

**Desmond Turner**

CERTAIN REFLECTIONS IN THE GLASS:  
TIBET'S INFLUENCE  
ON *PALE FIRE*

---

*...[T]he reality of such a poem as his [...] has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word.*

CHARLES KINBOTE  
*Oct. 19, 1959, Cedarn, Utana*

In publishing my view that *Pale Fire* (1962) was influenced by a particular contemporary world event, I cannot help but feel that this is my impersonation of suave Charles Kinbote... Nabokov began planning and writing *Pale Fire* between 1956–58 and, after a hiatus between spring 1958 and November 1960, completed it in December 1961. During this period, he not only achieved financial independence and fame, but also retired from teaching in the United States and moved to Switzerland to become a full-time writer.

In his 1963 foreword to *Bend Sinister* (1947), Nabokov wrote:

The influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my books, or at least this book, on my epoch. There can be distinguished, no doubt, certain reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life...<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bend Sinister*. 1947. (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 6.

Of the many world events making international headlines at the time he was writing *Pale Fire*, one in particular stands out in relation to a crucial theme of the novel (and indeed, Nabokov's life): Communist China's invasion of Tibet and the Dalai Lama's (and 80,000 Tibetans') subsequent flight into exile in India. Tibet scholar Tsering Shakya writes in *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows*: "In 1959, the international situation, although still very much under the influence of the cold war, was uneventful. Tibet therefore stole the world's headlines."<sup>2</sup> If we look at a small sample of article headlines from this year alone in *The New York Times* (the one national newspaper mentioned in *Pale Fire*<sup>3</sup>), we can track a dramatic story unfolding as the year progresses:

*TIBET – ABC OF A REMOTE LAND* (March 29)  
'Horror' on Tibet Reported (April 28)  
Tibet Refugees Total 11,500 (May 13)  
Genocide in Tibet (June 7)  
A New Plea for Tibet (July 27)  
*80,000 DEATH TOLL IN TIBET REPORTED*; Dalai Lama Warns of Plan by  
Communist China to Exterminate His People (August 25)  
*TAIWAN ASKS U.N TO DISCUSS TIBET*; Nationalist Aide Denounces Reds for  
'Tragic Events' – Soviet Bloc Absent (September 30)  
*U.N. VOTE ASSAILS TIBET REPRESSION*; Assembly, by 45-9, Deplores  
Chinese Curbs on Rights (October 22)  
U.S Aid to Tibetans Urged (November 26)  
*DR. JUDD SEEKS HELP FOR TIBET REFUGEES* (December 11)<sup>4</sup>

The link between what was happening in Tibet around the time *Pale Fire* was being written and aspects of its story gives us an example of "certain reflections in the glass." Kinbote admits that Shade's poem "cannot be regarded as a direct echo of my narrative" but adds: "one can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of story acted as a catalytic agent upon the very process of the sustained

---

<sup>2</sup> Shakya, Tsering, *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows: A History of Tibet Since 1947* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000), p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> "I relaxed on a shooting stick he had supplied me with, sipping a delightful scotch and water from the car bar and glancing [...] at an article in *The New York Times* in which Sylvia has vigorously and messily marked out in red pencil a communication from New Wye which told of the 'distinguished poet's' hospitalization." *Pale Fire*, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> See, *The New York Times* Archive:

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>

creative effervescence that enabled Shade to produce a 1000 line poem in three weeks.”<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, I believe that the events in Tibet that occurred during the period that *Pale Fire* was written (and gesticulated) also acted as a “catalytic agent” upon its final form.

As I will discuss, Tsarist Russia was the first European country to produce expert Tibetologists and the Himalayan state featured prominently in its foreign affairs during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nabokov held a lifelong ambition to travel in Central Asia (or somewhere similarly remote) and Tibet featured or was mentioned in a number of Nabokov’s pre-*Pale Fire* works, usually occupying a role not dissimilar to that of Zembla. Furthermore, *some* aspects of Zembla and its king’s flight also mirror the events happening in Tibet during the period the novel was written. Finally, though he unlikely had any real interest in Tibet’s culture or people (only its mountains and butterflies seem to have attracted him), as an exile and firm anti-communist, Nabokov’s political sympathies would certainly have been with those of the Tibetans.

#### NABOKOV AND TIBET

As an educated Russian with a family (on both sides) involved in politics and diplomacy, Nabokov would no doubt have been at least peripherally aware of Tibet’s significance to the Tsarist empire. The earliest known European scholars to come into contact with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism were Russians and Germans in the employment of the Russian Tsar, whose imperial subjects included Buryat, Kalmyk and Tuvan peoples, who were Tibetan Buddhists. The decline the Manchu-ruled Qing Empire (1644–1912) in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century encouraged a range of (military and other) expeditions by mainly Russian and British travelers to this remote and then largely unknown land as well as other parts of Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> Competition between these newcomers over this area became known as “the Great Game.” Though the Great Game is considered to have ended by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tensions between the two powers over Tibet continued into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nabokov’s paternal uncle Konstantin was the consul general in Calcutta during part of this period (in *Speak, Memory*, the author recalls that “[h]is

---

<sup>5</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> <https://journals.openedition.org/asr/2498>

charming little flat was full of souvenirs from India such as photographs of young British officers”).<sup>7</sup> In 1913, Konstantin Nabokov remarked that the thirteenth Dalai Lama’s conduct during his brief exile in British-ruled India “gave the English such a weapon that this game will be surely won by them.... It seems doubtless to me that England wants to continue having ‘la haut main’ in Tibetan affairs, and that the circumstances are quite favourable to her.”<sup>8</sup>

The Russian connection with travel in Central Asia continued even after the Soviet takeover. Well-known artist, philosopher and author Nicholas Roerich was, like Nabokov, an émigré from a wealthy St. Petersburg family. From 1925 to 1929, Roerich (along with his wife and son) went on an artistic and scientific expedition across Asia that started in Sikkim, went to Siberia by way of Turkestan, China, Mongolia and Russia’s Altai region, and then went back to India via Mongolia, the Gobi Desert, China, Tibet and India.<sup>9</sup> His reflections on his travels encapsulate what many Western observers have long felt about Tibet: “The Himalayas and Sikkim [sic] enclose Tibet. Nowhere is there such glimmer, such spiritual satiety as amidst these precious snows.”<sup>10</sup>

In ‘Nabokov and the Theatre’ (1984), Dmitri Nabokov writes:

The idea of travel had tantalized [father] since childhood... The thrill of expedition always enchanted him. He confided to me once, late in life, that his life had been marvelously happy, his ambitions achieved, and most of his dreams realized. Two of his intense yearnings, however, did remain unfulfilled, and both were related to travel.

The first, we are told is “a return to a non-Bolshevik Russia,” and the second “was for a lepidopterological expedition to some exotic, unchartered region. Father had dreamed of the Caucasus, of Mount Elbrus, but, in later years, spoke most often of the Amazon.”<sup>11</sup> In a 1966

---

<sup>7</sup> *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. 1967. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 38-9.

<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, K. D. quoted in *Soviet Russia and Tibet: The Debacle of Secret Diplomacy, 1918 – 1930s* by Alexandre Andreyev (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from ‘The Roerichs in Kashmir and Ladakh’ by Ajay Kamalakaran: <https://openthemagazine.com/columns/threes-great-game-roerichs-kashmir-ladakh/?fbclid=IwAR1ZGJ6pXSDnai-a2wkTEnMxonvLH4Tx6KlbW-DXbXtXUY3mOUxQMRjwm9w>

<sup>10</sup> Roerich, Nicholas. *The Altai-Himalaya: A Travel Diary. 1932*. Quoted from: <http://www.roerich.org/roerich-writings-altai-himalaya.php#a12>

<sup>11</sup> Nabokov, Dimitri. *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*. 1984. Trans. Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), pp. 8-10.

interview, Nabokov himself stated: “As a youth of seventeen, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, I was seriously planning (being the independent possessor of an inherited fortune) a lepidopterological expedition to Central Asia...”<sup>12</sup> Though we can likely never definitively prove whether he was being serious or merely playful with his interviewer, I think there is evidence enough in his early fiction to show that he at the very least occasionally thought about this abandoned plan.

In the short story “The Aurelian” (1930), Paul Pilgram longs to leave his butterfly store in Berlin to go butterfly collecting around the world. One butterfly sample has the label “Tientsenlu, East Tibet” attached, which is where, we are told, Father Dejean collected it. “Father Dejean, stout hearted missionary climbing among the rhododendrons and snows, how enviable was thy lot!”<sup>13</sup> the story’s narrator, channeling Pilgram’s thoughts, exclaims. Dieter E. Zimmer details his search for this location and the identity of Father Dejean in his essay, “Chinese Rhubarb and Caterpillars,”<sup>14</sup> where he uncovers some early reading of Nabokov, including *From the Snows of Tibet Through China* (1892) by British explorer and collector A. E. Pratt. Shortly after “The Aurelian” was published, it seems Pratt’s work was still on Nabokov’s mind, as in his 1931 essay, “Writers and their era,” “an explorer lost in the mountains of Tibet” is one of the few images seemingly randomly reeled off.<sup>15</sup>

The inspiration provided by Pratt’s work doesn’t finish here. Zimmer argues that it was also a clear model for Fyodor’s father’s travels in *The Gift* (1935-37), where Tibet is the likely location of Fyodor’s father’s disappearance. It is also worth noting that Fyodor’s father’s journey does not look too dissimilar to Roerich’s<sup>16</sup>: “Tackling Asia in earnest he investigated Eastern Siberia, Altai, Fergana, the Pamirs, Western China, ‘the islands of the Gobi Sea and its coasts,’ Mongolia, and the ‘incorrigible continent of Tibet.’”<sup>17</sup> In the foreword to the English translation

---

<sup>12</sup> *Strong Opinions*. 1973. (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> *Collected Stories*. 1995. Trans. Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 253.

<sup>14</sup> Zimmer, Dieter E., “Chinese Rhubarb and Caterpillars.”

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070927183932/http://www.nabokovmuseum.org/PDF/ZimmerR%26C.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> *Think, Write, Speak!* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> So far, I cannot find any evidence that Nabokov had read Roerich’s work though I believe this area is worth further investigation.

<sup>17</sup> *The Gift*. 1963. Trans. Michael Scammell and Dmitri Nabokov in the collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 101.

of *The Gift* in 1962 (incidentally the same year *Pale Fire* was published), he wrote: “... my father was not the explorer of Central Asia that I still may become one day.”<sup>18</sup>

Like Zembla in *Pale Fire*, Tibet provides a mysterious and romantic presence in *The Gift*. However, for Fyodor and his father, Tibet the state is of no interest, only its environment and butterflies are:

[...] [O]nce, at an international banquet in London (and this episode pleases me most of all), Sven Hedin, sitting next to my father, asked him how it had happened that, travelling with unprecedented freedom over the forbidden parts of Tibet, in the immediate vicinity of Lhasa, he had not gone to look at it, to which my father replied he had not wanted to sacrifice even one hour's collecting for the sake of visiting 'one more filthy little town' ...<sup>19</sup>

Tibetans, too, are of no interest to Fyodor's father, who unlike his fellow travellers “kept aloof, was severe and resolute in the extreme in his relations with the natives, showing no indulgence to mandarins and lamas.”<sup>20</sup> In short, only the environment and wildlife of Tibet interests Fyodor and his father. The father's scientific interest translates into an artistic one for the son: “In honour of your lips when they kiss me,” Fyodor writes to Zina, “I might devise a metaphor some time: Tibetan mountain-snows, their glancing shine, and a hot spring near flowers, touched with time.”<sup>21</sup>

In his next novel (his first written in English) *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), Tibet, and Tatsienlu, are also mentioned in the context of a longed-for travel location. A sample of Knight's *The Doubtful Asphodel* is quoted where the dying narrator expresses his regret at “never having seen Tatsienlu in Tibet...”<sup>22</sup> His following novel, *Bend Sinister* (1947) is – along

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Forward, vii.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 154.

<sup>22</sup> *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. 1941. (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 147. An interesting aside: in the Mandarin version available in The People's Republic of China, the diligent translator adds a footnote to explain that Nabokov “misunderstood” where Tatsienlu was (he claims it is actually in China's territory). Regrettably, but predictably, he relies on assertion and neglects to mention the complicated background to the disputed borders between China and Tibet: “作家说打箭炉在西藏西误解” *Zuojia shuo Dajianlu zai Xizang xi wujie*, from *Saibasitian Naite de Zhenshi Shenghuo (The Real Life of Sebastian Knight)*, Gu Qinan (trans.), (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2010), p. 185.

with *Invitation to a Beheading* – his most “political” (for want of a better word) novel.<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, given its dystopian setting and date of composition, it does not mention Tibet directly or obliquely. However, it is worth briefly pausing and noting its setting for a moment, as remarked on in a 1948 letter from the Nabokovs, before we come back to this matter (as it concerns *Pale Fire*) shortly:

One of the main subjects of BEND SINISTER is a rather vehement incrimination of a dictatorship – any dictatorship, and *though the dictatorship actually represented in the book is imaginary, it deliberately displays features peculiar a) to Nazism, b) to communism, c) to any dictatorial trends in an otherwise non-dictatorial order.*<sup>24</sup> [Emphasis mine]

After *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov wrote *Lolita*. This book is famously free from any kind of “message” (let alone a political one). The only point that draws our attention to it here is a single reference to Tibet, which comes as Humbert recollects his boyhood fascination with travel:

I remember as a child in Europe gloating over a map of North America that had ‘Appalachian Mountains’ boldly running from Alabama up to New Brunswick, so that the whole region they spanned, Tennessee, the Virginias, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, appeared to my imagination as a gigantic Switzerland or even Tibet, all mountain, glorious diamond peak upon peak, giant conifers, *le montagnard emigre* in his bear skin glory, and *felis tigris goldsmithi* and Red Indians under the catalpas.<sup>25</sup>

In *Pnin* (1957), written at the same time as *Lolita*, the Central Asian state is mentioned twice: first, in passing, when describing the Russian artist’s wife, “who wore a Tibetan charm on a long silver chain,”<sup>26</sup> and for the second time at a central moment, when Pnin is discussing history:

---

<sup>23</sup> Nabokov called *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* the “the two bookends of grotesque design between which my other volumes tightly huddle” (*Strong Opinions*, p. 287).

<sup>24</sup> *Selected Letters: 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990), p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Lolita*. 1955 (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p. 210.

<sup>26</sup> Mikhail Bezrodny suggests that Pnin’s compatriots, Serafima and Oleg Komarovs, had real-life prototypes: the couple was likely based on the writer Aleksei Remizov and his wife, Serafima (née Dovgello); the latter also had a

You and I will give next year some splendid courses which I have planned long ago. On Tyranny. On the Boot. On Nicholas the first. On all the precursors of modern atrocity. Hagen, when we speak of injustice, we forget Armenian massacres, tortures which Tibet invented, colonists in Africa... The history of man is the history of Pain!<sup>27</sup>

The single mentions of Tibet in four of the above-mentioned works is repeated in Nabokov's following novel – *Pale Fire* itself: "Fleur now slept [...] under a coverlet of genuine giant panda fur that had just been rushed from Tibet by a group of Asiatic well-wishers."<sup>28</sup>

In summary, in four of the six works discussed above where Tibet is mentioned, the mentions reflect Nabokov's interest in the state as a romantic travel destination. The other two are either a negative (*Pnin*) or neutral (*Pale Fire*) reference. Nabokov was clearly interested in the notion of travelling to Tibet, not to explore its civilization and culture, but to explore its fauna and flora.

#### "PERCEIVING AND TRANSFORMING THE WORLD"

In *The Tragedy of Mister Morn* (written in 1924), *Glory* (1930-32) and his abandoned 1940 novel, *Solus Rex*, kingdoms strikingly similar to Zembla appear. However, Nabokov was keen to stress the difference between these kingdoms and Zembla: he claimed that *Glory*'s Zoorland "[has] no connection to Nabokov's Zembla!"<sup>29</sup> and that:

---

Tibetan charm in her possession, which was a gift of Nicholas Roerich, a Russian painter, writer, theosophist, and philosopher. Nabokov met with the Remizovs in emigration and the souvenir from Tibet was prominently displayed in their apartment on rue Boileau in Paris, the same street where Nabokov lived (see: Bezrodny, M. "Suprugi Komarovy. Zametki na poliakh 'Pnina'," in: *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*. Anthology. St. Petersburg, 2011. Vol. 2, p. 925-926) – *Editor's Note*.

<sup>27</sup> *Pnin*. 1957 (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962 (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> *Glory*. 1971. Trans Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 9-10.



The two countries, that of the Lion King and the Zembla land, belong to the same biological zone. Their subarctic bogs have much the same butterflies and berries. A sad and distant kingdom seems to have haunted my poetry and fiction since the twenties. Unlike Northern Russia, both Zembla and Ultima Thule are mountainous, and their languages are of a phony Scandinavian type.<sup>30</sup>

Nabokov often stressed that his fictional worlds were purposefully fanciful recreations rather than attempts at accurate representations. It is a point he stressed repeatedly, not just with regards *Pale Fire* but for his other fiction, too. In his afterword to *Lolita*, for example, he talks of “inventing America” and adding “local ingredients... into the brew of individual fancy.”<sup>31</sup> This notion appears in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, too, where the narrator, V., explains that it is a “grotesque misconception” of biographer Goodman to assume that a particular passage in Knight’s *The Doubtful Asphodel* “tallies with Knight’s own attitude to Russia.” In fact, V. explains, the passage “refer[s] rather to a fanciful amalgamation of tyrannic iniquities than to any particular nation or historical reality.”<sup>32</sup> This method of purposely reinventing a place (which perhaps reached its zenith in *Ada*) was explicitly stressed with regards to Zembla in a note Véra wrote on her husband’s behalf to a publisher shortly before the *Pale Fire*’s publication:

He does not think you have to worry much about the identification of Zembla. Together with being completely articulate all art should leave a margin for the reader’s imagination to get some exercise. ‘A distant Northern land’ has poetry, nostalgia, almost a heartbreaking sob in its sound. If we say ‘a non-existent Northern land’ it becomes a label on an empty bottle.<sup>33</sup>

Recreating fictional worlds from ingredients available in “reality” is the very essence of the artistic process for Nabokov. In Kinbote’s forward he describes John Shade doing exactly this one evening as he stands on a terrace and looks out across a lake:

---

<sup>30</sup> *Strong Opinions*. 1973. (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 91.

<sup>31</sup> *Lolita*. 1955. (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p. 312.

<sup>32</sup> *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. 1941. (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 23

<sup>33</sup> Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p464

I am witnessing a unique psychological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up, so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse.<sup>34</sup>

This, the reader soon finds out, echoes canto four of Shade's poem:

I feel I understand  
Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight [...]<sup>35</sup>

### *IS ZEMBLA IN EUROPE?*

To date, there has been some excellent scholarship focusing on the northern European connections to Zembla. In one such essay, the author concisely summarizes the consensus of the fictitious country's available information (in a way Kinbote purposely fails to do): "The kingdom is located somewhere in the vicinity of Scandinavia, with a nod towards the Baltic region, and its dominant language is the West Germanic (but Russian influenced) Zemblan."<sup>36</sup> The points made here are largely accurate but are lacking a crucial caveat. As I have mentioned above, we are indeed told that Zembla is a "Northern land" and given samples of its language, which is a "phony Scandinavian type." However, it is crucial to remember *who* has given this information. If we are to accept it uncritically, we end up in a position somewhat like the policeman called to investigate

---

<sup>34</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 22

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 59

<sup>36</sup> Antonsson, Haki. "Pale Fire and Old Norse Literature," *Nabokov Online Journal*, Vol. X–XI (2016/2017).

the case of a cat in a neck bow of white silk.<sup>37</sup> To put it more bluntly, our narrator is “a remarkably disagreeable person” who “what’s more, [is] insane.”<sup>38</sup>

This consensus on Zembla’s European origins has long been established. Quoting Nabokov’s comments from an unidentified 1963 interview, Brian Boyd comments in his biography of Nabokov that he “needed to create Zembla ‘out of the rejects of other countries’ in Europe.”<sup>39</sup> However, now that the complete interview is available in *Think, Write, Speak!* (2019), we can see that when Nabokov’s words are viewed in their full context, a much broader interpretation of Zembla is possible:

There is also an imaginary kingdom called Zembla involved in the book, and that, of course, I had to create. That was the reason it was useful being in Europe. I had to create Zembla out of the rejects of other countries small countries, large countries – mostly northern countries.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, it is not difficult to see why so many scholars have accepted that Zembla was created only out of the rejects of countries in Europe. “[...] [T]he name of Zembla is a corruption,” Kinbote tells us, “not of *zemlya*, but of Semberland, a land of reflections, of ‘resemblers’.”<sup>41</sup> And in these “reflections,” we can see parts of several real-life models. Geographically, culturally<sup>42</sup> and linguistically, this “distant northern land,” where “most females are freckled blondes”<sup>43</sup> and the religion is a “Zemblan brand of Protestantism”,<sup>44</sup> bears many similarities to Scandinavia (and even appears to have “Copenhagen plane” service from its capital, Onhava<sup>45</sup>). Like the Scandinavian

---

<sup>37</sup> “One night the black cat which a few minutes before I had seen rippling down into the basement where I had arranged toilet facilities for it in an attractive setting, suddenly reappeared on the threshold of the music room, in the middle of my insomnia and a Wanger record, arching its back and sporting a neck bow of white silk which it could certainly never have put on all by itself. I telephoned 111111 and a few minutes later was discussing possible culprits with a policeman who relished greatly my cherry cordial, but who ever had broken in had left no trace” (*Pale Fire*), p. 82.

<sup>38</sup> *Pale Fire*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 422.

<sup>40</sup> *Think, Write, Speak!* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), pp. 313-14.

<sup>41</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 208.

<sup>42</sup> In response to a 1970 question about what research he does for his novels, Nabokov mentioned: “For *Pale Fire*, I drew a few handfuls of old jewels from Scandinavian folklore.” *Think, Write, Speak!* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 388.

<sup>43</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 164.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 177.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

countries, this “little hard country”<sup>46</sup> is a hereditary monarchy with a coastline. At the time of *Pale Fire*’s writing, the Baltic states no longer had monarchies, but like Zembla, they too had a coastline and the misfortune of having been overtaken by communism.

However, where Zembla differs significantly from Scandinavia and the Baltic states is in its mountainous environment, which features throughout the story of “that crystal land” (“perhaps an allusion to Zembla”).<sup>47</sup>

### CERTAIN REFLECTIONS

We also know that Zembla has a “gigantic neighbor”<sup>48</sup> with citizenry called “*Sosed*”, which is keenly agitating for revolution via Zembla’s extremists. Initially, this situation is under control but events soon begin to deteriorate for the king, who eventually becomes a captive in Zembla’s capital city’s Onhava Palace (elsewhere, we are told that the phrase “*onhava, onhava*” means “far, far away”<sup>49</sup>). Later, he recalls “those perilous nights in my country, where at any moment a company of jittery revolutionaries might enter and hustle me off to a moonlit wall.”<sup>50</sup>

Tibet’s own gigantic neighbour entered its territory in 1950, when the fourteenth Dalai Lama still occupied the Potala Palace. Skirmishes with Tibetan troops and uprisings in the east of the country took place in the intervening years before spreading west across the rest of the country and culminating in the violently suppressed March 1959 uprising. Shortly before the Dalai Lama’s flight from Tibet in March 1959, the residents of Lhasa woke to see a stream of people heading away from the city. “Like most rumours, it spread like wildfire. Some people claimed that they had heard that the Dalai Lama had been abducted by the Chinese in the middle of the night, others that the Chinese had attacked the palace.”<sup>51</sup> The events leading up to and after the Tibetan Uprising and Dalai Lama’s escape, are similar to those depicted in *Pale Fire*. Shortly before the Zemblan

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 201.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 81.

<sup>51</sup> Shakya, Tsering, *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows: A History of Tibet Since 1947* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000), p. 191.

king's flight, which happens just after revolution breaks out in Zembla on "May 1, 1958"<sup>52</sup>: "Rumours rumbled. It was said the captive would soon be tried by a special court; but it was also said that he would be shot whilst ostensibly being transported to another place of confinement."<sup>53</sup>

Like the Dalai Lama, who disguised himself in layman's robes and secretly escaped the Potala Palace at night,<sup>54</sup> the Zemblan king disguises himself, in "what felt like skiing trousers and something that smelled like an old sweater."<sup>55</sup> To the west of Zembla is "The Bera Range, a two-hundred-mile-long chain of rugged mountains, not quite reaching the northern end of the Zemblan peninsula [...]" which the king crosses during his escape, on "passes none of which exceeds an altitude of five thousand feet; a few peaks rise some two thousand feet higher and retain their snow in midsummer."<sup>56</sup> This altitude most closely resembles the Himalayas, which unlike Scandinavia, the Andes and Alps, has over 50 mountains exceeding seven thousand feet.

The dates of Charles the Beloved's ascension to the throne and escape from Zembla are also not dissimilar to those that the fourteen Dalai Lama came to power and escaped Tibet. Charles' reign, Kinbote tells us, was from 1936 until his escape in May 1958; the fourteenth Dalai Lama was discovered at the age of about two (he was born in 1935) and began his reign (albeit under the guidance of advisors initially) in 1940, before fleeing Tibet in March 1959. Zembla's revolution and the Tibetan Uprising occur within less than a year of one another, during the time that Nabokov briefly paused writing this novel.

#### *WHY WOULD ZEMBLA HAVE BEEN INSPIRED BY TIBET?*

The final argument I will make for my case is the easiest. Other than his long-held ambition to travel to Tibet to collect butterflies, *why* would Nabokov have had any interest in it whilst writing *Pale Fire*? Aside from the timing of Communist China's invasion of Tibet with Nabokov's

---

<sup>52</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.

<sup>54</sup> "A little after 10 O'clock, now wearing unfamiliar trousers and a long, black coat... slipping my glasses into my pocket, I stepped outside." – Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 151.

<sup>55</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 109.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113.

writing of the novel, there is, of course, the natural sympathy he would have had with any nation's inhabitants and exiles after a communist takeover.

Nabokov's hatred of Russian communism and "the ruthless imperialism of the USSR"<sup>57</sup> is well-known, and essential to understanding his world view. In a 1966 interview he stated that when his foreign policy opinions are in doubt, he "always follow[s] the simple method of choosing that line of conduct which may be most displeasing to the Reds..."<sup>58</sup>

He wasn't averse to including China in his condemnation of communist tyranny either: "Much less vaguely – quite adamantly, or even adamantly – I am aware of a central core of spirit in me that flashes and jeers at the brutal farce of totalitarian states, such as Russia, and her embarrassing tumors, such as China."<sup>59</sup> (This quote is unsurprisingly censored in the recent Chinese translation of *Strong Opinions*<sup>60</sup>). He further hints at his hostility towards the Chinese state in *Transparent Things* (1972) when the narrator Hugh Person mentions two other characters "[who had] visited Cuba and China, and such-like primitive, dreary spots..."<sup>61</sup> and more directly in a 1973 interview: "Modern Western Civilization is incomparably more refined, more humane, more artistic in its literature than its counterparts in Russia and in China today."<sup>62</sup> And in a 1968 interview, he mentioned Tibet whilst gleefully recalling "a communist agent" he encountered in Berlin:

...[he] got so involved in trying to wreck anti bolshevist groups by distributing drugs among them that he himself became an addict and lapsed into a dreamy state of commendable metaphysic sloth. He must be grazing today on some grassy slope in Tibet if he has not yet lined the coat of the fortunate shepherd.<sup>63</sup>

It is also not difficult to see why Nabokov would have had sympathy with the approximately 80,000 Tibetan exiles that crossed the Himalayas into India with the fleeing Dalai Lama. They were the latest wave of peoples fleeing communism, as Nabokov and many of his

---

<sup>57</sup> *Strong Opinions*. 1973. (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 98.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113.

<sup>60</sup> *Dushu Yijian (Strong Opinions)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2018), p. 109.

<sup>61</sup> *Transparent Things*. 1972. (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 28.

<sup>62</sup> *Think, Write, Speak!* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 424.

<sup>63</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 114.

fellow Russians had nearly four decades before. As with the description of Russian exiles (“the set to which he belonged”) given in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, here was another “set of kindly, well-meaning, gentle-mannered people driven to death or exile for the sole crime of their existing.”<sup>64</sup> Nabokov’s new home, Switzerland, was also the first Western country to accept Tibetan refugees, accepting 150 orphans in 1960 (and 1,000 more refugees in 1964). Though he called Zembla “an imaginary Kingdom,” and throughout the novel its vague and almost illusionary qualities are emphasized (“distant dim Zembla”<sup>65</sup>), elsewhere he did say that “*Pale Fire* is a very direct, realistic tale.”<sup>66</sup> The direct, realistic aspect of the tale comes, in my opinion, in the form of escape and exile faced by those driven from their homeland.

### CONCLUSION

At the risk of repeating myself, I must stress that to simply state that *Pale Fire* was inspired by events in Tibet at the time it was written would be an oversimplification. However, I believe that dismissing the similarities between the events there and in the novel would be risking ignoring the “certain reflections” that Nabokov himself admitted do appear in his work. To quote our narrator (the “unfortunate king”): “My commentary to this poem, now in the hands of my readers, represents an attempt to sort out these echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints...”<sup>67</sup> Or perhaps, as Shade tells Kinbote: “...there is no resemblance at all... Resemblances are the shadows of differences. Different people see different similarities and similar differences.”<sup>68</sup>

---

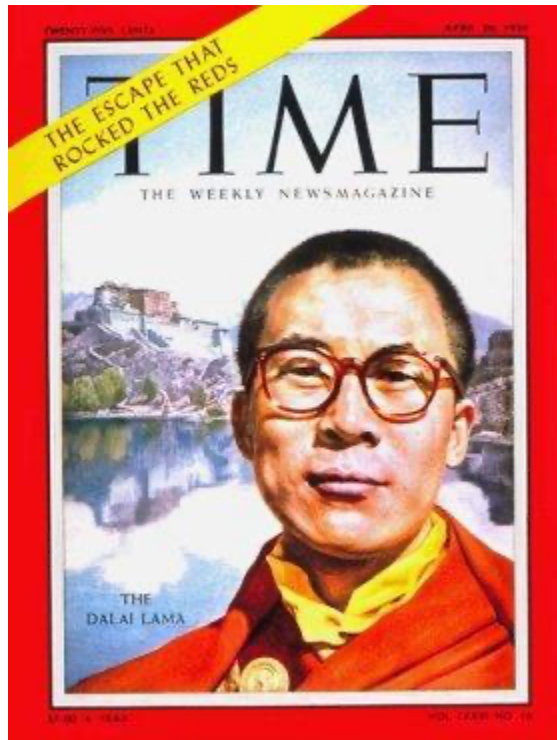
<sup>64</sup> *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. 1941. (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 23.

<sup>65</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>66</sup> *Think, Write, Speak!* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 409.

<sup>67</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 233.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 208-9.



On the April 20<sup>th</sup> 1959 edition of *Time* magazine, the Dalai Lama appeared on the cover with a tantalizingly Nabokovian depiction of the Potala Palace with its reflection in a lake in the background. Its headline was also surely one that would have pleased Nabokov, and – please excuse my final Kinbotism – for this reader, brings to mind something Kinbote mentions in his foreword: “One day I happened to enter the English Literature office in quest of a magazine with the picture of the Royal Palace in Onhava, which I wanted my friend to see [...]”<sup>69</sup>

#### WORKS CITED

- Andreyev, Alexandre. *Soviet Russia and Tibet: The Debacle of Secret Diplomacy, 1918–1930s* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
- Antonsson, Haki. “*Pale Fire* and Old Norse Literature,” *Nabokov Online Journal*, Vol. X–XI (2016/2017).
- Bezrodny, Mikhail. “Suprugy Komarovy. Zametki na poliakh ‘Pnina’,” in: *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*. Anthology. St. Petersburg, 2011. Vol. 2, p. 925-926.
- Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).

---

<sup>69</sup> *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 19-20.



- Dalai Lama. *Freedom in Exile* (London: Abacus, 1998).
- Gu Qinan (trans.). *Saibasitian Naite de Zhenshi Shenghuo (The Real Life of Sebastian Knight)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2010).
- Meyer, Priscilla. "Pale Fire As Cultural Astrolabe: The Sagas of the North," *Russian Review*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Jan., 1988), pp. 61-74.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Bend Sinister*. 1947. (London: Penguin Books, 2001).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Collected Stories*. 1995. Trans. Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 2000).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Glory*. 1971. Trans Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 1974).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lolita*. 1955. (London: Penguin Classics, 1995).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Pale Fire*. 1962. (London: Penguin Books, 2000).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Pnin*. 1957. (London: Penguin Books, 2000).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Letters: 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. 1967. (London: Penguin Books, 2000).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Strong Opinions*. 1973. (New York: Vintage International, 1990).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Think, Write, Speak!* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Gift*. 1963. Trans. Michael Scammell and Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Vladimir Nabokov (London: Penguin Books, 2001).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*. 1984. Trans. Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. 1941. (London: Penguin Books, 2001).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Think, Write, Speak!* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Transparent Things*. 1972. (New York: Vintage International, 1989).
- Shakya, Tsering. *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows: A History of Tibet Since 1947* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000).
- Tang, Jianqing (trans.), *Dushu Yijian (Strong Opinions)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2018).
- The New York Times* Archive:  
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>
- Zimmer, Dieter E. "Chinese Rhubarb and Catepillars":  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20070927183932/http://www.nabokovmuseum.org/PDF/ZimmerR%26C.pdf>
- Zorin, Alexander. 'Tibetan studies in Russia: a brief historical account' (2019):  
<https://journals.openedition.org/asr/2498>

