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## Exile and Assimilation

### Some Notes on Vladimir Nabokov's Journey through Space and Time

*Vladimir Nabokov once inimitably reflected on a consequence of exile: "I don't seem to belong to any clear-cut continent. I'm the shuttle-cock above the Atlantic, and how bright and blue it is there, in my private sky, far from the pigeon-holes and the clay pigeons."*  
*Looking into aspects of Nabokov's work related to exile and assimilation, I suggest that Nabokov's cosmopolitanism is mirrored in the current international reception of his work. The article makes use of Kwame Anthony Appiah's notion of "cosmopolitan contamination" and that of John Burt Foster Jr.'s "cultural multiplicity."*

### Introduction

In response to major political and social crises in the twentieth century, emigrant communities arose in different places in Europe, Asia, and the United States. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution, artists and intellectuals fled their country and attempted to build a new life in cities like Berlin, Paris, and New York, to varying degrees of success. In Germany and Austria, Hitler's assumption of power in 1933 caused the enforced or self-chosen exodus of representatives from the world of the arts and the sciences to the great cities in other European countries, as well as to the United States, thus leading to comparable developments. The diaries, letters, and other documents written by these intellectual migrants record the experience of wrestling with another language and a different culture. Notwithstanding the obvious differences in tone and style, these reminiscences attest to the flexibility required when looking for suitable occupations and establishing new connections, whereas, at the same time, exiles naturally sought to retain aspects of their identity, individually by means of family ties, and collectively (by way of language, religion, and education). From the 1970s onward, historical research has made use of these papers, using them for the first studies focused on the twentieth-century exile experiences.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Simon Karlinsky and Alfred Appel, jr. (eds.), *The Bitter Air of Exile: Russian Writers in the West 1922–1972*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977 (1973) and Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration 1919–1939*, Oxford and

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a growth of Diaspora Studies under different names. They have developed into a flourishing research area complete with conferences, journals, and academic curricula. Fed by the current interest in memory, and today's debates on globalisation and multiculturalism, the research perspective of Diaspora Studies has broadened, and the discussions are becoming ever more topical. Still, there is a steady focus on European emigrants in the first decades of the past century, as appears from two recent books, *Weimar on the Pacific* (2007) and *Artists in Exile* (2008)<sup>2</sup>, which study major figures from the world of arts and sciences, all of whom had fled from political events in their country of origin. The first study is mainly concerned with the attempts of such diverging personalities as Theodor Adorno, Vicki Baum, Bertolt Brecht, Max Horkheimer, Arnold Schoenberg, Salka Viertel, Franz Werfel, and Thomas Mann, all from the German language area, to redirect their creativity in a new environment – the North American West Coast – and to generate new works. The second book analyses the activities of Russian as well as German and Austrian artists. George Balanchine, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Erich Korngold, Max Reinhardt, Igor Stravinsky, and Kurt Weill are among the more prominent representatives of the performing arts who tried to settle in New York upon their eventual arrival in the United States. The studies are, contrary to former forays in this area, interested in the question of cultural interaction between immigrants and American artists.

Both Bahr and Horowitz raise the question of reciprocal effects: on the one hand, the sudden flow of European talents must have effected the arts in the United States, while, on the other hand, the work of the immigrants must have been influenced by their contact with Americans. Horowitz argues that the strategy of Russian refugees was directed at adaptation and assimilation. Both critics maintain that the German-Austrian contingent would not yield that easily, and made attempts at colonisation instead. There are important differences in the way the two books approach the subject matter. While Bahr presents an intellectual history, Horowitz's focus is on the performing arts, occasionally veering off to literature; as for example in his conclusion, which compares the successful American careers of Thomas Mann and Vladimir Nabokov. With such distinct ap-

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New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. A recent synthesis of the experiences of Russian immigration to the West can be found in the chapter titled "Russia Abroad" in Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance. A Cultural History of Russia*, London, etc.: Allen Lane (Penguin Books), 2002, pp. 522–586, 637–642, 688, 689. Research into emigration from German language countries is documented in the Gesellschaft für Exilforschung yearbooks (edition text+kritik), the first volume of which appeared in 1983; volume 25 (2007) is entitled *Übersetzung als transkultureller Prozess*.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrhard Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; Joseph Horowitz, *Artists in Exile: How Refugees from Twentieth-Century War and Revolution Transformed the American Performing Arts*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

proaches, discussions of the same artist in both books – Brecht and Schoenberg, among others – and certain shared conclusions become all the more interesting.

The present interest in cultural exile – testified by these two studies and evident, moreover, in various international research projects – relates directly to the theme of this *arcadia* issue, as is also shown by Els Andringa's contribution. The effect of the enforced encounter between native and foreign cultures can also be called a process of transfer and integration, both at the level of the individual case and at that of confronting an emigrant community with the receiving culture and its representatives. Bahr's description of the vicissitudes of German immigrants in the city of Los Angeles and its surroundings as a "clash of cultures" translates, in effect, into the central concepts of Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, which presents the literary (cultural) system as a number of hierarchically ordered subsystems.<sup>3</sup> The confrontation of the emigrant's cultural subsystem with that of the receiving party generates all kinds of transition processes in relation to the special situation of exile. That special situation is recorded in various ways in the work of Vladimir Nabokov, who fled from Russia to Europe with his family in 1919, but had to escape again from France in the nick of time (1940) with his Jewish wife and son, in order to settle in the United States.

The following paper looks into aspects of Nabokov's work related to exile and assimilation. It considers how this theme has become part of the academic reception of his work, with specific attention to recent developments in Nabokov research. Among the striking features of this research is that Nabokov's cosmopolitanism – which I take to refer to both the trajectory of his life and the manner of Nabokov's recording that trajectory in prose and poetry – is apparently ever more clearly mirrored by the current international reception of his work. Another remarkable feature is the "presence" of the author himself as a force in this discussion: Nabokov had a strong influence on the reception of his work by crafting his own translations and exerting a controlling influence on the interviews he gave, which he supplemented, moreover, with his own commentary. In his inimitable fashion and for as long as he could manage, he acted as a guide to his readers in the introductions he wrote for the editions of his novels and short stories. Nabokov's engineering the reception of his own work is rightly taken seriously in current academic debate and is, just as rightly, supplemented with research perspectives.

In order to shed more light on the complex relation between "native" and "foreign," which is inextricably bound up with the state of exile, I shall employ the concept of "cosmopolitan contamination," minted a few years ago by the Prince-

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<sup>3</sup> In recent years, Els Andringa has deployed Even-Zohar's polysystem theory in a number of articles. See, especially, "Penetrating the Dutch Polysystem: The Reception of Virginia Woolf, 1920–2000," in *Poetics Today* 27, 2006, 3, pp. 501–568. See also her contribution to this issue, especially the third section, "Das niederländische Polysystem: 'Ein System von Systemen'."

ton philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who attempted to create a historical perspective on the problematics of migration processes.

### The Cosmopolitan Project

In the past ten years or so, a range of disciplines within the humanities have considered the role that the concept of cosmopolitanism could play in examining societal questions. In 2006, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah published his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, in which he reflected what the preconditions for a tolerant society are.<sup>4</sup> As son of a Ghanaian father and an English mother, Appiah grew up in Ghana and England, and is in a pre-eminent position to examine transborder issues. Chapters of his book begin as often with a description of an incident taken from his personal life and family history, as with comments on present or past events causing major international upheavals. Appiah presents his arguments as if he conversed with the reader, but he manages to draw intricate patterns involving the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nationhood on the one hand, and certain highly controversial international topics, such as fundamentalism, warfare, the impact of globalisation, cultural patrimony, international human rights, and identity politics on the other. He offers a range of examples which show understanding as well as incomprehension of religious, sexual, and judicial practices, when different individuals and societies, from antiquity up to the present, are brought in contact with each another. What is “native,” what “foreign”? What happens when people and ideas from different cultures meet? Such are the questions that Appiah’s examples raise. In pursuit of his argument, he discusses the presence or absence of rationale in opposed positions, eventually arriving at *that* particular stance which is closest to the main values of as many parties as possible. Value takes up a central position in the argument, and Appiah continuously emphasizes the instrumental importance of language in both naming and evaluating values within society.

Appiah’s examples are drawn from spatially and temporally far and near, and this is one reason why he prefers to use the term cosmopolitanism rather than the obvious but trendy concepts of multiculturalism or globalisation.<sup>5</sup> Another reason lies in the venerable tradition this term derives from. In this respect, too, cosmopolitanism distinguishes itself from the other two terms which have been introduced only in the latter half of the twentieth century. The first use of cosmopolitanism dates back to the fourth century B.C., when the Cynics rejected the idea

<sup>4</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. The book was given the Arthur Ross Award of the Council of Foreign Affairs in 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (see note 4), pp. XIII, XIV, XV.

that a citizen belonged to a specific community, distinct from others, and maintained instead that every citizen was a citizen of the world (cosmos), that is, a cosmopolitan.<sup>6</sup>

Literature does not play a major part in Appiah's book, but he does regularly refer to literary works from classical antiquity to Salman Rushdie, because fiction is an important instrument in forging common values: "evaluating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world".<sup>7</sup> Appiah shows that those values are not related to a single linguistic, cultural, or religious tradition, by emphasising that all his examples contain a mixture of "native" and "foreign". That mixture is central to his strikingly, if not provocatively, worded "cosmopolitan contamination" concept. On the face of it, this choice of words may stir up a sense of unease, not because Appiah opts for a cosmopolitan, rather than a nationalistic, attitude, but because of his use of the highly contentious term "contamination". One might object that Appiah, by explicitly preferring cosmopolitan *contamination* to cultural *purity*, makes his position vulnerable because it contains a dichotomy, which, he argues, is unsustainable. Why did he opt for a terminology which is directly related to the extremely negative associations words deriving from the semantic field of "hygiene" have had since the end of the nineteenth century, and especially since the end of World War II? Appiah does advance, however, an explanation for his choice of words, by referring to the origin of the term "contamination". The Romans already used *contaminatio* to refer to a mixture of elements from different cultures. More specifically, it was used to describe the literary practice of Terence, an author who was born in Carthage and brought to Rome as a slave, and who, as a writer, inserted passages from Attic plays into his own Latin plays.<sup>8</sup> Using a quote from Salman Rushdie, Appiah illustrates the positive connotation of the term cosmopolitan contamination, as he sees it today:

hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, and songs [...]. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world.<sup>9</sup>

The cosmopolitan concept of Greek Antiquity surfaced again in Enlightenment thought as an expression to refer to the universal norm of human equality. After that, it re-emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth century, *en route* acquiring not just positive, but also negative connotations, as appears from Guy Scarpetta's *Éloge du cosmopolitisme* (1981). Scarpetta's point of departure is the post-1968 situation

<sup>6</sup> See also the entry "Cosmopolitanism" in Guido Bolaffi et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (see note 4), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (see note 4), p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (see note 4), p. 112.

in France. He develops the notion of a “dispositif idéologique d’enracinement” to describe a complex interplay of nationalistic, political, religious, and racist views that from the nineteenth century onward formed the breeding ground for the rise of fascism and comparable ideologies. He mentions *Les Déracinés* (1897), Maurice Barrès’s notorious novel, as one of the shaping texts within the French debate on “native” and “foreign”. The name of Dreyfus brings back the furious debate that divided the French, a debate in which cosmopolitanism was used to denote the “other”. In literature, this initially meant that the representatives of Decadence and Symbolism were derided as cosmopolitan. They were later joined by authors like Italo Svevo in Italy and James Joyce, to whom this epithet was applied at the first Soviet writers conference in 1934.<sup>10</sup> Scarpetta’s title unmistakably endorses a positive interpretation of the term, and his introduction underscores the relevance of his own biography in choosing his subject: coming from a Jewish Italian immigrant family, he now lives in France. In his view, Kafka, Joyce and Beckett are among the authors whose work exemplifies a truly modern cosmopolitan literature, a blend of personal experience and universal values, where the very notions of “native” and “foreign” are constantly queried. In Scarpetta’s view, the texts of these international writers display the term’s positive sense, and are permeated with notions like plurality, discontinuity, nomadism, and disidentification.<sup>11</sup> Reading these works involves encountering views, thoughts, and circumstances other than one’s own, which, according to Scarpetta, may signal a mental attitude prepared to subsume what is foreign as part of one’s native culture.

A threefold relation between cosmopolitanism, literature and ethics is explicitly foregrounded in Douwe Fokkema’s and Elrud Ibsch’s review of prevailing issues in literary research, *Knowledge and Commitment* (2000). The final chapter of this book, a slightly revised version of an earlier publication with the telling title “Towards a New Cosmopolitanism,” is a plea to read literature in order to learn about unfamiliar cultures. Fokkema and Ibsch agree with Scarpetta and also refer to Martha Nussbaum’s work, which designates the literary text as an apposite tool for gaining insight into other cultures. Nussbaum makes a distinction between cosmopolitans and those who are loyal only to their own religious, racial, ethnic or gender group. The first position is termed “the world citizens view,” as opposed to the second, “the identity-politics view”.<sup>12</sup> Appiah keeps referring to the centrality of language in designating a society’s values, while Scarpetta, Nussbaum, and Fokkema & Ibsch aver that the literary text can be an important touchstone, both

<sup>10</sup> Guy Scarpetta, *Éloge du Cosmopolitisme*, Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1981, see especially chapter II, “Archéologie de l’enracinement,” pp. 27–104.

<sup>11</sup> Scarpetta, *Éloge* (see note 10), p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Douwe Fokkema, Elrud Ibsch, *Knowledge and Commitment: A Problem-oriented Approach to Literary Studies*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000. The final section of Chapter 8 is entitled “Multiculturalism, the New Cosmopolitanism, and Literary Reading,” *ibid.*, pp. 174–188; on Scarpetta and Nussbaum, see especially pp. 183–186.

for testing one's views and for exploring other positions. The term "cosmopolitanism" is used to convey an open and tolerant position, which is desirable in a world of border crossings, faced by all individuals and societies.

This recalibration of the cosmopolitanism concept is not restricted to the domains of philosophy and literary research. In the social sciences, too, cosmopolitanism figures as the preferred principle for integrating the viewpoints of others into one's own life world. Thus, the German scholars Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande employ it when studying the blurring of ethnic and local ties, in light of future socio-political possibilities in a new Europe. Cosmopolitanism embraces a "both/and" principle and values *difference*, whereas concepts such as nationalism, identity and integration are founded on the "either/or" principle, furthering exclusion:

Hence cosmopolitanism calls for new concepts of integration and identity that enable and affirm coexistence across borders, without requiring that distinctiveness and difference be sacrificed on the altar of supposed (national) equality. "Identity" and "integration" then are no longer different words for hegemony over the other or others, of the majority over minorities. Cosmopolitanism accepts difference but does not make it absolute; rather, it seeks out ways for rendering it universally agreeable. In this, it relies on a framework of uniting and universally binding norms that should prevent deviation into postmodern particularism.<sup>13</sup>

The passage argues to realise on a macro level what, according to Appiah, is the golden rule of cosmopolitanism, quintessentially expressed by Terentius' dictum "homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto".<sup>14</sup>

### Nabokov's relevance today

During the first half of 2008, Nabokov-L, an online forum open to statements readers wanted to post about Nabokov, was buzzing with a discussion about the fate of *Laura*. Nabokov intended to publish a novel entitled *The Original of Laura* but at the time of his death in 1977, *Laura* consisted of no more than a set of index cards. The novel-in-progress has been kept in a Swiss vault ever since. Nabokov himself wanted to have this material burned, but his wife Vera (deceased in 1991) and his son Dmitri did not accede to this wish. Since 2004, Dmitri Nabokov – the sole heir – has started to place his father's literary estate in various archives and libraries, occasionally putting some pieces up for auction. Early 2008, he had to face once again the problem *Laura*. The press started to debate the "publish or

<sup>13</sup> Ulrich Beck, Edgar Grande, *Cosmopolitan Europe*, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007 (translation by Ciaran Cronin of *Das kosmopolitische Europa*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), p. 14. It is significant, in this respect, that Ian Buruma was awarded the 2008 Erasmus Prize for being, as several newspapers reported in January 2008, the exemplary "new cosmopolitan".

<sup>14</sup> Translated by Appiah as "I am human: nothing human is alien to me" (*Cosmopolitanism*, see note 4, p. 111).



destroy” dilemma and soon partisans from all over the world joined the debate: *The Times* devoted a file to “this burning question” and published an interview with Dmitri Nabokov, the French newspaper *Libération* interviewed a number of international experts, and the Indian publisher Nilanjana S. Roy contributed to the dispute in the pages of the *Business Standard India* with an elegant and passionate plea for saving the manuscript. In Montreux, Nabokov Jr. responded to the latter with warm approval, calling it “a splendidly sensitive article, much more to the point than the repetitive drivel of most academics and moralisers”. The forum on Nabokov-L followed the debate with vehement arguments for or against publication or destruction, until the matter was finally settled with a press statement on May 7: “Dmitri Nabokov decides: publish.”

The lively discussion concerning a skeletal text by Nabokov encompassed digitally channelled comments from Brazil on views expressed in England, whereas a citizen of Switzerland virtually patted the shoulder of an Indian publisher. It gave an exemplary illustration for the kind of attention the author has received since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nabokov reception has drawn in ever widening circles, but this cannot be ascribed to the internet alone, for interest in the author and his work had already been growing for decades. Once this little known writer had scored a huge success all over the world with *Lolita*, he gradually came to be integrated into the repertory of an international group of readers and scholars and so acquired citizenship, in a manner of speaking, in a global Republic of Letters. The gradual process of integrating his work was both slowed down and accelerated by his cosmopolitan background. Slowed down, because the speedy development of his craft as an author and his interest in international literature made him the odd man out in Russian émigré circles in Berlin and Paris; accelerated, because his various strategies for adaptation and his proficiency in three languages combined to advance his career outside Russian literature.

### Nabokov research: the institutional map

“Zembla,” the official Nabokov website<sup>15</sup>, has received, from the moment it was launched in 1995, a number of awards and many positive reviews, both in the US and Europe. “Zembla” derives from “zemlya,” the Russian word for “land”. The website’s name is taken from the novel *Pale Fire*, in which Zembla refers to “a distant northern land”. The site’s name is aptly chosen, not just for this specific allusion, but also because Nabokov’s work is actually littered with fictional places or towns that appear to be concocted from a variety of different countries and towns in Russia, the United States, and Europe. For example, readers who intend to look up “Fialta,” the eponymous town in the short story “Spring in Fialta,” will

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/zembla.htm>, retrieved April 9, 2008.

be searching in vain. Such fictional amalgams constitute a specific instance of assimilation which I propose to term, in analogy with Appiah's cosmopolitan contamination concept, "geographical contamination".

"Zembla" works both as an archive and a newscast for Nabokov research. The archival function is evident from links to articles from the journals *The Nabokovian* (1978) and *Nabokov Studies* (1994) and a portal to several bibliographies and indexes. These journals are supported by the International Vladimir Nabokov Society (IVNS), which was founded in 1978 and has been an allied organisation of the Modern Language Association (MLA) since 1983. The "news" button gives access to up-to-date information on new articles, conferences and recent Nabokov studies. The site is maintained by the Arts & Humanities Library of the Pennsylvania State University Libraries.

The institutional embedding of Nabokov research thus turns out to be chiefly an American affair. However, the site contains a link to the Nabokov Museum in the author's house of birth in St Petersburg.<sup>16</sup> Since its foundation in 1998, the museum has functioned as a support centre for Nabokov research in Russia, with its own publications, exhibitions and conferences. Nabokov criticism had flourished in the West ever since the 1960s, but the Russian counterpart could only begin once the author's work had been officially published in Russian during the 1990s, a project authorised by Gorbachev in 1988.

The linguistic situation in Nabokov research mirrors the transition the author himself had to make. From his arrival in the US, Nabokov made every effort to be regarded as an American author, however difficult the switch from Russian to English must have been. He has, in fact, frequently commented on this switch, for instance in the epilogue to *Lolita*:

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.<sup>17</sup>

With the exception of minor preliminary attempts, he did not translate his Russian novels into English until he made his name as an English-language author with *Lolita* at the end of the 1950s. US academic Nabokov research was initially stimulated by scholars affiliated to English departments, which meant that the first decades of US Nabokov research were mostly devoted to texts originally written in English. A dialogue between English-speaking scholars and their Russian colleagues in exile or the children of exiles emerged somewhat later. Since the latter were able to read the Russian works of Nabokov, they had access to texts that had

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nabokovmuseum.org/en>, retrieved April 1, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "On a book entitled *Lolita*", *Lolita*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 317.

remained closed to their colleagues – a situation that appears to characterise Nabokov's English-language reception to date, as we shall see. Similarly, Nabokov research in Russia, the US, and Europe are difficult to integrate, because of language gaps, despite good intentions regularly expressed by all parties.

In 2007, the first issue of a new journal, *Nabokov Online Journal*, appeared on the Internet. According to its "statement of purpose"<sup>18</sup>:

As a multilingual edition, the journal will seek to achieve a balance between the publication of English, French, German and Russian language scholarship. Its primary goal is to build bridges that link the various branches of Nabokov studies in a dynamic and intellectually creative environment.

The journal's editorial board is affiliated with fifteen universities across three continents. "Teaching Nabokov" was the subject of a discussion that filled the opening pages of the second issue, published on the net in April 2008. When the debate turned to the question of teaching the novels in an age of political correctness, Priscilla Meyer (Wesleyan University) remarked:

Nabokov parodies simplistic approaches to literature – sociological, moral, psychological; political correctness could be considered in the context of these parodies and juxtaposed to Nabokov's mockery of forms of real prejudice for example in *Lolita* of anti-Semitism, the stereotyped role of blacks, the exploitation of girls.<sup>19</sup>

The journal possesses three features that make it into a cosmopolitan and linguistically "contaminated" enterprise dear to Appiah and others: it contains articles in Russian, French, and English, and, moreover, it acts as a forum for an international group of scholars. They are in direct exchange with each other in an online site designed for this purpose; literary texts serve as material here for discussing ethical views.

### Perceptions on Nabokov 1980–2000

If an author has written works in three different languages, living consecutively in St. Petersburg, Cambridge, Berlin, Paris and various locations in the US before returning to Europe to spend the last sixteen years of his life in Montreux, Switzerland, and if he has translated his own work from Russian into English and from English into Russian<sup>20</sup>, then these complex geographical circumstances must in-

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.etc.dal.ca/noj/purpose\\_en.smhtml](http://www.etc.dal.ca/noj/purpose_en.smhtml), retrieved April 1, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.etc.dal.ca/noj/volume2/articles/01\\_Meyer.pdf](http://www.etc.dal.ca/noj/volume2/articles/01_Meyer.pdf), retrieved May 12, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> We should mention also Nabokov's revisions during the translation process, which produced certain differences between the Russian and English versions of his novels. For an impression of the extremely complicated linguistic situation, see Jane Grayson's excellent study, *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, and Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, "Translation and Self-Translation," in: Vladimir E. Alexandrov (ed.), *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995, pp. 714–724.

volve “transfer and integration”; indeed, they are essential for the study of his work. Beyond transfer and integration, Nabokov’s work ought to be understood within the specific problematics related to his exile twice over, and the impact of his belonging to different communities. To complicate matters further, Nabokov’s work is giving rise to ever more starkly diverging interpretations of his novels and short stories.

The first survey of different critical research positions on Nabokov’s work appeared in 1995, in the *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*.<sup>21</sup> The scope of this *Companion*, as well as the international cast of contributors, offered an indication of the growing Nabokov scholarship in the first decades after the author’s death. It consists of almost 75 brief chapters on themes in his work and life. There is a chapter for each novel, with each discussion stressing different points. Furthermore, the contributors address a range of related subjects, such as his correspondence, his lectures on (Russian) literature, the critical reception of his work, Nabokov’s library, and his political views. Titles like “Nabokov and...” figure the names of more than twenty authors Nabokov had admitted to his world, either in intertextual terms, or by translating their work or writing about them. There are chapters on “Nabokov and Bely,” “Nabokov and Chateaubriand,” “Nabokov and Joyce,” “Nabokov and Kafka,” “Nabokov, Updike and American Literature,” and of course “Nabokov and Pushkin”. This reveals both his connections with authors/contemporaries and the intertextual ties of his work to the Russian and the international literary tradition. The international cast of mainly Slavicist, Anglicist/Americanist and comparatist contributors reveals openly and emphatically for the first time the interconnectedness of Nabokov’s work with Western literary history. The intriguing question arises whether the cosmopolitan nature of Nabokov’s work will be recognized in the various national literatures and may begin to figure in literary histories other than Russian and American ones. Conversely, the work of authors like Nabokov supports the notion that national literary histories were rapidly losing their relevance. This observation is in line with the views put forward by Appiah, Scarpetta, Beck and Grande, and is also born out by insights offered by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1980s, the academic interpretative community focused mostly on unravelling the intricate narrative structure of Nabokov’s work<sup>23</sup>, whereas in the next decade Nabokov was read as a postmodern author.<sup>24</sup> Around the turn of the

<sup>21</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>22</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M.B. Debevoise, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007; translation from *La république mondiale des lettres*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Two samples from more than a hundred studies: Pekka Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics: A Narratological Analysis*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1985; Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Brian McHale’s incisive, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York: Methuen 1987.

century, approaches to his work shifted, perhaps decisively, from the aesthetic to the ethical realm. Today, Nabokov scholarship concentrates mainly on three thematic areas: the subject of death and the beyond, gender and sexuality, the central subject of debate being, not surprisingly, *Lolita*, and questions concerning (the loss of) identity. Nabokov's work continues to generate new interpretations. As Jane Grayson writes in the preface to the first of two volumes of proceedings from conferences in the US and Britain in 1999, the year of Nabokov's centenary: "the teasing complexity and rich allusiveness of Nabokov's art makes him a challenging subject for exegesis and commentary".<sup>25</sup> This is a recurrent perception of the author's work, succinctly expressed in the phrase in the *Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*: "reading Nabokov is anything but routine".<sup>26</sup>

### Nabokov in the twenty-first century: towards a synthetic view?

The *Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* was the next stage in international academic Nabokov criticism, although it does not really supersede the *Garland Companion*, being less ambitious in design. Nor was it intended as a replacement, as editor Julian W. Connolly stated in the preface. The *Companion* was designed as a showcase of the new critical pathways in Nabokov research, clarified by a group of distinguished Nabokov scholars for the interested reader. Whether users of the *Cambridge Companion* need a "chronology" with the most important biographical data is questionable. Connolly's elegant solution to this problem consists of a brief passage – seventeen lines in all – summarising the "seismic shifts" of Nabokov's life. The biographical resume closes with a reference to Brian Boyd's two-volume biography, the undisputed standard work.<sup>27</sup> Where appropriate, the fourteen contributions to the *Companion* lift a relevant passage from the biography, or, indeed, render the complete life at high speed. The reader who takes the trouble to read all contributions thus acquires a fairly complete survey of the most important moments in Nabokov's life and a number of crucial historical events in the

<sup>25</sup> Jane Grayson, "Introduction: The Shape of Nabokov's World," in: *Nabokov's World*. Volume I: *The Shape of Nabokov's World*. Edited by Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin and Priscilla Meyer, Houndmills, Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave, 2002, pp. 1–18, quotation from p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Julian Connolly (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990; *ibid.*, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. Boyd's biography is generally considered as the apex of both Nabokov research and the art of biography. On the Nabokov biographies, see Sophie Levie, "Nabokovs paradox. Tekst, werkelijkheid en de wanhoop van de interpreter," in Hans Renders (ed.), *Het leven van een doodsbbericht*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2005, pp. 103–118, endnotes on 180–182.

twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> Such assistance is always helpful in interpreting an author's work so evidently inspired by life, irrespective of the input of this author's imagination or the deviation of fiction from facts. The focus on biographical data is noteworthy, as it foregrounds the relation between the author's biography and the cosmopolitan identity of many of his characters.

Nabokov did not believe that his life consisted of a series of disjointed events, and was convinced that there was a pattern to it. Tracing that pattern and describing it was one of his goals in writing. This is evident in his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, but also in his novels and short stories. Over and over again, his characters are connected with wealth and terror, power and beauty, expeditions and displacement in all imaginable configurations.<sup>29</sup> As Connolly mentions, life as text is the recurring metaphor in his work.

A number of the *Cambridge Companion's* contributions address the aesthetic description of lived experiences and the artistic orchestration of one's own biography. Thus, Zoran Kuzmanovich singles out ten passages in a poem from 1952, "Restoration," and relates them to Nabokov's life and art.<sup>30</sup> His analysis is based on the verb "to levitate" which occurs in the second stanza of the poem. Kuzmanovich shows how Nabokov brings the levitation motif with ever new images and situations into play in several novels (*Mary*, *The Defense*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Pale Fire*, and *Transparent Things*). Remarkably, Kuzmanovich does mention the original event behind this motif as one of the examples in support of his argument, without identifying it as its germ, which could have made his argument even more powerful. The scene concerns the famous passage at the close of the first chapter in *Speak, Memory*. Vladimir's father is being tossed into the air and caught again in the strong arms of peasants, because he has granted them a wish (not because they are celebrating his liberation from prison, as Kuzmanovich states). Indeed, this scene crops up as one of the key passages in Nabokov's work, as a powerful conflation of life here-and-now and the prefiguration of death. Kuzmanovich builds a convincing argument that levitation should be seen as "a trope for restoration and its accompanying mid-flight images as a set of keys to Nabokov's

<sup>28</sup> The finest summary is in the first pages of Zoran Kuzmanovich's contribution. He manages to render in little more than two pages a highly informative account of Nabokov's life, larded with a number of interpretative remarks. Some other articles depart from a single fact in the bibliography in order to trace it as a motive in Nabokov's works. These include Barry Scherr's contribution on poetical inspiration in Nabokov's youth, Priscilla Meyer's on the themes of Nabokov losing his childhood, his country, his language, and his father in short stories, and Neil Cornwell's on the exceptional linguistic situation of the author's upbringing.

<sup>29</sup> A counterpart to my brief description of Nabokov's thematic can be found in the preface to his novel *Bend Sinister*, which he characterizes as "this crazy-mirror of terror and art," Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, New York: Mc Graw Hill, 1947, p. X.

<sup>30</sup> Zoran Kuzmanovich, "Strong Opinions and Nerve Points: Nabokov's Life and Art," in: *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (see note 26), pp. 11–30.

kov's fictional world of incremental and autoreferential repetition".<sup>31</sup> Discussing the poem's last line, "the jewel of bluish view," Kuzmanovich points out the positive connotation of the levitation motif, often in evidence in Nabokov's work as a strategy to avoid emphasising the sorrow of loss (of youth, country, language, father) and to remould it into a "conscious and joyful restoration".<sup>32</sup>

Before deconstructing the levitation motif, Kuzmanovich refers to a remark that Nabokov made in 1968 in an interview that is part of the collection in *Strong Opinions*:

I don't seem to belong to any clear-cut continent. I'm the shuttle-cock above the Atlantic, and how bright and blue it is there, in my private sky, far from the pigeon-holes and the clay pigeons.<sup>33</sup>

The significant image of the shuttle-cock above the ocean and the allusion to the private sky can be directly related to the words accompanying the levitation motif in the novels. Taking his cue from the interview, Kuzmanovich is able to bolster his analysis of the pattern used by Nabokov for casting his experiences into literature. It is only one out of many examples, where an argument in the *Companion* is reinforced by the buttressing interviews in *Strong Opinions*. This collection of interviews (with the author in command, as it were), published letters, and the forewords and epilogues to his novels which Nabokov himself had written, serves to underpin critical insight into Nabokov's fictions by means of his often rather quirky remarks about his own writing and those of others, and his audience. It is worth pointing out, furthermore, that the shuttle-cock image contains yet another form of what I propose to call geographical contamination.

The intertextual references in Nabokov's work and his attitude towards the Russian literary tradition form the subject matter of Alexander Dolinin's contribution.<sup>34</sup> Dolinin departs from a passage lifted from *Conclusive Evidence: A Memoir* (1951), the first stage in English of what after many linguistic and textual detours, would eventually become *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography revisited* (1967).<sup>35</sup> The passage describes Nabokov's career in the 1920s and 1930s, when he lived the life of a Russian exile in Berlin amidst other Russian refugees. He wrote in Russian at the time, using the pen name "Sirin" (the name of the firebird in Russian folktales) for his publications. In *Conclusive Evidence*, the memoir he wrote for an

<sup>31</sup> Kuzmanovich, *Strong Opinions* (see note 30), p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Kuzmanovich, *Strong Opinions* (see note 30), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 115–116, quoted from Kuzmanovich in *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 13; references are to *Strong Opinions*, New York: Vintage International, 1990 (reprint 1973).

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Dolinin, "Nabokov as a Russian writer," in: *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (see note 26), pp 49–64.

<sup>35</sup> The trajectory which led to *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* is concisely summarized in Sophie Levie, "Lagen van verandering en verlies: over *Speak, Memory* – de autobiografie van Vladimir Nabokov," in: *Biografie Bulletin*, Spring 2004, pp. 31–39, esp. p. 38.

American audience, Nabokov refers to an author called Sirin without mentioning that Sirin and Nabokov are one and the same person. Dolinin argues that Nabokov is not just playing one of his tricks with his American audience, but deliberately marks out his detachment from a former, Russian writing self.

The theme of Dolinin's contribution is really centred on the field of tension Nabokov operated in. An author who hailed from Russia and lived in Europe for two decades, he crafted the first part of his work in his native tongue, briefly considered writing in French, and continued to write in English once he moved to the United States. This way, Nabokov was able to continue writing and publishing in Russian after the first exile, the one which transplanted him from Russia to Western Europe, although publishing became increasingly difficult. After a while, the Russian emigrant community recognised that the young Sirin was among the best authors of his generation, but this position was not achieved without ado. While older authors clung to traditional forms of literature, Nabokov was among the few, together with Vladislav Khodasevich, who had no fear of literary innovation. Yet he also considered it to be his task to guard the Russian literary tradition. This preoccupation with the fate of Russian literature can be localised, as Dolinin shows, in numerous intertextual allusions in Nabokov's novels in Russian, which appear to be in discussion with the national canon, in some cases also rewriting it. Nabokov expressed his opinion on the state of Russian literature in his age, from both Soviet Russia and emigrant circles, by creating caricatured walk-on parts in his texts for his writing compatriots. This strategy served a two-fold objective: it kept Russian literature alive, while his position in that tradition was reinforced. The second aspect became less important once he gave up on his status as a Russian author and consciously sought to carve out an international career.

On the eve of his second exile in 1940 that would bring him from France to the United States, he decided, without any form of transition, to switch to English. Although he was potentially well equipped to do so, as he had studied in Cambridge and was taught English as a small boy, he still experienced this switch as "exceedingly painful".<sup>36</sup> Sirin's work remained unknown in the West until the success of *Lolita* in the late 1950s. The subsequent interest in the Russian works led to the publication of English versions of these texts. In most cases, Nabokov checked these English translations meticulously, or transposed the Russian into English himself, with the assistance of his wife and son. Dolinin describes how Nabokov, in the introductory prefaces to the English versions of his Russian novels, consistently presented the Russian texts as inferior, as juvenilia, which could not bear comparison with the original works in English of his American years. Obviously, this strategy influenced the reception of his work and it is certainly one reason why disputes occasionally flare up on the question of whether the Russian or the American Nabokov is better. Not a matter that can be settled easily, as the

<sup>36</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (see note 33), p. 54.



case is even more complex if one accounts for the many differences between the English translations and the Russian originals. Passages were cut or moved and all sorts of elaborations were added in the translations, because, as he writes, the original texts had to be elevated to the level of his current qualities as a writer. Dolinin argues, however, that this conscious strategy was also implemented for completely different reasons:

Beside purely artistic considerations, he was driven by a desire to recontextualise his Russian writings – to suppress or obliterate their vital ties with contemporary literary and historical contexts, especially Russian ones; to redirect their polemic or/and parodic currents and undercurrents towards new targets better suited to Nabokov's later transnational image; to adjust their style to the canon of *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, or *Ada*.<sup>37</sup>

Nabokov's "modus operandi" may be illustrated with numerous examples. In the novel *King, Queen, Knave* (1968, the Russian *Korol', dama, valet* is from 1928), for instance, the intertextual play with the highlights of Russian literature (Dostoyevsky, Pushkin) is substituted by allusions to a canon more familiar to a western audience, such as *Madame Bovary* and Hollywood films. Thus, Nabokov relinquishes the Russian subtext for a more general alternative in order to reach his English speaking audience. The strategy is more elaborately deployed in the trajectory that led from *Conclusive Evidence* to *Speak, Memory*. Apart from many allusions to Russian literature, which are swapped for intertextual passages more easily recognised in an international setting, all sorts of literary procedures were modified too: condensing, a shift in point of view, analysis instead of description, and a larger dose of eroticism and humour have made the text into a cosmopolitan *document humain*. Clearly these authorial intrusions, which Nabokov presented as an attempt to achieve greater precision and truthfulness, equally served to pave the way for a full integration of his texts into English language literature. The view, still held by some Nabokov scholars, that the English editions of the Russian novels and short stories can be considered as definitive substitutions for the source texts, is in Dolinin's opinion no longer sustainable. Nabokov had sought by various means and quite successfully to establish an image of himself as an author not primarily tied to his native language nor to his native soil (epitomised by his frequently quoted statement that "the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance"<sup>38</sup>) but for whom, as a cosmopolitan genius, individual imagination and personal recollections were sufficient. That image is contested by Dolinin.

In terms of Even-Zohar's perspective, this "modus operandi" implies that elements from two literary subsystems are mixed *by the author himself*; in a conscious attempt to reinforce his position in the international field, in Bourdieu's terminology. If academic criticism adopts this strategy as an example of cosmopolitan contamination, then claims on the author as primarily Russian or American be-

<sup>37</sup> Dolinin, Nabokov as a Russian writer (see note 34), p. 51, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 63, quoted in *The Cambridge Companion* (see note 26), p 53.

comes irrelevant. This is also the direction Nora Bukhs appears to have taken, when, back in 1999, she wrote in an introduction to a volume on Nabokov's European years:

However it is necessary to emphasize the extent to which the notion of translation when applied to Nabokov is inadequate. Nabokov was not satisfied with a "reproduction" of his text in another language, he created a new text, changing the names of characters whose names had a semantic significance, adapting them to an English code system, transforming entire segments of text, modifying elements of the plot and the pattern of allusions. A translation is a re-codification whose function is the adaptation into another linguistic and socio-cultural context.<sup>39</sup>

Other contributions to the *Cambridge Companion* likewise indicate to what extent the place of Nabokov in twentieth-century international literary history is still a matter of dispute, and to what extent critical views betray the critics primary affiliation. Obviously, this is not about the quality of Nabokov's work or about his belonging to one or another literary movement. Rather, these articles consider issues which bear on the construction of identity in his fiction and on Nabokov's remarks on his own identity, as well as issues concerning the idea of national roots versus transnationality or the linguistic complexity of his work. Not only in the case of Dolinin, but in other instances too, we can perceive a controversy which harks back to the question whether Nabokov's life was a case of continuity or rupture. Articles in the *Companion* often wield the oppositions of Russia – Europe; America – Russia; Russian – English; Sirin – Nabokov. There is a telling contrast, in this respect, between Dolinin's argument and the claim of Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's introduction, "Nabokov the American:"

That Nabokov is an American writer seems both a marvellous conceit and an unavoidable fact. Twenty years ago [...] I suggested that while Nabokov might not wholly belong to the American literary tradition, some of his novels did. Today, the case for his Americanness seems more conclusive, whether one considers his knowledge of American culture, his effect upon it, his publications, his audience, or his citizenship. It is true, of course, that Nabokov grew up in Russia, studied French and Russian writers at Cambridge, and published nine Russian novels as an émigré author in Europe. But he was also raised in a cosmopolitan family, became fluent in English early, and steeped himself in American literature – especially after 1940, when he came to the United States.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> "Il faut toutefois souligner combien la notion de traduction, appliquée à Nabokov est inadéquate. Nabokov ne se contentait pas de 'reproduire' son texte dans une autre langue, il créait un texte nouveau, changeant les noms des personnages chargés d'un contenu sémantique, les adaptant au système de codes de l'anglais, transformant des segments entiers de texte, modifiant des éléments de l'intrigue, le système des allusions. Une traduction est un re-codage en fonction de l'adaptation à un autre contexte linguistique et socio-culturel" (Nora Bukhs, "Avant-propos," in: Nora Bukhs, ed., *Vladimir Nabokov-Sirine: Les années européennes*, Paris: Centre d'études slaves, 1999, p. 6, 7; my translation, S.L.).

<sup>40</sup> Susan Elisabeth Sweeney, "By some sleight of *land*. How Nabokov rewrote America," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (see note 26), pp. 65–84, quotation from p. 65.

Sweeney claims that Nabokov does not try to compensate in his American novels for the loss of Russia by writing in an “exilic mode,” as other critics frequently argue, but by transposing Russia and the United States. The resulting “transposition” does not occur only at a geographical level, but at a linguistic and narrative one too. Thus, Sweeney pays special attention to the visualisation of space – especially the reconstruction of landscape in the American novels. Yet again, I would argue, the concept of cosmopolitan contamination, which in this example almost completely conflates with the notion of geographical contamination, serves to solve the question of where to place Nabokov’s work, that is, whether it belongs to either Russian or American literary history. My perspective which opts for the Beck and Grande “both/and” principle instead of the view which adheres to a fixed identity, can also be linked to the type of ethical reading currently dominant in the critical reception of Nabokov’s work.

While “transposition” is the key term in Sweeney’s contribution, the subject of Neil Cornwell’s contribution is the period of linguistic transition in Nabokov in the 1930s, when he had projects running in English, French, and Russian, and not yet made a definite choice in favour of either language.<sup>41</sup> Nabokov lived in Berlin at the time, but the heart of Russian emigrant culture had already moved on to Paris, and Nabokov, Cornwell points out, was exploring residential possibilities, not only in France, but in England as well. Cornwell supplements what had already been known about Nabokov’s linguistic choices in this decade with a detailed analysis of the French, English, and Russian texts from these years. The closing section, “the trilingual impact,” shows exactly how productive and innovative this period in Nabokov’s writing career had been: it acted as a “transition point” between two continents, two languages and two careers (French was not an option for long because of the move to the US).<sup>42</sup> The importance attached to Nabokov’s linguistic transition is in line with a position that had been taken up before by John Burt Foster in his book *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism* and a subsequent article on the interpretation of the 1930s works. Foster Jr. takes those American critics to task, who read and fix Nabokov first and foremost as an English language author.<sup>43</sup> He argues that any kind of linguistic or geographic demarcation is problematic, including the distinction habitually made between the author writing in English and the one writing in Russian, or between Nabokov in his European or American period. Such restrictions, he argues, are inept for “this writer’s long and amazingly mobile career” and “create a misleading impression of Nabokov the immigrant author, torn between the old world and the new, and

<sup>41</sup> Neil Cornwell, “From Sirin to Nabokov: the Transition to English,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (see note 26), pp. 151–169.

<sup>42</sup> Cornwell, “From Sirin to Nabokov” (see note 41), p. 166.

<sup>43</sup> John Burt Foster, Jr., *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1993, and “Interpreting Nabokov in the Thirties: Problems of Cultural Multiplicity and Retrospective Insight,” in: Bukhs, *Vladimir Nabokov-Sirine* (see note 39), pp. 10–20.

struggling to Americanise himself”.<sup>44</sup> Forster suggests the notion of “cultural multiplicity” in order to do justice to what I would call Nabokov’s journey through space and time. He advances the polysystem theory as a useful perspective for describing not just the different layers in Nabokov’s authorship, but the situation of Nabokov scholarship as well: “Nabokov *performs* the cultural multiplicity that so many scholars today want to analyse and theorise”.<sup>45</sup> Forster’s argument from 1993 for a synthesising view on Nabokov’s life and work very closely resembles the way cultural interaction between immigrants and American society was very recently described by Bahr and Horowitz. Unfortunately, Forster’s notion of “cultural multiplicity” has not, as yet, found its way to Nabokov research in our century. I would propose a renewed effort using the term “cosmopolitan contamination,” in order to consolidate the connections between philosophy, social science research and literary studies. It seems to me that the international community of Nabokov scholars would benefit from a synthesising term that does justice to the cosmopolitan world Nabokov holds up to his readers.

### Final remarks

I have reviewed both the strategies developed by Vladimir Nabokov in order to govern the transnational reception of his work, and the reaction of the international academic community to his stage directions. However, the problematic of exile and assimilation is first and foremost reflected in Nabokov’s writing. Let me take just one example to illustrate the way in which the cosmopolitan view defended by Appiah and others is part and parcel of Nabokov’s work. In the short story “Signs and Symbols”<sup>46</sup>, an elderly couple undertakes a trip with all kinds of obstructions in order to visit the clinic where their mentally ill son is staying. It is his birthday, and they have taken great trouble to think of something they can give their son that will not upset him: “a basket with ten different fruit jellies in ten little jars”. The story’s plot is not very significant, although the reader is to solve all sorts of conundrums in connection with the signs and symbols from the title. It is rather the description of characters and the off-hand details, sometimes no more than just a word or a name, that suggest a clash of cultures, consisting, in this case, of confrontations between the world of poor Russian-Jewish immigrants and the American society they have ended up in: the sloppy appearance of a wife who

<sup>44</sup> Foster, *Interpreting Nabokov in the Thirties* (see note 43), p. 9 and 11.

<sup>45</sup> Foster, *Interpreting Nabokov in the Thirties* (see note 43), p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> This short story at first appeared in *The New Yorker* (May 15, 1948) and was subsequently included in the collection *Nabokov’s Dozen* (1958). At the occasion of the story’s sixtieth anniversary, a panel of international renowned scholars staged an online debate on the story’s possible interpretations on the discussion pages of Nabokov-L. The matter of the elderly couple’s refugee status was extensively considered then.

speaks better English than her husband and therefore always answers the phone; her husband's Russian newspaper, "his new hopelessly uncomfortable dental plate, and the old overcoat with astrakhan collar"; the man who "in the old country had been a fairly successful businessman", but is now wholly dependent on his brother Isaac, a real American of almost forty years standing. The woman recalls their past life with a photo-album in her lap: Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin, "Aunt Rosa [...] until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about," and finally the year when they departed from Europe. It is too far-fetched to take this story as an example of Nabokov's strategy to remould loss into a conscious and joyous celebration.<sup>47</sup> Still, the woman's tenderness towards her husband, the space she allows him for clinging to rituals and objects from their past life, and her hope, against better knowledge, for a future reunion with their son, ensure that "Signs and Symbols" is not simply a tableau of sheer loss.

This short story contains all aspects pertaining to the world of the Russian exile from the first decades of the twentieth century: an allusion to the Revolution, relinquishing social status, the language problem, the wish to retain one's identity in a new environment, and, on top of that, a second exile, the transition from Europe to the United States. It is one of the most illustrative examples of how Nabokov recorded elements of his life's journey in fiction. This text exemplifies effectively the function of literature as an instrument, in the sense of Nussbaum and Appiah, to identify and discuss social values.

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<sup>47</sup> See the above discussion of Kuzmanovich's views.