

Title: The Bastard Sign, *or*, What is Plato Doing in *Bend Sinister*?

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Critics have long recognized *Bend Sinister* as one of Nabokov's most challenging novels—even if it tends not to occupy pride of place in general studies of his oeuvre—and most would agree that the opening of its seventh chapter, which revolves around questions of translation and authorship in Shakespeare, is probably one of the most involved and allusive passages to be found in the entire work, if not in all of his prose. Annotators such as Bowie, Boyd, and Zimmer have tracked down many of its myriad subtexts, but there is one that has yet to be noted: Plato's *Phaedrus*, specifically, its apparent indictment of writing as such. Far from simply constituting a marginal addition to commentary on the novel however, noting this subtext sends a ripple running across one's understanding of it: not least, it offers a clue to the identity of the "distortion in the mirror of being" which Nabokov later claimed the novel's title was meant to suggest, for if we accept what Socrates says in *Phaedrus*, that the written word always needs its father to speak for it, then a novel written under the sign of bastardy would seem to be acknowledging something that its critics still have not. The distortion in question is not solely attributable to a totalitarian political order that would stand opposed to the freedom of "infinite consciousness," but also to the medium in which this consciousness might be recorded: writing.

In addition to prompting a new reading of *Bend Sinister*, the *Phaedrus* subtext also poses a question that cuts across Nabokov's Russian and American fiction as a whole: namely, is an art that sanctifies memory and hints at intuitions of an immaterial, transcendental realm entirely at one with an art that valorizes writing as an end in itself?