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Speaking in Tongues:

Vladimir Nabokov as a Multilingual

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Speaking in Tongues: Vladimir Nabokov as a Multilingual Writer

My use of the term 'multilingualism' as it applies to literature or a writer proceeds from Zhanna Nikolaevna Maslova's study on bilingualism in Brodsky and Nabokov: "термин подразумевает создание автором художественного текста с использованием двух и более языков, а также макаронической речи, и взаимодействие языков в тексте"[1] (3). Thus, I consider a text "multilingual" not only because it uses two or more languages, but because it sets those languages in conflicting coexistence, interacting with and depending on one another. The role of the author in multilingual literature is not only to introduce several languages into a text, but also to mediate their interaction. This expanded definition not only applies to multilingual literature, but is the basic understanding behind some of the most elusive questions in the field of neurolinguistics. The questions that literary scholars ask are similar to those pursued by scientific researchers if we substitute "text" for "brain" and "author" for "mind": How does an author involve different languages in a text? On what levels within a text do these languages interact? How are secondary or 'foreign' languages mediated in the context of a primary 'native' one? These and related questions apply to my study of Nabokov as a multilingual writer.

I am interested in how Nabokov uses multiple languages in a given text: what linguistic and non-linguistic evidence he uses to mark a certain language, and how his novels mediate multiple languages and cultures within a unifying context. Language is inextricably tied to culture and identity, and one reason we call Nabokov a multilingual writer has to do with the

[1] "The term implies the creation of a text by an author who uses two or more languages, including macaronic speech, and the interplay of languages in such a text." (All footnoted translations are my own.)

ways he represents culture-specific coding in conjunction with language to work out problems of identity. I refer here to the non-linguistic elements of his writing that collaborate with language: for instance, a character may be coded as a foreigner by his manner of dress, his accent, and his 'foreign ways.' I am talking of those culture-specific characteristics by which we recognize someone as, for example, a Russian. One scholar of Nabokov's literary bilingualism, Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, argues that "Nabokov's polyglottism also functioned in symbiosis with other, essentially non-linguistic, systems of cognition" (Alexandrov 42). Cultural coding is one example of such "non-linguistic systems of cognition" employed by Nabokov to fashion the complexities of a character's identity. For example, linguistic and cultural knowledge of French and France make up a significant part of Humbert Humbert's identity in Lolita—set in the context of Suburban America, however, he is perceived as "vaguely European." We see then that language and culture function symbiotically to form a complex identity. Nabokov's art is multilingual in the way he takes such complex and 'foreign' identities as Humbert Humbert and installs them in a different cultural and linguistic context.

Nabokov once wrote that he had attempted tasks that "had not been tried by any human before" (*SM* 13). Although the world has seen more than one multilingual writer, seated among the best and most successful of that rare species is Nabokov. He was unique from the start of his life: he was "bilingual as a baby," raised in a liberal and cosmopolitan family, then cast permanently abroad as a young man (*SO* 5). His sense of national identity, a major topic in his writing, was complex, to say the least. When asked in an interview whether he felt "any strong sense of national identity," he replied: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany" (*SO* 26). For those readers familiar with Nabokov's biography, this summary appears pointedly concise in

what he chooses to omit, and how he chooses to present an international image. That is, of course, the point: Nabokov has been a citizen of many nations, but his identity is defined by none in particular. He was, after all, a multilingual writer. In this paper I will trace Nabokov's evolution as a multilingual writer from the unique circumstances of his childhood, passing through a period of nascent multilingualism when he wrote exclusively in Russian, to the full artistic multilingualism achieved in his English novels. Working from the above definition, I will explore the ways a text uses, manipulates, and mediates multiple languages, selecting one novel from each of the two periods of Nabokov's writing to illustrate my interpretation.

* * *

Born in 1899, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov belonged to the last generation of Russians raised under Tsarist rule. A member of an "exceptionally cultivated and enlightened" aristocratic family, Nabokov grew up in unique circumstances that had life-long repercussions for his art (Beaujour 84). Two facts of his childhood are vital to this study: firstly, he was raised a polyglot, speaking English and French fluently in addition to Russian; and secondly, international travel with his family exposed him to multiple European cultures from an early age. Nabokov once claimed that "all the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood" (*SO* 13). He attributed artistic inspiration to his Russian childhood, saying "I owe many metaphors and sensuous associations to the Northern Russian landscape of my boyhood" (*SO* 46). There is no question that his "Russian childhood" influenced his adult writing, particularly in terms of the "fertile nostalgia" which inspired and informed his Russian works, (*SO* 49) which he once called "a kind of tribute to Russia" (*SO* 13). His own recognition of the vital importance his childhood had on his art lends credence to any scholarly consideration of that same influence. Therefore, I am interested in those aspects of his childhood that speak to

his development as a multilingual writer. A closer look at what Beaujour calls "the essentially polyglot nature of his Russian childhood" may shed light on his beginnings and eventual emergence as a multilingual writer (90).

Nabokov claims in his autobiography that English was his first reading language, and it was in English that his parents spoke to him as a child (Speak, Memory, 79). At the age of five he began studying French, which was the more common second language of the Russian aristocracy. Gradually, French and Russian superceded English in his studies, but his 'second native language' did not disappear from his life. English remained a spoken, literary, and cultural presence, the effects of which could be seen in the innumerable details that round out his characters, often polyglots themselves. D. Barton Johnson argues that Nabokov's childhood reading habits, particularly English fairy tales, produced in his imagination indelible themes and subjects that he in turn wove into his art throughout his life. For example, the incarnation of the quintessentially English "knight-errant finds quite explicit echoes throughout the entire range of Nabokov's *oeuvre* from the early poetry through the late English novels" (1). Johnson points to passages of Glory, Speak, Memory, and other texts that contain echoes of similar figures and themes from the various English fairy tales Nabokov had read as a child. In his youth, the presence of English language and culture was so strong that Nabokov would later claim he had been, in many respects, "an English child" (*SO* 81). Nabokov's claim to an "English" childhood seems more credible when one considers the extensive range of specifically English details that Nabokov recreates in his autobiography.

In addition to the many English influences at home, Nabokov was exposed to other cultures by way of family vacations across Europe. Extended stays at the French resort town of Biarritz provided memories that Nabokov would later draw on as a writer. On the beach at

Biarritz, he met "Colette," who asked him: "'Je suis Parisienne, et vous—are you English?'… and the ten-year-old boy's first real romance had begun" (Boyd 79). It was a felicitous first love for the young polyglot, beginning with a question posed in two languages and a mistaken national identity. The reader of Glory may recall this authorial reminiscence when encountering the pleasure Martin takes in passing as an Englishman when among the French. I do not propose that every episode of a given novel can be traced directly to a period of Nabokov's childhood; rather, I wish only to point out that the problems and passions that are unique to Nabokov's multilingual characters are very much like the problems and passions experienced by Nabokov in his youth precisely because he too was a polyglot.

Nabokov would later recall with irony a childhood fantasy indulged in during those periods spent abroad. In an interview, he relates: "during trips with 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" (*SO* 178). The longing he imagined as a child later became a real source of inspiration, that "fertile nostalgia" he felt as a young writer living in forced emigration. The various multilingual and multicultural aspects of his childhood notwithstanding, Nabokov remained, in the depths of his memory, emotionally attached to the Russia of his youth and to the Russian language. Unlike his colorful cosmopolitan Uncle Ruká, a Russian diplomat whose "speech was a fastidious combination of French, English and Italian, all of which he spoke with vastly more ease than he did his native tongue," Nabokov is now celebrated for his masterful expressiveness in Russian (*SM* 71). In emigration, Nabokov made every effort to preserve his Russian: as a

student at Cambridge, he regularly read Dahl's Толковый словарь живого великорусского языка[2], and was determined to become a Russian writer.

While studying at Cambridge, the self-proclaimed "English child" was undeniably Russian. Nabokov discovered that "all the Anglophilism of his family was no help: the Englishness of his childhood was something belonging to the nursery" (Boyd, 167). At the same time that Nabokov was acquiring the "argot of the local etiquette" from English acquaintances, he was also struggling to become a Russian poet (Boyd, 167). Linguistic and cultural cross-fertilization was unavoidable. He often read two contemporaneous Cambridge poets, Rupert Brooke and A.E. Housman, whose cadences "were so much a part of his existence… that they infiltrated his Russian poetry quite without his awareness" (Boyd, 171).[3] Reflecting on this time of his life, Nabokov writes: "My fear of losing or corrupting, through alien influence, the only thing I had salvaged from Russia—her language—became positively morbid" (*SM* 265). If the linguistic and cultural presence of English, French and German was a source of pleasure and wonder for Nabokov in his youth, the irreversible immersion of emigration seemed a disruptive threat to the young writer's native tongue.

Nabokov's own account of the matter in Speak, Memory supports the claim of scholars who see an English-language influence in his Russian verse. However, when Nabokov's entire artistic career is taken into consideration, the influence is bidirectional. According to Sergei Il'in, Russian translator of Nabokov's English novel, Pnin, there is a noticeable Russian influence in Nabokov's English: "Nabokov brought a Russian syntax to his English prose as a matter of style, [particularly] in the way he creates a phrase" (interview). Maslova extends this same concept to

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[2] "The Definitive Dictionary of the Living Russian Language."

[3] Although Nabokov is more widely known as a prose writer, in recent years his poetry has attracted growing academic attention, particularly in Russia, where his works were made legally available only at the end of the Soviet era. See, for example, Maslova, 132-150.

include a stylistic transcendence of genre, arguing: "И в прозе, и в поэзии Набокова действуют сходные принципы. Более того, писатель пытается смешать их, 'навязывая фразе аллитерации, ассонансы и ритм, чуждый прозе'"[4] (133-134). In other words, Nabokov's style transcends any one language, and this can be seen in both his poetry and his prose of any language. A thorough study of the polylinguistic aspects of Nabokov's novels is beyond the scope of this essay, but many such studies have already been done, and excellently at that.[5] I wish to foreground here that more than one language plays a role in even Nabokov's monolingual prose, regardless of which language he happened to be writing in. Similarly, multilingualism was a defining feature of his entire life, regardless of which language happened to be the ambient one where he lived at any given time. This is what George Steiner means when he asserts that the "poly-linguistic matrix is the determining fact of Nabokov's life and art" (qtd. in Beaujour 83). Nabokov, the eternal émigré, lived and wrote in a private world defined by the clashing and blending of multiple languages and cultures.

It is ironic, then, that Nabokov should exhibit the influence of European languages and cultures in his writing, at that time in his career when he consciously sought to define himself as a Russian writer. He was partly encouraged in his efforts by the existence of a ready audience in the Russian émigré communities spread across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Nabokov was well aware of the limited scope of his readership: his Russian novels were "eagerly bought or borrowed by émigré readers but were absolutely banned in Soviet Russia" (*SO* 36). He entertained no hope that "the grotesque shadow of a police state" would be dispelled in his lifetime, and had no reason to believe that his works would ever reach readers in his former

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[4] "Both in prose and in poetry, Nabokov exhibits related principles. Moreover, the writer attempts to mix them, 'tying together a phrase with alliteration, assonance and rhythm, that are foreign to prose."

[5] See, for example, Grayson, Nabokov Translated and Appel, ed. The Annotated Lolita. Beaujour cites numerous other in note 11, Alien Tongues, 208.

home country (*SO* 10). His émigré readership was small, if devoted: Nabokov explained in an interview that a total sale of 1,000 or 2,000 copies would be a best-seller, but each copy would pass between 20 persons, and be read by more if stocked by a Russian lending library (*SO* 36).

This limited readership posed other problems for Nabokov, in that his nascent multilingual works were often coldly received as "un-Russian." One Russian émigré critic, Gleb Struve, writing in the early 1930s, rebukes the "пренребежительное молчание"[6] with which Sirin (Nabokov's pseudonym) was passed over by critics as "совершенно незаслуженно."[7] Struve comments on this perception of Nabokov: "Неоднократно указывалось на "нерусскость" Сирина. Мне это указание представляется неверным в общей форме. Но у Сирина есть "нерусския" черты, вернее, черты, не свойственныя русской литературе."[8] Struve identifies the influence of European literature on Nabokov's writing as the source of any 'foreign' or "un-Russian" elements. This is likely what the 'silent critics' detected in Nabokov's Russian texts, the cultural and other non-linguistic characteristics of his writing, and thus accused him of being "un-Russian." This may be why Beaujour writes that, "In many ways, bilingual or polyglot writers have more in common with each other, whatever their national origins, that they do with monolinguals who write in any one of their languages" (Alexandrov 37). On the other hand, this also means that Nabokov's multilingual artistic identity transcends any single national or cultural identity.

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While upbringing and education alone do not account for Nabokov's emergence as a multilingual writer in emigration, it did provide him with the linguistic and cultural exposure that

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[6] "harsh silence"
[7] "completely inexcusable"
[8] "In many ways this points to the 'un-Russianness' of Sirin. To me this claim is untrue in general form. However, Sirin has "un-Russian" traits, or to be more precise, traits which are not native to Russian literature."

in many ways informed his writing. Nabokov relates a story in Speak, Memory that reveals how, as he understood it, multilingualism was not so much an adornment to his speech and writing as an organic part of it: teachers "accused me of not conforming to my surroundings; of 'showing off' (mainly by peppering my Russian papers with English and French terms, which came naturally to me)" (*SM* 185). Even as a young student, Nabokov was already "naturally" using multiple languages in his writing. In other words, Nabokov's cosmopolitan childhood endowed him with a natural bent towards multilingualism, in his speech, in his schoolwork, and in his personal reading habits. Given his natural bent toward multilingualism, and his conviction, "I don't think that an artist should bother about his audience," it should not come as a surprise that his Russian novels exhibit some of the same multilingual marks as his mature, fully multilingual ones. Cultural and linguistic cosmopolitanism, like that which shaped Nabokov's childhood and university education, can be found in characters, narrators, and settings of Nabokov's early works, such as his fifth Russian-language novel, Подвиг (Glory).

Martin Edelweiss, the protagonist of Glory, is a characteristically Nabokovian multilingual character. At the very beginning of the novel, we learn that his "grandfather Edelweiss was a Swiss," and though Martin himself was raised by Russian-born parents, his name marks him as a foreigner (13). As a multilingual character, it may be no coincidence that his Christian name is Martin, which, derived from the Roman name 'Martinus,' is common in at least eleven European languages. Sofia, his mother, is from a family of Russian aristocrats. An "Anglo-maniac" who "loathed" Russian childrens magazines, fairy tales, and other folk-lore, Sophia Edelweiss raised Martin in an Anglicized home, not unlike the one in which Nabokov grew up (14-15). Martin's "English" childhood, along with his foreign-sounding surname, frustrate any attempt to fix down his national identity.

The Edelweiss family's emigration to Western Europe after the Bolshevik Revolution only further complicates attempts to classify Martin, and his shifting identity is a major preoccupation of the novel. Like Nabokov, Martin was raised as an "English child" with a native-like familiarity with English language and culture. He speaks French as well, but "with a British accent," much to the chagrin of his Swiss Uncle Henry (48). Uncle Henry may, in fact, echo Nabokov's own reservations about speaking any language with a 'foreign' accent, something he describes as being in "atrocious taste" (*SO* 164). This speaks directly to the novel's many ways of building and rejecting national identity, for the wrong accent in any language is bound to give a firm, if not always accurate, sense of foreigner status and national identity. Other culture-specific details add to Martin's aura of Englishness, such as his preference for skiing, "that English sport" (48). His university education at Cambridge, England, further develops the 'English side' of his identity. Nabokov uses many linguistic and cultural details to present Martin with a mind and personality that exude Englishness, but not without reminders that he is a foreigner; i.e., not British. Similar characteristics develop Martin's 'French side': in addition to speaking French, Martin relishes many memories of childhood holidays spents in Biarritz, and of the long train rides through the French and German countryside, which become part of the novel's setting in the second half of the story.

In addition to Martin's complex linguistic and cultural make-up, Nabokov implicitly involves other languages in the novel. At this point, I must distinguish between the Russian-language original of 1932, Подвиг, and the English translation of 1971, Glory. In Подвиг, the entirety of the text is rendered in Russian, including all dialogue that, from context, is understood to be 'spoken' in English, German or French. By doing so, Nabokov implicitly uses multiple languages in the subtext of an otherwise entirely Russophonic novel. This multilingual subtext

constitutes a substantial part of the novel, and the use of multiple languages often creates difficulties in communication for the characters. One example is the scene of Martin's party. Several of the main characters have assembled in Martin's room: a Russian friend of his mother's, Mrs. Zilanov and her daughter, Sonia, his Russophile Cambridge Tutor, Archibald Moon, and Martin's closest friend Darwin, a "splendid specimen" of an Englishman who is the only non-Russian-speaker present. The code-switching and cultural gaps between characters in the passage are representative of such occurrences throughout the novel:

> On another occasion, when Martin used the colloquialism *ugrobil* ('bumped off'), Moon grew angry and shouted that such a word did not and could not exist in Russia. "I've heard it, everybody knows it," Martin said meekly, and was sustained by Sonia….
>
> "Russian wordbuilding, the birth of neologisms," said Moon, suddenly turning to the smiling Darwin, "ended together with Russia, that is, two years ago. Everything subsequent is *blatnaya muzïka* (thieves' lingo)."
>
> "I don't understand Russian, please translate," replied Darwin.
>
> "Yes, we keep drifting into it," said Mrs Zilanov. "That's not nice. English, please, everybody." (68-9)

The conversation begins in Russian, which is not understood by all characters present, who then consciously switch to English. For the Russian émigré reader, this switch occurs below the level of the language in which the story is told; that is, Darwin's protest "Я по–русски не понимаю, переведите" is rendered in Russian. This is true for all instances of foreign languages in Подвиг. The reader understands a word or phrase as spoken in another language, but reads them only in Russian. By doing this, Nabokov keeps those other languages confined to the novel's subtext, not immediately confronted but still implicitly involved.

In the English translation, Glory, many of the passages which are understood to be spoken in Russian are written in English, but with a few notable exceptions. Nabokov chose to represent no small number of Russian words in transliteration, as seen in the passage quoted above: *ugrobil*, *blatnaya muzïka*. Interestingly, he made this choice for all three languages that are used in the novel—Russian, French and German—so that what is written in the Russian version, "Дарвинъ выпилъ тоже на брудершафтъ" and "Да, чувствуется югъ, -- ответилъ

Мартынь" becomes "Darwin had also drunk *auf Bruderschaft*" (102) and "*Oui, on sent le sud*" in the English version (143). The representation of foreign expressions and snatches of conversation in the original language became a standard practice for Nabokov in his English novels, often to the frustration of monolingual readers—Ada is a devilishly complex example of a trilingually composed novel. By representing words from languages other than English in either the original, as with French and German, or in transliteration, as with Russian, Nabokov foregrounds in Glory what was half-hidden in Подвиг: the conflicting coexistence of multiple languages within a single text.

The multilingual subtext of Glory extends beyond language to compass cultural-coding and national identity—an example of the extension of 'multilingualism' to include "non-linguistic systems of cognition" that I discussed in my introduction. The novel's fixation on whether Martin can pass as either an Englishman or a Frenchman fuels a recurring debate about a multilingual's ability and desire to use knowledge of foreign languages to feign or project that language's national identity. We know that Martin "quietly prided himself" on his English accent, and is frustrated at Sonia's "derisive corrections" of his pronunciation (58). He is similarly vexed by a fellow student's observation: "Judging by your last name I thought you were American" (74). Uncle Henry's sensitivity to Martin's English accent when speaking French is another example of the novel's concern with passing that engages national identity and language.

Martin is an unique character, a linguistic and cultural amalgamation: he is Russian but living in Europe; his name is Swiss but sounds American; he is fluent in English but with a foreigner's pronunciation; he speaks French but with an English accent. What I have called the novel's fixation on multilingual passing is also Martin's obsession with projecting a foreign, non-Russian identity. He partially accomplishes this when a Frenchman he meets believes he is

English, because of his accent when speaking French (145). Nevertheless, Martin is first and foremost a multilingual, which supersedes any particular national identity that is otherwise assumed by or ascribed to him. It is Martin's composite and complex identity, along with the subtextual involvement of multiple languages, that allows us to read Glory as a milestone in Nabokov's development as a multiingual writer.

* * *

The issues of multilingualism and national identity in Glory are often presented in terms of one language or culture confused or in competition with another. This treatment of multilingualism is typical of Nabokov's Russian works, and perhaps results from his perpetual state of living in emigration, in one sense at home in Russian-speaking communities, but always a foreigner in a foreign land. It should not surprise us to find that multilingualism in Nabokov's English novels takes on additional dimensions reflective of his emergence as an English language author, once he traded in the Russian émigré enclaves of Europe for mid-century American life. The problems that beset a multilingual character like Pnin or Vladimir Vladimirovich in Nabokov's later novel, Pnin, are not yet fully developed in Glory. Perhaps such problems are half-hidden in the Russian novels because Nabokov sought to preserve his Russian while writing almost exclusively for a Russian émigré readership. Or perhaps, because Nabokov felt at home in America in a way he never did in Europe, (if his interviews and autobiography can be trusted on that point), he felt free to openly address the issues of multilingualism and identity. Whatever the reason, Nabokov's novels in English are more recognizably multilingual in their complex interplay of languages and cultures.

Nabokov's emergence as a fully multilingual author is concurrent with his own developing identity as a multilingual, particularly after he forewsore Russian in speech and

writing in favor of English on moving to America. Nabokov's self-identity as a writer is a complicated one. In various interviews, Nabokov expounds on a writer's national identity and what may be called artistic identity. In terms of national identity, by 1967 Nabokov says: "I think of myself today as an American writer who has once been a Russian one" (*SO* 63). However, Nabokov placed limited importance on national identity, which he saw as secondary to a writer's artistic identity: "I have always maintained, even as a schoolboy in Russia, that the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance…. The writer's art is his real passport" (*SO* 63). Nabokov saw himself as a writer primarily in terms of his artistic identity, which, in his case especially, cannot be described by any single nationality.

Nabokov's artistic identity is fundamentally multilingual, defined as it were by the "poly-linguistic matrix" of his life, beginning with a polyglot and multicultural childhood, extending into perpetual emigration in various European countries, and eventually into the 'cultural melting-pot' of America. To the extent that his art reflects his life, his novels contain a multitude of languages and cultures that are often in conflict with one another. The mediation of these competing languages and cultures therefore becomes one of the major themes in his multilingual novels. Such mediation is part of what Maslova describes as a larger process of "Мировая литература – поток множества разноязычных национальных литератур, тесно соприкасающихся или относительно изолированных друг от друга"[9] (4). One can read Nabokov's early Russian-language stories as participating in this international process of "world literature," in part by default of his circumstances as an émigré writer, but explicitly so in the multilingual subtext and issues of nationally- and culturally-defined identity in Glory. In this respect, Nabokov shows signs in Glory of the multilingual writer who later wrote Lolita, Pnin,

[9] "World literature is a stream of multitudinous, multilingual, multinational literatures, closely intertwined and yet relatively isolated one from another."

and Ada. It remains to be seen how the mediating function of multilingualism in literature was developed in his later, more linguistically complex texts.

* * *

Nabokov did not fully emerge as a multilingual writer until he moved to America in 1940 and began writing exclusively in English. Writing on this topic, Beaujour claims that with Pnin Nabokov "confirmed the final consolidation of his awareness of himself as an intrinsically polyglot writer."[10] There are two aspects of Pnin that signify Nabokov's self-awareness as an "intrinsically polyglot writer." First, he externalizes a fully self-aware, multilingual narrative identity—Vladimir Vladimirovich. By creating a self-aware narrative persona, Nabokov foregrounds the multilingual experience that such a narrator brings to his story-telling: in this respect, Vladimir is to Pnin what Nabokov is to Glory. Secondly, in contrast with the half-hidden multilingualism of Glory, and the problems of national and cultural identity facing a polyglot character, Nabokov openly addresses these problems in Pnin. A close reading of Pnin will reveal how Nabokov's awareness as an "intrinsically polyglot writer" manifests itself in a fully multilingual novel, particularly in the externalized multilingual narrator, and will fuel further discussion of how Nabokov mediates multiple languages and cultures in his works.

A multilingual character, like Martin in Glory, possesses a high level of knowledge of multiple languages and cultures, acting as a sort of bridge between those cultures. Vladimir Vladimirovich, the narrator of Pnin, is a polyglot who has achieved mastery of the English language, and has in most respects successfully assimilated into 1950's America. Vladimir shares with his author, among other details, a childhood that included English bicycles and vacations to Biarritz—minutiae of the poly-linguistic matrix that shapes Vladimir's life and art. Like Nabokov, Vladimir's multilingualism extends to the artistic realm, for Vladimir is in many

[10] Beaujour, Alien Tongues, 101.

ways the 'author' of the story. He shows off his prowess in English in numerous lyrical passages throughout the novel, such as the 'bubble bath in the sink' episode that concludes Pnin's party (171-3). He demonstrates his skill as a storyteller by shaping the scene with dramatic build-up, leaving both Pnin and the reader in painful suspense of whether or not the aquamarine bowl has been broken.[11] Vladimir's artistic flourishes underscore the contrast between his polyglot polish and Pnin's "wild English" (187). The linguistic difference between the two is further highlighted by the novel's narrative hierarchy: Vladimir's Anglicized voice mediates the hopelessly foreign Pnin's otherwise untranslatable utterances, rendering Pnin's thoughts and words into English for the reader. By mediating the linguistic barriers between two languages, the narrator Vladimir enacts on the microcosmic level the macrocosmic function of Nabokov's multilingual literature. Vladimir, like his author, brings multiple languages and cultures together in a single text, and makes meaning out of their coexistence.

One facet of Vladimir's role as linguistic and cultural mediator is that of translator in the narrative, rendering Pnin's thoughts and words into English. Translation as it applies to Nabokov's art is pivotal to understanding his broader function as a multilingual writer, but that topic is beyond the scope of this essay.[12] As it applies to Pnin, Vladimir is the translator *de facto* of all those characters who, in the novel, are understood to be speaking in other languages, most frequently Pnin.

Vladimir's role as translator is two-fold: 1. he renders Pnin literally understandable for the English-speaking reader; and 2. he emphasizes the great extent to which Pnin still lives 'in

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[11] For further consideration of Vladimir as the 'author' creating the "easy art" of Pnin's story, see Lucy Maddox's Nabokov's Novels in English, 89-91. Here I mean only to draw attention to Vladimir's stylistic and formal accomplishments as narrator of the novel, in contrast with Pnin's tenuous grasp of English.

[12] For discussion of translation as it pertains to Nabokov's art, see: Beaujour, "Translation and Self-Translation," in Alexandrov, 714-724; Grayson, Nabokov Translated; Besemeres, "Self-Translation in Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin"; and Nabokov's own thoughts on translation in his "Translator's Foreword" in Lermontov's A Hero of our Time, v-xix, and the "Foreward" to his translation of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, vii-xvi.

Russian.' In some instances, it is understood that Pnin is speaking or writing in Russian, and his speech, reported by the narrator, is by necessity a translation. For example, Pnin's letter to Liza is recorded by Vladimir to read: a "sensitive (*chutkiy*) person," and "drinking himself to death (*govoryat, spilsya*)" (183). We understand that Pnin's letter is written in Russian, and parenthetical inclusions of the Russian words remind the reader of this fact. In other instances, Pnin is shown translating his own thoughts from Russian, the language in which he still lives mentally, to English, the language of the world he happens to inhabit. For example: "'Quittance?' queried Pnin, Englishing the Russian for 'receipt' (*kvitantsiya*)" (18). Here, Vladimir's explanation—that Pnin is "Englishing" words—introduces the Russian word "*kvitantsiya.*" In the first example, Vladimir translates Pnin's Russian into English; in the second example, Vladimir emphasizes the Pnin translates his own thoughts from Russian to English. The parenthetical interpolation of the Russian '*kvitantsiya*' again reminds the reader that Pnin still *thinks* in Russian. Both examples underscore the fact that, when Pnin expresses himself, in Russian or in Pninian English, the presumably monolingual reader can only understand him through the mediation of the multilingual narrator.

One defining feature of multilingualism in Pnin is the mediation of a linguistically limited character (Pnin) by a multilingual one (Vladimir). This occurs not only in the linguistic sense, as in the examples above, but in a cultural sense. As Mary Besemeres notes, "Pnin represents all that impedes and escapes an attempted translation from a Russian cultural sensibility into an English-speaking one" (391). The narrator explains how many of Pnin's peculiarities are a sign of his "Russian cultural sensibility," often illustrated by his exaggerated attempts at assimilation. For example, Pnin's 'Old-World stuffiness' concerning the propriety of personal appearances is discussed in the opening scene, and commented on throughout the novel.

The narrator explains how Pnin, "during the staid European era of his life," would never have allowed himself to "reveal a glimpse of that white underwear by pulling up a trouser leg too high," which "would have seemed to Pnin… indecent" (8). The present, Americanized Pnin, has changed his attitudes, is "crazy about sun-bathing, wore sport shirts and slacks, and when crossing his legs would carefully, deliberately, brazenly display a tremendous stretch of bare shin" (8). Vladimir provides the cultural context in which we are to understand Pnin's behavior, drawing a contrast between his Old-World sense of comportment and his adopted American one. While this appears to be an example of successful assimilation or cultural translation, Vladimir emphasizes that Pnin's display of "bare shin" is done "carefully, deliberately, brazenly." The effect is to present Pnin as a foreigner who is very much *trying* to look and act in a manner that he conceives is 'American.'

The extent to which Pnin unknowingly fails in his attempts to look and act 'American'—and the role that passing plays in the novel—can be seen in a short exchange between Pnin and his colleagues at a cocktail party:

> '*Zdrastvuyte kak pozhivaete horosho spacibo*,' Entwistle rattled off in excellent imitation of Russian speech—and indeed he rather resembled a genial Tsarist colonel in mufti. 'One night in Paris,' he went on, his eyes twinkling, 'at the *Ougolok* cabaret, this demonstration convinced a group of Russian revelers that I was a compatriot of theirs—posing as an American, don't you know.'
>
> 'In two-three years,' said Pnin, missing one bus but boarding the next, 'I will also be taken for an American,' and everybody roared except Professor Blorenge. (*P*, 36-37)

The divide between Entwistle and Pnin could hardly be greater. While it is hardly credible Entwistle's "demonstration" was enough for him to pass as a Russian posing as an American—more likely, he is just telling an amusing anecdote—this passage does foreground the novel's fixation on the multilingual's ability to pass. The humor of Entwistle's anecdote is the assumption that an "excellent imitation of Russian speech" should be enough to convince real Russians of an individual's 'true' national identity. Entwistle, of course, is *not* a multilingual, but

more like an actor who has practiced his lines well enough for a smooth recitation. Entwistle's anecdote dramatizes the fact that Pnin, a Russian aristocrat raised speaking French and, it is hinted, who also knows German tolerably well, has utterly failed to pass, and has never been "taken for an American." Aside from the possible interpretation that allows for Pnin's Old-World tendencies and "wild English" to be considered acceptably American, the laughter that Pnin's assertion incites in his colleagues illustrates the extent to which Pnin is unmistakably 'foreign.'

It is worth noting that Vladimir plays a significant role in shaping the assumed credibility and success of Entwistle's "demonstration"—Vladimir remarks that Entwistle "rather resembled a genial Tsarist colonel in mufti"—and in the assumed failure of Pnin's assimilation: "missing one bus but boarding the next." Had Vladimir omitted such commentary, the reader might consider Entwistle's anecdote absurd, but might also consider the possibility of Pnin's hopes coming true. However, in his role as narrator, Vladimir shepherds the reader towards a fixed interpretation of both Entwistle and Pnin, in regards to their linguistic and cultural identities. As he does throughout the novel, Vladimir mediates Pnin's foreigner status, this time in the cultural context of an American academic cocktail party.

We have seen how Vladimir's mediation of Pnin, linguistically and culturally, shapes Pnin's identity as a foreigner. The tone of this mediation is often one of gentle but persistent mockery, as Pnin is time after time held up for laughter. Indeed, it seems the only function of Jack Cockerell in the novel is to carry the mocking mimicry of Pnin to the level of "fatal obsession" (189). However, the mediation of Pnin by Vladimir is not the same as the mediation of Martin by Nabokov. The difference lies in that, for Glory, Nabokov remained at an authorial distance, with an unfixed line between author and narrative persona. By externalizing the narrative persona into the character Vladimir, Nabokov allows us to examine the multilingual

narrator's role in the novel with a directness which would have been unreliable in the case of Glory. Specifically, the use of Russian phrases in the narrative *not* spoken by Pnin, directs our attention to the only other possible speaker: the narrator Vladimir.

Vladimir often interpolates words and phrases from Russian into his own narrative passages. For example: "Timofey Pnin settled down in the living room, crossed his legs *po amerikanski* (the American way)" (33). The careful reader will note that the use of a foreign word or phrase implies the question of for whom this foreign language is an active and meaningful one. Besemeres describes the persistence of foreign phrases in Pnin as evidence of a "desire to recover a past lived in another language" (396), for both narrator and author. In this light, Vladimir's persistent use of Russian can be read as an unconscious manifestation of his own "desire to recover a past" lived in that language. Like Nabokov's own use of Russian phrases in Speak, Memory, Vladimir often employs the Russian phrasing first, offering the English translation in parentheses. By putting the Russian first, Vladimir, like Nabokov, demonstrates a syntactic preference for the Russian word over the English one. In this way, the syntax can be read as an illustration of the speaker's natural, and arguably emotional, preference for Russian over translated English. Such syntactic play is one more instance of the interactivity between languages and cultures that occurs in a multilingual novel, showing how a dominant lingua-cultural context mediates the perception and self-perception of the foreigner.

We can see how Nabokov's multilingual art became increasingly complex after he began writing primarily in English. One more example from Pnin will show the extent to which Nabokov developed as a multilingual writer in English, with a highly sophisticated control over the intricacies of linguistic and cultural interplay. While the predominant 'foreign' language and culture in Pnin is Russian, it is not the only one, and although Vladimir and Pnin are most often

in the novel's spotlight, other characters exhibit many of the same qualities of multilingualism and foreignness as Vladimir and Pnin, such as Dr. Hagen. The head of Waindell College's German Department, Hagen is overtly cast as Pnin's "staunch protector," who has kept him employed there largely out of personal attachment (11). In a few carefully constructed moments of the novel, Hagen is revealed as a non-native English speaker for whom his native German remains an active and meaningful language, especially in emotionally intense moments. This can be seen in the passage where he reflects on the unfortunate proximity of Buchenwald to Weimar, beginning: "*Aber warum*—but why—" (135). Other examples of Hagen's code-switching are found in the awkward conversation wherein he tells Pnin he will lose his job: "We shall just go on teaching, you and I, as if nothing had happened, *nicht wahr*?" and shortly thereafter, "*Der arme Kerl*," muttered kindhearted Hagen to himself" (170-1).

Hagen's frequent code-switching between English and German, especially in spontaneous, emotionally charged dialogues, is a common characteristic among polyglots.[13] In addition to his code-switching, Hagen occasionally exhibits a 'foreigner's English' in his speech: "'I go now,' said Hagen, who, though a lesser addict of the present tense than Pnin, also held it in favor" (170). Although Nabokov did not know German as well as he did English and French—he claims to have had no facility in it, but Il'in insists that "Nabokov was far too intelligent to live in a place and not know the language" (interview)—he nonetheless picks out those linguistic quirks that mark a non-native speaker of English, in this case the German Dr. Hagen. It will be remembered that Pnin is fluent in German, and in many ways retains an Old World sensibility, which may indicate the deeper bond of friendship between him and Hagen: they have more in common with one another than with anyone else, as polyglots, expatriates, and foreigners living in America. With Hagen Nabokov expands the novel's linguistic and cultural

[13] See Beaujour, 7-27, for discussion of the most recent neurolinguistic studies in polyglot code-switching.

reminiscences to include German. By adding this third linguistic dimension, Nabokov invariably makes a point about the multilingual novel's potential to mediate any number of languages, involving each in the same discussions about linguistic and culturally-coded identity.

* * *

It would be reductive to conclude with any assumption Nabokov's novels are *about* anything. It is well known that he was a proponent of 'art for art's sake,' and an opponent only to stupidity and cruelty, but he certainly did not write to deliver any particular 'message.' Indeed, the working title of Подвиг was Романтический век[14], about which Nabokov writes:

> I had chosen partly because I had had enough of hearing Western journalists call our era 'materialistic,' 'practical,' 'utilitarian,' etc., but mainly because the purpose of my novel, *my only one with a purpose*, lay in stressing the thrill and the glamour that my young expatriate finds in the most ordinary pleasures as well as in the seemingly meaningless adventures of a lonely life (*Glory* 8, emphasis added).

If an author's commentary on his own works can be taken at face value, then Glory is Nabokov's only novel "with a purpose." I hope that my reader will not think my topic has been falsely imposed on Nabokov's art. It is well to recognize that Nabokov has persistently evaded most efforts of classification, which for him would amount to no less than pigeonholing. His art is his passport, and his art, like his life, is uniquely multilingual.

Nabokov's art exhibits certain characteristics which mark him as a multilingual writer. He uses multiple languages in a given text, sometimes overtly, sometimes implicitly in the novel's subtext, bringing those languages into contact and showing how they interact with and depend on one another. He does so by employing both linguistic and non-linguistic systems of cognition, which are crucial in the creation and perception of his characters' identities. Identity, national and artistic, is the resultant theme, and one in which the multilingual novel is particularly interested: how identity is determined by language and cultural coding, how

[14] The Romantic Century, or Romantic Times.

multilingual characters of one nationality pass for another, and how, for the polyglot, artistic or 'true' identity is a thing much too complex for the narrow definitions of national identity. Nabokov's multilingual childhood, education, and life in emigration, gave him a unique perspective from which arose his rich and wonderfully complex art. Even when he consciously strove to be a Russian writer, his life was already so essentially multilingual that he could not but work into his novels that same multilingualism and cosmopolitanism in which he lived. Once he began writing in his 'second native tongue,' his art became openly multilingual, growing in linguistic complexity, but always with the result of mingling and mediating multiple languages and cultures in the unifying context of his novels.

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