

THE 'OTHER SHORES' OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV  
(1899-1977)

*Maria Lobytsyna*

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This paper focuses on the characteristically Nabokovian *persona* of the intellectual taken in the 'storm of history', a storm of history from which the 'Word', the artist's gift of literary metamorphoses, serves as a means of escape and salvation.

Tuned to *gaudeamus igitur* rather than to *memento mori*, the French writer Stendhal composed a self-epitaph designed to convey the essence of the writer's life: *lived, loved, wrote*.<sup>1</sup> Stendal's Romantic memento creates a striking opposition to Nabokov's tombstone that simply says *Vladimir Nabokov écrivain 1899-1977*.<sup>2</sup>

In line with the destructive rhythm of the period of which Nabokov himself was an inscription, the Romantic mandates to 'live' and 'love' are missing, and writing becomes a sole proof of this human's existence. Writing, indeed, becomes proof of his having not so much lived, as survived by his wits.

The significance of Nabokov's reticent inscription does not end there, however. Sadly, or, if you will, fittingly, Nabokov's epitaph: *écrivain* indicates an aspect that Stendhal probably would never have understood: the loss of the mother tongue for the sake of Art. The events, first,

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<sup>1</sup> Stendhal's self-epitaph was in Italian: 'visse, scrisse, amò'. See Volpert, L. I., *Pushkin i Frantsuzskaia Literatura*, Moskva, Nauka, 1998, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Wood, Michael, *The Magician's Doubts. Nabokov At the Risks Of Fiction*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1994, p. 3.

of the First World War and then of the Russian revolution led to a multilingual personification for Nabokov. Born in Russia and educated in England, he embarked on a literary career in Germany, found shelter in America, and was subsequently buried in Switzerland, where he was commemorated by an epitaph in the language of Russian aristocratic circles that he had belonged to as a child.

Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg in 1899 and died in Montreux, Switzerland in 1977. Having fled Russia to Germany in 1917, Nabokov spent fifteen years in Berlin leaving it on the eve of the Nazi terror in 1937. Paris was occupied by the Nazis one week after the Nabokovs left it by the last ship in 1940. With changes of place went changes of social persona: from a privileged Cambridge student and a flamboyant Berlin writer enjoying his first success to a poor artist in Paris; from a casual lecturer in America, moving with his family from the home of one professor on sabbatical to another, to the famous author who left the American Paradise in favour of a small, antiquated place in Switzerland.<sup>3</sup>

In the end, however, Nabokov did manage a solution to his problem: by rejecting the limitations of time and reviving the mythological image of the imperial Russia conjured in his fiction, he could imagine Montreux to be his St. Petersburg's mansion. Nabokov's rejection of America and return to Europe throws light on 'grimaces of history' that have proved characteristic of the lives of twentieth century intellectuals: its enlightened migrations and loss of 'a sense of place'; its more or less explicit nostalgias and its search for a new cultural ego.

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<sup>3</sup> For a long discussion of Nabokov's biography, see Boyd, Bryan, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, c. 1990 and *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, c. 1991.

Nabokov's American *ego* proved to be a success: yet this academic and literary success was of a bitter nature. Nabokov embarked on his last journey to Switzerland soon after he had established both his literary and financial independency: a kind of reputation that an exile could only dream of. Yet he appeared to be more sarcastic as the years passed, sealing his American fame. Nabokov responded, for example, to his fellow Russian nobleman in exile, Halfter (who earned his bread as an engineer), that he had written *Lolita* for money.<sup>4</sup>

His academic career, at first glance, was also a success. Nabokov taught at Wesley, Harvard, Cornell, developing, as he put it, describing his weight as well as his status, from lean lecturer to full professor.<sup>5</sup> But Nabokov's life was a 'torture', as he confessed, for he had made a painful decision to stop writing in Russian as soon as he moved to America. He wrote ten of his novels in Russian while he was living in Germany in the 1920s-1930s. Following his move to America he would write in English: *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita* and *Pnin*, and a translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. After his retirement from Cornell in 1959 and his move to Switzerland in 1961, he translated his Russian novels, completed *Pale Fire* (1962), and wrote *Transparent Things* (1972), *Look at The Harlequins* (1974) and *Ada* (1969), the latter estimated by Michael Wood as 'the long novel about the possibility of happiness'.<sup>6</sup>

Nabokov's works weave the subtlest of webs out of truth and fiction, with historical reminiscences that derive from his wanderings through Europe reticulated throughout with mythological fantasies. The mythological aspects elaborate Nabokov's vision of the twentieth century as a period

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by Nikolai Dmitrievich Halfter who now lives in Perth, Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, *Strong Opinions*, New York, Vintage, 1990, p. xv.

<sup>6</sup> Wood, Michael, *The Magician's Doubts. Nabokov At the Risks Of Fiction*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1994, p. 3.

embodying human loneliness and create an ambiguous, an *uncanny* picture of the world – the sort of uncanniness captured in the title of his novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959). Nabokov's universe, in other words, is poised between the earthly world and another or outer world – ‘the other shores’ – as he called it in the Russian title of his fictional memoirs. *The Other Shores* (1966) is a title of the Russian version of his memoirs, while the English is *Speak, Memory* (1951).

The paradox is that, in terms of his own life, the ‘other shores’ of an imagined St. Petersburg, where he spent the first nineteen years of his life (1899-1918) in the end prevail over the subsequent fifty nine years wandering through Europe and America (1918-1977).

Nabokov's *émigré* hero exacerbates his own loneliness by searching for a place of his heart that will remain him of a non-existent Russian Empire and the allegory of a pilgrimage motivated by an image of the ‘lost home’ becomes a subplot of the novels, the very composition of which is motivated by a fantasy of recuperation. In *King, Queen, Knight*, (1928) as his biographer Brian Boyd has emphasised, ‘he learned how to cross that line, to take us as if into a time where all past is present’.<sup>7</sup> This nostalgia is highlighted in the titles of some of the novels. In a short-story ‘Cloud, Castle, Lake’, for instance, what is at first glance a peaceful land proves an illusion, albeit one sustainable in the mind. ‘One of my representatives – a modest, mild bachelor, very efficient – happened to win a pleasure trip at a charity ball given by Russian refugees’, the narrator recollects. Yet the pleasure trip turns into tragedy when the protagonist, ‘the modest, mild bachelor’ is humiliated, both physically and mentally, by his fellow-travellers: ‘After returning to Berlin, he called on me, was much changed . . . told his story; kept on repeating that he

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<sup>7</sup> Boyd, Bryan, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, c. 1990, p. 20.

must resign his position . . . insisted that he could not continue, that he had not the strength to belong to mankind any longer' (437).<sup>8</sup>

The Nabokovian protagonist in most of his American works is mythopoetic, forcing his imagination to conjure the smallest details of those places of his youth – St. Petersburg and the Nabokov's estate, for example – destroyed during the revolution and the Civil War of 1917-1921. Nabokov invented the fictional double Mr. Nikerboker – Mr. Nobody – to emphasise his obsessive search for 'nothing' and to reflect the indifference or cruelty of an abstract history that moves people about like the chess-figures. Indeed, the leitmotif of the chess-game becomes at once a crucial narrative device and a symbol of human homelessness.

The final act of Vladimir Nabokov's life was played out in an old-fashioned Montreux Palace Hotel, situated not far from Lake Geneva, the name of which, along with the spirit of the place, aroused specific associations. Not only has Switzerland always been the country of *émigrés*, but its three languages and uncertain national boundaries have over the years conspired with its determined neutrality to suggest something utopian in both the original senses intended by Thomas More: at once a good place, and no place at all. Nabokov's death in a hotel suggests a momentary stay in his long journey to a utopian 'home':

On certain nights as soon as I lie down  
My bed starts drifting into Russia,  
And presently I am led to a ravine  
To a ravine to be killed.  
(Berlin, 1927)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Collected Stories*, London, Penguin Books, 1995. References are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, 'The Execution', *Poems and Problems*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1947, p. 47.

The district was also linked with the name of Rousseau and in spite of the time-lag, and of national and cultural barriers, the Rousseau who called himself 'a solitary walker'<sup>10</sup> evoked Nabokov's own vagrant, solitary existence as a deracinated twentieth-century intellectual. More to the point, perhaps, and again like Rousseau, this celebrated chameleon of a Russian-American bilingual writer was surely one of the twentieth century more Quixotic characters. Doomed alike to search for an invisible Holy Land, Nabokov's life and works fit a Quixotic pattern. He seems the eternal wanderer, who laments a loss of both his motherland and mother tongue.

'Some day', Nabokov told a friend, 'a sagacious professor will write about my absolutely tragic situation'.<sup>11</sup> The tragic situation he referred to was his decision to abandon Russian, the language of his youthful novels and poems, for the sake of English. 'I myself don't fully register all the grief and bitterness of my situation', Nabokov wrote to his wife, revealing his 'terrible desire to write, and write in Russian'. Yet, he continues, 'it is impossible. I don't think that anyone who has not experienced these feelings can properly appreciate them, the torment, the tragedy'.<sup>12</sup>

The implication is clearly that a writer cannot have two languages, a view which makes Nabokov different from most bilingual authors of the century, as, for example, Samuel Beckett.

Much later, Nabokov translated his autobiography *Speak, Memory* into Russian, and found himself 'after fifteen years

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<sup>10</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Reveries Of The Solitary Walker*, New York, New York University Press, 1979.

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Field, Andrew, *Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Part*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1977, p. 249.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Boyd, Bryan, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, c. 1991, p. 52.

of absence, wallowing in the bitter luxury of my Russian verbal might'.<sup>13</sup> Later, still, translating his most famous novel, *Lolita*, into Russian, Nabokov spoke not of luxury, but of deprivation. Michael Wood argued that it was to be 'a long – awaited linguistic springtime that had turned to autumn in his absence'.<sup>14</sup> Nabokov would lament his Russian language which he decided to abandon during the early American years. Rising to the suggestion that his 'mastery of English almost rivals Joseph Conrad's', Nabokov protested: 'Conrad knew how to handle readymade English better than I; but I know better the other kind. He never sinks to the depths of my solecisms, but neither does he scale my verbal peaks'.<sup>15</sup>

Before he left Europe for America in 1940, Nabokov had translated two of his Russian novels (*Laughter in the Dark* and *Despair*) into English, and in 1938-1939 had written a novel directly in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). He had known English since childhood, and had a degree from Cambridge. Yet Nabokov is constantly referring to the torment and tragedy of bilingualism. He addresses the problem with an almost biblical zeal, by sacrificing his 'rich and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second – rate brand of English'.<sup>16</sup> His understanding of the self-sacrifice as the artist's destiny in life and a kind of the sacred ritual parallels T. S. Eliot's:

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality... Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape

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<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, New York, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990, p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> Wood, Michael, *The Magician's Doubts. Nabokov At the Risks Of Fiction*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1994, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Karlinsky, Simon, ed., *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: 1940-1971*, New York, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979, p. 253.

<sup>16</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, 'On A Book Entitled Lolita', in *Lolita*, London, Penguin 1980, p. 315.

from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.<sup>17</sup>

By saying farewell to the language of exile, he managed if not to light up a candle but to find a way in this darkness. His is a way of mock-heroic and the self-mockery, when his Russian Muse has finally mastered the uncommon, inventive English.

Speaking of Nabokov's English, after a controversial success of *Lolita* his wife Vera would respond to the question as to how a university professor could invent such a plot (a middle aged protagonist who falls for a twelve year old stepdaughter). Nabokov, she said, got accustomed to listening to passengers chatting in the buses. However ironic, Vera's remark reveals both 'the depths of linguistic solecisms' and 'scales of his verbal peaks' as mentioned in Nabokov's note on Conrad. For *Lolita* is a polyphonic, multivoiced novel and its Russian born, Cambridge-educated author did reach the verbal peaks by mimicking the different characters: Lolita's mother: a middle class wife, Lolita, an American teenager, a professor of the European origin (the seducer and the victim, Humbert), his American publisher and others. Nabokov the writer feels comfortable in this 'zoo of words', notwithstanding the fact that, in terms of class and education his characters do speak different languages.

Nabokov indicates that the linguistic barriers are more important than the class prejudices, for professor Humbert can fall for an American teenager, but what hurts him most is a language gap. Nabokov's subtle analysis of the characters' ways of speaking indicates his belief that a language is a man. It might be his double-voiced narrative (Humbert's European and Lolita's American opposite

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<sup>17</sup> Eliot, T. S., 'The Progress of an Artist', *Selected Essays*, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964, p. 7.

voices, though they both speak English) that made American critics suspect an allegory: an aged sophisticated Europe is tempted by a youthful and intellectually innocent America. At the same time, *Lolita* presents a controversial version of the posthumous memoirs: we learn at the beginning, that Humbert and Lolita are dead, their sad journey together led to a murder, imprisonment and death for Humbert and death in childbirth for Lolita. Yet they are still wandering, together with the reader, through the fictional 'zoo of words'.

Nabokov's vision of the Word is, nevertheless, not of the 'zoo', but of the sacred place and revelation and, thereafter, the only way in which a man can redeem his past. Interestingly, it is not a loss of a mother tongue and a numbness of an exile who finds himself alienated from the socio-cultural structure of his adopted country, but a loss of spiritual meaning of the words that frightens him. In Nabokov's mind, language is a token of eternity, as long as it helps mankind to create the other worlds.

His universal use of the language is not related to the place, as it is in Conrad's: however exotic, even in the heart of geographic darkness of the remote islands, it is still English. Language is not time, as, for example, in Proust, where the metamorphoses of the story-telling bring back to life hours, minutes, seconds that were supposed to vanish, to die, to disappear forever within the fourth dimension.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov says that he does not believe in time. He refers to the magic space, a realm where past is present and present is past and time is frozen. Nabokov's idea of language is that of the magic space, given Platonic understanding of space as a sensual, flexible substance that is constantly undergoing a process of metamorphoses. This flexibility of fictional space serves as a token of eternity, overcoming the horror of death which in Nabokov's works is associated with silence, numbness, impossibility to

express oneself in words: a burden of speechlessness, a kind of Alzheimer. Speechlessness means death and, vice versa, the horror of human death could be overcome when the words are restored to their meaning.

‘I suddenly saw the world such as it really is’, Nabokov’s narrator confesses in a short-story called *Terror*, ‘You see, we find comfort in telling ourselves that the world could not exist without us, that it exists only inasmuch as we ourselves exist... Death, infinite space, galaxies, all this is frightening, exactly because it transcends the limits of our perception’ (176). His horror turned out to be a loss of the words, the lack of linguistic perception:

Well – on that terrible day when, devastated by a sleepless night, I stepped out into the centre of an incidental city, and saw houses, trees, automobiles, people, my mind abruptly refused to accept them as ‘houses’, ‘trees’, and so forth – as something connected with ordinary human life. My line of communication with the world snapped, I was on my own and the world was on its own, and that world was devoid of sense. I saw the actual essence of all things.

...Near me a dog was sniffing the snow. I was tortured by my efforts to recognise what ‘dog’ might mean, and because I had been staring at it had, it crept to me trustingly, and I felt so nauseated that I got up from the bench and walked away (177).

A loss of words precipitates a loss of the human universe in which Nabokov’s character is ‘no longer a man, but a naked eye, an aimless glance moving in an absurd world. The very sight of a human face made me want to scream’(177). Interestingly, Nabokov’s theme of the wordless world deprived of its sense is echoed in Markes’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Yet in Markes a loss of linguistic perception is recalled as a temporary ‘disease’:

his characters, having been suddenly affected, do not remember the meaning of the words. So they start to label their belongings: 'a table', a spoon', in order to cope with the situation.<sup>18</sup> This strange disease would disappear and Markes's characters would recollect an illness but not as Nabokov's protagonist did, a terror and a threat.

'The meaning of being and nonbeing', the sense of perception is associated in Nabokov with human pain. The narrator is cured when he receives a telegram that a woman he loves is dying:

'I felt astonishment and intense, unbearable but quite human pain.... While I travelled back, while I sat at her bedside, it never occurred to me to analyse the meaning of being and nonbeing, and no longer was I terrified by those thoughts. ... Her death saved me from insanity. Plain human grief filled my life so completely that there was no room left for any other emotion. But time flows... and I know that... the terror I experienced once, the helpless fear of existing, will sometime overtake me again, and then there will be no salvation'(178).

In this sense Nabokov's Word could be associated with Resurrection, for the dying heroine is immortalised by the narrator, and as she comes through the metamorphoses she becomes a printed letter, a page, a book. Given these fictional metamorphoses Nabokov echoes the eighteenth century English literary tradition and Laurence Sterne respectively rather than Russian or American tradition.

We suggest, that he did follow this pattern but in an ambiguous way of Sterne's, who indeed could be recalled (remembering a title of Nabokov's novel) as the 'Laughter in the Dark'. Sterne, for example, depicts his character's

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<sup>18</sup> See Marquez, Gabriel García, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa, London, Cape, 1970, pp. 48-49.

death in *Tristram Shandy* (the novel that Nabokov aptly quoted in his works) in a twofold way: by describing in details his last minutes and by making the following page black and devoid of text. Thus his idea of Death is an impossibility of the printed metamorphoses, a loss of the printed word. Thereafter, when the printed letters are present, the story goes and his character is alive. Thus both Sterne's and Nabokov's literary interpretation of death is the end of the story: the blank page, but, simultaneously, the beginning of the new, fictional *Life* which the reader is presently acquainted with. In *Lolita*, for instance, Humbert the narrator is imprisoned for murder. His bitter laugh draws a line between life and death, between fiction and reality as seen in a prison sell: 'You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style'. Yet, in spite of the hero's Gothic mockery his 'fancy style', his narrative means confession and forgiveness.

Nabokov's belief in the sacred power of the word, the word that links the beginning and the end of human life and illuminates a way to Paradise differs from his contemporaries. Sartre, for instance, had a sombre vision of the hell as a small dark room where a man is endlessly reading the same book by the candlelight.

In conclusion, Nabokov's was a pioneering use of English as an open multilingual, polyphonic space where the words are to undergo a process of linguistic metamorphoses, being enlivened and enriched by the other languages brought from other shores. Thus Nabokov's tombstone: neither to love nor to live but to write is to be the twentieth century word for the eternity.