

Poem and Problems
by
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Part I

A combination composed of a sacrifice has more immediate effect upon the person playing over the game in which it occurs than another combination, because the apparent senselessness of the sacrifice is convincing proof of the design of the player offering it. Hence it comes that the risk of material, and the victory of the weaker material over the stronger material, gives the impression of a symbol of the mastery of mind over matter. Now we see wherein lies the pleasure to be derived from a chess combination. It lies in the feeling that a human mind is behind the game dominating the inanimate pieces with which the game is carried on, and giving them the breath of life.

– R. Reti, *Modern Ideas in Chess*¹

Luzhin, preparing an attack for which it was first necessary to explore a maze of variations, where his every step aroused a perilous echo, began a long meditation: he needed, it seemed, to make one last prodigious effort and he would find the secret move leading to victory. Suddenly, something occurred outside his being, a scorching pain - and he let out a loud cry, shaking his hand stung by the flame of a match, which he had lit and forgotten to apply to his cigarette. The pain immediately passed, but in the fiery gap he had seen something unbearably awesome, the full horror of the abysmal depths of chess. He glanced at the chessboard and his

brain wilted from hitherto unprecedented weariness. But the chessmen were pitiless, they held and absorbed him. There was horror in this, but in this also was the sole harmony, for what else exists in the world besides chess?

- V. Nabokov, *The Luzhin Defense*²

Phaedrus: A chessboard? And the game underway, to judge by ruined towers, fallen soldiery, clergy, royalty – though you, Socrates, sit characteristically alone, as though above the fray.

Socrates: In my life I am very like a pawn, plodding a step at a time, frequently blocked until the opportunity arises to attack, when I shift diagonally. Like all pawns, I dream of becoming something better than I am.

P: Enough with games. How about philosophy?

S: Very well. A famous physicist – Heisenberg, I think it was – remarked that chess is not a game at all but a mathematical problem to which no solution has been discovered.

P: If it looks like a game, walks like a game, and quacks like a game, I think it must be a game.

S: Perhaps another account of chess, due to Boris Spassky, will be more to your liking: “Chess, with all its philosophical depth, its aesthetic appeal, is first of all a game in the best sense of the word, a game in which are revealed your intellect, your character, your will.”³ But it is true that tomorrow a mathematical discovery could take a lot of the fun out of it.

P: So chess is a mathematical problem, to which no solution has been

discovered, in which are revealed your intellect, your character, your will?

S: Ah, romantic poetry! Allow me to recite for you some famous romantic poetry. This poem is supposed to be sung as a call-and-response duet, but I will take both voices myself, like so. Ahem:

- (1) e4 e5
- (2) f4 exf4
- (3) Bc4 Qh4+
- (4) Kf1 b5
- (5) Bxb5 Nf6
- (6) Nf3 Qh6
- (7) d3 Nh5
- (8) Nh4 Qg5
- (9) Nf5 c6
- (10) g4 Nf6
- (11) Rg1 cxb5
- (12) h4 Qg6
- (13) h5 Qg5
- (14) Qf3 Ng8
- (15) Bxf4 Qf6
- (16) Nc3 Bc5
- (17) Nd5 Qxb2
- (18) Bd6 Qxa1
- (19) Ke2 Bxg1
- (20) e5 Na6
- (21) Nxg7+ Kd8
- (22) Qf6+ Nxf6
- (23) Be7

P: That didn't sound romantic to me.

S: Though textual critics quibble about its canonic form, this poem is 'The Immortal Game' – or simply, 'The Immortal' – by Anderssen-Kieseritzky. Anderssen gets the victor's share of aesthetic credit.⁴

P: I will be sure to forward it to him when it arrives. Can you hasten its arrival?

S: I am a midwife, not a postman. You perceive that this poem is composed in standard, algebraic chess notation? I am reminded of Nabokov's description of Luzhin, protagonist of *The Defense*, learning to read such stuff.

At first he learned to replay the immortal games that remained from former tournaments – he would rapidly glance over the notes of chess and silently move the pieces on his board. Now and then this or that move, provided in the texts with an exclamation or a question mark (depending upon whether it had been beautifully or wretchedly played), would be followed by several series of moves in parentheses, since that remarkable move branched out like a river and every branch had to be traced to its conclusion before one returned to the main channel. These possible continuations that explained the essence of a blunder or foresight Luzhin gradually ceased to reconstruct actually on the board and contented himself with perceiving their melody mentally through the sequence of symbols and signs.⁵

In my performance I omitted question marks and exclamation points. Consideration of the pragmatics of such scholia might confuse matters.

P: I think it would helpful if you added such things to your own remarks, so the audience could know when the trap was laid. But on I blunder. Why do you call a chess game – for that is evidently what it is – a 'poem'?

S: It is a beautiful linguistic object! What else is a poem?

P: But, as per the Nabokov passage, would it not be more accurate to tell the dancer from the dance: the *game* was beautiful, or beautifully *played*? It is not the algebraic symbols that are beautiful, but what they *mean*. One must be able to see *through* to the game – as I confess I cannot – in order to see the beauty, such as it may be.

S: Yes, it is only when this witch – *caïssa* – truly ‘makes herself into air, and vanishes into it’ that her beauty is disrobed. A poem should not mean, but be. Luzhin is now a chess master, capable of playing ‘blind chess’ against numerous opponents:

He found therein deep enjoyment: one did not have to deal with visible, audible, palpable pieces whose quaint shape and wooden materiality always disturbed him and always seemed to him but the crude, mortal shell of exquisite, invisible chess forces. When playing blind he was able to sense these diverse forces in their original purity. He saw then neither the Knight’s carved mane nor the glossy heads of the Pawns – but he felt quite clearly this or that imaginary square was occupied by a definite, concentrated force, so that he envisioned the movement of a piece as a discharge, a shock, a stroke of lightning – and the whole chess field quivered with tension, and over this tension he was sovereign, here gather in and there releasing electric power.⁶

Likewise in more conventional poetry it is rare for the sounds and squiggles themselves to be exclusive sources of aesthetic gratification. If you can’t read English, you can’t appreciate English poetry.

P: True, but you can have a chess game without an algebraic denotation of it. You cannot have a poem without words.

S: Yet often what makes a poem beautiful are non-linguistic features. In the poem *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare, it is very beautiful that Banquo dies but Fleance lives to become king hereafter. For, so it is written: “Verily, unless a seed fall to the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” It is also beautiful that Macbeth, who plays false to the death with those around them, is in the end paltered with by life itself. The play is about sacrificing and losing, only to win all in the end. Conversely, it is about greedily seizing on things – like kingship and promises of weird women in the night – only to have them turn out to be empty tokens.

P: So you think *Macbeth* is good not because of the poetic *language*, but because it teaches the meaning of life, or lack thereof; or at any rate has an improving moral? The play teaches hatred of this false old world and love the next, or something similarly utilitarian?

S: You ironic fellow! I have no idea whether *Macbeth* has saved a soul from “the common enemy of man,” whoever he may turn out to be. I’m thinking about how ‘The Immortal Game’ is admired because, with move 17 – Nd5 – white is evidently already planning for a perfect minor checkmate. A very neat formal trick: in a pure checkmate, all open squares around an enemy king are covered, but none more than once. In a pure minor checkmate, only minor pieces – in this case, a bishop and two knights – are required for complete, coverage. A double economy of force, if you will. So the poem shines, as the best do, formally. But that is not all. In order to pull off the formal trick, white is called upon to sacrifice his queen, two rooks and a bishop. When checkmate is achieved, he is down a king’s ransom. And black, whose king is suddenly in need of ransoming, learns to his regret this great pile of material he has amassed is just so many worthless tokens. “Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown/ And put a barren sceptre in

my gripe.” All of black’s material is strewn, sterile but intact, to corners of the field. White’s fallen seeds have born fruit in the very heart. In short, the game – like the play – is about sacrifice: about giving up all, only to win all in the end. Thus, the game is essentially an object of formal beauty, but equally essentially an expression of intellect, character, and will. If either element were lacking – if the sacrifices and victory were formally crude, or the perfect minor checkmate came after a listless middle-game –

P: - You are straining this conceit to the breaking point. But I suppose there is nowhere to plod but forward. Why call this game ‘romantic’? Merely because of the multiple deaths of white’s queen and companions at the hand of a man in black?

S: There is also a loose quality to the formal elegance of the game. Some might say it was mere mathematical melodrama. The game is not a model of discipline by contemporary standards. The opening is thoroughly peculiar. Among other things, white and black chase each other around on horseback. Likewise, in modern fiction chases on horseback are passé. More generally, black does not defend himself brilliantly; nor does white take every care that his many sacrifices not be in vain. The linchpin – that maddening Nd5 – is reckless from a certain standpoint; d4 would be safer. So a chess technician may sniff at the romantic cult of ‘The Immortal’. Emanuel Lasker writes that, however extraordinary the endgame, the character of the opening “insults our feelings.”⁷ The great systematizer Steinitz puts the point generally: “A win by an unsound combination, however showy, fills me with artistic horror.”⁸ Likewise, Gide sniffs at the romantic cult of Shakespeare: ‘one can learn neither right reason nor correct style from this stuff,’ or words to that effect. More fundamentally, to quote the literary critic Denis Donoghue: “I hate chess.” The response of many literary critics to a stretch of algebra on the altar of literary romanticism will be to hustle this unclean offering from the temple.

P: It may be that literary studies should bear a motto opposite in sense to the one that graced Plato's academy. 'Only those without mathematics may enter.'

S: Plato went head over heels for math and broke his crown, but it is equally absurd to go overboard in the opposite direction. I have tried to show that this particular chess game has a little something in common with *Macbeth*.

P: But perhaps the anti-algebraic guardians of the temple have a point. Perhaps it is as simple as this: a chess game is a *game* for two players; a poem is not a *game*. Ergo, a chess game is not a *poem*.

S: But one *might* compose a poem under conditions of competition. It is hardly novel to view the poetic tradition as anxiously competitive. For that matter, you do not need two players to play chess. A writer and reader will do. Consider a description, from Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, of the process of chess problem construction:

It should be understood that competition in chess problems 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), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of "tries" – delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray. But whatever I can say about this matter of problem composing, I do not seem to convey sufficiently the ecstatic core of the process and its points of connection with various other, more overt and fruitful, operations of the creative mind, from the charting of dangerous seas to the writing of one of those incredible novels where the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he

surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a love world from the most unlikely ingredients – rocks, and carbon, and blind throbbings.⁹

P: Suppose, for the sake of argument, I grant ‘The Immortal’ is a sort of poem. What follows? Your alignment of this game with Shakespeare’s play is athletic. Is there more to be gained than the odd-angle spectacle of you scrambling up an unlikely thematic hill?

S: Locke once complained of Descartes’ perverse itinerary, seeking knowledge of the external world via the method of doubt, ‘like planning a trip from London to Constantinople via the North Pole.’ Nabokov would have seen the point. He writes of the delights of problems with false but fashionably complex solutions. When the right answer is simple. So you make small progress, “as somebody on a wild good chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores.” But sights along the way compensate for the misery of deceit; one experiences “a synthesis of poignant artistic delight.”¹⁰ Consider two broad schools of thought about poetic language: formalism (anti-intentionalism) and intentionalism (anti-formalism). Formalism comprises a range of positions, from the New Criticism to deconstructionism. Intentionalists run the gamut from E.D. Hirsch to Stanley Fish, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. Here is a definition to get us started. According to E.D. Hirsch, formalists conceive of a “piece of language” – nice, Empsonian phrase – as “a public object whose character is defined by public norms.” The problem with this, allegedly, is that, “no mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone. Referred to these alone, the text’s meaning remains indeterminate.”¹¹

P: Hence the need to bring in intentionality, to nail down ‘character’?

S: Hirsch philosophizes with a hammer, yes. In the limiting case, intentionalists

like Knapp and Michaels assert that, “the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author’s intended meaning.”¹² In response to this intentionalist line, formalists may maintain that intentions are unnecessary or undesirable as determinants of meaning. This would be the classic, New Critical line. Formalists may alternatively embrace indeterminacy, perhaps in a deconstructive spirit.

P: All this is more complicated than just ‘formalism vs. intentionalism’.

S: So I do not pretend to have bagged the lot in some decisive way.

Nevertheless, intentionalism and formalism seem to me to imply instructively competing views of – how to put it? – the ontogenesis of poetic *character*. By that I simply mean to indicate that formalists may be death-of-the-author ‘language speaks *through us*’ post-Heideggerians. They may be textual autonomy-minded modernists, like Eliot or Pound. They may be New Critics. Wimsatt and Beardsley propound ‘the intentional fallacy’. Cleanth Brooks maintains that “the language of poetry is the language of paradox”, and “paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet’s language”¹³ – as opposed to the very nature of the *poet*. So formalists agree on this much: poetry’s subtly is *language’s* subtlety; it’s play, *language’s* play, it’s depths, *language’s* depths. Intentionalists, by contrast, see these self-same poetic goods as products, rather, of *mind*. Hirsch, for example, is often derided as *narrow-minded* for wanting to confine us within the nutshell of a poet’s ‘intentional horizon’. But he is quite eloquent about the infinite space in there. He invokes Dryden on inexhaustible textual treasure – no text ever fully explicated. This, he thinks, is due to the *intentional* character of textual meaning. There are many sorts of intentionalists, of course. Whereas Hirsch likes to nail down solid, Stanley Fish inverts the implement and works every solid thing loose. Hirsch focuses on authors, Fish more on readers. But both see poetry as deriving its distinctive character from the distinctive nature and workings of *intention*.

P: And your point?

S: Neither line is plausible, applied to 'The Immortal'. Isn't that interesting?

P: The intentionalist critic will point out that what gives the game its poetic character is *mind* at work behind math: intellect, character, and will.

S: Nevertheless intentionalists are wrong to claim – as they do – that we are driven to consider intentions *by general considerations about the nature of linguistic meaning*. The first sentence of Fish's *Doing What Comes Naturally* reads: "It is one of the theses of this book that many of the issues in interpretive theory can be reduced to a few basic questions in the philosophy of language."¹⁴ Yet 'Nd5' patently falsifies Knapp and Michaels' strong intentionalist thesis, which is also Fish's. A chess computer may announce its move in this way, yet we do not infer it has intentions. 'Nd5' also falsifies Hirsch's weaker claim: "no mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone. Referred to these alone, the text's meaning remains indeterminate." The verbal meaning of 'Nd5' is *perfectly* determinate, in virtue of simple public norms.

P: I think Knapp, Michaels and Fish will respond that we always read any sentence *as if* it were the intentional product of a mind. Surely this is true of chess. When playing against a computer, we interpret its moves *as if* they were intentional. This seems rather important.

S: For clarity, we should distinguish senses of 'intention'. The creation of a language involves conscious acts. So, in a trivial sense, all sentences are intentional products of mind; but to read 'Nd5' is patently not to read the mind of whoever invented algebraic chess notation. It is also possible to use 'Intentionality' as a general term to cover anything – a thought, a sentence - that is 'about' anything. But Knapp, Michaels and Fish are not just saying meaningful sentences must be 'about' things. Again, this is trivial. 'Intention' may mean *plan* – a notion applicable to the present case, and the very sort of thing New Critics

deny one should consider about a poem: namely, intentions to have specific *effects*. Clearly Anderssen has a *plan*. But it is possible to interpret 'Nd5' – i.e. understand what it says - without forming any notion as to *why* the move is made, or what the next might be. Next, 'intentional' may be, as it is for Hirsch, a technical term denoting something like a 'horizon of awareness'. We may ask how much Anderssen probably understood about the board position he faced – what he saw, what he missed. But we do not need this information to figure out where he moved. Finally, it is, as you say, natural for humans to recognize and interpret board positions in terms of *intentions* in at least a few of these other senses. But, in the first place, we have already got beyond the question of what is strictly needed to understand the meaning of a *sentence*; second, the point is still not right. For example, the challenge of chess problems, of the sort Nabokov favored in particular, often hinges on the *impossibility* of an intentional interpretation. In problems of retrograde analysis, for example, one must deduce from a board position what the previous move, or series of moves, must have been. These positions are typically senseless, in the sense that they could never arise in actual play. One does not ask why anyone would end up here; one simply grope for technical combinations. Getting back to your point, the reason we are interested in Anderssen's *intentions* – and we certainly are - is obviously not that we are obliged to consider them in order to understand what the *sentence*, 'Nd5', means. It means, simply: knight to d5.

P: Let me try a different tack. Doesn't the move, Nd5, turn out to be pregnant with meaning, hence also the sentence 'Nd5', which denotes the move, and, by extension, anything 'inside'?

S: One of those "Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie/Thy soul's immensity"-type situations? I grant the premise, not the conclusion. The *move* is pregnant with meaning, if you like. Anderssen's opponent failed to note it to his cost. Unlike *Macbeth's* witches, poor farmer Kieseritsky evidently could not "look into the seeds of time/ And say which grain will grow and which will not." But it

does not at all follow that the *sentence*, 'Nd5', is pregnant with all this meaning. Put it this way. Suppose we take it on good authority that, "We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms/ As well a well wrought urn becomes." Then every great chess game is sixty-four rooms, a few handsomely furnished. A brilliant game can hardly fail to be a well wrought urn, in Cleanth Brooks' sense, since for Brooks, a poem is a complex unity in disunity, an aesthetic monad riven by paradox.

P: I am not sure I know Brooks' sense of 'paradox'.

S: Brooks says *poetic* paradox is characterized by the logic of 'both-and' rather than 'either-or'. "We are disciplined in the tradition of either-or, and lack the mental agility – to say nothing of the maturity of attitude – which would allow us to indulge in the finer distinctions and the more subtle reservations permitted by the tradition of both-and."¹⁵

P: Brooks thinks 'paradox' means *conjunction*? He thinks conjunction a more agile relation than disjunction?

S: He is trying to draw our attention to the fact that the occasional impossibility in one's semantic marching orders – and the impermissibly of countermanding half these on one's own logical authority - generates aesthetic satisfaction. Take the case of pity cast against type in the difficult role of "naked newborn babe/ Striding the blast." How is this to be imagined? "Is the babe natural or super-natural – an ordinary, helpless baby, who, as new-born, could not, of course, even toddle, much less stride the blast? Or is it some infant Hercules, quite capable of striding the blast, but, since it is powerful and not helpless, hardly the typical pitiable object?"¹⁶

According to Brooks, the fact that poetry thrives on 'paradox' like this guarantees poetic "unity is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to an algebraic formula."¹⁷ Which is precisely what makes our Nd5 such a perfect example of paradox, in Brooks' sense. One's mind is set

oscillating unstably between notional poles of ludicrous weakness and impossible strength.

P: So, according to you, a good illustration of how a poem cannot possibly be a piece of algebra might be a line from a poem composed entirely of algebra?

S: (P & -P) is not a very good poem. Brooks is obviously right that simple algebra cannot satisfactorily encode live paradox, in his sense. But the *meaning* of Nd5 is paradoxical. Therefore, 'Nd5' does not mean the same as Nd5. Pace Dryden, this text, 'Nd5', can be completely explicated – knight to square d5 – though the paradoxical thing the sentence *means*, Nd5, cannot be. As the poet Gray might have put it, had he been vouchsafed an audience with that humble token, Anderssen's d5 knight: "Ludic historian, who canst thus express/ A mathy tale more sweetly than our rhyme:/ What rule-fringed legend haunts about thy shape/ Of deities and mortals, or of –"

P: Do you have an argument from premises no one could deny to the irresistible conclusion that there is a sharp distinction the meaning of 'Nd5' and the meaning of Nd5?

S: You mean besides the obvious one that if you want to know the meaning of life, a dictionary will not suffice, though if you want to know the meaning of 'life', it will? Suppose I am teaching you chess notation. I test you on this sentence, 'Nd5'. What is the criterion of your complete understanding of the sentence?

P: Confronted with the board, I must be able to place the right piece on the right square? Confronted with no board, I must be able to say there is a knight on square d5?

S: Suppose I now inquire after the *meaning* of Nd5: the *move*, not the sentence denoting it? Suppose you answer that you do not know?

P: It follows I am not good at chess, or have not studied the game, or cannot see the board in question; it does not follow that I do not understand chess notation. It is easy to learn to understand chess notation perfectly. It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand chess perfectly. But what does all this really prove?

S: That formalism is wrong to assume the character of poetry is a function of the character of the *language* in which it is composed. The character of 'The Immortal' cannot be a function of 'the complexity of language', or 'language-use', or 'language-games', let alone 'linguistic elements drawing attention to their own linguisticity', or 'free-play of signifiers'. The algebra in which 'the Immortal' is composed is too simple, rigid and unplayful for any of this to be remotely plausible.

P: Perhaps we just need to combine the two views – formalism and intentionalism. For chess is a math problem, to which no solution has been discussed, in which are revealed our intellect, character, will. Is this your theme?

S: Both-and? As Nietzsche writes: "Let us introduce the refinement and rigor of mathematics into all sciences as far as this is at all possible, not in the faith that this will lead us to know things but in order to determine our human relation to things. Mathematics is merely the means for general and ultimate knowledge of man."¹⁸ As Nabokov writes, of the demons that may be left when the math is folded back:

Themes in chess, it may be explained, are such devices as forelaying, withdrawing, pinning, unpinning and so forth; but it is only when they are combined in a certain way that a problem is satisfying. Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy; and although in matters of construction I tried to conform, whenever possible, to

classical rules, such as economy of force, unity, weeding out of loose ends, I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil.¹⁹

Upon rereading his own novel, *The Luzhin Defense*, and considering its themes, Nabokov writes that he feels “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 a monument.”²⁰ On the other hand, he may be lying.

P: Why would you think?

S: He is certainly lying a few lines down when he helpfully calls the critic’s attention, in advance, to certain scenes in the novel that illustrate this ‘chess theme’. He cites, for example, patterns on frosted windowpanes; and the scenes in which the black king, Luzhin, is preoccupied by patterns of tiles on corridor floors and in bathrooms, while he sits morosely on the throne. In my mind, these scenes are connected not just with Nabokov’s interest in the chess themes of ‘The Immortal’ but with those of *Macbeth*: strong queen; king whose capture is governed by seemingly arbitrary, yet unbreakable rules; hints at otherworldly powers controlling the pieces; importance of ‘hereafter’; final scenes as *solus rex* problem; equivocal technicalities concerning military concealment and perinatal medical complication as analogs to the springs of any well-laid combination, in which the danger is not perceived because it seems “barred, impossible, excluded quite naturally from the range of possible moves.”²¹ Above all, the ‘fairy chess’ theme of escape from the board.

... If the assassination
 Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
 With his surcease success; that but this blow

Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We'd jump the life to come.

Do you recall how in *Pale Fire* Kinbote considers Macbeth's psychology? He advances a hypothesis concerning the ghostly, floating dagger:

We must assume, I think, that the forward projection of what imagination he had, stopped at the act, on the brink of all its possible consequences; ghost consequences, comparable to the ghost toes of an amputee or to the fanning out of additional squares which a chess knight (that skip-space piece), standing on a marginal file, "feels" in phantom extensions beyond the board, but which have no effect whatever on his real moves, on the real play.²²

Macbeth is a knight who dreams of jumping off – like Luzhin out the window.

... I have no spur
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
 Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
 And falls on the other.

P: Other *what*?

S: *Exactly*.

P: Setting *Macbeth* aside, how are you so sure Nabokov is lying about how the bathroom scenes, etc. remind him Nd5 from 'The Immortal'? Chess allegory seems likely enough.

S: The scenes are not in the novel. Which just goes to show it is a bad idea snatching up valuable material poets appear to have left completely undefended.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dialogue was inspired by two articles I happened to read together simply because they were back-to-back in an issue of *American Chess Journal*: Daniel Edelman on Nabokov and chess problems (which brought me to the journal, researching *The Luzhin Defense* and Nabokov on chess generally); and Robert Hübner on 'The Immortal' (which happily caught my eye.)

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NOTES:

- ¹ Richard Réti, *Modern Ideas in Chess*, trans. John Hart (New York: Dover, 1960), p. 4.
- ² Vladimir Nabokov, *The Luzhin Defense*, trans. M. Scamell and V. Nabokov (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 139.
- ³ Quoted in Anthony Saily, *The Battle of Chess Ideas* (New York: RHM Press, 1972), p. 125.
- ⁴ Socrates follows Robert Hübner, "The Immortal Game," *American Chess Journal*, no. 3 (1995): "The game score varies wildly in different publications. This is already noticeable in Amelung's 1901 article in *Baltische Schachblätter*. I am following the score given by Hooper and Whyld in *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, first edition (1984), p. 150. (The version given by D. Levy and K. O'Connell in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games, Vol. 1, 1981, p. 176, is definitely not authentic.) However, it seems extremely unlikely that Black resigned after 20 Ke2 as Hooper and Whyld claim. According to Amelung in *Baltische Schachblätter*, Vol. 4 (1893), p. 325, what probably happened was that Kieseritzky played 20 ... Na6 and Anderssen announced mate in three; the final combination was never played on the board" (p. 15).
- ⁵ *Defense*, p. 57.
- ⁶ *Defense*, p. 91-2.
- ⁷ Quoted in "The Immortal Game", p. 33.
- ⁸ A famous quote. I am unable to locate a source for it.
- ⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1999), p. 227.
- ¹⁰ *Speak, Memory*, p. 228-9.
- ¹¹ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967), p. 224.

¹² S. Knapp and W. B. Michaels, "Against Theory," in *Against Theory*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: U Chicago, 1982), p. 12.

¹³ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (London: Dobson, 1968), p. 1, 5.

¹⁴ Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham: Duke UP, 1989), p. 1.

¹⁵ *Well Wrought*, p. 65.

¹⁶ *Well Wrought*, p. 22.

¹⁷ *Well Wrought*, p. 159.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §246.

¹⁹ *Speak, Memory*, p. 227

²⁰ *Defense*, "Foreword", p. 8.

²¹ *Defense*, p. 65.

²² Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 276.