Nabokov
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Published by Cornell University Press


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Pnin: The Quest That
Overrides the Goal

We came into the world like brother and brother,  
And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another.  
William Shakespeare, The Comedy of Errors 5.1

Around 1950–51, with Lolita still unfinished, Nabokov started intermittently working on Pnin. Separate chapters first appeared in the New Yorker, and the book came out in 1957, four years after the completion and two years after the publication of Lolita. Lolita deliberately excludes explicit Russian references, the only exception being the Paris taxi driver Maximovich.1 The symbolic element in its story (see Chapter 11), is not estranged from the Russian connection, yet the “Russian” material—that is, such issues as the predicament of Russian intellectuals in America, and Nabokov’s own status as a Russian-born author of a would-be all-American novel—had no place in the world of Humbert Humbert. It had to be channeled elsewhere. The story of Professor Timofey Pnin became, to some extent, a contrasting companion piece to Lolita.

Pnin is largely the debt that Nabokov pays to Russian emigration. Not surprisingly, a number of its motifs—for example, Pnin's

1Priscilla Meyer, “Nabokov’s Lolita and Pushkin’s Onegin: McAdam, McEve, and McFate,” in Gibian and Parker, Achievements, pp. 179–211, points to what Meyer regards as connections between Eugene Onegin and Lolita in order to prove that “Lolita represents a translation through space and time of a Russian literary monument of the 1820s into an American one of the 1950s, a parody of 'paraphrastic' translation at its most extreme, which Nabokov wrote concomitantly with his literal one” (p. 180). I do not agree with this thesis. What Meyer presents as analogies between the two works may be symptoms of Pushkin’s blood diffusely running in the arteries of Nabokov’s imagination; they are not a “trail of colored pebbles” (p. 192) intentionally dropped by Nabokov. Moreover, the impulse to allude to Pushkin was channeled into Pnin, the
"Russian-intelligentski" way of getting into his overcoat (P, 65), or a character who imitates somebody else so frequently that he actually becomes like him—are echoes of the material of The Gift, the last novel that Nabokov wrote in Russian. Remnants of the émigré intellectual circles that seem to have reached an impasse in the pre-apocalyptic world of The Gift are transplanted to America and almost miraculously revived in the world of Pnin. This novel, however, is much more than a comic account of one ethnosocial group. The present century is the age of the greatest Migration of the Peoples: in Nabokov's hands, the portrayal of a Russian immigrant in America becomes an inquiry into the art of exile,2 into the secret of any expatriate's resilience, into the morality of his resilience, into the conflict between his qualms of conscience and love of life. The inquiry takes the shape of a quest for the real life of Timofey Pnin, a quest that "overrides the goal" (P, 143), so that both its subject and its object eventually dissolve—yet not without leaving behind an account of the experience that may be true for "you, and me, and him over there" (IB, 25), a generalized version of "personal truth" (ND, 14). In most of Nabokov's fiction an Everyman is a seeker of the Grail; as such, he is also an Exile.

I

As a structural principle, the quest that "overrides the goal" roughly follows the scheme of Nabokov's 1935 short story "Recruiting," which begins with a seemingly omniscient account of a poor sick old émigré, one of a long series of Nabokovian émigré Russians who have learned to live without hope in prewar Europe. The old man is on his way home from a funeral; he sits down to rest in a small park and is overcome by an unaccountable feeling of happiness. At that moment the narrator steps in and admits that he has just invented a whole life story for a fat shabby stranger on the bench beside him. The narrator's imagination has been triggered by a sudden wave of joy, which he also attributes to the old man. Yet though the pro-

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agonist’s biography thus turns out to be spurious, he seems to share the narrator’s mood. This mood is a secret bond between the two, a bond more important than their fictional identities.¹

Like the first half of “Recruiting,” the first six of the seven chapters of *Pnin* seem to be presented by an omniscient narrator. This impression is not destroyed even by the narrator’s intrusions into the fictional universe: for example, by his claim to have visited the Cooks before Pnin did, or to have helped him write a letter to a newspaper.⁴ In the seventh chapter, however, the narrator turns out to be a flesh-and-ink inhabitant of the fictional world, the “littératueur” (*P*, 45) who is responsible for Liza Bogolepov’s suicide attempt and marriage to Pnin, the “fascinating lecturer” (*P*, 169) who supersedes Pnin at Waindell College, the owner of the “private collection” (*P*, 45) in which Pnin’s love letter is preserved. As a first-person narrator, the “I” of *Pnin* has little authority over the protagonist’s thoughts or the scenes that he did not witness: he was not there to see the events of chapters 1–6; hence, these events turn out to be largely a product of his imagination.⁵

The narrative may thus seem to fall into two parts: (a) *biographie romancée*, where the skeleton of the historical facts is coated with imaginary scenes and dialogue (a genre supremely scorned by the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*), and (b) firsthand evidence that reveals the narrator’s “sources” (compare *Roots III*, in which Alex Hailey describes his search for the information out of which he has spun the first two volumes in the *Roots* sequence).⁶ A disconcerting


⁴These intrusions illustrate the narrative convention of *metalepsis*, a “transgressional” movement from one narrative level to another, a movement not based on a definite embedding of narrative levels; see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, 1980), pp. 234–36. Genette’s is among the modern literary systems for which Nabokov’s work has proved a vast though perhaps not entirely safe playground. An extensive discussion of Nabokov’s work in terms of modern critical conversation can be found in Maurice Couturier, *Nabokov* (Lausanne, 1979); and David Packman, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire* (Columbia, Mo., 1982).

⁵According to Genette’s nomenclature, the material of chapters 1–6 is paraleptic. *Paralepsis* is the presentation of more information than is authorized by focalization: i.e., more information than the focal character (in our case, the narrator) can possibly possess; see *Narrative Discourse*, p. 195.

⁶Different aspects of the point of view in *Pnin* have been discussed in, e.g., Paul Grams, “*Pnin*: The Biographer as Meddler,” in Carl R. Proffer, ed., *A Book of Things*...
detail, however, undermines this division of the material: on two occasions the protagonist denies the veracity of the narrator’s eyewitness reports. First, Pnin rebels against some statements for whose accuracy the narrator is prepared to vouch:

I tried not only to remind Pnin of former meetings, but also to amuse him and other people around us with the unusual lucidity and strength of my memory. However, he denied everything. He said he vaguely recalled my grandaunt but had never met me. He said that his marks in algebra had always been poor and that, anyway, his father never displayed him to his patients; he said that in Zabava (Liebelei) he had only acted the part of Christine’s father. He repeated that we had never seen each other before. Our little discussion was nothing more than good-natured banter, and everybody laughed; and noticing how reluctant he was to recognize his own past, I switched to another, less personal topic. [P, 179–80]

Second, Pnin accuses the narrator of having told false stories about him: “Now, don’t believe a word he says, Georgiy Aramovich. He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor (on zuhasniy vidumshchik)” (P, 185).

The narrator never records having mentioned that Pnin was his schoolmate. On the contrary, he talks about having attended a more liberal school than Pnin’s (see P, 176). It is, therefore, not clear whether Pnin is mistaken or whether the narrator is indeed a “dreadful inventor”—that is, a liar? What are the implications of these mutually exclusive yet co-present possibilities?

If the narrator has withheld from us some shameful jokes that he permitted himself at Pnin’s expense, his surprise at Pnin’s sally (see P, 185) is likewise a lie. In such a case the material not only of the first six chapters but also of the seventh (the so-called eyewitness information) is no more reliable than the news brought by the boy who cried “Wolf!” once too often. We cannot be sure that anything in the narrator’s story “really happened,” and this reminds us of what we have

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7This element of “the liar’s paradox” in Pnin is also discussed in Grams, “Pnin: The Biographer as Meddler,” p. 194.
known all along but did not like to keep in mind. Pnin is, after all, a fictional character, and no statement about him can be true or false. The narrator’s cognitive unreliability amounts to the novel’s self-conscious admission that the protagonist, no matter how vivid and legible, is nonexistent.

Yet what if Pnin himself is unreliable? What if he is confusing the narrator with someone else? He is presented as liable to such confusion. In chapter 6, for instance, he is unable to distinguish between professors Wynn and Thomas at Waindell: “For recalling certain other duplications in the past—disconcerting likenesses he alone had seen—bothered Pnin told himself it would be useless to ask anybody’s assistance in unraveling the T. Wynns” (P, 150).

Since Nabokov belonged to those writers who were perfectly capable of “remembering” their future work, among the “disconcerting likenesses” that Pnin alone had seen there may have been the resemblance between Nabokov and the protagonist of his 1974 novel, Look at the Harlequins!: the Anglo-Russian writer Vadim Vadimich, whose name and patronymic sound like “Vladimir Vladimirovich” when pronounced with familiarity and speed, whose appearance mimics Nabokov’s portrait, whose career is modeled on that of Nabokov, and whose books seem to be Antiterran transformations of Nabokov’s fiction. Vadim Vadimich is frequently confused with someone else, and on two occasions it is the authorship of Nabokov’s books that is mistakenly ascribed to him. Moreover he is haunted by a troubling fantasy of being someone’s inferior double: “I now confess that I was bothered that night, and the next and some time before, by a dream feeling that my life was the nonidentical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man’s life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon, I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer who was and would always be incomparably greater, healthier, and crueler than your obedient servant” (LATH, 89).

In Pnin, Vadim Vadimich is mentioned as an old acquaintance of the protagonist: “In reviewing his Russian friends throughout Europe and the United States, Timofey Pahlich could easily count at least sixty dear people whom he had intimately known since, say, 1920, and whom he never called anything but Vadim Vadimich, Ivan Hristoforovich, or Samuil Izrailevich, as the case might be” (P, 105). The lepidopterist Vladimir Vladimirovich is also mentioned—by Pnin’s friend Professor Chateau, who is fascinated by a butterfly:
“Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here,” remarked Chateau. “He would have told us all about these enchanting insects.”
“I have always had the impression that his entomology was merely a pose.”
“Oh, no,” said Chateau. [P, 128]

The cryptographic butterfly (which, unknown to Chateau, is supposed to be *Lycaeides samuelis* Nabokov) evokes the motif of doubling: Pnin is acquainted with both the twins, the man and the shadow. He is the only person to be aware of the likeness, just as the narrator is the only person to know the depth of Pnin’s feeling for Liza. When Professor Thomas wonders why Pnin calls him Wynn (a Nabokovian variation on the “Tim and Win are twins” theme), the grumpy philosopher Clements wryly observes: “He probably mistook you for somebody else. . . . And for all I know you may be somebody else” (P, 165). These words apply to the narrator rather than to the baffled anthropologist. Indeed, the narrator’s name is never mentioned, and for all we know he may be not Vladimir Vladimirovich, the fictional extension of the novelist, but Vadim Vadimich, the “I” of *Look at the Harlequins!* This additional ambiguity reminds us that, in effect, the narrator is also a fictional character, that like Pnin he is legible but nonexistent. The story of creative imagination told in *Pnin* is likewise fictional and not to be identified with the actual genesis of the novel.

Thus, both the protagonist and the narrator are canceled out: each dissolves in the image of the nonexistent other, leaving us with a subtle record of human experience and of its transformation into a work of art.

II

On repeated reading, aware of the narrator’s cognitive unreliability, we have to treat the narrative of chapters 1–6 as recording not the random flow of plausible events but the workings of the narrator’s imagination. We are challenged to seek a specific *raison d’être* for the salient narrative details and thus to reconstruct the story that the narrative pretends to tell us about itself. The main clues lie in the recurrent

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imagery and in the relationship between the images presented in chapters 1–6 on the one hand and in chapter 7 (*Roots III*) on the other.

"Were I a writer," says the protagonist-narrator of Nabokov's "Spring in Fialta," "I should allow only my heart to have imagination, and for the rest rely upon memory, that long-drawn sunset shadow of one's personal truth" (*ND*, 13–14). Relying upon memory for narrative details, the narrator composes six chapters out of images drawn from the would-be "hard facts" of the seventh. One of the most striking of these images is that of the squirrel. The "shadow-tailed" little animals that abundantly populate Pnin's world turn out to be the progeny of the stuffed squirrel that in chapter 7 the narrator recollects having glimpsed through the open door of young Pnin's St. Petersburg schoolroom: "I could see a map of Russia on the wall, books on a shelf, a stuffed squirrel, and a toy monoplane with linen wings and a rubber motor. I had a similar one but twice bigger, bought in Biarritz. After one had wound up the propeller for some time, the rubber would change its manner of twist and develop fascinating thick whorls which predicted the end of its tether" (*P*, 177).

In a first reading the stuffed squirrel is eclipsed by the toy monoplane and gets lost among the homogeneous parts of the sentence—it is, indeed, natural for a teenaged observer to focus on a mechanical contrivance rather than on a routine zoological item (the St. Petersburg home of young Luzhin in Nabokov's *Defense* also contains a stuffed squirrel). With repeated reading, however, one begins to suspect that the narrator was moved to attach a cryptographic significance to the stuffed squirrel several years later, on seeing Pnin in the company of Mira Belochkin (*belochka* is the Russian diminutive for "squirrel"). The strong impression that Mira produced on the narrator is conveyed by his cutting the section short immediately after referring to the "pretty, slender-necked, velvet-eyed girl" who received the greatest ovation on the night of the amateur theatricals (*P*, 179).

The link between the stuffed squirrel and Mira Belochkin's name may well have generated the whole story of Pnin's youthful love affair. The narrator never tells us exactly how he knows that Pnin was in love

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9The relationship of this image with the Cinderella motif and other interesting cross-referential patterns in *Pnin* are discussed in Charles Nicol, "Pnin's History," in Roth, *Critical Essays*, pp. 93–105.

10Cf. Nabokov's discussion of Gogol's use of "irrelevant details" to mask the main structural idea of "The Overcoat" (*NG*, 148).
with Mira. For all we know, the story of Pnin's first love may be correct, yet it may also be an invention based on the narrator's own "personal truth." As though in keeping with the principle proclaimed in "Spring in Fialta," the narrator allows his heart to imagine what it would feel like to have loved and to grieve for Mira—and then projects the imaginary experience onto the biography of Pnin.

Likewise, a great number of details that describe Pnin's life at Waindell College are traceable to the images and motifs of chapter 7 or to extratextual sources. Here are some examples.

1. The way chance remarks trigger Pnin's fascinating learned harangues on *Anna Karenin* and on Cinderella's shoes, under circumstances that favor only small talk, is encoded in the bus scene recollected in chapter 7: "As we hung from adjacent straps in the crowded and spasmodic vehicle, my good friend managed to combine a vigorous twisting of the head (in his continuous attempts to check and recheck the numbers of cross streets) with a magnificent account of all he had not had sufficient time to say at the celebration on Homer's and Gogol's use of the Rambling Comparison" (P, 186). The same incident seems to have given the narrator the idea of Pnin's wariness concerning the logistics of "average reality" and to have generated his adventures on the way to Cremona.

2. The easy charm of Pnin's manner and conversation in congenial company is based on the narrator's observation of him in the Russian circles of prewar Paris.

3. The toy monoplane with linen wings and a rubber motor, which produced "fascinating thick whorls" when wound up, may be responsible for Pnin's "passionate intrigue" with Joan's washing machine (P, 40): he loves to watch the storms through the machine's porthole and on one occasion feeds it his rubber-soled canvas shoes.

4. The bus station employee who in chapter 1 takes his wife to a maternity hospital on a premature alarm, is named Bob Horn—in memory, as it were, of Robert Karlovich Horn, the likable estate

11 During the episode at the Pines this piece of information seems to be confirmed by Madame Shpolyanski, yet her dialogue with Pnin is paraleptic (see n. 5 above), and there is no additional evidence that it ever took place.

12 The content of this "magnificent account" can be found in the chapter "The Homeric Simile in Dead Souls," in Carl R. Proffes, *The Simile and Gogol's "Dead Souls"* (The Hague, 1967) pp. 67–94; Pnin's comments on *Anna Karenin* (P, 122, 129–30) may be found in a more detailed form in *LRL*, 190–98. (Nabokov insisted on "Karenin" as the correct form of the heroine's name in English.)
steward who applauds at the wrong moments during Pnin's amateur theatricals in chapter 7.

5. The bells that accompany the Clementses' breakfast, as well as the menu of "oranges and lemons" (P, 30), seem to be conjured up by association with the rhyme "The Bells of London": "Oranges and lemons / Say the bells of St. Clemens."\(^3\)

Some of the patterns, however, appear to be imposed not by the narrator but by life itself: that is, by the omniscient novelist. For instance, the Russian books that Pnin uses for his research at Waindell have been donated by the millionaire Todd, and the house in which Pnin makes his home just before being fired is the former residence of the caretaker of Todd's estate. Thus, in a way, Pnin becomes the caretaker of Todd's cultural estate, and it is from this menial service that he is dismissed through the intervention of the narrator. Such a consideration may be soothing to the narrator's conscience, yet he may be suspected of inventing these "verifiable" facts precisely for the purpose of presenting Pnin's departure from Waindell as a promotion, or at least a liberation, rather than a setback; in fact, Pnin appears in *Pale Fire* as the head of the Russian department in another provincial college.

III

The more links we establish between the "imagined" scenes of chapters 1–6 and the eyewitness information, the more difficult it becomes to separate the narrator from the protagonist, and the more consistently does the narrator seem to project himself into Pnin's life story. This becomes especially clear when we examine the sequences of images and the shifts in tone within short narrative blocks.

When at the beginning of the novel the narrator presents Pnin as an anticlassical variety of the "zerstreute Professor," he pretends to be try-

\(^3\)For this observation I am indebted to Jessie Thomas Lokrantz, *The Underside of the Weave: Some Stylistic Devices Used by Vladimir Nabokov* (Uppsala, 1973), p. 79. However, I totally disagree with Lokrantz's repeated statement that *Pnin* is a relatively simple story and that its narrative is characterized by two voices. The latter view is shared by Herbert Grabes in his *Fictitious Biographies: Vladimir Nabokov's English Novels*, trans. Pamela Gliniars and Herbert Grabes (The Hague, 1977), p. 51, though not by Andrew Field, who, by using a similar expression, actually suggests that the narrator uses two tones of voice; see *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, pp. 135–36.
ing to "diagnose his sad case" (P, 13). However, a really serious attempt to diagnose Pnin’s case and reveal the secret of his resilience comes in conjunction with the Mira Belochkin theme. Pnin is shown deliberately controlling his thoughts and suppressing memories that could rekindle old wounds:

In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin . . . because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past. [P, 134-35]

The effort not to dwell on painful matters has turned into a mental habit; it is almost automatically that Pnin’s mind shifts from the thoughts of death, which creep in disguised as a line from Pushkin, to the physical realities of everyday existence: “V boyu li, v stranstvii, v volnah? In fight, in travel, or in waves? Or on the Waindell campus? Gently champing his dentures, which retained a sticky layer of cottage cheese, Pnin went up the slippery library steps” (P, 73-74).

Aided by this self-protective habit, Pnin blocks his awareness of Mrs. Thayer’s hint that Isabel Clements may claim the room in which he lodges. Subliminally, however, he is conscious of the menace and almost allows his physical fatigue to bring it to the surface: “Pnin suddenly felt very tired. Not only had the Zol. Fond tome become even heavier after its unnecessary visit to the library, but something that Pnin had half heard in the course of the day, and had been reluctant to follow up, now bothered and oppressed him, as does, in retrospection, a blunder we have made, a piece of rudeness we have allowed ourselves, or a threat we have chosen to ignore” (P, 79-80). The strenuous repression of unwelcome thoughts is one of the causes of Pnin’s breakdown during a Soviet movie.

Like Wordsworth’s Wanderer, Pnin cannot “afford to suffer,” because—as suggested in the foregoing quotation—his emotional and physical states are closely linked. Indeed his cardiac fits always conjure
up the loved faces of the dead; conversely, memories of the past—such as those evoked by the game of croquet at the Pines—lead to seizures. Pnin's heart condition is the result of grieving over the fate of parents and friends. His reluctance to remember the past is traceable to the episode in which he denies the narrator's story of former meetings, yet it also seems to be the secret bond between him and the narrator—just as the wave of happiness is the secret bond between the narrator and the protagonist of "Recruiting." Dissimilar in many ways, both the narrator and the protagonist of *Pnin* are fugitives from pain. While Pnin attempts to control the flow of his thoughts, the narrator strives to regulate the flow of his imagination so that he will not lose his aesthetic detachment in the face of matters pregnant with "human appeal."

This is especially evident in the narrator's handling of the scene in which Joan Clements finds Pnin shattered by his ex-wife's visit. The preceding section discloses the pain that Liza had once again inflicted on Pnin. Now, however, the moving though economical account of his state of mind is discontinued; as Pnin is approaching an emotional breakdown, he suddenly turns into a buffoon, rummaging through Joan's cupboard in search, as he reportedly tells her, of "viscous and sawdust" (*P*, 59). The transliteration "viscous" for "whiskey" is fantastic enough—the typical Russian distortion would have been something like "veeski"—but the substitution of "sawdust" for "soda" is impossible: the Russian word for "soda" sounds much the same as the English one. This pseudo-Pninism strikingly differs from the other records of the protagonist's speech, which call for at least a brief survey.

At the beginning of the novel Pnin's sentences are faithful word-for-word translations from corresponding Russian phrases: "And where possible to leave baggage?" (*P*, 18)—*A gde mozhno ostavit' bagazh?* Later Pnin inserts carefully stored colloquialisms into his conversation, or speaks in a funny yet credible mixture of solecisms and quotations from a curriculum vitae (see *P*, 33-34). By the end of the novel, under the influence of new friendships, his English is considerably improved, though not his pronunciation. The narrator, who discusses the regularities of the Russian accent (see *P*, 66-67) with a precision matching only Pnin's own phonetic analysis of his name and patronymic (see *P*, 104), generally refrains from transliterating his speech. Among the few exceptions is the account of the road directions
that Pnin, in the comedy of errors in chapter 6, gives to Professor Thomas, taking him for the ornithologist Wynn (see P, 151). Connected as it is with the disconcerting-likenesses motif, the episode seems to be the narrator’s little revenge on Pnin for having caught a glimpse of things which, until the publication of Look at the Harlequins!, no one was supposed to see.

Pnin’s conversations with his Russian friends are rendered in impeccable English, because then it is the narrator and not the protagonist who performs the translation; so are Pnin’s thoughts, because they are not supposed to be entirely verbal: “we do not usually think in words” (LATH, 123). Therefore, the “viscous and sawdust” deviation from verisimilitude can be accounted for only as a facetious quotation from Jack Cockerell, who tends to impute to Pnin such impossible mistakes as “shot” instead of “fired” (P, 188). Pnin’s failure to understand the humor of comic strips in the same episode is another blatant Cockerellian exaggeration.

At one of the most pathetic moments of the story, then, the narrator refuses to face the acuteness of the protagonist’s suffering. He jams the potentially tragic note and, through Cockerell’s parody on Pnin, moves to a parody on Cockerell. To further counterpoise Pnin’s pain he imagines the sympathetic Clementses secretly rejoicing over a happy letter from their daughter Isabel. A similar artificial consolation is imputed to Pnin: thinking about Mira’s arrival in Buchenwald, he imagines her “still smiling, still able to help other Jewish women” (P, 135). However, it is not clear whether the paragraph that deals with Mira’s death is supposed to be a record of Pnin’s thought process or the narrator’s commentary filling in the span of time during which Pnin fights his seizure at the Pines. Perhaps it is a combination of both: Pnin and the narrator join forces in order to extricate themselves from pain by letting the string of associations wander to Hagen’s already commonplace lamentation about Buchenwald’s proximity to Weimar. The historical irony is easier to brook than the fate of a concrete person; it places a distance between the object of perception and the perceiving mind. Through the image of the mortified Hagen, Pnin and the narrator safely pass over to the ridicule of academic absurdities, recalling the president of Waindell’s reference to Germany as “the nation of universities” and, in the same speech, his compliment to “another torture house, ‘Russia—the country of Tolstoy, Stanislavski, Raskolnikov, and other great and good men’ ” (P, 136). The narrative has again moved away from tragedy into farce.
A semirational sense of guilt, especially evident in his thoughts about Mira, turns Pnin’s memories into a menace. During the residue of his Cremona seizure, he has a vision of long-dead friends, “murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal” (P, 27), among the audience in the lecture hall. The word “unrevenged” shows that Pnin’s conscience is troubled by his having made peace with the world “in which such things as Mira’s death were possible.” The epithet “incorrupt” suggests that the victims of history’s sinister bends preserve their integrity, whereas an emigrant survivor becomes almost a renegade: his life, persistence, resilience in a foreign country or culture are in some way corruptions of early values, compromises with the self. By the same token, the Anglo-Russian narrator, who seems to have escaped the fate of a “writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art” (PF, 301), is a still graver renegade. The narrator is not immune to a Pnin-like sense of guilt. He imagines Pnin recalling “Vanya Bednyashkin, shot by the Reds in 1919 in Odessa because his father had been a Liberal” (P, 27). The executed young man’s name is so patently derived from an expression of pity (Bednyashka!) that its origin is surely in the narrator’s “easy art” (P, 136) rather than in the “historical truth.” Like Pnin, the narrator wishes both to keep the dead ones “immortal” and to survive and forget.

On the other hand, the narrator dramatizes his sense of guilt in the story of his ousting Pnin from Waindell, invading his privacy, and so on. The projection of the sense of guilt and the desire to cope with it (while also coping with exile and approaching old age) is what the reader is left with when the complexities of the point of view cancel out both protagonist and narrator. Like most self-conscious fiction,

In “‘The Rapture of Endless Approximation’: The Role of the Narrator in Pnin,” Journal of Narrative Technique, 16 (1986), 192-201, J. H. Garrett-Goodyear discusses some implications of the contrast between the “inelegant spontaneity” of Pnin and “the stylish sophistication” of the narrator; among other things he raises the problem of the narrative’s sometimes “conveying both Pnin and the narrator at once” (pp. 192, 197). The comic touch in the narrator’s description of Pnin is largely a distancing device, dictated by a fear akin to that of Osip Mandelstam’s “The Egyptian Stamp,” in which the narrator prays not to be made similar to his protagonist Parnok; see The Prose of Osip Mandelstam, trans. Clarence Brown (Princeton, N.J., 1967), p 171. Mandelstam’s narrator’s emotional life often seems to merge with that of Parnok, just as the experience of the narrator of Pnin sometimes seems to overlap with the pain of the protagonist. Under such circumstances the function of the distancing comic relief is therapeutic.
*Pnin* induces us to seek the “truth” not on the literal but on the moral and emotional plane: the real thing in it is the confession of the love of life despite vicissitudes and compromises, the wish to walk away from the tragic in order to enjoy what life and art can offer. The peculiar achievement of this novel lies not only in its brilliant character portrayal, in its subtlety and wit, and in the richness and density of its texture but also in the exploration of a specific modern predicament—the precarious balance between aesthetic reveling and intellectual self-castigation, between the joy of life and remorse.

Life asserts itself in *Pnin* even if its triumph is not ostentatious or proud. “This is the earth,” the narrator seems to think, together with the protagonist, “and I am, curiously enough, alive, and there is something in me and in life—” (*P*, 58): a handy squirrel breaks the generalization short. It is only in a genius that the struggle with despair can lead to a profound metaphysical insight, and Pnin, as he admits in his letter to Liza, is not a genius. He is too humane, and humanity is burdened with clay. The narrator’s turning away from Pnin’s pain at Liza’s departure is likewise, in a sense, an act of humanity, a response to Pnin’s appeal for the privacy of sorrow: “Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?” (*P*, 52). Whether too humane or too weak to respond to the challenge of the tragic, the narrator of *Pnin* seems to join the narrator of *Look at the Harlequins!* in admitting his lack of genius. The superior writer whom Vadim Vadimich imitates despite himself is perhaps not the real Nabokov but an imaginary might-have-been Nabokov, a much crueler man whose imagination would not balk at the approach of the tragic. It is by a voluntary loss of tragic power that Nabokov seems to have purchased his subtle knowledge of the human heart: his own, his character’s, his reader’s—any heart behind which (according to the diagnosis of Pnin’s doctors) there is, symbolically, “a shadow” (*P*, 126). For such a loss (to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth), the slow sad music of humanity has proved abundant recompense.

*Pnin* is characteristic of Nabokov’s major fiction in that its highly self-referential narrative points to something beyond itself, to human experience rendered universal by the cancellation of the discrete identities of the characters. At the same time the narrative creates an aesthetic (anaesthetic) distance between that experience and the reader. “I think there’s a pain somewhere in the room,” says the dying Mrs. Gradgrind to her daughter Louisa in Dicken’s *Hard Times*, “but I
couldn't positively say that I have got it." Opiates have distanced Mrs. Gradgrind's pain; it has become weaker—removed, as it were, from her body to "somewhere in the room." Yet there is also Louisa's pain in the room, and the painful sympathy of the reader, which Dickens alleviates by the distancing effect of the grotesque touch. The notorious virtuoso technique of Nabokov's novels, his elaborate patterns, his hilarious comic relief, and the vertigo of his self-referentiality are likewise anaesthetic distancing devices. Their specific effects are not identical in any two novels, but their overall significance lies in the paradox that concerns the whole of Nabokov's canon: his aestheticism, which many critics tent to oppose to the humanistic content of his works, is in fact the humanistic form singularly appropriate to this content.