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THE NABOKOVIAN HEREAFTER
OF FRENCH EXILE¹

In 1966, in all likelihood peering down upon Lake Léman from the overhanging balcony of his suite, located on the top floor of the wing of Montreux Palace known as “Le Cygne” [“The Swan”] — and seeing to his left, the Château de Chillon — Nabokov, an American writer of Russian origin, who had been residing in Switzerland since 1961, told a journalist that, “I am a very non-typical émigré who doubts that a typical émigré exists.”² This statement expresses the position the author thought he occupied as an emigrant, but also his perspective on the situation of emigration in general. Although Nabokov shared the same fate as many Russian émigrés who fled Russia after the October Revolution and the ensuing civil war, relocating from Berlin to Paris, then to the United States, and finally to Switzerland, he always rejected — both for himself and others — the caricatured fate of the typical émigré, governed by the dual political constraints of exile and asylum-seeking.

¹ **Author’s note:** Materials upon which this article is based are mainly French. All the French quotations have been translated by the translator of this article and revised by its author, except when an English translation of the French quotation was already available. I am very grateful to Yannicke Chupin (University of Cergy-Pontoise, France), Heidi Edel (Shepaug Valley High School, Washington, CT, United States) and Christopher L. Robinson (Ecole Polytechnique, France) for their help in revising this English version of the article, originally published as “L’au-delà nabokovien de l’exil français,” in “Figures de l’émigré russe en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles. Fiction et réalité,” ed. Charlotte Krauss and Tatiana Victoroff (Amsterdam/New-York: Rodopi, 2012), 311-29.

² In Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 162.

This was made evident on May 30, 1975, when, in the context of an episode of *Apostrophes* hosted by Bernard Pivot and dedicated to the Nabokov, speaking in French, he described how Russian émigrés were treated first in Berlin and then in Paris, the two successive centers of Russian emigration during the 1930s:

From time to time this spectral world [...] showed us who was the disembodied captive and who the true master. This would happen when we had to renew some damned identity card or other [...]. The League of Nations provided emigrants who had lost their Russian citizenship with a Nansen passport, a pitiful scrap of paper that tore every time it was unfolded. The authorities [...] seemed to believe that it didn't matter how badly off a nation was — Soviet Russia, let's say — any fugitive from said nation was much more contemptible for existing outside the bounds of its national administration. But not all of us consented to be a bastard child or a ghost: we travelled from Menton to San Remo, quite peacefully, I should say, by mountain paths well known to butterfly hunters and distracted poets.³

“Disembodied captive”, “bastard child”, or “ghost”: this was, according to Nabokov, how France, and Europe in general, typically characterized Russian émigrés at the time—deprived of nationality and threatened by illegitimacy or invisibility. When in 1937, Nabokov came to live in France with his Jewish wife and their young son, he met neither of the two working requirements dictated in France. Although his Nansen passport—“a pauper's permit, really”⁴—allowed stateless individuals to move around, Nabokov had not yet obtained his identity card from the French administration (which served as a residency permit at the time⁵); nor did he ever manage, during the three years he lived in France, to obtain a work permit.

Nevertheless, according to the author's statement to Bernard Pivot, countries did not have borders for butterfly hunters and distracted poets who thwarted nations and the “vulgar obsession

³ In “Vladimir Nabokov.” Interview by Bernard Pivot, *Apostrophes*, May 30, 1975. On *Les grands entretiens de Bernard Pivot* (DVD), ed. Roger Kahane (Paris: Gallimard, INA, 2004).

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: Random House, 2011), 63.

⁵ Nabokov only obtained his identity card on August 5, 1938.

with ‘documents’”⁶ by following mountain paths. The question still remains, however: how can we explain the difference that marks the irremediable separation of survivors into those who distractedly crossed borders against all odds, and those who were tragically stopped by the same borders? Let us recall that as Nabokov and his family left France for the United States on the last transatlantic ocean liner not torpedoed by the Germans, Walter Benjamin, having just crossed the French border, committed suicide in Port-Bou, “on the path to freedom,” as his friend Gershom Scholem once wrote.⁷

During the ten years between 1930 and 1940, when Nabokov sought to move to France and then lived there with his family, he was forced to confront a triple risk of imprisonment—a sort of triple border. Although in exile, the author was seeking to perpetuate and give new life to Russian literature, in particular by transforming it – thanks to the contribution of European, and mainly French, modernism, he was proclaimed a stranger to Eternal Russia by the Parisian Russian émigrés; a stranger to New Russia by Soviet writers; and “a stranger to himself,” to paraphrase Julia Kristeva,⁸ by Sartre, who in 1939 wrote a perfidious critique of *La Méprise* [*Despair*] in which he portrayed Nabokov as a rootless and arid victim of emigration.⁹

Although throughout his life Nabokov held on to the hope of annihilating what I will term (via a rather Nabokovian shortcut) these threefold apostles of ideological art, during his short French phase, it was by side roads—including his very brief foray into writing in French, a prelude to his metamorphosis into an Anglophone writer—that the author attempted to escape from this triple threat. Moreover, I think that it was this particular experience of emigration, which Nabokov expressed feeling since childhood¹⁰ well before having been subjected to its historical ordeal, which was decisive in that quest: elevating the figure of the émigré to the rank of a figure of human universality.

From the survival of the émigré to the afterlife of the artist: when faced with the major risk of dissolution that integration posed for a Russian émigré, Nabokov made the even more perilous choice of adopting a supra-life, an extra-life, snatching the figure of the émigré away

⁶ Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*, 63.

⁷ Gershom Scholem, *Benjamin et son ange*, trans. into French from German by Philippe Ivernel (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1995), 10.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Vladimir Nabokov : *La Méprise*,” in *Situations I: Critiques littéraires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 53–56.

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 234: “[...] my *Speak, Memory*, the records and recollections of a happy expatriation that began practically on the day of my birth.”

from the dual problematic of here and there, of same and other, to project it into the artistic “hereafter” of that political constraint which is emigration: an hereafter where the only passport needed, Nabokov informs us, is style, a denationalized travel allowance which transforms the Other into the Alter Ego and allows the figure of the émigré to reclaim its right to participate in humanity. The “hereafter” contained in my title is thus not metaphysical but in fact translates the Nabokovian stance, or what W. G. Sebald termed Nabokov’s “synoptic vision”¹¹: the author always being next to, ahead of, or above what he perceived.

VLADIMIR NABOKOFF-SIRIN, A “FRENCHMAN”?

“Yes, I might have been a great French writer,” Vladimir Nabokov declared to his first biographer, Andrew Field.¹² We should not naively lament the fact that he did not become so, but rather examine the originality of the artistic position he defended in response to the questions facing him, that of a Russian émigré author, during the decade where he sought refuge and a new future in France. Nabokov could have perfectly embodied a contemporary version of the “Western Russian” émigré stereotype, inherited from the nineteenth century and well known to the French, a kind of twentieth-century Turgenev (though lacking Flaubert’s friendship!). This is often the image evoked by other Russian émigrés who concur on — and largely condemn — the absence of Russianness in his artistic production. Here is a rarely cited example, an excerpt from Wladimir Weidlé’s essay *La Russie absente et présente (Russia: Absent and Present)*, originally written for a French audience: “The most noteworthy among them [*i. e.*, the few novelists of talent produced by emigration], Nabokov-Sirin, is undoubtedly the most western of all who have written in Russian, even in his sensibility and the workings of his mind.”¹³ Nevertheless, Weidlé here sought to inform a neophyte public that the true face of Russia was “an integral part of Europe”¹⁴ and that “[i]n Russia, as elsewhere, all the best writers and the only genuine artists, so far from shunning the West, are drawing closer to it than ever and accepting it still more fully.”¹⁵

¹¹ W. G. Sebald, “Dream Textures. A Brief Note on Nabokov,” in *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), 147.

¹² In Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 141.

¹³ Wladimir Weidlé, *Russia: Absent and Present*, trans. A. Gordon Smith (New York: The John Day Company, 1952), 95. Originally published as *La Russie absente et présente* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

In 1949, describing Sirin as a Western writer was thus no longer a reproach or a form of condemnation for Weidlé (unlike for earlier Russian émigré critics).

It was indeed a positive and unconventional vision of what it meant to “be Western” that Nabokov and his few champions pitted against the many critics, according to whom his art’s major flaw was a soulless formalism. Within the community of Russian émigrés, the stakes of the debate were high, if often implicit, during these ten years, but its transposition onto a French audience was particularly revealing. In the articles written for the French press during this short period, many authors — Russian émigrés who were better assimilated into French literary circles than Nabokov — paradoxically attempted to pass off Nabokoff-Sirin as being more French than Russian.

For Nabokov the émigré, France was not an entirely new world. Since childhood, it had been an oasis of leisure: “I spent my first summers in the countryside of our estate, not far from St. Petersburg; in the fall we would go to the south of France, to Nice, Pau, Biarritz, to Bastia, and in the winter it was always St. Petersburg.”¹⁶ Biarritz, where he spent two months with his family in the fall of 1909, was the site of Nabokov’s first love, Claude Deprès, the “Colette” of *Speak, Memory* and the short story “First Love”. As Nabokov explained to Bernard Pivot, from a young age he could already speak English, Russian, and French fluently:

At the age of three, I spoke English better than Russian, but on the other hand there was a period of time between ten and twenty years old during which, despite reading an astounding wealth of English authors [...] I spoke English only rarely. I learned French at the age of six [...] At twelve, I already knew all of the great French poets.¹⁷

A French language instructor by the name of Cécile Miauton, arriving in 1906 from Switzerland and more specifically from Lake Léman, stayed with Nabokov’s family until 1915 to give the two young boys, Vladimir and Sergei, a better grasp of the language than “common French, which was handed down from father to son.”¹⁸ She strove to do so by reading to the boys all the

¹⁶ Nabokov, “Vladimir Nabokov,” *Les grands entretiens de Bernard Pivot*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, “Mademoiselle O,” in *Mademoiselle O* (Paris: 10/18, 2005), 29. **Author’s note:** the text of “Mademoiselle O” which is quoted in this work is the original French text (1936), reproduced in the French volume

classic volumes of French literature, Corneille and Racine whom she “worshipped,” “all of the *Bibliothèque rose*¹⁹ and then Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas — never-ending novels which she enjoyed as enthusiastically as we did, despite remaining impassible in appearance.”²⁰

As émigrés, Vladimir Nabokov and his family only spent three years in France, between June 1937 and May 1940, in modest guesthouses on the Côte d’Azur, then in Paris, which “was becoming the center of émigré culture and destitution.”²¹ But in fact Nabokov’s French adventures truly began in October 1929 when he was abruptly shoved to the front of the Russian émigré literary scene in Paris, thanks to the publication of the first part of *Zashchita Luzhina* [*The Defense*], his third novel, by the most prestigious of the voluminous Russian journals in the city, *Sovremennye Zapiski* [*Contemporary Annals*]. Dominique Desanti describes this major turning point as follows:

When *The Defense* was published, Russian writers living abroad were truly shocked. [...] Bounine, always stiffly starched, as if propped up inside an invisible sheath, wandered around all of Russian Paris saying “This kid stole a shotgun and he's gonna finish off all of us old-timers, myself included.” Your financial situation improved a bit, and you were a rising star among expatriate Russians. You doubled down on readings. The Princess Zinaida Shakhovskaya [...] invited you to Brussels. You made a detour to Paris, where you stayed with your friends, the Fondaminskys [...].²²

For ten years, Sirin’s prose was, in Russian Paris, at the heart of all debates and discussions: this phenomenon was even called “Siriniana”²³ by the poet and critic Georgy Adamovich, one of Nabokov’s primary literary rivals. In fact Sirin ended up becoming a regular in *Sovremennye*

of short stories entitled *Mademoiselle O*. Quotations have been translated into English by this article’s translator and author.

¹⁹ Translator’s note: The *Bibliothèque rose* was a collection of books for children between the ages of 6 and 12 first created and published by Hachette in 1858.

²⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, “Mademoiselle O,” 19.

²¹ Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*, 62.

²² Dominique Desanti, *Vladimir Nabokov : essais et rêves* (Paris: Julliard, 1994), 124–26.

²³ See Nikolaj Mel’nikov and Oleg Korostelev (ed.), *Klassik bez retušī. Literaturnyj mir o tvorčestve Vladimira Nabokova* [*A Classic without Alteration. Literary World on Vladimir Nabokov’s Œuvre*] (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), 52.

Zapiski: the journal published all of his output (seven novels, an unfinished novel, and a short story) in thirty-eight of its forty-one final issues between the fall of 1929 and the summer of 1940.

This was nevertheless a paradoxical period that the two Russias granted Sirin. For the Russia “over there,” his talent served no purpose and helped no one, at a time when art was supposed to be useful, or propose a new form of life. Thus in 1938 in Paris when the Soviet writer Isaac Babel was asked what he thought about émigré literature following the publication of Nabokov’s *Priglasenie na kazn’* [*Invitation to a Beheading*], his response was clear: “A few individuals write with extraordinary skill, with brio even. [...] But of what use is that? Here in the Soviet Union it’s simple, no one needs that kind of literature.”²⁴ We are aware of only one mention of Sirin during the Soviet Union era: in 1934, the author Skitalets commented on *The Defense*, saying: “Sirin has an uncontestable talent. He deals with psychology and pathology. [...] What is striking in the novel is the author's tragic separation from the life of his native land.”²⁵

A stranger to his homeland, transformed into the Soviet Union, Sirin was also a stranger to his expatriate home. Everything in his art was suspicious in the eyes of a large number of Russian émigré intellectuals: his virtuosity, his artificiality, and his prolixity. Even his admirers were uncomfortable defending him:

I immediately realized his superiority over all the “young” émigré writers [...]. But having sensed and foreseen the place he would occupy in Russian literature, and consequently in world literature, I remained free from any sort of unconditional admiration for him. Something troubled me about Sirin’s work and especially about his virtuosity, which had emerged almost immediately, and about the budding sarcastic arrogance he had with regard to his readers, about the absence of spirituality I could begin to make out.²⁶

²⁴ Vassily Semenovič Yanovsky, “Iz Knigi ‘Polya Elisejskie’. Kniga Pamyati” [“From the book ‘Elysian Fields’. A Book of Memory”], in *V. V. Nabokov: pro et contra*, ed. B. Averin, M. Malikova, and A. Dolinin (Sankt-Peterburg: Izd-vo Russkogo Hristianskogo gumanitarnogo in-ta, 1997), 1:196.

²⁵ Gennadij Georgievič Martynov, *V. V. Nabokov: Bibliografičeskij ukazatel’ proizvedenij i literatury o nëm, opublikovannyh v Rossii i gosudarstvah byvšego SSSR (1920-2006)* [*V. V. Nabokov: Bibliographical Index of Works and Secondary Literature Published in Russia and the States of the Former USSR (1920–2006)*] (Sankt-Peterburg: Al’faret, 2007), 117.

²⁶ Zinaïda Schakovskoy, *À la recherche de Nabokov*, trans. Maurice Zinovieff (Lausanne: L’Âge d’Homme, 2007), 30.

In fact, Sirin's art disconcerted his Russian émigré readers because he offered a confident, brilliant and personal response to all the painful prospects of the younger generation regarding the survival of Russian literature in emigration; a response which upended the classic terms of the debate and eluded the great civilizing mission of Russian literature.

Even before 1932 and his first series of Parisian readings, on the path of his brief and curious metamorphoses into a French writer, a series of articles for the French press not only discovered Sirin — who had not yet seen a single line of his Russian prose translated — but also attempted to progressively offer more support to the hypothesis that his writing was very close in style and spirit to many works of French literature.

The first of these articles was published in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* [*Literary News*] on February 15, 1930. It was an ecstatic article penned in French by the art critic André Levinson, of Russian extraction, who analyzed the shock he felt upon reading *The Defense*; he proclaimed “the under-30-year-old” a “maestro of all things literary” and called Sirin a “Western Russian” who “in none of his works [...] takes a stand in the ‘two Russias’ debate.”²⁷

In April 1931, the first French-language study of Nabokov's work was published in the French literary press. The author (almost certainly Gleb Struve) contrasted Sirin with the tradition of Russian novels, which had always sought to reproduce or recreate life, characterizing the former's art thusly: “[Sirin] proclaims the absolute sovereignty of the author, his equality to life, his right to create on a plane parallel to reality” and adds that “one finds an equivalence with this ‘arbitrary creator’ in the work of only one contemporary: Jean Giraudoux.”²⁸

Then, in May 1931, the first text by Sirin that the French public could read (in French)²⁹ was followed by a rather lengthy portrait of the writer, also in French, entitled *Vladimir Nabokoff Sirine, l'amoureux de la vie* [*Vladimir Nabokoff Sirin, a Lover of Life*], which emphasized his divergence from Russian literature:

His literary work, which pays great attention to form and composition, is a very clear reflection of his personality. There is nothing weak, useless or shapeless in the construction of his novels [...]. In this, Sirin perhaps deviates from the general

²⁷ André Levinson, “V. Sirine et son joueur d'échecs,” *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (February 15, 1930), 6.

²⁸ “Les ‘romans-escamotage’ de Vladimir Sirine,” *Le Mois* (April 1931), 151.

²⁹ Vladimir [Nabokoff]-Sirine, “Les écrivains et l'époque,” *Le Mois* (June 1931), 137–39.

lineage of Russian literature. The “excess” of Dostoyevsky or the somewhat loose and complex scheme, rendered with broad sweeping strokes, of Tolstoy are foreign to him. It’s because Sirin is lacking that “healthy disquietude” that so exemplifies Russian literature and thought: his lust for life makes him, much like one of his characters, invulnerable.³⁰

Finally, Sirin’s fusion with French literature and his move to the side of reason, clarity and perfection was effected by a final comparison of the young writer with the individual whom Nabokov would later call a “West European Writer”³¹: Pushkin “the Frenchman.”

[Sirin] is very similar to the Russian author who was perhaps the most perfect and the least appreciated, with a handful of exceptions, in Europe: Alexander Pushkin, whose writing Mérimée found to be “entirely French.” Like Pushkin, Sirin displays a similar concern for form and measure, a love for order, which is typical of the French.³²

These last lines beg for commentary: they constitute a veritable tour de force, if not a slight of hand, for they establish an almost direct lineage between Pushkin and Sirin, evidenced by the formal properties of their style that are also inherent to French literature. Although Nabokov never abandoned the aesthetic conceptions of the autonomy and freedom of literature that this affiliation with Pushkin implied, even after he realized that he had to flee France and consequently chose English as his new creative language, the dream of a French evasion as a means of remaining Russian (but of the type of European Russianness of which Pushkin had been the first incarnation) materialized with the writing in French of the first autobiographical narrative in Nabokov’s career, “Mademoiselle O,” which inverts the problematic figure of the Russian émigré to sound its depths, its universality and its creative potency.

“MADEMOISELLE O”: A NEW DISTRIBUTION OF THE PERCEPTIBLE

³⁰ “Vladimir Nabokoff Sirine, l’amoureux de la vie,” *Le Mois* (June 1931), 141–42.

³¹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 36.

³² “Vladimir Nabokoff Sirine, l’amoureux de la vie,” 142.

At this point in Nabokov's career, France was still an amiable country that he admired very much: even before he settled in France, the series of readings during the three trips he made to Paris in 1932, 1936 and 1937 already attested to the gradual growth of his French reading public. His novels began to be published regularly: following *La Course du Fou* (the first translation of *Zashchita Luzhina*) and *Chambre obscure* (*Kamera Obskura*), both published in 1934, there came in 1935 the French publication of *L'Agnet* (the first translation of *Soglyadataj*). Of the three texts that Nabokov penned directly in French, I will focus on "Mademoiselle O," published in 1936. Although this work appears to flip our problem on its head—Nabokov painting the picture of a French émigré in the long-lost Russia of his childhood—I share the opinion of J. Edwin Rivers, who argues that this is "the only text in the sequence where Nabokov speaks directly about his own exile."³³ Likewise, I agree with John Burt Foster when he suggests that this pivotal text signifies "a decisive new step in the formation of his European identity."³⁴ The latter's importance for Nabokov — who called it "the cornerstone"³⁵ of his autobiography — can be measured by two significant traits: the incessant return of the character Mademoiselle, which appeared for the first time in 1925 in a short story entitled "Easter Rain,"³⁶ and the numerous rewritings and translations of this hybrid text, hesitating between fiction and autobiography.³⁷ I will argue that at the very moment when Nabokov sought to depict a French legacy intimately linked to his Russian identity³⁸ by writing a text that is testing the hypothesis of assimilation to French literature (a hypothesis that might save him from the threat of the existential disintegration of identity that bore down upon his work and his being with the attempts to banish him from the mainstream of great Russian literature), the goal pursued here—

³³ J. Edwin Rivers, "Alone in the void: 'Mademoiselle O'," in *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Steven Kellman and Irving Malin (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 101.

³⁴ John Burt Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 111.

³⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, "Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited," in *Novels and Memoirs, 1941–1951*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 362.

³⁶ According to Rivers, "no one else from his past, not even his beloved father, makes an equal number of 'real' and fictional appearances in his work" (Rivers, 100). For a study of the many versions of "Mademoiselle" in Nabokov's oeuvre, see Rivers, "Alone in the void: 'Mademoiselle O,'" 95–100.

³⁷ On the hybrid nature of "Mademoiselle," see Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*, 110–129, and Maurice Couturier, *La Figure de l'auteur* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 224–28.

³⁸ Let us here recall the late Wladimir Troubetzkoy's opinion, according to which "above and beyond his domestic Anglomania, his Russian heritage, Nabokov's national heritage, is Franco-Russian"; "French had already promoted the young Nabokov's consciousness of being Russian [...], Franco-Russian culture bringing him back to that real Russia from which English culture caused him to diverge." In Wladimir Troubetzkoy, "Vladimir Nabokov et le bilinguisme culturel," in *Études russes: mélanges offerts au professeur Louis Allain*, ed. Irina Fougeron (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1996), 132.

“saving what remained of the image”³⁹ of his schoolteacher and protecting it from the wrath of his literary art, where it would ultimately fade away—makes this unusual French text a tale of resistance against the cannibalism of fiction which swallows the real person, and a product of his revolt as a man against the artist. French is indeed, here, the language of memory and origins, as well as the primary medium of the autobiographical project to come – which will consist in “saving the living as well as the dead from oblivion by the speech of remembrance, but also saving the living author from disintegration caused by the ‘cannibalism’ of his fiction.”⁴⁰

In “Mademoiselle O,” Nabokov draws the pathetic portrait of a young woman of French origin who has immigrated to Russia out of necessity and is now transplanted into a hostile environment, threatening her vitality and very identity. Frightened, unable to learn the language, incapable of assimilating, and focused inwards on her memories, Mademoiselle is at risk of becoming one of those spectral émigrés, devoid of future or asylum: precisely the kind of fate Nabokov refused to embody—but could have, had he not been given the chance to receive a cosmopolitan and multilingual education, thanks in part to Mademoiselle. The proof of this felicitous opportunity is what Nabokov sought to embody with the French text of “Mademoiselle O.”

Nevertheless, I do not share Rivers’ reasoning that implicitly equates Mademoiselle with Nabokov, in a pastiche of Flaubert.⁴¹ It is certain that the three years Nabokov spent in France showed him that this country was not some sort of Promised Land, but that in fact he was living in another kind of exile. The disfigured homeland of Flaubert and Proust began, in 1934, to eye the U.S.S.R. and to terrorize literature (“La terreur dans les lettres” [“Terror in Literature”] was the subtitle of Jean Paulhan’s *Fleurs de Tarbes* [*Flowers of Tarbes*], published in 1936 in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*). The new mindset in France caused young writers to veer towards political engagement, becoming “the novices of 1930, worried, stressed, excessive and willing to carry forth ‘messages’.”⁴² Once the first blush of infatuation with Parisian literary circles was past, the reality was quite clear, according to Véra Nabokov: “There were no opportunities for a

³⁹ Nabokov, “Mademoiselle O,” 8.

⁴⁰ Jean-Claude Lanne, “L’autobiographie chez Vladimir Nabokov : Poétique et Problématique,” in *Vladimir Nabokov dans le miroir du XX^e siècle*, ed. Nora Bukhs. *Revue des Études slaves* 72 nos. 3–4 (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 2000), 412.

⁴¹ Rivers, “Alone in the void: ‘Mademoiselle O’,” 103.

⁴² Maurice Nadeau, *Le Roman français depuis la guerre* (Nantes: Le Passeur-Cecofop, 1992), 18.

career for him there,” relates Andrew Field.⁴³ As Isabelle Poulin has shown, these were the hidden stakes of “Sartre’s misunderstanding” in his 1939 review of *Despair*, which indicated the full force of the existential threat posed to Nabokov by Sartre’s hypothesis of total uprootedness: that of being reduced to “an undifferentiated man, ‘decapitated’, the nightmare of every exile.”⁴⁴

Regardless, even before he faced this new French exile, Nabokov had already begun to clear the paths by which he would escape with not only émigrés, but also the survivors and the banished, whom he would take with him, “making his way [like Cincinnatus, invited to the beheading] in that direction, where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin him.”⁴⁵ For in this autobiographical narrative, regarding this question of emigration, Nabokov had already operated—and here I paraphrase Jacques Rancière—a new “distribution of the perceptible”, a new “distribution [...] of space and time, place and identity, speech and noise, the visible and the invisible”⁴⁶ which determines the very manner in which a “common world” lends itself to participation and allows individuals to have a share in its “carving up”⁴⁷.

“Me, a barbarian, a friend of Rabelais and Shakespeare,” he wrote in “Mademoiselle O,” a declaration that clearly shows what kind of redistribution was occurring in his mind. On the one hand, there were those Russian émigré writers about whom, for example, the poet Khodasevich made the following prediction: “The fate of Russian writers is to perish. Death stalks them even in this foreign land where they had hoped to hide from it.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, there were a very few writers who had understood, as Khodasevich reasoned, that in order to survive, émigré literature could not have an émigré’s passport but needed an émigré’s soul: that is to say, “to truly become an émigré,” to find “in this situation the pathos which only could give it new emotions, new ideas as well as new literary forms”—“to experience in all its depth its own tragedy.”⁴⁹ With such an assertion, Nabokov, the Russian barbarian, imagined a multilingual hereafter beyond exile and stood on the side of writers such as Rabelais and Shakespeare who had given a new language and a new form to the two major linguistic spaces of French and

⁴³ Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, 209.

⁴⁴ Isabelle Poulin, “La nausée de Nabokov et la méprise de Sartre,” in *Vladimir Nabokov et l’émigration*, ed. Nora Bukhs (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 1993), 112–13.

⁴⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 204.

⁴⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Vladislav Khodasevich, “Literatura v izgnanii” [“Literature in Exile,” 1933], *Koleblemyj Trečnožnik. Izbrannoe [The Shaken Tripod. Selected Works]*, ed. V. G. Perel’muter (Moskva: Sovetskij Pisatel’, 1991), 472.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 469.

English literature.⁵⁰

The first carving up on the distribution of the perceptible that Nabokov hoped to enact through art — a vital carving up — was to save the émigré threatened by disembodiment. In real life, the “inversed novel”⁵¹ of poor Mademoiselle, misunderstood in Russia, concludes with her return to Lake Léman, where Nabokov, now an émigré himself, reunited with her in 1924. There, the young man strove to save her from deafness by offering her an ultimately useless ear trumpet. In his short story, written after Mademoiselle’s death, it was by diving headfirst into the French language — which Mademoiselle had transmitted to him verbally and which he had thus received from her aurally — that Nabokov sought to give his schoolteacher back both flesh and voice in order to negate her disembodiment. Let us not forget that of his three languages, it was French that his ear was most inclined towards. Mademoiselle’s voice, “that nightingale’s voice that emanated from the body of an elephant,”⁵² was not the organ of speech (the French émigré could not make herself understood by Russians) but the organ of reading, “that daily customary reading, which my memory eternally repeats, during which Mademoiselle would blossom”⁵³:

What a tremendous number of volumes she read through to us, during those sun-dappled afternoons on the veranda! Her slender voice sped on and on, never weakening, without the slightest stammer or stutter... what an admirable reading machine, which seemed wholly independent of Mademoiselle’s sick bronchial tubes.⁵⁴

Maurice Couturier reasonably asks if it is not “this voice, emanating from a body full of curves [...] that initiated [...] in him the drive to write.”⁵⁵ This line of questioning is confirmed, in my opinion, by O’s poetic rhapsodizing on her name, a passage stricken from the English and Russian versions of the text:

⁵⁰ On the topic of the meaning of Nabokov’s “friendship” with Rabelais, see Isabelle Poulin, “Vladimir Nabokov ‘l’ami de Rabelais’. Enjeux d’une approche plurilingue de la littérature,” in *Kaleidoscopic Nabokov. Perspectives françaises*, ed. Lara Delage-Toriel and Monica Manolescu (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2009), 175–87.

⁵¹ Nabokov, “Mademoiselle O,” 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁵ Maurice Couturier, *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir. Lecture psychanalytique* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2004), 50.

I have just called her by her true name, for “Mademoiselle O” is by no means the abbreviation of a name beginning with O [...] but indeed the complete name: a round and naked name which, written down, appears to be unbalanced without a period to prop it up; a wheel which has come free and stands upright all on its own, ready to topple over; an rounded mouth; a world; an apple; a lake.⁵⁶

Nabokov’s insistence on saying that this is her true name should make us prick up our ears: much has already been said about the rotundity of this symbol, but in French (and this is what explains the disappearance of the poetic expansion in English and Russian versions), this O is more than the symbol of Mademoiselle’s body, it is her veritable name because its initials, M.O., make of Mademoiselle the equivalent of MOT (“word” in French, pronounced [mo]), that great torrent of words formed by the never-ending reading in which Vladimir the child, plagued by insomnia, saw an image of paradise, at the end of a passage in which Nabokov rewrites the Proustian scene of the kiss, ultimately transforming the reading of Mademoiselle into a figure of desire.⁵⁷ In this first carving up, French is both the language of escape that Mademoiselle has sensually given to the Russian child as well as the true language of the resurrection of Mademoiselle’s dead body.

The second carving up that Nabokov enacts here on the distribution of the perceptible can be expressed thusly: the book is to emigration what life is not, the “common world” where the boundaries between space, time and death are abolished. I believe that it is in “Mademoiselle O” — and not before in his œuvre (which would explain the various rewritings of this text, the reappearances of this character, the status that this text holds as the cornerstone of his autobiography and its hybrid nature which foreshadowed current forms of auto-fiction) — that art acquired for Nabokov the ability to resurrect *his* first dead: to attest both to their death and their survival, in a process which transforms art as disfiguration (when fiction devours the dead) into art as transfiguration if it produces a “plausible” image of what the dead were like, conforming to the same process of transfiguration that Nabokov describes in his 1937 French essay, “Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable” [“Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible”], concerning the biographical vignettes of Pushkin he proposes:

⁵⁶ “Mademoiselle O,” 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

These images are probably false, and the true Pushkin would not recognize himself in them. Yet if I inject into them a bit of the same love that I feel when reading his poems, is not what I am doing with this imaginary life somehow akin to the poet's work, if not to the poet himself?⁵⁸

“Mademoiselle O” opens with the man rebelling against the artist and concludes with an apparent paradox. Nabokov admits that he has “the strange sensation of having made her up from scratch [...]. But nevertheless she is now real because I have created her [...]”⁵⁹ Nabokov the creator claims here that he perceives a very real possibility for the dead to be transfigured via literature thanks to the creative power of this new hybrid art form, unveiled in his œuvre with “Mademoiselle O.” To repeat the Israeli writer David Grossman’s magnificent phrase, I believe that in writing “Mademoiselle O,” Nabokov discovered “that books are the unique place in the world where both the thing and the loss of it can coexist.”⁶⁰

I will conclude with the third carving up, which the writer enacts without knowing it: literature possesses a power of creation and transformation that life does not. “The life of a poet is a kind of pastiche of his art,” Nabokov wrote about Pushkin.⁶¹ Surprisingly enough, Nabokov’s life became a pastiche of his work when it offered the Russian émigré, transformed into an American citizen, the refuge of Montreux’s luxurious palace. Intrigued by Nabokov’s settling near Lake Léman, Maurice Couturier hypothesizes that “this final migration was perhaps a sort of return towards an opulent and reassuring mother, a voracious reader of fictional tales.”⁶²

To my knowledge, there is one detail in the text of “Mademoiselle O” that has not yet been analyzed. In Mademoiselle’s room,

amid the heavy darkness which the lit lamp did not manage to dissipate, the writing table vaguely drifted, but by standing on the tips of my toes, I could freely examine a number of objects that were as much part of Mademoiselle as her

⁵⁸ Vladimir Nabokoff-Sirine, “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” trans. Dmitri Nabokov. *The New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1988, 40.

⁵⁹ Nabokov, “Mademoiselle O,” 35.

⁶⁰ David Grossman, *Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 13.

⁶¹ Nabokoff-Sirine, “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” 40.

⁶² Couturier, *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir*, 51.

portliness and asthma. On the table was that mother-of-pearl penholder with at one end a little hole, through which, when drawing one's eye close enough to brush it with the lashes, one could see the Château de Chillon under an azure and pink sky, miraculously contained within this tiny space.⁶³

And yet, this penholder did not belong to Mademoiselle, but in reality belonged to Nabokov himself as a child. In addition, it was perhaps his most cherished possession, intricately linked with his first French love, Colette (in real life, Claude), whom he met in Biarritz in 1909:

Among the trivial souvenirs acquired in Biarritz before leaving, my favorite was not the small bull of black stone and not the sonorous seashell but something which now seems almost symbolic – a meerschaum penholder with a tiny peephole of crystal in its ornamental part. One held it quite close to one's eye, screwing up the other, and when one had got rid of the shimmer of one's own lashes, a miraculous photographic view of the bay and of the line of cliffs ending in a lighthouse could be seen inside.⁶⁴

The writer thus enacted a transformation that the émigré in 1936 does not yet know will come to influence his life. By borrowing the child's favorite object, the penholder-as-microcosm, then giving it to Mademoiselle and, out of concern for internal verisimilitude, by swapping Biarritz for Chillon, the man in revolt, transfigured into a creator, transformed the penholder into a symbolic link between the French schoolteacher of his Russian childhood and the writer he had become; into a spiritual link between French art and himself, preemptively including himself in the lineage of the French artists Rousseau, Hugo, Flaubert, and Courbet, who all came to the Château de Chillon to seek the spirit of freedom sung by Byron in *The Prisoner of Chillon*; and into a pragmatic link between the young lady of Lake Léman, an émigré in Russia whose death elicited an evocation of the Baudelairean Swan in the text, as well as the Russian émigré settled on the shores of Lake Léman who, peering down from the overhanging balcony of his suite in the "Le Cygne" wing of Montreux Palace, could contemplate the Château de Chillon on his left

⁶³ Nabokov, "Mademoiselle O," 21.

⁶⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, "First Love," in *Nabokov's Dozen: a Collection of Thirteen Stories* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), 64.

and declare to a journalist in 1966: “I am a very non-typical émigré who doubts that a typical émigré exists.”⁶⁵

“I am still standing,” Paul Celan wrote on March 6, 1970, to the last love of his life, Ilana Shmueli.⁶⁶ But it would not be for long: during the night of April 19, 1970, the poet threw himself into the Seine. “Standing” until the very end — and even beyond that, in the hereafter of art — was, I believe, a point of pride for Nabokov. In the course of his emigration, however, he witnessed the disappearance of loved ones from his Russian past: Mademoiselle, but also his father, killed in 1922 by “the bullets of two Russian fascists,”⁶⁷ his mother, who perished of distress, and his brother Sergei, who disappeared into a Nazi camp.

Despite his pain and sorrow, Vladimir Nabokov always managed to remain standing, a “lover of life”, or a “messenger of joy,”⁶⁸ in the guise of a Russian child chasing butterflies with whom a young, still insouciant German woman crossed paths and whom her son, the painter Max Ferber, discovered in her memoirs: a fragile vision of happiness. Even so, seeking to escape the depression which haunted him in the Montreux Palace, as he had climbed to the top of Le Grammont — which he had already ascended in 1936 as a child with his father — Max Ferber found himself unable to bear the immutability of the landscape surrounding Lake Léman, which was almost unchanged since he had first seen it with his father (who had disappeared in 1941, with the mother’s painter, into a Nazi Camp). Yet, just as the painter was thinking about throwing himself into the void, he was suddenly saved from suicide by “a sixty year-old man holding a large butterfly net of white gauze”⁶⁹: the Russian child glimpsed by his mother. For W. G. Sebald, the figure of Vladimir Nabokov is not only erected as the last defense against the engulfing void: it is erected against those who tried to efface men, women and children, the banished and the émigrés, and also to erase the traces of this eradication – the butterfly-man

⁶⁵ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 162.

⁶⁶ Paul Celan and Ilana Shmueli, *Correspondance*, trans. into French from German by Bertrand Badiou (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 144.

⁶⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 524. This is *not* a mistake on Nabokov’s part. Concerning the ideological origins of Nazism, the historian Walter Laqueur has indeed shown what role played the ideas of the Black Hundreds imported into Germany starting in 1918 by their Russian émigré disciples, whom the two assassins of Vladimir Dmitrievič Nabokov used to frequent. Hence Fëdor Viktorovič Vinberg, an ex-colonel in the Tsar’s army, who became a writer and philosopher in Berlin and was presumed to have ordered the assassination attempt of Milyukov, which resulted in the murder of Nabokov’s father, was indeed the “true precursor of the Final Solution”, according to the English historian in his work *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 36.

⁶⁸ W. G. Sebald, “Max Ferber,” *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1996), 214.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

embodies the impossibility of expunging the link, however tenuous it might be, between a son who was an escaped émigré and his effaced mother. It is a beautiful homage to what I believe to be one of the essential truths of Nabokov's art.

Translated by Sarah-Louise Raillard

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