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Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* as Multicultural Autobiography

Few immigrant authors reached such a high position in the hierarchy of American writers as Vladimir Nabokov. Interestingly, though an immigrant himself, the Russian born author showed little interest in the category of "immigrant writing"; instead, he entered mainstream American literature and became one of the most highly respected and influential of twentieth century authors. The writer's multicultural background could not, of course, have failed to influence his literary output; nonetheless, as Bachman and Ifkovic insist, although the dominant theme in the works of Nabokov is the theme of exile,¹ the writer's only novel dealing specifically and directly with the nature of immigrants' displacement and acculturation is *Pnin*.

Nabokov tries to play down the role of exile in his life and writing; he argues with those authors who claim that his high position in American letters is strictly connected with his status of an exile:

The type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish is a well known biographical figure with whom I feel some affinity; but in a straighter sense, exile means to an artist only one thing — the banning of his books.²

In America, and later on, during the last 17 years of his life in Switzerland, Nabokov consciously avoided the term "immigrant," or "exile writer," emphatically calling himself "an American writer." Stressing his links with America, he explained: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England

¹ Carol Bachman and Edward Ifkovic, "Russian-American Literature" in *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature*, ed. Robert J. DiPietro and Edward Ifkovic (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1973), p. 225.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973). Hereafter to be cited parenthetically as *SO*.

where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany" (SO, 26). Nabokov elaborates:

An American writer means, in the present case, a writer who has been an American citizen for a quarter of a century. It means, moreover, that all my works appear first in America. It also means that America is the only country where I feel mentally and emotionally at home. ... My admiration for this adopted country of mine can easily survive the jolts and flaws that, indeed, are nothing in comparison to the abyss of evil in the history of Russia, not to speak of other, more exotic, countries. (SO, 131)

Nabokov refuses to be classified as a hyphenated American, or as an immigrant author, although he is of course aware of his background and its influence on his writing. "I am aware of the blend," he admits, "but even the most lucid plum pudding cannot sort out its own ingredients, especially whilst the pale fire still flickers around it" (SO, 192).

In his autobiographical writings Nabokov did indeed very little to analyze "the blend," almost completely ignoring such potentially interesting subjects as his acculturation in America or the difficulties connected with abandoning his mother tongue and becoming an American writer. His autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, leaves these subjects practically undiscussed ending as it does with Nabokov's departure for America; his letters and interviews treat them as marginal or unimportant. Consequently, while the reader learns that Nabokov's "complete switch from Russian prose to English prose was exceedingly painful" (SO, 54), he has no chance to trace the process and learn about its intricacies in any of Nabokov's writings.

The book which might have possibly developed immigrant and multicultural themes is the second volume of his autobiography, which the author intended but never managed to write. The volume was to be entitled *Speak On, Memory* or *Speak, America* and was supposed to describe "many curious things (apart from butterfly lore) — amusing happenings of Cornell and Harvard, gay tussles with publishers, ... friendship with Edmund Wilson, et cetera" (SO, 198). Whether the second installment of Nabokov's autobiography would have indeed treated the multicultural theme in any significant way, remains unknown; it would almost certainly have provided Nabokov's critics and biographers with more material to examine his complex and not too eagerly revealed links to various cultures.

Speak, Memory is not generally considered as an example of multicultural autobiography. Moreover, as happens with many self-narratives published in postwar decades, even its status as autobiography has been repeatedly questioned. That many critics question the book's generic status is not surprising. In

a time of blurring distinctions between genres and with the current popularity of critical theories questioning the existence of "self," such doubts may pertain to practically any text which claims to be autobiographical. What is puzzling, however, is the critics' reluctance to see *Speak, Memory* as a multicultural text. Most critics analyzing the volume do not concentrate on this particular feature of Nabokov's self-narrative and often do not even consider the theme of multiculturalism as important. V. Alexandrov, for example, mentions among the major themes of Nabokov's autobiography "death, life, time and eternity,"³ but fails to include such subjects as multiculturalism and exile. The multicultural character of the book is signalled — though never satisfactorily explored — by Dabney Stuart, who sees among Nabokov's major interests, the correspondence between art and exile;⁴ Albert Stone compares Nabokov's self-narrative to *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, concluding that few readers "would deny the Americanness as well as the Europeanness" in both of them.⁵ Nabokov himself does little to acknowledge the multicultural character of his autobiographical volume; in the index accompanying the book he includes such entries as baths, bicycling, dachshunds, honeysuckle, jewels, mushrooms, or soccer, while he limits the number of entries directly pertaining to his multicultural experience to only one term: "émigré life."

And yet *Speak, Memory* is an important multicultural work in several different ways. Already the history of the volume's creation and publication testify to its multicultural character. Vladimir Nabokov calls his autobiographical work "a systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections."⁶ The volume is, indeed, an "assemblage" since its constituent parts had originally been published in various periodicals as separate, self-contained units. For example, the chapter which started the volume, now the fifth chapter of the autobiography, was initially written in French and published in Paris under the title "Mademoiselle O" in 1936. The remaining chapters of Nabokov's autobiography were written and published as separate texts in various American magazines, while the final version, "An autobiography revisited," was completed after the author left America for Switzerland. Before the autobiography acquired its final 1966 shape,

³ Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 11.

⁴ Dabney Stuart, "The Novelist's Composure," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 1 (1975).

⁵ Albert Stone, "Modern American Autobiography: Texts and Transactions," in *American Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 112.

⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: A Wideview/Perigee Books, 1966), p. 9. Hereafter to be cited parenthetically.

it had been first published in a book form in 1951, under the title *Conclusive Evidence*. Two years after the publication of the first version of his autobiography, Nabokov, who felt it important to make the book available to Russian readers, translated it with the help of his wife into his native language and in 1954 published it under the title *Drugie Berega (Other Shores)*. The volume turned out to be not a mere translation of the original, but, in fact, contained various revisions and additions, including remarks on the original English language version in which Nabokov explains the nature of the introduced changes. The Russian language version also lacks an entire chapter (11) from the original edition, since the author felt that the subject of his fascination with poetry, as well as his youthful experiments in verse, both discussed in this chapter, were already known to the Russian readers through Nabokov's Russian language novel *Dar*. The final 1966 version of the book, where the addressee is again American, differs significantly from the first English language version and includes many additions introduced in the Russian version.

An Autobiography Revisited is, then, written from the new perspective of a writer who now considers himself and is considered by others not only an American writer, but also one of the major writers of the twentieth century. The new perspective changes the focus of the book, which, as J. Grayson observes, "shifts from memoir to autobiography."⁷ Nabokov himself refers to the final version of his autobiography as "re-Englising of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories" (12). This formulation best expresses the nature of the multicultural process of the book's creation.

Inevitably, in telling the American reader about his Russian childhood, Nabokov has to resort to the Russian language. In the third chapter (missing from *Drugie Berega*), for example, he describes his efforts to write his first poem. Nabokov introduces Russian words and phrases to explain the difficulties of his creative process. He also uses occasional Russian to create a more realistic background for the description of his childhood. Whenever he seems to think that the English language does not adequately reflect the meaning of an original Russian word or phrase, Nabokov also resorts to his third language, French. He does this in the fifth chapter, originally written in French, where he describes his governess whose language was for him a constant object of admiration. The autobiographer enjoys the sound of French and Russian; in the English text of his autobiography, he makes use of those two other languages of his childhood

⁷ Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 141. This change of focus is also reflected in the subtitles of the English language versions of Nabokov's autobiography. *Conclusive Evidence* and its 1951 English Edition *Speak, Memory* are both labelled on the title page "A Memoir," while the 1966 version is called "An Autobiography Revisited."

and adolescence, demonstrating his multicultural influences, hoping to pass on his aesthetic fascination with languages to his American reader.

Nabokov is always conscious of his Anglo-Saxon reader. He directly instructs his American printers to spell his Russian words with care (53), translates temperature expressed in Réaumur scale to American Fahrenheit (84), tries to explain different words and concepts (e.g. "gymnasium") which have no direct American equivalent, explains the intricacies of the Russian system of education (comparing it with the American system) (180), or demonstrates the idiosyncratic features of the Russian duel as opposed to the familiar French equivalent (189). Sometimes he even goes beyond giving mere equivalents and tries at length to familiarize his Anglo-Saxon readers with some typically Russian pleasures and pastimes, which he knows his American readers will not be able to appreciate properly. He includes a long section on mushrooms and mushroom picking, for example, explaining:

One of [my mother's] greatest pleasures in summer was the very Russian sport of *hodit' po gribi* (looking for mushrooms). ... Her main delight was in the quest, and this quest had its rules. Thus, no agarics were taken, all she picked were species belonging to the edible section of the genus *Boletus* (tawny *edulis*, brown *scaber*, red *aurantiacus*, and a few close allies), called "tube mushrooms" by some and coldly defined by mycologists as "terrestrial, fleshy, putrescent, centrally stipulate fungi." ... In classical simplicity of form, boletes differ considerably from the "true mushroom," with its preposterous gills and effete stipal ring. It is, however, to the latter, to the lowly and ugly agarics, that nations with timorous taste buds limit their knowledge and appetite, so that to the Anglo-American lay mind the aristocratic boletes are, at best, reformed toadstools. (43)

Nabokov acts here as a cultural guide to the Czarist Russia and to the exotic world of his aristocratic childhood, one who wants to be absolutely sure that his American readers not only follow the account of events from his life and his speculations on various subjects, but that they also visualize the world which fascinated Nabokov as a child and which shaped him as a multicultural writer.

Speak, Memory does not become a multicultural autobiography merely by virtue of its author mediating between the world of his exotic Russian childhood and that of his American readers. It also presents the life story of a Russian boy who leaves his country and becomes an outsider among exiles in England, Germany and France, only then earning fame as an American author. The

autobiography presents the role of exile, multilingualism and multiculturalism in shaping of an artist's mind.

Nabokov's exposure to other cultures began in his early childhood. Coming from a rich aristocratic family, Nabokov spent his childhood in Russia, surrounded by private foreign tutors and governesses who accompanied him on frequent trips to France and Germany. Writing about his care-free, opulent Russian childhood, Nabokov repeatedly mentions various multicultural influences that shaped and influenced him. With a precision of a heraldist he provides a detailed biographical description of his family's background, mentioning the fourteenth century Tartar founders of the family and his German ancestors, and also writing about his cosmopolitan uncles. Characterizing one of them, Nabokov writes that his "speech was a fastidious combination of French, English and Italian all of which he spoke with vastly more ease than he did his native tongue" (71). The Nabokov family is particularly open to other cultures. The writer's parents, though Russian patriots, are no different in this respect.

Admittedly, the Nabokovs' patriotism was a mild one, unpolluted by chauvinism or by any form of political or religious orthodoxy, and in this form it was passed on to their son. Returning from a prolonged stay abroad in France and Italy, Nabokov, a small child at that time, feels Russian enough to acquire for the first time the understanding of the word "motherland":

[The train] reached the Russian frontier. Against the background of winter, the ceremonial change of cars and engines acquired a strange new meaning. An exciting sense of *rodina*, "motherland," was for the first time organically mingled with the comfortably creaking snow, the deep footprints across it, the red gloss of the engine stack, the birch logs piled high, under their private layer of transportable snow, on the tender. (96)

Nabokov's way of thinking about Russia as his motherland does not change much as he matures. He understands the word *rodina* in purely aesthetic terms and associates it with the beauty of the Russian landscape and the charming world of his childhood. Even after many years of exile in Europe and America, Nabokov's homesickness is restricted only to some particular mental images of the Russia of his childhood and not to the whole country. Nabokov explains:

The mental image of matted grass on the Yayla, of a canyon in the Urals or of salt flats in the Aral Region, affects me nostalgically and patriotically as little, or as much as, say, Utah; but give me anything on any continent resembling the St. Petersburg countryside and my heart melts. (250)

Taught to be reasonably patriotic and at the same time open and tolerant of other cultures, young Nabokov is encouraged to speak foreign languages and learn about other cultures. His parents' conscious and steady effort eventually results in what Nabokov described in an interview as "a happy expatriation that began practically on the day of [his] birth" (SO, 218). This "expatriation" began with Nabokov's early exposure to Anglo-Saxon culture and the English language. Nabokov recalls:

The kind of Russian family to which I belonged ... had among other virtues, a traditional leaning toward the comfortable products of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Pears' Soap, tar-black when dry, topaz-like when held to the light between wet fingers, took care of one's morning bath. ... At breakfast, Golden Syrup imported from London would entwist with its glowing coils the revolving spoon from which enough of it had slithered on to a piece of Russian bread and butter. All sorts of snug, mellow things come in a steady procession from the English Shop on Nevski Avenue: fruitcakes, smelling salts, playing cards, picture puzzles, striped blazers, talcum-white tennis balls. (79)

It is not only the presence of artifacts of Anglo-Saxon culture in Nabokov's life, however, that slowly turns the boy into an expatriate. More important is his early exposure to the English language at the behest of his parents and "a bewildering sequence of English nurses and governesses" (86).

For Nabokov, English is not a foreign language which he is forced to learn methodically, at times it even becomes the language of family intimacy: English language books are read to him at bedtime by his mother. When Nabokov is old enough to read by himself, he turns to the Wild West fiction of Captain Mayne Reid, the books of James Fenimore Cooper, and to the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Nabokov quickly becomes immersed in Anglo-Saxon culture. As a young child he lives in the world of "Arthurian knights" (29); several years later, as an adolescent, he excitedly follows Wimbledon matches in the London papers with his father. His immersion in English language and culture is so complete that one day his father notices with dismay that his son "could read and write English but not Russian" (28). At the same time, one of his tutors complains to Nabokov's mother that Vladimir and his brother Sergey "were little foreigners, freaks, fops, *snobi*, 'pathologically indifferent,' ... to Goncharov, Grigorovich, Korolenko, Stanyukovich, Mamin-Sibiriyak" (160). Nabokov's "happy expatriation" brings on him additional criticism at school, where he is accused of "not conforming to [his] surroundings; of 'showing off' mainly by peppering [his] Russian papers with English and French terms, which [to him] come naturally" (185).

The expatriation Nabokov undergoes at school is soon followed by a real one in exile, from which he never has a chance to return. Nabokov's exile abroad is preceded by a short period of exile in Russia. The whole Nabokov family has to flee the Bolshevik revolution (which Nabokov calls patronizingly "that trite *deux ex machina*" [229] and seek refuge in peaceful Crimea. Abandoning the family estate and his comfortable life style, though certainly painful, is never presented in *Speak, Memory* as a major tragedy. What Nabokov describes as the main discomfort in the new situation is his separation with his first love, Tamara. The girl features prominently in the writer's autobiography; his descriptions of the couple's desperate attempts to find a secluded place where they could enjoy their intimacy prefigure the writer's later quest for a safe and comfortable refuge in exile. Describing his stay in Crimea, Nabokov recalls the moment of receiving a letter from Tamara:

Suddenly I felt all the pangs of exile. There had been the case of Pushkin, of course — Pushkin who had wandered in banishment here, among those naturalized cypresses and laurels — but though some prompting might have come from his elegies, I do not think my exaltation was a pose. Thenceforth for several years, until the writing of a novel relieved me of that fertile emotion, the loss of my country was equated for me with the loss of my love. (244-245)

The exile in the Southern part of Russia, which the Nabokov family expected to be a short-lasting episode, did not, in fact, last very long. However, since the Bolshevik revolution spread to other parts of the country, instead of coming back to his home in the north, Nabokov had to leave Russia forever and join other representatives of the Russian aristocracy who were forced to emigrate.

Unlike many of his exiled compatriots, Nabokov refuses to join the ranks of politically active opponents of the Communist regime. He has no illusions, of course, as to the nature of the new political system installed in Russia, noting that after "Lenin's gang" took over, "the Bolsheviks immediately subordinated everything to the retention of power, and a regime of bloodshed, concentration camps, and hostages entered upon its stupendous career" (241). Nabokov, however, claims that he does not consider himself as unhappy as his Russian fellow exiles. He thinks that, after all, "[c]hance has treated him kindly" (245), and refuses to mourn all the lost riches, the confiscated family estate and the bank assets that his family had in Russia. He explains to his American readers:

My old (since 1917) quarrel with the Soviet dictatorship is wholly unrelated to any question of property. My contempt for the émigré who hates "the Reds" because they "stole" his money and land is complete. The nostalgia I have been cherishing all those years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood, not sorrow for lost banknotes. (73)

Nabokov's contemptuous attitude towards other Russian émigrés and his somewhat aloof attitude towards the violent changes in the country of his birth are not surprising if one considers his attitude to history in general; the writer's autobiography contains only few references to such major historical events which took place during his life-time as the Bolshevik revolution and two World Wars. Nabokov portrays the background against which he recounts his own life in an unusually sketchy manner, treating it almost as unimportant. Tragic and violent historical events are for the writer not so much a cause for personal tragedy or for despair, as an unnecessary distraction in his artistic work.

Nabokov treats the exile which placed him in new and not altogether enjoyable circumstances in a similar way. Having to abandon Russia certainly did not make the author alter his artistic plans in any significant way. Undisturbed by adverse circumstances, Nabokov pursues his ambitions to be come a Russian writer. Looking back at the beginning of his exile, Nabokov refuses to admit that the new multicultural situation he found himself in presented him with major difficulties. However, even with his knowledge of the English language and culture, his adaptation was not an easy one. Characteristically, Nabokov does not give his readers too much information on the nature of his problems. On several occasions, however, he mentions his detachment both from the country he used to be fascinated with in his childhood and from his fellow exiles living there. Nabokov admits:

I had no interest whatsoever in the history of the place, and was quite sure that Cambridge was in no way affecting my soul, although actually it was Cambridge that supplied not only the casual frame, but also the very colors and inner rhythms for my very special Russian thoughts. (269)

Not unexpectedly, on the Cambridge football team Nabokov chooses the position of a goalie, "the lone eagle, the man of mystery, the last defender." "aloof, solitary, impassive" man, who finds teamwork "not conducive to the development of the goalie's eccentric art" (267). In exile, Nabokov often compares himself to a goalie. He writes:

I would hear in the distance, the broken sounds of the game, and think of myself as of a fabulous exotic being in an English footballer's disguise, composing verse in a tongue nobody understood about a remote country nobody knew. (268)

Nabokov's detachment was combined with a certain sense of superiority, which, from his American writer's perspective, the author finds somewhat unjustified:

As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities, we, émigrés, happened to dwell. These aborigines were to the mind's eye as flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane, and although we used their gadgets, applauded their clowns, picked their roadside plums and apples, no real communication, of the rich human sort so widespread in our own midst, existed between us and them. (276)

What particularly bothers Nabokov in exile is his physical dependence on the host nations, which, as he writes, "became painfully evident when some trashy 'visa,' some diabolical 'identity card' had to be obtained or prolonged" (276). This dependence limits the author's sense of detachment and freedom and, much to his annoyance, draws him from the world of literature, chess and butterflies to mundane matters.

Nabokov's main worry in exile, however, is of a different nature. Pursuing his ambition to become a Russian writer, Nabokov fears losing his language skills. He even admits:

My fear of losing, or corrupting, through alien influence, the only thing I had salvaged from Russia — her language — became positively morbid and considerably more harassing than the fear I was to experience two decades later of my never being able to bring my English prose anywhere close to the level of my Russian. (265)

In European exile Nabokov wants to be a Russian writer; therefore he has to work constantly on his Russian language. He contributes to émigré journals, occasionally meets and discusses literature with other Russian writers and

participates in the cultural life of Russian émigrés. This period of activity does not last long. Nabokov becomes disenchanted by the émigrés' political rather than artistic involvements. He eventually withdraws from émigré life, seriously limiting his ties with other Russian intellectuals. His isolation is so complete that it makes another writer, the exiled Russian Nobel prize winner Ivan Bunin, warn Nabokov that he "may die in dreadful pain and isolation" (286).

Nabokov, though lonely and alienated, refuses to be considered an unhappy victim of exile. In *Speak, Memory* he writes of both "gloom and glory of exile" (280); elsewhere, commenting on Edmund Wilson's statement that Nabokov's years outside Russia were full of "miseries, horrors, and handicaps," he dismisses this opinion as "mostly figments if [Wilson's] warped fancy" (SO, 218). Although Nabokov does not consider himself a victim of exile, he does not treat this period of his life as particularly enjoyable. In his autobiography, he devotes surprisingly little attention to the years spent in Europe. Significantly, one of the most memorable scenes from his European exile comes at the very end of his stay in France. Nabokov describes the port in St. Nazaire from which he sailed to America, his adopted home, thus terminating his exile:

In front of us, where a broken row of houses stood between us and the harbor, and where the eye encountered all sorts of strategems, such as pale-blue and pink underwear cakewalking on a clothesline, or a lady's bicycle and a striped cat oddly sharing a rudimentary balcony of cast iron, it was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture — Find What the Sailor Has Hidden — that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen. (309-10)

Nabokov's arrival in America which began the most creative stage in his artistic life as well as his early experiences in his adopted home are practically absent from his self-narrative, but since the book was written in America and later expanded and revised in Switzerland, it inevitably presents the perspective of an American writer. America, then, is discretely present in *Speak, Memory*, not only in the choice of the addressee but also in several other ways.

Nabokov, who as a child was familiar with England, France and Germany, and who could be plainly bored walking the streets of any European metropolis, recalls that the America he knew in his childhood was particularly exotic and mysterious. He writes, for example, about a place in Russia where he used to spend his summer vacations, recalling that "the vast expanse of misty-blue sphagnum bog, because of its mystery and remoteness, the Rukavishnikov

children had baptized America" (81). Elsewhere, he describes a fair in St. Petersburg:

with its squeaking and popping din, its wooden toys, its loud hawking of Turkish delight and Cartesian devils called *amerikan-skie zhiteli* ("American inhabitants") — minute goblins of glass riding up and down in glass tubes filled with pink- or lilac-tinted alcohol.

Nabokov explains to the curious American reader that "all the epithet [American] meant was 'outlandish'" (239). America, then, is for young Nabokov exotic and remote. Too remote, in fact, since in his childhood and adolescence, and also later in exile, Nabokov shows no special interest in this country and its culture. In *Speak, Memory* he mentions names of various European cities or European artists, but America remains for a long time absent from Nabokov's life. In a way, Nabokov, who with his Jewish wife managed to escape the war and found refuge in America, came to this country with no particular hopes to accomplish his American Dream. He differs considerably from other immigrants who considered America to be a very special place and who went there with anxiety, but also with hopes and high expectations.

Speak, Memory, devoted as it is to the pre-American stage in Nabokov's life, contains few remarks concerning the change of the author's status from an exile to an American citizen, yet the autobiography includes several direct statements which prove that this transition was unusually smooth and satisfying. Nabokov compares his search for a job in England and in America, for example observing: "I was hopelessly trying to find an academic job in England (the ease with which I obtained that type of employment in the U.S.A. is to me, in backthought, a constant source of grateful wonder.)" (271). Elsewhere, he calls America his "new and beloved world, where [he] learned to feel at home as easily as [he has] ceased barring [his] sevens" (277). Such remarks are rare in *Speak, Memory*, yet they are straightforward and sincere enough to clearly suggest that Nabokov noticed and appreciated the great qualitative change between his lonely, though by no means, wasted years in European exile, and the comfortable, creative and wholly satisfying years in America.

While in the United States Nabokov often thinks about Russia and occasionally toys with the idea of returning. He quickly rejects the idea, however, since the country of his birth, altered by the communist changes, now seems to him almost surreal: "I wonder ... what would happen if I put in a long-distance call from my desk right now? No answer? No such number? No such country?" (235). Russia, or what was then the Soviet Union, must be, Nabokov seems to feel, a totally different and possibly unrecognizable country. What

makes it particularly unattractive for Nabokov is its totalitarian political system. Though critical and highly contemptuous of it, Nabokov only occasionally makes his attitude to the Communist regime explicit by - for example — ridiculing its tendency to change traditional names of cities or streets, or by showing a generally malicious and ironical attitude to the Soviet Union.

Nabokov's autobiography contains few such remarks; its tone - unlike that of many other accounts by émigré intellectuals — is certainly not predominantly anti-communist. Travelling around the world and living in different cultures taught Nabokov to resist all those — no matter which country they come from — who are hate-filled and aggressively nationalistic. In a revealing statement, referring to the Soviets on official visits in the United States, Nabokov describes them in the following way:

those ruthless, paste-faced automatons in opulent John Held trousers and high-shouldered jackets, those *Sitzriesen* looming at all our conference tables, whom — or shall I say which? — the Soviet State began to export around 1945 after more than two decades of selective breeding and tailoring, during which men's fashions abroad have had time to change, so that the symbol of infinitely available cloth could only provoke cruel derision. (264-65)

The Soviet *apparatchiks*, however, are not the only group of which Nabokov is contemptuous. He refuses to single out the Soviet communists for criticism and hastily adds to the group of his enemies

jolly empire-builders in their jungle clearings, French policemen, the unmentionable German product, the good old churchgoing Russian or Polish *pogromshchik*, the lean American lyncher, the man with the bad teeth who squirts antimorality stories in the bar or the lavatory. (264)

While very explicit about this "subhuman circle" (264), Nabokov does not write much (if one does not mention his immediate family) about the people he respects or loves. In fact, his real love is not so much other people as literature and butterflies. It is they, or what Nabokov generally calls "unreal estate," which help him endure all his losses connected with exile. Art makes his displacement easier since, as a writer, Nabokov can be everywhere:

Lost in thought [the poet] taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes

along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cinder-gray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Docteur Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles occur — all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus. (218)

Though in America Nabokov cannot recreate his childhood Russia, through art and through his interest in butterflies he can at least make links to it. In the sixth chapter of his autobiography, Nabokov describes an unusually beautiful Swallowtail, which he caught in his childhood. Locked overnight in a wardrobe and expected to die there by naphthaline, the butterfly unexpectedly survives. The next morning, as Nabokov writes, the butterfly

made for the open window, and presently was but a golden fleck dipping and dodging and soaring eastward, over timber and tundra, to Volgoda, Viatka and Perm, and beyond the gaunt Ural range to Yakutsk and Verkhne Kolymsk, and from Verkhne Kolymsk, where it lost a tail, to the fair Island of St. Lawrence, and across Alaska to Dawson, and southward along the Rocky mountains — to be finally overtaken and captured, after a forty-year race, on an immigrant dandelion under an endemic aspen near Boulder. (120)

After a long search in various countries and in various cities Nabokov regains his childhood butterfly in America. His multicultural self-narrative is an account of his intercontinental search.

Maria Falska

**Influencia de la comedia española sobre el teatro clásico francés.
Consideraciones críticas sobre el estado de la investigación**

La influencia española sobre el teatro francés del siglo XVI ha sido ya objeto de numerosos estudios. La investigación del tema fue intensificándose a partir de los años 50 del siglo anterior para alcanzar gran importancia especialmente durante los primeros 30 años de este siglo. El trabajo bibliográfico de Lois Strong: *Bibliography of franco-spanish relations (until the XIX Century)* publicado en 1930 en Nueva York recoge ya un número considerable de estudios. En el segundo tercio del siglo XX el interés por el tema decae y en los años posteriores las publicaciones son muy escasas.

Se podría considerar que el tema estaría agotado tras un siglo de continuos intentos de abordarlo, si la lectura de resultados de la investigación no inspirara algunas reflexiones.

Todos los estudios existentes se pueden dividir entre los que sólo se dedican al análisis de un aspecto u obra particular y otros cuya intención es ofrecer un cuadro más completo de relaciones literarias franco-españolas limitado a veces a una época o autor. En el presente artículo nos queremos detener un poco más a analizar el segundo grupo para expresar nuestra opinión acerca del interés que estos estudios puedan presentar para el investigador contemporáneo.

En general los autores que se han pronunciado sobre el tema se pueden agrupar según la actitud que toman a la hora de valorar el teatro español del Siglo de Oro y la importancia de su influencia sobre el teatro francés.

Así el primer grupo es constituido por los que opinan que la inspiración española fue muy importante y se extendió a un número significativo de autores y obras francesas de la época.

El segundo grupo es el que generalmente se niega a reconocer aquella importancia, o sea minimizando el número de obras inspiradas por los autores españoles o despreciando sus fuentes.

Entre los dos grupos flota un número insignificante de estudios que no se pronuncian ni en pro ni en contra, pero cuyos autores tampoco profundizan mucho en el tema, contentándose con repetir las opiniones corrientes y superficiales.