

# The Nabokovian



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#### BEHEADING FIRST: ON NABOKOV'S TRANSLATION OF LEWIS CARROLL

*Ania v strane chudes* (Berlin: Gamaion, 1923), a masterful Russian retelling of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, was one of the first works in prose by young V. Sirin. Nabokov noted when interviewed by Alfred Appel in 1966, "In common with many English children (and I was an English child), I have been always very fond of Carroll." Like all Nabokov's writings, *Ania* was banned in Russia, and was first published there only in 1989.

In 1970, Simon Karlinsky ("Anya in Wonderland: Nabokov's Russified Lewis Carroll," *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations, and Tributes*, eds. A. Appel, Jr. & C. Newman, Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 310–315) wrote: "For the near future, Olenich-Gnenenko's awkward, misshapen *Alisa* [a Soviet translation of 1940--V.F.] seems fated to remain the standard *Alice* in Russian, while Nabokov's warm and witty *Anya* stays in exile on foreign bookshelves. Were she allowed to return to the country of her spiritual origin, *Anya* could easily supersede the ungainly incumbent."

Neither Karlinsky nor Nabokov knew about the new 1967 translation by Nina Demurova. In fact, Nabokov, who first read *Alice* in English at age six, "had never seen a Russian translation of it—either before or after making his" (letter of Véra Nabokov to Stephen Jan Parker, 18 September 1973). See also Appel & Newman (*op. cit.*, 375) where Nabokov himself says "Incidentally, I had not (and still have not) seen any other Rus-

sian versions of this book." Another generation passed before *Ania* came to Russia—but then she already faced strong competition from younger Russian *Alisas* by Demurova, Zakhoder, Shcherbakov, Orel, and others. The language changed as well, especially children's slang and folklore. In her *Lewis Carroll in Russia: translations of Alice in Wonderland, 1879–1989* (New York: Russian House, 1994), Fan Parker specifically, albeit not always justly, noted changes in the Russian language comparing various translations of *Alice*. Among other things, Parker stated that addressing Alice as "you" in the Russian second-person singular ("ty") instead of a polite plural ("vy") vulgarizes Carroll's text—a change probably hardly noticed by a modern Russian reader whose ear is accustomed to much more profound vulgarizations.

Warren Weaver (*Alice in Many Tongues. The Translations of Alice in Wonderland*, 1964) rated *Ania* "the best translation of the book into any language" (Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 197). Modern researchers agree (Demurova, N. M. "Alisa na drugikh beregakh" [Alice on Other Shores], Carroll, L. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Nabokov, V., *Ania v strane chudes*, Moscow, Raduga, 1992, 7–28; *id.* "Alice speaks Russian: The Russian translations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*." *Harvard Library Bulletin* 1994-1995, 5(4), 11–29; *id.*, "Vladimir Nabokov, translator of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*," *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. G. Shapiro, Cornell Univ. Press, 2003, 182–191; Tolstaia, N. I. "Russkaia sestra Alisy" [A Russian Sister of Alice], Carroll, L. *Ania v strane chudes*. *Perevod V. Nabokova*. Irkutsk, 1992, 112–116; Connolly, J. W. "*Ania v strane chudes*," *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (ed. V. Alexandrov), New York: Garland, 1995, 18–24; Vid, N. "Domesticated translation: The case of Nabokov's translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*," *Nabokov Online Journal*, 2008, 2).

In his "gleeful raid on the toys and tags of a Russian nursery" (Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 197), Nabokov carefully

leads Ania/Alice and her readers across abysses separating tongues and cultures. For instance, in the “dry lecture” on medieval Russian history (which supplants Carroll’s history of William the Conqueror), Nabokov’s Mouse explains how “...after Monomakh’s death, Kiev passed not to his brothers but to his sons, and became therefore a family property of the Monomakhovichs. . . . While they lived in friendship, their power in Kiev was strong; but when their relationships worsened..., the Olgovich princes rose against them, and took Kiev by force more than once. . . . But the Monomakhovichs, in their turn. . . .”

This text was taken by Nabokov verbatim from a famous textbook of Russian history (St. Petersburg, 1909–1910) by Sergei Platonov (1860–1933). This is mentioned as a known fact by Igor Vdovenko (“Raspolozhenie teksta v prostranstve kul’tury” [The Position of the Text in Cultural Space], *Nauki o kul’ture – shag v XXI vek*, Moscow, 2000; *Strategii kul’turnogo perevoda* [The Strategies of Cultural Translation], SPb, Ross. inst. istorii iskusstv, 2007), but to my knowledge this source was never before identified by researchers of Nabokov’s *Ania*. Karlinsky (1970, 313) talks about “some 19th-century history text,” and Alexander Floria (“‘Angel’skii iazyk’ V. Sirina. ‘Alisa v strane chudes’ v interpretatsii V. V. Nabokova” [The ‘Angelic Language’ of V. Sirin. ‘Alice in Wonderland’ as Interpreted by V. V. Nabokov]. *Almanakh perevodchika*, Moscow, 2001, 50–54) even considered this fragment a parody of Karamzin’s “History of Russia.” A prominent historian, S. F. Platonov, who lectured until 1926 at Leningrad University, was in charge of the Archaeological Institute and Pushkinskii Dom; in 1930 he was arrested and accused of plotting with Germany for “restoration to the Russian throne of his former student, Grand Duke Andrei Vladimirovich.” Platonov was exiled to Samara and died there.

For those children who read Nabokov’s translation in 1923, the textbook words about Kievan struggles were not at all dry—they bore a fresh echo of the Russian civil war, at the same time described by Bulgakov in his *White Guard* (1924).

On her dive “down to rabbit-hole” (“nyrok v krolichyiu noruku”), Ania finds herself in a hybrid world, much like Ada’s Antiterra. A brass plaque in Nabokov’s *Wonderland* still says “Dvorianin Krolik Trusikov (Nobleman Rabbit Bunnyson)” where Carroll has only “W. Rabbit.” Pet’ka and Iashka (Carroll’s Pat and Bill) call the White Rabbit “Vashe blagorodie” (Your Nobleness), a form of address long gone in Soviet Russia of 1923. Isn’t that a Pet’ka from Alexander Blok’s *The Twelve* (1918)? Just a few years ago in the Crimea, nineteen year-old Nabokov wrote a long, still unpublished poem, *The Two*—his anti-Bolshevik reply to the formerly beloved Blok.

Here, I must quote a quaint “Victorian” parody of *The Twelve* by Edmund Valpy Knox (1881–1971), a satirical poet, editor of *Punch* in 1932–1949, and the father of Penelope Fitzgerald:

I said to the moon, “The night goes soon;  
Katya is false to me;  
She is mine from her pointed head to her shoon  
By a Soviet law’s decree,  
And she flirts with Petka, the lousy loon,  
And Vanka the bourjoo-ee. . .

Nabokov in Cambridge could have easily seen this verse, published in *Punch* on February 23, 1921 under the pen name “Evoe.”

A number of the studies listed above, in English and Russian, discuss Nabokov’s *Ania* in some detail. These works mainly focused on Nabokov’s old-fashioned Russification of the text, on his ebullient rendering of Carroll’s endless puns, wordgames, nonsense, names, and verse parodies. However, none of these authors, to my knowledge, noticed Nabokov’s peculiar translation of a key paragraph in the last scene of the last (12th) chapter, “Pokazanie Ani” [Ania’s Evidence]”:

“Pust’ prisiashnye obsudiat prigovor,” skazal

Korol'... "Net, net," *prervalo Koroleva*. "Spervakazn,' a potom uzh prigovor!"

("Let the jury discuss the sentence," said the King... "No, no," interrupted the Queen. "Execution first—sentence afterwards!").

In Carroll's original text, the Queen says something quite different: her famous line is "*Sentence first—verdict afterwards!*"

In her commentary to *Ania's* parallel edition with the original *Alice*, Nina Demurova (1992, 310–311) explains the paradox contained in the words of the Queen, which should be "easily noticeable to anybody familiar with the English judiciary system... The Jury, after deliberations, makes a decision (Russ. *reshenie*--V.F.) of being guilty or not guilty (*verdict*). Then the judge announces the *sentence* (Russ. *prigovor*--V.F.) based on the decision of the jury."

Carroll's Queen switches the steps of the traditional judiciary procedure, hence the logical nonsense: how could one be sentenced before the guilt is established? Well, we in the USSR knew how—but the British citizen Alice with centuries of tradition behind her is fuming: "Stuff and nonsense! The idea of having the sentence first!"

However, in Nabokov's translation the procedures are not only switched but also moved one notch up, which changes the situation rather dramatically. Nabokov says: "*Execution first – sentence afterwards!*"

This, indeed, is "stuff and nonsense." A *sentence* could be appealed or commuted, even without a jury system. An absolute monarch could do that (one recalls Dostoyevsky's case). But *execution*, once done, can hardly be appealed.

I am inclined to think that Nabokov's "enhanced" translation of the "Sentence first" phrase was an intentional modification. However, this shift in the Queen's line caused an obvious error in the first line of the quoted paragraph (the King's words), which is translated "Let the jury discuss the sentence." Carroll's

King, of course, says "Let the jury consider their verdict."

Later Russian translators also had some difficulties following Carroll's legal terminology in this paragraph. Demurova's translation (1967) reads:

"*Pust' prisiazhnye reshaiut, vinoven on ili net, skazal Korol'*"... "*Net!*" *skazala Koroleva*. "*Pust' vynosiat prigovor! A vinoven on ili net, potom razberemsia!*" ("Let the jury decide whether he is guilty or not," said the King... "No!" said the Queen. "Let [them] announce the sentence! We'll figure out afterwards whether he is guilty or not!")

Here, we see a mix-up in the Queen's line similar to Nabokov's version of the King's line: it appears that the Queen orders the *jurors* to announce the *sentence* instead of the *verdict*. But the sentence must be announced by the judge, and the King himself is this judge, as the text clearly states earlier. The King keeps bothering the jury because he wants to hear their verdict in order to be able to announce the sentence.

In Vladimir Orel's translation (1987) the situation is even less clear:

"*Pust' prisiazhnye vynosiat prigovor,*" *povtoril on*... "*Net uzh!*" *zaiavila Koroleva*. "*Ty im sperva skazhi, kakoj prigovor vynosit', a potom pust' sebe vynosiat na zdorovye.*"

("Let the jury announce the sentence", repeated he [the King]... "No way!" – declared the Queen. "You tell them first which sentence to announce, and then let them announce it as much as they wish.")

A retelling by Mikhail Blekhman has (independently?) the same shift as in Nabokov's translation:

"*Prisiazhnye, oglasite prigovor!*," *prikazal on*...

"Net," vmeshalas' Koroleva. "Snachala pust'privedut v ispolnenie, a potom prigovarivai sebe skol'ko khochesh'."

("The jury, announce the sentence!" ordered the [king]... "No!" the Queen interrupted. "Let him be executed first – afterwards he can be sentenced as much as one wishes.")

On the other hand, Boris Zakhoder in his retelling (1972), while omitting the difficult term "verdict," follows Carroll's text very closely:

"Udaliaites' na soveshchanie!" skazal Korol'... "Nehego tam!" skazala Koroleva. "Sperva prigovor, posoveshchaiutsa potom."

("Withdraw for your deliberations!" said the King... "No need!" said the Queen. "Sentence first, deliberations afterwards.")

A precise translation was offered by Alexander Shcherbakov (1977) who used the word *reshenie* (decision), in this context synonymous with "verdict":

"Pust' prisiazhnye vynesut reshenie," ...povtoril Korol'... "Net," skazala Koroleva. "Snachala prigovor – potom reshenie."

("Let the jury announce [their] decision," repeated [the King]... "No," said the Queen. "Sentence first – decision afterwards.")

Other recent translators (A. Kononenko, Iu. Nesterenko) use "verdikt" and therefore easily manage to follow Carroll's exact words, "Sentence first – verdict afterwards."

Close meanings and little-known legal terminology confused some of the translators. Such a confusion is obviously related

to the absence of trial by jury in the USSR, where "prokuror daval srok" ("the prosecutor gave one a jail term"), somewhat like Carroll's Snark who (in the Barrister's Dream) serves as a defense attorney but also reads the verdict for the jury, and declares the sentence for the judge.

The trial by jury (introduced in Russia only by Alexander II in 1864, in Carroll's time) was so alien to Soviet language that Boris Zakhoder tried to pun with his children readers: "Do not confuse jurors (*prisiazhnye*) with trace horses (*pristiazhnye*), and you will have as much reason to be proud of yourself as Alice. Even more: both are found these days much less often than a hundred years ago."

The expression "[*gosпода*] *prisiazhnye* [*zasedateli*]" ("gentlemen of the jury") was mocked as outdated and ridiculous already by Ostap Bender (I. Il'f & E. Petrov's *Twelve Chairs*, 1928), ten years after the Bolsheviks did away with the former judiciary system. Zakhoder's Aesopian pun – unnoticed by the censorship – is very bitter: it was during that time (1970s) that Soviet judges handed down sentences to political dissidents. In the West, meanwhile, jurors did not disappear along with trace horses. Indeed, one of the most emotional shocks for a Soviet émigré in the USA is the discovery of universal *jury duty*. Good or bad, the verdict here indeed is decided by a dozen often ill-educated Bill the Lizards ("Iashki-iashcheritsy") rather than by a *troika* of "state judicial counselors" or "commissars in dusty helmets." Not much has been changed in the Russian system where "the poor little juror (it was Bill, the Lizard) could not make out at all what had become of it..."

Let us recall who read *Ania* in 1923: children born during the Great War, who escaped with their parents from Soviet Russia only three or four years ago. ("It was much pleasanter at home," thought poor Alice.) At that time, Berlin housed several hundred thousand Russian refugees. Many of them had served as jurors in Russian pre-revolutionary courts, where they regularly used to acquit terrorists. They understood the

direct, bitter meaning of Nabokov's puns as they read *Ania* to their children and grandchildren in Berlin and Prague, Sofia and Belgrade. These children were to face more suffering when they grew up, and had few rabbit-holes to hide in; many of them indeed went right through the Earth, ending in "New Zealand or Australia."

It is often mentioned, quite tactlessly, how *Lolita* brought fame and wealth to her author. Not everybody knows, however, that *Ania* also played a crucial role in the fate of Nabokov who fled with his family from the Communists in 1919 to Europe and from the Nazis in 1940 to the USA. Nabokov wrote in 1970: "I recall with pleasure that one of the accidents that prompted Wellesley College to engage me as lecturer in the early forties was the presence of my rare *Anya* in the Wellesley collection of Lewis Carroll editions." This was Nabokov's first more or less permanent job in America, which he held until 1947.

The show trial of the Knave of Hearts, Vyshinsky-style, takes place in Chapters 11 and 12. We know from earlier chapters that the Queen orders beheadings left and right for everybody without any trial. It is not clear, though, that any executions actually take place: "Alice heard the King say in a low voice... 'You are all pardoned.'" The Gryphon also comments "It's all her fancy, that they never executes nobody."

At the same time, Carroll wrote: "I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion—a blind and aimless Fury." Her medieval "off with their head" motif is elaborately developed in Nabokov's *Priglasenie na kazn'* (1934, published 1935-36), which only in 1959 became known to the world as *Invitation to a Beheading*. As often noted, the novel's famous ending rhymes with the finale of *Alice in Wonderland*: "the whole pack [of cards] rose up into the air and came flying down upon her," and Alice woke up.

The beheading motif was a reality in Soviet Russia. Ellen Pifer (*Nabokov and the Novel*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1980, 182)

notes: "Both Nabokov's and Solzhenitsyn's treatments of the totalitarian state's mock trials call attention to the nightmarish logic made famous by Carroll's Victorian fantasy, in which the Queen of Hearts appropriately calls for the 'Sentence first—verdict afterwards'." Both Anna Akhmatova and Ariadna Efron (daughter of Marina Tsvetaeva) compared their life in the USSR with the world of *Through the Looking-Glass* (traditionally translated by the potent Russian neologism "Zazerkalye," Behind-the-Mirror-Land, invented by Vladimir Ashkenazi who published the first Russian translation of *Through the Looking-Glass* under the pen name "V. Azov" in 1924, and emigrated to Paris in 1926). As the literary scholar and translator Evgeny Vitkovsky recently wrote: "We were told that we lived in Wonderland, but it was a demagogical lie: for almost the entire twentieth century we lived Behind the Looking-Glass" ("Russkoe Zazerkalye," [www.vekperevoda.com](http://www.vekperevoda.com)).

The poet Olga Sedakova says: "For me, Nabokov's fantasy, his combinatorial imagination, undoubtedly bears the mark of *Alice*. This could be why many people see him as a "non-Russian" writer, too alienated from 'soulfulness'." Numerous traces of Carroll can be found in all Nabokov's novels, Russian and English. Humbert can be read as a slimy parody of the White Knight. The red-clad King of Zembla on his run from Ekwilists, as Brian Boyd noted (*The American Years*, 452; *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 182), reminds us of the solipsist Red King from *Through the Looking-Glass* (as Tweedledee explains to Alice, "...you're only a sort of thing in his dream!"). The King of Zembla's first name, Charles, is the real name of Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson). Antique, so-called "pre-Staunton," chess sets were red and white, but Russian translations follow modern chess colors: the Red King becomes a Black King, and the Carrollian connection of *Pale Fire* is less obvious.

Years later, Ada and Lucette appear behind another mirror; their teacher is one Krolik (Russian for Rabbit); but how distant they are from the Liddell sisters with their good old Wonder-

land! Simon Karlinsky's sharp eye noted already in 1970 that there is an Ada in *Ania*, who comes intact from the original *Alice* text. "Some exegete should be able to make something of this," remarks Karlinsky (*op. cit.*, 312), and I am tempted to try a little bit of rational exegesis.

Nabokov's Ania tries to distinguish herself from both Ada and Asia; the latter substitutes for Carroll's Mabel. Carrollian experts point at a possible word game (Ada + Mabel = Adam + Abel). Natalia Vid (2008) suggested that Nabokov replaced Mabel with Asia "emphasizing Alice's doubt about her identity by establishing sound similarity between the names": *Ania-Ada-Asia*. In my view, Nabokov clearly offers an additional word game: he implies here a sequence of a Doublets game invented by Carroll in 1877 (which is the same as *Pale Fire's* Word Golf). The permutation is possible since each of these three names has three Cyrillic letters (ADA-ASIA-ANIA). A missing Word Golf link in Russian can be only "Adia," a rare but possible abbreviation of also rare Adelle (known from Pushkin's poems) or Adelaida (Ada Veen's full name): *Ada-(Adia)-Asia-Ania*.

It has been noted that one of the reasons Nabokov changed Alice to Ania in the first place might have been that the Empress Alexandra of Russia (born Princess Alix of Hesse) was commonly known as Alice ("Alisa"), a very foreign name for a Russian ear. "It may be that Nabokov wanted to avoid the name of the unfortunate woman who was murdered by the Bolsheviks in Ekaterinburg on the night of 16–17 July 1918" (Demurova, 1995, 15; *id.*, 2003, 184). As for Asia, it is not a full name but an abbreviation of Anastasia (equally commonly abbreviated as Nastia); Asia was the family name of Anastasia Tsvetaeva, Marina's sister. There is a "Princess Asia Ratmirova" in Lidia Charskaia's *Volshebnaia skazka* [*A Magic Tale*] (1915). The most famous Anastasia in 1923 was the Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna, murdered by in 1918 along with her siblings and parents. In a way, therefore, "Princess Asia" is a daughter of a "Queen Alisa," and Ania's frantic search for her personality

could reflect the rumors that the Grand Duchess Anastasia survived.

On the other hand, the most famous Asia in Russian literature is Turgenev's eponymous young heroine (*Asia*, 1858) who, in fact, also happens to be an Ania! Turgenev's narrator ("N.N.") says: "her name was properly Anna; but Gagin [her brother--V.F.] always called her Asia, and I shall allow myself that privilege." Asia is a very unusual diminutive of Anna. It was also used, clearly under the influence of the novel, by Asia (Anna Alekseevna) Turgeneva (1890–1966). She was a second cousin twice removed of Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev and the first wife of the poet Andrei Bely.

Says Ania: "*Ia naverno znaiu, chto ia ne Ada... ia ubezhdena takzhe, chto ia i ne Asia, potomu chto ia znaiu vsiakuiu vsiachinu, ona-zhe-akh, ona tak malo znaet!*" ("I'm sure I'm not Ada ... and I'm sure I can't be Asia, for I know all sorts of things but she—oh, she knows so little!") Indeed, if only Asias and Lizas of Turgenev's (i.e. Carroll's) time knew as much as their granddaughter Ania would know in Berlin in 1923!

I thank Stan Kelly-Bootle for his comments on this note.

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#### ON THE ORIGINAL OF CHEEPLY: NABOKOV AND POPULAR CULTURE FADS

The original version of *Kamera obskura* (written 1931, published 1932–1933), but not Nabokov's reworking of the novel as *Laughter in the Dark* (written 1937, published 1938), opens:

Round about the year 1925 an amusing little animal enjoyed world-wide popularity. It is now almost forgotten, but for a period of some three to four years it was to be seen every-