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Pnin and Goethe

The following note serves as a continuation of my discussions with Efim Etkind on the transformations of German literature within the Russian literary context. I would like to draw the reader's attention to a curious subtext in Nabokov's novel *Pnin*.

At the beginning of the novel's fifth chapter (in the second paragraph), the reader might be perplexed by the contextually unexpected appearance of Goethe's name:

From the top platform of an old, seldom used lookout tower [. . .] that stood on a wooded hill eight hundred feet high, called Mount Ettrick, in one of the fairest of New England's fair states, the adventurous summer tourist (Miranda or Mary, Tom or Jim, whose penciled names were almost obliterated on the balustrade) might observe a vast sea of greenery, composed mainly of maple, beech, tacamahac, and pine. [. . .] On a dull warm day in the summer of 1954, Mary or Almira, or, for that matter, Wolfgang von Goethe, whose name had been carved in the balustrade by some old-fashioned wag, might have noticed an automobile . . . (111)

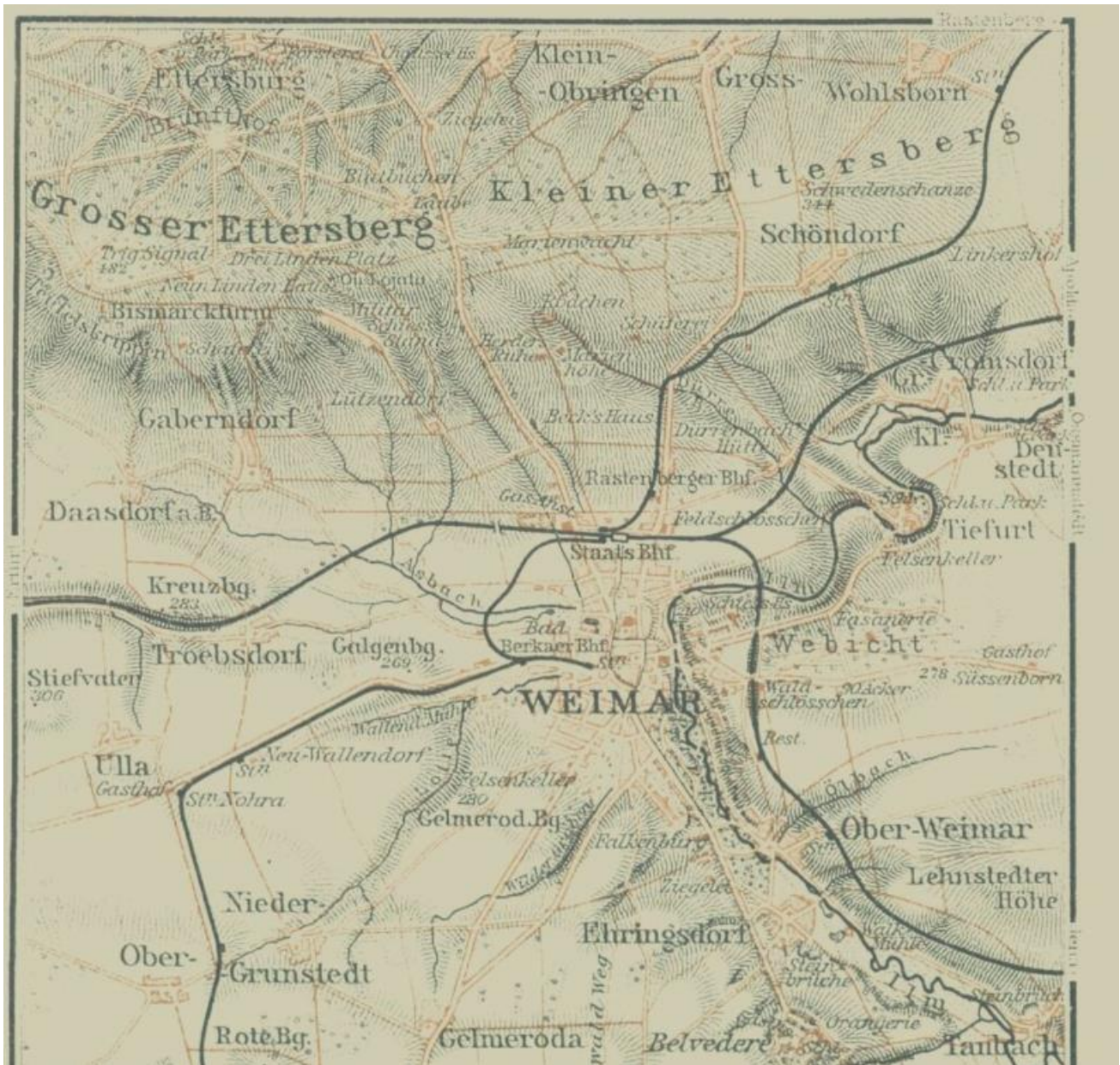
As we can see, the narrator himself notes the unexpectedness of this name's appearance in such a context: unlike all the other names, which were written in pencil on the railing of the tower, Goethe's name is carved in the balustrade, "by some old-fashioned wag." Goethe's name appears a second time at the end of Chapter Five, as Pnin is inwardly shaken by the flood of memories about Mira Belochkin and her death in the Nazis' Buchenwald concentration camp (Buchenwald=Beech wood), near Weimar:

. . . she was selected to die and was cremated only a few days after her arrival in Buchenwald, in the beautifully wooded Grosser Ettersberg, as the region is resoundingly called. It is an hour's stroll from Weimar, where walked Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Wieland, the inimitable Kotzebue and others. "Aber warum — but why — " Dr Hagen, [. . .] would wail, "why had one to put that horrid camp so near!" for indeed, it was near — only five miles from the cultural heart of Germany. (135)

In this case, we are dealing with a chronotope inseparable from Goethe's works and days, that is, Weimar and its surroundings. Goethe lived the last fifty-seven years of his life in Weimar, capital of the duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, arriving in 1775 at the invitation of Grand Duke Karl August (ruled 1775-1828). As reported in the *New Brokgaus-Efron Encyclopedia*, during Karl August's rule Weimar "achieved worldwide fame as the center of Germany's cultural life, thanks to the invitation to court of Goethe, Schiller, Wieland, and Herder" (ix:837).¹ Here we

1 Wieland was chosen by Karl August's mother, Anna Amalia, to be his tutor. Anna Amalia, who gathered around her a circle of eminent men of letters and aristocrats interested in the arts, played a very important role in Weimar's transformation into Germany's "center of cultural life."

are referring to the period of Weimar's cultural life known as its "Classical Age." The phrase "Classical Age of Weimar" (*Weimarer Klassik*) is also used in a narrower sense to identify the creative output of Goethe and Schiller between 1786 and 1788 (Goethe's Italian journey) and, especially, the period of their deep friendship from 1794 until Schiller's death in 1805.



As can be seen in the accompanying map, to the north of Weimar there rises a wooded mountain-ridge, Ettersberg, about 250 meters' elevation above Weimar, stretching twenty-two

kilometers west to east, and divided into a western massif—Grosser Ettersberg (with a peak elevation of 478 meters above sea level), and an eastern spur, Kleiner Ettersberg (maximum height about 340 meters) (Kuhlenz, 253). The extensive forests covering Ettersberg consist of beech, oak, and fir. In 1906, Meyer's *Grosses Konversations-Lexicon* noted particularly that Herder's favorite locale for taking walks used to be the beech forest on Grosser Ettersberg (vi:145). And, on Grosser Ettersberg, in 1937, Hitler's SS created the concentration camp called "Buchenwald," hidden in "the glorious forests of Grosser Ettersberg" (*Buchenwald Report*).

Goethe was, of course, well acquainted with the Ettersberg region. In the very first years of his life in Weimar, he hunted with the duke in the Ettersberg forests. From 1776 to 1780, the duke's mother Anna Amalia spent the summer months at the hunting palace of Ettersberg, on the northern slope of the Grosser Ettersberg (about ten kilometers from Weimar), and during this time the palace and its park became the center of aristocratic social life, of care-free diversions and literary events for the entire cultural elite of Weimar. One of Goethe's most famous poems was created on 12 February, 1776 "on the slope of Ettersberg" (as noted in the manuscript): the first "Wanderer's Nightsong" ("Der du vom Himmel bist . . .").

Eckermann, in his famous *Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of His Life*, gives an account of one of Goethe's strolls on Grosser Ettersberg in 1827 (involving, as always for Goethe, the study of fauna, flora, and rock specimens):

Goethe had invited me to take a drive this morning to the Hottelstedt Ecke, the most western summit of the Ettersberg, and thence to the Ettersberg hunting lodge. [. . .] Behind Lützendorf, where the journey was up-hill, and we could only drive leisurely, we had an opportunity for various observations. [. . .] We were now upon the height, and drove quickly along. [. . .] We had reached the western height;—the broad valley of the Unstrut with many villages and small towns, lay before us, in the clearest morning sun.

"This is a good resting-place," said Goethe, as he ordered the coachman to stop. "I think we may as well try how a little breakfast would suit us in this good air."

...

The view from this spot, in the clear morning light of the autumn sun, was truly magnificent.

...

We seated ourselves with our backs against the oak; so that, during breakfast, we had constantly before us the extensive view over half Thuringia.

...

"I have very often been in this spot," said he, "and of late years I have often thought it would be the last time that I should look down hence on the kingdoms of the world, and their glories; but it has happened still once again, and I hope that even this is not the last time that we shall both spend a pleasant day here. We will, for the future, often come hither. One shrinks in the narrow confinement of the house. Here one feels great and free, as the great nature which one has before one's eyes, and as one ought, properly, always to be." "From this spot," continued Goethe, "I look down upon many

points which are bound up with the richest recollections of a long life. What have I not, in my youth, gone through yonder in the mountains of Ilmenau?

...

We took another good draught from the golden cup, and then drove round the northern side of the Ettersberg to the Ettersberg hunting-lodge. Goethe had all the chambers opened. . . He told me that Schiller had for some time inhabited the chamber at the western angle of the first story.

...

We returned into the open air, and Goethe led me, in a westerly direction, along a footpath into the wood.

"I still want to show you the beech," he said, "in which fifty years ago we carved our names." —"But how everything has changed, and how everything has grown!" — "Now here is the tree! You can see that it is still there in all its splendor." —"And our names are still perceptible, although they have become so indistinct and deformed that they can hardly be made out."²

To these names carved in the beech's bark one might add that in Goethe's life there was also a famous episode, in which he used a pencil to write, on the wooden wall of a gamekeeper's lodge, what was perhaps his most renowned poem, the second of the "Wanderer's Nightsongs," "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh"³

The scene as given provokes several questions, initiated by the incongruity of Goethe's name in this time and place—after all, he could never have been to this locale in New England to carve his name there (and was surely no longer living when the structure was built). The scene brings together an observation tower, clearly connected, through the novel's inner logic and Hagen's later statement, with the Nazi camps; the *carved* trace of Goethe's name in the wooden balustrade, echoing Goethe's own carved name in the beeches (N.B.: *Buchen*), which he showed to Eckermann; the other names, which endure in pencil on the tower, perhaps echoing Goethe's poem "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh," written in pencil on the wooden wall of the hunting lodge. The hunting theme (the lodge in Eckermann) finds its echo in an actual gunshot in the woods around the tower, whose consequence is the leaping of a squirrel, in Russian "*belka*" or "*belochka*" (diminutive), anticipating Pnin's early love's appearance, in overwhelming reminiscence, later in the chapter. And Mira is implicit not only in the squirrel, but also in the penciled names *Miranda* and *Almira*, which accompany Goethe's name (along with Tom's, Mary's, and Jim's names) on the railings; even the name "Mary" is practically an anagram, reinforcing the same hidden function.

These traces produce both anticipation (in the chapter) and memory (markers of the past). To the extent that Goethe is long dead and never visited this place (whereas Mira is recently dead, but also never visited it), his carved name implies a certain degree of transcendence over death; the "action" here, such as it is, echoes Goethe's "Über allen Gipfeln" in its situation above the

2 Sept 26, 1827; Translation of final paragraph revised by *author*.

3 On this renowned poem see the detailed monograph by Wulf Segebrecht, "Johann Wolfgang Goethes Gedicht 'Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh' und seine Folgen." *Zum Gebrauchswert klassischer Lyrik. Text, Materialien, Kommentar*. München & Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978.

peak, over and among the trees. The poem, as well, with its final insistence on rest (“Ruhest du auch”) appears to unite nature, a view, and the anticipation of both ephemeral and final rest.

There are various echoes of *Conversations with Goethe* in the description’s language, from its mention of the view from the heights (cf. Eckermann, “We are now upon the western height;—the broad valley . . . lay before us”), to the list of trees in the surrounding wood, and, of course, the Ettridge-Ettersberg name echo is not subtle (and was noted, along with Mira’s name embedded in the tower’s names, by Omry Ronen (249)). The old-fashioned wag or humorist (his sense of humor is old-fashioned) finds himself in a situation (on the outlook tower with an extensive view of the landscape) which is reminiscent of some particulars of Goethe's biography, including Weimar, Ettersberg, Buchenwald, and the carving of Goethe's and Schiller's names on a beech-tree (which prompts him to carve), and Goethe's liking for a spot on Ettersberg that allows him to overview an extensive landscape of Thuringia. Significantly, Nabokov’s knowledge of these scenes in Goethe’s life most likely derives from Eckermann’s work. Thus, the juxtaposition forces a reader who knows Goethe, and who knows Eckermann’s book (and perhaps also the Weimar region, as Nabokov may have), to consider the carved name and the pencil-written names in the context of Goethe-related lore.

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