

From Russia to America: The Depiction of Nationality in Nabokov's Work

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A truly international writer, Vladimir Nabokov once declared: “the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance [...] The writer’s art is his real passport. His identity should be immediately recognized by a special pattern or unique coloration” (*Strong Opinions*, 63). Despite this affirmation, however, the treatment of nationalities in Nabokov’s work is highly individualized and distinctive. He himself traveled along an extraordinarily complex path through life. Born into a wealthy family in St. Petersburg, Russia, Nabokov was forced to leave his homeland in 1919 because of the Bolshevik Revolution. He attended Cambridge University in England, and after graduation moved to Berlin to launch a career as a writer. After a decade and a half he moved again, this time to France when life in Germany became unbearable due to the Nazi regime. Three years later, he fled once more, this time to the United States, where he eventually took American citizenship. But his travels were not yet over. Nabokov would ultimately land in Montreux, Switzerland, where he lived out his days in the Palace Hotel on the shore of Lake Geneva.

Nabokov alluded to the complexity of his life experiences when he declared in a 1964 interview: “I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany. I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home” (*Strong Opinions*,

26). Of course, even at this point Nabokov had moved on from America to Switzerland, though he always thought he might return to the States and he never relinquished in American citizenship.

An avid and accomplished lepidopterist as well as a celebrated writer, Nabokov was a perceptive observer of the world around him. It is not surprising, then, that his creative work would feature indelible portraits of the peoples and places he had come to know in his life. As one looks carefully at his writings, one sees that each of the lands Nabokov depicted is given a distinctive national coloring, and it is likely that Nabokov’s personal experience of living in these different lands had a decisive influence on the way they emerge in his art. In this essay I would like to retrace Nabokov’s odyssey through the Old and New Worlds and see just how he represented his various dwelling places in his work.

Let us start with Russia. Russia was the site of Nabokov’s happiest memories. Raised by a loving and indulgent pair of parents in comfortable settings in St. Petersburg and Vyra, an estate south of the capital, Nabokov regarded Russia as the place where three of his most cherished passions arose: first, for a warm and secure family environment; second, for the pursuit, capture, and cataloguing of Lepidoptera; and third, for the creation of poetry, which received a palpable stimulus when he fell seriously in love

for the first time at the age of sixteen. All three of these passions made their mark in his depiction of Russia in his work, and it would be worthwhile to take a quick look at each of these as we begin our journey with Nabokov the writer and world citizen.

(1) The Family

Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory* is full of fond recollections of the author's family, as well as of a haunting sense of what would be lost in the years following the family's departure from Russia, including the most tragic of these losses—the murder of Nabokov's father by an assassin trying to kill Pavel Milyukov at a public lecture in Berlin in 1922. One of the most moving passages in *Speak, Memory* comes at the end of Chapter Three, when Nabokov evokes a memory of his uncle's fondness for books that the uncle remembers from his youth. Nabokov writes:

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window [...] A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die. (Speak, Memory, 77)

Sadly, Nabokov's father would fall victim to an assassin's bullet in a matter of years.

(2) Lepidoptery

One finds many passages in *Speak, Memory* that display Nabokov's passion for butterfly collecting. One such passage reads in part: "From the age of seven, everything I felt in connection with a rectangle of framed sunlight [i.e. his bedroom window—JC] was dominated by a single passion. If my first glance of the morning was for the sun,

my first thought was for the butterflies it would engender." Nabokov then recalls one such butterfly he pursued, and he states: "my desire for it was one of the most intense I have every experienced" (*Speak, Memory*, 119–22).

(3) Poetry (and "Tamara")

Chapter Eleven of *Speak, Memory* is devoted to a description of the creation of what Nabokov indicates was his first poem (although in reality he had been writing poetry before the experience he depicts here). He recounts in great detail the trance-like state he found himself in, as well as the tremendous struggle he underwent as he sought to find the words appropriate to the experience he wished to convey. Finally, he recalls the wondrous sense of dissociation he would feel when he awakened from this creative reverie. Here is how he describes this last phenomenon, which occurred as he looked at himself in the mirror: "I had the shocking sensation of finding the mere dregs of my usual self odds and ends of an evaporated identity which it took my reason quite an effort to gather again in the glass" (*Speak, Memory*, 227). When Nabokov met Valentina Shulgina (whom he called "Tamara" in *Speak, Memory*) in the summer of 1915, he found not only first love, but a focus for his poetic inspiration. Chapter Twelve of the memoir offers a sensual description of the settings and moods that enveloped the young lovers during that first summer and in subsequent months leading up to their final parting.

All of these experiences, which were so lovingly depicted in *Speak, Memory*, provided ample fuel for Nabokov's fiction as well. His first romance with "Tamara" was distilled into a lyrical evocation of young love in *Mary*, Nabokov's first novel. Indeed, Nabokov would acknowledge the similarity between the accounts of romance in *Mary* and *Speak, Memory* in his introduction to the English-language

translation of the novel, and he claimed there that “a headier extract of personal reality is contained in the romantization than in the autobiographer’s scurpulously faithful account.” He explained this peculiar state of affairs by noting that “in terms of years, Ganin [the protagonist of *Mary*—JC] was three times closer to his past than I was to mine in *Speak, Memory*” (*Mary*, xiv). What is most significant about both of these evocations of young love is that, as Nabokov put it in *Speak, Memory*, “the loss of my country was equated for me with the loss of my love” (*Speak, Memory*, 245). Conversely, the letters that “Tamara” wrote to Nabokov had the power of calling up “with plangent strength every whiff of damp leave, every autumn-rusted frond of fern in the St. Petersburg countryside” (*Speak, Memory*, 249). Headly indeed.

Nabokov’s affair with Shulgina informed not only the novel *Mary*, but the short stories “A Letter that Never Reached Russia” and “The Admiralty Spire” as well. Similarly, Nabokov’s memories of his Petersburg childhood helped fashion the scenes of childhood depicted in the novels *The Defense* and *The Gift*, and it is in the latter novel that Nabokov provides the most evocative depiction in his fiction of the significance of the butterfly pursuits he experienced in his youth. There the protagonist’s recollection of his quest for butterflies is connected with the theme of his love for his missing father, a naturalist and explorer who made an untimely exit from the protagonist’s life. Describing the day of the father’s last departure from his country estate, the narrator follows the young protagonist Fyodor to his “favorite clearing” in the woods near his estate. In the narrator’s words, “[t]he divine meaning of this wood meadow was expressed in its butterflies.” After commenting on some of the many species to be found there, the narrator continues: “All this fascinating life, by whose present blend one could infallibly tell both the age of the summer [...] the

geographical location of the area, and the vegetal composition of the clearing—all this that was living, genuine and eternally dear to him, Fyodor perceived in a flash with one penetrating and experienced glance. Suddenly he placed a fist against the trunk of a birch tree and leaning on it, burst into tears” (*Gift*, 133).

Clearly, Nabokov’s recollections of Russia, and particularly of the rural area around St. Petersburg, carried tremendous value for him. Yet is it important to note that the rapturous tone found in Nabokov’s highly charged, deeply nostalgic evocations of the Russia of his youth completely disappears when he writes about or comments on the state of Russia in its post-Revolutionary Soviet condition. When he was asked by an interviewer in 1969 whether he would ever try to go back to Russia “just to look,” he replied:

There’s nothing to look at. New tenement houses and old churches do not interest me. The hotels there are terrible. I detest the Soviet theater. Any palace in Italy is superior to the repainted abodes of the Tsars. The village huts in the forbidden hinterland are as dismally poor as ever; and the wretched peasant flogs his wretched cart horse with the same wretched zest. As to my special northern landscape and the haunts of my childhood—well, I would not want to contaminate their images preserved in my mind. (Strong Opinions, 149)

On the other hand, he did admit to fantasizing about such a return, as he remarked in *Speak, Memory*: “What it would be actually to see again my former surroundings, I can hardly imagine. Sometimes I fancy myself revisiting them with a false passport, under an assumed name. It could be done. But I do not think I shall ever do it. I have been dreaming of it too idly and too long” (250). Of course, he did allow himself to indulge this fantasy in his

creative work, for example in the poem “To Prince S. M. Kachurin” and in his last completed novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* One notes, however, that he does not depict this imagined return as a positive experience. In “To Prince S. M. Kachurin,” the poet exclaims: “Mne strashno” (“I’m frightened”) and “Mne khochetsia domoi” (“I want to go home”) (*Poems and Problems*, 138). In *Look at the Harlequins!*, Nabokov’s parodic alter ego, Vadim Vadimych, writes of his return to St. Petersburg: “Its aspect [...] evoked no thrill of recognition; it was an unfamiliar, if not utterly foreign, town, still lingering in some other era: an undefinable era, not exactly remote, but certainly preceding the invention of body deodorants” (210). The only “eerie shiver” Vadim experiences occurs when he catches sight of the façade of a house on Gertsen Street, with a “floral design running above the row of its upper windows” (211). (This, of course, is Nabokov’s own childhood home at 47 Bolshaia Morskaia Street.)

What’s more, in the short story “The Visit to the Museum,” Nabokov depicts a physical return to Russia as an absolute nightmare. As his narrator comments: “Alas, it was not the Russia I remembered, but the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land” (*Stories*, 285). The lesson that emerges here, then, is that one should not try to return to the site of a cherished memory in a literal, physical fashion. Rather, one should do so in one’s mind, in a lovingly reconstructed memory, as we find Nabokov himself doing in *Speak, Memory*.

Having left Russia for good in 1919, Nabokov lived for a while in England as a student at Cambridge University. What is especially noteworthy about this English sojourn is that while Nabokov tried to blend in with the other Cambridge students, he made a concerted effort to stay connected with the Russia of his past. For example, he would faithfully read

pages from Dal’s dictionary of the Russian language (see *Speak, Memory*, 265). Nabokov summed up his time in England with a distinctive observation: “The story of my college years in England is really the story of my trying to become a Russian writer. I had the feeling that Cambridge and all its famed features—venerable elms, blazoned windows, loquacious tower clocks—were of no consequence in themselves but existed merely to frame and support my rich nostalgia” (*Speak, Memory*, 261).

When Nabokov took his degree in 1922, he moved to Berlin, where he spent more than a decade, at first making a living by giving private lessons and publishing poetry, and later by producing some of the finest prose works in Russian émigré literature. What is noteworthy about Nabokov’s time in Germany was his profound lack of interest in trying to assimilate into the native community around him. As he himself noted, the Russian émigrés who had settled in Berlin and Paris “formed compact colonies,” and within those colonies “they kept to themselves” (*Speak, Memory*, 277). Of his own relationship to the Germans around him, Nabokov recalled: “I lived in a closed émigré circle of Russian friends and read exclusively Russian newspapers, magazines, and books. My only forays into the local language were the civilities exchanged with my successive landlords or landladies and the routine necessities of shopping” (*Strong Opinions*, 189). In *Speak, Memory* he conjures up a wonderful image of the attitude that he and his fellow émigrés had toward the everyday world around them: “As I look back at the years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russian, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence [...] among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, émigrés, happened to dwell” (276). He presents a similar perspective in the novel *Mary*, which of course, was written in Berlin. As the protagonist

Lev Ganin looks down on the Berlin streets from the top of a double-decker bus, he “felt that this alien city passing before him was nothing but a moving picture” (*Mary*, 52).

As his work makes clear, Nabokov had no love for Germany, and this state of affairs may have been conditioned by the fact that, as the German scholar Dieter Zimmer has pointed out, Nabokov’s stay in Germany came on the heels of a “perfect childhood” (“L’Allemagne dans l’oeuvre de Nabokov,” 71). The contrast would have been stunning. Nabokov’s second novel—*King, Queen, Knave* (published in 1928)—gives a good idea of its creator’s disdain for the Germans among whom he lived. The novel features three main characters, each of whom is a model of egocentricity and selfishness. The businessman Dreyer consistently ignores or is insensible to the feelings of others. His wife Martha callously enjoys the sufferings of others and spends much of the novel plotting her husband’s murder so that she can be with her tawdry lover Franz. Franz himself is a fairly unreflective boor, but he does relish his recollection of killing cats when he was young (*King, Queen, Knave*, 51). He compliantly submits to all of Martha’s murderous schemes. Years later, when Nabokov translated the novel into English, he accentuated the kind of spirit he saw lurking in figures such as Franz. He inserted a very significant aside into one of his sentences describing Franz: “In those day—which as a very old and very sick man, guilty of worse sins than avunculicide, he remembered with a grin of contempt—young Franz was oblivious to the corrosive probity of his pleasant daydreams about Dreyer dropping dead” (*King, Queen, Knave*, 138; italics added). Presumably Nabokov envisioned Franz becoming a willing Nazi and possibly committing atrocities during wartime.

As unattractive as the characters are in *King, Queen, Knave*, the Germans who appear in Nabokov’s short

fiction from the mid 1930’s are even more hideous their predecessors. With the passage of time, Germany ceased to be merely an illusory or alien environment in which Russian émigrés obliviously lived. The rise of the Nazi regime began to create an oppressive and increasingly dangerous atmosphere, one that would have been acutely felt by Nabokov, married as he now was to a Jewish woman—Véra Slonim—whom he married in 1925 and with whom he had a child, Dmitri, born in 1934. Two such works were “The Leonardo” (written in 1933) and “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (written in 1937). The former work features a Polish man who moves into a rooming house occupied by a pair of German brothers who turn out to be brutal bullies who persecute the newcomer simply because he is “different” (*Stories*, 360). Nabokov’s descriptions of the bullies are truly startling. One reads: “Gigantic, imperiously reeking of sweat and beer, with beefy voices and senseless speeches, with fecal matter replacing the human brain, they provoke a tremor of ignoble fear” (*Stories*, 361). They end up killing the Polish newcomer.

“Cloud, Castle, Lake” depicts a Russian émigré who wins a vacation excursion in a lottery. He is excited at the prospect, for he senses that the trip promises happiness that “would have something in common with his childhood, and with the excitement aroused in him by Russian lyrical poetry” (*Stories*, 430). Nostalgia for childhood and the excitement of Russian poetry, we might recall, were two of the great passions Nabokov wrote about in *Speak, Memory*. Yet instead of this happy experience, the man finds himself forced to participate in the artificial camaraderie organized by a group of boorish Germans. During the excursion, the man discovers a place that seems instantly welcoming and pleasant, but his companions refuse to let him stay there and they make him return with them to Berlin. On the way back they even begin to beat

him with ingenious malevolence: “It occurred to them, among other things, to use a corkscrew on his palms; then on his feet [...] Atta boy! The other men relied more on their iron heels, whereas the women were satisfied to pinch and slap. All had a wonderful time” (*Stories*, 437).

Some of the harshest words Nabokov directed toward Germans are to be found in his last and longest Russian-language novel, *The Gift*. Early in that novel, the protagonist Fyodor becomes irritated by the appearance and conduct of a man on a bus. In an extraordinary passage that runs on for nearly twenty lines, Fyodor mentally directs his pent-up antipathy for Germans at this anonymous fellow passenger. The passage reads in part: he “knew precisely why he hated him: for that low forehead, for those pale eyes [...] for the lavatory humor and crude laughter; for the fatness of the backsides of both sexes [...] for the weakness for dirty little tricks, for taking pains with dirty tricks [...] for cruelty in everything, self-satisfied, taken for granted” (*Gift*, 81). Ironically, however, Fyodor learns to his surprise that the man is actually Russian, not German, and this unexpected discovery would seem to undermine and perhaps even discredit the invective in the preceding passage. Yet this new position is itself overturned later in the novel when Fyodor is depicted roaming through the Grunewald and coming upon German bathers frolicking at the lake. A lengthy description of unattractive body parts is followed by characterizations such as “the hopeless, godless vacancy of satisfied faces; romps, guffaws, roisterous splashing—all this formed the apotheosis of that renowned German good-naturedness which can turn so easily at any moment into frenzied hooting.” The passage continues: “And over all this [...] there reigned an unforgettable smell, the smell of dust, of sweat, of aquatic slime, of unclean underwear, of aired and dried poverty, the smell of dried, smoked, potted souls a penny a piece” (*Gift*, 336).

One might be tempted to dismiss this as the jaundiced perspective of a literary character, and not necessarily reflective of his creator’s opinions. Nabokov himself opens the door for such an excuse when he wrote in his foreword to the English translation of *The Gift*: “Fyodor’s attitude toward Germany reflects too typically perhaps the crude and irrational contempt that Russian émigrés had for the ‘natives’ [...] My young man is moreover influenced by the rise of a nauseous dictatorship belonging to the period when the novel was written and not to the one it patchily reflects” (*Gift*, [x]). Yet when we turn to *Speak, Memory*, which was written significantly later than *The Gift*, we find Nabokov himself describing Grunewald bathers in a manner very similar to Fyodor’s reflections: “Gray-footed goodwives sat on greasy gray sand in their slips; repulsive, seal-voiced males, in muddy swimming trunks, gamboled around [...] and the exhalations coming from these unfortunate frolickers, and their shed clothes [...] mingled with the stench of stagnant water to form an inferno of odors that, somehow, I have never found duplicated anywhere else” (*Gift*, 303–4).

Nabokov finally made the decision to leave Germany, and he did so in 1937, temporarily settling in France. From Cannes, Nabokov wrote to a friend later that year: “I shall never return to Germany. It is a loathsome and terrifying country. I have always been unable to abide Germans, the swinish German spirit, but in their present state of things (which, by the way, suits them rather well) life finally became unbearable there for me, and I don’t say this simply because I am married to a Jewish woman” (quoted in Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, 201). Now that Nabokov had settled in France, French settings and characters began to play a prominent role in this fiction. Significantly, however, although France was not depicted as the kind of boorish, vaguely threatening realm as Germany had been in Nabokov’s

recent fiction, neither was it shown to be a welcome, protective, warm sanctuary. Rather, France emerges in Nabokov's work as a site of instability, ambiguity, and unreliable identity.

One of the clearest illustrations of the disorienting effect associated with French topography in Nabokov's fiction of the late 1930s is the short story "The Visit to the Museum," written in October 1938. In this story, a first-person narrator visits a small town in France, attempts to purchase a portrait hanging in the town museum, finds his return visit to the museum becoming a journey of epic proportions, and finally discovers to his horror that when he exits the museum he is no longer in France, but in Soviet Leningrad. The story exhibits several characteristics of the unusual French chronotope of the late 1930s, beginning with the very issue of fluidity of space itself. The narrator offers no explanation of how he could enter a museum in France and exit onto a street in Leningrad. Yet even before this occurs, one notes that there is something amiss with spatial proportions and arrangements in the French setting. At the very outset of the story, the narrator is searching for a stationery store, but he is frustrated by spying "the spire of a long-necked cathedra, always the same one, that kept popping up at the end of every street" (*Stories*, 277). On his return visit to the museum, he encounters many new rooms and he designates the place as "the unnecessarily spreading museum" (*Stories*, 282).

Breakdowns in logic are a second characteristic of the chronotope in evidence here. When the narrator first meets the museum director, M. Godard, he sees the man throw a letter he had just sealed into the wastebasket. The narrator remarks: "This act seemed unusual to me; however, I did not see fit to interfere" (*Stories*, 280). Later, when Godard tries to rebuff the narrator's attempts to settle on a price for the portrait, he states: "I must first discuss the

matter with the mayor, who has just died and has not yet been elected" (*Stories*, 282). Although this can perhaps be construed as a garbled way of saying: "The mayor has just died, and a new one has not yet been elected," the statement as the narrator conveys it is completely illogical.

In attempting to make sense of the story, one might be tempted to view it as a dream, or, to be more precise, a nightmare. Upon spying the picture he has been asked to purchase, the narrator asserts: "It is fun to be present at the coming true of a dream, even if it is not one's own" (*Stories*, 279). A dream would explain the lack of logic, the oddly expanding space, and so on. Significantly, however, the narrator addresses this possibility and refutes it, commenting on his discovery that he has arrived in Leningrad: "Oh, how many times in my sleep I had experienced a similar sensation! Now, though, it was reality. Everything was real..." (*Stories*, 285). Alternatively, we can perhaps assert that madness or delusion is operating here. The narrator opens the story by making reference to "a friend of mine—a person with oddities, to put it mildly" (*Stories*, 277). In referring to his "friend," is he possibly referring to himself? Later he asserts that he had "always had doubts about my friend's capacity to remain this side of fantasy" and refers to him as "the good freak" (*Stories*, 277). When he sees the picture, he is amazed to find "the very object whose existence had hitherto seemed to me but the figment of an unstable mind" (*Stories*, 279). When he tells the director of his discovery, Godard says "Agreed [...] but I am not crazy either" (*Stories* 280). At the end of the story, when he has somehow made it back from the Soviet Union, he tells us that he has "forsover carrying out commissions entrusted one by the insanity of others" (*Stories*, 285).

Although "The Visit to the Museum" may provide the clearest example of the unstable or unreliable

realm associated with France in Nabokov's fiction of the late 1930s, it is not alone. One can also turn to the stories "Lik" and "That in Aleppo Once..." for further corroboration. But why would Nabokov depict France in this odd way? My hypothesis is that the state of instability Nabokov attributes to French settings reflects the considerable instability he was experiencing in his own life. Having left Berlin in 1937, Nabokov now confronted the serious problem of how to support himself and his family. The title for the chapter in Brian Boyd's magnificent biography of Nabokov that is devoted to this particular period in Nabokov's life formulates the situation with exquisite succinctness: "Destitute: France, 1938–1939." Boyd's summary of conditions in 1938 is worth quoting: "With no savings as a buffer, no regular income and just enough from the latest small advance or loan to last another week or two's rent, there was every reason for steady panic" (486). Moving to the south of France later in the year, the Nabokovs still found themselves in straitened circumstances. Again, I quote from Boyd's biography: "Their situation was wretched, they had never been so poor, it all seemed a slow death, they just did not know what to do next" (488).

Added to this had been the wrenching episode of Nabokov's affair with Irina Guadanini, which spanned nearly three-quarters of the year in 1937. Nabokov had met Guadanini in 1936, but began his affair with her in February 1937. Significantly, however, this dalliance did not bring unmitigated joy. The strains of infidelity, of separation from Dmitri and Véra, left him mentally and physically drained. As he wrote to his wife, his bouts with psoriasis "drove me to the border of suicide—a border I was not authorized to cross because I had you in my luggage" (*Selected Letters*, 26). These strains did not entirely subside until Nabokov ended his relationship with Guadanini, meeting her for the last time in September 1937 (Boyd, *Russian Years*,

443). Nabokov himself was perhaps commenting on his overall experience in France when he wrote in his memoir: "My bleakest recollections are associated with Paris" (*Speak, Memory*, 258).

All this would change when Nabokov left France in advance of the German occupation of that country, taking his family by ship to the United States in May 1940. Although Nabokov was virtually penniless when he arrived in the States, he immediately felt he had arrived in a place where people were open, warm, and spontaneous. He recalled his encounter with the Customs agents who had to summon a porter to break the lock on his trunk because the keys had been lost: "Lying on top of everything when the trunk was finally opened were two sets of boxing gloves. The two Customs men grabbed the gloves and began a mock sparring session, dancing around Nabokov." "Where would that happen? Where would that happen?" Nabokov later mused (see Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, 232).

As it turned out, this positive first impression set the note for Nabokov's subsequent experience of America. Although it took him several years to find secure employment, Nabokov responded positively to the warmth, openness, and generosity he perceived in the Americans he regularly encountered. He would subsequently make many positive remarks about America and its inhabitants. Thus, in a 1962 interview he declared: "In America I'm happier than in any other country. It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America. It is a second home in the true sense of the word" (*Strong Opinions*, 10). A few years later, in an interview for *Playboy* magazine, he talked about his early experiences in the States: "It so happened that I was immediately exposed to the very best in America, to its rich intellectual life and to its easygoing, good-natured atmosphere [...] I acquired more friends

than I ever had in Europe” (*Strong Opinions*, 27). (Incidentally, of this last point he wrote in *Speak, Memory* that “in the course of almost one-fifth of a century in Western Europe I have not had, among the sprinkling of Germans and Frenchmen I knew [mostly landladies and literary people], more than two good friends all told” [277].) In an interview conducted in 1966 Nabokov went even further: “I am as American as April in Arizona [...] I do feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers” (*Strong Opinions*, 98).

Significantly, in his memoir *Speak, Memory* Nabokov often connected the Russia of his youth with his present-day experience in the United States. For example, a description of butterfly hunting in a bog near his family’s estate in Russia grades seamlessly into a description of the continuation of the chase in the shadow of Longs Peak in Colorado (138–39). Similarly, a description of a Russian winter’s eve slips into an evocation of winter’s night in New England. As he scoops up a handful of snow, “sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust” between his fingers (100). In an interview given in Montreux Nabokov even spoke of cultivating the same “fertile nostalgia” in regard to America as he had evolved for Russia (*Strong Opinions*, 49). Later he seems to have succeeded, for in 1965 he stated: “I feel very nostalgic about America and as soon as I muster the necessary energy I shall return there for good” (*Strong Opinions*, 56).

It is not surprising, then, that America would feature prominently in Nabokov’s fiction. While one could look at a wide range of writings, from short stories such as “The Vane Sisters” to the novels *Pnin* and *Pale Fire*, the most sustained treatment of America is to be found in Nabokov’s most famous novel, *Lolita* (1955). As Nabokov later recalled, he faced quite a challenge in writing the novel, not simply because

the subject matter—pedophilia—is controversial, but also because as he put it “I did not know any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and Lolita” (*Strong Opinions*, 26). He did extensive research while working on the novel: he rode buses to record the way schoolgirls talked among themselves; he read manuals on the physical and emotional maturation of adolescent girls; he studied gun catalogues, read teenage magazines, and learned the titles of songs that were popular on the radio. And he incorporated the experience of several summers of driving across the US on butterfly-collection expeditions with Véra. Nabokov’s fertile imagination transmuted all of this material to create some indelible impressions of our vast, diverse, and intriguing land.

Nabokov’s descriptions of the realia of American life (in Charlotte Haze’s home and on the American road) are some of the most memorable in American fiction. Here is the narrator Humbert Humbert observing the state of the Haze household:

The front hall was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh’s “Arlésienne.” [...] But there was no question of my settling there. I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of that so-called “functional modern furniture” and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps. (Lolita, 36, 37).

But the pièce de résistance lies upstairs: Humbert is shown “the only bathroom, a tiny oblong between the landing and ‘Lo’s’ room, with limp wet things overhanging the dubious tub (the question mark of a hair inside); and there were the expected coils of the rubber snake, and its complement—a pinkish cozy,

coily covering the toilet lid” (*Lolita*, 38).

Once Humbert and Dolly Haze are on the road, Nabokov treats the reader to a broad array of sights and activities. Again, the fastidious Humbert takes special note of bathrooms in the motels they frequented, “all those Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Pine View Courts, Mountain View Courts, Skyline Courts,” etc. (*Lolita*, 146). Here is his comment on the bathing facilities:

The baths were mostly tiled showers, with an endless variety of spouting mechanisms, but with one definitely non-Laodicean characteristic in common, a propensity, while in use to turn instantly beastly hot or blindingly cold upon you, depending on whether your neighbor turned on his cold or his hot to deprive you of a necessary complement in the shower you had so carefully blended. (*Lolita*, 146)

Food, of course, played a central role in their journey:

We passed and re-passed through the whole gamut of American roadside restaurants, from the lowly Eat with its deer head (dark trace of long tear at inner canthus), “humorous” picture post cards of the posterior “Kurort” type, impaled guest checks, life savers, sunglasses, adman visions of celestial sundaes, one hell of a chocolate cake under glass, and several horribly experienced flies zigzagging over the sticky sugar-pour on the ignoble counter. (*Lolita*, 155)

And the ubiquitous pop culture:

The Lord knows how many nickels I fed to the gorgeous music boxes that came with every meal we had! I still hear the nasal voices of those invisibles serenading her, people with names like Sammy and Jo and Eddy and Tony and Peggy and Guy and Patti

and Rex, and sentimental song hits, all of them as similar to my ear as her various candies were to my palate. (*Lolita*, 148)

And, at the center of all this was 12-year-old Dolly Haze herself: “She it was to whom ads were dedicated; the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. And she attempted—unsuccessfully—to patronize only those restaurants where the holy spirit of Huncan Dines had descended upon the cute paper napkins and cottage-cheese-crested salads” (*Lolita*, 148). Sadly, of course, all of these consumer goods were the closest approximation of “normalcy” that Dolly Haze could experience during her travels with Humbert.

One could extend this catalogue of shrewdly observed realia, but the picture is clear. Nabokov had an unparalleled ability to pick out some small, trivial, ordinary detail of everyday life and bring it into sharp relief, describing it from a fresh, never-before-seen perspective, and, as in this novel, his perspective was often sardonic.

When the novel came out in the United States in 1958, several critics believed that Nabokov himself was mocking the tackiness of middle and low-brow American culture, but these critics, of course, simply failed to take into account the fact that this perspective was Humbert Humbert’s and not Nabokov’s own, and that everything that Humbert saw and described passed through the filter of his obsession with and unquenchable desire for Dolly Haze. Nabokov was so distressed by this criticism that he felt compelled to rebut it in his essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”:

Another charge which some readers have made is that Lolita is anti-American. This is something that pains me considerably more than the idiotic accusation of immorality [...] I chose American

motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only because I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy. On the other hand, my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him. (Lolita, 315)

As noted earlier, Nabokov would also depict American characters and settings in *Pnin* and *Pale Fire*, and there one finds a similar combination of close observation and imaginative revitalization of the quotidien.

When Nabokov moved on from the US to Switzerland, he continued to include aspects of Americana in his fiction, but his imagination now seemed to be unfettered by strict national boundaries, and a new, or more prominent trans-national dynamic surfaced in his work. Now, in a reversal of earlier patterns, his main character might be an American visiting Switzerland (and often experiencing discomfort, as in *Transparent Things* [1972]), or he would create fantastic geographies that have only a passing resemblance to the actual geographies of our world. Thus, the world of Antiterra in the novel *Ada* (1969) features the realm of Estotiland, somewhat like Canada, one part of which is occupied by Russians who have fled “Tartary,” with the other part containing the splendid estate of Ardis, where the novel’s narrator Van Veen first fell in love with the title character of the novel, who happens to be his sister to boot.

Comfortably ensconced in his hotel in Montreux (where the fictional Van and Ada stage a glorious reunion in *Ada*), Nabokov never bought a home in Switzerland or the United States, to which he always thought he would return. (In fact, he never owned any property after the 1917 Russian Revolution.) Yet he brought to vivid life in his art many of the

places where he had lived and visited, creating a rich tableaux of nations and peoples for his readers to enjoy. Nabokov’s creative “invention” of people and places will continue to enchant and delight his readers for decades to come.

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