

## NOVEL CLUB - April 2019 - Vladimir Nabokov: *Pnin*

EDMUND WHITE, in his recent memoir entitled: *The Unpunished Vice, A Life of Reading* (2018), spends a fair amount of time reflecting on Vladimir Nabokov. He reflects on the “image of Nabokov hunting American butterflies throughout the Far West (which is what he was doing while writing *Lolita*) which is appropriate to the spirit of his great novel. He was collecting American scenes, picturesque and grotesque. He was the great lepidopterist of the spirit.” writes White.

The novel of this evening’s focus is Nabokov’s *Pnin*, the fraternal twin of *Lolita*. As Nabokov struggled with the character of Humbolt and his infatuation with “*Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.*” Nabokov conceived a related but strangely distant literary child in the person of Timofey Pnin, (apparently pronounced ‘P’neen’); who is far from the butterflies of inspiration for the gamine *Lolita*. Nabokov needed some income to tide him over and to cover the cost of living as he polished his more famous, and second born, of the twin novels. Thus, *Pnin* was born; his fourteenth novel, and the fourth written in English.

I am grateful to Charles Poore of The New York Times (*Books of the Times*, 7 March, 1957) for the information regarding the proper pronunciation of the central character’s name, pronounced ‘P’neen’. Nabokov does not even hint in

the novel how it is pronounced. Another commentator, Jim Murdoch, writing for the *Dactyl Review*, describes this pronunciation as the sound of a stifled sneeze. One character in the novel describes hearing the name as “like a cracked ping-pong ball”. It all seems about right when we read the description of Pnin which Nabokov included in a letter to his editor at *The New Yorker*: “He is not a very nice person but he is fun.”

These fraternal twins, *Pnin* and *Lolita*, were written concurrently in little middle American roadside motels—the one chronicled so abundantly in *Lolita*—during Vladimir and Vera’s summer-long butterfly hunting tours. *Pnin* seems to have been Nabokov’s antidote and respite from Humbert’s grotesque characterization as an adolescent abuser, and the opposite of the character of Pnin.

The Novel was serialized by *The New Yorker* and published in book form in 1957. This brought Nabokov both his first National Book Award nomination and, for him, unprecedented popularity. Needless to say, *Pnin* was eventually eclipsed by *Lolita*.

So, what is Pnin. It is a tragicomedy? A veiled autobiography? A lexical *beau geste*? There are elements of all these.

Professor Timofey Pnin, a 52 years old Russian émigré teaching at Waindell College is a constant object of pity and the rich source of merciless lampoons. The novel opens as he

is traveling on the wrong bus, going to an event at which he is the speaker, and arrived hours late. Descriptions of his anxiety and dismay, along with his “*flamboyant goon tie*” create images that dent the imagination.



Illustration: Orange Goon Bow Tie

The novel is organized in chapters, and within each chapter each scene or fresh encounter is numbered, perhaps like a curated collection of butterflies in a display cabinet. While many of the situations and encounter with a variety of people reveal Pnin as an absentminded professor who finds difficulty in varied life situations, for me, these situations reveal a series of themes. Whether, autobiographical of the author or revealing in the character development of Pnin, the themes that are presented allow the characters and the situations to have greater depth of purpose and help the novel on a whole to bloom. Often, some of the short chapters reminded me of scenes from *Faulty Towers*. The themes that I offer are related yet distinct. They revolve around issues of alienation, nostalgia and loneliness, and suggest an unreconciled polarity. The themes I have selected are:

1. Language and communication, and the difficulty thereof;
2. Home and exile;
3. Love and the difficulty of relationships;
4. Memory and the Past;
5. Foreignness and “The Other”; Isolation and Belonging;
6. Vision of America with longing for Russia.

I have illustrated each theme with a quote from the novel.

#### I. LANGUAGE:

In the novel, language is often a barrier for Pnin. He has difficulty communicating and being understood by others. For Nabokov, despite his facility in English, he missed the Russian language, and wrote a sweet poem sharing his love of Russian carried into exile:

Beyond the seas where I have lost a sceptre,  
I hear the neighing of my dappled nouns,  
Soft participles coming down the steps,  
Treading on leaves, trailing their rustling gowns.

Quoted by Lance Morrow in “*A Holocaust of Words*”,  
Time Magazine, 2 May, 1988. *Morrow was reflecting on those who would destroy a culture by burning books. Language was at risk.*

For example, in Chapter one,

*“A special danger area in Pnin’s case was the English Language. Except for such not very helpful odds and ends as ‘the rest is silence’, ‘nevermore’, ‘weekend’, ‘who’s who’, and a few ordinary words like ‘eat’, ‘street’. ‘fountain pen’, ‘gangster’”, ‘Charleston’, ‘marginal utility’, he had no English at all at the time he left France for the States. . . .”*

Pnin also becomes quizzical about the definition of the human heart as “(‘a hollow, muscular organ’ according to the gruesome definition of Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, which Pnin’s orphaned bag contained). He thought it signified the center of our loves and the deep knowledge of ourselves.

The alienation by language continues throughout the novel, with sometimes humorous effect, but it also creates a sense of loneliness and isolation.

Some of the Novel Club members might recognize the name, Roderick Boyd Porter, a late Member of the Rowfant Club. In a book of poems he privately published to celebrate his upcoming marriage, his *Epithalamium* (which did not take place), he began the collection with: “*The human heart is an asymmetric screw; notions of symmetry just won’t do.*” Rod I suspect had his touch of Timofey Pnin.

## THE HOME & EXILE

In the opening lines of the third chapter, the narrator begins:

*“During the eight years Pnin has taught at Waindell College he changed his lodgings—for one reason or another, mainly sonic—about every semester. The accumulation of consecutive rooms in his memory now resembled those displays of grouped elbow chairs on show, and beds, and lamps, and inglenooks which, ignoring all space-time distinctions, commingle in the soft light of a furniture store beyond which it snows, and the dusk deepens, and nobody really loves anybody.”*

Poor Pnin does not have any comfortable place to sit his body down. If there were three semesters in those eight years, he moved 24 times. And the darkening reference at the end of this quote suggests distance and alienation. Is this an expression of Pnin’s exile from his native land, or this a rear view mirror of Nabokov’s own experiences?

## LOVE & THE DIFFICULTY OF RELATIONSHIPS

In chapter two, Pnin is already overthinking his relationship to Liza, a woman of little desirable qualities. The narrator relates her leave-taking. Pnin helps her with her coat as she criticizes his brown suit:

*“. . . a gentleman does not wear brown.”*  
*“He saw her off, and walked back through the park. To hold her, to keep her—just as she was—with her cruelty, with her vulgarity, with her blinding blue eyes, with her miserable poetry, with her fat*

*feet, with her impure, dry, sordid, infantile soul. All of a sudden he thought: if people are reunited in Heaven (I don't believe it, but suppose), then how shall I stop it from creeping upon me, over me, that shriveled, helpless, lame thing, her soul?"*

As one critic put it, "Liza sucks pretty hard." Why does this conflict of Love and disgust and take hold of Pnin? Is this the vision of Pnin or Nabokov? How does a reader make sense of this disastrous eschatological nightmare? Is Pnin suffering from some strange form of psychotic disorder?

## MEMORY AND THE PAST

In chapter four, Pnin is in bed but kept awake by a torrent of rain. After a variety of disturbances, such as "defenestrating" a soccer ball:

*"He had fallen asleep at last, despite the discomfort in his back, and in the course of one of those dreams that still haunt Russian fugitives, even when a third of a century has elapsed since their escape from the Bolsheviks, Pnin saw himself fantastically cloaked, fleeing through great pools of ink under a cloud-barred moon from a chimerical palace, and then pacing a desolate strand with his dead friend Ilya Isidorovich Polyanski as they waited for some mysterious deliverance to arrive in a throbbing boat from beyond the hopeless sea."*

Pnin's unconscious cannot let go of memories that haunt him. His waking obsessions are not enough.

## FOREIGNNESS & THE OTHER; ISOLATION AND BELONGING

Pnin is revealed as out of place to himself and to others. While occasionally it results in moments of mirth, more often than not, it is the source of embarrassment and loneliness. In chapter two, Liza, with whom Pnin has a conflicted, emotional engagement, is an icon of the conflict he feels. He is at once repulsed by her cultural amnesia, and feels himself as distanced because of his memories.

*“Liza Bogolepov, a medical student just turned twenty, and perfectly charming in her black silk jumper and tailor-made skirt, was already working at the Meudon sanatorium directed by that remarkable and formidable old lady, Dr. Rosetta Stone, one of the most destructive psychiatrists of the day, and, moreover, Liza wrote verse—mainly in halting anapæst; indeed, Pnin saw her for the first time at one of those literary soirees where young émigré poets, who had left Russia in their pale, unpampered pubescence, chanted nostalgic elegies dedicated to a country that could be little more to them than a sad stylized toy, a bauble found in the attic, a crystal globe which you shake to make a soft luminous snowstorm inside of a miniscule fir tree and a log cabin of papier mâché.”*

Again the narrator interprets the persons with whom Pnin has emotional truck and baggage. Pnin sees Liza as someone who remembers an imaginary Russia, and her memories are false and shallow. The meter called anapaest



come from the Greek ἀναπαίστος, which literally means “struck back.” I can’t imagine Nabokov missed that one.

## PNIN’S VISION OF AMERICA

Pnin goes to a sports shop near his campus for a purchase. This is an amusing but telling way in which Pnin interprets American sports and its culture.

*“On the eve of the day on which Victor had planned to arrive, Pnin entered a sports shop in Waindell’s Main Street and asked for a football. The request was unseasonable but he was offered one.”*

*“No, no,” said Pnin, “I do not wish an egg or, for example, a torpedo. I want a simple football, Round!”*

*“And with wrists and palms he outlined a portable world. It was the same gesture he used in class when speaking of the ‘harmonical wholeness’ of Pushkin.”*

In the context of that most American expression of identity, Sports, Pnin described, accurately but with comic strangeness, the Russian meaning of a ‘football’ to the shop keeper who knew it as a soccer ball.

I had a wonderful Greek prof in College, The Rev. Dr. Ettore Patragnoni, (his first name is the Italian of “Hector”, how cool was that since he taught ancient & Koine Greek) who when an American might have said “you’re pulling my leg” would regularly say: “you are pulling my shoes and socks.” Same thing, only different.

As I began with Edmund White's interpretation of Vladimir Nabokov as the "great lepidopterist of the spirit", I think Nabokov has caught a great collection of rare butterflies in the juicy bits of Timofey Pnin's life that he wrote and fantasized about. The specimens are bright in color but with sorrow, and are pinned down and enigmatic.

## QUESTIONS *for* DISCUSSION

1. Is Timofey Pnin believable as a character? Is he a cartoon with a message? What does he signify?
2. What emotions does Timofey Pnin elicit from the reader (you)?
3. Do the themes that circle round questions of communication, alienation, and loneliness make the characters more sympathetic, or more distant from the reader's understanding?
4. All the relationships in the novel seem weird, fragmented and troubled. What do the readers of this novel take from these relationships?
5. Would any of the Novel Club members invite any of the characters to a Novel Club meeting? Or home for dinner?