

Nabokov's Playground: *The Defense*

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Knight seemed to him
to be constantly playing
some game of his own invention,
without telling his partners its rules.

--Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life
of Sebastian Knight*

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation
executed within certain limits of the artistic time and place,
according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding,
having its aim in itself and being accompanied by a feeling of tension,
joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.”

-- Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

In his study of play in culture, Johan Huizinga claimed that “the [above] definition ... of play might serve as a definition of poetry... To call poetry ... a playing with words and language is no metaphor: it is the precise and literal truth” (Huizinga 132). Along these lines, any artistic creation, including literature, is deeply “rooted” in play, while play itself is believed to be “even more primordial than culture” (132). The language of literature plays with images so as to make every image “contain the answer to an enigma” (134), provided that the writer’s aim is “to create a tension that will enchant the reader and hold him spellbound” (132). The structuralist-semiotic approach to play maintains that play renders various aspects of reality by translating them into the language of its own rules. According to Yuri Lotman, play conventionalizes reality and presupposes a simultaneous realization of the so-called “practical” and “conventional” types of behavior. Considering Huizinga’s argument about the role of play in verbal art, it is not accidental that such biplanar behavior is also part and parcel of any conscious act of reading.

However, while both art and play are “secondary modeling systems” (Lotman’s term), they are not fully identifiable with each other. In what follows I will analyze some of the features that art and play have in common and highlight certain aspects that demarcate these two semiotic systems. Of all the varieties of play and art, I shall use chess as an example of the former and Nabokov’s novel *The Defense* (1929) as an example of the latter. I will argue that, while play and literature are ultimately heterogeneous semiotic systems, the actual process of reading Nabokov’s novel has much in common with that of playing a game of chess. I will also try to demonstrate how the concept of play in *The Defense* is deconventionalized and, instead, is recast as a ritual, shaping the image of the novel’s protagonist and reflecting his metaphysical transcendence (“dropping out of the game”). Nabokov’s treatment of chess goes beyond the sphere of play proper, inasmuch as it obliterates the distinction between play and non-play. The game of chess is transformed into a system of symbols that mark Luzhin’s withdrawal from the material world into a higher realm of being. In the sanctified sphere of chess Nabokov’s protagonist is exposed to a ritual-like experience that is apparently beyond the reach of the uninitiated, i.e. those surrounding him in his everyday life. Like most rituals, the game of chess endows Luzhin with a specific language through which this metaphysical experience is enacted. The language of chess symbols, engraved on Luzhin’s speech pattern, also “initiates” the reader into the fictional world of the novel and mediates his/her reading experience.

The Game of Chess vs. Chess Problems in Nabokov’s *Oeuvre*

In the context of Nabokov’s artistic legacy, the spheres of art and play are bridged by the author’s passion for composing chess problems. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1966), Nabokov admitted that there was a period in his life when his practice of composing chess problems nearly competed with his vocation of a writer:

Whatever it was, it belonged to an especially exhilarating order of sensation, and my only quarrel with it today is that the maniacal manipulation of carved figures, or of their mental counterparts, during my most ebullient and prolific years engulfed so much of the time I could have devoted to verbal adventure. (289)

Presumably, Nabokov regarded the composition of chess problems as a way of exercising his literary technique. This captivat-

ing activity offered him a “twinge of mental pleasure” (*SM* 289), which in fact appeared to be as powerful as literary inspiration proper. Or, in Nabokov’s terms, it solidified his “exhilarating order of sensation” that apparently underlies both art and play in general as well as literature and chess in particular.

In his foreword to the English edition of *The Defense*, his third Russian novel, Nabokov contextualizes the principles of the literary technique that he had derived from composing chess problems. Not only the novel’s plotline (“rereading this novel, replaying the moves of its plot...”), but also its entire conception and structural organization are identified in chess terms: “But the chess effects I planted are distinguishable not only in these separate scenes; their concatenation can be found in the basic structure of this attractive novel” (*D* 9). Once again using chess terminology (“moves”) to refer to the twists of his novel’s plot, Nabokov continues: “The entire sequence of moves in [the] three central chapters reminds one – or should remind one – of a certain type of chess problem” (*D* 10). By “planting the chess effects” in the text of his novel, the author creates a tension between the novel’s structure and subject matter.

Ascribing chess problems to the sphere of art rather than to the sphere of play, Nabokov acknowledged that they had very little in common with the actual game: “It is a beautiful, complex and sterile art related to the ordinary form of the game only insofar as, say, the properties of a sphere are made use of both by a juggler in weaving a new act and by a tennis player in winning a tournament” (*SM* 288). Following Nabokov’s own argument, Janet Gezari suggests in her article that “a position better adjusted to Nabokov’s art is that chess problems are more like works of art than are chess games, and that chess problem themes and strategies, in particular those expressed in Nabokov’s own chess problem composition, figure in his novels” (47). However, the actual process of reading Nabokov’s novel is more reflective of playing a game of chess than of solving a chess problem. The text-mediated relationship between the author and his hypothetical reader assumes that both of them are involved in the creative act: the interdependence of the author and the reader, *i.e.* their counteractive reliance on each other, is considered to be indispensable and artistically functional. The relationship between the author and the reader is, therefore, fundamentally different from that between the composer and the hypothetical solver of a chess problem. Much of Nabokov’s “verbal adventure” reveals a creative synthesis of chess

and language regarded as semiotic systems. This synthesis entails a peculiar mode of poetic signification, which suggests both reading a work of art as playing a game of chess and, conversely, playing the game of chess as reading an artistic wording.

Certain reservations, of course, seem to be necessary here. Unlike in a game of chess, the bonds connecting the author and the reader of a given literary work are largely based on the relationship of inequality: not only does the author always “play white,” but throughout the entire “game” he also remains its permanent conductor, striving to shape the reader’s perception through the text of his work. Unlike in a game of chess, where, ideally, two players reveal a commensurable ability to evaluate the position of their chess pieces at a given stage of the game, in a work of literature it is the author’s immediate “advantage” over the reader to formulate the concurrent value of his pieces—alias—characters. As compared to a pair of chess players, each of whom is presumed to be equally skillful in playing the game, the reader has incommensurably fewer chances to foresee each of the author’s moves. The “ideal” reader does not avail either, since this inequality is implied *a priori*. In order to validate the process of reading, the reader is compelled to “observe the rules” of the author. On the one hand, this text-mediated “relationship of inequality” may often result in a misreading or misunderstanding, while on the other it may constitute a rich source of variability and virtual infinitude of interpretations of one and the same text.

Since any game, in addition to the sanctity of rules, suggests a simultaneous realization of the “conventional” and the “practical” (“serious”) types of behavior, the reader’s perception is always preconditioned by the author’s intent. Paraphrasing Lotman’s statement held in relation to play, “the [reader] who does not accept [the author’s] rules, [the process of reading] is something incongruous which bears no relation to serious reality” (Lotman 63). According to Lotman, an individual engaged in the artistic process experiences the entire spectrum of emotions, which could as well be excited by a similar situation in real life, but, at the same time, s/he realizes that no actual measures that would apparently resolve the real life situation should be taken (65). If reading is considered to be a creative act, it implies both confidence and distrust, a combination equally inherent in any conscious act of playing a game.

Chess and Language (Ferdinand de Saussure)

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure uses the example of chess to reflect on such phenomena of language as value, conventionality, fortuity, synchronic and diachronic dimensions, as well as internal and external aspects of language perceived as a system of signs. Saussure's comparison of language with chess is based on the fact that both of these semiotic systems operate conventional ("arbitrary") signs that function only in juxtaposition with each other (cp. his famous conception of language as a "system of differences"):

But of all comparisons that might be imagined, the most fruitful is the one that might be drawn between the functioning of language and a game of chess. In both instances we are confronted with a system of values and their observable modifications. A game of chess is like an artificial realization of what language offers in a natural form. (88)

What makes chess an artificial model of language is, among other things, that it is preconditioned by a set of rules that the players have to follow in order to maintain the conventionality of the game. "It is also true," Saussure continues, "that values depend above all else on an unchangeable convention, the set of rules that exists before a game begins and persists after each move. Rules that are agreed upon once and for all exist in language too; they are the constant principles of semiology" (89).¹ It is instructive to mention in this respect that the "unchangeable convention," a prescribed set of rules that exists *a priori*, is also inherent in any ritual. As Catherine Bell rightly observes, "ritual [is] analogous to language in that both ritual and language are traditional cultural systems bound by rules" (72).² The set of rules that define the very nature of ritual makes it possible to assume that any ritual, like any language, has its own "grammar." However, while natural languages use arbitrary signs, the language of ritual operates with symbols that in *The Defense* are most often associated with the sphere of chess. The "chess effects" planted throughout Nabokov's novel function precisely as such symbols that mark the protagonist's ritual-like experience while playing the actual game of chess.

While language, like chess or ritual, is indeed governed by a conventionality of rules that are manifested in its both synchronic and diachronic dimensions, the fact remains that the "rules" in a given literary work assume a different type of conventionality. Unless by "convention" we mean a particular literary canon or tradition, conven-

tionality in a text is stipulated by the author and is not communicated to the reader beforehand. In other words, conventionality of a given literary work is not *a priori* explicated. Nor does it require an “agreement to be signed” by the author and the reader in order to set the “literary game” going. Conventionality in literature is, thus, different from that of chess, language or ritual. It is but a product of the actual reading process that, of course, cannot exist *in absentia*, i.e. before the process of reading is actually initiated. Contrary to conventionality in language (*la langue*), conventionality of a literary text is not an abstraction; it is a concrete and dynamic phenomenon (*la parole*) that is always different from itself, depending on what text, what author and, finally, what reader is involved.

As Saussure himself observes, language cannot be entirely explained in chess terms: the underlying difference is that “the chess player *intends* to bring about a shift and thereby to exert an action on the system, whereas language premeditates nothing” (89). In literature, on the other hand, the role of intention is somewhat similar to intentionality in chess. Like any two conscious chess players, the author and his reader, each from their own side, aim at the logical denouement of their initial “intention.” In *The Defense*, Nabokov “intends” to depict his protagonist’s life from childhood to his physical death, while the reader “intends” to decipher the author’s “moves” and project them onto the concurrent development of the novel’s plot line. Likewise, the reader intends to decipher an upcoming narrative “combination” by registering the author’s “moves” in his/her memory and correlating them with his/her background knowledge and previous artistic experience. Thus, demarcating the spheres of chess and language, the category of intention seems to bridge the spheres of chess and literature, which makes reading similar to playing a game. In a somewhat different way, intentionality is also distinctive of ritual-like activities, insofar as the participants of a ritual aim at achieving a certain transcendental effect, such as to cure a disease or administer a communion.

An important difference between reading a work of art and playing a game of chess lies in the notion of synchrony, which Saussure eagerly ascribes to language and further projects onto the system of chess. Naturally, in a given literary work, the category of synchrony ceases to have the kind of significance that, according to Saussure, it enjoys in both language and chess. As it is commonly understood, signification in verbal art takes place along both syntagmatic and para-

digmatic axes, the former producing meaning through a juxtaposition of contiguous linguistic entities, the latter—by associating them with antecedent linguistic manifestations (Compare Jakobson’s definition of poetic function as “the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination” [69]). In order to remain adequate to the semantic pattern of a literary work at a particular instance of reading, the reader has to re-actualize and contextualize his previous experience of having come across this or that structural element earlier in the text.

On the contrary, in a game of chess, according to Saussure, ... *any particular position has the unique characteristic of being freed from all antecedent positions*; the route used in arriving there makes absolutely no difference; ... to describe this arrangement, it is perfectly useless to recall what had just happened ten seconds previously (emphasis added). (89)

Indeed, neither chess nor language relies on the chronological sequence of events in the same way as a work of literature does. Instead, both chess and language are focused on the ultimate expedience and efficacy of every instantaneous manifestation *de facto*. Whether those are moves in chess or instances of verbal communication in language, they are regarded separately from each other, i.e. without much reference to what might have constituted their ulterior motivation. According to Saussure, in both language and chess instantaneity is absolutely sufficient in order for the meaning to be produced. (This essential fact alone well explains Saussure’s predisposition to the synchronic perspective on language.) Chess players can easily resume their game without having to bear in mind what had actually brought their pieces to a given position. It is also easier in chess to “replay” the sequence of moves in a reverse order than to “read backwards” a literary text.³

Needless to say, this is not exactly so in literature. For a reader who had not read the novel’s previous pages and, as a consequence, is not familiar with the protagonist and his story, the contextual meaning embedded in the grammatical form of the novel’s last sentence may be claimed inaccessible. Standing out as a one-phrase paragraph, the sentence is a negative past tense construction:

But there was no Aleksandr Ivanovich. (*D* 256)

Its “literal” meaning of this sentence unequivocally negates the very existence of the protagonist in the fictional world of Nabokov’s novel. However, as long as the reader is familiar with the novel’s prior context and plot-line development, s/he perceives this sentence as the author’s final “move:” much like a chess mate, it finishes the author’s game with the reader, who is left spellbound by the grammatical ambiguity of this construction’s and, further, is deprived of a chance for revenge, because the game is over and the figures have been removed from the chess board. Using a negative past tense sentence (which opens with the emphatic conjunction “but”), the author “wins” the game by “cutting down” the protagonist, who up to this point was intended to invoke the reader’s sympathy and thereby to shape his/her continuous perception of the novel.

It can be assumed that, throughout the novel, the role of the protagonist is to balance the “practical” and the “conventional” types of the reader’s behavior. If reading, like any game, is also governed by a simultaneous realization of the “practical” and the “conventional” types of behavior, the reader assumes the behavior of a chess player. In *The Defense*, the reader’s “practical” plane of behavior is preconditioned by his empathy with the protagonist, while the “conventional” plane of behavior is stipulated by his/her awareness that the image of the protagonist remains beyond the sphere of “real life” and does not require any real assistance.

Luzhin: The “Fatal Pattern”

Apparently, “the maniacal manipulation of carved figures,” mentioned by Nabokov in relation to chess problems, is projected onto these figures’ “mental counterparts” materialized as his fictional characters. It is important to note that the concept of manipulation is basic to most rituals, and that ritualistic “manipulation must be carried out through symbols, that is, through meaningful equivalents of things meant which belong to another order of reality” (Lévi-Strauss 200). As was mentioned earlier, such symbols in *The Defense* are primarily based on various chess attributes. By manipulating such symbols so as to engage the reader in a ritual-like reading process, Nabokov “manipulates” the reader’s consciousness and provokes his/her genuine reaction to the events described. Because Nabokov’s narrative saturated with “chess effects” that actually function as symbols aims at recreating the real experience of playing a game of chess, it comes as no surprise that the reader’s exposure to such an experience is the

most powerful when it comes to the author's treatment of his novel's protagonist, Grandmaster Luzhin:

My story was difficult to compose, but I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a *fatal pattern* into Luzhin's life and to endow the description of a garden, a journey, a sequence of humdrum events, with the semblance of a game of skill, and, especially in the final chapters, with that of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellow's sanity (emphasis added). (*D* 8)

As Nabokov observes in his foreword to the novel's English translation, "poor Luzhin has had to wait thirty-five years for an English-language edition" (*D* 7-8). Remarkably, the belated English translation not only made Nabokov's protagonist "thirty-five years older," but also introduced a "fatal pattern" into the very acoustic image of his foreignized name. "The name," writes Nabokov, "rhymes with 'illusion' if pronounced thickly enough to deepen the 'u' into 'oo'" (*D* 7). Once the protagonist's name is euphonically associated with the English "illusion" (/ˈluʒin/ and /ˈlu:ziŋ/), his life is bound for a collapse ("losing").⁴ As the Russian fricative consonants /ʒ/ and /z/ form an alternating pair, Grandmaster's last name – Luzhin – reveals an inter-lingual pun: "one who plays and loses." The pun is reflective of the novel's subject matter: although Luzhin's match with Turati is not exactly lost but, rather, suspended, it does have a fatal significance in his life story. Whereas to remain such, any ritual must be administered as an uninterrupted procedure, Luzhin's aborted match with Turati is precisely what causes the drama.

Luzhin's "fatal pattern" stems from his inability to distinguish between life and game.⁵ His failure to withstand the affliction of losing a game makes him incapable of dealing with reality, which is, by definition, contrary to the mode of play behavior. The art of play, according to Lotman, "consists in the mastery of biplanar behavior. Any withdrawal ["dropping out"] into uniplanar behavior of either a serious or conventional type destroys its specific character" (62). However, since for Luzhin life and play prove to be virtually inseparable, their confluence presupposes a different kind of relationship. It would be an underestimation to say that by "dropping out" into the serious plane of behavior Luzhin simply violates the norms of the play behavior. Rather, he consecrates himself to a supernatural kind of

experience and is exposed to a different mode of existence. Hence, the very notion of play in Nabokov's novel is transvalued into a ritual-like sense.

Luzhin's escape ("dropping out") from reality into the sphere of play is further supported by his predilection for playing blind. Doing without the so-called "real-life factor," a blind game fulfills the protagonist's longing for not having to deal with the material chessboard and chess pieces, as well as his physical (real) opponents:

... 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 that 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 gathering in and there releasing electric power. Thus he played against fifteen, twenty, thirty opponents and of course the sheer number of boards told – since it affected the actual playing time – but this physical weariness was nothing compared to the mental fatigue – retribution for the stress and rapture involved in the game itself, which he conducted in a celestial dimension, where his tools were incorporeal quantities. (*D* 91-92)

It becomes clear that Nabokov's treatment of play is cardinally different from Lotman's behaviorist model. In *The Defense*, the game of chess is transformed into a more sophisticated phenomenon. For Luzhin, chess is not merely a game in Lotman's sense, but rather a portal to another mode of existence, a different system of measurement, a higher realm of being. Through chess Luzhin transcends the phenomenal world of matter and enters the nominal sphere, whereby the concept of play is endowed with a metaphysical nature. What makes such a transcendence possible is the ritualized mode in which the game of chess is conducted.

It remains true, however, that in Nabokov's novel the transformation of game into ritual is largely sustained by the protagonist's inability to maintain the balance between the serious and conventional planes of behavior. Therefore, it is worth paying special attention to the functioning of the play-element in Nabokov's text. By "play-element" I mean various symbols that are somehow associated with the sphere of chess and that appear to be transformative in relation to Luzhin's metaphysical transference from the world of matter to a higher realm of being. Such symbols, considered as the minimal units of the chess ritual, can be manifested as words and phrases, syntactic patterns and linguistic relationships, spatial units, spectrum of colors, etc. Most of them are related to the image of the protagonist, but they also serve as the author's means of inducting the reader into the fictional world of his novel.

A Reconstruction of the Play-Element

It comes as no surprise that chess in *The Defense* stands out as both a configuration of the novel's structure and the structure of its figurativeness. Luzhin's inability to distinguish between the spheres of life and play is inscribed in the very text of Nabokov's novel: the protagonist's withdrawal into uniplanar behavior is engraved on his speech pattern. Incapable of coping with life *in praesentia* and having resolved to commit suicide by throwing himself out of the window, Luzhin resorts to chess terms to formulate his earnest intention. Chess terms, on the whole, seem to be the only way in which he can speak or think. In other words, the trajectory of Luzhin's thought and his way of verbal expression is entirely motivated by chess logic:

"The only way out," he said. "I have to drop out of the game." (D 52)

The interference of the spheres of life and play is communicated to the reader by means of a linguistic substitution: in the above sentence, the idiomatic "way out" is to be perceived literally ("out of the window"), while the literal "to drop out of the game" reveals a metaphoric implication ("to commit suicide"). Not surprisingly, such linguistic interplay proves to be parallel to the play model in general, where "each element and the model as a whole are themselves, but not only themselves" (Lotman 64). The play-element inscribed in the

text puzzles and enchants the reader. At the same time, it serves as an impulse for the reader to decipher Nabokov's linguistic pattern.

On the lexical level, the seepage between the spheres of life and play reveals a semantic shift of a dual origin: while the play-element communicated by the primary narrator tends to *actualize the multiple semantics* of a word with more than one lexical meaning, the play-element inscribed in the speech pattern of the protagonist tends to *narrow the lexical meaning* of a polysemantic word by constraining it solely to the sphere of game. This, of course, is especially evident when the word in question relates to both spheres. In the following example, the Russian word *zevok* (yawn) is used to refer to the boredom of Luzhin's father as he plays chess:

... все эти случайные партии, полные зевков и бесплодных раздумий, были для него небрежным отдохновением или просто способом пристойно молчать в обществе человека, с которым беседа не клеится, - короткие, незамысловатые партии, не отмеченные ни самолюбием, ни вдохновением, и которые он всегда одинаково начинал, мало обращая внимания на ходы противника (emphasis added). (*Zashchita Luzhina* 34)⁶

While the Russian *zevok* in the common use of the word literally means "a yawn," its chess meaning suggests "an oversight" ("losing a piece by accident"). Communicated by the primary narrator, the play-element in the above example actualizes both meanings: Luzhin's father both "yawns" and "loses his chess pieces" (perhaps, simultaneously). Thus, chess terminology and everyday language are intertwined; the boundaries between the spheres of life and game are obliterated.

Another example of actualizing such lexical ambivalence is Nabokov's use of the word "combination" (which in the novel's context refers to both the spheres of life and play). In the following passage, this word denotes a group of people and, at the same time, a certain pattern of chess moves:

Once the visitors began to come, appearing every evening now in various combinations, Luzhin was unable to be alone with his fiancée for a single moment and his struggle with them, his efforts to penetrate through the thick of them to her, immediately took on a tinge of chess. (*D* 130)

Any contact with outside reality spurs Luzhin to retreat into his inner world, which is entirely associated with chess. Even the image of Luzhin's fiancée appears to be reduced to the sphere of game, since he has to cope with the "combination of visitors" in order to approach her. Once the word "combination" is used in one of its meanings ("a group of people"), its other, specific meaning ("a pattern of moves") is immediately brought forth, thereby tinting the narrative with a chess context and, again, obliterating the boundaries between life and game.

In the above examples, Nabokov broadens the semantic field of such words as *zovok* and "combination:" they bridge the spheres of life and game, enriching the text with additional connotations. However, the meaning of polysemantic words is narrowed, when such a word is uttered by the novel's protagonist. Unable to differentiate between the spheres of life and game, Luzhin tends to identify general vocabulary with chess terminology. For instance, when he hears his wife pronouncing the word "play" (which generally denotes *any* kind of playing, including acting, i.e. role-play), he immediately associates this word with chess, showing no awareness of any other contexts in which it could also be used.⁷ In the following passage, Luzhin comments on a chess episode from the film that he and his wife saw the day before:

And the following day over morning coffee he leaned an elbow on the table and said thoughtfully: 'Very, very good – that picture.' He thought a bit more and added: 'But they don't know how to play.' 'What do you mean, they don't know?' said his wife with surprise. 'They were first-class actors'. (D 192)

The semantic field of the verb 'to play' is confined to the sphere of chess, which, in Luzhin's mind, is exclusive of any other spheres or contexts.⁸ Although Luzhin's speech does not reveal any obvious communication failure and, on the whole, is grammatically correct, the linguistic context of whatever he hears or speaks—reduced, as it were, to the sphere of chess—is too narrow for an adequate communication (dialogue) to be performed. Thus, on the lexical level, Luzhin's withdrawal from the sphere of life into the sphere of game is reflected in his *deactualizing* the "non-game" meaning(s) of the vocabulary that is normally applicable to both spheres.

The seepage between the spheres of life and play is also reflected on the syntactical level. Separate sentences may resemble

moves of a chess game. In the following passage, Mrs. Luzhin is trying to divert her husband's attention from the sphere of chess back to the world of real-life events described in the newspaper. However, her efforts remain futile, as Luzhin ceases to react to anything that does not relate to chess world. The pattern of phrases he mutters to himself while trying to untangle a certain chess combination is entirely disengaged from what his wife is trying to communicate to him. The elliptical sentences in the passage resemble the moves of two either unconscious or utterly inexperienced chess players. The lack of logical linkage between the phrases produced by Luzhin and his wife reveals a communication failure, which in Nabokov's novel symbolizes the precipice separating Luzhin from real life:

[PLAYER 1] “...The whole activity comes down to a fundamental transformation and augmentation, which are designed to insure...’ read his wife in an even voice.

[PLAYER 2] (An interesting construction, thought Luzhin. Black's Queen is completely free.)

[P 1] ‘... draws a clear distinction between their vital interests, moreover it would not be superfluous to note that the Achilles heel of this punitive hand...’

[P 2] (Black has an obvious defense against the threat on h7, thought Luzhin....)

[P 1] ‘If in this respect,’ she continued, ‘nothing is respected...’

[P 2] (‘Oh, splendid!’ Exclaimed Luzhin mentally, finding the key to the problem – a bewitchingly elegant sacrifice.)

[P 1] ‘...and disaster is not far away,’ his wife concluded the article, and having finished, sighed.” (*D* 223-224)

Such syntactical contrast is supported by the opposition of black and white colors. In *The Defense*, the black-and-white color pattern is, of course, reflective of the thematic seepage between the spheres of life and chess. The spectrum of colors often remains black and white even when it does not directly relate to chess sphere: a child in a white nightshirt is playing the black piano (*D* 25); Luzhin's recollection of his school years is invoked by the image of white numerals on the blackboard (*D* 29), etc. However, it is most natural that in *The Defense* the black-and-white color pattern pertains to chess: Luzhin's hallucination is represented by the "evil differentiation of shadows" that he sees on the floor of his room (*D* 127); this "differentiation" immediately evokes in Luzhin an association with a chess combination (*D* 127-128).

Further, in addition to the black-and-white pattern of colors, chess imagery in *The Defense* is just as vividly embodied in a series of square-shaped figures (often of a black-and-white color): Luzhin sees dark squares showing through a white tablecloth (*D* 123); the black squares of a taxi remind him of a chessboard (*D* 147), etc. The most significant in the novel's square-shape pattern is the recurring image of a window, a symbol of both separate squares of a chessboard and the chessboard itself: it is through an open window that Luzhin's wife for the first time sees her future husband bent over the square of an empty chessboard; it is also through a windowpane that the apartment is illuminated with daylight or, conversely, overcast with night darkness; Luzhin's own shadow on the floor of his room is caught by the square of moonlight (*D* 117). Finally, Luzhin commits suicide ("drops out of the game") by throwing himself out of the window. Below he sees death as a fatal combination "spread out before him" in the form of "dark and pale squares:"

Before letting go he looked down. Some kind of hasty preparations were under way there: the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him. (*D* 255-256)

Given the fact that chess symbolism in *The Defense* has a broader application than merely denoting landmarks of the protago-

nist's career as a chess player, Luzhin's dropping out of the window (*zavetnyi kvadrat*) is not only an evidence of his madness (caused by his inability to distinguish between life and game), but, above all, it is also his final step ("move") towards the higher realm of being that he had long sought in the sphere of chess. According to Vladimir Alexandrov, this last image of a window "is usually read as the final instance of Luzhin's deluded projection of chess-related images onto the world around him. But because there is much evidence in the novel implying that Nabokov transvalued earthly madness into otherworldly sense, it may also be argued that the chessboard pattern he briefly glimpses is in fact the image of the true eternity that awaits him" (Alexandrov 87).

Another motif, which is also closely related in the novel to the theme of chess, is music. Like chess, music belongs to the broader sphere of play, perhaps representing its most celestial and abstract variety. According to Huizinga, music reveals all the formal characteristics of play proper: "The activity begins and ends within strict limits of time and place, is repeatable, consists essentially in order, rhythm, alternation, transports audience and performers alike out of 'ordinary' life into a sphere of gladness and serenity, which makes even sad music a lofty pleasure" (Huizinga 42).⁹ It is worth mentioning, along these lines, that the initiation of young Luzhin to the world of chess stems from his childhood encounter with a musician, whom his father invited to a musical evening held in their apartment.¹⁰ Musical art and the musician's passion for chess results in the fact that for him chess transcends the sphere of mere play and enters the sphere of art: "'What a game, what a game,' said the violinist, tenderly closing the box. 'Combinations like melodies. You know, I can simply hear the moves' " (D 43). After his accidental encounter with the musician, young Luzhin starts to regard chess not so much as a game of skill but rather as a form of art.

Throughout his depiction of Luzhin's fatal match with Turati, Nabokov resorts to a series of musical tropes. The mild opening of the game is compared to an orchestration of "muted violins;" a sudden turn in the game is allegorized as a "tender singing of a chord;" Luzhin's thinking of a possible combination is described as a "trace of melody;" a lull in the game is referred to as silence—again, the actual realization of a chess stratagem is communicated as "a swift combination of sounds;" chess moves are generally referred to as "sounds," while the most significant ones are formulated as a "chime of a deep

dark note;" the interplay of the weightiest pieces resounds as "trumpet voices;" Luzhin's "bewitching, brittle, crystalline combination" is "disintegrated (*rasyypalas' s legkim zvonom*) at Turati's first reply;" "a kind of musical tempest" engulfs the chessboard as soon as Turati launches the combination. This prompts Luzhin to search for "the tiny, clear note that he needed in order in his turn to swell it out into a thunderous harmony;" and, again, after a short retreat, the game assumes "*agitato*" (*D* 136-138; *Zashchita* 78- 81).

Musical orchestration of the chess theme in *The Defense* intensifies the functioning of the play-element. Nabokov's use of musical tropes further emphasizes the metaphysical nature of chess. Based on the fact that Luzhin's initiation into chess had happened via his encounter with a musician, one could even argue that his chess muse descends from the realm of music (derived from the Greek "*Mousa*," the words "muse" and "music" are etymologically related).

Moreover, while in a real game of chess one is compelled to deal with material signs (such as chess pieces, chessboard, etc.), "musical forms," according to Huizinga, "are determined by values which transcend logical ideas, which even transcend our ideas of the visible and the tangible" (158). Apparently, this well explains Luzhin's predisposition to playing blind: doing without the "real-life factor," music reminds him of playing a blind game of chess. Or, vice versa, he is predisposed to play blind because his chess experience reveals a musical origin.

Conclusion

As the examples show, a wide range of elaborate patterns and applications of the play-element in Nabokov's novel sustain the theme of the protagonist's withdrawal ("dropping out") from the sphere of life into the sphere of play. Yet the very notion of play exists only as long as a firm distinction between play and non-play can be drawn. Therefore, as Luzhin is utterly unable to distinguish between play and non-play, for him the notion of play ceases to exist. In Luzhin's world, play is a substitute for reality, whereas to remain such, play must resemble reality and at the same time be different from it. It is "play with its biplanar behavior," writes Lotman, that makes it "possible for a man to enter into situations that are beyond his reach in real life, and thus it is play that permits a man to discover his true essence" (63). Although Nabokov's protagonist is engaged in play throughout the novel, he never manages to discover his true essence

until, perhaps, the very last moment of his physical existence allegorically referred to as “dropping out of the game.” This moment, upon first sight, may seem to be a marker of Luzhin’s earthly madness but, given Nabokov’s metaphysical treatment of play, is in fact his long-awaited passage from the world of physical matter into the sublime realm of “pure game,” where the balance between the “practical” and the “conventional” types of behavior no longer must be maintained and where Luzhin’s true essence is finally realized. Arguably, Luzhin’s “dropping out” into the otherworldly state of existence plays the role of a sacred communion to the supernatural spheres, in which case his previous dramatic career as a chess player is to be interpreted as a prolonged ritual of a symbolic value.

In Nabokov’s novel, this metaphysical transformation is carried out through the agency of the play-element, which functions as the main trope of the text and is manifested on its different levels, including phraseology, vocabulary and syntax. The play-element is also sustained in the deliberate patterns of shape and color, as well as in the side-motif of music. Such functioning of the play-element in Nabokov’s text inveigles the reader in a game mode, as s/he is compelled to resort to his/her own imagination, creative abilities and background knowledge in order to decipher the author’s linguistic “moves.”

With that in mind, the process of reading Nabokov’s novel is carried out largely at the expense of the novel’s protagonist: the more Luzhin’s self is disintegrated in the text’s overall play-pattern, the more self-conscious and “skillful” the reader becomes. It is also at the expense of the protagonist that the reader “discovers his true essence” by projecting his own “self” onto the fictional world of the novel. Thus, the play-element in *The Defense* is brought into function on the level of text-mediated relationship between the author and the reader. Some of the aspects of this relationship also reveal a ritual-like dimension: following the novel’s play-pattern, which operates with chess symbols that mark Luzhin’s metaphysical transcendence, the reader acquires the knowledge not only of the protagonist’s story but also of the sphere of chess in general, but because this sphere is essentially ritualized, this knowledge makes possible a specific experience that the reader “lives out” as s/he reads Nabokov’s novel. And yet, the reading process itself is similar to playing a game: the reader assumes a biplanar behavior of enthusiastic confidence and self-conscious distrust, which is parallel to the simultaneous realization of the

“practical” and the “conventional” types of behavior in the game model. This conventional mode of the reader’s behavior is to remain “switched on” throughout the process of his reading Nabokov’s novel, in which the play-content and the play-structure reveal an isomorphic relationship.

Notes

1. Compare the initiation of Nabokov’s protagonist, Grandmaster Luzhin, to the unchangeable convention of chess rules: “‘First let’s place the pieces correctly,’ began his aunt with a sigh. ‘White here, black over there. King and Queen next to each other. These here are the Officers. These are Horses. And these, at each corner, are the Cannons’ ‘This is called a Pawn. Now watch how they all move. The Horse gallops, of course.’ ... ‘The Queen is the most mobile,’ he said with satisfaction and adjusted the piece with his finger, since it was standing not quite in the center of the square. ‘And this is how one piece eats another,’ said his aunt. ‘As if pushing it out and taking its place. The Pawns do this obliquely. When you can take the King but he can move out of the way, it’s called check; and when he’s got nowhere to go it’s mate. So your object is to take my King and I have to take yours. You see how long it takes to explain’” (D 45-46).
2. Bell further mentions that “the ritualism of sports derives from the importance of the more encompassing sets of rules that define and regulate the activity. These rules constrain the contenders and force them to follow very controlled patterns of interaction. ... Rule-governance, as either a feature of many diverse activities or a strategy of ritualization itself, also suggests that we tend to think of ritual in terms of formulated norms imposed on the chaos of human action and interaction” (154-55)
3. “He [Luzhin] began to think ... that the combination was even more complex than he had at first thought ... and that it was necessary to *return and replay all the moves of his life* from his illness until the ball” (emphasis added) (D 200-201).
4. Had the novel’s original Russian title—*Защита Лужина*—been rendered literally (as “The Luzhin Defense” or, possibly, “The Defense of Luzhin”), it would have produced an oxymoronic resounding: “The [Losing] Defense” or, worse, “The Defense of [Losing].” Respectively, the protagonist’s suicide in the end of the novel is referred to as a *self-mate*.
5. Whatever is inaccessible to Luzhin in real life is fully available to him in the world of the chess. He perceives the game as a “safe zone,” while the chessboard becomes the only “area” where his self-actualization and self-assertion can take place: “Real life, chess life, was orderly, clear-cut, and rich in adventure, and Luzhin noted with pride how easy it was for

- him to reign in this life, and the way everything obeyed his will and bowed to his schemes” (D 134).
6. “...and all these chance games, full of oversights and sterile meditations, were for him little more than a moment of relaxation or simply a means of decently preserving silence in the company of a person with whom conversations kept petering out – brief, uncomplicated games, remarkable neither for ambition nor inspiration, which he always began in the same way, paying little attention to his adversary’s moves” (D 64).
 7. The semantic field of the verb “to play” encompasses a wide range of such specific meanings as “to engage in sport or diversion,” “to amuse oneself,” “to take part in game of chance (to gamble) or skill,” “to act/ behave without seriousness or in a certain specific manner (lightly, insincerely),” “to perform on a musical instrument (to produce musical sounds),” “to act/perform on stage,” etc.
 8. The same verb “to play” is also used to create the effect of confusion of game and life on the idiomatic level: “ ‘Ваша фамилия – Лужин?’ – с любопытством спросил господин. ‘Да-да, - сказал Лужин, - но это не *играет* значения’ ” (emphasis added) (*Zashchita Luzhina* 116). This pattern of Luzhin’s answer reveals a contamination of two synonymous phraseological expressions “иметь значение” (to have significance) and “играть роль” (to play a role). The idiomatic interplay is lost in the English translation: “ ‘Is your name Luzhin?’ asked the gentleman curiously. ‘Yes, yes,’ said Luzhin, ‘but it’s of no importance’ ” (D 197).
 9. Huizinga emphasizes the etymological cognation of music and play: “The English ‘play,’ ‘to play’ is very remarkable from a semantic point of view. Etymologically the word comes from the Anglo-Saxon *plega*, *plegan* meaning primarily ‘play’ or ‘to play,’ but also ... ‘playing on a musical instrument’ ” (38).
 10. Only in April, during the Easter holidays, did that inevitable day come for Luzhin when the whole world suddenly went dark, as if someone had thrown a switch, and in the darkness only one thing remained brilliantly lit, a newborn wonder, a dazzling islet on which his whole life was destined to be concentrated” (D 39).

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