

Michael Wood

Princeton University, USA

The Politics of Zembla

“I do not like that other world”

Ulysses

“That ‘other world’ comes in handy
when misfortune befalls the infidel”

Pale Fire

It’s easy enough to show that Nabokov’s interest in the “otherworld” did not preclude a passionate attention to this world, and not only to the natural and human details he so fiercely loved. John Shade speaks of “historical hells,” and rebukes himself for conflating two hells, both historical: that of slavery and that of the persecution of the Jews (217). Pnin tells his friend and colleague that the history of man is the history of pain (141), and there is nothing in Nabokov’s whole oeuvre to suggest a denial of that history – either the history of pain or the pain of history. As Alexander Dolinin has well shown, Nabokov distrusted history in its second sense – the writing up or writing down of history in its first sense, history as what happened – because he thought it was full of bland generalities and worse. But of course he distrusted it because he cared about what happened. To put this all too bluntly, Nabokov never forgot what Pnin scrupulously taught himself never to remember: Buchenwald and all the many other horrors of twentieth-century history. In fact, as the text of Pnin makes movingly clear, Pnin himself was not the ideal student of his own lesson, and we see him painfully

remembering what he has (not quite) taught himself to forget. When Nabokov writes, in the Foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading* of the “full volume of welcome” reached by the Nazi regime in Germany (v), only the tinniest of ears would miss the angry sarcasm, or the weight of historical pain behind it.

But of course to remember a painful history, to accept it as a set of hellish facts, to address it persistently in one’s fiction, is not the same as finding it acceptable, and Nabokov does resist history in this sense: he refuses to believe it is all there is, even in this world. That is, he does not accept history, even the undisputed record of what happened, when such a thing is available, as any kind of verdict on human possibility. History itself could have been different, and that is why we need to know what happened and why that is not the whole story. Many parts of this story – of human possibility – take us away from history altogether, or into such discreet or private corners of history that history scarcely seems any longer to be the word for it. So there is nothing totalizing or exclusive in what I am about to suggest. But possibility in history itself as we ordinarily understand it is a matter of politics – perhaps in a slightly more expanded sense than we usually give the word. I want to revisit the question of politics in Nabokov’s fiction – not Nabokov’s politics, although as a matter of fact I don’t believe they are all that different from what we find in the fiction – and I want to start in that most unlikely (and also of course predictable) place, the former kingdom of Zembla.

Are there any politics there, you will ask. Any politics that we can take seriously, that is. Surely the politics of Zembla are those of Zenda or Ruritania or any other fantastic place. Well, yes, the politics and the place are fantastic. But fantasies are made of pieces of the real, and fantasy politics may tell us something about real politics,

through their fantastic construction rather than in spite of it. Let's leave the author of this particular fantasy out of it for the moment – he will be back, don't worry, whoever he is – and try to place this toppled kingdom and its recent history.

Charles Xavier I ruled this kingdom – if ruled is the word – from 1936 to 1958. In May 1958 there was a revolution, the king was made a prisoner in his palace while his fate was being decided by the new Extremist government. Our text doesn't tell us what kind of Extremists these people but since they came to power, at least in the ex-king's account, with the help of “the tainted gold and robot troops” of “a powerful police state a few sea miles away,” we can guess (119). In August 1958 the king escaped from the palace, and after a long mountain climb and with much loyal assistance, managed to get out of the country. By October 1958 he was in America, and by February 1959 he was, under the name Charles Kinbote, teaching Zemblan literature at Wordsmith College in New Wye, in northern New England.

Now without even stepping outside of this fantasy – without even asking whether there is anything fantastic about it – we are already abundantly aware that the ex-king's point of view is a very particular one, as indeed we would expect. It's not just that he's uncertain about dates – how could the peasant who lives on the mountain have a picture of the king and queen taken twenty years earlier if the king and queen were married only 9 years before, and the king met the future queen only 11 years before – he's quite open about his optimistic editing of his own history. “Harmony,” he says, “was the reign's password. [...] The climate seemed to improving. Taxation had become a thing of beauty. The poor were getting a little richer, and the rich a little poorer...” (75). Is this consistent with his later reference to “the odious Council Chamber with its unsolvable

problems and frightened councilors” (76), to say nothing of the revolution itself? No, but even optimistic editors nod from time to time. I confess that until my last re-reading I had not noticed – or had not drawn any conclusions from the detail – that the lynching of the wrong people (“two baffled tourists from Denmark”) for the burning of the building holding the 1950 Exposition of Glass Animals also took place during this good king’s reign (112). All Jacob Gradus did, the future assassin, was help the fire brigade clear a space in the square. What was the government doing? Were lynchings common then? When the ex-king evokes the “few discerning historians” who are going to get things right (75), we can be sure they will be very few, and will have to practice a very special kind of discernment. Later the ex-king says that “whereas an objective historian associates a romantic and noble glamour with Karlism, its shadow group must strike one as something definitely Gothic and nasty” (150). This is quite a complicated proposition, and I’ll return to the remarkable fact that political positions in Zembla are perfect mirrors of each other, like the ends of palindromes, but for the moment let’s just note that it’s hard to think of “nasty” as an objective historical judgment in any context. This is not a defence of the revolution, just a reminder that the king was a king.

It’s true the king had other things on his mind apart from reigning, boys and pleasure mainly. And the first and last thing to be said about Charles Xavier’s relation to his kingdom perhaps is that he liked being king but wasn’t very interested in governing. He didn’t see being a king as, so to speak, a political job. This is only to be expected, perhaps, in a fantasy – a situation where the king is not really a king but only a person who likes to imagine he was once a king – but it’s worth remembering that plenty of actual kings in history appear to have felt the same way. In any event, when Kinbote

himself uses the phrase “political reasons” he means the political reasons of other people, namely republican sympathizers who are so keen to see his kingdom end that they are happy to bury it in oblivion. “Whatever happens, or has happened to him,” a physics professor whom Kinbote calls a Pink says, “cannot interest the Zemblan people. History has denounced him” (266). John Shade calmly says this is true but “in due time history will have denounced everybody” – not quite the response we expect, perhaps (Ibid.). The physics professor is pompous and insensitive and, in his way, doggedly orthodox, and Kinbote’s definition of a Pink is both very funny and very telling. We are, you remember, in the year 1959. A Pink believes in “Progressive Education, the Integrity of anyone spying for Russia, Fall-outs occasioned solely by US-made bombs, the existence in the near past of a McCarthy Era, Soviet achievements including *Dr Zhivago*, and so forth” (Ibid.). There would be much to say about this list, but it’s clear that this is what Kinbote means by politics; not being king and making sure that lynchings don’t take place in your kingdom.

But where is Zembla? It is defined as a “distant northern land” (355), and the name of its capital means “far away,” or at least onhava-onhava means “far, far away” (255). But far away from where? It is separated, we are told, from “the mainland of madness” by “an impassable canal” – that’s impassable, not impossible (137-138). Are these the few sea miles between Zembla and the “powerful police state” that backed the revolution? Odd phrasing for a canal, perhaps, even an impassable one. And then things get stranger. Zembla is a peninsula a little over two hundred miles long, divided by a mountain range which runs from north to south. From one of its highest peaks “one can distinguish on clear days, far out to the east, beyond the Gulf of Surprise, a dim

iridescence which some say is Russia” (138). This lovely, infinitely cautious sentence may mean many things, but I take it to mean at least two: that from these mountains the Soviet Union can be seen, although some people insist on calling the place Russia; and that by a ghostly temporal trick of the kind which fills the pages of *Pale Fire*, on some days, from Zembla, to your surprise, you can actually see an older, liberal Russia, the delayed light of a different political star. This is a country Nabokov himself repeatedly spoke of, the very country that was lost in both Eastern and Western versions of what Russia had become, but we don’t actually need to go outside the text of *Pale Fire* to find it, since Kinbote himself evokes it: “a different Russia – a Russia that hated tyrants and philistines, injustice and cruelty, the Russia of ladies and gentlemen and liberal aspirations” (245).

Is the Soviet Union both the southerly mainland of madness and the eastward-located destroyer of this different Russia? Is it both very distant, seeable only on clear days and only a few sea miles away? I think we have to say that the world itself, the whole world apart from Zembla, is the mainland of madness, and now the madness has arrived in Zembla too, courtesy of the Soviet Union, local mainstay of the mainland of madness. But then what is this madness? Madness is the politics and history of the modern world, contrasted with the idyllic Zembla, which has held out against the madness for so long. Even Kinbote, especially Kinbote, is aware of the irony here. He is calling madness what everyone else calls sanity, however murderous its products and conditions. By implication he is calling sanity a life of literature, luxury and sexual indulgence scarcely imaginable in what we think of as the real world. The strategy resembles John Shade’s definition of what he refuses to call madness:

“That is the wrong word. [...] One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention” (238).

The strategy has its problems, in spite of Shade’s amiable embrace of it. For one thing it is haunted by what it denies – indeed at times seems to be made up of nothing but that denial.

One last question about the notional history of Zembla, and then we can turn to what is fantastic in this fantasy. The geographical location of Zembla makes its politics without analogue in modern history: we have to imagine something like a province of Russia with a king as late as 1958; or a Denmark shifted to the east and with a revolution occurring in that year. Kinbote writes of an “iron curtain” going up (131), but he means the fire-curtain of a theatre. Whatever he means, though, we can hardly shake off what the phrase had so firmly come to mean to us by 1959. Zembla is a place behind the Iron Curtain where the Iron Curtain didn’t drop until 1958. A very particular kind of fantasy. In 1959 Krushchev, according to the copy of the *New York Times* which Gradus reads, abruptly postpones a visit to Scandinavia and plans to visit Zembla instead. Kinbote is already imagining Krushchev’s speech: “you call yourselves *zemblerami*, Zemblans, and I call you *zemlyakami*, fellow countrymen” (274). Spoken in the true voice of empire, and all the more remarkable in its ambitions if the country is a sort of historical dream.

This is not the time or the place to discuss the authorship of the fantasy, and whether Kinbote is really Botkin, and the exact ontological location of Zembla: is it real within the fictional world of *Pale Fire* or fantastic even there? What I want to insist on is the impossible combination of time and place for this king and this revolution. The

impossibility is important, but so is its corollary, the realization that it is the combination that is impossible, not the events. There have been monarchs (kings, tsars) who have been imprisoned by a revolution, and then escaped or been executed – or even, like Louis XVI, who first escaped and was then recaptured and executed. Kinbote himself is fond of the analogy with Charles I of England. The author of this fantasy is placing real events, or a replay of various real events, in an imaginary place in the wrong real time. Quite a complicated performance, and it is, precisely, the politics of this performance which interest me.

There is too much to say here, but let me sketch a direction of inquiry. If we attend to the conflation of times, the meeting of different historical worlds – say the imprisonment of Charles I of England by Soviet-inspired revolutionaries, or the instigation of a 20th century East European revolution by the political arguments of the English 17th century – it is clear that we must lose or neglect many – perhaps most – aspects of both times to make the meeting happen. We understand the king's dilemma, but not what those Marxist-Leninists are doing in the English 17th century. Or we understand the 17th century politics, but we don't know what they are doing in the 20th century. Or we don't try to understand any of this, and we accept the purified, generalized dilemma: the king wants to be the king, and the extremists want to get rid of him; and do. But then this looks like a refusal of politics, or a conversion of politics into a recurring fable: there will always be rulers to fall and revolutionaries to topple them.

I want to suggest that this refusal of politics, in *Pale Fire*, is a failed refusal, and I take Nabokov's discreetly placed historical markers – Khrushchev's planned visit to Zembla, an American woman who looks like Malenkov – as reminders of something that

is being willfully forgotten. But the refused politics, the politics that are not quite successfully refused, are not those of particular parties or positions, of left and right and center, but the sheer unruly presence of politics in the world; other people's politics, whatever they are, and the unshakeable need for, and endless inadequacy of, government.

This refusal is not only Kinbote's. Nabokov often made it himself. But he was also capable of criticizing that refusal, and in *Pale Fire* the critique is built into the structure of the refusal itself. A concrete example. Inside and outside of his fiction, Nabokov liked to insist on the stupidity of tyranny, "the streak of stupidity that fatally runs through the most competent tyranny," as Kinbote puts it (148). This looks like a consolation of sorts, but a brutal little story in *Pale Fire* shows just what sort of consolation it is. One of the king's most loyal and brilliant supporters is captured and tried by a special commission, of which Jacob Gradus is a member. The hero is sentenced to death, but the firing squad bungles the job, and the wounded man is sent to hospital. Gradus is infuriated at this miscarriage of justice, and rushes into the hospital and shoots the hero twice, point-blank, missing each time. By the time Gradus returns to the scene of this fiasco, the condemned man has gone, presumably whisked away by Royalist companions. The lesson Kinbote draws, with what he calls "pardonable glee" is that the likes of Gradus "are never granted the ultimate thrill of dispatching their victim themselves" (153). But this conclusion is itself a historical fantasy, the wrong move from the right premise. There are plenty of inept thugs, there are stupid tyrannies, but this doesn't stop them from killing people. They may kill the wrong people, but what sort of consolation is that. Are we to imagine Nabokov's mother and her children made happier when their husband and father is slain, by the thought of the assassin's mistake or

failure? One of the structural and ethical beauties of *Pale Fire* is that whatever happens at the end of John Shade's life, whichever story we accept, that of the local madman out to get the judge who put him away, or that of the much-travelled Zemblan killer out to dispose of his former king, Shade is the wrong man. He is not the judge, he merely looks like him; he is not the king, he is merely walking with him. Lines that are parallel in every other respect intersect in this death, so that against Kinbote we might say that the likes of Gradus always dispatch their victim, because their victim is whoever comes into their line of fire. The victim is the constant here.

And just as Kinbote's theory of tyranny is an evasion of the truth he himself is about to live, so Zembla is a drastic, romantic simplification of the world as it is beyond its borders. In Zembla everything comes in pairs. The Royalists are shadowed by the Shadows, the dashing Royalist Odon has an epileptic Extremist half-brother Nodo. Read backwards the name of Jakob Gradus gives us Sudarg of Bokay, said to be "a mirror-maker of genius" (314). These are all signs, among many others, that the fantasy is a fantasy, the tidy, slightly pedantic construction of a universe out of oppositions and reversals. But in the present context the most interesting feature of this world is the habit of mind it suggests. Kinbote says he knows God by what He is not, a sound enough theological practice, no doubt, but a rather dangerous principle if transposed to politics. Kinbote knows everything by what it is not, celebrates his homosexuality by hating heterosexuality, his vegetarianism by onslaughts on others' meat-eating, the sophistication of his consciousness by the detailed creation of the half-life of Gradus' non-mind, and his own brand of liberalism by his assumption that the only possible alternative to it is dictatorship and the police state. Kinbote is, in other words, the ideal

citizen of the world of the Cold War. His views are close, in many respects, to those of many of his new compatriots in America, but the mode of thought must have been familiar in Russia, or indeed in many places.

This is not to say that *Pale Fire* is a Cold War novel – or rather it is a Cold War novel in a particular sense. It depicts a Cold War mentality and invites us to see as it a form of fantasy. I'm not suggesting that Nabokov was any kind of Pink – the Pinks indeed represent the very same mentality, only with different contents – only that he is not Kinbote, and that he has no Zembla to retreat to, no other world, or otherworld. Nabokov inhabits the mainland of madness like the rest of us, and in this place the McCarthy Era, for instance, both did and did not exist. The era existed if, like most of us, you thought Senator Joseph McCarthy and the frame of mind he represented did untold amounts of damage to many people, and caused severe infringements of political liberties in the United States. It did not exist if, like Nabokov no doubt, you thought Senator McCarthy was a small-time disturbance, a mere buzzing sound compared with what was going on in the rest of the world, and that American political liberties were still in pretty good shape – witness the fall of Senator Joe McCarthy. But certainly Senator McCarthy and his rampages existed either way, whatever we made of them, and whether there was an era of that name; just as, within *Pale Fire*, John Shade is shot by mistake whatever story we believe or tell. The trouble with the politics of Zembla is that they are shadow politics, politics in a mirror, cut off by an impassable canal from anything happening this side of the looking-glass. This does not mean they are not real politics – who says shadows are unreal – only that, like Kinbote and many people who are not in novels, they prefer symmetry and self-absorption to unruly accidents. We all have such

politics from time to time, and many people on all sides are brandishing them at this very moment. But then a poet dies, or a senator asks us to inform on our friends, or a liberal country, strongly provoked but clouded in mind, begins to suspend the elementary freedoms of its citizens, and we return to the mainland if we can.

Bibliography

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation to a Beheading*. Greenwich, Conn. Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1960.

----- . *Pale Fire*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.

----- . *Pnin*. Afterword by Michael Wood. Penguin Books, 1997.