THE VISION OF RUSSIA IN NABOKOV FICTION

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Abstract

In Nabokov’s fiction one sees many a wondering person. This person is in exile from his homeland and yet is bound to it both intellectually and emotionally. Nabokov seems to repeat certain objects, shades and configurations both in the homeland and in exile which seems to build the content of the exile theme in his novels.

The vision of Russia is represented in the figure of the exile who never settles for he recognizes the old in the new, both assuming equal importance in his mind. Since the land of the beginning of conscious life in Russia, it becomes seminal in Nabokov’s work.

Love, longing, separation and sensitivity to beauty are among the meanings of the image of Russia in Nabokov’s fiction. The homeland therefore seems to evoke happy yet painful memories, while the exile is rarely able to escape the world, instead it strengthens his band with the world.

For all of Nabokov’s exiles the polarities of experience are the homeland left behind and the countries newly found. Russia is the country of origin; the countries of residence are many; Germany, England, France, Switzerland and the United States. A displaced person often wonders throughout Nabokov’s fiction. In exile from his homeland, he is yet bound to it; he remembers it, dreams of it, and sees his surroundings in reference to it. Nabokov’s novels show this person in the various stages of his exile. In Mary (published in Russian in 1926, in English in 1970) this person has recently left the homeland. More than a generation later in Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (published in 1969), the person of Russian extraction is still in

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exile, alienated now from the homeland and his environment and himself, as exile or the feeling of exile continues, transmitted from parent to child.

The temptation to identify the characters with the author himself is very great, especially if Speak, Memory be read in conjunction with Glory or The Gift. Martin and Fyodor remember things that Nabokov himself remembers, but they do not represent him. Nabokov insisted on the distinction: “I am very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity. Only the background of the novel can be said to contain some biographical touches” (1) In the fiction these facts accumulate their own meanings, as character after character lives his life in his own ways, while having much in common with the other emigres. Because these experiences and images recur within and among the works, at different points in one émigré's life and in the lives of the other emigrés, they unify the time of the novels. W. W. Rowe explains this relationship of images and time:

A tiny detail, a shape, a vivid little phrase will appear and reappear—almost unnoticed. The present is thus subtly colored by the past, and the reader himself tends to experience the story within its own perceptual framework. And the future is constantly prefigured. Time becomes a series of superimposed translucent layer’s shifting just enough to reveal unexpected, familiar glimpses. (2)

By the repetition of objects, shades and configurations noticed both in the homeland and in exile, Nabokov builds the content of the exilic theme in his novels. A fact of the exile's life becomes an image through repetition and connotation. In The Gift, for example, the child Fyodor sees a place similar to the one he recalls in childhood and adds to them what he is now experiencing. The place and the configuration remind him of Russia - its woods, fields, colors, and smells - of his family, his childhood, and the awakening of his consciousness. The complete image of the homeland is complex indeed. It is possible to speak about Russia, the land, and Russia, the image of home. Features of the homeland gain importance as they begin to mean love, fidelity, and consciousness. Details and features that recur throughout the novels have a consistent meaning, which is found as the elements are traced.

Nabokov frees his characters from the strictures of time and from the facts of their lives by changing the facts into images.
J. Moynahan develops this idea:

Images are openings. Made out of words and from the materials of contingent experience, they paradoxically and magically create apertures in the walls of imprisoning time, transparencies which let in light from the free world of timelessness. (3)

Not only do the images alter time by bringing the past into the present and prefiguring the future. They also rearrange space. Distant Russia seems near when a terrain like Russia's is seen. The place in Russia, for example, where lilacs blossoming in the spring were first noticed is associated with the place where they are later seen, and thus the two places merge in one acute impression. Features, such as color and forms, and things, like a bowl or a butterfly that recur in various places at different times introduce a sense of the continuity of life.

The characters departure from Russia is not portrayed as a flight in the novels; certainly not as a flight from actuality into imagination or from the world into the mind or into art. A change in local, whatever the cause for displacement, reveals to them the same beauty of the world. If the cause of exile is political tyranny in the homeland, then the departure means freedom; the freedom, among other things, to be creative, to one's own life, to roam in the world. Nabokov's emigrés leave slavery (not reality) behind and enter the condition of freedom that was there before the revolution. If the émigrés remain uprooted, homeless, that is their choice. The upheavals in their lives do not complet them to wander. Not upheaval but continuity marks their lives as the beauties and interests of the homeland are found in the new countries, providing a bridge of imagery, experience, and creativity. Nabokov's sane characters aim for a fuller comprehension and evaluation of facts of their lives and a greater appreciation of the beauty of this world, whether they are then able to transform what they find into art depends on their talent. Often, Nabokov's characters lapse into nostalgia, but usually they gain deepening with their imagination. Certainly, the exiles' losses are great, but their gains are greater. To be sad or melancholic about the past means limiting the past by considering it completely over; Nabokov's exiles, on the contrary, show that true values and beauty continue, despite spatial dislocation.

The exile, then, is not escaping reality by moving on geographically, mentally, creatively. By moving on, he remains an exile; he does not settle, does not replace the primary geographic point, the lost home, with a surrogate home. He does not
become fixated in images of the past, but recognizes the old in the new, both old and new being equally important in his mind.

Nabokov is interested in the consciousness of his exile, in his sensibility. Consciousness was first awakened and sensibility first formed in the homeland. Since the land of the beginning of conscious life is Russia; Russia is seminal in Nabokov's work. The exile think, feels and creates with the details of the specifically remembered homeland. Ganin, luzhin, Martin, Fyodor, Sebastian, V., Pnin, and the Vees remember the same seasons, the same colors, the fauna and flora of Russia. They speak its language. They share the same sensibility, formed by the Russia they knew in their childhood. These characters find freedom and contentment in developing the memories, the images of their childhood and youth.

In Nabokov, Russia is divested of time and place because it is found in the émigrés' minds and because its signs are all around them. Perhaps Nabokov learned to abstract the essence of a thing through his expatriation.

Remembrance of the homeland, or the thought of Russia is central to Nabokov's major works. Even if the country is not named as Russia in one work, its description fits that of Russia in another work. The exiles think and speak of Russia, wherever they may live. Some remember Russia more vividly than do others; some are more intensely devoted to Russia than are others. But for all the émigrés Russia is the point of departure. It is the place they leave after the Revolution; it is also the source of the impressions they retain throughout their lives.

The point of the protagonist's contract with the homeland may differ from novel to novel, but it is always important. In *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* the protagonists see a country identifiable with Russia politically destroyed.

In *Mary*, whose events take place after the Revolution, the emigres, now living in Berlin, constantly discuss Russia. The émigrés of *The Defense*, set later than *Mary*, establish their own little Russia in Berlin. *Glory* portrays various attitudes towards Russia; longing, sentimentality, indifference and describes feats performed for the homeland. *Despair* reveals both love of and hatred for Russia. The *Gift* shows the émigrés group in action, while showing the main character's relationship with Russia. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the main topic of V. 's discussion in his half-brother's Russianness. *Pnin* follows one emigre group from Paris to
America and shows the changes in its feelings for the homeland; Pnin includes, in addition, the second generation of that group, since Pnin is set later than the other novels. Ada recreates Russia in Ardis, and look at the Harlequins does something none of the other novels does; it presents a return to Soviet Russia.

Russia leaves an unforgettable impression on the children of the early twentieth century in Nabokov’s novels. These children have a collective memory of Russia; its cities and countryside, its seasons, its citizens. Most of Nabokov’s pre-Revolutionary children-Ganin, Fyodor, Martin, Sebastian and V., Pnin, and the elder Veens-have good memories. Their childhood is firmly imbedded in their minds. What Nabokov says himself and his generation holds true for his fictional compères as well:

I would moreover submit that, in regard to the power of hoarding up impressions, Russian children of my generation passed through a period of genius, as if destiny were loyally trying what it could for them by giving them more than their share, in view of the cataclysm that was to remove completely the world they had known. (4)

In Nabokov’s novels, the stored impressions of the émigrés comfort them in exile by enriching their lives. The details of the homeland are so vividly recalled that they seem as clear years later as they were originally.

Nabokov’s Russia is colorful. The dominant colors of Russia are not merely actual visual colors; they become images with their own references and meanings. Among these colors, blue is used as the color of Russia itself. The child Pnin’s Russia is remembered as blue because it is that color on the globe he studies in his childhood (Pnin, p. 144). Blue is the hue of the Russian summer sky. Luzhin adds the ”the blue gleam” the Russian autumn (The Defense, P. 192). Blue is also associated with Russian girls, who wear blue ribbons as part of their school uniform. The blue present in configurations that evoke childhood jars the emigre into a process of thought that results in keener awareness.

The memory of the exuberance of a summer day in childhood remains poignantly with the exile. Blue skies mean a good day for play and exploration. They also open the world of nature to the young scientist. Fyodor hunts butterflies in the The Gift; luzhin wanders freely, escaping from his unhappy parents in The Defense. In the summer Fyodor in The Gift and Martin in Glory fall exploration,
freedom, love- recur when blue is especially noticed. Blue is finally associated to the past and to Russia.

Another significant color is lilac or purple. Lilacs, their color and scent occur in almost all the novels. They herald summer, the best season for the child. Luzhin remembers "a swift country summer consisting in the main of three smells: lilac, new-mown hay, and dry leaves" (The Defense, p. 15). Lilac is also the color of love for luzhin: his beloved aunt lives in a plum-coloured house with a stained- glass door; "a whole bush of lilac" is brought into the house (The Defense, p. 50). The color and the smell of lilacs remind Luzhin of the only person he ever loved. Luzhin's association of love and freedom with this color is shared by most of Nabokov's male expatriates. They remember the lilacs growing around their country homes; their first sexual strings are associated with lilacs. The color signifies the passage of time, the progression from moment to moment, from winter to summer, from childhood to youth. Lilac tones are poeticized by Shade in Pale Fire:

White butterflies turn lavender as they pass through its shade where gently seems to sway the phantom of my little daughter's swing (p. 24)

Lavender is associated with shade's dead daughter. Her presence is so tangible that shade's mind seems to be reaching from time to eternity, from life to after-life.

Lilac, then, has a twofold function. It is one of the dominant colors of the summers which the children enjoyed. Their experiences of awakening consciousness are tied to that color. Lilac is, then, one of the colors of Russia. Secondly, lilac is a transitional color. Because it marks the change from winter to summer, it implies the passage of time. It greets the child returning to the country from the city. As the color of change, it becomes the image of new possibilities, new development. Associated specifically with Russia, it is the color of the ever-presence of Russia in the novels of its continuing beauty and meaning.

Gannin in Mary sees Russia in Berlin, and this vision sharpens his mind. He does not lapse into futile day-dreams as he sees the colors he had noticed when he waited for Mary in youth. Rather, he begins to awaken, for he recognizes the color, but he admits to himself that he is not in the Russia of his youth. His memory of Russia helps him to judge his situation correctly. He decides to leave Berlin and Mary; he

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chooses to go on. In this and other cases the colors of Russia indicate not an escape from the present into the past, but a fuller concentration on the present in the light of the past.

In *Pale Fire* Russia is "a dim iridescence." (P. 99) In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* a distant summer in a dreamland Russia" is recalled. (P. 140) But for most characters Russia remains not only a memory but also a catalyst for action. D. B. Johnson notes that: "The synesthetically intermixed sensory cues seem to reinforce each other and to resonate thus fixating scenes of memory and imagination far more vividly than is possible through discrete modes of perception." (5) The scenes so deeply impressed affect the capacity to reason in the same way and with the same intensity that they stir the memory and the imagination. Precise memory leads these characters to action.

But no matter how beautifully Russia is manipulated to seem a paradise, it is still a place of both happiness and suffering. In *Glory*, Zoorland, an executive land where "ordinary mortals are not admitted." (P. 14) They know Zoorland is fictitious and do not identify it with Russia, but its very invention expresses their nostalgia for the homeland. Zoorland is what these recently exiled youths would perhaps like Russia to have been like in order to prevent the forming of the Soviet State.

The Zoorland, fantasy-land occurs in *Pnin*, where lonely Victor imagines a kingdom whose king is his father. (P. 83) All along Victor is interested in Russia; he also needs a father. These two concerns, Russianness and fatherhood, result in his version of Zoorland; again not an ideal state, but one wrecked with Revolution.

Because Russia includes both pain and joy, fulfillment and frustration, it is a microcosm in which the children find that what they will encounter in life is in exile. The duality of the homeland, the pain and joy of the childhood setting are expressed by black and white, evident in nature and among human.

In nature, shadows and sunlight represent co-existent pain and bliss; among humans, the contrast of black hair and white skin indicates the same suffering and joy. All of the beloved women in Nabokov’s are black and white, while the time of separation is gray. Blackness and whiteness are significant features which complement the other colors.
Both the Russian city and the Russian countryside provide images found in most of Nabokov’s novels. The natural colors and configurations of summer become images of beauty, thought, love, co-existent joy and sorrow. At the end of the summer the child leaves the countryside for the city. This separation in itself foreshadows the eventual severance of citizen and country. Life in the city of St. Petersburg is sadder for the child than life in the countryside. The winter home is not rich in natural imagery. The children’s memories of life in the city center on their family life. This is a happy memory for Pnin, who remembers his parents contentedly sitting in the evening at home on Galernaya Street. (Pnin, P. 75) Luzhin’s memory of his parents at home in the city is unhappy in The Defense yet he sees beauty in the white St. Petersburg winters, recaptured in Berlin’s winter. Luzhin’s wife vividly remembers her family’s St. Petersburg house, realizing that it is “completely irreplaceable” and that her parents Berlin apartment, where they pretend to have recreated their Russian home, is “so unlike their quiet St. Petersburg house.” (P. 105) The homes in which the children spent their winters belong to times past and places left, cannot be replaced. The exiles are homeless, and home itself cannot be recreated.

For this reason, after leaving Russia, none of Nabokov’s exiles owns a home. None settles. Pnin is the only one who comes close to finding a home. He considers the Clement’s house his house, but that illusion ends suddenly when he decides to leave Waindell college. The sense of being at home is welcome while it lasts, but is deluding, as the address itself suggests: 999 Todd Road reads “Nein nein nein Tod” in German; translated, it means “No no no death.” The house cannot become Pnin’s Permanent home. “The sense of living in a discrete building all by himself was to Pnin something singularly delightful and amazingly satisfying to a weary old want of his innermost self, battered and stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness. “Pnin is surprised to think that “everything... would have been “no Russian Revolution, no exodus, no expatriation in France no naturalization in America.” There are lilacs by the house, Russia is still blue on the globe in the living room, the morning reflections remind him of the stained-glass windows in Russian country houses. (Pnin, PP. 143-45) But the Clement’s house does not and cannot become Pnin’s home because it is not in Russia and because his family is missing from it. It is only in the colors and forms around the house that Pnin can see real similarities, and only in these impressions are the past and present united.
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Departure from the childhood home and therefore from Russia, is foreshadowed in the child's travel and in his nighttime experimentation with space. Nabokov's family travelled in the way described in the novels. Nabokov states in the premonition he had:

In the first decade of our dwindling century, during trips my family to Western Europe, I imagined, in bedtime reveries, what it would be like to become an exile who longed for a remote, sad, and (right epithet coming) unquenchable Russia, under the eucalypti of exotic resorts. Lenin and his police nicely arranged the realization of that fantasy. (6)

Like Nabokov, the young characters in his novels travel with their families by train. Martin's trip in Glory and Fyodor's in The Gift are the most notable. The boys peek through the windows at the lights in the distance. The lights suggest adventure, exploration; they afford a new perception of space.

Confining space seems pierced by a streak of light, an opening out of space into another dimension. Space is also expanded by the distance vistas seen from the moving train. The child's experimentation with space help him imagine the state of exile, of moving from place to place.

The separation from Russia during the revolution is sudden and final. The image of Russia is established in the minds of the characters, and they take Russia with them in this way as they embark on their exilic journey. With time they realize that there can be no return to the homeland. They will remain without a country, homeless. In tracing the realization that the exit from Russia is irreversible, Nabokov says:

I think that in the middle thirties we had just given up the idea of going back. But it didn't matter much because Russia was with us we were Russia. We represented Russia... What had we lost? we had lost... a few sounds and smells, the sun at the end of a leafy avenue, the backdrop of a magic childhood. (7)

And yet with the passing of time, it becomes clear that the characters in Nabokov's novels have a keen power of observation and register the sounds, the smells, and the shadows of Russia all round them, though they will never again feel
them in Russia. The Russian setting in most of Nabokov's major novels derives from the very qualities he at first thought lost. In this sense Nabokov talks of inventing Russia, a feat that took a long time. The sights and sounds of Russia find expression in the fictional homeland of Nabokov's exiles. For this purpose Nabokov knew that "all the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood." (8)

The period of exile begins after the Revolution when the separation from Russia is complete. The émigrés feel dissierved from their past and from their present environment. Maloff analyses the feeling of isolation from Russia among the white Russian émigrés:

... There could be no vital relation to a homeland which the émigrés had not merely left but repudiated with contempt and loathing. The Mother Russia they dreamed of, imagined, wrote of, as they couldn't help knowing, however much they buoyed up their flagging spirits with euphoric reports and wistful rumors- that Russia, their Russia lay shimmering in the irrevocable past, violated beyond recognition by the usurping barbarians... the émigrés were certain they had carried the high civilization away into exile, leaving behind a crude mockery, barren tundra, a debased beaurocratic gibberish, some dreadful kitsch called "social realism," a cultural void.(9)

Since Russia is no longer Russia after the Revolution, there is nothing to return to. In the novels only two characters go back. One is Martin in Glory; the novel ends with Martin's departure for Russia. The other is Vadim of Look at the Harlequins. Vadim's trip shows the futility of returns; nothing is accomplished, everything has changed. Totalitarianism destroys the human spirit and its expression, Nabokov writes again and again in his novels.

The Russian child rehearsed for expatriation during his travels to Europe for vacation; he rehearsed for his dream of return when coming home after the vacation. Nabokov describes the second part of the trip- the return- in Speak, Memory. After a year abroad, the family is returning to Russia. The child Vladimir

could not help being affected in some way of his own by a mother's nostalgia and a father's patriotism. In result, that particular return to
Russia, my first conscious return (at the age of six), seems to me now, sixty years later, a rehearsal—not of the grand homecoming that will never take place, but of its constant dream in my long years of exile. (10)

Nabokov's characters share his dream. Among the topics they discuss is this question of going back. In Mary the recently dispossessed émigrés speak about Russia with love and longing. "Tell me: do you love Russia?" He continues: "Quite so. We should love Russia. Without the love of us emigres, Russia is finished. None of the people there love her" (PP. 58-59). After some more conversation she asks: "... will it go on like this for long?" (P.58) The finality of the separation is incomprehensible at the outset. Towards the end of The Gift the same question is repeated? "And when will we return to Russia?" (P. 362) The novel answers the question: never. There is no such possibility. The homeland is now more than a topographical point. It is literature, art, memory, beauty.

Fyodor and the other Nabokovian exiles will not return. In the last scene of The Gift Fyodor is walking with Zina through the streets of Berlin in his slippers. His left slipper is falling off. (P.378) "For a long time he had wanted to express somehow that it was in his feet that he had the feeling of Russia, that he could touch and recognize all of her with his shoes, as a blind man feels with his palms." (P. 75) Never again will he walk on the streets and paths of his childhood, but these avenues are immortalized in his work.

Love, longing, separation, and sensitivity to beauty are among the meanings of the vision of Russia as it is used by Nabokov. The thought of the homeland does not enable the exile to escape the world; instead it intensifies his bond with the world, a bond so exalting and so imbued with ecstasy. The features of the homeland are found again and again in many countries, and they evoke blissful, yet still painful feelings.
Notes


(6) Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, pp. 177-78.


References


