harmonious, where thought ascended marble stairs to victory; there were tender stirrings in one corner of the board, and a passionate explosion, and the fanfare of the Queen going to its sacrificial doom. . . . Everything was wonderful, all the shades of love, all the convolutions and mysterious paths it had chosen. And this love was fatal. (246)

Yet Luzhin's wife and his aunt are not mere doubles. Or, rather, in Nabokov's fictional universe, would-be doubles should be treated with suspicion. At first blush, it might appear that Luzhin's wife stands for his defending Queen, whereas the aunt functions as the tempting and deceiving Queen of the opponent. In *Speak, Memory*, however, Nabokov mentions that the competition in a chess problem "is not really between White and Black, but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work

of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world)" (290).⁷ To read Nabokov's novel in black-and-white is to commit Luzhin's paranoiac error. Having traced the moves of Luzhin's aunt on the novel's chessboard, the reader can then begin to see what elements refuse to fit neatly into the economy of Luzhin's chess system. For one, the female protagonists themselves resist being pigeonholed into the convenient divisions of ally versus trap. Luzhin's wife at once offers him support and distracts him from his art. Luzhin's aunt is at once his beloved, tender aunt and a home wrecker. What Luzhin cannot come to terms with is that pain and pleasure are often inseparable and cannot be resolved within a system of strategic sacrifices that exists in chess. Faced with his own dilemma, Luzhin's father, who is but a second-rate writer, shrugs his shoulders and simply muses "how sad life [is], how difficult to do one's duty, not to meet anymore, not to telephone, not to go where he [is] irresistibly drawn," whereas Luzhin attempts to employ his artistic genius to force the messiness and unpredictability of life into an artistic combination (53). Despite Luzhin's failings, his paranoia perhaps echoes, in an intriguing manner, his creator's anxiety that sexual and romantic relationships with women distract from artistic creation, even as such relationships are often paradoxically a source of inspiration to be sublimated into the higher realm of art.

In Nabokov's fictional universe, when not helping the artist, women (and sexually alluring women in particular) often prove dangerous in their distraction to the artist. While sexual desire might help ignite the artistic imagination, it also disturbs artistic concentration. Total abstinence from the company of women, however, is perilous as well. This danger is made evident in *The Luzhin Defense* through Valentinov's extremist "theory that the development of Luzhin's gift for chess was connected with the development of the sexual urge, that with him chess represented a special deflection of this urge" (94). Valentinov keeps Luzhin at a distance from women, an act that renders Luzhin socially maladjusted and seems to contribute to his mentally spiraling out (80). Thus, *The Luzhin Defense* teeters between chess and sex and between the realm of art and the company of women, unable to resolve its tension.

CROSSING BORDERS

The dangerous woman who pulls the artist away from his craft returns in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a novel with faint echoes of chess, in the form of the alluring and vulgar Nina.⁸ The novel takes on the form of a detective tale where the narrator and the half-brother of the celebrated writer Sebastian Knight tries to find out the identity of Sebastian's late lover who had made him desperately unhappy but whom he could not give up. In his quest, however,

the narrator, or V. as he is identified in the text, almost gets caught in the snare of the very lady whom he seeks. In her ploy, Nina can be compared to the seductive Queen set up as a chess trap for the inexperienced player. In the novel, Nina is compared to an international spy, Mata Hari, the “Belle Dame Sans Merci” of John Keats, and “a type from a cheap novel” (30, 134). She is a woman who is constantly on the go, changing her addresses and names, as she makes admirers chase after her. Nina takes Sebastian away not only from his craft, but also from good-girl Claire Bishop who supports Sebastian, manages his literary estate, and types out his works for him. Moreover, Nina is described chiefly through her absence. Her ex-husband Pahl Pahlich, for example, remembers her in the following manner: “As a matter of fact, I often catch myself thinking that she has never existed [. . .] it was merely a bad dream after seeing a bad cinema film” (135). Stranger still, Pahl Pahlich retains no photographs of Nina as though, indeed, she were a mere dream. V. uncovers Nina’s true (Russian) identity by a clever linguistic trick. He then abruptly leaves her in the garden without so much as an explanation: “No, I did not say a word of all this” (158). V. does, however, provide the reader with the imaginary response that he might have given to Nina in “our liberal grand Russian language” (158). At first blush, it may appear that, unlike Sebastian, V. gives Nina up and escapes unharmed from her web. Or does he?

The novel that the reader holds is construed in part as a written response and explanation to the dark lady. V. might have resisted the carnal temptation proffered by Nina, but like his brother, he too writes to her, albeit in an indirect way: “She will be sent a copy of this book and will understand” (158). Nina, banished at the end from the text of the novel, is reimagined as one of its most intimate readers. What is more, given how the entire fictional biography of Sebastian Knight that V. sets out to write essentially revolves around Nina’s absence and given how the search for her identity structures his entire quest, the reader of V.’s book and of Nabokov’s novel is left wondering if perhaps Nina has not managed to ensnare V. after all. She captures nothing less than his artistic imagination. V.’s book does not merely contain traces of Nina, but can also be said to spiral around her very absence. The “*cherchez la femme*” structure of the novel is exciting and keeps the reader on his or her toes. Has Nina been safely sacrificed in the world of the novel, or has she dangerously usurped the artist’s imagination, the one domain that the artist must learn to control? One way to read Nina’s absence in the novel is to treat it as a sign that the male artist has managed to keep the absent woman in the domain of “inspiration,” as Larmour puts it (12). Another way to look at Nina’s absence, coupled with V.’s obsessive references to her, is to see it as proof of the lingering anxiety that the absent woman is not so easily repressed and that she continues to disrupt and push back at the male artist’s desire for control.

The sacrifice of a female protagonist also has the power to affect the author's own attitude toward her, as in the case of Nabokov and the character of Lolita, or Dolly, as she signs her name. As critics have remarked time and again, Dolly's voice is absent from the book and we know her mainly through Humbert's words.⁹ Yet Dolly's sacrifice, performed for the movement of the plot and the set-up of the novel's ethical problem, is signaled to the reader throughout the narrative. When Humbert sees Dolly for the last time, she is described as a crucified figure:

Against the splintery deadwood of the door, Dolly Schiller flattened herself as best she could (even rising on tiptoe a little) to let me pass, and was crucified for a moment, looking down, smiling down at the threshold, hollow-cheeked with round *pommettes*, her watered-milk-white arms outspread on the wood."
(*Annotated Lolita* 270)

Another haunting image is Dolly sleeping in one of the many hotels that Humbert takes her to, "mouth open, in a kind of dull amazement at the curious inane life we all had rigged up for her" (215). Who are "we?" Included in this "we" may be Humbert, Quilty, but also author Nabokov who is in charge of all the moves of his figures.

Like the real sacrifice of the "formidable Queen," (182), which Humbert loses to Gaston in their last chess game, the absence of Dolly's voice is a risky and challenging choice on the part of Nabokov. Have the gains of this artistic endeavor outweighed Nabokov's risks? When early readers and critics failed to hear Dolly Schiller's sobs in the night, Nabokov and Vera were moved to become her advocates against the critics. In 1956, Nabokov added an afterword to *Lolita* ("On a Book Entitled Lolita") for the first US edition where he identified for his reader "the nerves of the novel," one of which is "pale, pregnant, beloved, irretrievable Dolly Schiller dying in Gray Star (the capital town of the book)" (316). "Lolita is famous, not I," Nabokov once said (interview with Herbert Gold, 107). Although sacrificed for the overall composition of the novel, the female protagonist of *Lolita* has surely transcended the mere role of a "galley slave," exerting a strange, enchanting power over the author himself who felt compelled to speak in her defense. Paradoxically, Nabokov had to become his own reader, the ethical reader of *Lolita*, to advocate for the child in his novel who cries "every night, every night" (176).

CONCLUSION

The female characters in Nabokov's fiction may be absent or silent, but they nonetheless exude a powerful influence on the male protagonists, the

reader, and the author. This effect of their absence can be explained in many ways from Joni Mitchell's lyrics "you don't know what you've got till it's gone" to Jacques Lacan's thesis that it is a lack that causes desire (139). Like the Queen in chess, Nabokov's female protagonist is indeed the most mobile of figures, crossing borders within the fictional world and even, in the case of *Lolita*, having an afterlife outside of the novel. So considerable is her force that it is often portrayed in Nabokov's fiction as a source of both anxiety and inspiration for the male artist. Nabokov's woman repeatedly defies and challenges the silent supporting role in which the male artist has cast her.

NOTES

1. See Gezari "Game Fiction"; Gezari "Roman et problem"; Purdy; and D. Barton Johnson.

2. In a 1977 BBC interview, Nabokov said, "I have always had a number of parts lined up in case the muse failed. A lepidopterist exploring fabulous jungles came first. Then there was the chess grand master . . ." (*Selected Letters* ix).

3. In an interview with Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov compared the composition of novels to the search for an economical and elegant solution ("trouver une solution économe et élégante, comme dans les problèmes d'échecs"). Elsewhere, Nabokov stressed that he was not interested in chess games: "Games means the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance—chess problems, for example, which I compose in glacial solitude" (*Strong Opinions* 117).

4. See de la Durantaye.

5. It should be noted, however, that during Nabokov's time, chess was predominately a male social pastime. Although from the Middle Ages to the Age of Enlightenment, chess was popular with both men and women of the upper classes, by the nineteenth century the chess world became dominated by male grandmasters. The situation would begin to change in the late 1970s, when Nona Gaprindashvili from Georgia became the first female International Grandmaster in 1978.

6. In the Foreword to *The Luzhin Defense*, Nabokov remarks: "Thus toward the end of Chapter Four an unexpected move is made by me in a corner of the board; sixteen years elapse in the course of one paragraph, and Luzhin, suddenly promoted to seedy manhood and transferred to a German resort, is discovered at a garden table, pointing out with his cane a remembered hotel window (not the last glass square in his life) and talking to somebody (a woman, if we judge by the handbag on the iron table) whom we do not meet till Chapter Six" (10–11).

7. In a 1971 interview with Paul Sufrin, however, Nabokov noted that he meant to say that "the real clash" was "between the author and the reader": "On the other hand, a good reader is bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author, but those efforts can be most rewarding after the bright dust has settled" (*Strong Opinions* 183).

8. Despite these chess echoes, Nabokov writes in a letter to Edmund Wilson: “[N]o—except for the sketchy chess-game alluded to in one chapter there is no ‘*chess-idea*’ in the development of the whole book. Sounds attractive, but it is not there” (*Dear Bunny* 58).

9. See, for example, Kaufmann.

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