THE EDGE OF THE FOREST AS THE EDGE OF EXILE
IN NABOKOV’S EARLY SHORT FICTION

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Interdisciplinary Student Research Symposium
The Museum of Russian Art, 21 February 2015

Given his emigration from Russia in 1919, first to Cambridge and later to Berlin in 1922, and his continual return to the topic of emigration in his writing, Vladimir Nabokov is often seen as emblematic of Russian exile writing in his multilingual maneuvering and highly referential style. Nabokov’s early short stories were written and originally published in Russian from 1921 to 1940 in a variety of émigré journals based in Berlin and Paris before publication in collections and translation to English by the author and his son Dmitri, and are, as Philip Sicker claims, “linked by the predominance of a single theme: the experience of cultural and psychological loss, most often embodied in the loss of a beloved” (254). Indeed, Nabokov “integrates himself into a transnational community of writers in imaginary exile, yet at the same time he aligns his own exile with a specifically Russian sense of homelessness” (Bethea & Frank 208).

Associated with such uprootedness is the memory of a lost homeland; as David Bethea and Siggy Frank posit in The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature, “Although far removed from their geographical homeland, the majority of Russian émigrés regarded themselves as keepers of an authentic Russian tradition and culture that was preserved and shielded from corrupting Soviet influences” (199). They argue that Nabokov, however, “soars above such petty concerns as national identity, insisting on his individuality and freedom outside geographical or linguistic borders. For Nabokov, exile is an opportunity, an enabling condition which grants him an elevated position” (206).

Backing this view of Nabokov, Hana Píchová states in her book The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov & Milan Kundera that “[t]he importance of writing and publishing as a means of personal intellectual outlet and as a means of cultural augmentation beyond the Russian borders became a topos for Nabokov” (69). One setting frequently encountered in Nabokov’s early short fiction is the forest as an environment both widely recognizable and geographically, and therefore culturally, specific. After all, “Central to imaginations of Russia as ‘ancestral homeland,’ the forest in twentieth-century Russian and Soviet culture offered—as it had in the nineteenth century—emotional security but also emotional and ethical challenge,” as Jane Costlow argues in her recent book Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest. Forests, distinct in the specificity of the flora that comprise them, serve as a physical determiner of geographic, and therefore national, location. Separated from their homelands, characters in Nabokov’s short fiction use imagined space linked to forests in order to bring themselves closer to the memory of their inaccessible homelands. Progressively over the course of Nabokov’s early writing career, the characters in his stories begin to
more effectively channel the imaginary forest in order to solve what Rachel Trousdale calls “the fundamental problem facing transnational writers: how to bring their physical surroundings and their imaginary worlds into dialogue” (38). Bringing to life imagined creatures and spaces outside its national borders, the Russian forest serves in several of these stories as a way for the narrator to reconcile the hybridity present in the émigré identity.

Nabokov’s first short story, “The Wood-Sprite,” was published in 1921 while he was a student at Cambridge, and is narrated by an émigré “pensively penning the outline of the inkstand’s circular, quivering shadow” in an apparent attempt at writing. He begins the story saying “I, dreamer that I am, imagined someone was knocking at the door” (3). The visitor is, of course, the title character: a self-described “former Forest Elf, a mischievous sprite” (4). Remarkably, the sprite, commonly referred to as a lesший in Russian folklore, is a familiar sight to the narrator, who assures the reader “of course I knew him—perhaps had even been fond of him” (3). The sprite reminds the narrator of their time romping together “[b]ack in the old country,” and goes on to describe in great detail the destruction of the homeland from which he has been exiled (4). At the end of his story the wood sprite reaches out to the narrator and says, “My friend, soon I shall die, say something to me, tell me that you love me, a homeless phantom, come sit closer, give me your hand,” though the sprite disappears as soon as he touches the narrator’s hand (5). This quick story, much like a daydream, is quite revealing of Nabokov’s newly exiled condition, as an émigré writer, lacking any real inspiration, must dream up a fantastical creature representative of his homeland—a creature who claims, “It was we, Rus’, who were your inspiration, your unfathomable beauty, your agelong enchantment!” (Nabokov 5). The émigré, having once experienced the Russian forest firsthand, is able to recall the lost source of inspiration, ironically, by imagining the “spirit” of the forest physically embodied in the traditional folkloric form of a lesший, thereby mobilizing the forest outside the national borders uncrossable by the exiled, bringing about a pseudo-physical encounter. However, Brian Boyd comments in his biography of Nabokov that “[t]he story’s combination of the elfin and the reproachfully nostalgic cuts a trail Nabokov soon learned not to follow in his attempts to explore an irretrievable past and a world of states not our own” (180). Full recapture of the homeland in this “reproachfully nostalgic” way is impossible, as demonstrated by the disappearance of the sprite upon contact with the narrator, though he is left with the “wondrously subtle scent in the room, of birch, of humid moss,” uncertain of how “real” the encounter actually was (Nabokov 5). In his attempt to summon a physical representation of the forest he longs for, the narrator is unsuccessful—the same conditions that forced him out of Russia have irrevocably altered the environment as he remembers it, thereby making it impossible to apprehend physically.

While the narrator of “The Wood-Sprite” recalls the Russian forest via his imagination in lieu of elements of the physical reality of the woodland, in “Gods,” written in 1923, Nabokov provides the stream-of-consciousness of a Russian émigré longing for and speaking to a lost love, noting the mobility of trees. “See those lindens lining the street?” he asks; “Black boughs covered with wet green spangles. All the trees in the world are journeying somewhere.
Perpetual pilgrimage” (Nabokov 45). Conjuring such mobility, the narrator delves into an exploration of memory:

Remember, when we were on our way here, to this city, the trees traveling past the windows of our railroad car? Remember the twelve poplars conferring about how to cross the river? Earlier, still, in the Crimea, I once saw a cypress bending over an almond tree in bloom. Once upon a time the cypress had been a big, tall chimney sweep with a brush on a wire and a ladder under his arm. (Nabokov 45)

The sight of the real lindens down the street sparks the memory of trees specific not only to the journey to the lovers’ adopted land, but also to a particular Russian territory—a memory summoned by the construction of a fantasy beneath the real events. The narrator continues fictionalizing and anthropomorphising the trees: “Head over heels in love, poor fellow, with a little laundry maid, pink as almond petals. Now they have met at last, and are on their way somewhere together. Her pink apron balloons in the breeze; he bends toward her timidly, as if still worried he might get some soot on her. First-rate fable” (Nabokov 45). Observing the impossibility of restraining such a poignant force of recollection, the narrator says, “Today some lindens are passing through town. There was an attempt to restrain them. Circular fencing was erected around their trunks. But they move all the same” (Nabokov 45). In this story, Nabokov gives an imagined literal mobility to trees, but the mobility is reliant on previous individual experience—access to the Russian forest is granted only to those who have already seen it firsthand, exiles and émigrés included. Frustratingly for the narrator, the forest and trees, much like the lesiy, cannot be physically apprehended and used for their ability to fuel memory. However, Nabokov expresses this problem much more explicitly here than in “The Wood-Sprite,” in the intent to literally fence in the linden trees.

In Nabokov’s 1932 story “Perfection,” the Russian tutor Ivanov struggles to make a connection with his student David; unable to connect with David on David’s grounds (Ivanov attempts to swim in the sea but almost drowns and gets a horrid sunburn afterwards), Ivanov makes a reluctant David accompany him to a local forest in order to turn the tables. Once in the woods, Ivanov pontificates:

While admiring nature at a given locality, I cannot help thinking of countries that I shall never see. Try to imagine, David, that this is not Pomerania but a Malayan forest. Look about you: you’ll presently see the rarest of birds fly past, Prince Albert’s paradise bird, whose head is adorned with a pair of long plumes consisting of blue oriflammes. (Nabokov 344-345)

Once again, the protagonist’s memory is induced by the local flora, which provides the catalyst necessary to break out of the inhabited space into an imaginative “anywhere.” David rejects the catalyst, however, and comments with a terse “Ach, quatsch” in his native tongue, to which Ivanov replies, “In Russian you ought to say ‘erunda’,“ thereby steering his student toward the Russian sensibility required to understand such a concept. He continues:
Of course, it’s nonsense, we are not in the mountains of New Guinea. But the point is that with a bit of imagination—if, God forbid, you were someday to go blind or be imprisoned, or were merely forced to perform, in appalling poverty, some hopeless, distasteful ask, you might remember this walk we are taking today in an ordinary forest as if it had been—how shall I say?—fairy-tale ecstasy. (Nabokov 345)

Ivanov makes the argument that, given any less-opportune situation dealt an individual in his or her life (like being an exile forced to teach an unappreciative pupil), one can recall the forest to escape and to momentarily mend the gap between past and present experiences. The brief lecture grows in profundity considering Ivanov’s “dozen years of émigré life” during which he “daydreamed about the many things that he would never get to know closer,” suggesting that this tactic of fond environmentally-fueled remembrance is one all too familiar to him (Nabokov 340). Struggling with his relocation, Ivanov’s imagination in the forest serves to help him comfortably and momentarily reconcile his hybrid identity of being an émigré native to Russia. Notably, however, his imagination is able to move immediately past the sheer physicality of his environment—a skill unmastered by the earlier narrators. Whereas in “The Wood-Sprite” the narrator’s longing for his homeland causes him to imagine the embodiment of the forest he can no longer physically experience, and the narrator of “Gods” is caught in fleeting moments of recollection sparked by trees, Ivanov achieves reconciliation between his lost homeland and his adopted country by recognizing the harsh times he has endured as well as his use of imagination to escape them for a brief time. In “Perfection,” Nabokov moves past attempts at physical encounters with the old Russian forest, resorting almost entirely to imagination in the presence of a similar environment thousands of miles away from the one imagined.

The reconciliation of émigré hybridity can, perhaps, be seen most explicitly in the 1934 story “In Memory of L. I. Shigaev,” in which the narrator, a writer tormented by visions of tiny devils, which he calls “the most Russian of all hallucinations,” is taken under the wing of the recently-deceased fellow émigré Shigaev. The old bachelor is noted to have been working on a “Russian-German pocket dictionary of technical terms,” in a particularly pragmatic approach to reconciling the differences between his Russian heritage and his adopted German home of Berlin (369). Above his bed were illustrations of the Neva river and of Tsar Alexander I, acquired in “a moment of yearning for the Empire, a nostalgia he distinguished from the yearning for one’s native land” (372). The narrator notes, however, that Shigaev is also “totally indifferent to [...] what is commonly known as nature” (372). Despite this fact, the old man enjoyed making day trips to the countryside and to the woods, on which he would take the narrator. The narrator says of Shigaev, “[H]e could not tell the difference between a bee and a bumblebee, or between alder and hazel, and perceived his surroundings quite conventionally and collectively” (373). When the narrator tries to comment on “the differences between the flora around [them] and a forest in central Russia: he felt that there existed no significant difference,
and that sentimental associations alone mattered” (373). The narrator, here, displays a cognizance of the physical Russian forest, present to him only in opposition to the German forest he presently occupies. But to Shigaev, the subtle differences and similarities between Russian and German plants are unimportant, and he begins to “discourse lengthily on the international situation or tell stories about his brother Peter […] who, back in prehistoric times, drowned one summer night in the Dnieper”—all apparently instigated by the forest surrounding him (373). Shigaev does not need the concrete detail of the Russian forest to be immediately present in order to conjure up memories of his homeland—the association alone is sufficient, and imagination does the rest. So when Shigaev dies and leaves the narrator to his own devices to notice the differences between Germany and his lost homeland of Russia, the narrator cannot help but note that his life “is a perpetual good-bye to objects and people, that often do not pay the least attention to my bitter, brief, insane salutation” (Nabokov 374).

Much like the narrators of “The Wood-Sprite,” “Gods,” and “Perfection,” Shigaev is allowed access to memories of Russia via his imagination while he inhabits a space much different from the reality of the Russian forest spawning such inspiration of imagination. Speaking more generally of Russian authors and their remembrance of the forest, Jane Costlow states that “[i]n these spaces of experience and articulation, the relationship between perceiver and perceived, between memory and presence, between what is remembered and what is not known, or still-to-be-known, becomes complex and weblike, less a matter of linearity than a form of traipsing back and forth over ground that is sometimes awkward and difficult, sometimes open and clear” (14). As the émigrés in Nabokov’s fiction attempt to reconcile their identities torn between their Russian heritage and adopted cultures, they, too, find that the issue is not quite so linear and binary. They struggle to engage with the cultures in which they live while maintaining the ability to return in mind and heart to their original homes. The exiled characters live simultaneously on the edge of their own imaginary Russian forests accessible even in other countries and in the presence of unfamiliar flora, and the edge between their Russian and adopted identities and cultures.

Rachel Trousdale argues that characters in Nabokov’s later works Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle also become increasingly capable of uniting the physical and imaginary as Nabokov develops as a writer. This may mean that the progression of Nabokov’s forests becoming more flexible and imaginary over the course of his early career reflects a greater trend in his writing that continues in even his most well-known works written in the West—a residual lasting legacy of the Russian forest in its literary history.
Works Cited


