Framing Nabokov:
Modernism, Multiculturalism, World Literature

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Notoriously resistant to being contextualized, Nabokov would probably have regarded all three of the cross-cultural terms in my subtitle as misleading simplifications or even distortions? —as frames not in the honorific sense of adding luster to his career but in the negative one of deliberate falsification. Yet in fact are they any more misleading than the widely used epithets "Russian" and "American," which in effect extend the two main languages in which he wrote into larger claims of cultural identity? After briefly considering the annotation versus interpretation issue as applied to Nabokov's affiliations with international modernism, this paper will examine these two more recent attempts to place him in cross-cultural frameworks. Neither multiculturalism nor world literature is rooted as explicitly as modernism in Nabokov's own presentation of his work, nor is their definition as firmly established. It is doubtful, for example, that either term means quite the same thing in the United States and Europe. But in recent years, apart from the commentary surrounding the *Lolita* anniversary, the reception that Nabokov has received in the U.S. in such venues as book reviews, literature anthologies, and op-ed pieces suggests an attempt to see him in one of these two ways. Can either attempt be justified or even amplified?

1.

Let me come clean right away on the topic of annotation versus interpretation: if forced to choose, I would strongly favor interpretation. "Just the facts," without some broader framework of meaning, leave me dissatisfied. An exercise that I've devised for a course on research methods captures my attitude. Students are asked

examine the dozens of variants listed in the Norton edition of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, pick the five that most challenged or confirmed their understanding of that story, and write a coherent essay explaining why. My goal is to get them to engage more thoughtfully with masses of data, and, as they seek to formulate an interesting and compelling thesis, to learn by practice that research in the humanities requires an active, imaginative involvement in the material at hand. It cannot mean a quasi-scientific emphasis on verification and objectivity alone, though these more passive or receptive approaches to research certainly have their place. The words of Roland Barthes, that provocative member of our excellent host and editor's dissertation committee, still ring true, that "Lire cependant n'est pas un geste parasite, le complément réactif d'une écriture que nous parons de tous les prestiges de la création et de l'antériorité."[1] When Barthes goes on to affirm that such reading must be considered "un travail," what he means by "travail" is an act of interpretation, which by nature possesses its own creative dimension.

The language just cited comes from *S/Z*, Barthes's famous, perhaps notorious commentary on Balzac's short story "Sarrasine," where the critic outperforms the writer in a proportion of almost seven pages to every one of text. At this point Nabokovians no doubt recall, perhaps with a dose of *Schadenfreude*, Charles Kinbote's handling of John Shade's poem, in an almost identical ratio. At first this association must strike a jarring note, for it highlights how greatly Nabokov differs from Barthes on the issue of free play in literary interpretation–or, to use a phrase better attuned to Nabokov's distaste for overly bold reading methods, on the role of "critical license." Yet before we let *Pale Fire* overrule *S/Z* on the issue of interpretation's proper role, let us consider: can we be sure that Nabokov advocates rejecting everything in Kinbote's lepidopteral transformation from loyal and admiring annotator to megalomaniacal interpreter? Doesn't Shade himself, after all, clearly demonstrate sympathy for anyone who, like

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1 Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 15; in English: "reading is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority" and "a form of work," in *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, pref. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 10.

his future editor, "deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention"?[2]

Before dismissing even this statement as a self-serving intrusion by Kinbote, we need to allow for a second set of affinities between *S/Z* and Nabokov. Given that Pushkin was Balzac's exact contemporary (both authors were born in 1799) and also that Pushkin had nearly finished work on *Eugene Onegin* when "Sarrasine" appeared in 1830, Nabokov's *Onegin* translation turns out to inhabit the same chronological niche as *S/Z*. There are also several more substantial correspondences. In neither work is the high proportion of commentary to text intended as a learned joke, but instead represents the exuberant tribute of two brilliant readers to literature's expressive richness. Then, too, just as some of Barthes's asides on Balzac can be primarily informative, so do comments surface among Nabokov's monumental array of notes that are dazzlingly interpretive. Consider the delight with which he analyzes the deftly modulated "themes" and daringly acrobatic digressions in Book I of the *Onegin*, or his admiration for the suggestiveness and originality of the imagery in Stanzas 36 and 37 of Book VIII, the ones that describe Onegin's reveries in the winter months after he has written his own letters to Tatyana.[3]

In thus balancing *S/Z*'s interpretive euphoria against both the sardonic brio of *Pale Fire* and the devoted attentiveness of the *Onegin* commentary, we are in a position to appreciate more fully the depth of Nabokov's ambivalence toward the impulse to interpret. In its unavoidably creative aspect this impulse runs the Kinbotian risk of utter delusion, yet if well-attuned to its subject it can provide powerful new insights into texts we thought we already knew. It is this ambivalence that, by putting "framing" first in my title, I wanted both to emphasize and to acknowledge. Ideally a frame serves to enhance and bring out the significance of the picture that it surrounds, but it can also distort and misrepresent–witness the colloquial expression "to frame someone," meaning to manipulate evidence in such a way as

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2 Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962; rpt. New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 238.

3 Vladimir Nabokov, trans. and commentary, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse* by Alexandr Pushkin (1964; rev. ed. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1971) Vol. II, pp. 108, 115; Vol. III, pp. 227-29.

to convict people of crimes that they did not commit. Such ambivalence can certainly arise in the case of interpretations that posit some sort of cultural context, like the ones that this paper will consider, first in touching briefly on modernism and then in examining multiculturalism and world literature in greater detail. Assertions involving any one of these three issues certainly could frame works and authors in ways that might be illuminating at times but at other times would be misleading. Even though cultural contextualization is not (in Nabokov's practice if not in his opinions[4]) as taboo as Freudian, Marxist, or myth-oriented approaches, neither does it often feature the careful scrutiny of concrete detail, stylistic tone, or literary technique that he insisted upon so strenuously. So as we set forth on this essay's particular interpretive project, I will proceed with a caution that registers Nabokov's own sense of ambivalence. I plan to draw attention to suggestive qualifications and details in his formulations while viewing both his own generalizations and such grand contextualizing terms as multiculturalism or world literature with a wary critical eye.

In its concern with cultural contexts, most Nabokov scholarship works on the assumption that he is properly read as a Russian or American author. This approach in effect elevates one of the two languages in which he did most of his writing into a marker of cultural identity. It would be absurd to deny the value of such approaches; but if they illuminate major *aspects* of Nabokov's identity and heritage, they at most give lip service to one of his most striking accomplishments. I refer to the cross-cultural adaptability that accounts for his remarkable success in moving among different literary contexts throughout his long career. Much of my own research on Nabokov, of course, has focused on how this adaptability became manifest in the strategies that he devised for affiliating with modernism as an international, multilingual literary movement.[5] One could argue that much of what I examined in this research was data suitable for annotation. Who is the

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4 For example, the index to Nabokov's *Onegin* translation cites fourteen references to romanticism in the commentary, seven to classicism, and five to "pseudoclassicism."

5 See especially my *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1993) and "Nabokov and Modernism," *The Cambridge Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Julian Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2005), pp. 85-100.

writer mentioned in this passage, what situation in which novel is being echoed in this paragraph, who has been pilloried in this ingenious witticism? But beyond the factual answers to these questions, I wanted to understand how all these intertextual markers fit together to suggest an evolving cross-cultural perspective on early twentieth-century modernism. For what made Nabokov so unique and strikingly significant when framed in this way was his self-consciously polemical stance as an alternative to canonical English-language definitions of that movement, especially ones influenced by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. The echoes, allusions, and parodies that point to an array of nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors, models, or paths to avoid became truly interesting when, after being recognized and identified as factual data, they were *interpreted* in relation to each other. The overarching question, in light of various developments in Russian and French, English and German, and even Italian literature and thought, became "How do all these benchmarks add up? What alternative map of modernism has this exceptionally well-placed author laid out for us?"

2.

In this essay, however, I mean to focus on two other cross-cultural frameworks for measuring Nabokov's significance, ones that (at least in my part of the world) have become steadily more important since our last meeting here in Nice. I refer to his possible contribution to multiculturalism and to the stature he might assume within world literature, both of them issues that rely on complex terms with shifting meanings in any given place, not to mention their differing implications elsewhere in the world. The first term, in popular American usage at least, can often sound like a polite or coded term for racial difference; thus the "multicultural office" at the New England college that my daughter is attending held a welcoming reception for what it called "students of color." An alternative term that seems to be gaining ground is "diversity," which assumes that factors like native languages other than English, religions beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition, or continents of origin outside Europe or North America can have just as much importance as race in setting the criteria for cultural variety.

In a somewhat general way Nabokov can be aligned with these developments, as may be suggested by considering two examples from his writings, one of them Russian in subject-matter and the other American. In *Speak, Memory*, when he looks back at his boyhood education, Nabokov starts by imagining his father's apparent policy in choosing tutors, based "upon the ingenious idea of engaging each time a representative of another class or race, so as to expose us to all the winds that swept over the Russian Empire."[6] The series of vignettes that follows includes the son of an orthodox priest, a Ukrainian, a Lett, a Pole, and a vaguely aristocratic young man identified as Volgin; but the chapter pays much more attention to Lenski, described as "a Lutheran of Jewish extraction."[7] In light of today's multiculturalism in the United States, we might question whether, in singling out "race" and "class," Nabokov has chosen the best general terms for the kinds of cultural variety mentioned in this list. These terms are in fact almost mandatory in contemporary cultural studies, but Nabokov's actual examples correspond to "ethnic identity" better than to "race," and by the same token he gives religious affiliation as much importance as class. Later in the 1950s, however, after Nabokov had learned how controversial *Lolita* could seem to American publishers, he could remark, with race now clearly in his sights, that an equally taboo theme for his novel would have been "a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren."[8]

Upon reflection, however, neither of these examples, for all their vivid rhetoric, really dovetails with what multiculturalism means in common parlance today. Beyond even the relative importance to be given to race, religion, or language, or to Nabokov's emphasis in his Russian memories on class and ethnic identity, the word now tends to summon up *groups* of people with differing heritages, where each person belongs to one specific heritage and each heritage is distinct from the others. The result is that no individual may be considered multicultural in him- or herself. Yet it is precisely this situation of

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6 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1967; rpt. New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 153.

7 *Speak, Memory*, p. 159.

8 Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," *Lolita* (1955; rpt. New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 314

multiple cultural traditions at work within a single person that Nabokov's two examples end up bringing to our attention. In the autobiography, after all, it is Nabokov himself and his brother who, by virtue of having been exposed as students to "all the winds" of imperial Russia's many cultures, have presumably absorbed that diversity to some extent. In addition, it is the similarly diverse Lenski, "the Lutheran of Jewish extraction," to whom Nabokov devotes far more attention than to his other tutors. By the same token, in the comment on *Lolita*, the black-white marriage that brings together what a multiculturalist might define as two utterly distinct traditions leads, as Nabokov fleshes out his deliberately provocative example, to "lots of children and grandchildren," in each of whom these traditions (and potentially others as well) would mingle in incalculable ways. At this juncture, of course, Nabokov must have been thinking of Pushkin and his African great-grandfather as a telling case in point. More than allowing for a multicultural array of groups within a society, then, Nabokov chooses to zero in on the cultural multiplicity that can inhere in individuals.

In taking this position, of course, Nabokov spoke with the authority of personal experience. As one key instance of how this multiplicity became manifest in his own life, he could point to the complex compositional history of his autobiography, which epitomized his struggle with literary bilingualism (though actually, in the passage I am about to cite, he does not take "Mademoiselle O" and the book's original French inspiration into account). Thus the "Foreword" to the final edition of *Speak, Memory* can evoke the "diabolical" intricacy of what Nabokov calls the "re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place."[9] Beyond the light it casts on Nabokov's sense of himself, the emphasis in this passage on language over race also anticipates a major shift in American national awareness of sharp divisions in group identity. I am referring to the extent to which, since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, an Anglo-Hispanic dichotomy has achieved a prominence that rivals the black/white one. Even in the early 1990s, when Latin American immigration had not yet reached today's much-discussed level, Nabokov could be invoked in a *Time* magazine editorial as a model for sophistication about language, for a

9 *Speak, Memory*, p. 12.

linguistic multiculturalism so to speak, that could counteract the insensitivities of English-only advocates.[10] Still, despite Nabokov's mainly bilingual career as a novelist, which may well appear more impressive in the United States than in less anxiously monolingual parts of the world, this well-meant observation elided the distinction between high literacy and everyday competence. An achievement that Nabokov himself described as "diabolical" in its difficulty should not be considered all that relevant to the more routine social, economic, and educational controversies over the merits of English versus Spanish to be met, for example, in today's Miami or Los Angeles.

Yet despite this mismatch between Nabokov's multilingualism and the language debates associated with multiculturalism, I would assert that Nabokov has had a certain impact in furthering cultural diversity in the American literary curriculum. The content of *Speak, Memory* alone, in presenting so vividly the Russian background of an author who succeeded in becoming both an American bestseller and a respected novelist's novelist, had to have a significant exemplary force. Although the rubric "multi-ethnic literatures of the United States" does not, to my knowledge, include a special slot for Russian émigrés,[11] I do have an anecdote to support this point. In the early 1970s, when the idea of multi-ethnic American literature had barely gained any academic respectability, I joined the Stanford English department shortly after Alfred Appel had left for Northwestern. At that point there were two faculty members who regularly taught something by Nabokov: Scott Momaday, who included *Speak, Memory* in an autobiography course, and Arturo Islas, who assigned *Lolita* in a survey of twentieth-century American fiction. Momaday, of course, was already well-known as the first native American to win a Pulitzer Prize, and by now is honored as the pathbreaker for the rich

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10 Even after much research, I have been unable to locate the editorial, but believe that it was connected to the newsmagazine's special issue on multiculturalism, which appeared with the title *A New Face of America*. See *Time*, Vol. 142, No. 21 (November 1993). The magazine has often given favorable attention to Nabokov, most notably in 1965 when it reprinted *Bend Sinister* for the Time Reading Program.

11 For the term "multi-ethnic literatures of the United States," see especially the scholarly organization with that name and its use of the term as an acronym in its scholarly journal *MELUS*.

outpouring of contemporary native American writing.[12] Islas, just in the past few years, seems to be attaining the same stature in the area of Chicano or Mexican-American border writing.[13] Obviously Nabokov cannot be credited with having inspired either author, but from their eagerness to teach his books it seems just as clear that his example could hardly have been a discouraging one. Despite his major differences from Momaday or Islas in background and experience, there must have been important core affinities, perhaps amounting to the shock of recognition that "if he could do it, I can do it too." Even if Momaday's and Islas's books are often taken as exemplars of a particular type of ethnic literature, that doesn't mean that they couldn't admire and learn from Nabokov as a writer who came to American literature, like them, from outside.

Yet finally, to return to the key point, Nabokov's role vis-a-vis multiculturalism goes well beyond the success story of a hyphenated American. In *Speak, Memory*, over and above the information that the book provides about his life, its agile, high-spirited modulations of topic and tone give voice to a rich and fascinating interweaving of multiple influences – French and English as well as Russian, visual as well as verbal, scientific as well as poetic, and more besides. It is in this demonstration of how widely varied cultural strands can flourish within a unique individual and in the zest with which the autobiography *enacts* this multiplicity that Nabokov contributes the most subtly and provocatively to debates and discussions of multiculturalism.

3.

World literature, my other emergent cross-cultural issue, might be all-too-hastily defined as multiculturalism globalized, and in one of its

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12 For example, a widely used anthology of American literature can comment on Momaday's role as follows, "What some scholars call the 'Native American Renaissance' is usually said to have begun with the publication of *House Made of Dawn* in 1968 and its reception of the Pulitzer Prize the following year." See Nina Baym et al, eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 2003), Vol. E, p. 2321.

13 For indications of Islas's growing importance, see Frederick Luis Aldama, *Dancing with Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2005). Examples of his approach to *Lolita* appear on pages 48-49, 94-95, 147, and 155.

most widely discussed aspects it is just that. As a curricular initiative, it is often promoted as one useful way of ensuring that students acquire the broader awareness of the world's peoples and cultures that current economic circumstances would seem to mandate. Taken too literally, of course, such an approach runs the risk of sacrificing literature, in the sense of richly expressive structures of language, for the sake of information about the world. This is not the vision of world literature that Nabokov would want to be identified with. We all know how witheringly contemptuous he was of the kinds of fiction that embrace sociological generalities and issues of burning public interest. But when conceived more broadly and flexibly, world literature can mean works from elsewhere, read either in translation or in non-domestic versions of one's native language, which enlarge one's sense of human possibility, add detail and texture to one's inner map of geographical assumptions, and (above all) nourish one's imagination in new and valuable ways. Obviously one's own literature can do much to fulfill these goals, but arguably world literature can do it even better. Reading works in translation of course does entail some loss in linguistic and cultural nuance, even a drastic loss in the case of poetry. But balancing that loss is a gain in widened horizons; and in any case no advocate of world literature would seriously maintain that people should stop reading their own literature, just that they stop reading it exclusively.

Considered in this more open spirit, world literature does offer a suitable context for measuring Nabokov's significance in at least four ways. The most obvious approach is the one that emphasizes his career as a multilingual, transnational author, one who underwent exile not once but several times. This is the way that Nabokov is normally represented in my country's current spate of world literature anthologies, where if included at all he is categorized with labels like "Writing Across Boundaries" or "Cosmopolitan Exiles."[14] The text of choice is not a work of fiction, however, but "An Evening of Russian

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14 These two labels appear in Mary Ann Caws and Christopher Prendergast, eds., *The HarperCollins World Reader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) and in David Damrosch, ed., *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (New York: Longman, 2004). Nabokov does not figure at all in two other recent anthologies Sarah Lawall, ed., *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (New York: Norton, 2004) and Peter Davis et al., eds., *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003).

Poetry," and in that guise Nabokov appears alongside figures like Naipaul, Milosz, Rushdie, Borges, Walcott, and Heaney. This link between exile and world literature acquires a deeper basis in words first cited by Erich Auerbach, then popularized by Edward Said, both well-known scholars who were themselves exiles and who had interests in world literature. Citing the medieval monk Hugo of St. Victor, they both emphasized how essential the experience of exile (which should be understood in a metaphoric as well as a literal sense) was for any writer. Through exile writers, and for that matter people in general, can grow imaginatively and so achieve an enlarged outlook better attuned to the world as a whole: "It is therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about in visible and transitory things…"[15] Without a doubt, Nabokov became a seasoned adept in this discipline of "changing about"; and he also clearly recognized, when he identified his exilic loss of place with "a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood,"[16] that his experiences in being uprooted needed to be understood as a special, heightened confrontation with the general transitoriness of things.

Some contemporary critics, in noting Nabokov's special love for Russian, French, and English literature, might now accuse him of "Eurocentrism." But as we know, the horizons of his imagination actually extended even further than Hugo's pre-Copernican ones, involving as they did the intuitive sense of "cosmic synchronization" that he mentions in recalling the composition of his first poem.[17] From the standpoint of world literature, however, this dazzling expansion of consciousness out into the universe at large would seem to involve, as its dark underside, an overly hasty disregard for much of the world. Even Nabokovians will have to admit that if possession of a "global outlook" is held to be the standard, their author does better as an entomologist than as a reader or writer. Still, "Eurocentric" as a pejorative label appears manifestly unfair, first on biographical grounds in light of Nabokov's stateless predicament from 1919 to 1940 during his first sojourn in Europe, then culturally given the oversimplification of aligning Russian literature smoothly and

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15 Cited in Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 335.
16 *Speak, Memory*, p. 73.
17 *Speak, Memory*, p. 218.

unproblematically with the Western traditions of the French and the English. Nabokov's strong distrust of centers, as shown for example in his preference as a soccer player for "the goalie's eccentric art" or in his fondness for spirals seen as circles that have "ceased to be vicious," suggests that "Euro-eccentric" might be a better formula for his cultural posture.[18] In a broader spirit, this resistance to fixed centers explains the guiding principle of his autobiography, as expressed in an initial choice of title, *The Anthemion*. In Nabokov's gloss, this rarely used word should be taken to mean "a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters."[19] Beyond its direct relevance as an image for Nabokov's life, this emblem has, I would suggest, important cross-cultural resonances. Not only do the "expanding clusters" correspond to Russian literature's off-center relationship to the West, as already noted; but, if we enlarge on the notion of interlacement, the emblem could prove fruitful for envisioning world literature itself as a complex intermingling of varied expressive traditions.

Secondly, since any meaningful exposure to literature from many parts of the world must depend on translation, Nabokov's exceptional qualifications and wide experience in this area should give him special authority. If his translations have been controversial at times, still it is significant that the first words in the valuable *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, preceding even the obligatory allusion to Goethe's seminal ideal of *Weltliteratur*, should be "Pushkin, according to Vladimir Nabokov…"[20] However, Nabokov's

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18 *Speak, Memory*, pp. 267, 275. For a more detailed discussion of centers and eccentricity in Nabokov, see my article "Eccentric Modernism: Nabokov and Yeats," in *Nabokov's World, Volume II: Reading Nabokov*, Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillian, and Priscilla Meyer, eds. (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan/Palgrave), pp. 141-55.

19 *Speak, Memory*, p. 11. A more suggestive and elaborate version of these images appears at the end of Chapter 7, which describes Nabokov's last boyhood meeting with his first love Colette in a Parisian park. In a passage where circles dissolve into spirals only to culminate with the evocation of an anthemion, she is shown pushing a hoop round and round a circular fountain. Then a detail in her clothing reminds the boy of "the rainbow spiral in a glass marble," and finally the path on which Colette is running turns out to be itself surrounded by "the interlaced arches of its low looped fence" (p. 152).

20 Peter France, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (New York: Oxford U P, 2000), p. xix.

goal in this major effort as a translator did not really involve the creation of an English version of *Eugene Onegin* that would be suitable for world literature anthologies. It was, instead, to give English-speaking students of Russian a shortcut to reading Pushkin in the original before they had mastered the necessary vocabulary. They would then be in a position to appreciate such untranslatable items in the work as rhyme, rhythm, sound patterns, and word order, without the tedium of flipping through a Russian-English dictionary or the challenge of trying to discriminate among possible meanings. As a contribution to world literature, Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* aims above all at affirming Pushkin's status as a world-class author; the poetic richness of this masterpiece would be more widely appreciated once it became more readily accessible to readers who had learned at least a moderate amount of Russian. Nabokov's effort has succeeded to the extent that world literature anthologies in the United States now do regularly include Pushkin, though mainly in shorter pieces like "The Queen of Spades" or "The Bronze Horseman."[21] However, when it comes to long poetic works poised between neoclassical and romantic modes, Goethe's *Faust* still trumps *Eugene Onegin* as *Weltliteratur*. And if Nabokov's ulterior motive was to clear the way for Pushkin to supplant Dostoevsky on short lists of global greats, no such revaluation of the canon has yet occurred.

In the two instances considered so far, Nabokov's relevance for world literature has gained some recognition, but his verdict on the possibility of a sufficiently accurate circulation worldwide of the world's best literary works has clearly been guarded. In part, that is because his focus has been on poetry, and on the obstacles, not just in theory but in the painful details of actual practice, to any reasonable transfer of one language's expressive resources into another. Yet Nabokov's penchant for loopholes is in evidence here as well. He can write a poem in English mourning the loss of his fluency in Russian,

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21 Pushkin did not appear at all in the *HarperCollins World Reader*. He is represented by "The Bronze Horseman" in *The Bedford Anthology*, by "The Queen of Spades" in *The Norton Anthology*, and by "The Bronze Horseman," a selection from Chapter I of *Eugene Onegin*, and the lyric "I Visited Again" in *The Longman Anthology*. The first part of Goethe's *Faust* appears, with a few minor deletions, in all of the last three anthologies. Earlier editions of the *Norton* from the 1960s and 1970s did, however, include selections from *Eugene Onegin*, perhaps in response to Nabokov's still recent translation.

yet in doing so demonstrate the impressive, even strikingly innovative command of his new language that can make Nabokov's prose so exciting for native English readers. Or, despite the obstacles to making Pushkin's genius shine outside the Russian language, he can still pursue the possibility, though with the key proviso that anyone serious about world literature should be willing to learn at least something about more of the world's languages.

4.

Given Nabokov's achievements as a fiction writer, however, shouldn't his best novels or—allowing for the limits on length of any world literature anthology—at least some of his short stories be featured as world literature? My candidates would be works from the late thirties like "Spring in Fialta," "Cloud, Castle, Lake," or "The Visit to the Museum," with their startlingly abrupt, emotionally jarring, but also thought-provoking shifts in temporal, cultural, or spatial perspective. In the actual practice of today's anthologies, however, the answer has been a disappointing "No." Many of Nabokov's own favorite writers do regularly appear, like Tolstoy and Chekhov and sometimes even Lermontov among the Russians alongside Pushkin; or Flaubert, Joyce, and Kafka among the Europeans, as well as contemporaries with whom he has been linked, like Borges, Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet. Mandelshtam, Akhmatova, and Solzhenitsyn represent the fate of Russian literature under Soviet rule, in situations more desperate than Nabokov had to face; while Hitlerian evil, whose potential Nabokov recognized but luckily eluded, finds ultimate expression in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and Tadeusz Borowski's "Ladies and Gentlemen, to the Gas Chamber." Even the need to write in a language not one's own, the dilemma that seems so quintessentially Nabokovian as he faced the crisis of his émigré audience in the late thirties, now has a new, postcolonial slant. It is associated with African writers like Chinua Achebe and Mariama Bâ, who use the English or French of their nations' former rulers.

However, these choices, though they reflect the prestige of the writers mentioned in both their own cultures and abroad, correspond to world literature as it must be taught in introductory survey courses. Miniaturists like Borges and minimalists like Kafka can thrive in such venues, while Tolstoy and Joyce must be represented by stories like

"The Death of Ivan Ilyich" and "The Dead," not by narratives with the moral-psychological depth or the structural and stylistic complexity of *Anna Karenina* and *Ulysses*, or for that matter Proust. In measuring his own achievements on a scale that can accommodate major novels like these, Nabokov has suggested at least two criteria for world rank. One would be the number of languages into which his books, especially *Lolita*, have been translated, with the caveat that he has no means of knowing how faithful the translations have been.[22] One might also inquire whether the translations came into being due to his novels' intrinsic excellence or merely as a result of their notoriety, as the cover illustrations would sometimes suggest. Still, it is an initial index of Nabokov's claim to world rank that his reputation, or at least that of *Lolita*, has circulated so widely, well beyond the already significant core area of English, French, and Russian.

Another, weightier factor underlies Nabokov's claim, made while writing *Bend Sinister*, for the decisive importance of striking originality, as demonstrated by the novel's introduction of "a device never yet attempted in literature."[23] More broadly in this spirit, he upholds that "very small number" of writers who possess "a unique, dazzling gift," like Joyce, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and – a more surprising name in Nabokov's lists of this kind – Milton.[24] Elsewhere he makes it clear that Flaubert belongs in this small group, but whether Nabokov would include himself he modestly leaves open. World literature as a term to conjure with can have many implications, among them those of offering a selection of works that exemplify a broad array of the world's cultures or ones that have excited significant interest world-wide, among cultures other than the writer's own. But for Nabokov the term can only mean world-class masterpieces according to standards that give priority to vivid detail, inventive technique, and stylistic bravura. In that case the top

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22 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp. 37-38, 105.

23 Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940-1977*, Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli, eds. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989), p. 50. The implications of Nabokov's claim as it applies to his "two-world" theme have been discussed in persuasive detail by D. Barton Johnson in *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), pp. 187-205.

24 *Strong Opinions*, pp. 147, 146.

candidates among his novels would probably be *The Gift* for its richness of detail, *Lolita* for its stylistic edginess, and *Pale Fire* for its technical ingenuity. If autobiography also merits a place in world literature, then *Speak, Memory* would be a strong contender for its eloquence and gusto.

Leaving aside whether Nabokov's three criteria can hold their own among the many others proposed for world literature, how might he have reacted to the courses that are currently enlarging the purview of his own "Masterpieces of European Fiction," which in its day was itself held to be wide-ranging? In assessing these recent ventures to include works from East and South Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, I expect that Nabokov could have applauded their virtue of curiosity. But he would worry that, in needing to rely so heavily on translations, such courses could not avoid sacrificing a large part of the ecstasy that literature can inspire. Minus the linguistic immediacy required for sharpness of detail, brilliance of technique, and nuances of style, could the "aesthetic bliss" at the basis of all art for Nabokov still hope to survive? And if, when he glosses that famous phrase, art certainly begins with curiosity, it depends in the end upon ecstasy.[25]

In addition to his first-hand experience with exile and multilingualism, and beyond his role in debating translation and world-class fiction, Nabokov is also a staunch advocate for freedom of artistic expression. Here he launches an all-out defense of one essential basis for the very existence of world literature in its current, author-centered phase. When interviewed by Alvin Toffler, he described his position as "classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art."[26] In light of the stylistic complexity of so much Nabokovian language, and given as well his scrupulous avoidance of clichés, this is a statement whose force comes from its drastic reversal of everything normally seen as eloquence in this author. It is Nabokov's equivalent, as he lists the enabling principles for literary excellence, to the stark simplicity of Lear's fivefold "Never" before Cordelia's body. It is also, if we wish to account for Milton's name on his list of world-class writers, the later polyglot author's version of "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master

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25 "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," p. 315.
26 *Strong Opinions*, pp. 34-35.

spirit."[27] Even as Nabokov reiterates this "classical" defense of free expression, however, his words gain new power and true authority through the example of his career. Though never a victim like Mandelshtam or Levi, the originality, vividness, and multi-layered meaning of his writings amount to spirited acts of defiance in times when artistic freedom was disregarded, derided, or harshly denied, whether in Russia, Western Europe, or the United States. Through it all Nabokov kept writing, with remarkable persistence; and he insisted that the gift of verbal expression needed the same freedom world-wide.

Despite his aversion both to groups and to generalizations, therefore, Nabokov can only gain in stature when interpreted in light of multiculturalism and world literature, just as he does when viewed as an heir to literary modernism. As a modernist he straddles the East-West divide that for much of the twentieth century kept Western innovators from appreciating the full importance of Russian authors other than Dostoevsky, even as Nabokov pulled together the lessons of Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, and Proust and gave them his own distinctive imprint. With our two more recent topics, Nabokov demonstrates the same ability to complicate and enlarge the meaning of general categories. Beyond a multiculturalism that for all its good intentions can revive divisions among groups even while trying to heal them, he celebrates the potential for cultural multiplicity within specific persons. In stressing the diverse affiliations and allegiances within individuals, whose richness he shows in vivid detail rather than with bare markers of identity, Nabokov replaces divisive abstractions with a novelist's love for the intricate weave of human experience.

With world literature, though he clearly valued works that met his modernist standards over global inclusiveness, Nabokov's three-way devotion to Russian, French, and English showed that he was no literary Cyclops. Moreover, if world literature depends in some literal or metaphoric way upon exilic detachment from home and homeland, Nabokov was abundantly well-qualified. At least emblematically, therefore, if not in elaborated detail, the anthemion image of interlaced clusters that charted his Euro-eccentric passage from Russia across Western Europe to the United States furnishes a plausible

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27 John Milton, *Areopagitica*, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957), p.720.

schema, tested by hard experience, for readers eager to venture forth among the world's literatures. And yet, ever mindful of tensions between the literary and the global, Nabokov issues a final warning: wide-ranging curiosity and freedom of expression are fine, but readers of world literature should never forget that they are giving up the pleasures and insights of linguistic fluency for the treacherous approximations of translation.