

Borders and Butterflies in José Manuel Prieto's *Livadia/Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire*

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ABSTRACT: In Cuban novelist José Manuel Prieto's 'Russian Trilogy', and in particular, in the novel *Livadia/Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire* (1997), the experience of crossing borders and the reflection on how to pass safely, and often secretly, is vital. The geographical borders that take center stage are those of the former Soviet Union of the 1990s and adjacent Northern and Eastern countries as well as the Black Sea. In a first step, this essay examines the portrayals of changing borders, changing concepts of the border, as well as the protagonist's main strategies of border-crossing in the novel. In a second step, it explores the impact of a seemingly lighthearted metaphor, that of the butterfly to elucidate what I see as Prieto's protagonist's innovative approach of reacting to the experience of the border and his previous hyper-individualist attitudes when facing it. This experience is intrinsically linked to the role of writing and reading. Both hold a transcending potential for the narrator, as it is through acts of reading and reiterated attempts at writing that he begins to engage in a process of care for himself and others and devise transformative forms of being with others, even virtually, when a spatial or temporal separation prevents real encounters. His pondering on his previous restless crisscrossing of national confines may thus help, in the most fortunate moments, transcend spatial and conceptual confines, move from a geopolitical to an ecopolitical conceptualization of fugitive crossings, and broaden what he calls the notion of an 'imaginación aduanal.'

KEYWORDS: José Manuel Prieto, border-crossing, Livadia, butterfly

In Cuban novelist José Manuel Prieto's 'Russian Trilogy'—*Enciclopedia de una vida en Rusia/Encyclopedia of a Life in Russia* (1997), *Livadia/Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire* (1999), and *Rex* (2007)—, the experience of crossing borders and the reflection on how to pass safely, and often secretly, is vital (Newman "Negotiating Borders" 153). The geographical borders that take center stage in the fictional spaces of the novels are those of the former Soviet Union of the early 1990s and its surrounding states. Prieto's protagonist J. experiences the collapse of the Soviet bloc of communist countries and shifting of national boundaries in, or on his way to or away from, Novosibirsk, St. Petersburg, Helsinki, Istanbul, Odessa and Livadia, and, in the case of *Rex*, the Spanish coastal city Marbella.¹ He is a restless traveler and muses (*Enciclopedia*), a smuggler of night vision goggles, hunter of rare butterflies and love letters (*Livadia*), and finally the private tutor of the son of a fabulously wealthy Russian diamond forger (*Rex*). The narrative style of Prieto's novels is non-chronological, marked by digressions and parenthesis. His prose is metafictional and references a variety of discursive models: *Enciclopedia* emulates encyclopedia entries, *Livadia* refers to the model of the letter, and includes manifold allusions to the writings of Vladimir Nabokov, and finally *Rex* adapts the 'Art of the Pastiche' in Anke Birkenmaier's coining (123), being both a pastiche of the genre of the commentary (Newman "Negotiating Borders" 155) and homage to Marcel Proust's writing. All these strategies result in the

telling of their narratives in fragments, drafts and comments, hence inviting us to engage in combinatory and associative readings.

This essay examines in a first step the portrayals of changing borders, changing concepts of the border, as well as the protagonist's main strategies of border-crossing in *Livadia*.² The geographical borders that are described refer mainly to the borders of the former Soviet bloc with Northern and Eastern countries as well as the Black Sea, the shores of which were shared by the Soviet Union and Turkey and today by Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey. Here, J.'s deep loneliness, distrust of others, and radical attitude of fending for himself reference the experience of a reality in flux that was moving from a one-party system and state-regulated economy towards strong separatist endeavors and a surge in rough, including rogue, capitalist practices. In a second step, I will explore the impact of a seemingly lighthearted metaphor that is repeated at several instances in the narrative and becomes the title of the novel's English translation—that of the butterfly and in particular its wings, to elucidate what I see as Prieto's protagonist's innovative approach of reacting to the experience of the border and his previous hyper-individualist attitudes when facing it. In the novel, this experience is intrinsically linked to the role of writing and reading. Both hold a transcending potential for the solitary narrator-protagonist J., as it is through acts of reading and reiterated attempts at writing that he begins to engage in a process of care for

himself and others and devise alternative forms of being with others, even virtually, when a spatial or temporal separation prevents real encounters. His pondering on his previous restless crisscrossing of national confines may thus help, in the most fortunate moments, transcend spatial and conceptual confines. The butterfly as a figure of migration, mimicry and the subversion of mimesis becomes a catalyst to move from a geopolitical to an eopolitical conceptualization of crossings.

Prieto's narrator J. observes his surroundings with a singular acuity, yet he himself reveals very little of his fictional biography and avoids the slightest reference to the space of his adolescence.³ It is only indirectly that we find out that our narrator-guide, with his intrinsic knowledge of the Russian language, dialects and culture is a foreigner hailing from Latin America, more precisely Cuba.⁴ Unlike in other literary works that center on the experience of migration, J. is not yearning for a past space or coping with places of belonging. For years, he has rejoiced being on the road and non-belonging: 'atravesar las fronteras, hacer trabajar a mi favor el gradiente de precios entre una formación celular—un estado—y otra, saliendo cargado de oxígeno, de días enteros sin hacer nada, porque las ganancias, en un primer momento, habían sido fabulosas, y los gastos de nervios mínimos' (*Livadia* 229). During those years, he defines himself through movement, he travels to overcome distance and get rich, yet often gets lost in speed and finds himself trapped in mechanical and virtual motion.

J. is initially portrayed as a Virilian 'dromomaniac'⁵ par excellence: an international commuter that oftentimes either attempts to escape from someone or something (the border control, the mafia, painful memories, etc.) or catch someone or something (goods, another smuggler, a lost lover, a butterfly, a false diamond, or the most perfect epistolary novel ever written). He states that: 'Me interesaba mucho el problema de la frontera, desde un punto de vista práctico, claro está' (28). For this partially or entirely illegal crosser, aiming to outsmart others and make money on the black market, the border is initially the site of an adrenaline kick and source for a potentially good story to be told. He marvels at the story of an Estonian-Russian border crossing he had heard told, during which,

habían pasado por la frontera con Estonia cientos de personas, cientos de contrabandistas. Un sueño. Los diarios no publicaron nada sobre aquel incidente, su relevancia política.... meses después, en Varsovia o en Berlín, uno podía encontrarse a personas que contaban sobre aquella noche sin luna en la que, desde las profundidades de Rusia, como un ejército de lémures, echaron a andar las primeras divisiones de contrabandistas y se pudo pasar de todo.... Yo viajé a Ivangorod cuando el recuerdo de aquella noche todavía alentaba historias contadas durante horas en el restaurante de la estación ferroviaria...[Ahora] pasar exigía presencia de ánimo, la posibilidad de tener que

arrojar la carga y correr. Rusia había traído a militares sin práctica alguna desde guarniciones muy lejanas, en los Urales o Bashkiria, con escasa imaginación aduanal, dispuestos a confiscarte un reloj pulsera para detener la expoliación del país (28-29).

A combination of keen observation, luck, and quick wits are fundamental for a successful passing and financial gain. Prieto's 'imaginación aduanal'⁶ points at the jointure of creativity and resourcefulness that is needed at the threshold of the border (both for the illegal crosser and the border agent). In addition to this imagination, it takes an exercised coolness, acquired during countless customs inspections.⁷

His initial strategy to surpass spatial limitations is to be in sync with an outside speed or even attempt to beat it. He describes this yearning in a passage in parenthesis about an observation of a farm-worker:

(...con la cara tiznada de trabajar en el campo, [a quien vi] saltar desde la cama de un camión en marcha a otro que viajaba a la misma velocidad. Yo observaba la escena desde un tren también en marcha como en uno de esos problemas mentales que sirven para explicar la relatividad del movimiento. El hombre aterrizó sobre sus pies, se tambaleó un momento recuperando el equilibrio y se aferró a la baranda del segundo camión, riendo.) (181)

When reading the passage above, it is hard not to be reminded of Paul Virilio's now classical description of a passenger looking out of the window of a train and seeing a landscape in motion, included in his *Essai sur l'insécurité du territoire*, published in 1976. In his study, Virilio elucidates what he terms to be the conquest of the newest continent, that of velocity and its relation to visual perception (256-7).⁸ While J. admires the man's ability to cope with the fast mechanical speed, and even play with relativity, he himself is not as successful a commuter on this new Virilian continent. He miscalculates movement, repeatedly misses his trains, and instead of being in charge of, he feels to be at the mercy of an external motion and inscrutable capricious will that decides whether or not he can advance and cross a border. J.'s yearned-for dominance of space turns into a sensation of spatial and moreover existential insecurity. In a passage when he escapes Istanbul together with V., a young woman whom he had helped getting away from a bordello, the two of them illegally embark on a container ship towards the Ukrainian port city Odessa. J. has bribed the captain who allows both stowaways to hide in the motor room of the vessel. In deep darkness, the two are anxiously waiting for the engines to be turned on. Finally,

[!]ojos, en algún punto de la oscuridad, oíamos trabajar por fin el motor a toda máquina. Los pistones del diesel

entrando y saliendo, chorreando aceite, dos tiempos arriba y dos tiempos abajo, holgadamente, deslizándose dentro de la cámara de ignición, que los había estado esperando—quería crearlo así—desde hacía mucho tiempo, convirtiéndose aquel abrazo en un motor o causa primaria de algo, de una historia que echaría a andar en la costa norte del Mar Negro, en Livadia (268).

Besides the eulogizing tone of the mechanical accomplishment of the motor and partially sexual innuendo of the passage (V. and J. do have sex during their passage, yet she will leave him as soon as she reaches her country), J. notices his utter dependency on a suborned captain and the external speed of a diesel machine. He realizes that his idea of being in charge of motion has been an illusion. To return to Virilio, in his *L'horizon négatif* and the essay 'The Third Interval: A Critical Transition', the theorist similarly highlights the potential of an individual's sense of non-belonging and related existential disquiet. The anthropologist Marc Augé adds to this an exploration of solitude as a consequence of the passing of a momentary space of passage. In *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Augé examines the logic of excessive circulation through places in late capitalist, western, urban environments that do not allow for individual inscription. Examples of those locations are airports, trains, numbered hotel rooms, malls, and subway corridors. According to Augé, in such formal surroundings, human beings undergo an intense isolation that creates a peculiar form of solitude (117). Prieto's fictional spaces differ in part from Virilio's and Augé's, as they are less 'high tech' and less often created within a late but rather within a sudden capitalist framework. Nevertheless, in *Livadia*, too, the feeling of inertia during instances of external high speed oftentimes results in a profound lonesomeness for J.. In the passage quoted above, J.'s awareness of his inability to influence external movement parallels his sensing of the illusory nature of the projected love story with V.. Once they arrive in her home country, V. abandons him, and all that remains to him are the letters from her that suddenly reach him from a nowhere place, while he is staying in a guesthouse in Livadia attempting to catch a rare butterfly for a client, and write the perfect response letter to V..⁹ He will fail in both endeavors.

Related to speed, a second strategy of border-crossing that J. admires initially is that of being barely visible or entirely invisible. He dreams of traveling not only at the speed of light, but also of being too small or too large for others to perceive him. Yet this yearned-for state that he invokes on many occasions also proves to be unattainable. He recognizes that not being perceived by others and not partaking in a shared chronotopos ultimately excludes the invisible being from understanding that very environment. Also, he realizes spacetime does not pause when an individual leaves it, but alters and thus excludes an invisible or super-fast traveller from partaking in it in a 'future' by not recognizing it and being recognized by it anymore. *Livadia* describes this in a parable about a man who

passes through space with the same ease as that of 'la hoja de un cuchillo caliente [que] hunde la mantequilla' (51). After his jubilant travel to the past and in invisibility, the world he returns to is not his world any more: 'Ha regresado a un mundo distinto, que gira muy lejos de su órbita anterior' (51). These speculative travels cause an increasing bewilderment in J., who realizes that 'cada vez, con mayor frecuencia, yo estaba desordenando mi vida' (51). The traveler, who finds out that he is not able to return to and recognize a world he has left before, is trapped in an alternate space-time that again accentuates his existential solitude.

In this context, it is noteworthy that prior to attempting to catch the rare butterfly in Crimea, J. had made his money by selling night vision goggles fabricated for the Soviet military; his sales pitch being the promise to potential buyers that they would see everything and everybody without being seen themselves. Yet his own obsession with the perfect night vision and temporary annulment of one's own corporeity in order to control a surrounding space turns out to be yet another, now optical, illusion that even impacts his perception during daytime. One of the instances J. obsessively returns to in his musing is the moment when V. abandoned him. He saw her running to catch a train, yet did not recognize her: '¿Cómo pude no reconocerla? ¿Cómo pude no darme cuenta de que me abandonaría en Odessa?' (103). Awareness comes belatedly; a future with V. has slipped through J.'s fingers. This he only realizes once he starts drafting the beginning of his response to V.'s letters that reach him in Livadia.

Prieto's postmodern, metafictional universe ultimately portrays speed and invisibility as not so secure and powerful modes of controlling a shared space and crossing porous border environments. Instead, it proposes lingering and deceleration as forms of disturbance and resistance to a pre-determined external, systemic pace or utter stasis. It is only when he comes to rest at the guest house in Crimea at a great distance away from his previous life of hustle and bustle carrying goods from one point to another that J. becomes aware of his previous lack of agency and blind acceptance of concepts such as border, success, or belonging. In this recognition, and during a short exchange of greetings with the townspeople, he discovers a new consciousness and even a home beyond his prior obsessive restlessness and lack of self-reliance: 'Uno va descansando en la cara roja del quiosquero,.. la bata jamás blanca de la mujer que vende kvas, el asirio limpiabotas' (290). The townspeople become 'jalones puestos aquí para que no equivoquemos el camino, nos deslicemos rápidamente a casa' (290). The stay at the guesthouse is the only time where J. experiences a feeling of being at place and at home, and this, despite his landlady's obsessive interfering in his day-to-day life, or his neighbor's repeated spying on him and even breaking into his room and stealing one of V.'s letters, which J. later retrieves by intruding into his neighbor's room to get it back.

The location of J.'s profound reflection, the town of Livadia in the Republic of Crimea, is yet another multi-layered allusion to

the importance of the topic of changing national borders, changing concepts of the border and belonging, as well as vastly different strategies to deal with the experience of crossing, and also in the case of Livadia dwelling at the threshold of a border. The splendid summer residence of the last Russian Tsar Nicholas II, Livadia, is situated on the southern tip of the Crimean peninsula, which was part of the Russian Empire from 1783 to the Revolution in 1917 and again the Soviet Union from 1918 to 1991. Among the most momentous encounters of the 20th century that took place there was the Yalta Conference at the end of World War II, in February of 1945, during which the post-war reorganization of Europe and Germany were defined. In the Russian and Ukrainian historic imagination, Crimea has held a special status (not unlike Cuba in the context of the Spanish colonies). The former easternmost tip of the Russian Empire, still partially associated with the late Tsarist splendor, became a tourist figurehead of the Soviet Union. In the novel, this is referenced via J.'s residing in a run-down summer vacation residence for former party members.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing Ukrainian independence, Crimea remained part of Ukraine. Yet in 2014, it was annexed by the Russian Federation that staged a 'referendum denounced as illegitimate by 100 countries in an UN vote' (Dobrokhotova 'Pro-Russian Activist...'). Vladimir Putin's response to the international criticism was the essentialist statement that Crimea was "'sacred" Russian land' (Dobrokhotova 'Pro-Russian Activist...'). While *Livadia* was written prior to the recent Russian annexation of Crimea, Prieto is acutely aware of the symbolism of the space. The fact that his protagonist reflects on his many past border-crossings at this specific site that belonged to different nations and was the location of the establishment of the post-war borders, highlights the centrality of the theme and in particular the relativity and volatility of concepts of the border. J.'s initial motivation to visit Livadia, however, is not to write a meditation on the concept of the border, but to catch a butterfly that may or may not be extinct.

The nocturnal butterflies in Prieto's novel are first a reference to the women at the nightclub, and to the ever elusive and tempting V. as their epitome (297). It is furthermore the quest for a butterfly that brings J. to Crimea: his client Stockis, an avid collector and trader, asks him to catch a rare butterfly, 'el *yazikus* [*euxinius*], mariposa del emperador' (230), which for some unexplained reason J. holds to still exist on the peninsula. Prieto's butterfly is of course an entirely literary creature: *yazikus*, from the Russian *yazyk*, and *yazik* in Ukrainian is the east Slavic lexeme for 'tongue' or 'language', while *euxinius* refers to the Greek name for the Black Sea, 'Pontos Euxinios.' In addition to the geographical reference, the adjective *euxinus* means 'hospitable' in everyday Greek.²⁰ Moreover, it is a clear homage to Vladimir Nabokov. While *Livadia* contains a wealth of allusions to the Russian-American writer, the multifold references to the butterfly might well be its most obvious one.

Nabokov's lifelong love for butterflies is well documented.

Alan Levy summarizes it at the beginning of his *Vladimir Nabokov. The Velvet Butterfly*:

Some of his discoveries have been named after him – and his memory speaks with rapture of "that blessed black night in the Wasatch Range" when he boxed one of them, now classified as Nabokov's Pug [*Eupithecia nabokovi*]... From 1942 to 1948, while lecturing on literature at Wellesley, Nabokov was also a Harvard Research Fellow in lepidoptera at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. Toward the end of any Nabokov novel, when its artistic "circle" is complete, a butterfly or moth will make a fleeting, incidental appearance (Levy 6).

Butterflies are connected to the artifact of the book, and to the act of writing in many of Nabokov's narratives. In the early novel *The Gift*, published in 1939, the narrator Fyodor, an emigre author from Russia living in Berlin, marvels over 'his father's astonishing lepidopterological library' (Boyd 56). He is a particularly avid reader of 'the first tomes of his father's *The Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire*' (Boyd 56), a title too close to the English translation of Prieto's novel to be coincidental. Nabokov's experience of cultural and linguistic uprooting, the knowledge of the difficulties of an author to write against the backdrop state censorship (his *Lolita* was only published in Russia in 1989), and his firm rejection of social realism as the sole prescribed form of literary expression in the USSR resonates well with Prieto's experiences and worldview. Prieto's linguistic butterfly is a fleeting object of obsessions and desires. Its well-nigh weightlessness, 'de poco menos que un gramo de peso podía costar... vendida para la colección de un jeque petrolero, diez mil petrodólares' (230) gives it an almost virtual quality.

Like the 'linguistic' butterfly, V., the human equivalent of the elusive insect that will ultimately escape, and return in the form of pages written from a nowhere place and sent to Livadia, builds her spell over J. on language, too. During their first stroll through Istanbul, both are visiting the Hagia Sophia. On the stairway, V.

dijo algo que no logré entender, algo en turco, pensé buscando con la vista el próximo escalón. Pero al momento alcé la vista porque mi cerebro había comenzado a descifrar, identificándola al fin como una frase en ruso: *Ty takoi joroshi... Ya by tebe i tak dale* ("Eres tan bueno²¹ ... Me acostaría contigo gratis"), y cuando enfoqué sus ojos húmedos, entendí por fin lo que acababa de decir y quedé perplejo. Ella comprendió su error, palideció, pareció hundirse en la piedra del muro, diluirse en ella... (111).

V.'s cunning use of language, first spoken and later written, initially perplexes J., who thinks she speaks Turkish but then realizes that the sentence was said in Russian. Like a butterfly, she is well-versed

in mimicry and blends in with the surroundings as in the quote above. Once she realizes that she might have offended J., she turns pale and seems to melt into the stone wall, or at least this is the very subjective impression of her reaction rendered by J. our sole witness of the scene. He later revisits and starts to question the cited impression, describing V.'s sentence as a joke or even part of a stratagem to test and later abuse him to get out of Istanbul (111-112). In other passages, V. accentuates her appearance with striking colors to distinguish herself from her environment, as when she and J. are walking through a bazaar surrounded by women wearing black long kaftans, V. similar to a brimstone butterfly, opted for a 'blusa amarillo canario' (295). That same night when J. sees her at the nightclub, he initially does not recognize her. Instead, he is mesmerized with her and her colleagues' colorful saris that remind him of the images of butterflies in an illustrated book (99). He then observes her dancing and the rainbow-colored nail polish that has an alluring visual effect in the darkness. It is this strategic characteristic of adjusting to the surrounding bedazzling the observer's senses via a blending into different environments or a contrasting striking differentiation of her body from these environments that ultimately help V. escape from the brothel, and after having arrived in Odessa, leave the unsuspecting narrator-protagonist and epistler-to-be.

In most mimetic situations, deception by the mimic is key. The aim is to be taken for the model (for instance a poisonous or inedible conspecific), and thus escape a hunter's hunger. In the specific case of the butterfly, a species well-versed in mimicry, the wings themselves provide an added layer of security. A butterfly wing is covered with thousands of minute scales and hairs. These are overlapping outgrowths of the body that can be regenerated, such as in the case of a predator's attack, where scales are rubbed off and thus may allow the butterfly to escape.¹² In addition, many butterflies show different patterns on the front and back of their wings, hence the opening and closing of their wings may confound an onlooker, and in a precarious situation, might allow for an escape.

The butterfly as mimic, keen observer of its surroundings, master of camouflage as well as escape artist that can even rebuild body parts that may have been left behind incarnates many of the characteristics that J., the former illegal border-crosser, highly cherishes. All these strategies contribute to a quality of immunity during moments of threshold experience, such as the moment when a passing from one country to another is decided by an agent looking alternately at a document and the individual in front of them. The list of affinities expands if we take into account the specific linguistic being of the mesmerizing *yazikus euxinius* that captures the lonely epistler at the shores of the Black Sea. On his way back to his residence, J. catches sight of a butterfly and ponders: 'Jamás tendría la paciencia necesaria de cazar mariposas' (300). In the next sentence, somewhat abruptly, he adds that 'Nabokov había donado su colección de mariposas al museo de Lausana, en Suiza, envueltas.... en sobrecitos de fino papel caligrafiados' (300). The dead bodies of the butterflies, caught by the author-hunter were put into labeled en-

velopes. Thus, they resemble letters similar to those from V. that, as the narrator describes admiringly are written on 'un fino papel de arroz, agradable al tacto, con vetas blanquecinas y los grupos de una producción artesanal...' and put in simple and elegant white envelopes (13). The novel is structured according to the receipt of V.'s letters: the seven chapter titles of *Livadia* are labeled 'Primera Carta' to 'Séptima Carta.' Yet while many other letters that J. consults in the process of drafting his response to V. are cited at length in the text, the letters by V., the traveling artifacts that are the motivation of the writing of the text of *Livadia* as a future response to her, are absent from the novel.

After V.'s disappearance, all that remains to him is to contemplate at which instance she might have transformed from a caterpillar to a pupa, both carrying the imago of the butterfly, into an actual butterfly (298). Unlike the yearned-for woman, the *yazikus euxinus* gains a different presence for J. as the novel concludes. During one of his final strolls, the protagonist suddenly thinks, 'con espantosa certeza' (301) that he has just caught sight of a *yazikus*. At first, 'so-speché, que se trataba de una proyección mental... El patrón del *yazikus* que dormía en mí se habría interpuesto entre una simple mariposa y la fuente de luz de mis ojos, proyectado la imagen de aquel insecto inexistente, que había sido capturado por última vez en 1914, en vísperas de la guerra' (301). After a second pondering, during which he becomes convinced that he did actually see the species he had come to catch, he initially concludes that it must have been dormant since 1914 and had just hatched for him to see it at this specific moment. His final conclusion is altogether different: He speculates about the experience of having passed through so many cities, and to now be in Livadia in order to 'descubrirme sentado apaciblemente en aquel banco con dos botellas del mejor vino de Masandra' (301). Only at that moment he becomes aware of the fact that 'cualquier mariposa podía ser el *yazikus*; las descripciones divagaban' (302). After a final, fruitless halfhearted chase of the butterfly that is now any butterfly, J. returns to his bench and bottles of wine, 'alegre por haber dejado escapar la mariposa' (308). While this could have well been the fitting end of a postmodern novel with its conclusion of the inescapable fortuity of natural phenomena and the limitation of human will, Prieto proposes one more ironic twist and material transformation in line with Nabokov's fascination for metamorphosis (Nabokov, 'On Transformation' in Boyd 53). J. closes his eyes and suddenly possesses the power to fly. He raises up in the air and:

[S]in abrir los ojos y sin mover un músculo comencé a bajar con el pensamiento en rápido planeo, sobrevolando los bosques helados de Laponia, las doradas cúpulas de los templos de Petersburgo, el azul oscuro de las coníferas, las flores de los prados del sur, los trigales maduros, los picos nevados del Cáucaso, el pequeño pueblo, Livadia... [luego] me posé silencioso, como un pájaro o un ángel, bajo la ventana de mi cuarto. (308)

Thanks to the reading of V.'s seven letters, J. is able to elevate and leave his bodily reality behind in a fleeting, quasi-mystical state of consciousness that transcends geographical confines. While this moment could have been the end of a mystically inspired novel, Prieto adds a few more pages to his speculative lepidopteral examination. Once J. returns to his room, he encounters his double, reading the draft of his response letter to V.. He then falls asleep and has a wonderful dream, not about becoming a butterfly, which as he himself notes, 'hubiera sido lógico después de tantos meses intentando atrapar una; como en la parábola del hombre que sueña que es una mariposa y al despertar no sabe si es el hombre que se soñó mariposa o si es la mariposa que ahora sueña ser hombre' (313). Instead, in a more prosaic fashion, he dreams of being inspired and of writing pages and pages of a captivating response letter to V.. In its final image, *Livadia* invokes once again an elevation, now not of the human body but of the drafted letter, the manuscript of the novel we have supposedly been reading, which is now being transformed by fire. After reading V.'s letters and all his notes and quotes from other correspondences, J. throws all sheets of paper into a fire:

... las arrojé [las cartas] todas, después de leerlas, al fuego. Leí también, de punta a cabo, este borrador, todos mis apuntes, los fragmentos de cartas ajenas, que fui lanzando al fuego. Algunas se elevaban propulsadas por el aire caliente, las llamas lamiendo sus bordes, rojas como mariposas. Esa imagen, ¿por qué no? Subían hasta muy arriba y caían luego y desaparecían en un segundo... (318).

After this purifying act, in the final paragraph, he sets out to write (yet again). The last two words of the novel that include for the first time V.'s name, are the beginning of the yearned-for letter to her: 'Querida Varia:' (318, emphasis in original). The novel ends with a salutation to an absent conversant. Its final punctuation mark, a colon, marks an ultimate pause and intake of air prior to a statement to come. Varia (not Véra, as readers of Nabokov might have guessed), this literary creature invites one final time for associations, playing

with variations, welcoming inconsistency, and evoking a draft of loose notes and the notion of a pluralization of authorship (definitions of 'vario, -ria' according to *DRAE*). In the final transformation of the text, the ashes disperse, some elevate, fly and then disappear like variegated and capricious butterflies.

At the end of his initially restless crisscrossing of countries and cities, J. does not try to calculate speed and control contingencies, but simply observes ashes dancing in the air. Some of these may stay, while others may transcend human-made barriers, transform and may become the beginnings of new forms of correspondence. The time in *Livadia* and the reflection on Varia's letters reaching him from a nowhere place helped him revisit his own past instances of border crossing and become flexible facing chance encounters and contingency in his (fictional) existence. The butterfly-letters that were initially described as the search for the perfect word, have become a practice of a pluri-language in an extended sense. This expanded philology (Hamilton 258) thus provides J. the opportunity to ponder, mimic, play, and transform, which he only now sees as a gift and form of self-affirmation. It allows him to build a form of versatile and strong agency when confronted with a seemingly immutable exterior separation.

Which *yazikus* 'language' is the *euxinus*, the 'hospitable' one for J.? It is likely the one that he can seize and actively expand that allows for the revisiting of established meanings and definitions, such as that of a geographical separation between nations. Like a letter reaching us from a nowhere place, a casual conversation that brings surprising insight or a quote that resonates and changes meaning, the language where Prieto's border-crosser and sedentary epistler-to-be feels most welcome is the one that challenges him to conceptually grasp his world, but that at the same time escapes 'de-finition' and 'de-limitation.' It is a *yazikus* that requires him to continually modify and rework his and others' conceptualizations, observations, and movements. Thus, *Livadia* invites us to be read, among other things, as a move away from a geopolitical to an ecological conceptualization of crossings, and an exercise of a broadening and more inclusive conceptualizing of the initial 'imaginación aduanal' (28).¹³

NOTES

¹ Similarly to his protagonist, the author José Manuel Prieto (*1962), has a deep familiarity with the Russian culture and language, he had studied and lived in the country for 13 years, witnessed Mikhail Gorbachev's resignation on December 25, 1991, and Boris Yeltsin's taking over the presidency of the newly independent Russian state. Prieto left Cuba in 1980 to study Computer Engineering in Novosibirsk, USSR. He briefly returned to Havana, where he stayed from 1987-88, prior to settling in Leningrad, where he lived until 1993. From 1993-2003, he lived in Mexico, where he earned his doctorate in History at the UNAM, and since 2003, in New York City, where he was a 2004-2005 fellow at the Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. Before that, he was a Guggenheim fellow (2002) and a recipient of grants from the Mexican Sistema Nacional de Creadores (2003-2005). He currently teaches literature at Seaton Hall University in New Jersey. In addition to being an author, Prieto is an accomplished translator from Russian to Spanish of poems by Vladimir Maiakovski, Anna Ajmátova, Joseph Brodsky, and Osip Mandelstam, among others.

² While *Enciclopedia* and *Rex* are also including many instances of border crossing, it is in *Livadia*, where we find the most elaborated practices and reflections on the border.

³The company J. enjoys the most is that of the book seller Vladimir Vladimirovich (an obvious reference to Nabokov), who precisely never inquires about J.'s whereabouts or origins. 'Vladimir Vladimirovich jamás me preguntó como, por ejemplo, los policías: "Y usted joven, ¿de qué país es?"' Era un asunto absolutamente transparente e irrelevante para él' (72).

⁴Britton W. Newman examines that the words Cuba o Cuban, 'appear[] only three times in the trilogy, and only twice in connection with the narrator's identity' ("Internal Censorship", no pag.). In his review of the novel, Rafael Rojas describes Prieto as 'el primer autor cubano que se empeña en no escribir ni una sola novela sobre Cuba' ('Las dos mitades' 233, cited in Newman "Internal Censorship", no pag.). Since the publication of this book review in 2000, Prieto published one piece centered on Cuba, the short autobiographical essay 'La Revolución Cubana explicada a los taxistas' (2008), translated into German that same year. In his "Negotiating Borders of Identity in the Fiction of José Manuel Prieto", Newmann interprets this 'careful elision of Cuba . . . as a method of sidestepping the restrictive expectations placed on authors of Cuban origin—the obligation to discuss the country's political situations, its waves of exiles, etc.' (168).

⁵See Virilio's *Vitesse et politique: Essai de dromologie*.

⁶The literal translation of 'imaginación aduanal' is 'border imagination' or 'imagination of the border.' The 'real sense of customs' (*Nocturnal Butterflies* 21) in Carol and Thomas Christensen's otherwise excellent translation captures the polysemy and partial paradox of the term only in part.

⁷In a later scene, he describes his practice of acquiring such an 'estudiada calma' during countless customs inspections where he learned to 'desconect[ar] una a una mis terminaciones nerviosas' (222).

⁸La conquête du nouveau au dernier continent, celui de la vitesse . . . Tout le mouvement de la physique moderne est esquissé ici [in the image of a train in motion] pour aboutir en 1916 à la théorie de la relativité généralisée, la désintégration du milieu . . . Si la lucarne du train est bien une lanterne magique, elle fait apparaître les ombres de la science... la voiture est aussi une chambre noire où les éléments de notre habitat quotidien deviennent particules en mouvement' (*Essai sur l'insécurité du territoire* 256-257). /The conquest of that new and last continent, that of velocity... All the movement of modern physics is outlined in this image [a train moving through a landscape] and will, in 1916, lead towards the theory of general relativity, the environmental disintegration... If the train's hatch is a lantern magique, it makes visible the shadows of science... The car is also a darkroom, where the elements of our everyday habits become particles in motion (my translation).

⁹Moreover, in retrospect, he notices that V. might have selected him as her travel companion not only as a result of his experience and astuteness related to the crossing of borders, but also because she sensed his loneliness and yearning to break free of it. Her belly dance at the night club was thus exclusively dedicated to J., with the aim to to enthrall him: 'A mi paso por Estambul V. descubrió mi soledad y yo fui el salvado, el atrapado por la pesada masa de una mujer que proyectó hacia mí toda la fuerza gravitatoria del baile del vientre...' *(Livadia 52).*

¹⁰I thank my colleague in Russian Studies, Dr. Timothy Sergay, for his help with possible avenues in translating Prieto's new literary creation (email 4/2/21).

¹¹The Russian sentence gives J. a name, calling him Jorosha, similar to José, yet the narrator omits this in the Spanish rendering.

¹²Linden Glendhill's close-ups of *Butterfly Scales* are compelling examples of the wings' characteristics. They were one of the inspirations for this examination.

¹³I thank Anindita Barnerjee and Debra Castillo for organizing the online *Border Environments* Conference at Cornell University in 2020; our meetings and discussions were among my personal intellectual highlights during a semester otherwise marked by covid-19-related restrictions. Many thanks to the two anonymous proofreaders of my essay for their illuminating comments and suggestions, and to my Research Assistant Caitlin Fanning for her painstaking editorial help.

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