The Tongue, That Punchinello: A Commentary on Nabokov's Pnin

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> Poetry … is a child of death and despair because although Polyphemus has been blind already for a long time, his tastes have not changed, and his ephemeral guests feel a toothache at the very thought of the stone with which he shuts the entrance for the night.
> —Innokenty Annensky, "What is Poetry" (1909)

Pnin is Vladimir Nabokov's fourth English novel and the third to be written in the United States (Ithaca, NY; 1953–56). Its first chapter was written before *Lolita* was finished. The protagonists of both novels are émigrés and men of letters; they are antipodes as characters.

Tragically lonely, farcically talking, poor and pure Timofei Pnin is a protagonist of more than one tragicomedy. Upon the main stage where he lives and acts, there is a second little stage where a more refined tragicomedy occurs, presenting the hidden, sublime and ridiculous essence of the play on the main stage. Functioning like the famous "Mousetrap" in *Hamlet,* it comes, however, from a different lineage: the little stage is inventively placed upon Pnin himself—quite in the manner of the old popular street show Petrushka, whose puppetmaster carried a little stage right on his head.[1] The Petrushka character used to present himself as a phony foreigner, *Mus'iu* (*Monsieur*), and

1. Petrushka, from Russian *Petrusha, Petr* (Peter), *Petia* (Pete), *petushok* (cockerel), coming from Italian *pulcinella* (cockerel), was a popular Russian street show from at least the seventeenth century (it is mentioned in Olearius' travelogue) until the 1917 revolution (see Kelly). The puppetmaster manipulated two fabric puppets, sitting on his fingers like gloves, over his head upon the little portable stage he carried there. The English Punch and the French Guignol are Petrushka's closest relations. Pulcinella originally was a mask in *commedia dell'arte.*

his favorite counterpart was *Nemets* (*German*) who spoke broken Russian. Here is the description of this little stage:

> The organs concerned in the production of English speech sounds are the larynx, the velum, the lips, the tongue (that punchinello in the troupe), and, last but not least, the lower jaw; mainly upon its overenergetic and somewhat ruminant motion did Pnin rely when translating in class passages in the Russian grammar or some poem by Pushkin. If his Russian was music, his English was murder. (*Pnin* 66)

A detailed description of Pnin's English follows in such a manner as to invite the reader to follow a pantomime of Pnin's articulatory motions that are so grotesquely inadequate for English sounds and thus to play out the "murder" more dramatically against the background music of his Russian. We can unmistakably recognize here a tragicomedy of emigration, of life in a foreign language. The portable stage is Pnin's articulatory apparatus, and the main protagonist is "the tongue (that punchinello in the troupe)." Of course, *tongue* in the physiological and *tongue* in the linguistic sense are here twins, or more precisely, a double-pronged entity. The oral stage metaphor has actually appeared earlier in the novel. Poor Pnin put an end to the suffering from his decaying teeth by having them removed altogether and replaced by a splendid simulacrum of dentures. He feels a reformed man:

> The great work on Old Russia, a wonderful dream mixture of folklore, poetry, social history, and *petite histoire*, which for the last ten years or so he had been fondly planning, now seemed accessible at last, with headaches gone, and this new amphitheater of translucent plastics implying, as it were, a stage and performance. (39)

To sum it up, amphitheater, stage, and performance present the context in which Pnin's tongue, that punchinello of the troupe, appears.

* * *

The performance on the little stage presents in miniature the essence of the tragicomedy that takes place on the main stage. But of course, the play on the main stage is a lot more complicated. A teacher of Russian, Pnin enacts his nostalgia in such a way that his performance turns into an esoteric theater for himself:

> Directing his memory, with all the lights on and all the masks of the mind a-miming, toward the days of his fervid and receptive youth (in a brilliant cosmos that seemed all the fresher for having been abolished by one blow of history), Pnin would get drunk on his private wines as he

> produced sample after sample of what his listeners politely surmised was Russian humor. (12)

A sublime champion of his native tongue, Timofei Pnin appears on the anglophone stage as a farcical protagonist. Stage light effects distort this figure throughout the novel. Elsewhere we have shown that the fairground booth theater (*balagan*), including *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime, circus, and Petrushka, is an ever-present context of Nabokov's poetic world (Senderovich and Shvarts, "Verbnaia shtuchka" and "The Juice of Three Oranges"). *Pnin* is no exception. The context calls attention to itself as a chain of little circus performances. They take place at the most improbable, yet always significant, moments. One of them occurs when Pnin speaks of Pushkin's death. The latter is a motif whose intimately existential significance was established in *The Gift* (*Dar*) (see Senderovich, "Pushkin v Dare Nabokova"); it is a Schopenhauerian "minor chord" with which philosophy begins, or, closer to our context, the toothache whose child is poetry, according to Annensky (see the epigraph).

> "But," exclaimed Pnin in triumph, "he died on a quite, quite different day! He died—" The chair back against which Pnin was vigorously leaning emitted an ominous crack, and the class resolved a pardonable tension in loud young laughter.
>
> (Sometime, somewhere—Petersburg? Prague?—one of the two musical clowns pulled out the piano stool from under the other, who remained, however, playing on, in a seated, though seatless, position, with his rhapsody unimpaired. Where? Circus Busch, Berlin!) (68)

A diligent commentator would point out that there was indeed a real Busch circus in Berlin in the 1920s. But there was an even more real Busch circus in the 1930s in Nabokov's own Berlin, in his novel *The Gift*. At a literary soirée of Russian émigré writers, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev listens to the playwright Busch, a Russian German from Riga, who reads his play, which is written in ridiculous broken Russian. This is sheer circus—everybody is amused, and the reader is supposed to share the fun. Only the poet Koncheev, whom Fyodor admires, notices that it wasn't altogether bad (*SSRP* 4:255–56). Let us keep in mind that all the conversations with Koncheev take place in Fyodor's own imagination. The importance of the Busch vignette is established later: Busch is the only person who takes Fyodor's book on Chernyshevsky seriously and, after all Russian publishers have refused it, helps to publish it. Busch is a mirror image of Pnin as a German/*Nemets* in a Russian milieu.

Broken language laced with elements of foreign tongues has always been a

typical feature of circus clowning. In a paper from the 1920s, the same period that saw the beginning of Nabokov's prose writing, the poet Mikhail Kuzmin observed:

> The international nature of the circus is so evident that the small verbal part of its program (clowns' dialogs, addresses to the public and so on) is conducted in a broken language, notwithstanding that the performer might be Ivan Petrovich Kozelkov. Foreign speech in the circus does not perplex anybody, it even seems to be expected, desirable and understandable, especially when accompanied by expressive gestures. (Kuzmin 33–34)[2]

Circus parallels are pervasive in *Pnin*. Near-falls and falls, favorite devices of clowning, mark Pnin's progress from the beginning to the end. One of them is again associated with both Pushkin and death: "Pnin, on the dirty black ice of the flagged path, slipped again, threw up one arm in an abrupt convulsion, regained his balance … *V boiu li, v stranstvii, v volnah?* In fight, in travel, or in waves? Or on the Waindell campus?" (73). The verse that he quotes is, of course, from Pushkin's meditation on his future death. Pnin's falls are parallels to his slips of the tongue.

> A terrible clatter and crash came from the stairs: Pnin, on his way down, had lost his footing. … Poor Pnin had come down the last steps on his back. He lay supine for a moment, his eyes moving to and fro. He was helped to his feet. No bones were broken.
>
> Pnin smiled and said: "It is like the splendid story of Tolstoy—you must read one day, Victor—about Ivan Ilyich Golovin who fell and got in consequence *kidney of the cancer* …" (107–8; emphasis added)

Thus, Pnin's physical fall precipitates his *lapsus linguae.* Here is another of Pnin's circus entrances:

> The Clementses were playing Chinese checkers among the reflections of a comfortable fire when Pnin came clattering downstairs, slipped, and almost fell at their feet like a supplicant in some ancient city full of injustice, but retrieved his balance—only to crash into the poker and tongs.
>
> "I have come," he said, panting, "to inform, or more correctly ask you, if I can have a female visitor Saturday—in the day, of course. She is my former wife, now Dr. Liza Wind—maybe you have heard in psychiatric circles." (43)

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2. A recent historian of the circus confirms that most Russian circus clowns used to distort the Russian language (Makarov 53).

Various comic contexts in the novel shed an ambivalent light on Pnin; but the ambivalence works in a non-conventional manner: the tragic lurks from behind the clownish, and the sublime shines through the comic. Several times Liza, the traitorous Columbine with Schnitzlerian scarf,[3] involves Timofei in *commedia dell'arte* triangles in the role of lunar Pierrot, pure and faithful. Mixed language is a feature of this context also: "The world of the *commedia* was a macaronic one in which different styles, dialects, forms of dress, and theatrical comportment (e.g., the 'normal' Tuscan language and natural gesture of the *innamorati* juxtaposed with Harlequin's acrobatics and the Venetian and Berganese dialects of the masks) were 'montaged' to bizarre effect" (Clayton 135).

Yet it is Petrushka's features that are dominant in Pnin. In the very first paragraph of the novel, he is described as having beneath a strong-man torso "a pair of spindly legs (now flanneled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet" (7). Such is the traditional shape of the Petrushka puppet, which had a full torso and weak legs made of cloth. Petrushka is, of course, a Russian descendent of Pulcinella-Punchinello-Polichinelle. A striking appearance of Pnin in a Petrushkan guise occurs during his visit to the Kukolnikov country house (note that *kukol'nik* is the Russian word for "puppetmaster"). While playing a game of croquet, Pnin undergoes an instant transformation: "From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback" (130). This is a precise traditional portrait of Petrushka. And he beats everybody in the game, adroitly using his mallet. Not fortuitously, this scene occurs as Pnin plays the game in the setting of hoops—"time-honored but technically illegal" (130)—the so-called "Cage or Mousetrap," a farcical counterpart to the stage upon the stage in *Hamlet*. Another comical reference to *Hamlet* appears when Pnin looks for a line that he knew in the Russian *Gamlet*[4] but is not sure whether it can be found in the original text, for "whenever you were reduced to look up something in the English version, you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line that you remembered all your life from Kroneberg's text in Vengerov's splendid edition. Sad!" (79). Within this farcical world, the comic figure of the black charwoman Desdemona in the Clements' house is a reference not to *Othello* as such but via Shakespeare's play to Atella, the town that gave its name to *commedia Atellana*, the Roman predecessor of *commedia dell'arte*.

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3. Symptomatically, Pnin, in his young years, takes part in a performance of Schnitzler's *Liebelei* in the role of a betrayed husband (178).

4. Russian, of course, lacks the sound signified by the English "h"; it is habitually replaced by "g" (as in "ghost").

The Petrushka context ripples through the entire text. A twisted reverberation occurs toward the end when the German (and the Chair of the German Department that supported the seatless Pnin) Hagen comes to Pnin's housewarming party. A scene in which Petrushka clobbers the German to death was a fixture of the Petrushka show. But here the situation is reversed: it is Hagen who comes with a cane—and the story of this ancestral German cane is given prominence—in order to deal a blow to poor Pnin by letting him know that he has been fired from his job. In this situation, Pnin, who not only takes the beating but also speaks a broken language, is a *Nemets*, that is, a "mute one, speechless, inarticulate," which is the meaning of the Russian word for "German," as well as part of his role in the Petrushka show. And Hagen, who plays a cruel role in this episode, is generally a kindly character. This reversal is symbolic in the twisted tragicomic world of the novel.

Pnin's predicament is in the first place a tragicomedy of his language, his tongue. But let us make no mistake: his situation is not trivial. Though it looks like the typical émigré typecast of soap opera, it is subtly different. Pnin, for instance, is not monolingual. Besides his garbled English, he has an excellent command of French, which—in accordance with the laws of the tragicomic context—serves to his disadvantage. Upon the abolition of the Russian program, Hagen recommends Pnin to Blorenge, the head of the French department, as a teacher of French:

> "You mean," asked Blorenge sternly, "he can *speak* French?"
>
> Hagen, who was well aware of Blorenge's special requirements, hesitated.
>
> "Out with it, Herman! Yes or no?"
>
> "I am sure he could adapt himself."
>
> "He does speak it, eh?"
>
> "Well, yes."
>
> "In that case," said Blorenge, "we can't use him in First-Year French. It would be unfair to our Mr. Smith … Does your man *read* French as well as speak it? … Now, if what's-his-name does not read French—"
>
> "I'm afraid he does," said Hagen with a sigh.
>
> "Then we can't use him at all." (142–43)

Thus, having command of another language does not make Pnin's life any easier. Pnin's tragicomedy is not that of a monolingual man in exile.[5] His unnecessary French, along with his fate and physique, only brings out the

5. Compare with "monolinguists" in *Pale Fire* (279–80), which, in certain ways, continues the problematics of *Pnin*.

tragicomedy of the native tongue in emigration, the Petrushka show, or the "Mousetrap" of *Hamlet*.

* * *

As always in Nabokov, his *balagan*, his fairground stage, is intimately associated with the avant-garde theater of the Russian Silver Age which in search of pure theatricality, unadulterated by ideological tendentiousness and untrammeled by any commitment to imitate reality, uplifted the crude traditional popular forms of entertainment to the level of the most refined theater, reworking them, indeed, into the last word of art. Reflected colors, so to speak, from the worlds of the great masters of Russian avant-garde theater—Evreinov and Meyerhold—comprise a consistent and profound dimension in *Pnin*.

After the remnants of his decaying teeth have been removed and replaced with dentures, Pnin begins to enjoy the new gadget. Just before the above-quoted lines about the amphitheater of translucent plastic, we read:

> It was a revelation, it was a sunrise, it was a firm mouthful of efficient, alabastrine, humane America. At night he kept his treasure in a special glass of special fluid where it smiled to itself, pink and pearly, as perfect as some lovely representative of deep-sea flora. (38–39)

Pearly dentures is not a chance metaphor (there hardly are such in Nabokov, one of the most deliberate of the great writers). To use the novel's own language, "a passing allusion tacitly recognized in the middle distance of an idea, an adventurous sail descried on the horizon" (41), the pearl motif connects Nabokov with Nikolai Evreinov, one of the leading practitioners and a most prolific and brilliant theoretician of avant-garde theater. His favorite subject was theatricality (*teatral'nost'*), which he viewed as a vital element not just of human life, but of all of nature. Performing for the sake of becoming for a while something else expresses, according to Evreinov, a fundamental law of nature that transcends elementary physical laws. He observes it in the animal world as well as in the human. While discussing the spontaneous theatrical games of children, he speaks of the theatrical instinct that is in human beings as powerful as the sexual one. Evreinov developed his theory in opposition to the naturalist theater and the "natural"—that is, mimetic—style of performance which, in the eyes of avant-gardists, cancelled out the very theatricality. Always fond of paradox, Evreinov considered artificiality as the essence of art, as well as of nature. In his *Theater as Such* (*Teatr kak takovoi*), he wrote:

> … in the history of culture, theatricality is an absolutely self-sufficient principle and … art relates to it in roughly the same manner as a pearl

> to its shell. If you put forward an objection that "a pearl is a disease of the shell," I shall respond that Max Nordau is not entirely wrong in regarding all-enticing art as a sort of disease.[6] (*Teatr kak takovoi* 28)

In Nabokov, the pearl motif appears in various texts; already in *Glory* (*Podvig,* 1930), we read about Martin's first day in London:

> He noticed that he was walking along the same street for the second time, recognizing it by a shop window filled with pearl necklaces. He stopped and made a cursory check of his long-standing aversion for pearls: oysters' hemorrhoids with a sickly sheen. (50)

An association with Max Nordau's idea of art as a sort of disease is here quite clear, as sickliness is mentioned, but it is the context of theater that links the pearl motif in Nabokov with Evreinov. In *Pnin*, the motif occurs first in Chapter One, in connection with Timofei's insane Baltic aunt, an admirer of "the great ham actor Khodotov": it was at her estate that Pnin took part in amateur theater; she appears wearing pearls in the first row of the theater of his imagination still affected by a recent mysterious seizure (27). The associations of pearl and disease, art and artificiality, distinctly come together in *Pnin*—that is, in Pnin's mouth, in the theater of his tongue. But wherever the pearl motif appears in Nabokov, it has Evreinov's recognizable ring. Another of Evreinov's characteristic ideas must be mentioned here. Throughout his life Evreinov asserted that executions historically have always been an essential kind of public show, a theater, and vice versa, that theater has tended to present torture and death. "Theater and Scaffold" is Evreinov's own formula and the title of a lecture he toured with in the south of Russia in 1918, when Nabokov lived in the Crimea. Nabokov's pearl motif is an emblematic reference to Evreinov's close association of theater and scaffold and to his view of life as a *balagan* of death (Evreinov, *Istoriia telesnykh* and "Teatr I eshafot"; see also Senderovich and Shvarts, "Balagan smerti").

This is not the only example of Nabokov's details reflecting the colors of Evreinov's world. Just minutes before learning that he's gotten the boot, Pnin tells Hagen that he is planning to offer the next year a course "On Tyranny. On the Boot. On Nicholas the First. On all the precursors of modern atrocity"; "the history of man," adds Pnin, "is the history of pain" (168). These last plans of Pnin's at Waindell remind us of Nikolai Evreinov's beginning: he first made his name as the author of *A History of Corporal Punishment in Russia* (1915).[7]

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6. Evreinov alludes here to a passage in Max Nordau's book *Entartung* (*Degeneration*; Berlin, 1892–93), which was highly influential at that time.

7. Evreinov was a lawyer by education, a graduate of the same St. Peters-

In no lesser degree Pnin's theater reflects colors from the world of Evreinov's rival, Vsevolod Meyerhold.[8] Laurence Clements, Pnin's landlord at one point, a specialist on the philosophy of gesture, soon discovers that Timofei is a veritable encyclopedia of Russian gestures:

> Laurence even made a film of what Timofey considered to be the essentials of Russian "carpalistics," with Pnin in a polo shirt, a Gioconda smile on his lips, demonstrating the movements underlying such Russian verbs—used in reference to hands—as *mahnut', vsplesnut', razvesti*: the one-hand downward loose shake of weary relinquishment; the two-hand dramatic splash of amazed distress; and the "disjunctive" motion—hands traveling apart to signify helpless passivity. And in conclusion, very slowly, Pnin showed how, in the international "shaking the finger" gesture, a half turn, as delicate as the switch of the wrist in fencing, metamorphosed the Russian solemn symbol of pointing up, "the Judge in Heaven sees you!" into a German air picture of the stick—"something is coming to you!" (41–42)

Refinement of gesture into the major element of theater was, of course, Meyerhold's signature. Very early on in his career, the greatest master of the Russian avant-garde stage turned to pantomime as the theatrical language *par excellence,* being far from any ideology and beyond naturalistic imitation of reality, and requiring a high degree of artistry. On the basis of pantomime, Meyerhold devised biomechanics, a discipline of training actors so that their bodies turn into expressive instruments—the kind of expression that should take place on stage without being subordinated to the events and dialog. In a similar manner, Pnin's art of gesturing is totally divorced from his practical concerns but presents him as a keen observer of human behavior and psychology, and a kind of artist. The passage quoted above that ends with the opposition between the idealistic Russian finger-shaking gesture and its physically threatening German counterpart continues thus: "'However,' added objective Pnin, 'Russian metaphysical police can break physical bones also very well.'" Indeed, this ending perfectly describes the closure of the life of

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burg School of Jurisprudence (*Uchilishche Pravovedeniia*) as Nabokov's father.

8. For an explication of the posited narrator V.V.'s phrase "I am so constituted that I absolutely must gulp down *the juice of three oranges* before confronting the rigors of day" (190; emphasis added) as a reference to Meyerhold, who made Carlo Gozzi's play *The Love for Three Oranges* an emblem of his own infatuation with *commedia dell'arte* and of his style of art, as well as an expression of Nabokov's own unquenchable thirst for mockery, see Senderovich and Shvarts, "The Juice of Three Oranges."

Meyerhold, the great master of gesture, who was tortured and murdered in the dungeons of the KGB in 1940.

Meyerhold defined the tradition, to which Pnin belongs in his own unique way, in the programmatic article "Balagan" (1912):

> *Balagan* is everlasting. Its protagonists don't die. They only change appearances and take on new forms. Protagonists of the *Atellanae* of antiquity, half-witted Mac and simpleton Papus were resurrected almost twenty hundred years later in the personalities of Harlequin and Pantalone, protagonists of the *balagan* of the late Renaissance (*commedia dell'arte*), whose public not so much heeded the words as watched the wealth of gestures with all their clobberings, adroit leaps, and various jokes of a theatrical nature. (Meyerhold 1:222–23)

In this context, we can see Pnin's own language actually turning into gestures—be it his native tongue reduced for the benefit of his students to tokens of "elementary Russian" or his English twisted to incoherent and enigmatic paralingual expression. And of course, the very notion of *balagan* as Meyerhold interpreted it is indispensable for understanding Nabokov's world.

Among the legendary figures of the Russian Silver Age whose colors are reflected in *Pnin*, there is one more worthy of mention—the painter Alexandr Benois, one of the principal creators of the ballet *Petrushka*. Early in the novel, Pnin's new dentures are compared to a "fossil skull" (38). On the estate of Kukolnikov, we encounter a Russian émigré, Professor Chateau, who remarks: "A soap bubble is as real as a fossil tooth!" (118). Is this a chance parallel? Hardly. The oral association between Pnin's dentures and the fossil tooth is surely not accidental, as orality is Pnin's sphere. Nor is the equation of a soap bubble and a fossil. It should be read in the context of Nabokov's insistence that not all that passes is mortal. Alexandr Benois, another Russian with a French name, mentions in his memoirs that among the paintings that he loved, owned, left behind in Russia but never forgot there was one named "Children Making Soap Bubbles" by the painter Petr Pnin (Benois 2:407). Benois was one of those congenial souls who also felt that much that passes is immortal; he called himself a *passeist,* apparently deriving this from the French *passé* (Benois 1:653). Such was also the shared spirit of the World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*), the association of artists and an art magazine, the vital centers of St. Petersburg avant-garde art whose influence on Nabokov in his formative years is not to be overlooked. Benois was a friend of the Nabokov family and a contributor to the newspaper *Rech'*, edited by Nabokov the elder; another prominent member of the World of Art, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, gave young Volodia lessons in drawing.

* * *

The shadows of the great figures of Russian avant-garde theater lurk between the lines of *Pnin* not only in the theatrical, balaganesque context of the novel, but also as representatives of the bygone formative years of both Nabokov and his protagonist, of the Silver Age of Russian culture, the ever present Elysium of Nabokov's world.

Let us once more return to the page describing Pnin's acquisition of dentures. That Pnin's teeth should be nothing but remnants is linguistically inherent in his name. The Russian *pen'*, *peniok*, from which the name Pnin is derived, signifies a tree stump, but also any remnant of a limb of human body (cf. Vladimir Dal's *Tolkovyi slovar'*) as well as of a tooth. Pnin himself is a remnant of a cultural world that perished, and his body, especially his organs of speech, is a stage upon which the drama of stumps is played out. In the Postscript to the Russian version of *Lolita*, disclaiming the adequacy of his own translation, Nabokov explicitly brings together the motif of the lost culture of language and that of the stump:

> The story of this translation is a story of disillusionment. Alas, that "divine Russian tongue," that I hoped was somewhere awaiting me, blossoming like a faithful spring behind the tightly closed gate a key to which I kept for so many years, happened to be non-existent; and there is nothing behind the gate, except charred stumps [Russ. *pni*] and an autumnal hopeless perspective, and the key in my hand is more like a passkey. (*SSRP* 5:386)

Pnin's acquisition of new dentures is naturally preceded by the extraction of the remnants of his decaying fossil teeth:

> It surprised him to realize how fond he had been of his teeth. His tongue, a fat, sleek seal, used to flop and slide so happily among the familiar rocks, checking the contours of a battered but still secure kingdom, plunging from cave to cove, climbing this jag, nuzzling that notch, finding a shred of sweet seaweed in the same old cleft; but now not a landmark remained, and all there existed was a great dark wound, a terra incognita of gums which dread and disgust forbade one to investigate. (38)

Of course, *caves* and *coves* are but *grotti*, a motif in Nabokov always evocative of the grotesque (see Senderovich and Shvarts, "The Juice of Three Oranges" 88–89, 117). Yet a seal among the rocks, caves, and coves of the past, where

not a landmark remained, only terra incognita—this is not a chance metaphor either; it is a metonymic representation of a topos known since antiquity, embellished in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, conflated with various versions of so called island utopia, and revisited by scholars of the Celtic and Old Norse traditions in the beginning of the twentieth century: an image of Ultima Thule, a remote island in the Northern Sea where heroes go to dwell after death. Ultima Thule attracted Nabokov's imagination.

At the end of his Russian period, he wrote a fragment of a larger prose work entitled "Ultima Thule" (1942, *Novyi zhurnal*, no. 1). The painter Sineusov is visited by a man, a Swede, Dane, or Icelander, who commissions a series of illustrations for his poem *Ultima Thule*. In the manner of the Mozartian Black (or, according to another version, Gray) Man, he vanishes, but soon Sineusov's dearly loved wife dies. Sineusov eventually learns that one Falter, a former tutor of his, has undergone a strange transformation as a consequence of his discovery of the key to the secret of life. As Sineusov longs for his wife, he looks for Falter in the hope that the latter might confide to him his discovery, which the painter needs for one purpose only: to find out whether there is a chance he may meet his wife again. Conversation with Falter leads nowhere, and there the story ends. But we are left with the sense that looking for Falter's help was a false move. Indeed, the last paragraph of the story implies that Sineusov should return to the efforts of memory, to the theme of Ultima Thule: in the words of H.W. Longfellow, "That land of fiction and of truth, The lost Atlantis of our youth."[9] This Ultima Thule is accessible only through art, as was suggested by the mysterious guest.

The Ultima Thule motif attracted the attention of poets of the Silver Age. One of the five great Russian poets of this epoch "whose names began with 'B'—the five senses of the new Russian poetry" (*Gift* 74), Valery Briusov, wrote, in 1915, a poem entitled "Ultima Thule." The island is described as a desolate place, *Gde I tiuleni na kamniakh ne dremliut v iule …* (Where even in July seals are not basking on the rocks …). These seals should remind us of the seal of Pnin's tongue, for the very landscape presents a place where everything used to be and is no longer:

> *Ostrov, gde net nichego I gde vse tol'ko bylo,*
> *Kraem zhelannym mne kazhesh'sia ty potomu li?*
> *Vlastno k tebe ia vlekom neizvedannoi siloi,*
> Ultima Thule.

9. H.W. Longfellow, *Ultima Thule*, "Dedication."

[The desolate island, where everything but used to be,
Isn't this why you are so alluring to me?
I am drawn to you incomprehensibly, fully,
Ultima Thule.]

Likewise, the tongue in Pnin's mouth after the last extraction visits the place where everything *used to be* and is no more (*gde net nichego I gde vse tol'ko bylo*). So is his native tongue able to visit the land where everything used to be. The tongue as a seal is no accidental metaphor, for this is an attribute of Ultima Thule.

The theatrical nature of Pnin's imagination stages for him an Ultima Thule in still a different manner in Chapter One, when he is being introduced to the audience of the Cremona women's club. In a "faint ripple stemming from his recent seizure" (27), the ladies of Cremona sitting in front of him are replaced by his deceased relatives and friends, among them his theater-loving Baltic aunt wearing pearls—all "[m]urdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal" (27). And every exercise in Pnin's native tongue in one way or another brings him in touch with the Ultima Thule of his memory. He takes the teaching of the Russian language as a pretext for excursions in Russian history that please him and serve as an exotic theater for his audiences.

This consideration gives us a chance to revisit the ever contentious problem of another Pnin of Nabokov's, a marginal figure in *Pale Fire*. As a realm of things that no longer exist, Ultima Thule is what Nabokov in *Speak, Memory* called "unreal estate" (40), a true domain of poets, but Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, a pretender in many regards, introduces the narrative of a "real" kingdom in northern Europe, Zembla, lost by its "real" King. Kinbote's narrative presents a farcical transformation, a travesty of the Ultima Thule motif. In an unobtrusive and ironic reference to that, the guards of the deposed King, conscripts from Thule (*Pale Fire* 120), presumably a province of this Zembla, are also called Thuleans[10] (132). In *Pale Fire,* the figure of Professor Pnin, "the head of the Russian Department (a farcical pedant of whom the less said the better)" (229), a character opposite to the Pnin of the eponymous novel, appears as a symptom of the falsity of its Thule, of a local inversion of the realm of the true Ultima Thule.[11]

Thus, we have traced a characteristically Nabokovian event of a motif opening—in a balaganesque show—a unique depth of meaning, an enfilade

10. The word *Thuleans* also stands in paronomastic proximity to the Russian word *tiuleni*, "seals."

11. Accordingly, a different literary allusion is played out in the Thule of *Pale Fire*; it is "Complaint du roi de Thulé" by Jules Laforgue.

of meanings: the tongue enacting the charade of a lonely seal is telescoped through the seal representing the northernmost Ultima Thule, the realm of memory where things of the past are preserved. This deepening of perspective by means of cultural associations and literary references is set off by the primary act of substitution by pun, *double entendre:* tongue/tongue. Timofei Pnin is both the puppetmaster and the portable stage for the tongue, that punchinello, quite in the manner of Petrushka show. Miss Clyde introduces Pnin to the ladies of Cremona with the following words: "Professor Pun-neen. I hope I have it right" (26). The pun was not intended by Miss Clyde, but she did get it right. Pnin, in English, becomes an embodied punning, and he performs a charade of dual identity which presents a comedy of the Punchinello tongue and the tragedy of the lonely seal upon Ultima Thule.

A principal function of Nabokov's artistic language is to be a repository of cultural memory and a traveler beyond the boundaries of life, be it to Elysium or to Ultima Thule. We may call it an Orphean function. The constant metapoetic realization of that function in Nabokov's oeuvre is reflected this time in the comic mirror of Pnin.

* * *

Pnin's miscommunications go beyond any natural language in still another sense. He calls Margaret Thayer "Mrs. Fire" (32) and Professor T.W. Thomas "Professor Win." "'Our friend,' answered Clements [to the puzzled Thomas], 'employs a nomenclature all his own. His verbal vagaries add a new thrill to life. His mispronunciations are mythopoetic. His slips of the tongue are oracular'" (165). This is not an act of clemency, but an authentic understanding of Pnin—or of Pnin as a device of poetic language. The story implacably moves towards Pnin's being *fired* from the job he is dedicated to; at the same time he unconditionally *wins* the reader's sympathy. With his verbal vagaries, Pnin is a linguistic carrier of his own destiny. The essence of his peculiar usage of English is not to be reduced merely to its substandard forms. In the shadow of the latter, one indeed may recognize a nomenclature all his own and see that his mispronunciations are truly mythopoetic and oracular, his distorted English being a very personal idiom.

In his behavior, well-bred Pnin strictly observes social conventions: in his European life, he felt indecent "showing himself to ladies minus collar and tie" and his socks were held up by garters; in America, he wears polo shirts and "sloppy socks … of scarlet wool with lilac lozenges" (7–8), and his flashy suit evokes an exclamation on the part of a compatriot: "*pryamo amerikanets* (a veritable American)" (121). But in the matter of correct language, which consists of ready-made forms, Pnin obviously does not conform in America.

Pnin's English, however, is not simply a broken English but a version of his own making, recreating clichés according to his own needs of expression. True, it is improper and funny. But it is also a funny mirror of how a poet molds the ready-made material of language. A passage describing the writer Vadim Vadimych's transition from Russian to English in *Look at the Harlequins!* offers a serious commentary on this phenomenon, treated so comically in *Pnin*:

> the phrase itself is a glib cliché; and the question confronting me in Paris, in the late Thirties, was precisely could I fight off the formula and rip up the ready-made, and switch from my glorious self-developed Russian, not to the dead leaden English of the high seas with dummies in sailor suits, but an English I alone would be responsible for, in all its new ripples and changing light? (124)

Of course, a poet bends a language without breaking it, though limits actually are never set, and there remains but one step from a sublime virtuosity to a ridiculous mumbling.

At this point we touch on the very central nerve of *Pnin*. Pnin's linguistic situation is not a simple mirror but a distorting mirror, a veritable parody of Nabokov's own plight. The difference between the elementary and sophisticated levels of the problem reveals *Pnin,* the novel, as an estranged Nabokov's identification with the predicament of a culture in emigration, a grotesque representation of the author's own concern, an ironic empathy and a lyrical farce. In the Foreword to *Drugie berega*, the Russian version of his memoir, Nabokov wrote:

> Having a full command of French and English from early childhood, I could have switched, for the purpose of fiction writing, from Russian to a foreign language without any difficulty if I were, say, Joseph Conrad,[12] who before the beginning of his writing in English had not left any trace in his native (Polish) literature, but in the language he turned to, English, adroitly used clichés. When I decided to switch to English in 1940, my trouble was that, during the prior fifteen plus years, I wrote in Russian, and in that period I left my own imprint on my tool, on my medium. Switching to a different language, I thus relinquished not the language of Avvakum, Pushkin, Tolstoi—or of Ivanov, nanny and Russian literary criticism—in a word, not the common language, but the individual, intimate idiom. The long-standing habit of expressing myself in a personal

12. Compare the "English of the high seas with dummies in sailor suits" in the previous quotation.

> manner did not allow me to be satisfied with clichés in the chosen new language; and the monstrous difficulties of the impending transformation, and the horror of parting with a live pet had thrown me initially in the state on which there is no need to expound; I will say only that no other writer of a certain level had experienced that before me. (*SSRP* 5:143–44)

In the Foreword to *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov mentions his own translations of his essays "from my difficult Russian into pedantic English" (xvii). *Strong Opinions* abounds with statements to the same effect, which certainly present a leitmotif of Nabokov's post-war reflections on his literary career. Here is a representative selection:

> Yes, that was a very difficult kind of switch. My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English. (An interview for BBC, 1962; *SO* 15)

> My complete switch from Russian prose to English prose was exceedingly painful—like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion. (An interview for Television 13 Educational Program in New York, 1965; *SO* 54)

> I differ from Joseph Conradically. First of all, he had not been writing in his native tongue before he became an English writer, and secondly, I cannot stand today his polished clichés and primitive clashes. (The same interview; *SO* 57)

Nabokov insists on the inferiority of his English in comparison with his Russian, in spite of sometimes admitting that "upon reaching middle age" he achieved "a certain degree of precision in the use of my private English" (June 26, 1969, an interview for *Vogue*; *SO* 154). *Private* is here the key word: this is to compensate for the correct, clichéd language considered an achievement on the part of a non-native speaker but insufficient for a writer, or at least one who has an artistic sense of language.

The significance of Pnin's situation vis-à-vis Nabokov's own is all the more clearly indicated by recalling that key description of Nabokov's artistic endeavor which was put in the mouth of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev: "I must make my way along this narrow ridge between my own truth and a caricature of it" (*Gift* 200).

* * *

In the last chapter of *Pnin*, the posited narrator V.V., having arrived at Waindell, introduces the pulcinellesque figure of Jack Cockerell, who

> impersonated Pnin to perfection. He went on for at least two hours, showing me everything—Pnin teaching, Pnin eating, Pnin ogling a coed, … Pnin trying to convince Professor Wynn, the ornithologist who hardly knew him, that they were old pals, Tim and Tom—and Wynn leaping to the conclusion that this was somebody impersonating Professor Pnin. It was all built of course around the Pninian gesture and the Pninian wild English … (187)

And so on, and so on, including among other things Pnin's declaring one day "that he had been 'shot' by which, according to the impersonator, the poor fellow meant 'fired'" (188).

Jack Cockerell, a veritable Pulcinella, "Rooster," *Petushok*, *Petrushka,* recapitulates in a nutshell the entire story of Pnin told in the novel. V.V., for whose benefit Cockerell stages this spectacle, is both amused and taken aback. In his eyes, Cockerell, "a rather limp, moon-faced, neutrally blond Englishman, had acquired an unmistakable resemblance to the man he had now been mimicking for almost ten years" (87); he wonders "if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule" (189). This very logic extends from Cockerell to V.V., who relates his victim's story while savoring every detail—and impersonating the author of *Pnin*. The meanness and compulsive jocularity of the narrator are amplified in Cockerell as his mirror. Pnin feels out of place when V.V., the narrator who impersonates the author of the novel, arrives at Waindell. There is an uncanny, intimate, sympathetic, and antagonistic connection linking the three of them.

Who is who in this gallery of crooked mirrors? Having conveyed Cockerell's claim that Pnin used the word "shot" for "fired," V.V. immediately adds a disclaimer—"(a mistake I doubt my friend could have made)"—whose parenthetic framing, in standard Nabokovian punctuation, emphasizes its importance. Indeed, two pages down the road, V.V. admits to having a sleepless night after Cockerell's performance: "I kept dozing off and sitting up with a gasp, and through the parody of a window shade some light from the street reached the mirror and dazzled me into thinking I was facing a firing squad" (190). Of course, "firing" here is a reverberation of Pnin's being "shot."

Nabokov's own Russian was displaced by his ample English when he turned to it as the tongue of his art. The *balagan,* the fairground booth, was a major

context of Nabokov's entire work from the very beginning of his prose writing, and he did a good deal of punning and other tongue-twisting in his Russian period, but as he switched to English, linguistic clowning, verbal *harlequinage* or *pulcinellata,* became compulsive, like an uncontrollable twitch, shading more and more into private games—until, in *Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins!*, his text becomes overwhelmingly hermetic.

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