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Transformations in Exile:

The Multilingual Exploits of Nabokov's *Pnin* and *Kinbote*

Having become fluent in Russian, English, and French as a child, Vladimir Nabokov was not simply a Russian writer until 1939 and an Anglo-American one thereafter. More accurately a polyglot with amazing metalinguistic awareness, he incorporated within his writing, especially his English-language novels, a polylinguistic matrix. Employing techniques such as code-switching, language overlapping and multilingual literary puzzles, motifs, themes and allusions, Nabokov created a “web of sense,” a subtext partially accessible to monoglots, but only fully comprehensible to those who know well several languages, literatures and histories. In addition to providing an enriching experience for the monolingual reader, *Pnin* (1957), which marked Nabokov's self-awareness as an intrinsically polyglot writer, and *Pale Fire* (1962), which revealed the immensity of his genius and complexity, also offer these engaging multilingual subtexts.

With Bolshevik machine guns firing at it from Sebastapol's shore, the Greek ship *Nadezhda*¹ zigzagged out of the harbor. It carried a cargo of dried fruit, the seven ministers of the regional government and their families and the Nabokovs. On deck, twenty-year-old Vladimir sat playing chess with his father. In a few hours he would see his beloved Russia for the last time.² It was April 25, 1919. For the next fifty-eight years, until his death in Montreux, Switzerland on July 2, 1977, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov would live in exile, a Russian expatriate finding occasional refuge, solace, even happiness, but never home.

In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov offered an Hegelian description of his life:

*A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life. The twenty years I spent in my native Russia (1899-1919) take care of the thesis arc. Twenty-one years of voluntary exile in England, Germany, and France (1919-1940) supply the obvious antithesis. The period spent in my adopted country [the United States] (1940-1960) forms a synthesis—and a new thesis.*³

That one cataclysmic occurrence, his loss of Russia, became “the determining fact of Nabokov’s life and art.”⁴ Soon afterwards, at Cambridge, his “main intellectual and artistic endeavor. . . was to make himself into a Russian poet.”⁵

His “fear of losing or corrupting, through alien influence, the only thing. . . salvaged from Russia—her language—became positively morbid.”⁶ For nearly twenty years then, supported by the many Russian journals, magazines and publishing houses in Berlin and Paris, Nabokov wrote and published in Russian several books of poetry, novels, collections of short stories, plays and translations of English works, mainly under the nom de plume, *Sirin*.

Nabokov chose *Sirin* “to distinguish him from [his father] V. D. Nabokov, whose byline appeared frequently in. . . the émigré press.”⁷ In addition, choosing the name of

a fabulous bird of paradise in Russian folklore also revealed “both his longing for Russia and his more unexpected link to Russia’s bright supernatural forces.”⁸ He wrote,

*I have read somewhere that several centuries ago there was a glorious variety of the pheasant haunting Russian woods. . . This wonder-bird made such an impression on the people’s imagination that its golden flutter became the very soul of Russian art.*⁹

So too, Nabokov/Sirin hoped, would his poetry.

For the homeless wanderer, the word *Sirin* also echoed Russia’s siren call,¹⁰ a call Nabokov could answer for a time in his art, but never again in his life. In December 1938, stopping his ears as Odysseus had, Nabokov gave up his primarily Russian self and began his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. “Across the dark sky of exile, *Sirin* passed. . . like a meteor and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness.”¹¹

Despite this shift to English, Nabokov’s Russian as well as several other languages continued to appear in his writing. Thus, to call him bilingual, to label him a Russian writer until 1939 and an Anglo-American one thereafter misses the mark. During his formative, pre-exile years, in addition to Russian he “thoroughly and early mastered English and French.”¹² He also knew German well. More accurately a polyglot with “increased metalinguistic awareness,”¹³ Nabokov created especially in his English novels—the focus of this study—a “polylinguistic matrix. . . [which was] the determining factor”¹⁴ in his art.

Creating this polylinguistic matrix was at first most difficult, and writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in English was fraught with anxiety:

*He was most anxious that this first novel in English should sound neither “foreign” nor read as though it had been translated into English.*¹⁵

Ten years later, however,

*after almost a decade of self-imposed barriers and exclusions, Nabokov began to allow his polyglot nature to reappear. . . [a]t first, in **Bend Sinister**,*¹⁶

set in Imaginary “Sinisterbend,” which is both multi-lingual and multi-national. Although written in English, the novel contains a Russo-German combination that all characters speak and understand; French, the language of intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals; and English, the language of artists and writers. By the middle of the 1950s, having completed *Lolita*, Nabokov was not only writing novels in English and within an American milieu; he was also translating from Russian into English: *The Song of Igor’s Campaign* and *Eugene Onegin*. The publication in 1957 of *Pnin*, an English-language novel set in America and containing both a Russian protagonist (Pnin) and narrator (V.V.), indicated that Nabokov had lost his

*insidious fear of involuntary contamination of one language. . . [by another and] confirmed the final consolidation of his awareness of himself as an intrinsically polyglot writer.*¹⁷

With *Pale Fire*, a polylinguistic, multi-cultural *tour de force*, Nabokov revealed in 1962 the immensity of his literary genius, his extraordinary ability to meld languages, literatures and histories: English, Russian, Finno-Ugric, Celtic and Germanic (West and North).¹⁸

Though written mainly in English and set primarily in the United States, *Pnin* and *Pale Fire* were pivotal in Nabokov’s becoming an international novelist of the first order. Both recount the story of a Russian exile teaching at a northeastern United States university and trying to adjust to a new culture without losing his original, primary identity. While Pnin’s and Kinbote’s circumstances echo Nabokov’s at Wellesley College and Cornell University, their experiences differ greatly from their creator’s.

Perhaps not surprisingly, however, Pnin's and Kinbote's native (Russian) and adopted (English) languages become significant aspects of their lives and major formal elements of each novel.

On one level, the infusion of Russian (and to a lesser extent German and French) intensifies the illusion of reality in *Pnin*. As a non-native speaker of English, Pnin uses code-switching out of necessity to communicate his thoughts and ideas. To distinguish the Russian words, Nabokov italicizes and transliterates the Cyrillic alphabet into modern Western European. Of course, not using Cyrillic letters lessens the visual impact; however, transliteration enormously enhances the oral/aural effect. The English-speaking reader who does not know Russian can still recognize the italicized Russian words, and make a reasonable attempt at pronouncing them since Nabokov's transliterations are, for the most part, phonetically consistent. In addition, Nabokov typically provides a translation, often literal, and often in parentheses. For example, during the novel's opening sequence, Pnin checks his bag at a bus station:

“*Quittance?*” queried Pnin, Englishing the Russian for ‘receipt’ (*kvitansiya*).¹⁹

Of course the clerk does not understand (“What’s that?”), so Pnin must continue:

“*Number?*” tried Pnin.

This early exchange precisely illustrates Pnin's difficulty with English which, in turn, epitomizes his inability to “fit in.” With Americans, his code-switching usually involves interference, that is “deviation from the norms of one language [English] under influence from another [Russian].”²⁰ With his inadequate English, Pnin borrows from his native Russian in an attempt to fill the lexical gaps. Rather, he overlaps the two languages and inhibits communication.

While Pnin's listeners are confused both by his code-switching and his mispronunciations, readers are not. Thus, although "his difficulties with English. . . make him a comic legend throughout the campus," readers see him at first as a figure of fun but soon as an object of pathos.²¹ Enabled by Nabokov's linguistic and textual strategies to understand most of Pnin's words, and privy to his thoughts, readers recognize the suffering exile has caused him. They see a more detailed portrait of the man in his professional life, in his relationships with acquaintances and friends (especially Russian émigré friends) and in his private world. Nevertheless, without knowing Russian, the readers, like Pnin's listeners, miss a good measure of the web of sense Nabokov creates to shape his character's life and the novel itself. In particular, certain Russianisms signal stages of Pnin's attempt to establish a past-present-future continuum so that he may adjust to life in the United States and, more importantly, create a new self.

Early in the novel, despite having lived in the United States for nearly ten years, "his English was still full of flaws" (*Pnin*, 368), most probably because he continues to think in Russian. Another example occurs in the bus station scene: Unable to claim the bag he had checked, Pnin discovers to his relief that

*It was there, slava Bogu (thank God)! Very well!
He would not wear his black suit—vot i vsyo (that's all)
(Pnin, 371).*

Significantly, not only the language, but especially Russian memories dominate his thoughts and make integration into a new culture virtually impossible.

Nabokov's novels often include allusions to "real people," some readily recognizable (Tolstoy, Hans Christian Andersen, Freud, Ophelia), others apparent only to a knowledgeable few (Nikolay Lobachevski: nineteenth-century Russian mathematician; Ivan Sergeyeovich Aksakov: nineteenth-century leader of Russia's Slavophiles).

To weave a subtext that suggests Pnin's fixation with his past, Nabokov creates a number of evocative, imaginary Russian names pertinent to Pnin's relationship with his past, his present and even his future. The three women in his life—Mira Belochkin, Elizaveta Innokentievna Bogolopov and Betty Bliss—poignantly illustrate this effect.

Mira Belochkin, his fiancée in Russia until “the Civil War of 1918-22 separated them. . . [and] history broke their engagement” (*Pnin*, 465), represents Pnin's preoccupation with his Russian past. Her given name, *Mira*, means “world” and “peace” in Russian (*mir*), two things that the Revolution literally snatched from Pnin. Her surname, *Belochkin*, evokes an even richer pattern of meaning. Russian for “squirrel” (*belka*), it is part of an image pattern representing Pnin's painful loss of Russia and his difficulty adapting to the United States.

Much has been written about Pnin's several encounters with squirrels.²² His first occurs at age eleven when, with a high fever, “poor cocooned pupa, Timosha (Tim) lay under a mass of additional blankets” (*Pnin*, 375), studying the squirrel carved on a wooden screen in his bedroom. In the United States every subsequent incident with squirrels signals Pnin's developmental stage: pain, confusion, even panic because he cannot relinquish his past (still cocooned) or attempted adaptation to a new life (emerging from the chrysalis). His recurring memories of Mira Belochkin, whom he lost because of the Revolution and who later died in a Nazi concentration camp, are always heart-rending.

Nabokov ironically names the next woman in Pnin's life, his former, notoriously unfaithful wife. She is Elizaveta (from the Hebrew for “oath of God”), Innokentievna (Russian patronymic, “daughter of Innocent”), Bogolepov (“*Russian calque of the Greek theoprepaes, ‘agreeable to God’*”).²³ Unfortunately, Pnin cannot recognize Liza's true nature and continues to love her even a decade and a half after she jilted him.

In 1952 she visits Pnin to announce the end of her marriage to Eric Wind (the man for whom she left Pnin), to tell him of her new lover, George, and to ask Pnin to help pay for her son's private school education. As they converse, she and Pnin use and often overlap Russian and English. Nabokov's unusual failure to translate much of the Russian here intensifies the visual impact and suggests the terrible obstacle that Pnin's love for Liza poses to his moving on to a new life:

Suddenly he heard her sonorous voice ("*Timofey, zd rastvuy!*") behind him, and. . . [t]here she was. She always felt hot and buoyant, no matter the cold, and now her sealskin coat was wide open on her frilled blouse as she hugged Pnin's head and he felt the grapefruit fragrance of her neck, and kept muttering: "*Nu nu, vot i horosho, nu vot*"—mere verbal heart props—and she cried out: "*Oh, he has splendid new teeth.*" He helped her into a taxi. . . "*By the way,*" interrupted Pnin, ducking and pointing, "*you can see a corner of the campus from here.*" . . . (*Yes, I see, vishu, vishu, kampus kak kampus: The usual kind of thing*). . .

"*Here we are. this is my palazzo,*" said jocose Pnin . . . "*What a gruesome place, kakoy zhutkiy dom,*" she said, sitting on the chair near the telephone and taking off her galoshes. (*Pnin*, 399-400)

Hoping that she will again be part of his life, that perhaps they may even remarry, Pnin instead learns that Liza has come to exploit his love for her once more. After she leaves, he mentions in conversation with his landlady, Joan Clements, two Lermontov poems which "expressed everything about mermaids" (*Pnin*, 405). Probably referring to *The Mermaid* (1832) and *The Sea Princess* (1841), he retreats from life into the scholarly comfort of Russian literature. He does not, however, connect literature and life, does not overtly acknowledge that Liza is, like

Lermontov's "Sea Princess," actually a ghastly reptile. Devastated by "losing" her again, he cries pitifully: "I have nofing left, nofing, nofing!" (*Pnin*, 406).

Pnin's love for Liza has also eliminated any possibility of future romance. A few days before her visit he holds hands with the third woman in his life, a twenty-nine-year-old graduate student, appropriately named Elizabeth Bliss. Although she nearly captures his interest (*bliz* is Russian for "near"), he rejects this Elizabeth because "his heart [still] belonged to another woman" (*Pnin*, 390).

Three later incidents, and the Russian names connected to them, reveal Pnin's further attempts to shed the stifling cocoon of his past and emerge into a new and satisfying life. In April of 1954 Liza's son, Victor, visits, and little seems to go well despite Pnin's efforts. Afterwards, it is clear that he has established a lasting and meaningful bond with the boy, beginning with "a staid and decorous correspondence" which included a letter "followed by a picture postcard representing the Gray Squirrel" (*Pnin*, 427) from Pnin to Victor, and culminating with a beautiful crystal bowl from Victor to Pnin. It is important that during the visit, Pnin identifies himself first in the traditional Russian manner as "Timofey Pavlovich Pnin," then immediately tells the boy to "call me simply Mr. Tim or, even shorter, Tim" (*Pnin*, 441). Previously "greatly embarrassed by the ease with which first names were bandied about in America" (*Pnin*, 441), Pnin adjusts easily with Victor.

Later, the first positive squirrel appears and with the bowl completes a linguistic transformation. At his house party where he uses Victor's bowl, Pnin explains that,

Cendrillon's [Cinderella's] shoes were not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur—*vair*, in French. It was, he said, an obvious case of the survival of the fittest among words, *verre* [French for "glass"] being more evocative than *vair* which, he submitted, came. . . from *veveritsa*, Slavic for. . . winter-squirrel fur (*Pnin*, 484-485).

Here French supplants Russian. Similarly, just after he tells Victor to call him “Tim,” Pnin tries to converse with the boy in French, which he “speak[s] with much more facility than in English” (*Pnin*, 441). Unfortunately, Victor comprehends “*Très un peu*,” so they return to Pninian English. Although Pnin is adept in Russian and French, his progress with English stopped around 1950. However, because Victor has heard many Russians speak English, he has no difficulty understanding him, unlike the members of the Waindell College community.

The second incident during which Russian names suggest Pnin’s attempts to shed his past occurs in the summer of 1954 when he visits Cook’s Place, a haven for Russian émigrés. Having just learned how to drive, he arrives despite being unable to follow a mimeographed-sketch map from Cook and directions from a gas station attendant. When he steps out of his car, Varvara Bolotov exclaims,

“*Avtomobil*’, *kostyum*—*nu pryamo amerikanets* (a veritable American), *pryamo Ayzenhauer!*” (*Pnin* 454).

Only partially translated in the text, the full statement reads, “That car, that suit—a veritable American, a veritable Eisenhower!” Although Varvara Bolotov proclaims assimilation—indicated by Pnin’s car, suit and resemblance to Eisenhower—the conversation and the ambiance at Cook’s remain Old Russian, filled with memories of the past. In fact, although Cook, “a Business Executive, a Mason, a Golfer,” has Americanized his name and speaks “beautifully correct, neutral English, with only the softest shadow of a Slavic accent” (*Pnin*, 450), the shadow is there. Formerly Aleksandr Petrovich Kukolnikov (*kukolka* is Russian for “chrysalis”), Al Cook seems to have emerged from his cocoon and completed his metamorphosis, his own assimilation. However, his devotion to Russian people, language and culture suggests that his

new name is, like Pnin's car and suit, "make believe," a "disguise" (*kukol'nyi* in Russian).

The third incident during which Russian names suggest Pnin's attempt to emerge from his past involves his much hoped-for tenure after nine tenuous years at Waindell as an assistant professor: "oh, not next year, but example given, at hundreth anniversary of Liberation of Serfs" (*Pnin*, 493). During his houseparty, at the precise moment when he expresses this hope, he learns that he is to be fired, not tenured. Afterwards, just before he leaves Waindell, Pnin thinks he sees among the

fresco portraits of faculty members in the college dining hall. . . the preliminary outlines of a ghostly muzhik [Russian serf] on the wall (*Pnin*, 509).

Painted by his nemesis and gadfly, reactionary Sovietophile Oleg Komarov (appropriately, *komar* is Russian for "gnat"), the unfinished portrait enrages Pnin. Believing that his face will appear "above that [muzhik's] blouse," Pnin loses "all control over what English he had" (*Pnin*, 509). Denied tenure despite his tremendous efforts, he will not gain the liberation the serfs did a century before. Instead, he will remain symbolically enslaved by his historical and linguistic past, not a Russo-American intellectual, not an honored member of the faculty, but a misunderstood *muzhik*.

As the novel closes on February 15, 1955 (Pnin's birthday), Pnin drives away from Waindell with the little white dog he has taken in, and seems to the narrator V.V. "free at last. . . [for] there was simply no saying what miracle might happen" (*Pnin*, 511). Indeed, when we next encounter him four years later in *Pale Fire*, he has become head of the Russian Department at Wordsmith College. While only sparse information about Pnin's new life comes from an unreliable source—Charles Kinbote, the central character and mad first-person narrator of *Pale Fire*—it is consistent with what we already know. He

reappears as “a bald-headed suntanned professor in a Hawaiian shirt. . . with a fat little white dog”²⁴ and a name “all find it difficult to *attack*. . . [but] Think of the French word for ‘tire’: *punoo* [actually *pneu*]” (*Pale Fire*, 268). Despite the continued interference his name causes, miraculously now Pnin seems “to fit in.” At Wordsmith his liberation has finally occurred.

In dramatic contrast, Charles Kinbote of *Pale Fire*, another exile teaching at a northeastern United States college, is an outrageous misfit. Where in *Pnin* Nabokov presented a rather straightforward story of painful adjustment to a new country and culture, in *Pale Fire* he creates

*a structural surprise: the symbolic level, the fantastic, the poetic, lies on its surface and is obvious, while the factual, the realistic is only slightly hinted at, and may be approached as a riddle.*²⁵

(Nabokov once “observed that the unravelling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind.”)²⁶ Mary McCarthy first noted that Kinbote is not the exiled King of Zembla, but really Vseslav Botkin, an American scholar of Russian descent who stole John Shade’s poem. Furthermore, Shade was not shot and killed by the Zemblan assassin, Jakob Gradus, who meant to shoot Kinbote, but by Jack Grey, an escaped psychopath who mistook Shade for Judge Goldsworth.²⁷ Taking part in this riddle-like game of discovering concealed identities and hidden motives surely will offer attentive readers a delightful challenge. Likewise, Nabokov’s style, which interweaves words and literary (as well as historical) allusions from several languages and cultures, as well as rare, obscure and sometimes non-existent English items, will send conscientious readers scrambling about the reference section of their library.

As I noted earlier, through his narrator, Kinbote, Nabokov presents in *Pale Fire* a Gordian Knot of languages, literatures and histories: English, Russian, Finno-

Ugric, Celtic and Germanic (West and North). The code-switching, language mixing, arcane words and neologisms have high visual impact, and therefore allow—as well as require—greater effort than ordinary reading. Consider, for example, Kinbote’s description of Zembla, his imaginary native, “crystal land”:

*Zembla, my dear country. . . Everybody, in a word, was content—even the political mischiefmakers who were contentedly making mischief paid by a contented Sosed (Zembla’s gigantic neighbor). . . The last king of Zembla . . . had become. . . passionately addicted to the study of literature. . . [H]e had attained such a degree of scholarship that he dared accede to his venerable uncle’s raucous dying request: “Teach, Karlik!” Of course, it would have been unseemly for a monarch to appear in the robes of learning at a university lectern and present to rosy youths **Finnegan’s** [sic] **Wake** as a monstrous extension of Angus MacDiarmid’s “incoherent transactions” and of Southey’s **Lingo-Grande** (“Dear Stumparumper,” etc.) or discuss the **Zemblan variants**, collected in 1798 by Hodinski, of the **Kongs-skugg-sio** (*The Royal Mirror*), an anonymous masterpiece of the twelfth century. . .*

*During these periods of teaching, Charle Xavier made it a rule to sleep at a **pied-à-terre** he had rented, as any scholarly citizen would, in Coriolanus Lane, a charming, central-heated studio with adjacent bathroom and kitchenette. (*Pale Fire*, 74-76)*

A labyrinth of visually prominent linguistic, literary, and historical twists and turns marks the above passage. Some corridors are simple and straightforward, for example *pied-à-terre* (French for temporary lodging) and *Sosed* (Russian for neighbor), both italicized to indicate they are “foreign words.” Other avenues, consisting mainly of proper names and titles, make one’s head spin. For example, a monolingual reader would not know that *Karlik* is

Russian for “dwarf” (and part of an image pattern I will discuss later). Astute readers would recognize *Finnegan’s* [sic] *Wake*, and perhaps connect Kinbote’s “*Zembla*” with Alexander Pope’s, but would they see the relationship to the Russian *Zemlya* (land), or realize that “*Kongs-skuggsio*” does mean Royal Mirror in Old Icelandic and alludes to “the most important scholastic work of medieval Scandinavia?”²⁸ Likewise, “Southey” is obviously the British historian, critic and Poet Laureate (1813), but what in the world is “Lingo-Grande (‘Dear Strumparumper,’ etc.)”? And “Angus MacDiarmid”? Is this somehow an allusion to Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid? And why the allusion to Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*?

In his next novel, *Ada* (and later in *Look at the Harlequins!*), Nabokov will go even further and allow

*surface interference and interreference [to] permeate the entire fabric. . . [He will] behave linguistically very much as polyglots behave when they communicate with each other, rather than with monoglot speakers of any of their languages.*²⁹

As a result, fully comprehending *Ada* will be virtually impossible for most monolinguals. With *Pale Fire* the challenge is imposing but not hopeless.

Pale Fire’s central character and narrator, Charles Kinbote, is adept with English; yet like Pnin he is mocked by his colleagues. Unlike Pnin, however, Kinbote is mentally unhinged, enormously self-centered and unabashedly homosexual; his colleagues continually ridicule these qualities.³⁰ To cope with the anguish of exile, he “construct[s] the compensatory refuge of *Zembla*,”³¹ where Vseslav Botkin, disdained professor of Russian at Wordsmith College, becomes King Charles the Beloved. Deviating from

*set modes of expression and conventional registers of style. . . [he invents] new and arresting word combinations, employing high-flown, recherché vocabulary,*³²

and a web of language mixing.

The Zemblan language which Kinbote creates is “a synthesis of Slavic and Germanic roots. . . often combined in a single word.”³³ For example, he terms an “unshaven dark young [sentinel] *nattdett* (child of night)” (*Pale Fire*, 95). Indeed, *natt* comes from the Germanic *nacht*-, and *dett* from the Slavic *det*-, so Kinbote’s parenthetical translation is, as usual, accurate. According to Priscilla Meyer, through Kinbote’s Zemblan language,

*Nabokov merges his Russian and English childhoods, his Russian and Anglo-American cultural strains, in the regal realm of the imagination.*³⁴

However, although Kinbote’s Zembla mirrors Nabokov’s Russia, the image is distorted. Furthermore, neither the form nor the substance of Kinbote’s foreword, commentary and index illuminate Shade’s poem, *Pale Fire*. Instead, they strive to create an identity which will earn Vseslav Botkin admiration, adulation and respect rather than contempt, disdain and rejection. He believes that his transformation depends on Shade, for when Shade transmutes Charles the Beloved’s story into poetry, “the stuff *will* be true, and the people *will* come alive” (*Pale Fire*, 214).

Although Kinbote nearly always provides in parentheses an accurate, literal translation of the Zemblan common nouns, verbs and adjectives that he interjects into his commentary, the proper nouns frequently contain significant, hidden, emotionally charged meaning. Thus, besides the overt code-switching, which seems to establish empirically that Zembla and its exiled king do exist, there is covert polylingualism through which Kinbote unintentionally affirms his true nature and identity.

Kinbote's Russian heritage certainly affected his life as V. Botkin, for it enabled/influenced him to become a professor of Russian at Wordsmith College. Although he rejects his ethnic identity, it persistently pulls aside his Zemblan mask, particularly for the bilingual reader who knows both English and Russian. In this context, the eye-catching names Kinbote assigns to people and places reinforce his denigration of heterosexuality, his exaltation of homosexuality and the "flimsy nonsense" of his autobiography. He treats nearly all of the heterosexuals he describes as threatening, repulsive or somehow pathetic. First among them is Sybil Shade. Kinbote believes that she forced her husband to

tone down or remove from his Fair Copy everything connected with the magnificent Zemblan theme which I [Kinbote] kept furnishing him (Pale Fire, 91).

Because she threatens Zembla, she becomes his second (to Jakob Gradus, who threatens his person) greatest enemy.

Less obvious are Zemblans such as Count Otar, "heterosexual man of fashion and Zemblan patriot" (*Pale Fire*, 311). On one hand, to fabricate his loyal subject, Kinbote draws upon Ottar the Black, court poet and historian to King Olaf of Norway. On the other hand, the name echoes the Russian for "flock (of sheep)," for though a patriot, Otar's sexuality is for his king mundane, merely a herd instinct. Likewise, Kinbote names the heterosexual queen "who drowned in an ice-hole with her Russian lover" (*Pale Fire* 315), Yaruga, suggesting the Russian for "I scold" (*ya rugayu*). He also associates heterosexuality with cold on other occasions, notably when he links a Zemblan saying with his wife, Disa, who loves him despite his rejection of her:

belwif ivurkumpf wid sneu ebanumf, "A beautiful woman should be like a compass rose of ivory with four parts of ebony" (Pale Fire, 206).

Comparing the Zemblan with its inaccurate translation will provide a merry chase for any linguist, but keeping to my purpose here, *wid snew ebanumf* offers a Slavic-Germanic combination of note: “they copulate” (Russian *ebanut*) “with snow” (*withro snoigwh-*), certainly not a romantic depiction of conjugal love.

Although he has transformed his homosexuality into kingship, throughout his tale Kinbote continually expresses moral qualms about his “sinful practices,” and dreads yet expects to be punished. Thus, in addition to feeling ennobled and exalted by his sexuality, he also feels threatened and debased. Dwarf imagery consistently represents his ambivalence. For example, during his escape, Kinbote suffers “a shiver of alfeard (uncontrollable fear caused by elves)” when he discovers that his reflection in a small mountain lake is actually “a red-sweated, red-capped doubleganger” (*Pale Fire*, 143). He later wonders if “a dwarf in the [Zemblan] police force [could] pose as a pig-tailed child” (*Pale Fire*, 146). His loyal supporters, perhaps not surprisingly, echo his ambivalence: the “Karlists” endorse and defend “King Charles”; on the other hand, their name closely resembles the Russian for “dwarf” (*karlik*), and Kinbote even gives himself (as King Charles) the diminutive *Karlik*.

Other bilingual clues to the truth behind Kinbote’s mask appear in the doubles he creates. For example, he abhors his Wordsmith colleague Reginald Emerald for rejecting his homosexual advances. He also vilifies the Zemblan, Isumrudov (Russian for “emerald”), for opposing his monarchy. Similarly, his supporter Odon has a half-brother, Nodo who opposes the king. Perhaps they are “one and the same” (*odin* in Russian; also, Odon is Nodo backwards), or perhaps they express Kinbote’s sexual dilemma: “Oh do! No don’t!”³⁵ “Sudarg of Bokay” and “Jakob Gradus” certainly reflect his dichotomous identity and world. The first, an artisan who manufactured “a truly fantastic mirror. . . a secret device of reflec-

tion" (*Pale Fire*, 111), represents Kinbote's "brilliant invention." The second, an assassin sent to kill the king, represents reality breaking through. The Russian in these two names reveals the characters' underlying sameness and reinforces the idea that Kinbote's fragmentation/doubling only hides and distorts true identity. Since Jakob Gradus represents "the real," he is the dull, mundane aspect of a single "personality": "I" (*ya*) am a "degree" (*gradus*), a part of the whole. In contrast, Sudarg of Bokay represents the fantastic with its permutations, so he appropriately is the "ruler" (*gosudar'*) of the other "side" (*bok*) of "me" (*ya*).³⁶ However, neither Jakob Gradus nor Sudarg of Bokay exists, for Kinbote has transformed the psychotic killer, Jack Grey, to his own ends.

Just so with Botkin, himself, with whom Nabokov plays a bilingual joke. As Andrew Field observed,

*The direct anagram of Botkin in Russian is nikto, the Russian for "nobody." Botkin has. . . the same superfluous "b"—the Russian is zemlya and means "land"—we find in the Popean Zembla,*³⁷

and of course in Kinbote's Zembla. Ultimately, the man and the place then are "nobody" and "nowhere."

His creator, however, was indeed someone and somewhere. When he fled Russia in 1919, Nabokov left behind his homeland and his Russian self. With him he took his memories and the imaginative genius and passion to become V. Sirin and Vladimir Nabokov. His immense legacy to readers is marked by a richness that grows geometrically as we explore more deeply the "webs of sense" that he left us, as we learn more about our world's histories, literatures and languages from reading—and from studying—his writings.

Notes

- ¹ Coincidentally and appropriately, *Nadezhda* is Russian for “hope.”
- ² Boyd, Brian. 1990. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 160.
- ³ Nabokov, Vladimir. 1966. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 275.
- ⁴ Meyer, Priscilla. 1988. *Find What the Sailor has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 4.
- ⁵ Beaujour, Elizabeth Klosty. 1989. *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the “First” Emigration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 86.
- ⁶ Nabokov. *Speak, Memory*, 265.
- ⁷ Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 180.
- ⁸ Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 181.
- ⁹ Cantaboff, V. [another Nabokov pen name] 1923. Painted Wood. *Carousel* 2:9.
- ¹⁰ *Sirin* closely resembles *Sirena*, Russian for siren.
- ¹¹ Nabokov. *Speak, Memory*, 288.
- ¹² Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*, 95.
- ¹³ Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*, 102.
- ¹⁴ Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*, 101.
- ¹⁵ Noel, Lucie Leon. 1970. Playback. *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, Appel, A. Jr., ed. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 215.
- ¹⁶ Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*, 99.
- ¹⁷ Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*, 101.
- ¹⁸ For a close analysis of *Pale Fire*’s multi-lingual and multi-literary components, see Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*.
- ¹⁹ Nabokov, Vladimir. 1968. *Pnin* in *Nabokov’s Congeries*, Stegner, P., ed. New York: Viking Press, 371. Subsequent references to *Pnin* will be parenthetically listed in the text.
- ²⁰ Haugen, Einar. 1978. Bilingualism, Language, Contact, and Immigrant Languages in the United States: A Research Report 1956-1970 in *Advances in the Study of Societal Multilingualism*, Fishman, J., ed. The Hague: Mouton, 21.
- ²¹ Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 271.

- ²² See Nicol, Charles. 1971. Pnin's History. *Novel* (Spring): 197-208 and Barabtarlo, Gennadi. 1989. *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 21-23.
- ²³ Gennadi. *Phantom of Fact*, 157.
- ²⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. 1962. *Pale Fire*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 155. Subsequent references to *Pale Fire* will be parenthetically listed in the text.
- ²⁵ Berberova, Nina. 1970. The Mechanics of *Pale Fire*. *Tri-Quarterly*, 17: 147-148.
- ²⁶ Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 158.
- ²⁷ McCarthy, Mary. 1962. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. *Encounter* 19: 71-84. See also McCarthy, Mary. 1962. A Bolt From the Blue. *New Republic*. 146:21.
- ²⁸ Meyer. *Find What the Sailor has Hidden*, 50.
- ²⁹ Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*, 108.
- ³⁰ Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 434.
- ³¹ Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 433.
- ³² Beaujour. *Alien Tongues*, 105.
- ³³ Meyer. *Find What the Sailor has Hidden*, 88.
- ³⁴ Meyer. *Find What the Sailor has Hidden*, 88.
- ³⁵ Field, Andrew. 1967. *Nabokov: His Life in Art*. Boston: Little, Brown, 311.
- ³⁶ In *Nabokov: His Life in Art* 303, Field claims that *gosudar* is to be understood in the more humble, modern corruption of the term" as "sir," not "lord." Actually, *gosudar* meant and means "sovereign," except in the prerevolutionary epistolary formula, *Milostivyj gosudar'*, equivalent *only here* to "sir" or "Dear Sir."
- ³⁷ Field. *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 314.