BERNARD MEETS VLADIMIR

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Abstract: The two stories this paper attempts to put together (Dean Flower's suggestion) are "Victor Meets Pnin" by Vladimir Nabokov and "The German Refugee" by Bernard Malamud, two authors who are themselves refugees into the English language (of America) and whom we find writing about (their own) such experiences, i.e. getting educated into another culture and language. Their two heroes, Pnin and Oskar, are Old World elderly exiles (Russian and German) who get to be "tutored"(directly or indirectly) by much younger "counterparts" in the New World and so become able to break the barrier/s (of language, culture, age, psychology…) controlling their lives. As there seems to be no way out of/for their complex personalities, their "education" ends, paradoxically, tragically or fatefully, in sleep or death.

Key words: Nabokov, Malamud, exiles, language, education/initiation

Since this is a paper about how "Victor Meets Pnin," Martin meets Oskar and, tentatively, Bernard meets Vladimir, we can begin by showing that dictionaries give about a dozen meanings for our title verb, from among which we can retain here: to come together by chance or arrangement (the chance is that decided by destiny, the arrangement—as in our two stories—by the narrative-imaginative decisions of our authors); to get to know (and we, ignorant readers soon to become privileged ones in both stories, join the protagonists in this); be introduced for the first time; find; experience; answer, especially in opposition…

We can next favor expectation over surprise, and turn upside down the usual development of any such comparative effort: rather than describe first the two stories ("Victor Meets Pnin" and

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"The German Refugee," whose "togetherness" is suggested by Dean Flower) and then go to pointing out similarities and/or contrasts, we will show now their common characteristics (i.e. how and where they meet) and then see if the respective narratives justify our reading/s; as indicated elsewhere (our Between Critical Thinking and Literary Critical Thinking, 2013, for instance), it is criticism that places—often, forces—literary pieces into more or less suitable relationships, rather than have the latter determine the progress of critical arguments. Somehow along the same lines, in the two "meeting" stories, the almost only way to communicate (their central problem) is through the reader—the privileged reader mentioned above.

The larger cultural topic in the two stories is Europe—the Old World—and America, the New World, and a number of other compositional elements derive from this over encompassing theme; the "counterparts" (Dean Flower, again) in each are young men (fourteen and twenty years old, respectively) vs. adults or elderly men (in their fifties and more); the adults are instructed (either indirectly and implicitly in one and directly, as from tutor to pupil or student in another) and sustained by young men whom they virtually become father, or, at least, father-figures. The Old World (Russia and Germany) characters are both exiles and scholarly men incapable of easy accommodation to America; consequently, their communication problems increase their estrangement, as the age gap is enhanced by the culture and language gap.

In the first story, Professor Pnin is known (from the larger context of the novel that the story was to become part of) for his "butchering of English," and that "his English was murder," though, paradoxically, he likes to talk: "Pnin talked. His talk did not amaze Victor, who had heard many Russians speak English, and he was not bothered by the fact that Pnin pronounced the word 'family' as if the first syllable were the French for 'woman'." And Victor may not have been bothered by such other words as "pahtronymic," or "kroket," or "trakl," or "footballist," or even by Pnin's scholarly explanations: "'My name is Timofey,' said Pnin… 'Second syllable pronounced as 'muff,' ahksent on last syllable…'"

In his turn, the "German refugee," Oskar Gassner is even more detailed, sophisticated and convincing in his corrupt English explanations: "I do not—not longer possezz my former value of myself…"; "Confidenze I have not. For this and also whatever else I have lozt I thank the Nazis…"; "If I do not this lecture prepare, I will take my life"—a promise he will finally keep; as a matter of

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fact, sleep in one story and death in the other seem to be the two complementary ways out of the exiles' trap. His teacher's comments and observations are even more enlightening: "their /the immigrants'/ great loss was the loss of language…; they could not say what was in them to say. You have some subtle thought and it comes out like a piece of broken bottle:" or—"He would attempt to say something and then stop, as though it could not possibly be said;" and "he misplaced consonants, mixed up nouns and verbs, and mangled idioms, yet we were able at once to communicate."(sic)

Pnin's and Oskar's painful pasts, including their respective separations from their wives, turn them into helpless figures ready to (have one) blame the decay of society's responsibility for its outcasts and minorities; this feeling seems to be "inherited" by the young men in their existence, upon whom the adults' loss of identity, beliefs, choices and power seems to be thrown back for reassurance, trust, and understanding; this way, the young men are initiated into the unpleasant depths of adult despair, i.e. into the meaninglessness of their lost lives, while the real initiation is that of these human failures into what the young know, and can to or express, into a foreign language and culture, and, most painfully, into their own lost illusions (Pnin's real purpose in life seems to be that of playing shadow to his brilliant adopted son); no wonder then Oskar has to undergo psychoanalytical treatment, while Victor is oppressed by his psychoanalytical parents.

It is also interesting to notice that Victor is blessed with no less than three fathers: an imagined/imaginary one (a king in a palace, who refuses to abdicate—the Czar?) so he himself is some kind of prince; a natural, "psychoanalytical" father, Dr. Wind, for whom he is a "patient"; and a surrogate father, Professor Pnin, with whom he is in a relationship as from one story character to another. On the other hand, the other young protagonist, Martin, loses in the end a student and friend (the "German" refugee), a Jewish co-national, and also a father (figure); in both, the dream of brotherly/fatherly love proves an impossibility.

It looks as if one cannot have a story about minorities, often focused upon the limits of one individual to understand another as well as on the possibility of communication through self-transcending art (painting, writing) without an inevitable elements of pride; in "The German Refugee," student-teacher Martin Goldberg thinks about "the pride…/he/… felt in the job /he/ had done," i.e. helping Oskar with his English. The irony here (writes again one privileged reader) is

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that the young narrator does not seem to be aware of his own role in Oskar's decision about suicide. In the Pnin story, the third-party first-person narrator (and, most certainly, the author himself) is demonstratively proud of his own command of English; pride/hubris in being a successful teacher of English and pride in being a foreigner who is an accomplished writer of English. So that a quotation from Saul Bellow (from his eulogy to Malamud in 1986)—himself of a Jewish-Lithuanian descent, the third great writer in this category being the American-Galician-Jewish Philip Roth—seems in order here: "Well, we were here, first-generation Americans, our language was English and a language is a spiritual mansion from which no one can evict us. Malamud, in his novels and stories discovered a sort of communicative genius in the impoverished, harsh jargon of immigrant New York. He was a myth-maker, a fabulist, a writer of exquisite parables."

A great fabulist himself, Vladimir Nabokov first published his "Victor Meets Pnin" in The New Yorker, Oct. 15, 1955; two years later, the story becomes an episode (Chapter 4) in the seven-chapter novel Pnin (first title, My Poor Pnin), depicting the protagonist's life in 1953-1954, as a series of mostly disconnected events, a string of more or less detachable story-length episodes, whence the (almost too) many time slides. What we are given is a series of concentric circles of about four-and-a-half years of progressive time, plus more than a century of retrospection. The novel—also viewed as Nabokov's reply to Don Quixote—is part of the author's North American trilogy, made up of Lolita, Pnin, and Pale Fire (where Pnin also figures as a tenured professor at the fictional Wordsmith University).

From the novel we learn that Timofey Pavlovich Pnin, a bumbling professor of Russian Literature at Waindell College, is an émigré/refugee who had lost his wife Nina Belochkina ("belochka"=squirrel in Russian, so there are eleven squirrels in Pnin) and arrives from Russia in 1940, the same year as Nabokov himself. The whole book is extracted from the author's life as a professor at Cornell, where Marc Szeftel, also a Russian émigré (historian) and a colleague of Nabokov's (the two collaborated on a study of the medieval Russian epic The Song of Igor's Campaign) readily becomes the model for Pnin: the same verbal gawkiness, odd looks, pedantic ways, eccentricities: "He is not a very nice person, but he is fun" (Nabokov about his character, in Murdoch); still, he loves America, even though an idealized, unreal, stylized country and culture.

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Chapter 4 of the novel is the central one, both thematically and compositionally; it focuses on Victor, fourteen, who only "meets" Pnin on page fifteen of the twenty the story covers; in the meantime, we find that he had been sent to a progressive kindergarten in New Jersey, then to a day school (in Cranton, Massachusetts), and now to St. Bart's; he is a genius with an IQ of about 180 (at six he could "see the colors of shadows, the difference in tint between the shadow of an orange and that of a plum or of an avocado pear"; at eight "he told his mother he wanted to paint air"; and at nine "he had known the sensuous delight of a graded wash…"), in one of the three best scholars in the school, is "a little peculiar" and indulges in fantasies; his father is Dr. Wind, a "cranky" German refugee (n.b.), his mother (former Mrs. Pnin)—a Russian refugee; Victor's fantasies or "mild fancies" are about films, plays and family history, so at the beginning of the story (or Chapter 4)—after remembering from Ch. 3 that he likes to draw and has an active imagination—we are invited to discover that, in fact, he has had bad parents, that he paints all sorts of things, especially cars and also that he smokes a cigar at school… and is in trouble; his "opening" dream is about an imaginary father, a lonely and betrayed king who does not abdicate (see infra, the sequel to his dream).

At school—and out of school—Victor passes all sorts of tests—the Rorschach included--, all of which point directly to his artistic inclinations, and has as his favorite teacher a Mr. Lake, "a tremendously obese man," and an art expert with the "morose temper of genius." The unnamed narrator makes a point from emphasizing that "I do not think he /Victor/ loved anybody."

As a painter, he also dreamed of the Old Masters, and seems to have ideas (from Lake) about how to "immortalize a motorcar": "One way to do it might be by making the scenery penetrate the automobile. A polished black sedan was a good subject, especially if parked at the intersection of a tree-bordered street and one of those heavyish spring skies whose bloated gray clouds and amoeba-shaped blotches of blue seem more physical than the reticent elms and evasive pavement. Now break the body of the car into separate curves and panels; then put it together in terms of reflections. These will be different for each part: the top will display inverted trees, with blurred branches growing like roots into a washily photographed sky, with a whale-like building swimming by—an architectural afterthought; one side of the hood will be coated with a band of rich celestial cobalt; a most delicate pattern of black twigs will be mirrored in the outside surface of the rear window; and a remarkable desert view, a distended horizon, and a remote house here and a

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lone tree there, will stretch along the bumper. This mimetic process Lake called the necessary 'naturalization' of man-made things." Genius in painting can always be matched (met?) by genius with words—and language in general

As Victor makes plans to meet Pnin, we see Pnin buying welcoming present for him (a football—as it later turns out, Victor hated playing football—and a book by Jack London—whom Victor did not know), and they finally meet, after Victor travels from Cranton to Waindell. From a letter, Victor knew that Pnin would "appear in dark spectacles and hold a black briefcase with…/his/… monogram in silver." The professor talks all the time about all sorts of things that Victor has no interest in (Russian literature, Lermontov, Anna Karenina, various sports), from the "shabby old diner" they then go to his lodgings, rented from the Sheppards (one of the brothers is appropriately deaf), Pnin falls down the stairs but "no bones were broken," and it rains all the time.

Thus, there is no meaning in their meeting (see story title, and Pnin's comment—"an extremely satisfactory meeting")—that of two foreigners in a rain-enveloped night that only requires another of "those dramas that still haunt Russian fugitives"; it just so happens that, as he falls asleep, Pnin's dream is a continuation of Victor's opening dream: "Pnin saw himself fantastically cloaked /like a king?/ fleeing through great pools of ink /writing and language/ under a cloud-barred moon from a chimerical palace /n.b./…"—therefore, an encircling dream.

And the story ends with everybody asleep, except for the narrator, the author and the "privileged reader": "Presently all were asleep again. It was a pity nobody saw /well?/ the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zig-zags…"; all is language, imagination, and writing in these "spiritual mansions." Chapter 5 of the novel (which is not necessarily out topic here) shows an assembly of Russian intellectuals, Pnin's Blotchkina is remembered as incarcerated at Buchenwald, and Vladimir Vladimirovich (Nabokov) is mentioned as an expert on butterflies. Pnin then loses his job (in Chapter 6), and the lepidopterist-narrator appears again in Chapter 7.

If literature is the only salvation man has (especially as a refugee/immigrant/exile/outcast/ minority…) in this universe, another Russian-Jewish descendant sees the theme of self-loathing embodied in a refugee who faces the challenge of writing a lecture in English; and thus teaching may seem to be the great concern of modern man (what we teach, to whom, how, who

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teaches who, how do we face the endless problems of language and communication…) for a writer who invited Idiots First in the 1963 title of his collection in which "The German Refugee" was included.

Quite interestingly, Bernard Malamud's German refugee is not a German refugee, and this is a "writer's paradox" we do not claim to be able to solve (or understand); as we gradually learn from the story (whose first, magazine title was "The Refugee"), Oskar hates Germans, "he cursed… the German nation"—"an inhuman, conscienceless, merciless people…, pigs masquerading as peacocks"; he also "cursed the German language" as "he hated the damned country and the damned people." The simple question here (which, once more, we cannot answer) is why not title the story as in the first version or, even more frankly, "The Jewish Refugee"?

So this is the story of one of the numerous German-Jewish refugees who fled from Nazi Germany to America; in fact, Oskar Gassner comes first to America to see how things are and what he can do in the new country, then goes back, says good-bye to his wife (a gentile, ironically converted to Judaism after Oskar's abandoning of her, so that the Brown Shirts could remove her to Poland where she is killed) and to his "appalling anti-Semitic" mother-in-law, and comes for good to America to take the job of a lecturer at the Institute of Public Studies.

This "Berlin critic and journalist," who was, at the time of the story, "maybe fifty,' embodies the theme of defeat—by politics, by (as we shall presently see) Walt Whitman, by communication and language; his actual defeat, however, as the teacher-narrator notices, is his loss of self-image—a composite of all his problems: "His problems, God knows, were real enough, but could there be something more than a refugee's displacement, alienation, financial insecurity, being in a strange land, without friends or a speakable tongue?" Or, as Oskar himself puts it, "in my life there has been too much illusion."

As the story may also be read as a description of the narrator's growing intellectual understanding of Oskar's actual defeat—and first is his physical description: "He had a big face and heavy hands. His shoulders sagged. His eyes, too, were heavy, a clouded blue; and as he stared at me after I had identified myself, doubt spread in them like underwater currents." Being himself Jewish (as the reader discovers in the end), the teacher becomes aware of his own unexplored alterity: "Looking at him I realized what's meant when somebody is called 'another man.'"

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Still, all Oskar's fears, insecurity, anxiety, depression, emotional entrapment or his "no status" existence are all connected (as already suggested in the Pnin case) with his linguistic problems, i.e. his "tormented English"; and the objective-subjective metaphorical transfer in "tormented" is taken over and over again: "The little he had to say was in handcuffed and tortured English"; or, "He seemed to me always suspended between two floors…" And all these add up to his several attempts at suicide.

One solution is that of finding a teacher who could help him improve his English and also write his first lecture—on Whitman and some German poets. These two challenges are "met" by a twenty-year old poor student, on his "way to senior year in college," who sustains himself (another exile's family, most likely, but the story does not say) by giving English lessons to recently arrived refugees. He is a "skinny, life-hungry kid," a "thin, elongated, red-headed" young man, who at times thinks of Hitler and his doings across the ocean; after the Great Depression, he had tutored other students, all of them "accomplished men). As for Oskar, he is his third English tutor.

Part III of the story (in seven parts) begins: "I had met Oskar at the end of June," and so the narrated time is end of May, summer, late June, mid-August, end of August, early September and early October 1939, four-and-a-half months during which their story is made up of lessons—diction exercises, reading aloud, grammar, conversation, composition correction; and the composition is a lecture on Whitman, the first words practiced are "right" and "treasure" (a good working title for this paper), and the stage is set: "Now we are once more enacting the changeless scene, curtain rising on two speechless characters /Beckett is already present/ in a furnished apartment, I, in a straight-back chair, Oskar in the velours armchair…/generation gap/, his flesh grey, the big grey face, unfocused, sagging." The larger setting in New York, West Tenth Street, West Eighty-Fifth Street, with imaginative projection to Danzig and Stettin in Germany, Warsaw in Poland…

As breaking the language barrier is the central issue (fear immobilized Oskar, he could "never get past page one" of the lecture), against the backdrop of Germany's invasion of Poland and the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact, a generalization is required: "that's what a world crisis does for people, they get educated"—the elderly educated by the young. As a result, the lecture about Whitman is finally completed (but the triumph is not), it gets to be properly translated with help

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from an erudite historian, it is then successfully delivered, the young teacher is proud, and the elderly student kills himself; he leaves "Martin Goldberg all his possessions," Frau Gassner is taken to Poland, toppled "into an open ditch, with naked Jewish men, their wives and children, some Polish soldiers, and a handful of gypsies." The teacher's work is done.

And so is ours—almost; the real-life narrators of the two stories meet—we have seen—in a variety of ways. Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (1899-1977), born in St. Petersburg, spent most of his life as an exile—in England (studies at Cambridge), Germany, France, the United States (professor at Wellesley and Cornell) and Switzerland (Montreux, where he is buried). Nabokov (pen name Vladimir Sirin) wrote his first nine novels in Russian, then all the rest in English (Lolita—1955, Pale Fire—1962, Speak, Memory—1936-1966 and others); the famous lepidopterist and chess composer (married to Jewish-Russian Vera Evseyevna Slonina in 1925) made his writer's name as an author of complex plots (many campus stories), characterized by clever word play, florid writing, linguistic playfulness in general and attention to detail. Also a teacher and professor (Bennington College, Oregon State University), Bernard Malamud (1914-1986)—born in a New York family of Russian Jewish immigrants—is the author of eight novels (The Natural—1952, The Assistant—1957, The Fixer—1966…) and three collections of short stories (The Magic Barrel—1958…), all of them oblique allegories set in the dreamlike urban getto of immigrant Jews in search for hope and meaning in their lives; his—like Nabokov's—motto seems to be "Life is a tragedy full of joy:" and thus, no end of paradoxes in the lives and works of people who find their homes (mansions) in a language different from their native tongue, and write provocative stories on such forms of initiation and education.

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