

Reimagining Nabokov: The Russian Émigré in Germany and America

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Abstract:

This paper investigates how Vladimir Nabokov's experience as an exiled writer in Germany and in America serves as a model for the protagonists in his last Russian novel "Gift" (1938) and his English novel "Invitation of a Beheading" (1957), in which exile is the primary theme. Nabokov takes an unprecedented approach to exile: rather than lamenting the loss of his homeland, he represents exile as a natural state of being, a state of perpetual transition. His displaced characters grapple with severed roots, linguistic barriers, the fragile, reconstructive power of memory, and the lasting trauma of a lost home country. Even though the protagonists, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev and Pnin, are both true exiles, they demonstrate remarkably different responses to their dislocations; however, these novels, when read in tandem, illustrate Nabokov's depiction of exile, his transient status, and his transcendence of exile through creativity and art. The paper explores some of the psychological implications of the exile in Nabokov's life and in the two novels, focusing on the roles of memory and imagination. Drawing on specific examples, the paper argues that his relocation to America is the illustration of successful immigration, the foundation of which is a desire to embrace American culture, showing respect to the country where he was initially a stranger.

Keywords: Nabokov, immigration, memory, exile, cultural studies

