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THE RIVER KUR IN *BEND SINISTER*

In my monograph on Nabokov and painting, I discuss the vertically falling oversized snowflakes, or as Nabokov puts it, “the stylized snowscape of the ‘Art World,’ *Mir Iskusstva*”—the imagery that spans over forty years, from his first novel to his memoir (*Speak, Memory* 236). This imagery serves the writer as an important metonymic device that encapsulates his Russian past and enables him to express nostalgia for the bygone years of his golden childhood and early youth. This is perhaps one of the reasons the *World of Art* painters, such as Léon Bakst, Alexander Benois, Konstantin Somov, and particularly Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, his drawing master, were so dear to Nabokov, as he viewed this quintessential representation through the prism of their pictorial portrayal of St. Petersburg, his beloved city (see Shapiro 102–5).

This snowscape imagery undergoes a drastic transformation in *Bend Sinister*. It appears in the episode in which Adam Krug finds himself on the bridge over the Kur. The river runs through Padukgrad, the city so named after the dictator Paduk, similarly to the actual Soviet cities named after the Bolshevik dictators—Leningrad, Stalingrad. While standing on the bridge, Krug notices an unusual phenomenon: “very large, greyish, semitransparent, irregularly shaped snowflakes slowly and vertically descended; and when they touched the dark water of the Kur, they floated upon it instead of melting at once, and this was strange” (*Bend Sinister* 189). Even though these “very large [...] and vertically descended” snowflakes are evocative of the *World of Art* snow, they, by contrast, are “greyish, semitransparent, irregularly shaped,” and do not melt in “the dark water.” This “strange” scenery, coupled with “the sky quilted with a livid and billowy expanse of thick cloud” and exuding the air of “the smiling sadness,” presents an ominous sight (*ibid.*).

The word “Kur” has multitudinous, predominantly negative connotations. Among them is the name of the Sumerian “great below” which means “the Nether World” (Kramer 76). Kur may also stand for “the monstrous creature that lived at the bottom of the ‘great below’” (*ibid.*). It is instructive that Kur is associated in Sumerian mythology with water, specifically with “the primeval waters”: “when Kur is destroyed, these

waters rise to the surface of the earth, and all cultivation with its resulting vegetation becomes impossible” (Kramer 78).¹

In addition, this fictional hydronym in *Bend Sinister* may be linked to Kura, the river that flows through the city of Gori, the birthplace of Stalin—one of Paduk’s prototypes. Although “Kur” in German means “cure,” usually by drinking or bathing in healing waters, it evidently carries ironic connotations in the episode, considering the river’s menacing description.² Lastly, in Russian, “kur” is synonymous with “*petukh*” (rooster). The appellation is best known as part of the proverb “*kak kur v oshchip*.” The proverb, which literally means “as a rooster to be plucked,” is tantamount to the English saying “to end up in a jam”—indeed, the predicament, in which Krug finds himself in the tyrannical, totalitarian Padukgrad.³

Thus, the persistent nostalgic imagery of the *World of Art* snow, associated in Nabokov’s oeuvre with his blissful years in Imperial Russia, undergoes fundamental change in *Bend Sinister*. As the Kur river episode indicates, the described aberration of nature, suggestive of an apocalyptic vision, is concomitant with the societal abnormality which finds its ultimate expression in the novel’s Communazist-like dictatorship.

REFERENCES

¹ Nabokov could familiarize himself with Kramer’s monograph on Sumerian mythology, published in 1944, while working on the novel which he completed in May of 1946 (see *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 192). The writer’s familiarity with Kramer’s scholarship, albeit not necessarily at the time of writing *Bend Sinister*, is evidenced many years later in one of the discarded index cards for *Pale Fire*; see Roth. Curiously, in his memoir, Nabokov compares the early twentieth-century Russian society to the Sumerian one: “I suppose it would be easy for a detached observer to poke fun at all those hardly palpable people who imitated in foreign cities a dead civilization, the remote, almost legendary, almost Sumerian mirages of St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1916 (which, even then, in the twenties and thirties, sounded like 1916–1900 B. C.)” (*Speak, Memory* 282).

² I am indebted to Eric Naiman for this suggestion.

³ Nabokov uses the proverb’s variant, «как кур во щи» (“like a rooster in cabbage soup”), in his letter to Véra of June 19, 1926 (*Letters to Véra* 86 and 572).

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