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The Russian Émigré in America: Translating and Transcending Exile in Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin and Pale Fire

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THE RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ IN AMERICA: TRANSLATING AND TRANSCENDING
EXILE IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *PNIN* AND *PALE FIRE*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Yelena N. Severina

August 2010

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
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ABSTRACT

THE RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ IN AMERICA: TRANSLATING AND TRANSCENDING EXILE IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *PNIN* AND *PALE FIRE*

by Yelena N. Severina

This thesis investigates how Vladimir Nabokov's experience as an exiled writer in America serves as a model for the protagonists of *Pnin* (1957) and *Pale Fire* (1962), two of Nabokov's English-language novels in which exile is a central theme. Although the protagonists, Pnin and Kinbote, are both true exiles, they illustrate markedly different responses to their dislocations; read in tandem, the novels constitute Nabokov's analysis of exile, his lament over its painfulness, and his transcendence of exile through art. Chapter One looks at Nabokov through the lens of exile while establishing fundamental theoretical concepts and terminology. Chapters Two and Three examine the linguistic and psychological dimensions of exile as represented in *Pnin* and *Pale Fire*. Chapter Two looks at how Nabokov portrays language and exile, analyzing issues of translation, transliteration, language barriers, "Pninisms," and the invented quasi-language of *Pale Fire*, Zemblan. Chapter Three explores some of the psychological implications of exile in Vladimir Nabokov's life and in the two novels, focusing in particular on the roles of memory and imagination. Finally, Chapter Four discusses the unique relationship between Nabokov and his Russian, American, and global audiences.

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Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's literary works repeatedly evoke the pain of his exile from Russia and reveal a permanent imprint that his involuntary displacement left in the soul of the artist. The author's status as an American writer of Russian descent not only makes him a mediator between two cultures but also helps in reconciling an internal conflict that he experienced when writing in both languages. Torn between his love for pre-Revolutionary Russia and his contempt for the Soviet regime, Nabokov expressed his anguish in the poignant voices of his characters, whose attempts to cope with reality are not always successful. Looking back at his early fiction, written in Europe under the pseudonym of "V. Sirin"—his young-self, this self-proclaimed true product of exile—Nabokov declared that Sirin's "best works are those in which he condemns his people to the solitary confinement of their souls" (*Evidence* 216-217). This condemnation becomes the author's trademark, justified as a response to his banishment from Russia. Nabokov makes it clear that political changes are only part of a larger problem and that "the stress is not on Russian Revolution. It could have been anything, an earthquake, an illness, an individual departure prompted by a private disaster. The accent is on the abruptness of the change" (*Opinions* 148). Each of his life transitions—from Russia to Europe, from Europe to the United States, and from the United States back to Europe—required serious adjustments, but the desired transition—back to Russia—was to remain a dream. His fictional exiles—these stateless wanderers and incurable eccentrics—cannot adequately

relate to the world around them, growing more depressed in their yearnings for something unattainable and opting for a comforting world of memories that resurrects nothing.

This thesis demonstrates how Nabokov's experience as an exiled writer in America serves as a model for the protagonists of *Pnin* (1957) and *Pale Fire* (1962). The historical overview of several exile theories will ground an analysis of how the protagonists of these novels, Pnin and Kinbote, embody the characteristics of true exiles and illustrate markedly different responses to their dislocations. Chapter One introduces fundamental theoretical concepts and terminology. Chapters Two and Three investigate two key concepts of the exile experience, language and memory. Chapter Two focuses on how Nabokov treats the characters' native and acquired languages, analyzing issues of translation between English and Russian, transliteration, language barriers, "Pninisms," and the invented quasi-language of *Pale Fire*—Zemblan. Chapter Three explores the power of memory that provokes nightmares and hallucinations, destabilizing the characters and affecting their interaction with the world. Lastly, Chapter Four discusses the relationship between Nabokov and his audiences.

Chapter One

Literary Identity through the Exile Lens

One of the ways in which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *exile* is as “a banished person; one compelled to reside away from his native land.” The etymology of the word suggests that *exile* originates from the Latin *ex(s)ul* where *ex* is “out” and *sal*—the root of the word—is “to go.” One of the early archetypes of exile is Ovid, the celebrated Roman poet who was condemned by Emperor Augustus to spend his last days among the Barbarians on the shores of the Black Sea. Like Ovid, Nabokov was also to some extent a suffering artist without a country. Of course, he was not banished by a sovereign, but rather belonged to a larger emigrant group: his exile from Russia, which lasted from the age of twenty until the end of his life at seventy-eight, is usually referred to as *emigration*, a term that broadly describes “the mass exodus from Russia after the Revolution” (Tucker xvi). The juxtaposition of a banished Roman and an exiled Russian is a reminder that the image of an exile has metamorphosed through the centuries and includes a broad spectrum of experiences. The literature of the twentieth century in particular is replete with works by exiled writers of every race, renowned for their uniquely personal experiences that depend largely on the circumstances that led to their departures. As for Nabokov, the theme of exile figures prominently in his works, and when asked about what his exile from Russia meant to him, he replied:

The type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish is a well-known biographical figure with

whom I feel some affinity; but in a straighter sense, exile means to an artist only one thing—the banning of his books. . . . It's Russia's loss, not mine. (*Opinions* 118).

The affinity that Nabokov acknowledges with someone who is distraught over his fate and must come to terms with the fact that he is no longer wanted at home explains the uncertainty he feels about his status as a Russian writer who, during his lifetime, was essentially robbed of his audience.

The only state of permanence shared by all artists who are forced to reside away from their birth places is defined by Nabokov's close friend and literary critic Mary McCarthy as “the condition of waiting” (*Prose* 70). She emphasizes that this condition depends on the memories of one's native country and is continuously reinforced by hope of returning home someday in the future. However, Nabokov's loyalty toward Russia is tested by his desire to exist without any emotional burdens. In his poem “To Russia” (1939), composed in Paris and later self-translated into English, he pleads with his country to leave him alone. The poet depicts an emotional torture—an equivalent of slow death—as he is being constantly reminded of places that he will never again visit:

Will you leave me alone? I implore you!

Dusk is ghastly. Life's noises subside.

I am helpless. And I am dying

Of the blind touch of your whelming tide. (*Poems* 1-4)

The memory of his country brings up the central question of the poem: the poet made a decision to leave Russia years ago, so why can Russia not grant him the same courtesy?

Nabokov searches but cannot find a satisfactory balance: one part of him firmly holds on to the past, while another successfully adjusts to the present. The poem expresses the frustration of two irreconcilable desires—to free oneself of haunting memories and to speak or write of one’s beloved country. First, the poet has the right, perhaps even the duty, to speak on the subject of his lost country: “He who freely abandons his country / on the heights to bewail it is free” (*Poems* 5-6). Yet Nabokov also depicts the sacrifice that he is willing to make to be free of Russia’s persistent ghost:

I’m prepared to lie hidden forever
and to live without name. I’m prepared,
lest we only in dreams come together,
all conceivable dreams to foreswear;
to be drained of my blood, to be crippled,
to have done with the books I must love,
for the first available idiom
to exchange all I have: my own tongue. (*Poems* 9-16)

The somewhat awkward wording of the poem is due to Nabokov’s insistence upon “literality” in all translations from Russian; the same poem in Russian is perfectly melodic. But the poet’s message is precisely the same in either language: the speaker wants to trade off memories of his past for peace in the present. He wants Russia out of his dreams, out of his mind, and out of his life; and yet the prevalent awareness that Russia will never leave him explains the emptiness that he feels the longer he stays away. Tucker refers to this emotional vacuum as “awareness of loss” (xiii). To compensate for

this loss, Nabokov produces novels filled with memories of the country that he once knew. The tragedy of leaving Russia is the subject that he cannot avoid, and some of his private pain is inevitably imparted into the lives of characters who confront the same kind of agony.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born on April 10, 1899 (an Old Style date that as Nabokov writes in *Speak, Memory* should have been translated into the Gregorian calendar as April 22 but is instead listed as April 23) in St. Petersburg, Russia. The eldest of five children of Vladimir and Elena Nabokov, the future author was forever to look back at his childhood as the happiest and most tranquil time of his life. The Nabokovs' family estate at Vyra, not far from St. Petersburg, became that idyllic place in his memory, a lasting witness to his innocent and carefree boyhood. *Speak, Memory* offers one of the earliest recollections of Nabokov's life, when as a three-year-old, holding his parents' hands, he "strutted, and trotted, and strutted again, from sun fleck to sun fleck, along the middle of a path, which I easily identify today with an alley of ornamental oaklings in the park of our country estate, Vyra" (22). Nabokov's affection for the past is evident in his autobiography, which is full of nostalgic reminiscences for the time long gone. Love for literature and lepidoptery developed early in the boy, who was fluent in English and French from an early age and was educated in the best traditions of Russian nobility. Later in life Nabokov said that his was a special generation that came of age during the reign of Czar Nicholas II and witnessed the horrors of the First World War, the Revolution of 1917, and the Civil War. After leaving Russia, Nabokov never again returned to his beloved Vyra: the estate was used as headquarters by the Nazi army

during the Second World War and was later burned to the ground. Throughout Nabokov's life, the absurdity of his departure without the possibility of return remained an open wound.

Nabokov's hometown of St. Petersburg played an important role in shaping his political views and contributed to the development of his sense of national identity. The city on the Neva River, founded by Czar Peter the Great in 1703, and appropriately known as "Window to the West," St. Petersburg has always had a reputation of a progressive and cosmopolitan Northern capital of Russia (Moscow was officially declared a capital in 1918) that was first to witness any political changes introduced by the government. Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* offers a compelling view of the country's citizens who, in the author's opinion, had more freedoms during the Czars' regimes than when the Bolsheviks assumed power:

Since the reforms of the eighteen-sixties, the country had possessed (though not always adhered to) a legislation of which any Western democracy might have been proud, a vigorous public opinion that held despots at bay, widely read periodicals of all shades of liberal political thought, and what was especially striking, fearless and independent judges. (264)

Growing up in this kind of environment gave Nabokov a unique perspective on various political events that took place. When asked about a sense of national identity, he replied: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany" (*Opinions* 26). He

clearly avoided a direct answer, alluding instead to his multicultural background that emphasized that he was a citizen of the world.

At twenty, Nabokov found himself as a refugee in Europe, and like many Russian émigrés he was too full of hope that Bolshevism would prove a temporary occurrence, soon to be overthrown; this hope diminished with each passing year and eventually disappeared. Nabokov and his family belonged to the community of White Russian Refugees who had the advantage over other refugees due to their excellent education, command of one or more foreign languages, better financial standing, connections, and general knowledge of Western culture. During his family's short stay in London, Nabokov began attending Cambridge, studying Modern and Medieval Languages on a scholarship, which at his own admission was "awarded more in atonement for political tribulations than in acknowledgement of intellectual merit" (*Memory* 241). It was during his second year at Cambridge, shortly before re-joining his family in Berlin, that he wrote his mother a letter full of pain at the realization that he would probably never again return to Vyra:

Mother dear, yesterday I woke up in the middle of the night, and asked someone—I don't know whom—the night, the stars, God: will I really *never return*, is it really all finished, wiped out, destroyed . . . Mother, we must return, mustn't we, it cannot be that this has all died, turned to dust—such an idea could drive one mad! I would like to describe every little bush, every stalk in our divine park at Vyra—but no one can understand this . . . How little we valued our

paradise. . .—we should have loved it more pointedly, more consciously. . .

(*Russian* 177)

Nabokov's father, the former head of chancellery in the Provisional Government and later a political activist abroad, established a Russian newspaper *Rul'* (*The Rudder*)—intended for the large community of Russian émigrés residing in Berlin. This was also the time when young Nabokov adopted the pen name “V. Sirin” for its romantic undertones:

. . . in old Russian mythology [Sirin] is a multicolored bird, with a woman's face and bust, no doubt identical with the 'siren,' a Greek deity, transporter of souls and teaser of sailors. In 1920, when casting about for a pseudonym and settling for that fabulous fowl, I still had not shaken off the false glamour of Byzantine imagery that attracted young Russian poets of the Blokian era. (*Opinions* 161)

The primary purpose of this pen name was to distinguish himself from his father, whose name was already well-known in literary circles. The second devastating event of Nabokov's young life—his father's assassination—took place on March 28, 1922. His father's death at the hand of a terrorist became another defining moment that profoundly affected the aspiring writer and later found place in his work. *Pale Fire* is one of his later novels that replays his father's murder and in which, as Brian Boyd suggests, Nabokov “transforms his own father's killing into the shambolic farce of Shade's death” (*Shade and Shape* 3).

Some of Nabokov's works during this literary career in Berlin include such novels as *Mashen'ka* (1926)—translated as *Mary* (1970); *Korol', Dama, Valet* (1928)—

translated as *King, Queen, Knave* (1968); *Zashchita Luzhina* (1930)—translated as *The Luzhin Defense* (1964); *Kamera Obskura* (1933)—translated as *Laughter in the Dark* (1938); *Otchayanie* (1934)—translated as *Despair* (1937, 1965); *Priglaseniye na Kazn'* (1936)—translated as *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959); and *Dar* (1938)—translated as *The Gift* (1963). His first novel that was written “directly” in English, in 1938-1939, was *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, published in the United States in 1941. This impressive body of work would have ensured Nabokov’s status as an important literary figure even had he never published more famous and acclaimed English-language works such as *Pale Fire* and, of course, *Lolita*.

Interestingly, Nabokov resisted being attached to any popular literary movements. When Jean Paul Sartre’s *Situations* presented an unflattering review of Nabokov’s *Despair*, claiming that the author of the book drew inspiration from Expressionists, Nabokov’s response was full of sarcasm: “I do not know German and have never read the Impressionists—whoever they are. On the other hand, I do know French and shall be interested to see if anyone calls my Hermann ‘the father of existentialism’” (*Despair* xiv). In his inimitable fashion Nabokov mocks both Expressionism and Impressionism by purposefully confusing the two, and adds Existentialism into the mix to emphasize that *Despair* is not influenced by any movement. If Nabokov accepted Russian Symbolism with the Silver Age of Russian Poetry as having some part in shaping his literary tastes, he stood adamant against the idea that Impressionism, German Expressionism, Russian Futurism, Existentialism, or any other literary trend of the day had any influence on his work. Certainly, he did not portray himself as part of a community of émigré writers.

Nonetheless, in his study of aesthetics in Nabokov's novels, Page Stegner places Nabokov with the "impressionistic novel tradition (usually European) which begins with Sterne, but with which we most closely associate Proust, Conrad, Ford, Woolf, James, and Faulkner" (45). To support this decision, Stegner focuses on memory, imagination, and emotion as the essential elements of the artist's impressionistic approach. Stegner's case is significantly stronger than Sartre's, for Nabokov's novels certainly employ these impressionistic techniques. Furthermore, Stegner writes that "the prevailing inability to be precise about Nabokov's art erroneously suggests that he exists in isolation" or that Nabokov "really belongs to no tradition of any kind" (45). Nabokov's vision for his art to remain ambiguous is most definitely impressionistic: "I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture" (*Opinions* 73).

In 1940 the Nabokovs fled the Nazi regime to the United States. At this moment in his life, Nabokov was a married man and a father who again had to face the challenges of reinventing his career in a different country. His American novels—*Bend Sinister* (1947); *Conclusive Evidence: A Memoir* (1951); *Drugie Berega* (1954)—translated from Russian as *Other Shores*; *Lolita* (1955); and *Pnin* (1957) reflect nostalgia for his Russian past but are still "marked by two equally strong propensities: the reluctance to judge and the passion to describe" (Morton 9). Notorious to the Western world for writing *Lolita* during his second decade in the United States, Nabokov focused on teaching Russian literature and translating. His decision to return to Europe in 1961 was motivated by personal reasons (the Nabokovs wished to live close to their only son, Dmitri, an opera

singer in Milan) and was not an easy one, since his status as an American writer was well-established. During his first years in Switzerland, Nabokov published the novel *Pale Fire* (1962), which he had begun writing while he was still in the United States. In the last sixteen years of his life, spent in Montreux, he proudly considered himself an American, retained his American citizenship, and continued paying taxes to the United States government. His works from this period of his life include *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1967); *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969); *Transparent Things* (1972); *Strong Opinions* (1973); *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974); and *The Original of Laura* (fragmented and incomplete novel that was published posthumously in 2009). Nabokov's English translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* in 1964 and his Russian translation of *Lolita* in 1965 are his best known translated works during these years.

Should Nabokov be considered only as an exile during these three very different periods of his emigration? In her essay "A Guide to Exiles, Expatriates, and Internal Émigrés" (1972) Mary McCarthy distinguishes among several categories of émigrés, which include exiles, refugees, expatriates, and internal émigrés. One of the first influential literary figures to insist upon such a distinction, she applies her theory to Nabokov, who was driven away from his country by the totalitarian regime; James Joyce, who willingly abandoned his country due to political disagreements; and Boris Pasternak, who never left the Soviet Union despite being virtually sentenced by the government to life in isolation. Pasternak, who was given an opportunity to leave Russia, refused to become an exile: "I am bound to Russia by my birth, my life, and my work. . . . For me to

leave my motherland would be equivalent to death” (Rowland and Rowland 493).

McCarthy mentions the supposed jealousy that Nabokov, as an exile, must have felt toward Pasternak, an internal émigré, who despite his hatred for the Soviet regime never left the country. If Pasternak equated exile with death, Nabokov recognized the opportunities that exile offered. In an engaging discussion about this problematical subject, McCarthy proposes how to apply the term *exile*: “The exile waits for a change of government or the tyrant’s death, which will allow him to come home. If he stops waiting and adapts to the new circumstances, then he is not an exile any more” (*Prose* 69-70). This particular definition is ambiguous: does it mean that to be considered an exile one must resist any attempts at assimilating into a new culture and spend his or her life rejecting possibilities that the new country has to offer?

McCarthy offers more details when she places émigrés in four distinct categories: an exile who is “essentially a political figure, though the offense he has committed may have been in the sphere of morals”; a refugee who failed to make a conscious decision to leave his country (unlike an exile) and “is the very image of helplessness, choicelessness, incomprehension”; an expatriate whose “departure was wholly voluntary” and who simply does not want to go back to his country; and an internal émigré who, like Pasternak, is “something like an internal expatriate” refusing to abandon his homeland under any circumstances (*Prose* 69, 71). How accurate is such a categorization? And where does Nabokov fit in McCarthy’s various categories? Answering the second question is much easier than the first: McCarthy specifically refers to Nabokov in her article, arguing that the true period of exile in Nabokov’s works comes during his

American emigration and ends with his departure for Europe. “It is as if the author,” she writes, “once a Russian exile in America, with all that implies of loss and grieving, had metamorphosed into an American expatriate living on a Swiss mountaintop ‘above it all’” (*Prose* 78). McCarthy’s assessment is well-informed but perhaps not authoritative. We know that despite Nabokov’s appreciation of McCarthy as a sympathetic and faithful reader and critic, he often disagreed with her about his work. For instance, he responded with the following after reading her detailed review of *Pale Fire*: “[McCarthy] added quite a bit of her own angelica to the pale fire of Kinbote’s plum pudding” (*Opinions* 99).

When speaking about Nabokov as an exile, it is important to understand that he is an exile from the Soviet Russia and that his fiction conveys the echoes of the vanished world as a means to recompense for his unplanned departure from home. Although “exile” usually evokes negative ideas—loss, refusal, denial, unhappiness, and hardship—it can also be liberating. Nabokov is the example of the exiled writer who enjoyed having a whole new world in front of him to explore and to use as a mirror to hold up to the old world and his past. His fiction in general appears to bear this out. Nabokov acknowledges the unique atmosphere of exile when he explains why he would never write another novel in Russian:

The era of expatriation can be said to have ended during World War II. Old writers died, Russian publishers also vanished, and worst of all, the general atmosphere of exile culture, with its splendor, and vigor, and purity, and reverberative force, dwindled to a sprinkle of Russian-language periodicals, anemic in talent and provincial in tone. (*Opinions* 37)

He expresses his disillusionment for the community of young generation of exiled writers who failed to appreciate the exile culture to its fullest.

Whatever its limitations, McCarthy's theory provides a valuable insight into the way that émigrés were perceived during Nabokov's life by someone who knew him well. She illustrates the controversy that the term *exile* engendered in the course of the twentieth century. However, her generalized categorization of émigrés is both potentially misleading and largely ineffective. In his thorough study of the exiled writers, Martin Tucker writes that any categories, however appealing and "clear in outline and in analytic terminology . . . are rarely absolute in the experience of them" (x-xi). In selecting the authors to be included in his dictionary of literary exiles, Tucker considers different approaches when weighing who could be referred to as an *exile*. For instance, he cannot overlook "writers who returned to their native land" because, in essence, they are "still considered part of this world in exile, following the assumption that exile does not disappear with geography: memory persists in the psychic sphere" (Tucker viii). This is a category that McCarthy does not consider. Indeed, the strongest asset of her theory is its uniquely personal perspective, developed through her friendship with Nabokov over many years, as well as McCarthy's intimate knowledge about the circumstances of his life in exile. Furthermore, her analysis was conducted during the time of the Soviet regime in Russia, when the writer harbored no illusions about seeing his country again. Nabokov's resentment to be categorized within a particular framework led to the perception of him as an outsider, as the artist who followed his own rules: "I propelled myself out of Russia so vigorously, with such indignant force, that I have been rolling on

and on ever since” (*Opinions* 27). The limitations of McCarthy’s theory as a universal explanation of exile do not erase its relevance to the particular case of Nabokov during a time when his exile was a prominent issue in his life and in his art.

Some critics argue that the main difference between Nabokov’s European and American exiles is the absence of hope of returning to Russia that is evident in his works written after his departure from Europe. To settle this point would require a careful examination of all his novels, short stories, and poems that is beyond the scope of this project. This thesis will focus exclusively on two works—*Pnin* and *Pale Fire*—both of which are set in America and depict characters whose hope of returning to their native land is clearly absent. Through the trials of these novels’ protagonists, Pnin and Kinbote, Nabokov conveys the sense of prolonged loneliness that is in the foreground of any exile experience.

One thing that remains certain is the significance of Nabokov’s years in America, during which he achieved worldwide fame as a novelist; America became, as he would someday say, his “second home in the true sense of the word” (*Opinions* 10). This sense of belonging is reaffirmed by the fact that even after his departure from the United States for Montreux, Nabokov was regarded by some critics as an American expatriate living abroad, a fascinating phenomenon for this Russian-born writer at the height of the Cold War. This attests not only to his mastery of the English language but to the impact that his works had in the United States. It also compensates for his virtual obscurity in Europe during his early years, when Nabokov “as a Russian . . . was regarded as an outsider by many Europeans” and was living “on a temporary Nansen passport that in

effect made him stateless during the interwar years” (Foster 6). This statelessness formally ends with American citizenship but comes at a high price. Nabokov’s longing for the country that no longer wants him had to be confronted. In several poems dedicated to Russia, he pours out his angst over the incomprehensibility of his fate. Years later, in his American writings, when not just the country borders but the ocean separates him from Russia, Nabokov no longer questions but willingly admits both the absurdity and the finality of his exile.

In the second volume of his definitive biography on Nabokov, Boyd isolates the subject of exile in Nabokov’s works as an important thematic pattern (*American* 158). The complexity of reconciliation between past and present is successfully conveyed through the characters’ escapades, evoking Nabokov’s own experience as an émigré abroad. The writer’s bitterness over his fate and the circumstances beyond his control that made him leave Russia is a recurrent presence even in his most optimistic works; he did after all plan things for his future in Russia and entertained dreams that were not destined to be fulfilled. In an interview Nabokov offers an interesting perspective on what might have been: “It is not improbable that had there been no revolution in Russia, I would have devoted myself entirely to lepidopterology and never written any novels at all” (*Opinions* 100). As a writer, he invents characters that are strikingly different and that are often left to contemplate an obscure past, unreal reality, and an uncertain future. A masterful puppeteer of their fictional lives and a self-proclaimed dictator of his “galley slaves,” Nabokov must have experienced dissatisfaction at not being able to control the

circumstances of his own life, which explains this ubiquitous presence of doom in his works.

Edward Said proposes interpreting exile as a prison sentence, emphasizing the fact that the writers who face exile “lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity—to deny an identity to people” (175). Nabokov’s pain is very much present in Pnin’s tears and Kinbote’s anguish as they wander from place to place in search of permanence. McCarthy compares these exiles and their “refusal to put down new roots” with “birds . . . perching wherever they are, ready for homeward flight” (*Prose* 71). These characters are the solitary individuals. They face difficulties in finding a common language with other émigrés, who endure similar struggles and logically ought to be sympathetic to their countrymen. Historically, Nabokov is a remarkable exception to the general rule of Russian exiled writers, most of whom either perished in obscurity abroad or chose to return to the Soviet Union only to be prosecuted by the government.

The hostility from those who ought to be supportive is yet another personal experience that Nabokov develops in his work, especially since the European émigré community served as a surrogate for his homeland during his early years abroad. Ivan Bunin, another prominent Russian émigré writer, recognized Nabokov’s talent but seemed irritated by the young writer’s ambitions. Nabokov later recalled his admiration for the aging poet and the failure of the two to understand each other: “[Bunin] was annoyed by my refusal to lay bare my soul” (Marullo 302). Annoyed and perhaps envious of young Nabokov’s individuality and potential, Bunin made a prediction that no aspiring writer wanted to hear from his countryman abroad: “You will die in terrible

torment and in complete loneliness” (Marullo 302). Such resentment from other émigrés is the type of experience that Said names as “to have been exiled by exiles” (178).

Fortunately, Bunin’s prediction did not come true. In fairness, Nabokov recognized that there was always a place for an exception, “a far violin among near balalaikas,” and though his departure from Europe to the United States constitutes a second exile, it is significantly less dramatic due to the lack of support he received from the émigrés like Bunin (*Memory* 287). Nabokov did outwit them all by managing to live comfortably well into old age, raise a family, and speak openly about various political issues.

The idea that after many years spent away from Russia, Nabokov preferred no Russia at all to the idea of the Soviet Russia is a testimony to the author’s hatred for Communist ideology. In his mind, the new regime was a temporary sentence that had no bearing on how he felt about Russia in general. To the question of whether he still felt Russian, Nabokov replied:

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. (*Opinions* 13)

One of the ways to confront this disappearance is through Pnin’s misfortunes and Kinbote’s fantasies. This shock is also apparent during Nabokov’s defining years as a writer in Europe struggling to publish his works for the audience of his fellow émigrés. Many years later, as a college professor in the United States with a rich variety of

butterflies in an American landscape to keep him occupied, Nabokov appeared to be content, and when asked whether or not he felt American, he replied with enthusiasm:

Yes, I do. I am as American as April in Arizona. The flora, the fauna, the air of the Western states are my links with Asiatic and Arctic Russia. Of course, I owe too much to the Russian language and landscape to be emotionally involved in, say, American regional literature, or Indian dances, or pumpkin pie on a spiritual plane . . . (*Opinions* 98)

The interesting aspect of his statement is the connection that he, as a naturalist, made by associating America with different parts of Russia. Evidently, the compromise always existed in his mind along with his accent, Slavic looks, and an unshakable faith in a different future for his country. Proud of his ethnic roots and his success in overcoming the challenges of immigration, Nabokov explored the dream of what might have been in creating the characters who were also affected by the profound loss of their homelands.

Chapter Two

Three Languages of Exile: English, Russian, and Zemblan

The hope that his works would someday appear on bookshelves in Russia was behind Nabokov's commitment to translate his novels, short stories, and poetry from English into Russian. His zealous desire to preserve his mother tongue made him treat the Russian language "as a national treasure the usurper Bolsheviks appropriated from him, to turn over to the rabble" (*Prose* 77). Though this particular quotation references his controversial translation of Alexander Pushkin's epic poem *Eugene Onegin*, the same remains true for everything else Nabokov translated during his years abroad. An omnipresent fear that the Soviets would irreparably damage his language was second only to the fear—shared by other immigrant writers abroad—that the exposure to Western culture might somehow compromise the richness of his native tongue. Not long after settling in the United States in 1941, Nabokov expressed this concern in a letter to his friend and literary critic Edmund Wilson: "It seems that I will soon forget how to write Russian, since I write so much in my 'pidgin'e" (Karlinsky 39). Interestingly, he conjugated the last word of the sentence, putting it in the prepositional case with an 'e' ending according to the rules of Russian grammar (Wilson knew Russian).

Abandoning his native tongue was never an option for Nabokov, and hence the idea that "the bilingual writer, especially in exile, may feel traitorous, amputated, and divided" accurately reflected his inner turmoil (Beaujour 43). His bond with the Russia of his childhood was maintained through the use of his primary language and became an

integral part of his identity as an international author. After arriving in the United States, Nabokov entertained the idea of finding an adequate translator for some of his European works written in Russian. In letters to Wilson in late 1942, shortly after realizing that translating his own writings from Russian into English would keep him from writing anything new, he asks his friend to recommend a reliable translator. He immediately rejects certain categories of émigrés as potential translators, like the older Russian women who emigrated to the United States, satirized in *Pnin* as:

. . . those stupendous Russian ladies scattered all over academic America, who, without having had any formal training at all, manage somehow, by dint of intuition, loquacity, and a kind of maternal bounce, to infuse a magic knowledge of their difficult and beautiful tongue into a group of innocent-eyed students in an atmosphere of Mother Volga songs, red caviar, and tea. (*Pnin* 10)

Nabokov soon became convinced that the only person who could satisfactorily translate his novels was himself.

His English poem “An Evening of Russian Poetry” (1945) depicts Nabokov as a lecturer who is getting ready to teach his students about the beauty and complexity of Russian verse. The lecture on the subject of language begins with specific instructions on how his name ought to be presented:

My little helper at the magic lantern,
insert that slide and let the colored beam
project my name or any such-like phantom

in Slavic characters upon the screen.¹ (*Poems 6-9*)

The poem's meter and rhyme, intentionally imitating Pushkin's well-known style, illustrate the underlying desire to speak in Russian again, as well as the compromises that an émigré author must make when composing in a foreign language. In his heartfelt tribute to Russian, the speaker focuses on the structures of words, sounds, and wondrous combinations of syllables:

Yes, Sylvia?

'Why do you speak of words

When all we want is knowledge nicely browned?'

Because all hangs together—shape and sound,

heather and honey, vessel and content.

Not only rainbows—every line is bent,

and skulls and seeds and all good words are round,

like Russian verse, like our colossal vowels:

those painted eggs, those glossy pitcher flowers

that swallow whole a golden bumblebee

those shells that hold a thimble and the sea.

Next question. (*Poems 17-28*)

He concludes the poem with a painful admission that his road, like the roads of so many who decided to seek personal freedom, was “always fated / to lead into the silence of exile” (*Poems 110-111*). It is almost as if Nabokov defies this “silence” during his years

¹ This is what the poet's name would have looked like had it been projected: *Владимир Владимирович Набоков*.

abroad by giving a voice to the uncertainty of an exile's fate, by teaching those who do not know and reminding those who might have forgotten the innate beauty of his first language. Though some critics assert that "[Nabokov's] bilingualism also allows him the option of voluntarily betraying his last tie to Russia—the language that has embodied his already established self as a writer," the author does not perceive it as betrayal (Beaujour 42). Rather, the world recognition that came after the publication of *Lolita* meant more opportunities for translations and compositions in which *his* Russia was ever-present.

In the afterword to *Lolita*, the author expresses the dilemma that he faces when composing in English:

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, devoid of any of those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way. (316-317)

This passionate critique of his "second-rate" English reveals the novelist's frustration in his quest for satisfactory balance when composing in both languages. Which of the two needs him more? Though Nabokov claims that he "had spoken English with the same ease as Russian, since [his] earliest infancy," he is either overly critical or implausibly modest when referring to *his* English as "this second instrument . . . a stiffish, artificial thing . . . which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction" (*Opinions* 189, 106). This frequently expressed dissatisfaction with his English is

preposterous, for his control of the language is phenomenal. In her study of Nabokov's literary bilingualism, Galya Diment suggests that "[English] afforded [Nabokov] distance to create art, therapy to soothe the pain of his losses, and freshness to escape trivializing that which he wanted least to trivialize" (6). Nabokov's continuous migrations across countries and continents also created a physical distance between him and Russia, and the longer he stayed away from his home country, the more certain he became that he would never again return to the place where he spent his happiest years. By admitting "the inescapability of his earliest language," Nabokov shows that he is not afraid to be perceived as "an anomaly to native English speakers" (Besemeres 407). Instead he embraces the opportunity to show the world an émigré's linguistic struggles through Pnin's comical English and the maddening trajectory of Kinbote's Zemblan thoughts.

Theater of Pninisms

Pnin is one of Nabokov's funniest and most engaging works, about the misfortunes of an absentminded professor whose colloquial Russian strives to dominate the narrative. Timofey Pnin embodies all the characteristics of a genuinely displaced person but despite a number of jokes at Pnin's expense, Nabokov never reduces him to a comic vehicle or caricature:

Whatever Pnin is, he is certainly least of all a clown. What I am offering you is a character entirely new to literature—a character important and intensely pathetic—and new characters in literature are not born every day. (*Selected Letters* 178)

Disoriented and confused, Pnin also struggles with the knowledge that he will never again set foot on his native soil. Those who regard *Pnin* as “a debt that Nabokov pays to Russian emigration” are correct in their assessment, as the character of this professor endures the same difficulties as many other Russian émigrés during what Nabokov referred to as the second “spiral” of emigration from war-torn Europe to the United States (Toker 21). More importantly, Pnin’s thoughts, rooted firmly in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and his lack of illusions about returning home make him an exile. He and his creator share the same cultural background, and Nabokov’s recollections about the chaos of the transatlantic crossing—“that dreamlike, complex day of [the Nabokovs’] departure, the panic-stricken, gaping suitcases and the whirlwind of old newspapers”—evoke the image of Pnin amidst the havoc as he sets out on a journey with a new kind of hope (*Selected Letters* 33).

The difficulty of someone who is no longer young and who must adjust to living in a different culture is a fundamental theme of the novel. The sense of a real person with real pain inevitably comes through, despite all the jokes made at Pnin’s expense, in Nabokov’s deft portrayal of Pnin’s simple and largely unfulfilled wish to be understood in 1950s America. Boyd notes the moral questions that the novel inevitably poses: “How can we laugh at another person’s misfortunes? How can consciousness and conscience exist in a world rife with pain?” (*American* 269). The answer is, perhaps, that Pnin does not feel sorry for himself. Nabokov’s stylistic abilities are put to the test in *Pnin* as he incorporates two languages into the narrative. The result is that the novel illuminates Nabokov as an author with an exceptional control of both English and Russian. The

portrayal of the novel's protagonist, this charming and very determined exile, inexorably brings up feelings of warmth and compassion. Despite Nabokov's claims that he is always "careful to keep [his] characters beyond the limits of [his] own identity," his self-identification with Pnin is undeniable (*Opinions* 13).

The identity of the narrator in *Pnin* is an ambiguity that deserves special attention. In his private correspondence, Nabokov claims to have written himself into the text of the novel as Pnin's old and not particularly likable acquaintance. The author refers to himself as Vladimir Vladimirovich, a professor of Russian language, "the fascinating lecturer" with a passion for lepidoptery. However, the resemblance between this fictional Nabokov and the real one is almost too good to be true, which brings up the question of whether the portrayal is authentic. Can this be another trap set for the reader? This thesis will treat Nabokov's narrator in *Pnin* as a semi-fictional character, an alter-ego of a genius, whose self-assurance and success contrast sharply with Pnin's misery.

Despite targeting an American reader, the text is filled with Russian phrases and cultural remarks, depicting the power that an émigré's native language has on his acculturation and how it affects the process of him relating to middle-class America. How multicultural is this America? Outside of Pnin and Komarov, the only other Russian at the Fine Arts Department at Waindell College, the rest of Pnin's immediate acquaintances are financially secure, white Americans, most of whom are genuinely fond of "that foreign gentleman" (*Pnin* 188). To assimilate in this type of environment poses significant challenges which Pnin, whose cultural background is vastly different from that of his American colleagues, fully embraces, yet he also maintains his Russian roots.

Teaching others about his country's history and traditions prior to the Revolution becomes Pnin's mission, as he struggles to retain connection to his country through the use of Russian. Pnin's English, in contrast, underscores his otherness:

If his Russian was music, his English was murder. He had enormous difficulty ('dzeefeecooltsee' in Pninian English) with depalatization, never managing to remove the extra Russian moisture from *t*'s and *d*'s before the vowels he so quaintly softened. (*Pnin* 66)

The English language remains an area of confusion and disorientation in the life of Timofey Pnin, who appears to be much keener on preserving his Russianness than on making his American self passable.

Nabokov informs the audience early on that "a special danger area in Pnin's case was the English language" (*Pnin* 14). Pninian English becomes a character in itself—a formidable display of one man's persistence to explain himself. In his analysis of the novel, Boyd asserts that Pnin's "noble, generous heart . . . beats within the body of a clown whose every phrase in English is an unwitting joke" (*American* 274-275). In all fairness, Nabokov depicts the English language as a universal problem for Slavic émigrés. For instance, Pnin's colleague Komarov faces similar linguistic hurdles: "It would be hard to say, without applying some very special tests, which of them, Pnin or Komarov, spoke the worse English; probably Pnin" (*Pnin* 72). Nabokov does, however, allow several exceptions to the rule in the figure of himself as Pnin's old acquaintance and several other émigrés, most notably "Alexandr Petrovich Kukolnikov (known locally as Al Cook)" who comes from the Russian upper class. Curiously, one of the major

difficulties that Pnin encounters is shared by his creator: lecturing in English in front of an American audience. Like Pnin, who was “utterly helpless without the prepared text,” Nabokov too never came to a lecture without a prepared manuscript (*Pnin* 15). When asked about the homework he did beforehand, the author replied:

Every lecture I delivered had been carefully, lovingly handwritten and typed out, and I leisurely read it out in class, sometimes stopping to rewrite a sentence and sometimes repeating a paragraph—a mnemonic prod which, however, seldom provoked any change in the rhythm of wrists taking it down. (*Opinions* 104)

Why does Nabokov pass his phobia to an already insecure Russian émigré? Was he too, like Pnin, fearful that an incorrect word could slip off his tongue? This decision reveals that even someone with an outstanding command of the English language faced problems shared by other émigrés.

A shocking absence of patronymics is something about the English language that Pnin gradually comes to accept. When his protégé, Victor, arrives for a short stay at Waindell, Pnin gives the boy a detailed explanation of which syllables are accented in “Timofey Pavlovich Pnin,” followed by the instructions on the proper way of address between them: “I have a long time debated with myself . . . and have concluded that you must call me simply Mr. Tim or, even shorter, Tim, as do some of my extremely sympathetic colleagues” (*Pnin* 104). Derived from his father’s first name (Pavel), Pnin’s patronymic (Pavlovich) represents first and foremost the connection between two generations—father and son. To Victor, who understands Russian and “who heard many Russians speak English,” it would not have been difficult to address Pnin by his first

name, followed by his patronymic (*Pnin* 105). However, eager to befriend a teenager, Pnin sacrifices a beloved Russian tradition, left unchanged even after the Revolution. The author's sadness is recognizable in the depiction of Pnin's dilemma, as Nabokov's patronymic, seemingly obliterated from most of his other English works, reappears in *Pnin*. The narrator's voice cannot conceal the notes of nostalgia and affection as Pnin's friends remember Vladimir Vladimirovich who knows all about moths and butterflies. After losing a part of his name, Pnin's revenge comes in a form of sheer indifference toward any American name that is "not that of a poet or a president" (*Pnin* 53). As the novel progresses, Pnin's English improves significantly, allowing fewer opportunities for ridicule, as he gradually trades places with Cockerell, the real clown. For instance, Pnin's English is impeccable during the conversation with his friends at The Pines. Is it because he really communicates in Russian, translated by the narrator, and not in English? Whatever the case may be, the painfully awkward professor of the beginning of the novel disappears and a confident individual emerges: Pnin turns into someone who appears to have made peace with the foreign tongue.

Nabokov's method of self-translation in *Pnin* offers his American readers a lesson in foreign language—the author's version of "Russian 101." In his introduction to *Poems and Problems* (1969), he describes the only acceptable way of translating between languages as fundamentally different as English and Russian: "For the last ten years, I have been promoting, on every possible occasion, literalness, i.e., rigid fidelity, in the translation of Russian verse" (14). Irritated by the interpreters who strive to preserve rhyme with an unforgivable sacrifice of meaning, he is relentless about the effectiveness

of his theory: “The only object and justification of translation is the conveying of the most exact information possible and this can be only achieved by a literal translation, with notes” (*Opinions* 81). Any translation that approximates meaning is like a gross amputation, an undesired deformity, and foremost a disrespect toward the language. Some critics note that Nabokov “not only translates but brings in the theory of translation” as they recognize how awkward and downright awful to one’s ear some of his translations are: such examples include *Eugene Onegin* and his Russian poems that he translated into English (Lattimore 506). But Nabokov insists on being precise when it comes to translations, hoping that the American audience learns the exact meaning of Pushkin’s poetry from his version of *Eugene Onegin*. In much the same way, Pnin’s thoughts are clearly being formed in his head in Russian as he speaks and must be translated accordingly. The rules of his native language are so embedded in Pnin’s mind that he even transports the Russian grammar into English, thus ending up with poor word choices, absence of articles, and incorrect sentence structures. This is evident in the scene in which Pnin, searching for the right bus to Cremona, composes his questions in English just as he would have structured them in Russian: “Where stops four o’clock bus to Cremona?” or “And where possible to leave baggage?” (*Pnin* 18).

In recognition of his linguistic limitations, Pnin reluctantly requests help only when he absolutely needs it. The best example of that is a “newspaper clipping of a letter [Pnin] had written with [the narrator’s] help, to the New York Times in 1945,” which Pnin carries “in the inside pocket of his present coat” (*Pnin* 16). Besemeres suggests that unlike the narrator, “whose Russianness has been smoothly converted into an acceptable

American persona,” Pnin “represents all that impedes and escapes an attempted translation from a Russian cultural sensibility into an English-speaking one” (391). The existence of this clipping proves the protagonist’s lack of confidence in his knowledge of English: he is desperate enough to request help from the narrator who so obviously repels him. Though his limited English vocabulary is gradually expanding, his Russian constantly interferes, thus hindering an already slow process. For example, Pnin takes no notice of the fact that a word’s gender may alter from one language to another. He faithfully preserves a feminine gender of the Russian word “logic” in the conversation with his landlady: “First of all, logic herself—” (*Pnin* 60). The process of translation from complex English into familiar Russian results in unintentionally amusing blunders which can make anyone (but Pnin) self-conscious. He is never hesitant to explain himself using gestures to express his emotions when words fail him.

The method that Nabokov dubs as “Englishing the Russian” contributes to Pnin’s existence in a “bubble of Russianness” (*Pnin* 18, *Besemeres* 407). Whenever he is not aware of an English equivalent for a Russian word (usually, an international word) he invents an equivalent. Published by an American press, *Pnin* abounds with transliterated Russian word and phrases, as well as translations between two languages. The author gets away with this mainly because the main character is immensely likable. Like the narrator, Pnin too expresses abhorrence for Communist ideology and remains faithful to a pre-Revolutionary Russian language. Various abbreviations and acronyms that invaded the language after the Bolsheviks came to power and were later made popular by such poets of the age as Vladimir Mayakovsky are noticeably absent from the Russian that

Pnin and his circle of friends use to communicate. To better orient the American reader, who is unfamiliar with this Slavic tongue, many words can be recognized with relative ease, thus not requiring the narrator's diligent translations: "catastroph" (catastrophe), "kabinet" (cabinet), "huligani" (hooligans), "amerikanski" (American), "'Gamlet' Vil'yama Shekspira" (*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare), "footballist" (football player) (*Pnin* 17, 63, 73, 77, 79, 106).

Whenever Pnin is unaware of the English equivalent, he literarily makes up a word that, in Pnin's mind, sounds authentically English, in which case the narrator clarifies the meaning: "'Quittance?' queried Pnin, Englishing the Russian for 'receipt' (kvitantsiya)" (*Pnin* 18). At the expense of an unsuspecting professor, Nabokov introduces foreign audiences to the difficult task of mastering a new language, and because Nabokov "cannot reach his audience through Russian, he is forced constantly to translate himself, a process which, however appealing to the literary chameleon in him, in the case of *Pnin* involves a self-parody" (Besemeres 396). Appropriately, the character of another Russian exile—the narrator himself—slowly emerges. Frustrated with his inability to return to the country that he never intended to leave in the first place, Nabokov uses Pnin's life story as an opportunity to illustrate the structural differences between Roman and Slavic tongues and to explain Pnin's decision to speak Russian even when he speaks English.

In his letter to Cass Canfield of *Harper & Brothers* in 1955, Nabokov describes the main character of his new novel: "It is this combination of the grotesque and the gentle that makes [Pnin] so pleasingly bizarre" (*Selected Letters* 182). By depicting

Pnin's lasting war with the English language, Nabokov projects his own frustrations in having to translate phrases that cannot always be adequately translated between languages. In his response to an interviewer's question about his acquired fame, Nabokov's dissatisfaction is apparent: "*Lolita* is famous, not I. I am an obscure, doubly obscure, novelist with an unpronounceable name (*Opinions* 107). "An unpronounceable name" is another element that the author shares with the protagonist—Ping-pong Pnin, heroic Pnin, Dr. Neen, Professor Pun-neen—who is continuously ridiculed for butchering the simplest English words. In Pninian English *whisky and soda* are "viscous and sawdust," *Mrs. Thayer* is Mrs. Fire, *nutrition* is "nootrition," *efficient* is "effishant," *stupid* is "stooped," and *stars* come out with rolling Russian *r*'s (*Pnin* 59, 74, 35, 75, 43). Such detail helps readers imagine Pnin's thick "ahksent" and awkward pronunciation, which are at once comical and sad, as in the conversation with his landlady, shortly after his ex-wife's departure, when Pnin pours his heart out about the emptiness in his life: "I haf nofing left, nofing, nofing" (*Pnin* 104, 61).

In the final chapters of the novel, the narrator comes to rely less and less on entertaining the audience at Pnin's expense. Boyd suggests that the reason for that might be that Pnin "becomes much too immediate and vivid a person, too real and durable to be reduced to a series of comic pratfalls" (*American* 272). As horrendous as Pnin's pronunciation remains, his personality gradually wins us over, due to the dedication with which he hopes to enjoy "wonderful America which sometimes surprises . . . but always provokes respect" (*Pnin* 104). For instance, in the scene between Pnin and Komarov, "the mediocre muralist" who paints Pnin in the place of Napoleon in the fresco with other

faculty members, the readers witness how Pnin's fury eliminates his existing English vocabulary, making him lose "all control over the English he [has]" (*Pnin* 188). This scene accentuates his foreignness and emphasizes that Pnin, when supremely confident in his point of view, does not care about others' perception of him.

The narrator also relays his affinity with the character by giving Pnin the most unlikely friend, another loner—Victor Wind, the son that Pnin never had. One of the most poignant scenes in the novel occurs when Pnin, distraught over being let go by the university, nearly breaks the bowl that Victor has given him as a present:

He looked very old, with his toothless mouth half open and a film of tears dimming his blank, unblinking eyes. Then, with a moan of anguished anticipation, he went back to the sink and, bracing himself, dipped his hand into the foam. A jagger of glass stung him. Gently he removed a broken goblet. The beautiful bowl was intact. (*Pnin* 172-173)

A young boy and his mother's ex-husband forge an unlikely friendship, the important aspect of which is that each understands the depth of the other's loneliness. The narrator hopes that by this time the audience too perceives Pnin differently than in the novel's opening chapters, as a complex human being whose strength of character and past experiences define him.

When he was asked to select the most beautiful language among those he spoke fluently, Nabokov wanted to stay objective: "My head says English, my heart, Russian, my ear, French" (*Opinions* 49). This answer proves that language for him is more than a tool for communication but something like an exquisite painting or a beautiful piece of

music. In sharp contrast, Pnin's head, heart, and ear would have unanimously selected Russian. To make his audience understand how an everyday use of Russian is integral to Pnin's identity, Nabokov populates the text with numerous transliterations. In a manner that echoes Humbert Humbert's musical recitation of Lolita's name in the first paragraph of *Lolita* with "the tongue taking a trip," Nabokov clearly hopes that American readers will at least attempt to decipher some of many Russian words (*Lolita* 9). To accommodate those unfamiliar with the language, transliterated words are almost always followed by translation in parentheses: *Soedinyonnie Shtati* (The United States), *slava Bogu* (thank God), *vot i vse* (that's all), *po amerikanski* (the American way), *V boyu li, v stranstvii, v volnah?* (In fight, in travel, or in waves?) (*Pnin* 11, 19, 33, 73).

Occasionally, Nabokov provides a translation first, followed by transliteration: "for non-drinkers" (*dlya trezvih*), "by stupidity" (*po gluposti*), or "all the more vexing" (*tem bolee obidno*) (*Pnin* 75, 126, 127). In both cases, Nabokov familiarizes the readers with the way words, formed in Pnin's head, must first be translated from Russian—a frustrating process that is best expressed by Pnin's "relinquishing" gestures (*Pnin* 59). These disorienting moments also let the reader experience, for a brief moment, the uncertainty and linguistic dislocation that Pnin faces constantly.

The émigré "whom fate has left dangling in the alien English language" is perceived by others "through the distorting medium of that unselected second language" (Besemeres 390). Some transliterations are given without any translations at all, thus leaving an American reader "dangling" in the alien Russian language. The words and phrases that are not translated tend to appear when Pnin encounters other Russians, and

some of these words can be easily guessed. The conversation that takes place between Pnin and Komarov, in which Pnin questions his countryman about the encyclopedic volume that he is so anxious to locate, illustrates this point. The narrator explains that Pnin's *antikvarniy liberalism* ("antique liberalism") is the reason for Komarov's dislike (*Pnin* 72). Quite similarly, other words and phrases are left in the text without any translation at all. For instance, Pnin and Liza's meeting in Chapter Two leaves the non-Russian audiences guessing about the meanings of *zdravstvuy* (hello) or *Nu, nu, vot i horosho, nu vot* (well, well, that's quite alright) (*Pnin* 53). At other times, Nabokov gives a translation that is only partial or is an approximation of the phrase—another proof that the author is having fun at the reader's expense by inserting jokes intended for someone who is comfortable in both languages. One such example depicts Pnin's glorious arrival at Al Cook's party, driving his car, when one of Pnin's acquaintances exclaims: "Avtomobil', kostyum—nu pryamo amerikanetc (a veritable American), pryamo Ayzenhauer" (*Pnin* 121). Nabokov hopes that a reader will pause before associating *kostyum* with "costume" (but perhaps miss the idea that Pnin is dressed up) and *Ayzenhauer* with "Eisenhower." In his quiet support for the hero's desperate struggle in mastering the English language, Nabokov makes the American audience switch places with Pnin and get a taste of what it is like to be constantly presented with unpronounceable words and phrases.

Interpreting that "Phony Scandinavian" Tongue

In her frequently quoted critical essay "A Bolt from the Blue," which appeared shortly after the publication of *Pale Fire*, McCarthy declares Nabokov's latest novel to be

“a Jack-in-the-box, a Fabergé gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself kit” (*Essays* 15). The book, which was started in the United States and completed in Switzerland, presents one of the most unreliable, exasperating, and mysterious narrators in American literature, whose identity almost a half a century later still ignites passionate scholarly debates. Charles Kinbote is a quintessential exile, so blindly devoted to his private fantasies that they come to compensate for an unsatisfactory reality. In his study of Bergsonian and Russian Formalist influences in Nabokov’s novels, Michael Glynn suggests that through the main character, who “fashions for himself a complex alternative personality, Nabokov has presented us with an extreme example of the Bergsonian dyadic personality, the divided self” (86). Kinbote’s narration is non-linear and problematic. His exalted arrogance produces a fascinating tale of Zembla, which in Kinbote’s mind must be told to the rest of the world through the words of the most celebrated poet in America. The fact that the poet is dead and that his last poem has nothing to do with Zembla is a minor inconvenience which this ex-king must overcome. It is as if, enjoying the success of his emigration and established identity as an American author, Nabokov does everything in his power to destabilize Kinbote’s world, testing his unlimited power and forcing him to self-destruct. Nabokov’s portrayal of Kinbote depicts the extreme case of one man’s refusal to accept his mediocrity. By retaining a strong loyalty to his imagined past, Kinbote’s invention of Zembla adds purpose to his life and becomes a mental form of escape from America that remains to him fundamentally foreign.

Who is the narrator of *Pale Fire*? Just like with *Pnin*, this question is in itself a springboard for scholarly debate and cannot be overlooked in the analysis of the novel. Boyd suggests that Kinbote “has built up his Zembla to cope with an overwhelming sense of loss—and that it is the loss of Russia emerges irresistibly” (*American* 434). Taking this into consideration, the essay will address the narrator as “Kinbote,” a self-proclaimed ex-king of non-existent Zembla, who is known in the real world as “V. Botkin,” a professor of Russian at Wordsmith University at New Wye, Appalachia.

Kinbote’s use of Zemblan—“the tongue of the mirror”—demonstrates an émigré’s need to validate his identity through the use of his native language. His surroundings in Appalachia curiously resemble *Pnin*’s in that they too consist of predominantly white, middle-class Americans with no Zemblan soul in the vicinity to keep Kinbote company. Kinbote’s animosity toward *Pnin*, whom he calls “a farcical pedant of whom the less said the better” and who reappears in *Pale Fire*, mirrors *Pnin*’s hatred for Komarov (*Pale* 229). From a linguistic perspective, Zemblan presents a “synthesis of Slavic and Germanic roots” that allows Nabokov to merge “his Russian and English childhoods, his Russian and Anglo-American cultural strains, in the regal realm of imagination” (Meyer 88). For Nabokov “language is not only [his] *property*, but body, ultimately self,” and “by abandoning his language, Nabokov feels that he risks his physical and spiritual wholeness and integrity” (Beaujour 42). The same is true of Kinbote. His need to establish inside his mind the perfect language produces Zemblan that belongs solely to him. Kinbote acknowledges his familiarity with the Russian language:

I certainly do speak Russian. You see, it was the fashionable language *par excellence*, much more so than French, among the nobles of Zembla at least, and at its court. Today, of course, all this has changed. It is now the lower classes who are forcibly taught to speak Russian. (*Pale* 268)

The Russian madman thus invents the language that will allow him to separate himself from masses of immigrants whose plight resembles his own, as well as from those, still in Russia, who forced him into exile.

Kinbote's scholarly facade is as phony as is his tale about a spectacular landing with a parachute on American soil or his commentary on John Shade's poem that turns into a story of Kinbote's escape from Zembla. He references his princely education, an English tutor, and his uncle—famous translator of William Shakespeare's works into Zemblan—with self-praise that fails to compensate for his astounding incompetence as translator. His condescending remarks toward America and his criticism of those who do not agree with him reveal a highly egoistic and self-centered individual whose pompous sentences only reaffirm his arrogance:

I was not yet used to the rather fatiguing jesting and teasing that goes on among American intellectuals of the inbreeding academic type and so abstained from telling John Shade in front of all those grinning old males how much I admired his work lest a serious discussion of literature degenerate into mere facetiation. (*Pale* 21).

The blind stubbornness with which Kinbote wants to stay connected to his Zemblan past offers him a magical getaway into the world where he is an adored monarch. When

speaking about fictional characters in general, Nabokov points out that “the more gifted and talkative one’s characters are, the greater the chances of their resembling the author in tone or tint of mind” (*Opinions* 120). Kinbote is an excellent example of such resemblance. He inherits from his creator an uncontainable imagination and fervent passion to tell others about a life that was supposedly snatched away from him, dwelling on the same sense of loss that Nabokov too confronted.

Kinbote’s ignorance about American culture is one of many flaws that impede his assimilation. When he looks at Shade’s “Line 130: I never bounced a ball or swung a bat,” his lack of knowledge in the area of American sports is obvious: “Frankly I too never excelled in soccer and cricket” (*Pale* 117). The poet’s allusion to basketball and baseball becomes soccer and cricket in Kinbote’s version—two European sports that are familiar to him. Furthermore, Kinbote repeatedly relies on his faulty memory for answers, as when he provides a short summary of the life and works of Robert Frost: “Frost is the author of one of the greatest short poems in the English language, a poem that every American boy knows by heart, about the wintry woods, and the dreary dusk, and the little horsebells of gentle remonstrance in the dull darkening air” (*Pale* 203). In addition to the non-scholarly tone of this supposed academic, Kinbote presents Frost’s “harness bells” as “horsebells.” The Zemblan king makes a similar error when recalling the conversation that he and Shade had one evening, during which Kinbote entertained Shade “with tales of Zembla and harebreath escapes!” (*Pale* 185). In this instance Kinbote boasts of his verbal acuity but renders “hair’s breadth” with the malapropism “harebreath.” The critics who suggest that Nabokov “conveys some of his own desire to

recover a past lived in another language” may agree that the same desire is a driving force behind Kinbote’s exasperated need to bestow upon himself a status of importance (Besemeres 396). In Kinbote’s case, however, everything that can restore memories of his lost world, like Shade’s poem, is tremendously exaggerated, and while Kinbote’s English effectively conveys the depths of his sorrow, it also effectively discredits him as a reliable scholar and translator.

Kinbote’s vague translations between English and Zemblan demonstrate his carelessness toward his acquired language. The way that the narrator introduces various translations into the text is also reminiscent of translations in *Pnin*. Zemblan words are often followed by English translations enclosed in parenthesis: “sampel (‘silktail’),” “situla (toy pail),” “harvalda (the heraldic one)” (*Pale* 73, 125, 172). In his analysis of the novel, Boyd enumerates multiple reasons that indicate the narrator’s astonishing unreliability and identifies Kinbote as someone who “does not bother to trace sources in the original language, fails to identify natural objects, and misconstrues the mores and milieu of his poet because he is too preoccupied with his own Zembla” (*Magic* 69). Indeed, Kinbote’s Ruritanian fantasy becomes the sole purpose of his existence, during which the mind of a madman invents the most incredible fantasies. In *Foreword* to Shade’s last poem, Kinbote attacks his former colleagues and Sybil Shade after they accused him of thievery. However, while others increasingly doubt his ability to present the slain poet’s manuscript to the world in a proper form, Kinbote is determined not to let these fiends succeed in re-possessing *his* treasure. If he gives up the manuscript, he might as well give up any hope for the world to learn about his Zembla:

I have reread, not without pleasure, my comments to [Shade's] lines, and in many cases have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb, and unconsciously aping the prose style of his own critical essays. (*Pale* 81).

This sentence alone proves that this is clearly someone who cannot adequately judge his own work, in which case how can he possibly do justice to somebody else's?

Kinbote's Zemblan is in many ways an unrestricted territory. This new language means freedom, more puzzles, and word games that even the most careful of readers can easily miss, as they get lost in a madman's twisted mind. How authentic is this language? Kellman's *The Translingual Imagination* states that Nabokov "does not provide enough extended specimens of Zemblan to enable a linguist to do much more than identify morphemes and speculate over cognates" (66). As extensive as Kinbote's vocabulary is, Kellman is correct in his assessment: the collection of Zemblan words and phrases might be considered passable for a preliminary orientation to a new language and its basic sounds, but is not nearly sufficient for this language to be studied seriously.

Nevertheless, Kinbote is tirelessly introducing as much Zemblan as he can, making sure that readers know that *kinbote* is "regicide," *grados* is "tree," and *vebodard* is "upland pastures" (*Pale* 267, 93, 136). His interpretation of Shade's poem, which (as usual) has nothing to do with the meaning that the poet intended, allows readers a glimpse of how Kinbote's mind prioritizes the languages. The following passage is a rare moment in the poem when Shade alludes to Kinbote:

Nor can one help the exile, the old man

Dying in a motel, with the loud fan
Revolving in the torrid prairie night
And, from the outside, bits of colored light
Reaching his bed like dark hands from the past
Offering gems; and death is coming fast.
He suffocates and conjures in two tongues
The nebulae dilating in his lungs. (*Pale* 609-616)

Ironically, Kinbote fails to recognize himself in these lines and ponders over those “two tongues” that the poet mentions, coming up with an impressive list of seventeen pairs of different languages, in which “English” is usually paired with an Eastern European language. Curiously, the pair “English and Russian” dominates the list by occurring four times, whereas Zemblan (paired with English) is mentioned only once.

“Magic Zemblan” appears in the text in an effort to solidify Kinbote’s claim of being the descendent of a royal bloodline as he reminisces about his escape through the mountains (*Pale* 242). The Zemblan verse, inserted by Kinbote, offers a preview of its supposedly beautiful sound: “Id wodo bin, war id lev lan, / Indran iz lil ut roz nitran” (*Pale* 242). Several examples that Kinbote provides demonstrate the language that appears to be more of Germanic origin than Slavic, which is another reason why critics tend to disagree on how Zemblan should be studied. For instance, Meyer writes that the language can and should be looked at for a number of connections purposefully developed by Nabokov. To support this theory, he points to Zemblan words like *grad* (“city” in Old Russian) which allude to a connection with Viking culture (Meyer 90).

Others, like Kellman, insist that Zemblan is no more but “a symptom of Kinbote’s pathological inability to distinguish fantasy from verity” and that “those who plumb the Zemblan mind by analyzing the language’s pronoun distributions, subject-object functions, or structure of tenses exhibit something of the same disorder” (66-67). At one instance, during one of his many lengthy monologues, Kinbote unexpectedly lapses into Russian or something that resembles Russian: “Would they shoot me at once—or would they smuggle the chloroformed scholar back to Zembla, Rodnaya Zembla, to face there a dazzling decanter and a row of judges exulting in their inquisitorial chairs?” (*Pale* 96-97). What remains unclear is whether “Rodnaya Zembla” is one of those instances where Zemblan and Russian happen to share vocabulary: *zemlya* (without ‘b’) is “the land” in Russian and *rodnaya* is “my own.” The way in which Kinbote cries out for his homeland reveals his private pain, and the phrase he uses sounds suspiciously Russian. Wouldn’t a true patriot cry out for his beloved home, his crown, his lost kingdom in Zemblan? Or at least with a phrase that is unique to *his* language and not to the language of those who assisted in his dethronement?

As if the invention of Zemblan were not enough to disorient the audience, Kinbote mentions the existence of two other “languages” in the narrative: “a BIC language” and the special version of “broken English” which the spies use (*Pale* 215). The meaning of the BIC acronym is never clarified, but in Véra Nabokov’s Russian translation of *Pale Fire* BIC stands for “Behind the Iron Curtain,” though it remains unclear whether it stands for the language of the Soviet Union or some other country from the Soviet Block. As for the “broken English,” Kinbote meticulously outlines the

complex system of communication in the language between Gradus and the spies at the Zemblan agency:

Under the assumption that it would attract less attention than a BIC language, the conspirators conducted telephone conversations in English—broken English, to be exact, with one tense, no articles, and two pronunciations, both wrong. . . . using two different sets of code words—headquarters, for instance, saying ‘bureau’ for ‘king,’ and Gradus saying ‘letter,’ they enormously increased the difficulty of communication. Each side, finally, had forgotten the meaning of certain phrases pertaining to the other’s vocabulary so that in result, their tangled and expensive talk combined charades with an obstacle race in the dark. (*Pale* 215)

The ex-king’s self-proclaimed abilities as a great translator destroy any faith in the truthfulness of his narrative. His egocentric motives and translations (or rather retranslations) are not just incorrect, they are preposterous. Kellman asserts that “the imperfection of linguistic transposition is a reminder of the flaws in all communication and of the incommensurability of Self and Other” (68). The biggest *faux pas* that Kinbote commits is failure to accurately translate the passage from William Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* from which Shade presumably borrowed his poem’s title. If a lazy reader is likely to overlook many parallels and allusions between Shakespeare’s last and incomplete play and Shade’s final poem, a literary scholar and critic cannot miss the connection. The Zemblan version of *Timon Afinsken* happens to be with Kinbote at most crucial moments of his life: during his escape from the palace and his work on the

commentary. Still, Kinbote has no clue about the connection between Shade's poem and Shakespeare's play. Without a library to consult in "the desolate log cabin," he only has his copy of Shakespeare's play in Zemblan, and he does not bother to look inside for answers: "All I have with me is a tiny vest pocket edition of *Timon of Athens*—in Zemblan! It certainly contains nothing that could be regarded as an equivalent of 'pale fire' (if it had, my luck would have been a statistical monster)" (*Pale* 285). Kinbote's unreliable memory hence becomes his library: "I am compelled for the purpose of quick citation to retranslate this passage into English prose from a Zemblan poetical version of *Timon* which, I hope, sufficiently approximates the text, or is at least faithful to its spirit" (*Pale* 79-80). This sufficient approximation of a classic text is what ends up in an allegedly scholarly edition of Shade's last work: the passage that has been translated from English into Zemblan by Kinbote's maternal uncle Conmal is now being translated back from Zemblan into English by his indefatigable nephew. The best way to check for the inaccuracies in Kinbote's version is to read both poems—Shakespeare's original and Kinbote's retranslation of Conmal's translation—just like Kinbote hopes the reader will read Shade's poem and his commentary: side by side. The following is Kinbote's retranslated version:

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea
and robs it. The moon is a thief:
he steals his silvery light from the sun.

The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon. (*Pale* 80)

This is Shakespeare's original text from Act IV of *Timon of Athens*:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears. (439-443)

In Kinbote's retranslation, Shakespeare's "pale fire" becomes "silvery light," while "sun" and "moon" swap genders: "sun" takes on a masculine gender and "moon" takes on a feminine gender. Incidentally, in Russian *solnce* (sun) is of a neutral gender, while *luna* (moon), just like Kinbote decides for it to be, is of a feminine gender. This deranged royal and "a literary thief" thus outdoes himself by butchering the poems by these two bards while "seeking to redirect the rays of Shade's genius in order to illuminate his own Zemblan idyll" (Glynn 83).

Some critics point out that "in the case of Nabokov, all of whose work engages the problematic of exile and belonging both thematically and . . . strategically, humor plays a characteristically modernist role" (English 77). Kinbote's inaccuracies when translating Shakespearean verse do not keep him from mocking the Shadows who mistranslate the letter, written by Queen Disa in English to her imprisoned husband. Intercepted by the Shadows, this letter is "translated into crude Zemblan by a Hindu member of the Extremist party" (*Pale* 205). The letter is then read to Kinbote, who praises himself for noticing the errors that guards failed to identify after re-Englishing the letter back from Zemblan. These translations between languages are curiously reminiscent of Nabokov's recollections when composing various versions of his

memoirs: writing his biography in English—*Conclusive Evidence* (1951), then translating it into Russian—*Drugie Berega (Other Shores)*, 1954), and then re-translating it from Russian back to English—*Speak, Memory* (1967). Nabokov describes the difficulties that he encountered when compiling the final version:

This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before. (*Memory* 12-13)

Nabokov writes that the process of “switching from one [language] to another by means of spasmodic jumps causes a kind of mental asthma” (*Selected Letters* 42). The complex process of switching back and forth between languages is not something that Kinbote, whose own identity is not translating well, successfully accomplishes, but in his typical self-adoring fashion, he easily convinces himself of the opposite.

Through the characters that seem perpetually lost in their surroundings and lack necessary communication skills, Nabokov addresses the common problems of an unsuccessful and undesired emigration. The Russian-born writer expresses compassion for his fellow countrymen by depicting their inner struggle, the same struggle that remains a mystery to those who never experience the uncertainty of having no permanent home. Nabokov’s private correspondence sheds some light on how conflicted and insecure he feels about himself as an American writer, and these are the same insecurities, perhaps somewhat exaggerated, which he imparts to his characters. For instance, Wilson’s praise over the fact that “[Nabokov] should write such fine English

prose and not sound like any other English writer, but be able to do [his] own kind of thing so subtly and completely” is accepted with both gratitude and self-doubt (Karlinsky 49). That first year in the United States, the burden of having “no relation with [his] Russian muse” weighed heavily upon his mind, while his desire to compose in English became stronger (Karlinsky 46). Aware of the American public’s perception of him as a foreigner, Nabokov had to make sacrifices: *Dar (The Gift)*, composed in 1938, was his last novel written in Russian. The success of his literary career paved the way, however, for numerous translations, among which the most notable was his Russian version of *Lolita* (1967).

The language becomes an obsession that, as a polyglot, Nabokov passes to many of his characters, including Pnin and Kinbote. The memory of Humbert Humbert’s famous rant after he loses his nymphet comes to mind: “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (*Lolita* 32). In a sense, Pnin and Kinbote are also left to play with words. In his study of exiled writers, Tucker suggests that:

. . . when a writer begins to write in the adopted language of his new country, he may well be stating that he has reached the end of his exile, that he is now associating himself with a new identity, a *word* no longer foreign to him. In this sense, a writer transcends exile once he adopts the home of a new language.

(xxiii)

However, after beginning to write in English professionally, Nabokov not only does not stop writing in Russian but accepts the fact that his responsibilities doubled. Throughout his career, he remains conscious of how his novels will be perceived by Russians readers,

as well as how his English-speaking audience will interpret many allusions and references to Russia in his work. Beaujour writes that “it was not enough for Nabokov to *wish* to abandon Russian and Russia, justifying his apostasy with the reasoning that Russian had betrayed him first. Russia and Russian seemed unwilling to allow themselves to be abandoned” (93). The Russian language is an integral part of his identity as a writer. Nonetheless, many recognize that Nabokov “rejected the premise of linguistic determinism that our language defines our world” and insisted “that we think outside any language” (Kellman 70). In one interview, Nabokov commented on the subject of the language: “I don’t think in any language. I think in images” (*Opinions* 14). Each letter of the alphabet has a particular color and shade—the components that help create images in his mind. This phenomenon echoes the ideas of French Symbolism and in particular Charles Baudelaire’s poetics of synesthesia. This connection between language and imagination is a key concept in Nabokov’s work that helps to reassess the troubled moments of the characters’ lives before setting them off on the journey, where they must reach into the past in order to make sense of the present.

Chapter Three

The Nightmare of a “Displaced Soul”

In his Russian poem “The Execution” (1927) Nabokov credits the state of exile with a feeling of safety, paradoxically threatened by the kind of “fertile nostalgia” that comes to torment the poet during his life as an exile (*Opinions* 49). This poem addresses a fundamental conflict in an exile’s identity by describing a man who, after settling in a new country, still dreams about returning to the place where he was born. The poet is not intimidated even by death, which in a sense becomes his macabre desire:

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. (*Poems* 1-4)

The last stanza focuses on the poet’s need to smell racemosas one last time. The blooming of racemosas is associated with spring and hope, so that if one’s life is the price to be paid for racemosas’ sweet smell, then the poet is willing to part with it: “Russia, the stars, the night of execution / and full of racemosas the ravine!” (*Poems* 19-20). The “fortunate protection” that exile offers threatens the poet’s inner peace, sending him on a journey toward the places and people he once knew. In his idiosyncratic memoir, Nabokov once again turns to the figure of Sirin, identifying him as one of the exiled Russian writers of the young generation who was “the loneliest and most arrogant one . . . until he vanished as strangely as he had come . . . Across the dark sky of exile . . . like a

meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness” (*Memory* 287-288). The illusion of his old creative self, his once established literary identity vanishing indicates of Nabokov’s desire to start anew—the opportunity that America offers to all immigrants. The author arrives in the United States, while Sirin, a shadow of a disappeared writer, everything about whom “was bound to offend Russian convention,” follows him closely on this path toward self-invention (*Memory* 287). Quite similarly, the characters from his novels are often incapable of escaping their shadows, which stalk them as ominous reminders of their old lives.

Nabokov’s treatment of memory is that of a meticulous owner who knows every item in his treasure chest:

I keep the tools of my trade, memories, experiences, sharp shining things, constantly around me, upon me, within me, the way instruments are stuck into the loops and flaps of a mechanician’s magnificently elaborate overalls. (*Opinions* 155)

In his novels, memory not only functions as a stable link to the past, designated to reveal a person’s darkest secrets, but also acts as a catalyst in setting off chains of events which come to test a character’s sanity. In her comparison of Nabokov and Joyce, McCarthy writes: “If a self-banished Joyce was making a one-man literary revolution, Nabokov, a genuinely displaced person, has been trying throughout his career to make a one-man literary restoration, using his prodigious memory to undo the present” (*Prose* 76-77). This “prodigious memory” is a complex mechanism with the wheels constantly at work bringing back the most obscure memories. This attention to detail is a result of a brilliant

collaboration between memory and imagination. After all, Nabokov states that “imagination is a form of memory . . . An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory . . . both memory and imagination are a negation of time” (*Opinions* 78). *Speak, Memory*, a memoir rich with poignant imagery, serves as the best example of such collaboration.

Rivers and Nicol aptly describe Nabokov’s unique interpretation of his personal history:

[He] transforms a set of memories, frequently unattractive and painful, by imaginatively synthesizing them with later experience and associations . . . it is the artist in him who attempts, in both the autobiography and the fiction, to save his childhood in Russia by subduing the demons of an estranged world. (50)

Such synthesis blurs the borders between fact and fiction as Nabokov’s autobiography does not exactly save his childhood, as the critics suggest, but rather reinvents it. Like everything else in his fiction, the many parallels between his life in Russia and the lives of the characters in his novels are filtered through the prism of his later experiences. To deal with the loss that defines him as an artist, Nabokov finds strength in the memories of his happy childhood that led to an uncertain and chaotic youth. He resents the notion that a character has any power to dictate to the writer his or her next action. Nabokov considers the idea preposterous, emphasizing that he is the “perfect dictator in that private world” in which he and he alone is “responsible for its stability and truth” (*Opinions* 69). He manipulates the characters’ memories to reveal their darkest secrets, running them into corners and forcing them to confront their pasts, thus making sure that the reader is

always aware who is in charge. The central voice is the voice of an author, and “within each novel, his self-conscious devices—the intrusive authorial voice, allusions, verbal games and reflexive patterns—call attention to the circumscribed realm of the novelist’s authority” (Pifer 56).

Pnin’s Imaginary Encounters

In the case of Timofey Pnin, the professor who is determined to persevere in the face of never-ending disasters, Nabokov’s dictatorship is particularly extreme. According to Stegner, Pnin’s inner strength is what keeps the novel from “turning into nothing more than sentimental bathos,” presenting instead “a moving portrait of an unself-pitying victim whose victimization *matters*” (97). Pnin, with his “nostalgic excursions in broken English” and “pear-shaped tears” trickling down his cheeks, must overcome the senselessness of political upheavals in his country which forever altered the course of his life (*Pnin* 11, 12). Memories allow him to re-visit the world that is populated with people who are no longer living, places that no longer exist, dreams that can never be accomplished. This is a world populated with the shadows of places and faces he once knew, the world where nothing is real. Quite often, what begins as an innocent memory of a childhood event turns into a horrific vision, unleashing demons and luring Pnin into the abyss where he cannot control what happens. At times like this, Pnin is at his most vulnerable: “And suddenly Pnin (was he dying?) found himself sliding back into his own childhood. This sensation had the sharpness of retrospective detail that is said to be the dramatic privilege of drowning individuals” (*Pnin* 21). Strong emotions lead to seizure and after a short reprieve, return with vengeance. When he is getting

ready to present his lecture, Pnin recognizes faces of his dead relatives and friends in the audience. This vision, fueled by the knowledge of injustice that was done to these people, re-opens old wounds: “Murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people” (*Pnin* 27).

Memories disrupt the order of Pnin’s world, where “past and present are telescoped together” and where he is no more than an idle witness (Clancy 118). Stegner asserts that Pnin “suffers for a *real* exile, for a *complete* loss of home and cultural ties, for 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” (101). Psychologically, Pnin is still very much a prisoner, and though his escape to the United States ensures safety, fears resurface, bringing along with them an avalanche of memories. During the reunion with his old friends at The Pines, he is forced to confront the memory of Mira Belochkin, executed at a concentration camp during the Second World War. Everything about Mira, whose very name suggests non-violence (*mir* is “peace” and *belochka* is a diminutive for “squirrel”), exemplifies this woman’s kind nature and makes her murder so much more horrific. Lurking in the background, squirrels create a strong symbolic imagery, reinforcing both the haunting image of young Mira and Pnin’s guilt for not knowing the exact circumstances of her death: “Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again” (*Pnin* 135). A disturbing variation of death sequence hints at the absolute loneliness of this man, as he cheerlessly wanders through the alleys at The Pines, where the natural world

mirrors his pain with the image of a “dying” sky (*Pnin* 136). One way to cope with the depression that unexpectedly overcomes him is to believe that the dead do go on in some way: “He did not believe in an autocratic God. He did believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts. The souls of the dead, perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended to the destinies of the quick” (*Pnin* 136). A victim of two totalitarian regimes, Pnin hopes for a democratic society in death: the society that will bring back his companionship with dear old friends.

In a letter to Pascal Covici, the editor at Viking Press, Nabokov mentions the original ending of *Pnin*: “Then, at the end of the novel, I, V.N., arrive in person to Waindell College to lecture on Russian Literature, while poor Pnin dies, with everything unsettled and uncompleted, including the book Pnin had been writing all his life” (*Selected Letters* 143). Why was the author so keen on killing off one of his most endearing literary creations? Could it be because, rationally, Nabokov could not envision Pnin transcending the hardships of exile experience? Pnin appears too child-like in the society where nobody aside from Victor truly cares about him. Where does he get his strength? Stegner answers this question with the observation that Pnin’s “response to suffering is not a self-destructive howl at past horrors, but a legitimate and admirable refuge in the antithesis of nightmare—the beauty of Russian lore and literature, the aesthetics of art” (101). The memories of places where he grew up are so strong in his mind that Pnin sees it as his duty to carry on the tradition. Nabokov cleverly juxtaposes Pnin, whose heartache for Russia is genuine, with Liza, who belongs to a completely different category of émigrés, for whom Russia is no more than “a sad stylized toy” that

she can miss in her dramatic fashion (*Pnin* 45). Clancy suggests that, just as with Nabokov, imagination is a key concept in understanding Pnin's interpretation of the world: "For Pnin imagination is almost inseparable from the real life which surrounds him; it is the narrator who coldly discriminates between them for us. Time for Pnin is not linear; the past can coexist with the present" (117).

Pnin's American dream to own a house is a defining element of his character. Throughout the novel, as he changes one room after another, lovingly "pninizing" each in his own inimitable fashion, the last house that he rents is the one where he hopes to settle down for good. Boyd accurately identifies Pnin's American exile as a "series of rented rooms in other people's homes" (*American* 275). When Pnin rents out a room at the Clements' house, he is described as "more of a poltergeist than a lodger" (*Pnin* 39). Quite appropriately, Pnin's very arrival in the United States begins with his detainment on Ellis Island after his imprudent discussion with immigration authorities on the subject of anarchism. This temporary residence under the cloud of suspicion from the government officials is the first in a long list of temporary lodgings. This makes Pnin's realization at the end of the novel that he once again must pack up and leave, looking for someplace new, especially bittersweet. According to McCarthy, having a permanent residence in a foreign country might stop one from becoming a *true exile*—someone who prefers "transient accommodations . . . like Nabokov at the Hotel Montreux-Palace in Montreux. If an exile buys a house or takes a long lease on a flat, it's a sign that he's no longer a true exile" (*Prose* 72). Nabokov justified his preference for hotels: "It simplifies postal matters, it eliminates the nuisance of private ownership, it confirms me in my

favorite habit—the habit of freedom” (*Opinions* 149). By bestowing upon Nabokov the status of *true exile*, McCarthy’s theory grants the same status to his fictional creation, Pnin. He too exercises a “habit of freedom” by not signing a lease. His decision to leave Waindell College becomes the assertion of his individuality, as well as an opportunity to start again. As Pnin’s “little sedan boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, sputtered up the shining road,” the narrator witnesses one man’s silent triumph by remaining true to his principles and refusing to work under someone (the narrator) whom he does not respect (*Pnin* 191).

Pnin’s Russian friends share his love for the language, literature, and Russian culture in general as well as understand the challenges that one faces after the transatlantic journey. More importantly, they share his love for America. At the party hosted by Al Cook, Pnin is delighted to find himself surrounded by his friends, most of whom he has known for years. Through their acceptance of him, Pnin undergoes a transformation from a clumsy émigré into a full-fledged member of this Russian-American society. In the matter of several pages, his awkwardness disappears as he is taken seriously by those around him, just as the narrator informs the audience of how comfortable Pnin looks during the game of cricket: “From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, [Pnin] changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback” (*Pnin* 130). He becomes a successfully adapted émigré who impresses the crowd by arriving at the party driving his own vehicle. Boyd interprets the scene at The Pines as redemption for the character who has been wearing a clown mask far too long,

forced to entertain the audience with his pidgin English. Boyd also remarks about the change in the professor's conduct that cannot go unnoticed:

Among those who share his background, his precise knowledge of Russian culture . . . suddenly seems of the highest value. His language becomes graceful, dignified, and witty, and the pedantry he shares here with his peers no longer seems misplaced fussiness but rather the index of a well-stocked mind with a passion for accuracy. (*American* 275)

The accepting atmosphere at The Pines presents the readers with a different Pnin—comfortable and confident—the characteristics that again resurface when Pnin hosts the party for his American colleagues.

The relationship between Pnin and the narrator is an unresolved mystery of the novel. The author's self-proclaimed guilt over his affair with Pnin's ex-wife Liza, which led to her suicide attempt, may explain the consistency with which he strives but fails to win Pnin's friendship. Pnin keeps the narrator at a distance for reasons that are not clearly explained, vehemently protesting the stories about their past encounters in St. Petersburg, as if deeply embarrassed by the history that they share: "He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor (*on uzhasniy vidumshchik*)" (*Pnin* 185). A more accurate translation for Pnin's "*uzhasniy vidumshchik*" would have been an "incurable embellisher," or as Gennady Barabtarlo suggests, "incorrigible fabricator" (160). It is almost as if Pnin dislikes the narrator only because Liza cannot forgive him for her humiliation, thus rejecting the narrator's every attempt to mend their broken friendship.

The narrator, who according to Boyd is different from Nabokov and also “lacks Pnin’s moral fineness,” is remarkably persistent in his efforts to befriend Pnin (*American* 277). Nevertheless, Pnin’s answer is categorical: “We are friends, but there is one thing perfectly certain. I will never work under [the narrator]” (*Pnin* 170). Toward the end of the novel, the character of Vladimir Vladimirovich gradually “comes to occupy more and more of the centre of the novel’s attention until, at the end, Pnin is merely glimpsed in passing, momentarily, as he leaves the town in his absurd motor car, on his way to no one knows where” (Clancy 122). Tempting as it may be to identify the narrator with the author, there is something insincere in his eagerness to be Pnin’s friend. Besides, *real* Nabokov would not have had to try so hard only to fail so miserably.

Pnin’s attitude toward other émigrés, outside of those with whom he interacts at The Pines, is not that simple. The division between the Whites and the Reds is the primary reason for his hostility toward Komarov. The echoes of the Russian Civil War (1917-1923), which divided the country and claimed the lives of millions, permanently placed these Russians in two different camps. Their conversation that revolves around the whereabouts of an encyclopedic volume (*ZFL*), which Pnin is diligently tracking down before realizing that he was the one who requested it from the library, turns into an angry argument. Pnin’s “rather discourteous manner of address” in using Komarov’s last name (incidentally, *komar* is “gnat” in Russian) indicates his low opinion of his colleague, whom he addresses by neither pre-Revolutionary *Gospodin* (Sir) nor by the Soviet *Tovarisch* (Comrade) (*Pnin* 72). Komarov, the Cossack’s son and an ardent admirer of both the Red Army and the Russian Church—two organizations that seem

mutually exclusive—detests Pnin who, unlike him, comes from the Russian upper class. His choice to reply to Pnin’s question in both languages demonstrates the depth of his contempt. Their relationship of “a subdued state of war” is justified by Pnin’s hatred for the Soviet devotee who interprets his life in the United States as a gift to “the benighted American people” (*Pnin* 72, 71). Nabokov’s own frustration over the multifaceted masses of Russians arriving to the United States can be felt in Pnin’s quiet abhorrence.

Many of Pnin’s American colleagues and students are genuinely sympathetic to his problems. Laurence and Joan Clements are among Pnin’s strongest supporters and “appreciate Pnin at his unique Pninian worth,” and though he continuously refers to Mrs. Clements as “John,” Joan Clements is not at all bothered by her lodger’s peculiarities (*Pnin* 39). One episode that illuminates Pnin’s devastating loneliness takes place shortly after Liza’s visit, when Joan hopes to cheer up the distraught man with “a cartoon drawing of a desert island with palm tree, shipwrecked sailor, and mermaid” (*Pnin* 60). The drawing produces an opposite effect on Pnin, who knows all too well the emotional implications of a human being left alone in unknown territory. Can something as cruel as that be amusing? Pnin’s keen observation that this tiny island cannot exist in the enormity of the ocean and not be destroyed is, in many ways, an outcry of his soul: “Impossible isolation!” (*Pnin* 60). After dismissing Joan’s appeal to recognize the humor and concluding that Mikhail Lermontov “expressed everything about mermaids in only two poems,” Pnin breaks into sobs (*Pnin* 61). He must be mentally identifying the “mermaids” of his life—Mira and Liza—both of whom abandoned him. The memory brings back the images of life’s injustices, while the narrator creates a parallel between

two “lore’s”: Joan’s “Lore”—a nickname for her husband Laurence—and Pnin’s “lore”—his “paradise of Russian lore” (*Pnin* 101). Furthermore, “lore” echoes Lorelei, a German mermaid famous for luring sailors on the Rhine to their deaths, much like a Greek siren or the Russian mythological “Sirin,” Nabokov’s early literary pseudonym. Page Stegner suggests that “the difference between Nabokov and his characters is obviously that [Nabokov] possesses an artistic obsession, and is not possessed by it” (133). The preservation of the “Russian lore” that represents traditions of vanishing Russia, ignited by fears that the Bolsheviks would eradicate the essence of his country, becomes Pnin’s obsession. As he leaves Waindell, Pnin is ready to once again discover new possibilities, while Cockerell is stuck performing the cartoonish version of Pnin—the only role at which he excels. The reappearance of Pnin in *Pale Fire*, as the chair of the Russian Department at Wordsmith University, reaffirms his later success in life, though he is yet again looked down upon by a countryman, this time Kinbote.

Private ghosts and obsessions preoccupy Pnin’s life as he marches to his unique tune all the way into Nabokov’s other novel. His philosophy in life is simple: “the history of man is the history of pain” (*Pnin* 279). Some critics even suggest that the sound of Pnin’s last name evokes the word *pain*, but this is perhaps an exaggeration: Pnin’s last name has the same root as the Russian word *pen’*—“a tree stump,” and in a way “stump” serves as a metaphor for Pnin’s short uncomfortable last name instead of a longer and more traditional one². The clown in the opening chapters of the novel, he

² Historically, the Russian nobility gave its illegitimate children surnames which were shortened, missing the first key syllables which would have linked these children to their noble fathers. This was the case with Ivan Pnin (1773-1805), a Russian poet and the illegitimate son of Prince Nikolai Repnin (1734-1801). Ivan Pnin is not related to Nabokov’s fictional Timofey Pnin.

undergoes a transformation that uncovers a gentle soul, an indomitable spirit, and a tremendous will power. Pnin's genuine interest in America is continuously reinforced as he comes to admire little things, like fascinating gadgets that make his life a little easier. His new set of plastic teeth enralls him: "It was a revelation, it was a sunrise, it was a firm mouthful of efficient, alabastrine, humane America" (*Pnin* 38). He not only refuses to dwell on the pain of his losses but is determined to make the United States of America his new home. In one interview, Nabokov refers to himself as "an American writer raised in Russia, educated in England, imbued with the culture of Western Europe" who is "aware of the blend, but even the most lucid plum pudding cannot sort out its own ingredients, especially whilst the pale fire still flickers around it" (*Opinions* 192). Pnin, like his creator, is a complex pudding.

Kinbote's Hallucinatory Present Meets His Invented Past

In his lecture "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," published posthumously in *Lectures on Literature* (1980), Nabokov articulates the difference between a madman and an artist: "A madman is reluctant to look at himself in the mirror because the face he sees is not his own: his personality is beheaded; that of the artist is increased" (*Lectures* 377). This description ideally reflects Kinbote's skewed perception of himself—an exiled Russian émigré who is masterfully disguised as a main character in the fantastic adventures of Charles the Beloved. Nabokov is a perfect author to create an unbalanced character such as Kinbote, as he jokes about the presence of madness in his own life: "My habitual hallucinations are quite monstrously sufficient, thank Hades. Looking at it objectively, I have never seen a more lucid, more lonely, better balanced mad mind than

mine” (*Opinions* 129). In his usual way, Nabokov provides plenty of clues early in the novel that disclose the narrator’s state of escalating madness. Most notably, one of Kinbote’s acquaintances hints that something does not seem right about him: “You are a remarkably disagreeable person. I fail to see how John and Sybil can stand you. . . . What’s more, you are insane” (*Pale* 25). Irritated by this “tabulation of nonsense,” Kinbote dismisses the comment, justifying his sanity by friendship with John Shade: how can a poet of this fame and stature choose a lunatic for a friend? As these men strive to make some kind of order in their lives, the “awareness of chaos, insoluble mysteries, and irrational hopes and agonies . . . are openly exploited” in both Kinbote’s and Shade’s texts (Bader 47). Everything about Kinbote suggests the chaotic and irrational, the spontaneous and erratic, the curious and invented. These are the same qualities that trigger a flux of memories with dark and unmanageable force that determines the course of his life. Memories play an important role in his deluded mind by shielding him from the real world, introducing adventure into his life, and helping him to feel like *his* reality matters.

Kinbote’s conviction that the Shadows will eventually hunt him down is responsible for his living in fear and derangement. Almost everyone around him is perceived as an adversary, so that when he discovers an anonymous note in his pocket informing him that he has “hal.....s real bad,” he is quick to interpret the word as “hallucinations” instead of “halitosis” (*Pale* 98). This simple misunderstanding (and Kinbote’s miscounting of the omitted letters) offers an insight into the mind of a very troubled individual who is rightly paranoid about losing his sanity. Kinbote’s main

concern, however, is with the legacy that he must leave to the world by linking his Zemblan past with the fame of a slain poet. He is mad. He is desperate. He is determined to authenticate his fantasies for the sake of self-elevation. Boyd aptly assesses Kinbote's paranoia:

Kinbote lives within a complex and intricate network of delusions typical of the classical paranoiac. Not only do his delusions have the fixity and logical coherence of all paranoia, but he even manifests in rotation the symptoms of all three main kinds: the grandiose, the persecutory, and the erotic. (*American* 433)

The paranoia so grossly distorts his present that as the commentary comes to consume his time and mind, reality matters less and less, until one can no longer recognize Russia in Zembla, the Soviets in the Shadows, Jack Grey in Gradus, and Professor Botkin in a disgruntled ex-king. Clancy states that "memory, the exile's refuge and one particular form and function of the imagination, is more powerful, more 'real', than reality . . . and can recreate a world fuller and more intense than that in which the memory is actually operating" (7). Kinbote's mind works tirelessly to construct a reality that only he can interpret.

Kinbote attempts to define reality in relation to Shade's poem with the statement that gives an equal importance to the primary text (Shade's poem) and secondary sources (Kinbote's foreword, commentary, and index):

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his . . . has to depend entirely on the

reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. (*Pale* 28-29)

However, Kinbote's extra work focuses on *his* reality and not that of his friend's, so the poem, according to this line of reasoning, is still left without "human reality." In his lecture Nabokov notes that "madness is but a diseased bit of commonsense, whereas genius is the greatest sanity of the spirit" (*Lectures* 377). Desperate to achieve greatness by exploiting his dead friend's legacy, Kinbote uses Shade's unexpected death as a convenient opportunity to promote his own story. The reality for Kinbote is his much less glamorous-self, profound dissatisfaction with being ordinary, and lack of any extraordinary potential to rise above the common folk. As a result, Kinbote's flamboyant, homosexual, vegetarian, and voyeuristic life is rife with unbelievable escapades.

The only advantage that the narrator's real self has over an imagined persona of Zemblan king is Botkin's very real future, whereas his alter-ego, Kinbote, can only achieve freedom in death. At one instance, when the dethroned monarch recalls his escape from the palace through the secret passage—the journey down the same tunnel that he made with his friend, Oleg, many years before—he names death as the only alternative to freedom. His nostalgic reminiscences envy the deceased: they are free of the torment of everyday life. Kinbote speaks of his friend's ghost as "the phantom of freedom" after noticing a "thirty-year-old patterned imprint of Oleg's shoe" in the sand (*Pale* 132, 133). Boyd also defines "the king's transition from Zembla to Appalachia" as a transition "from one world to another, from life to death" (*American* 451). There is no

other way for Kinbote to finish his life but by terminating it; his claim that he “may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art” alludes to the émigrés’ experiences of both Nabokov and Botkin (*Pale* 301). Nabokov later confirms that sad outcome of his wandering Zemblan: “Kinbote committed suicide (and he certainly did after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem)” (*Opinions* 74).

Boyd observes that Nabokov “treats art as the essence of our human urge to make sense of our lives, to find a shape and permanency to resist the accident and transience of life” (*Shade and Shape* 2). For Kinbote, whose Zemblan past is more exciting than his present, migration increases his isolation from society, and the only object of art to him is the poem. He sees no purpose in this kind of resistance. Why resist something that has been a defining element of his life in exile? Why put an end to this magnificent fantasy? Kinbote’s arrival in the United States, accomplished by parachuting “from a chartered plane piloted by Colonel Montacute, in a field of hay-feverish, rank-flowering weeds, near Baltimore” is by far more romantic than Pnin’s detention on Ellis Island (*Pale* 246). Kinbote is only comfortable when he knows (or he thinks he knows) that his unsuspecting neighbor is working on the opus that in reality has nothing to do with Kinbote’s beloved Zembla. In fact, the poet’s house matters more to Kinbote than his own “cheerless domicile” (*Pale* 90). The lines that this poet pens convey the impossibility of understanding the ordeals that people go through, and exile is certainly one such ordeal: “How ludicrous these efforts to translate / Into one’s private tongue a public fate!” (*Pale* 231-232).

Instead of reaching out to those who share his cultural background or those who can genuinely appreciate him, Kinbote yields to endless fantasies that turn him into a hermit. Even his religious convictions cannot sustain hope of a new beginning. On a day when the sun is smiling upon him, Kinbote recognizes darkness in nature but is only concerned with how it might compromise his chances of getting into heaven: “On such sunny, sad mornings I always feel in my bones that there is a chance yet of my not being excluded from Heaven, and that salvation may be granted to me despite the frozen mud and horror in my heart” (*Pale* 258). This “frozen mud” is what drives him further away from people and into seclusion, until he suffers from “the mental isolation” and “the tendency to affectlessness that are concomitants of a delusional state” (Glynn 87). Kinbote seems proud of his refusal to socialize with others and identifies himself with Timon, who leaves Athens to live in a cave in the woods. Kinbote chooses to be isolated from the society that looks down upon him, the society that he despises. His homosexuality gives him another reason not to trust people: “Kinbote is presented as a doubly isolated individual. Meaningful contact with others is made difficult not only by his elaborate regal delusions but also by his sexual predisposition” (Glynn 87). Tormented at once by desire for companionship and fears of it, this Zemblan royal is “abysmally lonely,” left to colorize his obscure black-and-white past (*American* 447).

Kinbote’s refusal to work under Pnin’s supervision at Wordsmith University reveals the deep hostility that exists between the two men, and Pnin’s exclusion of Kinbote from his circle of friends indicates that not everything is right about this so-called Zemblan. If one accepts Kinbote as mad Botkin, then he and Pnin have many

things in common: they share the same cultural background and speak the same language, and as for their political views, Kinbote's statement about Gradus with his "morbid affection for the ruddy Russia of the Soviet era" echoes Pnin's passionate dislike of the Komarovs (*Pale* 77). Why do these countrymen choose not to socialize? Is Kinbote's behavior so unstable and unpredictable that Pnin purposefully avoids him? Pnin seems better adjusted, although Kinbote describes him as "a regular martinet in regard to his underlings" and "grotesque 'perfectionist'" (*Pale* 155). Without knowing for sure who the narrator is, the audience is left to speculate about possible reasons for their animosity. The unusual quality of Kinbote's exile, which begins with his imprisonment in his palace in Zembla, perhaps alludes to Botkin's tormented days in Russia shortly after the Revolution. His paranoia progresses at the prospect of being murdered by the Shadows, this "group of especially devout Extremists" (*Pale* 150). Incidentally, everyone around Kinbote recognizes the dangers of extreme isolation from the world, yet he remains oblivious and apparently comfortable leading this kind of existence. For instance, in his detailed commentary on Shade's *Canto 3*, there is a lengthy passage (lines 503-548) which is not annotated with the usual allusions to non-existent Zembla. Ironically, the passage that escapes the commentator's attention is again one that depicts a stranger alone in an unfamiliar place:

What if there's nobody to say hullo
To the newcomer, no reception, no
Indoctrination? What if you are tossed
Into a boundless void, your bearings lost,

Your spirit stripped and utterly alone,
Your task unfinished, your despair unknown,
Your body just beginning to putresce,
A non-undressable in morning dress,
Your widow lying prone on a dim bed,
Herself a blur in your dissolving head! (*Pale* 538-547)

After reading so much into Shade's poem and searching fanatically for something that bears a faint resemblance to his life, Kinbote overlooks the passage that is about someone precisely like him. The speaker of these lines, Shade, is no stranger to despair, which perhaps explains his compassion toward Kinbote. Although Shade's frantic quest for "the dark, a tall white fountain" never consumes him the way Kinbote's obsessions dominate his world, Shade understands the emotional vacuum of Kinbote's soul. Shade's wife and daughter are the center of his universe, and even after his daughter's death he still wants to make some sense out of his life and not let daydreams overwrite reality. Kinbote has no family to support him.

Boyd looks at how differently Shade and Kinbote deal with their ordeals: "Shade tries to compensate for the limitations of his life through the control of his art; Kinbote responds to the anguish of his isolation through the removal of restraint that his madness allows" (*Shade and Shape* 2). Kinbote is painfully aware that others constantly make fun of his looks, behavior, and accent. His disappointment is evident as he recalls "a skit performed by a group of drama students" in which "[Kinbote] was pictured as a pompous woman hater with a German accent, constantly quoting Housman and nibbling raw

carrots” (*Pale* 25). Such ferocious mocking is an insult to the supposed royal, whose homosexuality is yet another secret. This attitude, shared by students and most of the faculty, drives Kinbote even further into his shell, and after being betrayed by his homosexual lovers, he focuses exclusively on one person who still remains cordial to him: John Shade, the celebrated American poet. Their friendship “on that higher, exclusively intellectual level where one can rest from emotional troubles, not share them” is the only sure thing in Kinbote’s life and, like a jealous wife, he fiercely guards it (*Pale* 27). In his mind, Kinbote is so above everyone else that when he is directly questioned on whether he was born in Russia and whether his name is an imperfect anagram for Botkin, he is annoyed: “You are confusing me with some refugee from Nova Zembla” (*Pale* 267). The truth is that he does not want to be “some refugee.” He wants to be the king; or better yet, the king in exile!

Kinbote’s obsession with Zembla is foremost an obsession with himself. Boyd defines it as “obsessive desire for attention and admiration that deep down [Kinbote] knows he does not deserve” (*Shade and Shape* 8). His life is strangely governed by his devotion to Zembla, the magic place that exists only in his mind. It creates fantasies but does not cure nightmares:

Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring of 1959, I had feared for my life. Solitude is the playfield of Satan. I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress. . . . I wish to stress that cold hard core of loneliness which is not good for a displaced soul. (*Pale* 95)

This loneliness ignites paranoia, and soon the ex-king is tormented by sleepless nights and fears of being assassinated. The only safe haven is the imagined past, where his “displaced soul” entertains no dreams about the possibility of a new life. His insomnia triggers a flood of memories which produce the opposite effect, thus aggravating him even further: “I would lie awake and breathless—as if only now living consciously through those perilous nights in my country, where at any moment, a company of jittery revolutionists might enter and hustle me off to a moonlit wall” (*Pale* 96). This recollection is reminiscent of Nabokov’s poem about his imaginary execution and slow death in the ravine with racemosas.

Kinbote thinks of Shade as a “psychological phenomenon” with a “head, containing a brain of a different brand than that of the synthetic jellies preserved in the skulls around [Shade]” and his admiration for the poet “a sort of alpine cure” (*Pale* 27). Shade becomes Kinbote’s only hope to tell his story to the masses before he takes his life. As the borders between real and unreal cease to exist, the only certain thing to him is the sight of a pensive poet working in his study, unaware of being watched. Boyd states that Kinbote’s obsession with Zembla mirrors Nabokov’s obsession with Russia: “the loss of Russia and the rise of the Soviet Union stand somewhere behind Kinbote’s sense of a lost kingdom” (*Magic* 90). The author’s individual experience in overcoming the crisis manifests itself in his depiction of the uncontrollable urge with which this desperate Zemblan wants the rest of the world to see what he lost. Life without Zembla has no meaning to him. This explains his apathy and deterministic ideas: “with no Providence the soul must rely on the dust of its husk” (note to 549) or “The more lucid and

overwhelming one's belief in Providence, the greater the temptation to get it over with, this business of life, but the greater too one's fear of the terrible sin implicit in self-destruction" (*Pale* 219). Why make an effort to live elsewhere if he can never again travel home? Nabokov inserts clues that foreshadow the event that is not in the text itself—Kinbote's suicide. In an effort to recapture his feelings toward Russia through Kinbote's obsession with his glorious wonderland, Nabokov's Russia is indeed "reflected in the looking-glass world of Zembla" (*American* 456).

The theme of the double or the Doppelgänger motif has been frequently discussed in criticism of Nabokov's work. Although Nabokov referred to the Doppelgänger motif as "a frightful bore" and (somewhat implausibly) denied that there were any doubles in his novels, this approach is a convenient device for representing an alienated or divided self. *Pnin* and *Pale Fire* both contain alienated characters, and often these characters mirror one another in some way: for example, the poet Shade is balanced by the commentator Kinbote, Nabokov writes himself into *Pnin* as its narrator, and Jack Cockerell devotes himself to mimicry of Pnin. Indeed, scholars frequently define Jack Cockerell's essential function in the novel as that of Pnin's double (*Opinions* 83). Cockerell, whose very existence depends on impersonating Pnin, creates a theater of "pninisms" that effectively strips him of his own individuality. Cockerell becomes so consumed by perfecting his parody that he is too busy to notice that his audience eventually regards him solely through the prism of his impersonations. While observing his performance, the narrator wonders "if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own

victim for that of the initial ridicule” (*Pnin* 189). Possibly Nabokov finds literary criticism devoted to the doppelganger theme “a frightful bore,” but clearly his novels play with the trope of doubling repeatedly and delightfully, as in the justly famous passage from *Lolita* in which Humbert Humbert and his nemesis/double Quilty are conflated not just in image but even in syntax: “He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us” (299).

If Nabokov resisted the analysis of his characters as doubles, he apparently embraced the related notion of “serial selves” in his works. In *Opinions* he, well, opines that “people tend to underestimate the power of [his] imagination and [his] capacity of evolving serial selves in [his] writings” (24). *Pnin* and *Kinbote* are good examples of the writer’s serial self. Some, like *Pnin*, never abandon the idea of homeland, changing every rented room to carry the essence of the past; others, like *Kinbote*, entertain no illusions and keep on migrating from place to place. As “the condition of waiting” stretches for years, *Pnin* makes an effort to embrace America, whereas *Kinbote*, for whom every other country is significantly inferior to *Zembla*, refuses to assimilate. Morton has a different perspective on *Kinbote*’s ordeal that connects the two novels: “*Kinbote*’s narrative is a rich and complex expansion of Victor Wind’s fantasy of the king-father in *Pnin* . . . yet the king in the case of *Pale Fire* can father nothing” (107). Both characters isolate themselves from the world, but if *Pnin* fights loneliness, *Kinbote* submits to it. Boyd suggests that “*Pale Fire* portrays the isolation of the soul as the fundamental condition of mortal life. Besides the necessary moral tax of privacy, our individual isolation exacts

another cost: the burden of human solitude” (*American* 447). The character’s attitude toward solitude acts as a defining factor in whether this character manages to overcome the hardships of exile or fails miserably by choosing to end it all. Memory plays cruel tricks by luring the characters into a net of hallucinations (Pnin) or sheer madness (Kinbote). Nabokov thus presents these characters poised precariously between a tormenting past and an ominous future. Kinbote’s demise is understandable; Pnin’s seemingly modest survival becomes heroic.

Chapter Four

The Exiled Writer and His Audiences

Nabokov wrote “mainly for artists, fellow-artists and follow-artists” (*Opinions* 41). He expects that his books will be devoured by intellectuals and artistic individuals who recognize his authority and value art. In one interview, the author is precise when declaring his audience:

My books, all of my books, are addressed not to ‘dunderheads’; not to the cretins who believe that I like long Latinate words; not to the learned loonies who find sexual or religious allegories in my fiction; no, my books are addressed to Adam von L. [Adam von Librikov is another anagram of Nabokov’s name], to my family, to a few intelligent friends, and to all my likes in all the crannies of the world, from a carrel in America to the nightmare depths of Russia. (*Opinions* 196)

When comparing Nabokov’s dictatorship of his fictional world with the set of requirements from his readers, Pifer notices that unlike realists, Nabokov does not “claim the kind of worldly authority or omnipotent social wisdom” but “deploys self-conscious artifice to trace the limits of his sphere of influence as well as the delights of artistic creation” (57). His *ideal* audience must consist of people who do not question him. Nabokov expresses hope that such an audience will regard him as a “plausible and not altogether displeasing personality” (*Opinions* 158). He seeks readers who can relate, suspend disbelief, and accept his version of the émigré’s view of the world.

Nabokov's sense of audience was surely complicated by the fact that he had two essential but very different audiences—American and Russian. His reputation as a virtuoso of English language did not keep Nabokov from maintaining the connection with his Russian readers in the United States and in the Soviet Union. His primary concern was for the readers who did not have access to his works. In her study on exiles and expatriates, McCarthy observes that “if [the exile] is an author, he has exiled himself from his audience: at home his books are banned” (*Prose* 73). This is a somewhat misleading statement, applied to Nabokov, for it implies an exile's indifference toward the readers in his home country. This was certainly not the case for Nabokov, whose abhorrence for the Soviet Union did not keep him from communicating with his readers across the globe (even behind the Iron Curtain)—the readers who recognized his talent and smuggled banned books into the country. In an interview from 1969, Nabokov alludes to “yesterday's letter from a reader in Russia” that reaffirms a correspondence with those who admire their exiled compatriot (*Opinions* 133). Nabokov acknowledges such devotion as heroism and as protest against the Communist regime: “I would like to say a lot about my heroic readers in Russia but am prevented from doing so—by many emotions besides a sense of responsibility with which I still cannot cope in any rational way” (*Opinions* 192). He must ultimately accept the fact that he is not read as widely in the language that he knows even better than the one that brought him international fame, but an enduring hope that one day things might change is ever-present in his work.

Nabokov's dream that his books would one day be available to Russian readers became reality less than a decade after his death. The second edition of *Soviet*

Encyclopedic Dictionary (a compilation volume from *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*), published in 1982, already provides the following summary of Nabokov's career: "Russian-American writer; son of V.D. Nabokov. [V.N.] wrote in Russian and English (since 1940). [V.N.] emigrated from Russia in 1919. [V.N.] emigrated to the United States in 1940" (Prokhorov 862-863). The works that are listed include *Luzhin's Defense*, *Gift*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Lolita*, and *Eugene Onegin* (translation). A short selection of his work—due, partly, to the enormous amount of information that the volume contains—at least introduces Nabokov to the Russian readers. As for the other writers' listings, an equally short overview of Bunin's career provides a summary that at least references key influences and traditions in his work. It appears that in Nabokov's case, the volume's editors did not consider it necessary, but coping with exile could have been listed as one of his work's central themes. Nabokov depicts exile as either a death sentence or opportunity, letting the audience decide whether the characters of his novels are winners or victims. Stegner claims that the fact that Pnin "never wallows in self-pity or adopts self-conscious postures and poses" is the reason he succeeds, the reason we perceive him as "more than a pathetic victim of the ambitious, self-centered, self-inflated culture to which he is exiled and in which he will always *be* an exile" (16, 98). In sharp contrast, he refers to Kinbote as a "grotesque parody of the victim, who inadvertently condemns himself for lunacy, pederasty, and halitosis" (Stegner 16). The juxtaposition of Pnin and Kinbote demonstrates how differently people cope with challenges of emigration, and why some of them succeed while others fail.

Toker suggests that “in Nabokov’s hands, the portrayal of a Russian immigrant in America becomes an inquiry into the art of exile, into the secret of any expatriate’s resilience, into the morality of this resilience, into the conflict between his qualms of conscience and love of life” (22). However, the secret of Nabokov’s own resilience during his years as an exile lies with his family—the single component that is noticeably absent from Pnin and Kinbote’s lives. Nabokov’s wife and son helped to sooth the pain of loss and disillusionment that is prevalent in these works. The family also provided support so that the artist in him was free to imagine the most extreme cases of displaced foreigners: Timofey Pnin with his “disarming old-fashioned charm” and Charles Kinbote with his fervent passion to tell the world about that “distant northern land,” his Zembla (*Pnin* 10-11, *Pale* 98). Nabokov said: “I have always maintained, even as a schoolboy in Russia, that the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance” (*Opinions* 63). Intrinsicly, his desire to merge himself in the American culture, with his wife and son by his side, helps to confront the pain that he feels over the irrationality of his father’s murder, the Revolution of 1917, and the necessity to abandon Russia.

The protagonists of *Pnin* and *Pale Fire* are less fortunate. Interestingly, in addition to sharing a common theme, these novels also share some of the structure, namely a part of the chapter (Chapter Four in *Pnin*) that Nabokov initially wrote on his index cards with the intention of using it as a potential chapter for *Pale Fire*. This chapter begins with the description of the King, Victor’s imaginary father, who prefers “the unknown quantity of exile,” and reminisces in a familiar Kinbotean fashion about his royal past (*Pnin* 85). Both works are excellent examples of Nabokov’s control of the

language, and both betray his nostalgia for Russian. This does not go unnoticed by the critics; for example, Brown writes that “it is remarkable for a writer of such foreign origin and temperament to serve as a model in many matters of style for indigenous authors” (4). Pnin’s memory of Mira Belochkin, executed by the Nazis, and Kinbote’s image of Queen Disa, abandoned at her villa on the French Riviera, personify the longing that these men have for the past that cannot be recaptured. As dissimilar as Pnin and Kinbote appear at first glance, they are determined to retain the essence of their previous lives, fully realizing the impossibility of the task. In a way, they too stand out in the crowd just like Nabokov stood out among his contemporaries.

The author’s hatred for the Soviet regime does not negate the feelings of patriotism toward his nation. Throughout his life, he claimed an apolitical position, yet remained outspoken against the political changes taking place in his home country. He was never completely cut off from Russia. In a description that evokes similarities with Pnin, McCarthy mentions that exiles are not only dependent on mail but are also “great readers of newspapers and collectors of clippings. The fact that the press of their country is censored (a corollary, evidently, of their exile) makes them more hungry for scraps of rumor and information which they can piece together” (*Prose* 70). Nabokov followed the news closely and was always happy to present his opinion. The horrors of the Second World War and Russia’s crucial part in its outcome stirred deep feelings of patriotism. He writes about his hopes for the Red Army’s victory in a letter to Wilson:

For almost 25 years Russians in exile have craved for something—anything—to happen that would destroy the Bolsheviks,—for instance a good bloody war.

Now comes the tragic farce. My ardent desire that Russia, in spite of everything, may defeat or rather utterly abolish Germany—so that not a German be left in the world, is putting the cart before the horse, but the horse is so disgusting that I prefer doing so. (*Selected Letters* 46)

The human tragedy that caused the deaths of millions obliterates any political disagreements and strengthens the connection between Russia and its former citizens. However, Nabokov was not blinded by an overwhelming sense of patriotism, and toward the end of the war, when the Nazi army suffered setback after setback, and the victory was near, he openly resisted the veneration of Stalin and his regime. His Russian poem “No Matter How” (1944), composed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and later translated into English, reflects his position against totalitarianism. The poet protests freedoms that were taken away by the Soviet government and horrors that were imposed upon the Russian people:

No matter how the Soviet tinsel glitters
upon the canvas of a battle piece;
no matter how the soul dissolves in pity,
I will not bend, I will not cease
loathing the filth, brutality, and boredom
of silent servitude. No, no, I shout,
my spirit is still quick, still exile-hungry,
I'm still a poet, count me out! (*Poems* 1-8)

The pros and cons have been weighed, as the poet reaffirms his position against the oppressive government despite its glorious victory. Boyd notes “the pro-Soviet euphoria” that swept the country and how Nabokov “felt it was time to protest the glorification of Russia’s own mass murderer—even if to a public that did not want to hear” (*American* 60-61). Curiously, the exact wording in the Russian version of the poem contains three words—*Sovetskaya Susal’neishaya Rus’*—translated as “Soviet Tinsel Rus’” where *Rus’* is “Russia” from the Old Russian (*Poems* 2). The pairing of *Rus’* and “Soviet” reinforces the absurdity of combining tradition with the name of a regime that destroys tradition. In the English version of the poem *Rus’* disappears entirely and is translated as “Soviet tinsel,” just like *rabstvo* from the original Russian version becomes “servitude” instead of “slavery” in an otherwise very literal translation. This is a poet who protests history’s tyrants, insisting that exile is the right solution when one considers the alternative.

Conclusion

Nabokov's multiple roles as novelist, poet, translator, language instructor, and naturalist gave him extraordinary insights into the experiences of those who by no choice of their own become unwelcome in their home countries. Looking back at his Russian childhood, the author remarked at how during his family's trips to Western Europe, he "imagined, in bedtime reveries, what it would be like to become an exile who longed for a remote, sad, and (right epithet coming) unquenchable Russia, under the eucalypti of exotic resorts. Lenin and his police nicely arranged the realization of *that* fantasy" (*Opinions* 178). The fantasy becomes a nightmare that he has to confront as an adult. He is the exile longing for that remote, unquenchable Russia, and any country he visits is destined to be compared with Russia:

America is the only country where I feel mentally and emotionally at home. . . .

My admiration for this adopted country of mine can easily survive the jolts and flaws that, indeed, are nothing in comparison to the abyss of evil in the history of Russia, not to speak of other, more exotic, countries. (*Opinions* 131)

When asked if he would like to go back to see his childhood home again, Nabokov makes it clear that there is nothing for him to see anymore; the dream has been abandoned: "As to my special northern landscape and the haunts of my childhood—well, I would not wish to contaminate their images preserved in my mind" (*Opinions* 148-149). His is the example of successful emigration, the foundation of which is a desire to embrace American culture, showing respect to the country where he is initially a stranger.

Through Pnin's genuine attempts to fit in, Nabokov depicts the way one must try to adjust by staying truthful to his principles and accepting his fate. Kinbote, on the other hand, illustrates the opposite: his burning desire to relay the horrors of revolution, death, and hardship, instead obliterate reality.

The theme of exile is present in Nabokov's many works, told through the lives of characters that are forced to relocate, acculturate, and adapt in different countries. After fleeing two totalitarian regimes, Nabokov was able to adapt abroad with far greater success than most immigrant writers, not without the help of his excellent knowledge of the English language and the Western literary tradition. His departure from Russia was a loss equaled only by the loss of his father. What kind of writer can depict this kind of pain? In a letter to his younger brother Kyril in 1930, Nabokov summarizes the essential requirements that a real writer, in his opinion, must have to express the emotion of that caliber: "Are you really drawn to it irresistibly, does it surge from your soul, do images and sensations naturally don the dress of poetry, crowding to emerge?" (*Selected Letters* 9). In Nabokov's mind, only the writer who experiences this passion has the right to create, passion that guided Nabokov throughout his literary career in both languages.

Severed from his cultural roots, Nabokov uses language to subvert stereotypes and express disillusionment. He equates "the solution of the riddle theme"—created by his passion for chess problems—with "the solution of the theme of exile, of the intrinsic loss" (*Evidence* 250). What is that solution? Perhaps it is an émigré's lived experience itself, driven by hopes and frustrated by failures, challenged by turns and twists of fate that unveil one's inner strength. Nabokov both challenges and agrees with Said, who

refers to exile as “death but without death’s ultimate mercy” (174). He recalls the nightmares of exile that he had as a young boy, which later materialized without the romanticism that his youth embedded in them: “in my early childhood, long before the tremendously dull peripatetics of Revolution and Civil War set in, I suffered from nightmares full of wanderings and escapes, and desolate station platforms” (*Opinions* 132). The emotional defeat and illusiveness of the past are continuously confronted with every new novel, every new character, and every unknown place.

In his biography of the author, Boyd cites a letter that young Vladimir wrote to his mother while in Cambridge; the letter describes the despair inherent in remembering Russia:

Yesterday as the day slid down we ran about the paths and fields like madmen, laughing for no reason, and when I closed my eyes it seemed I was in Vyra.

‘Vyra’—what a strange word. . . . I came home drunk with memories—with the buzzing of maybugs in my head, with my palms sticky with earth, with a child’s dandelion in my buttonhole. What joy! What agony, what heart-rending, provoking, inexpressible agony. (*Russian* 175)

Nabokov expresses the emotions of this magnitude in his poetry, short stories, and novels, emphasizing how the characters, forced into exile, always hope to reclaim their faith in life. He turns the tragedy of his own exile into what Humbert Humbert calls the “durable pigments” of art (*Lolita* 309). Nabokov’s achievement in *Pnin* and *Pale Fire* is that the condition of exile becomes the human condition writ large.

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