1988

Nabokov's Non-Fiction as Reference Library: Igor, Ossian and Kinbote

Priscilla Meyer
Wesleyan University, pmeyer@wesleyan.edu

Recommended Citation
Priscilla Meyer. "Nabokov's Non-Fiction as Reference Library: Igor, Ossian and Kinbote" Slavic Review 47.1 (1988): 68-75.

PRISCILLA MEYER

Igor, Ossian, and Kinbote: Nabokov's Nonfiction as Reference Library

"How ludicrous these efforts to translate
Into one's private tongue a public fate!"
Pale Fire, lines 231-232

It is becoming apparent as research sets out the points of contact among Vladimir Nabokov's works[1] that Nabokov deliberately designed his total oeuvre as a spiral that finds ever-widening patterns in the weave of the universe. We are beginning to see how Nabokov combines the passion of natural scientific investigation and the cool distance of literary creation in his art;[2] from reading his commentaries to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, we understand how he interprets literary texts through the accumulation of precise detail anchored in fact.[3] Just as the evolution of natural species involves tracing migration and patterns of mimicry, a literary work may be investigated through the evolution of its cultural history. Nabokov's art combines the scientific method of accumulating the "hard data" gleaned from literary texts and historical docmuents with the artistic quest for unifying themes in life and art. His commentaries collect the relevant materials for studying the evolution of a literary text in its cultural environment using natural scientific methods of taxonomy and explicating the history, literatures, and languages that determine the features of the text under observation.

The commentary to *Eugene Onegin* is a perfect example. Nabokov establishes the Petersburg environment of Pushkin's time meteorologically as well as by locating it in western European culture. In the process, he invisibly provides the reader with the principles, relevant texts, and confirming links to allow a cogent reading of his own novel, *Lolita*.[4]

Analogously, Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory* provides carefully coded data for a reading of his novel *The Gift*:[5] the hero Fyodor's artistic evolution, which incidentally involves writing biography, is charted in terms of experiences that Nabokov treats as autobiography in the memoirs. Nabokov's introduction to Lermontov's novel, *A Hero of our Time*,[6] in turn, establishes the connection

This article should owe even more than it does to the painstaking reading and multiple corrigenda of Gene Barabtarlo, University of Missouri-Columbia.

1. For the raw data, see especially Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and Pekka Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1985).

2. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 5, "on the artist's passion and scientist's patience."

3. *Eugene Onegin*, 4 vols. (New York: Bollingen, 1964); *The Song of Igor's Campaign* (New York: Random House, 1960).

4. See Priscilla Meyer, "McAdam, McEve and McFate: Nabokov's *Lolita* and Pushkin's *Onegin*," in *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. George Gibian and Stephen Jan Parker (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Institute for Foreign Studies, 1984), pp. 179-211.

5. *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam's, 1966); *The Gift* (New York: Putnam's, 1963).

6. Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of our Time*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov and Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Doubleday, 1958). Like Nabokov in his introduction, Kinbote in his commentary to "Pale Fire" mentions Lermontov's frequent use of the eavesdropping device in *A Hero of our Time*.

made in *The Gift* between the adolescent stage of Fyodor's literary evolution and that of the Russian literary tradition. Nabokov's nonfictional assessment of Lermontov, then, gives access to an objective *point de repère* from which to assess Nabokov's self-portrait in *Speak, Memory*.[7]

In his commentaries Nabokov defines the prism that he uses to turn the historical universe into art. Once that principle is clear, his translation of and commentary to *The Song of Igor's Campaign* can become a key to the interpretation of *Pale Fire*. The novel alludes obliquely to *The Song of Igor's Campaign* when providing the genealogy of Charles the Beloved of Zembla:

> Charles the Beloved could boast of some Russian blood. In Medieval times two of his ancestors had married Novgorod princesses. Queen Yaruga (reigned 1799–1800), his great-great granddam, was half-Russian; and most historians believe that Yaruga's only child Igor was not the son of Uran the Last (reigned 1798–1799) but the fruit of her amours with Hodinski, her goliart (court jester) and a poet of genius, said to have forged in his spare time a famous old Russian *chanson de geste*, generally attributed to an anonymous bard of the 12th century.[8]

The Song of Igor's Campaign was, apparently, written by an anonymous bard, a poet of genius, in the twelfth century.[9] The reference is further reinforced by the names Igor, Hodinski, and Yaruga, and by the theme of the forged epic. Igor Sviatoslavich of Novgorod Severskii (died 1202) was the great-great-great grandson of Riurik,[10] as is clear from the "pedigree of Russian territorial princes" with which Nabokov prefaces his translation of *The Song of Igor's Campaign*.

The bard Hodyna, mentioned only in the Igor tale, was a singer in the court of Igor's father and the predecessor of the anonymous author of the *Song*. In *Pale Fire* Hodinski is the presumed father of Igor, and hence Charles's true ancestor.

The source of Queen Yaruga's name is harder to unearth, since, though it sounds like Iaroslavna, Igor's second wife, the name does not exist. But the word *iaruga* appears three times in the *Song*: it is Old Russian for "ravine" and, Nabokov says, a "comparatively rare word" (p. 95). By using it, Nabokov forces us to connect *Pale Fire* with *The Song of Igor's Campaign* via his commentary, for unless we are Slavists with volume three of Sreznevskii's *Dictionary of Old Russian* in hand, we have no hope of identifying the reference. The name of Charles the Beloved's ancestor, then, carries the specificity of time, place, and text of the Igor tale appropriate to a descendant of Novgorod princesses.

The Slavist is familiar with the famous controversy over the authenticity of the Igor tale, long said to be an eighteenth century forgery. The authorship had been attributed to Count Musin-Pushkin who discovered a sixteenth century copy of the *Song*. He had a copy made of it in 1795-1796, which survived when his house burned down in 1812, but the sixteenth century manuscript was destroyed. He published the *Song* in 1800. Nabokov addresses the question of authenticity at

7. These ideas owe much to collaboration with Jeff Hush and Joanie Mackowski.

8. Note to line 681, *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam's, 1962).

9. Be it said, the scholarly dispute about the authenticity of the *Slovo* has not yet been (and may never be) settled, although Nabokov was convinced of the poem's authenticity.

10. The Varangian connection is made in Priscilla Meyer, "*Pale Fire* as Cultural Astrolabe: The Sagas of the North," *Russian Review*, forthcoming.

length in his commentary. He analyzes the "subtle balance of parts which attests to deliberate artistic endeavor," the consistency of the metaphors, the interplay of themes, the system of stylization of flora and fauna that lend "a touch of local reality" and concludes that the *Song* is "the lucid work of one man, not the random thrum of a people" (p. 6) and that the man is a poet of genius whose masterpiece "not only lords it over Kievan letters but rivals the greatest European poems of its day" (p. 12). The burden of proof of forgery, he says, is therefore "shifted onto the frail shoulders of insufficient scholarship" (p. 14).

Having seen that Nabokov deliberately established a highly specific connection between *The Song of Igor's Campaign* and *Pale Fire*, with his own commentary as essential interpretive link, we can consider why he goes to these lengths. To follow his logic, we must first explicate an earlier passage in *Pale Fire* that is directly connected to the one cited above by the mention of Hodinski (note to line 12):

> . . . it would have been unseemly for a monarch to appear in the robes of learning at a university lectern and present . . . *Finnigan's* [*sic*] *Wake* as a monstrous extension of Angus MacDiarmid's "incoherent transactions" . . . or discuss the Zemblan variants, collected in 1798 by Hodinski, of . . . *The Royal Mirror*, an anonymous masterpiece of the twelfth century.

"MacDiarmid," here connected to eighteenth century forgeries by association with Hodinski and to Scottish lore by *Finnegans Wake*, suggests James MacPherson (1736-1796), who claimed to have discovered and translated a collection of ancient lays by a third century bard named Ossian.[11] Nabokov connects the *Poems of Ossian* to *The Song of Igor's Campaign* explicitly in his commentary to the *Song*: "Throughout The Song there occur here and there a few poetical formulas strikingly resembling those in MacPherson's *Ossian* . . . certain bridges and ruins of bridges may be distinguished linking Scottish-Gaelic romances and Kievan ones" (p. 12).

Nabokov discusses the "tremendous impact" *Ossian* had on both western European and Russian literature, notably Pushkin's *Ruslan and Liudmila*. He documents the function of *Ossian* as a link between Russian and western European literature through the medium of French in his commentaries to both the Igor tale and *Eugene Onegin*, in which MacPherson and Ossian are discussed on thirteen occasions. Nabokov examines patterns of literary cross-fertilization when he addresses the hypothesis that the Igor tale might have been forged on the model of *Ossian*: "these coincidences tend to prove not that a Russian of the 18th century emulated MacPherson, but that MacPherson's concoction does contain after all scraps derived from authentic poems" (p. 12). Noting many turns of phrase in *Ossian* that resemble those of the *Song*, Nabokov concludes, "The curious point is that if we imagine a Russian forger around 1790 constructing a mosaic out of genuine odds and ends with his own mortar, we must further imagine that he knew English well enough to be affected by the specific elements of MacPherson's style" (p. 12).

11. James MacPherson, *The Poems of Ossian*, 2 vols. (London, 1806). The Scottish theme in *Pale Fire* is elaborated further through the work of Thomas Campbell, Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, and Robert the Bruce (to be discussed elsewhere).

After all, Russians read *Ossian* in the French translation by Pierre Letourneur "who never renders, of course, the mournful cut, the pathetic brevity" of the original (p. 98). Nabokov, then, has set *Igor* and *Ossian* in mirroring opposition, but the first national epic is genuine—it is the second that is the real eighteenth century forgery, as Samuel Johnson charged in 1775. The thematic purpose of the conjunction will become clear with a description of MacPherson's work.

A Scottish national epic comparable to the Igor tale did not exist, so MacPherson invented one. Beginning with *Fragments* in 1760, he then published six books of "ancient lays" in 1762, under the title *Fingal, An Ancient Poem in Six Books, by Ossian, Son of Fingal*, and eight more, entitled *Temora*, in 1763. MacPherson wanted to create a literary basis for Scottish national sentiment at a time when public taste craved the primitive, the national, and the sentimental after the surfeit of neoclassicism that had been purveyed in the eighteenth century translations of Homer, Horace, and Theocritus. MacPherson's introduction attests to this reaction (1: xvii):

> The nobler passions of the mind never shoot forth more free and unrestrained than in the times we call barbarous. That irregular manner of life, and those manly pursuits from which barbarity takes its name, are highly favorable to a strength of mind unknown in polished times. The human passions lie . . . concealed behind forms, and artificial manners; and the powers of the soul, without an opportunity of exerting them, lose their vigour. The times of regular government and polished manners are therefore to be wished for by the feeble and weak in mind. An unsettled state, and those convulsions which attend it, is the proper field for an exalted character, and the exertion of great parts. Merit there rises always superior; no fortuitous event can raise the timid and mean into power.

In *Pale Fire* Nabokov parodies the "manly pursuits" by reducing them to the "manly [i.e. homosexual] customs" of Zembla that survive in the New World in Kinbote's Ping-Pong combat, and the kind of merit that rises to power in times of civic convulsion is shown to be the least vigorous and exalted despite its conspicuous lack of polished manners, exemplified by the Zemblan agent Gradus. Nabokov's own sentiments are stated directly in his foreword to *Bend Sinister*,[12] itself a valuable commentary that explicitly connects the themes at issue here.

MacPherson's scholarly attitudes were as foreign to Nabokov's as his political ones. MacPherson knew no Gaelic, possessed no ancient manuscripts, and had insufficient scholarship to answer Johnson's challenge to the authenticity of *Ossian*. Answering the charge in his introduction to a subsequent edition of *Ossian*, he exhibits a tell-tale vagueness: "The manners described suit the ancient Celtic times, and no other period. We must therefore place the heroes far back in antiquity; and it matters little, who were their contemporaries in other parts of the world" (1: xv).

MacPherson cooks up some false derivations to footnote his tales. The name *Colmal* is derived from *Caol-mhal*, "a woman with slender eyebrows," a feature which, he says, Ossian "seldom fails to give to fine women in his poems." *Caol* does mean "slender" in Gaelic, but *mhal* does not exist. Other etymologies seem to be mere improvisations, such as *Dar-Thula* (a woman with fine eyes) and

12. *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974).

Cor-mar (an expert at sea).[13] *Mar* in Gaelic is a preposition with the general sense of "just as," unrelated to the Latin *mare* (sea).

Nabokov parodies MacPherson's false etymologies in his Zemblan coinages, which can be accurately traced to their original Slavic and Anglo-Saxon roots to create a field of meaning within *Pale Fire*.[14] The joke is that while MacPherson's etymologies purport to be true, Nabokov's masquerade as false, as mere mad fantasy. The theme of bad translation in *Pale Fire* is linked to King Charles's Uncle Conmal, the Zemblan translator of Shakespeare. The derivation (as Conmal does a poor job of conning Shakespeare's text) is, on the surface, easily accessible. But as we now see, it also masks an allusion to MacPherson's poorly conned name derivations.

Nabokov's well-known dictum to his students, "learn to distinguish banality," could take *Ossian* as text. He does agree on one thing with MacPherson, who defended himself against his challengers by writing: "to judge aright requires almost as much genius as to write well; and good critics are as rare as great poets" (1: vii). Nabokov resolves the issue of the authenticity of the Igor tale by his assessment of the author's unquestionable artistic genius; he judges MacPherson's forgeries, by contrast, to be lacking in balance, vivid detail, linguistic authenticity, or historical verifiablity. Here is the description of *Ossian* that Nabokov gives in his commentary to *Onegin* (2: 251-255):

> James MacPherson's famous fraud is a mass of more or less rhythmic, primitively worded English prose. . . . The kings of Morven, their blue shields beneath the mountain mist upon a haunted heath, the hypnotic repetitions of vaguely meaningful epithets, the resounding, crag-echoed names, the blurred outlines of fabulous events.

Nabokov's own art as well as his scholarship is, *par contre*, extraordinarily meticulous. In his commentary, he traces the word *vermillion* used in *The Song of Igor's Campaign* back to the *coccus polonicus*, or *chervets*, the worm that was the source of the crimson dye. The bard's phrase *cher(v)lennye shchity* (vermillion shields) contains the kind of specific detail grounded in local nature that convinces Nabokov of the Igor tale's authenticity, like the "migrating flocks of swans, a characteristic feature of spring nights on the lakes and marshes of southern Russia" (p. 100) that collapse the distance of eight centuries between the bard's experience and Nabokov's.

But who is Angus MacDiarmid? MacPherson's nationalism is carried by this parody of a Scotch name, which turns out to be appropriate, since "Hugh MacDiarmid" was the pseudonym of C. M. Grieve (1892-1978), a Scottish poet and notorious boozer. In an effort to revive the tradition of the Scottish ballads, MacDiarmid wrote poetry in a lowland Scots dialect that is itself an invention, "a concoction made from the poetic diction of Burns, Dunbar, and more recent demotic sources, and given currency (under the name 'Lallans') by MacDiarmid . . . and others."[15] He was also a political activist, founding the Scottish

13. MacPherson, *Ossian*, 1: 98, 111, 149.

14. See Priscilla Meyer, "Etymology and Heraldry: Nabokov's Zemblan Translations," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 29 (Winter 1987): 432–441.

15. Peter Dunn, private communication. I am grateful to Dunn for reading this paper and contributing his erudition.

Nationalist party and advocating the establishment of workers' republics in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Cornwall—"a sort of Celtic USSR in the British Isles," as he says in his autobiography *Lucky Poet*.[16] A member of the Communist party (though expelled for unorthodoxy in 1938), he wrote two "Hymn[s] to Lenin" (1932, 1935).

By associating MacPherson's forgeries with MacDiarmid's poetry, Nabokov makes several points about art and politics. Both Scots were motivated more by nationalist sentiments than by artistic inspiration and take a cavalier attitude toward truth. MacPherson's images are as vague as his scholarship, not to mention his attempt to hoax the public; MacDiarmid, wearing the mask of a Scots pseudo-nym, was more eager to create Celtic unity than to investigate the Soviet model he wrote hymns to. Artistic forgery (as opposed to parody) is allied to political demagoguery: Both distort art and reality to spurious ends. Apropos, Nabokov says in his commentary to the *Song*, "Marxist scholastics and nationalist emotions . . . tend to transform modern essays on The Song into exuberant hymns to the motherland" (p. 13). In his foreword to *Bend Sinister* Nabokov has stated his contempt for "the idiotic and despicable regimes . . . that have brushed against me in the course of my life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of Fascists and Bolshevists, of Philistine thinkers and jack-booted baboons" (p. vii).

The real-life distortion of literature by political ideology is for Nabokov intimately linked to matters of style. Yet all art is in some sense tendentious. In his notes to *The Song of Igor's Campaign* Nabokov speaks of the "antiphonal pro-Russian birds" and playfully points out elements of distortion introduced by the bard: "The tenacious *shadow* of Boyan [an eleventh century poet] is used by our bard for his own narrative purposes" (p. 6) and "The protagonist of The Song is a *shadow* of an actual contemporary of our bard who, for the rest, has greatly magnified the campaign of 1185" (p. 7, italics mine). It will be remembered that the "regicidal organization which commissioned Gradus" (index to *Pale Fire*) is called "The Shadows." In the context of politico-stylistic skulduggery, Nabokov's use of *shadow* in the Igor commentary implies a mirroring relationship between the bard of the Igor tale and Kinbote. Kinbote uses Shade's poem "for his own narrative purposes" and "greatly magnifies" his own campaign—his escape from Zembla.

Now we can see that Gradus carries in his disgusting person a set of articulated meanings that are perceived variously by Kinbote, Shade, and Nabokov. For Kinbote Gradus is a political assassin who gets ready "to leave Zembla for his steady blunderings through two hemispheres" (note to lines 120-121) on July Fourth, the same day John Shade ends Canto 1 of his poem that begins "I was the shadow of a waxwing slain." Kinbote finds in the word *shadow* the fateful portent of Shade's death (note to line 131); he sees the force propelling Gradus to be "the magic action of Shade's poem itself. . . . Never before has the advance of fate received such a sensuous form."

In relation to Shade, Gradus represents blind fate: the gunman was presumably aiming at Judge Goldsworth whom Shade happened to resemble and who chanced to live next door. Gradus is furthermore understood to signify all of our inescapable eventual deaths, by extension of Kinbote's closing words about "a

16. Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas, Being the Autobiography of Hugh MacDiarmid* (London: Methuen, 1943).

bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus" who will eventually "ring at [his] door."

So poetry, politics, fate, and death are concentrated in the image of Gradus. The added dimension alluded to by Gradus's name is the *gradus ad parnassum*, a school book in rhetoric and metrics.[17] For Nabokov the *gradus ad parnassum* is a potential compendium of literary cliches. In the foreword to *Bend Sinister* (a novel about the stylistic banality of tyrants) Nabokov says that "death is but a question of style, a mere literary device" (p. xii).

Kinbote is a scholar of northern tales, as his role of lecturer on them in Zembla and his subsequent university position suggest. Zemblan lore contains recognizable fragments of five known northern tales, the Scandinavian *Eddas*, the Finnish *Kalevala, Pale Fire*, MacPherson's *Ossian*, and the works of King Alfred the Great.[18] Kinbote's annotation of Shade's poem is passed through his Zemblan prism, one that is tendentious and distorting for his own literary-political purpose: to get Shade to immortalize Zembla—the name furnishes an appropriate point of contact between Shade's eighteenth century studies and Kinbote's Slavic northern connections. Kinbote's eccentric scholarship is conspicuously inaccurate. He mistranslates and misidentifies, but above all, he never has recourse to a library, the source of objective truth that transcends self. Thus the northern land he creates can only reflect his psyche; marred by MacPhersonism, his myth of manly heroism is riddled with false derivations and scrambled scholarship. In this sense, Nabokov's portrait of Kinbote as Bad Reader is a parody of a political reading of a literary text.

This kind of thing is often taken as evidence of Nabokov's arch superiority. Actually, it bespeaks the opposite: The next outward arc of the spiral includes Nabokov's parody of himself. By having Kinbote read Shade in the same way as the Igor bard retells history, Nabokov parodies his own endeavor. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov speaks of "retwisting my own experience when inventing Kinbote."[19] His commentary to the Igor Tale[20] mirrors Kinbote's commentary to *Pale Fire*, because Nabokov is engaged in an effort to trace his own personal fate to its origins. These he glimpses "through the mist of Scandinavian sagas" that form the bridges or ruins of bridges . . . linking Scottic-Gaelic romances with Kievan ones" (foreword to *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, p. 12). The Scandinavians provide bridges because the Vikings traveled east to Russia, west to England and Vinland, and north to Ultima Thule.

Kinbote gives Charles the Beloved's pedigree in *Pale Fire*; Nabokov gives Igor's in his commentary to *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, and these are matched by Nabokov's own in *Speak, Memory*. The Igor commentary contains a map of northern Russia; Kinbote has drawn Shade a map of his palace in Onhava ("far away"); and Nabokov provides a map of the Vyra estate outside Petersburg in *Speak, Memory*. In terms of Nabokov's personal fate, *The Song of Igor's Campaign* provides a historical and cultural, as well as geographic, map of Nabokov's

17. As has been discussed by David Renaker, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *The Explicator* 36 (Spring 1978): 22-23.

18. See Priscilla Meyer, "De Consolatione Geographiae Universitatis: *Pale Fire* and the Works of King Alfred the Great," forthcoming.

19. *Strong Opinions* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1973), p. 77.

20. And for that matter to *Eugene Onegin*.

kingdom. The northern tales in *Pale Fire* that are refracted parodically through Kinbote's mad prism serve the "bigger, more respectable, more competent" Nabokov an analogous end: Through them he can trace his own history back to its earliest records.

In distinction to Kinbote, Nabokov points us outward to the real, in the sense of verifiable, world. To understand the angle of transformation wrought by Nabokov's prism, we are referred to a large library where, by the slow accumulation of minute, multiply buried, interconnected detail, we too can reassemble, retrace the unfolding of Nabokov's major cultures—Russian and Anglo-American—through historical and literary landmarks. In Kinbote's tendentious scholarship Nabokov parodies his own bending of the history of the north over the last thousand years to his very private purposes.

The bard of the Igor tale records an historical event brilliantly, albeit from a biased viewpoint, and thereby sets Russian literature in motion. Kinbote synchronizes the completion of the first canto of Shade's poem with Gradus's preparations for departure from Zembla; both take place on July Fourth, the official birthday of the United States. American culture was Nabokov's culture and language at the time of writing *Pale Fire*. In *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, then, Nabokov provides the Slavic component of his own literary-historical coordinates that are made use of in *Pale Fire*: The novel is Nabokov's synthesis of his Russian and Anglo-American evolution.

The enterprise incidentally parodies the concept of the unconscious: The detective-critic, like a psychoanalist, must unearth a deeply buried set of personal associations. These, however, are buried not in the unconscious, but in texts, in history. Nabokov's principles of literary creation emphasize the need for an overarching consciousness of the interconnections that make up the universe in order to transcend trauma and to wrest beauty from tragedy.

That is why Nabokov provides data for the doctor by writing commentaries and forewords as points of calibration between the real world of history and documents, and Nabokov's personal vision of them as reshaped in his art. *The Song of Igor's Campaign* shows us that *Pale Fire* contains a refraction of Nabokov's cultural autobiography. He gives us the date of inception of his own fate in the very first sentence of the commentary: He says that Igor set out on the ill-fated campaign on 23 April. But Nabokov does not mention that 23 April is his own birthday.