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PEEKING THROUGH A *KWAZINKA*

Nabokov wrote *Bend Sinister* in the years immediately following WWII; it was published in 1947. The plot follows professor of philosophy Adam Krug as he tries to escape the influence of his former schoolmate, Paduk, and his burgeoning dictatorship. As Nabokov remarks in his 1963 introduction, the novel is not a condemnation of dictatorship, nor about his ideological position concerning the Nazis or the Bolsheviks. In fact, he makes clear that his work is not interested in pedestrian social and political critique: “There exist few things more tedious than a discussion of general ideas inflicted by author or reader upon a work of fiction.... I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment,” (*BS xii*). Our beloved contrarian! However, it is no secret that he rather delights in the role of linguistic autocrat. The real-world context preceding the novel’s conception can, instead, be construed as chiefly relevant to its aesthetic concerns.

In *Bend Sinister* as elsewhere, Nabokov has constructed a language (broadly slavo-germanic, with a bit of Latin), words and phrases of which are sprinkled around, often accompanied by their English “translations”. This vernacular halfheartedly serves the world-building of the novel, while wholeheartedly weakening the boundaries of that very world, exposing its construction as product of the whims of its ultimate dictator: the author. The author, who in this novel (as in others by Nabokov) curiously fuses with the narrator, encouraging the reader to question the conventional distinction between the two entities.

One such moment in which language renders suspect this distinction – and which simultaneously parodies and philosophizes the possibilities and limits of language – occurs in chapter 11, when Paduk summons Krug to a meeting. Upon his arrival Krug is subject to a security search. The inspection of his person becomes an opportunity for one soldier to test another on his competence. The latter is sent behind a screen, while a vial marked H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> (sulfuric acid) is hidden by the former under Krug’s left armpit (a sinistral detail) (*BS* 125). “Having had Krug assume a ‘natural position’, [the soldier] called his companion, who approached with an eager smile and immediately found the object: upon which he was accused of having peeped through the *kwazinka* [a slit between the folding parts of a screen]” (*BS* 125).

Recognition and appreciation of the word's construction depends on the reader's ability to deconstruct it. *Kwazinka* is a likely echo of the Russian *skvazhina*, evoking a *hole*, or a *chink*, a *well*, even perhaps a *rift*. In *kwazinka* we can also read the Latin *quasi*. *Kwazi* ('kwā,zī) is the International Phonetic Alphabet's rendering of *quasi*, a nod to the influence of Latin, and the lexicographical use of the IPA to distinguish pronunciation – it is well known that Nabokov was an avid reader of the dictionary. The word *kwazinka* even seems to fold in half like the screen, its two *k* sounds hinged by the letter *z*, itself hopelessly folded. Nabokov demonstrates how all the elements of a word are potential evidence of its constructedness, and therefore of the word's arbitrariness and even potential meaninglessness. This “screen” and the demarcation of its existence in the vernacular becomes a slit in the narrative screen through which we may catch sight of the author-narrator. And while it is an opportunity for us to glimpse him, it is also an opportunity for the author-narrator to peak through to the reader and reflect on his own process. He, too, is acknowledging the product of his conquest of language – the reader's experience of his creation, and how it contributes to her experience of the novel as a product that exposes its own construction. In the diminutive suffix *-ka*, we might discern a perfunctory attempt to narrow this slit even further, to draw the reader back into the construction.

A final peculiar detail is the vial, marked H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>: sulfuric acid. In this context, H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, presented only in its chemical formula – and not translated – seems to echo the abstraction of an *idea* that lies behind every word, suggesting that every word may only be an imperfect translation. Moreover, the highly corrosive nature of sulfuric acid is guilty of corroding both words and the efficacy of Paduk's attempts at social order.

After the *kwazinka* dispute, Krug is introduced to the “*zemberl* [chamberlain]” (BS 125). If given a German pronunciation (hard *s*, throaty *r*), this word sounds like *semble*. It is only the semblance of an authentic word. The comedic bureaucracy of the Padukian regime is incarnate in the characters themselves. Just as they are entirely incompetent and create the parodic bureaucratic institutions within which they function, so is the language they use to communicate evidence of the same arbitrariness and ineptitude. As the word suggests, the *zemberl* himself only *seems* to have a purpose.

Having been practically torn from his home, Krug arrives at Paduk's palace still in slippers. A wholly inadequate collection of footwear is accumulated for him from throughout the palace at the request of the *zemberl*: “a number of seedy-looking pumps, a girl's tiny slipper trimmed with moth-eaten squirrel fur, some bloodstained arctics, brown shoes, black

shoes and even a pair of half-boots with screwed on skates. Only the last fitted Krug” (*BS* 125). Though a chamberlain is supposed to manage the household, all he does is manage Krug’s appearance. The author-narrator may be supposed to manage the novel’s various aspects, and we may be under the impression that language merely constitutes the surface. The *zemberl*’s preoccupation with appearance betrays the inadequacies of the entire regime in much the same way the author-narrator’s occupation with language evidences his larger aesthetic considerations. This *semblance* of meaning and order faces new development and reincarnates itself rather blatantly in the later *Pale Fire*, in the similarly named Zembla.

Nabokov demonstrates how a word’s supposed simplicity can instead betray a greater, more complex incomprehensibility. Translation becomes a technically impossible task. While a dictatorship is meant to streamline governmental bureaucracy, under this regime bureaucracy only multiplies. While readers are entertained by a veritable circus of agencies, departments, and incompetent lackeys, we are simultaneously – and uncomfortably – forced to acknowledge the disadvantage of the novel’s constructed language, and, in a baring of the device, of such a word that leaves a slit in its definition. A mongrel Latinate and Slavic amalgam, the *kwazinka* represents only two or more parts of disparate wholes, languages which are not mutually intelligible – a conflict illustrated by the regime’s myriad branches, as they struggle ad infinitum to reach expressive and conceptual accord throughout the novel.

#### Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Bend Sinister*. Time, Inc., 1964.