

Nostalgia and the Bilingual World of Vladimir Nabokov

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To *Natalya*

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“How would you say ‘delightful talk’ in Russian?”

“How would you say ‘good night’?”

Oh, that would be:

Bezónnitza, tvoy vzor oonýl i stráshen;

lubóv moyá, otstóopnika prostée.¹ /

(Insomnia, your stare is dull and ashen,
my love, forgive me this apostasy.)

An Evening of Russian Poetry

(Poems and Problems 162-163)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky believed that “universal responsiveness”, or an “ability for complete reincarnation into the character of another nation”, is a principal national feature of the Russian character. Even having this in mind it is difficult not to be amazed by the phenomenon of the writer Vladimir Nabokov, who was a famous master of style in the literatures of two different languages: Russian and English. There were (and there are!) many Russian writers who lived and worked successfully among the people of other nations, who had their writings translated into other languages, and whose books were popular among the people of different national cultures. There were also few foreign-born people who received recognition for their artistic English writings. Probably because of his Slavic background, Nabokov was frequently compared with Joseph Conrad, whose native language was Polish and who became a famous British novelist. Nabokov himself, however, loved to say that he “differed from Joseph Conradically” because, in particular, Conrad “had not been writing in his native tongue before he became an English writer” (Strong Opinions 57). It is an important aspect of Nabokov’s art, that he existed as a writer parallel and, to some extent, even separately for Russian and American people. While the American Heritage Dictionary perceives Nabokov as a “Russian-born American writer of poetry, short stories, and novels, most notably the satirical Lolita, ” and ignores completely the fact that Nabokov was a Russian writer to the same degree as he was an American one, Ellendea Proffer concluded after her meetings with “Moscow and Leningrad intellectuals” that some Nabokov’s admirers read only his Russian novels and “do not know that Nabokov has written in English”

(253, 257). This dual bilingual existence of Nabokov as a writer was brought into being by the personal condition of exile which became usual for Nabokov since he was eighteen years old.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the exilic situation had actually formed the artistic world of Nabokov and that this world was then tremendously enriched by the *bilingual* existence of its owner. To achieve our goal we are going first to gather some important for our purpose biographical information on Nabokov, then to elaborate on the central role which the conception of exile played in Nabokov's works, and finally we will compare and contrast Nabokov himself with the protagonist of his novel Pnin to gain the insight into Nabokov's perception of the life in exile.

* * *

On certain nights as soon as I lie down
my bed starts drifting into Russia,
and presently I'm led to a ravine,
to a ravine led to be killed.

.....
The watch's ticking comes in contact
with frozen consciousness;
the fortunate protection
of my exile I repossess.

But how you would have wished, my heart,
that *thus* it all had really been:
Russia, the stars, the night of execution
and full of racemosas the ravine!

The Execution, Berlin, 1927
(Poems and Problems 47)

Vladimir Nabokov was born in a noble Russian family of St. Petersburg in 1899. According to Nabokov family legend, "their line began with a fourteenth-century Tatar prince, Nabok Murza" (Boyd 16). Nabokov's father was "a distinguished Russian jurist who would become cabinet secretary for the Provisional Government formed after the February Revolution of 1917" (Benet's 747). He was arrested soon after the Bolshevik coup, and he would be definitely shot, just as many other aristocrats were, but he miraculously escaped. Describing this incident, Nabokov wrote, "in those days the chaos of orders and counterorders sometimes took

our side: my father followed a dim corridor, saw an open door at the end, walked out into a side street and made his way to the Crimea with a knapsack he had ordered his valet Osip to bring him to a secluded corner” (Congeries 50). Other Nabokovs followed the father. They stayed in Crimea till 1919, when they had to escape by sea to Germany, because the Red Army seized the peninsula.

While his family lived in Berlin, Nabokov went to England in 1919 and returned back to Germany in 1922 with an honors degree in French and Russian from Trinity College. At that time, Berlin and Paris were the two major enclaves of Russian emigrants, and Nabokov’s social life was very intensive. He was rather hard up, and made living by giving tennis and English lessons. It was the time when he started to consider his literary work, which he had been doing since he was seventeen years old, as a possible source of income. Nabokov’s first novel Mashenka was written in Berlin in 1924, and it was written in Russian. Strangely, it is not quite obvious, which language was *the first* one for Nabokov. Critics’ opinions on this subject are somewhat contradictory. Page Stegner states that “in 1938 Nabokov abandoned the Russian language as his literary voice and began to write in English” (12), i.e. Stegner considers Russian to be the first language of Nabokov. However, in Benet’s we read, that in 1936 Nabokov “translated his novel Despair into English – owing to a British governess, English had been his first literary language” (747). To resolve this apparent contradiction, we can turn to Nabokov’s own opinion expressed in his Strong Opinions :

Between the ages of ten and fifteen in St.Petersburg, I must have read more fiction and poetry – English, Russian and French – than in any other five-year period of my life . . . / In other words, I was a perfectly normal trilingual child in a family with a large library (42-43).

George Steiner considered this “poly-linguistic matrix” to be “the determining fact of Nabokov’s life and art” (123) because “for the writer to become bi- or multi-lingual . . . , / genuine shifts of sensibility and personal status had to occur” (120-121). Those “shifts” had happened to Nabokov, probably, by 1938, when he wrote his first English novel, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Many years later he wrote

that because since his “earliest infancy,” he “had spoken English with the same ease as Russian,” “linguistically, though not emotionally, the transition was endurable” (Strong Opinions 190). In fact, however, at that time he was very “anxious that this first novel in English should sound neither ‘foreign’ nor read as though it had been translated into English,” (Noel 215), and this was the reason for him to ask Lucie Leon Noel to go over his manuscript.

In the late thirties Nabokov with his Jewish wife Vera (they got married in 1925) and son Dmitri (born in 1934) left Berlin for Paris, because the fascist face of Germany had become apparent by that time. In 1940, when the Nazi plague was quickly propagating over Europe, Nabokovs escaped from the Old World to America.

In the United States Nabokov was writing prolifically in English. His three novels and many stories got published and made him visible among other American authors. However, the salary he got from holding academic positions with Stanford University, Wellesley College, and, finally, Cornell University remained the major source of his income. In his academic career he started from teaching Russian Grammar in 1941 and has progressed to giving lectures on Masters of European Fiction by 1950. In his lectures he interpreted Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Joyce “with the penetration of a scholar and with the familiarity of a creator participating in others’ acts of creation” (Bishop 235). The course on European Fiction brought him real fame as a teacher: enrollment doubled up from two to four hundred students, although in early fifties most of his students didn’t have “the vaguest notion he’d written a single word of fiction” (Wetzsteon 240) ² . His students saw just the stern and deep literary critic of multilingual nature whose “first lecture on each novel consisted largely of a long list of corrections of the inevitably wretched translation” (“Turn to page 15, line eight – cross out ‘violet’ and write in ‘purple’ ”) (Wetzsteon 244) and whose students, when studying Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, had to know “not only precisely what sort of beetle Gregor turned into, but also the arrangement

of the rooms and the positions of doors in the Samsa flat” (Field, Life in Part 276). The reason for such an attention to details was that Nabokov compared a novel with a painting which one should approach “not going from left to right but taking in the whole, a simultaneous totality of experience” (Wetzsteon 243).

During his Cornell years, Nabokov wrote two novels, Lolita and Pnin, the first version of his autobiography entitled “Conclusive Evidence” at that time, and his major tribute to Russia – the annotated translations to Eugene Onegin and The Song of Igor’s Campaign (Nabokov said in his interview with Herbert Gold, “I shall be remembered by Lolita and my work on Eugene Onegin” (Strong Opinions 106)).

When Lolita got published and became a bestseller, its author became famous. Now everyone knew that he was a writer, not only a university professor. For the second time in his life, Nabokov became a rich man (the first time it happened in 1916, when he was seventeen and inherited from his uncle a country estate of two thousand acres and a fortune of roughly two million dollars, which were confiscated by Bolsheviks in 1917), so he resigned from Cornell and moved to Switzerland to devote himself entirely to writing. It was his third, the last, and this time completely voluntary exile, which lasted till the end of his life in 1977.

* * *

But to unneeded symbols consecrated,
escorted by a vaguely infantile
path for bare feet, our roads were always fated
to lead into the silence of exile.

An Evening of Russian Poetry
(Poems and Problems 161)

There is a paradox pertained to the position of a writer in exile. From one side, this position never considered as advantageous one, or, as Alfred Appel, Jr. eloquently put it, “the sorrows of exile were infinite: isolation, poverty, despair, disease, early death, suicide, or – if the émigré writer survived, languageless in some distant land – silence, obscurity, and the nightmare of nostalgia” (“Portrait”, 5). But from another side, as Michael Seidel noted in the beginning of his article

“Nabokov and the Aesthetics of American Exile”, “so many writers have gained a kind of sustenance from actual or self-imposed states of exile . . . , that experiences native to the life of the exile seem almost activated in the life of the artist” (224). And, in fact, not only *activated*, but also *activating* were they for Nabokov’s work, as Seidel demonstrated then in his article.

In 1927, on the tenth anniversary of Russian Revolution, Nabokov wrote in his article to the main Berlin *émigré* newspaper, The Rudder:

Let us not curse exile. Let us repeat in these days the words of that ancient warrior about whom Plutarch wrote: ‘During the night, in desolate fields far from Rome, I would pitch my tent, and my tent was Rome to me.’ (Field, The Life and Art 107)

Although technically this fragment represents a piece of political rhetoric (a very rare for Nabokov kind of writing, by the way), it also manifests a purely artistic idea of the imaginative recreation of the past, and emphasizes the motivation which the exile creates for an artist. A writer becomes obsessed with the past, and this obsession is a creative force, or as Seidel specified this, “ exile contributes to the obsessive release of memory, to the induced and sometimes fruitful states of paranoia that engender literally plots, to the condition where the prospect of remove contours the historical or aesthetic shape of home” (224). This mechanism is intrinsic to Nabokov’s art. To prove this we can turn to Nabokov himself who wrote:

I think it is all matter of love: the more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it is. I think it’s natural that I have a more passionate affection for my old memories, the memories of my childhood, than I have for later ones, so that Cambridge in England or Cambridge in New England is less vivid in my mind and in my self than some kind of nook in the park on our country estate in Russia. . . . / I do feel Russian and I think that my Russian works, the various novels and poems and short stories that I have written during these years , are a kind of tribute to Russia. And I might define them as the waves and ripples of the shock caused by the disappearance of the Russia of my childhood (Strong Opinions 12-13).

The reversed side of Nabokov’s exile is the bilinguality of his art. Despite his mentioned above English fluency, it was not easy for him to reach his famous quality of English writing. Even in his article “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”, being already recognized for his outstanding English tongue, he complained, “My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon

my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English” (Lolita 315). Brian Boyd, however, remarked that, although for Nabokov the transition from Russian to English in the art “was agony, but without it he would never have written Lolita and in all probability would have remained almost unknown beyond the Russian emigration for at least another generation” (6).

The American prose of Nabokov was enriched by its multitude of obvious or hidden literary allusions of a Russian breed, and we meet both types of allusions in Pnin. We hear how Timofey Pnin interprets Pushkin’s lines in context of the everyday life and events on the campus of Waindell College and appreciate the interplay of Russian senses and constructions in his heavily accented English speech. An example of a less obvious allusion is that Pnin’s ex-wife has the same name as “the heroine of Karamzin’s famous eighteenth-century sentimental tale, Poor Lisa, and so, when the narrator exclaims: ‘Poor Lisa!’ he is indulging in a joke at the expense of his English readers” (Field, Life and Art 295). Another, even deeper hidden allusion cited by Field is that Pnin’s very name “was taken from the name of the late eighteenth century Russian poet Ivan Pnin” whose most famous work was The Wail of Innocence, while Nabokov’s hero often “wails” and is always innocent (*ibid.*).

The condition of exile influences the work of a writer in many different ways. One of them, less obvious than the direct use of pre-exilic experiences and associations, is that, according to Seidel, “expulsion literally becomes the motive force in fables where exiles from one place are founding figures for another, where the blighted, ill-fated, or luckless from one sphere become originators or instigators in another” (226), so “dispossession becomes destiny, and myths of expulsion weave into myths of resettlement” (227). Nabokov’s novel Pnin provides an excellent example of such *underlying* exilic idea. However, not only Pnin, but, as Stegner notes, almost all Nabokov’s heroes are “homeless wanderers, forced by real or self-imposed

exile to replace their terrestrial roots with various forms of distracting obsessions” (11). An obsession can happen to be either Russian literature, as for Pnin, or chess, as for Luzhin (The Defense), or nymphets, as for Humbert Humbert, but in all cases it enables its carrier, through an absorption with the aesthetics of his infatuation, “to escape the difficulties and suffering in part produced by a vagrant existence” (*ibid.*).

Now we shall consider in longer detail Nabokov’s only hero sharing the main infatuation of Nabokov himself, namely, that of Russian language and literature.

* * *

Advice to a young writer

If possible, be Russian. And live in another country. . . . Be an active trader between languages. Carry precious metals from one to the other. . . . Use unlikely materials. Who would choose Pnin as hero, but how did we live before Pnin? . . . Honor the working day. Sit at your desk. Not all of this is possible for you. But it is possible for Vladimir N., perched on his hill in Switzerland.

Irwin Shaw. The tribute to TriQuarterly volume dedicated to Nabokov on the occasion of his seventieth birthday.

Stegner called Pnin “the most straightforward of Nabokov’s works” (16), and, according to Appel (“Portrait” 12), it is the only novel of Nabokov bearing the disclaimer “All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental” because many details in it “happen to be drawn from ‘real life’ in the academy.” The hero of this novel was called “the most charming of Nabokov’s heroes” by Lawrence Lee (124) and “one of the few characters in Nabokov’s novels who evoke a real compassion in the reader” by Stegner (16).

As it is usual for Nabokov, the novel was designed in remarkable and exciting style. Its hero, Timofey Pnin, was born in a good family in Russia, went to exile into Western Europe after Revolution, lived in Paris among Russian intellectuals, did some research in Russian literature, came to America in 1940. At the time we meet him in the novel, he is teaching Russian in Waindell College and writing a

book, “a *Petite Histoire* of Russian culture,” how he calls it (76). The story is told to us by “I”, the narrator who is, in short, Nabokov, although “the narrator is not the actual Nabokov who wrote the book, he is that character, the author who tells the story, whom Nabokov sometimes impersonates” (Lee 126). As Field explains it, the narrator has two voices, and the one of them “collects and relates all the hilarious misadventures” (294) of generally unsuccessful and unhappy Pnin, but the other one is serious, and it tells us a story about a man who always keeps his “integrity which in the end is his dignity” (Lee 128). This contrast in meaning between two voices can be symbolized by the Nabokov’s description of Pnin’s languages: “If his Russian was music, his English was murder” (66). Nabokov writes that “the special danger area in Pnin’s case was the English language,” because even after many years of studying English and ten years of life in America his English was “full of flaws” (14). And language was not the only problem, because, in general, Pnin was badly accustomed to the life in “unpredictable America,” where he had “a constant war with insensate objects that fell apart, or attacked him, or viciously got themselves lost as soon as they entered the sphere of his existence” (13). And still, such things are not the worst attributes of Pnin’s life. What makes it really horrible is that Pnin is “the victim of *real* exile, a *complete* loss of home and cultural ties, a *total* absence of love; / and the monsters that must inhabit his dreams are not projections of self, but very real Bolshevik and Nazi torturers” (Stegner 18-19).

Nabokov and Pnin have many common features: they both emigrated from Russia, both experienced “double” exile, first from Bolsheviks, then from Nazi, both are Professors of Literature, both are obsessed with Russian culture: Pushkin, “Anna Karenina,” Gogol.

Pnin was “utterly helpless without the prepared text” (15) when delivering a lecture, and Nabokov admitted “I speak like a child” and recognized in his Foreword to Strong Opinions that during his academic career he has “never delivered . . . one scrap of information not prepared in typescript beforehand.” Pnin, doing

his study in the history of Russian culture, was happy to see how his “index cards were gradually loading a shoe box with their compact weight” (143), and Nabokov, speaking about his work on the notes on Eugene Onegin, showed to an interviewer, with obvious proud, the index which “runs to 5,000 cards in three long shoe boxes” (Strong Opinions 38) But here comes the difference. Nabokov did accomplish his work on Eugene Onegin, but Pnin will never finish his book. Nabokov, a famous teacher, with slight contempt describes Pnin’s “amateurish” and pedagogically inefficient seminars.

There is one more important point of similarity between Nabokov and Pnin. We learn about it when Pnin visits the villa of his friend where surroundings remind him of Mira Belochkin, a Jewish girl he was in love with before Revolution, back in Russia. This girl died in a Nazi concentration camp, and since that time, as we are getting to know, “much of Pnin’s / past is largely forbidden territory for him” (Field, Life and Art 294-295). The passage in the novel which deals with Pnin’s feelings toward Mira’s death is, to my opinion, the strongest one:

Only in the detachment of an incurable complaint, in the sanity of near death, could one cope with this for a moment. In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin . . . , / because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol, into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past (134-135).

We have to remind at this point that the reflections like those cited above were probably very familiar to Nabokov himself who in the late thirties during the few years was very concerned about the possible future of his Jewish wife. Moreover, Nabokov’s brother died in German concentration camp in 1945, and Nabokov’s father was shot at a political meeting in Berlin in 1922, as he was shielding a speaker, his friend Professor Milyukov, from Russian monarchist assassin, who then became the chief of the Gestapo’s *émigré* section in Hitler years (Appel, “Portrait” 5). Field provides the evidence that during long time Nabokov could not use his memory

about his father and brother, so that the first edition of his autobiography lacked almost any information about them. He, however, managed to overcome this, so that few pages about them were included into the second edition. Thus, again Nabokov proved to be stronger than Pnin.

I believe that Nabokov created Pnin as *an unfortunate copy* of himself, to analyze what would happen *in exile* to a man with a personality similar to his own, but lacking his talent, his brightness, his education, his luck, and “his overwhelming desire to excel” (Congeries). We will not try to study Pnin’s weaknesses in order to specify a particular culprit of his general failure in life, because such an attempt wouldn’t probably be encouraged by Nabokov himself who strongly negated a didactic function of literature,³ but what we believe the novel clearly shows is that a man with a Pnin-like heart and principles deserves sympathy and respect even if he didn’t accomplish much in his life.

Notes

¹ Nabokov translated these two lines of Russian into the two following English lines in brackets fully preserving rhythm and rhyme.

²Ross Wetzsteon wrote, “those of us who took his courses in the early ’50’s didn’t have the vaguest notion he’d written a single word of fiction” (241), and Alfred Appel, Jr. wrote in his “Backgrounds of *Lolita*”:

I was Nabokov’s student at Cornell in 1953-54, at a time when most undergraduates did not know that he was a writer (18).

Appel himself, however, knew “all of Nabokov’s works in English (and had searched through out-of-print stores to buy each of them)” (*ibid.*).

³ Nabokov wrote in his Strong Opinions: Ellendea Proffer’s report on my Russian readers is both heartening and sad. “All Soviet age groups,” she observes, “tend to feel that literature has a didactic function.” This marks a kind of dead end, despite a new generation of talented people. “*Zhalkiy udel* (piteous fate),” as the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* says *á propos de bottes* (March 4, 1970).

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