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PEEPING AT POSSIBILITIES:
WORDPLAY AND THE MIRROR OF NATURE IN *PNIN*

Polysemy and wordplay often enliven Vladimir Nabokov's work, but only *Pnin* (1957) embeds a "pun" in the novel's title and titular protagonist. At one point introduced as "Pun-noon,"¹ Pnin is himself an inveterate pun-maker. Homophony is an innate part of Pnin's multilingual thought process – his outlook unavoidably colored by the shared sounds of French, Russian, English, and German. Any effort to understand Pnin's idiosyncratic English obliges the reader to pursue the professor's intended meaning across several languages. Moreover, Pnin is a constant mediator between languages, an interpreter and teacher. He supplies explanations of Russian phonetics to his American compatriots, offers up etymologies, and has a distinctively interlingual approach to teaching his students Russian. The narrator, another professor-to-be, is similarly fixated on linguistics. He devotes special attention to Pnin's poor English, contrasting it, by implication, with his own accomplished prose. Given the narrator's control over the narration and language of the story (a world constructed out of English words) Pnin is hopelessly overmatched.

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin* (New York, NY: Random House, 1989), 28.

However, occurrences of paronomasia and polysemy (many of them instigated by Pnin) offer further valences of meaning, often by way of languages with which Pnin seems to have greater facility. In this essay, I will focus on a particular aspect of Nabokov's polysemic language – the repetition and transformation of certain syllables. I will show how several significant syllables and related words can be reconfigured as signposts pointing to Pnin's predicament and his eventual escape. I will argue that this instrumentalization of language constitutes an attempt by Nabokov to undermine realist fiction, to forego the referential function of language in favor of a unique conception of artistic mimesis. Further, I suggest that linguistic creation is but one of several creative acts in the novel which operate according to this mode of mimesis.

“NABOKOVIAN” AND “PNINIAN”

In order to illustrate how *Pnin* encourages scrutinization of words and their constitutive parts, I will first elaborate on the unorthodoxies of Nabokov's use of language. In “The Juice of Three Oranges: An Exploration in Nabokov's Language and World,” Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts postulate three dimensions to Nabokov's language, which they term “Nabokovian.” Two of these dimensions relate to linguistic usage within the work. Nabokovian exhibits “sequences of recurrent motifs – not necessarily in identical forms, but also as synonymic, semantically adjacent, or antonymic modifications” and these motifs derive their effects from “both interlingual and intralingual verbal games such as the pun, paronomasia, anagram, and charade.”² Senderovich and Shvarts suggest that Nabokov often relies on the make-up of a morpheme – etymology, anagrams, paronomasic meanings – to construct motifs and patterns. Nabokov's style of wordplay destabilizes the reality to which a word corresponds and instead draws attention to its semantic mutability, the network of intra- and interlingual connections which a slight tweak in sound-image or spelling can provoke.

The playful Nabokovian language takes center stage in *Pnin* because Pnin is associated with its principles. A description of Pnin's teaching style reveals him to be an advocate of just

² Senderovich, Savely, and Shvarts, Yelena. “The Juice of Three Oranges: An Exploration in Nabokov's Language and World.” *Nabokov Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 75-124. 75.

such an adventurous approach to language. Being an “amateurish and lighthearted” teacher, Pnin eschews linguistic formalism in his classroom:

[...] nor did Pnin [...] presume to approach the lofty halls of modern scientific linguistics, that ascetic fraternity of phonemes, that temple wherein earnest young people are taught not the language itself, but the method of teaching others to teach that method, which method, like a waterfall splashing from rock to rock, ceases to be a medium of rational navigation but perhaps in some fabulous future may become instrumental in evolving esoteric dialects [...] spoken only by certain elaborate machines.³

This mockery of scientific linguistics suggests that the discipline is appropriate only for abstemious types – cut off from the world in their “ascetic fraternity of phonemes.” Strict divisions between linguistic systems are useless formalities for a polyglot like Pnin, whose lived experience shows that such divisions don’t necessarily factor into cognition. In setting himself apart from this academic fraternity, Pnin echoes Nabokov’s view of verbiage as a realm in which phonemes mix promiscuously across words and languages.⁴

Pnin’s formally imperfect use of the English language also links him, albeit unintentionally, to a Nabokovian perception of language. Much like Nabokovian, “Pninian” – the professor’s phonetically muddled, grammatically Russian version of English – evokes elements of multiple languages. In particular, pronunciation as practiced by Pnin evinces a certain semantic transformation. As he details the oddities of Pnin’s English, the narrator emphasizes the phonic and semantic changes his words undergo: “His [Pnin’s] explosive ‘hat’ [...] differed from the common American pronunciation of ‘hot’ [...] only by its briefer duration, and thus sounded very much like the German verb *hat* (*has*). Long o’s with him inevitably became short ones: his ‘no’ sounded positively Italian.”⁵ According to the description, Pnin’s mispronunciations of English words put one in mind of those words’ meanings in other languages. The English “hat,” when channeled through Pnin’s mouth, becomes a polylingual proposition. Thus, through

³ Nabokov, 10.

⁴ I am grateful to my anonymous *NOJ* reader for pointing out an example of Nabokov’s interlingual ingenuity as a teacher: the use of “yellow blue vase” to help students remember the Russian “I love you”; cited in Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 122.

⁵ Nabokov, 66.

pronunciation, Pnin causes syllables to become unbound from larger meaning-determining units like the word and even the linguistic system in which those words are theoretically circumscribed.

Phonetics and etymology, two key sources of Nabokovian wordplay, combine to disclose a motif at the heart of the novel. The recurring appearances of squirrels has frequently been treated as central to *Pnin*.⁶ Their presence in all seven chapters, often adjacent to Pnin, makes the squirrels *Pnin*'s most conspicuous pattern. In the postcard he sends to his ex-wife's son Victor, Pnin informs the boy that the word 'squirrel' comes from "a Greek word" meaning "shadow-tail."⁷ Later, Pnin embarks on a more detailed etymological exploration pertaining to squirrels: "Cendrillon's shoes were not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur – vair, in French. It was, he said, an obvious case of the survival of the fittest among words, verre being more evocative than vair which, he submitted, came not from varius, variegated, but from veveritsa, Slavic for a certain beautiful, pale, winter-squirrel fur."⁸ Here, the transposition of a sound-image across languages keys the reader in to the possible significance of the recurring appearances of squirrels in the novel. We learn elsewhere that Mira Belochkin, Pnin's old love, whose surname derives from the Russian word for squirrel, had "married a fur dealer of Russian extraction."⁹ In another linguistic lesson, this one phonetic, Pnin instructs Victor in the pronunciation of his first name "Second syllable pronounced as 'muff,' ahksent on the last syllable, 'ey' as in 'prey.'"¹⁰ Mira Belochkin wears a "karakul muff"¹¹ to her last meeting with Pnin in Petrograd.¹² Savvy readers will recognize that Pnin breaks up the name "Timofey" into non-semantic sounds, one of which ("muff") then reappears as an English word. Likewise, detailed passages on the etymology of "squirrel" and "squirrel fur" make appearances of the word in Russian (in the surname "Belochkin") and French ("vair") stand out as important. Pnin directs the reader to see discrete words and syllables as part of a pattern beneath the English-language surface. In other words, he

⁶ See Charles D. Nicol, "Pnin's History". *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 4 (3), (Spring 1971): 197-208; and J. H. Garrett-Goodyear, "'The Rapture of Endless Approximation': The Role of the Narrator in *Pnin*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 16:3 (Fall 1986): 192-203.

⁷ Nabokov, 88.

⁸ Ibid. 158.

⁹ Ibid. 134.

¹⁰ Ibid. 104.

¹¹ Karakul is a breed of sheep, but the tubular shape of the muff resembles that of a squirrel's bushy tail. When a squirrel is upright with its tail raised, it might give the impression that the squirrel is wearing a muff.

¹² Nabokov, 104.

instigates a Nabokovian perception of language. Moreover, Pnin's tendency to transform English words, due either to mispronunciation or etymological hints, destabilizes the language and, by extension, the narrator's command of the narrative, based as it is on his command of the English language.

THE MIRROR OF NATURE

Before pursuing a reading of *Pnin* according to significant sounds and syllables, it is important to note that language is one of several forces in the novel which function by fragmentation and reconstitution of parts. The novel itself is, in Julian Connolly's account, "organized along the lines of one of Nabokov's famous spirals: events, images, and associations recur over the course of the novel in a tightly controlled pattern in which external repetition is accompanied by internal transformation."¹³ As will be shown, this pattern of recurrence and transformation is also extant in the words of the text. Leland de la Durantaye explains that a given pattern in Nabokov's work "never tells a larger, overarching story... never takes on the form of allegory – but instead reflects the principal theme of the story itself."¹⁴ Thus, the elements of the novel which share a common *modus operandi* – that of the spiral as described by Connolly above – are essential indicators of the novel's central theme or a particular iteration of that theme.

Those moments in *Pnin* where physics and metaphysics intersect provide insight into Pnin's afterlife and the natural processes of life and death. During his cardiac episodes, Pnin is depicted as experiencing a kind of dissolution akin to death. This experience is captured in the narrator's formulation "death is divestment, death is communion."¹⁵ While the narrator's conception of death suggests the end of individuality, Pnin's experience of the afterlife indicates the opposite. In the first of many such episodes, Pnin feels "something very like that divestment, that communion"¹⁶ and then sees his dead relatives and friends gathered in a hall having been

¹³ Connolly, Julian "Pnin: The Wonder of Recurrence and Transformation" in *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on his Life's Work*, eds. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 195.

¹⁴ de la Durantaye, Leland. "The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 35.4 (2006): 301-26. 316.

¹⁵ Nabokov, 20.

¹⁶ Ibid 20.

“wonderfully recovered from their obscure dissolution.”¹⁷ In Pnin’s vision, his loved ones may have dissolved in the material world but they remain recognizable as their previous selves in the next.¹⁸

Pnin’s position in the narrator’s here-and-now is an unhappy one, but nature’s spiral offers the possibility of transfiguration. Indeed, the echoes of Christian theology here are a propos given the prominent Christian motif in *Pnin*. Michael Maar observes that in *Pnin* it is not “the world redeemed by Christ that Nabokov depicts. It is the world of an evil designer, a world that one can escape only by tearing a hole in it.”¹⁹ Besides the fact that he is chaste, kind, and long-suffering, several significant moments suggest (with some levity) that Pnin is a saintly or Christ-like figure. Pnin wears a “dazzling” cross which causes him to be mistaken for a saint,²⁰ mimics St. John pointing upward to heaven in Leonardo’s painting *St. John*,²¹ appears “transfigured” during a croquet game, and gestures at prayer when he learns he will be fired, clasping his hands on his knees in front of him.²² This last detail is particularly significant, since, according to Jack Cockerell, Pnin lamented the fact that he had been “shot,” when Pnin meant that he had been fired.²³ If his dismissal constitutes Pnin’s death in the world of the novel, then the last chapter is his rebirth. Chapter Seven begins with a memory from Easter Sunday, April 11, 1911, and ends on Pnin’s birthday, February 15th 1955. After leaving the novel on his birthday, Pnin will be resurrected in an entirely different image, as a thriving pedagogue in *Pale Fire*. The natural mechanism which Pnin glimpses during his heart attack – his relatives’ death and reconstitution in the afterlife – also governs Pnin’s own ascent in the universe of Nabokov’s oeuvre. Having suffered a mock death in the corrupt world of *Pnin*, he is reconstituted in a higher station in *Pale Fire*.

In *Pnin*, dreams prove capable of rearranging – even transcending – the constituent parts of the narrator’s reality. Pnin’s and Victor’s dreams display a capacity for fragmentation and reformation parallel to that of nature. Their respective subconsciouses take elements of each

¹⁷ Ibid. 28.

¹⁸ For more on Nabokov’s metaphysics and its relationship to the world of his novels, see Toker, Leona. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.

¹⁹ Maar, Michael. *Speak, Nabokov*. London: Verso, 2009. 97.

²⁰ Nabokov, 40.

²¹ Vries, Gerard de, Donald Barton Johnson, and Liana Ashenden. *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 57.

²² Nabokov, 169.

²³ Ibid. 170.

dreamer's reality and reconstitute them in the mind. The beginning and end of Chapter Four illustrate the particular imaginative power of dreams. As Gennady Barabtarlo notes in his commentary *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin*, in the chapter "Pnin's closing dream is reflected and diffracted in Victor's opening fantasy."²⁴ Victor's dream depicts "The King," awaiting his deliverance from a kingdom in revolt at the seaside, while, in his dream at the end of the chapter, Pnin sees himself preparing to flee a palace, waiting on the beach. The narrator offers a list of the "obvious sources of Victor's fantasies,"²⁵ which includes tales of "the flight of Russian intellectuals"²⁶ that he presumes Victor has heard. Likewise, Pnin's dream is described as "one of those dreams that still haunt Russian fugitives."²⁷ The narrator's insinuation that the "obvious" basis of Victor's and Pnin's dream connection is the trauma of exile suggests that the common elements of their dreams are coincidences rooted in some shared biography. However, these common elements have been acted upon by Victor's and Pnin's respective unconscious minds, where they form an alternate reality, a dreamworld. While Victor's and Pnin's shared dream of escape falls short of reaching this transcendent realm: the King is left standing on the shore, their improbable connection on this subconscious plane does provide brief respite from the narrator's "reality," where the two are disarrayed. Thus, dreams do more than merely reshuffle the discrete experiences of waking life, as the narrator would have it. They provide a glimmer of that communion, the reunification of kin, found in the spiral of life.

Certain creative processes, like the brilliant Victor's painting, also operate according to a principle of fragmentation and reconstitution. Victor's art instructor, Mr. Lake, teaches the boy that "Van Gogh is second-rate and Picasso supreme, despite his commercial foibles; and that if Degas could immortalize a caleche, why could not Victor Wind do the same to a motor car?"²⁸ Lake's lesson focuses on fragmentation: Picasso's cubist style deconstructs and reassembles figures and objects, while the Degas painting in question, *Carriage at the Races*, depicts a carriage cut off in the foreground.²⁹ Victor imagines going about his motor car project in a similarly piecemeal manner, doing so as to "break the car into separate curves and panels; then

²⁴ Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Phantom of fact: a guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 150.

²⁵ Nabokov, 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 86-87.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 97.

²⁹ Vries, Gerard de, Donald Barton Johnson, and Liana Ashenden. *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 48, 50.

put it together in terms of reflections [...] the top will display inverted trees [...] one side of the hood will be coated with a brand of rich celestial cobalt; a most delicate pattern of black twigs will be mirrored in the outside surface of the rear window.”³⁰ Victor proposes to paint not just the car, but the landscape as refracted by the car. Victor’s refracted car parts retain both local and refracted identity: the “scenery penetrate[s] the automobile,” not just superimposing itself but interweaving with the black of the car. According to Mr. Lake, this process is one of “naturalization.”³¹ Indeed, Victor’s reshaping of material reality, a simultaneously destructive and creative act, resembles the workings of the natural order. Victor’s method of painting, like the perception of language unfolded above, involves breaking the subject into parts and putting it back together, enriched, in new contexts.

Imagination, when mobilized for creative pursuits like painting, harnesses the material world, reforms and refracts it. Art, language, and dreams aspire to nature’s supreme artistry. While creative acts like Victor’s fragmented car might seem to disfigure reality, they in fact attain a proximity to nature which straightforward realism – supposedly the mirror image of the material world – cannot claim. Just as nature and the imagination subvert the hostile world designed by the narrator, so too can the matter of the novel, its words, be reimagined as signs of a reality other than the one the narrator presents.

MORPHEMES AND METAFICTION

Tracing the appearances of given morphemes reveals not a “shadow tale” or alternative story, but a metafictional meaning that keys the reader in to the machinations of the narrator. Identifying the syllabic subtext enables the reader to recognize the presence of the narrator whose inventions can be undermined once their “reality” is discredited. In this regard, Victor’s “naturalization” of the world around him, which entails skepticism of its superficial features, is a model for reading *Pnin*. Julian Connolly remarks that “the reader, like the Nabokovian artist, must be attuned to the differences in the recurring events as well as to the similarities.” Recognizing the transformations which occur in recurring syllables is likewise a task for the sensitive reader. Leland de la

³⁰ Ibid. 97.

³¹ Ibid. 97.

Durantaye mentions that Nabokov's pattern-making is an artful way of "signing," meaning that "instead of communicating a message, [patterns] sign and seal a provenance."³² In *Pnin*, where the precise connections between narrator, character, and implied author are difficult to discern, and the information provided by the narrator suspect, the provenance of a given statement becomes all the more revealing. As will be shown, the "uzhasnyi vy dumshchik" N-, who announces himself as the designer of the whole tale at the end of *Pnin*, has embedded his signature in the text along with his fabulation.

There is a particular syllable (along with its attendant reverberations) that can be identified with the narrator. Eric Naiman claims in *Nabokov, Perversely* that the "syllable 'ver' – admittedly unavoidable in English – [...] establishes a network of connections far more numerous than the appearance of the squirrel."³³ The syllable is implicated in Pnin's explanation of the material of Cinderella's shoes, which he claims were made of squirrel fur, or *vair* in French rather than *verre* (French for "glass"). Naiman suggests that here Pnin hints at another homonym: *vers* or "verse," which stands in for verbal art itself. Further, there are several instances in which "the sound 'ver' is repeated in a context which unites it with a word etymologically linked to the Latin root [of *vers*] 'vertere,' meaning 'turn'."³⁴ One such instance reveals the metafictional import of the "turn": "Feverishly, he [Pnin] would flip right and left through the volume, and minutes might pass before he found the right page."³⁵ Pnin goes right and left, looking for a pattern. The failed search sees Pnin under the influence of "fever," and, by extension, the narrator, that "friend of fever."³⁶ Naiman remarks that finding the "right" page would be "akin to reversing the perverse narrator's bend sinister."³⁷ The syllable "ver," can thus be associated with the narrator, his cruel art, and the taunting twists and turns he puts Pnin through.

Chapter Four, however, signifies a turning point, a potential reversal of the narrator's "ver," of his creative contortions. The fourth chapter, the middle of seven, announces itself as a transitional moment. It opens with Victor's dream and the dream-image of "the King" "wearing

³² de la Durantaye, Leland. "The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 35.4 (2006): 301-26. 321.

³³ Naiman, Eric. *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2010), 92.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁵ Nabokov, 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 102.

a very white sports shirt open at the throat and a very black blazer” sitting at a “spacious desk whose highly polished surface twinned his upper half in reverse.”³⁸ The “turn” theme is evident here from the unnecessary repetition of “*very*” and the reversed image of the King. As will be shown, this image is essential to Victor’s dream since it will go on to present two opposing accounts of Victor’s father’s identity. In Victor’s dream, a “revolution” occurs in both the fabula and in the control of the narration. A corresponding change occurs in the “*ver*” pattern: just like the King’s blazer and shirt, the syllable is *reversed*.

The fact that Victor’s dream marks both a *revolution* in narrative control and depicts a revolution in the plot is indicated by the narrator’s abrupt injection of “reality” into the dream’s telling. Following the depiction of the King (said to be Victor’s father) hiding from the revolution in his palace, the narrator interrupts the dream to interpolate: “...Actually, Victor’s father was a cranky refugee doctor.”³⁹ The ellipsis and contradictory claim about Victor’s paternity suggests that this statement comes from a voice distinct from the previous one. The initial speaker rebuts the idea that Victor’s father is a refugee doctor when the dream resumes: “The King, his more plausible father, had decided not to abdicate.”⁴⁰ This marks a reassertion of authority by the first narrator of the dream (the one who found Pnin to be Victor’s more plausible father). Moreover, the King’s refusal to abdicate becomes intertwined with that first speaker’s refusal to cede control of the narrative. The first voice goes on to describe the King staring at a portrait of Victor’s dead mother, which becomes a point of contention when the power shifts again. At the end of that same paragraph another ellipsis occurs: “...Of course, Victor’s mother was not really dead” cautions the second voice. Before the dream sequence comes to a close, this same voice adds that Victor’s mother had actually “left his everyday father, Dr. Eric Wind”⁴¹ after which point the dream is over. Thus, the battle over Victor’s kinship plays out in the very telling of the boy’s dream. The “real” (what we know according to the novel so far) is challenged by the “imagined” (the diffracted reality of the dream world) in both the plot and the narration. His strenuous insistence on the verity of his own version places the second narrator on the side of the “real”: words like “actually,” “really,” and “everyday” undergird his claims. On the other hand, the rival voice submits that the King is not Victor’s real father, but his more plausible one.

³⁸ Ibid. 84.

³⁹ Ibid. 84.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 85.

⁴¹ Ibid. 87.

The juxtaposition of the two realms and their respective modes of comprehension begs the reader to consider whether conventional epistemology or dream logic is more salient to the story.

Another iteration of the reversal extant in Chapter Four involves the narrative focus turning on the narrator and his narrative's veracity. Metafictional analogies for the narrator, novel, and reader emerge in the two dreams. Vehicles hold special importance as stand-ins for narrative movement in *Pnin*. Pnin will leave the novel in a car blocked off by two trucks, he begins the novel on the wrong train, and Naiman suggests that the bus Pnin chooses not to ride at the beginning of the novel marks the first such turning point in the novel.⁴² Victor's revolutionary dream scene is depicted as a stoppage in narrative time with "no newspapers [...] coming out" and "The Orient Express [...] stranded, with all its transient passengers, at a suburban station, on the platform of which, reflected in puddles, picturesque peasants stood and gaped at the curtained windows of the long, mysterious cars."⁴³ Given that Pnin is trapped by the narrator on an "inexorably moving railway coach"⁴⁴ from the opening page of the novel, this interlude represents a moment of reflection during which the narrative itself becomes the focal point. The image of the stranded train-novel with all its characters being gawked at by an audience of peasants is a derisive portrait of an unsophisticated readership mesmerized by the narrator's story.

By the end of Pnin's dream the narrator's "ver" is reestablished. In the dream, the King awaits the arrival of "Percival Blake, a cheerful American adventurer" who had "promised to meet him with a powerful motorboat."⁴⁵ The name itself is, according to Barabtarlo, an allusion to the "courageous Englishman Percy Blakeney of The Scarlet Pimpernel [...] who conceals his identity and outwits his opponents."⁴⁶ By adding a syllable to his first name (from "Percy" to "Percival"), Nabokov provides a paronomasic link ("Percival" and "perceive") between the character and perception. The American adventurer's, or reader's, perception has been infiltrated by this character, who resembles the narrator insofar as he conceals his identity and deceives the perceiver. Indeed, the dream seems to end in triumph for the narrator. Victor's dream never includes the actual flight of the King, instead "the very act of postponing that thrilling and

⁴² Naiman, Eric. *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2010), 104.

⁴³ Nabokov, 85.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 86.

⁴⁶ Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Phantom of fact: a guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 153.

soothing episode, the very protraction of its lure, coming as it did on top of the repetitive fancy, formed the main mechanism of its soporific effect.”⁴⁷ Along with the telltale “very,” repetition and flights of fancy are apt descriptors for the narrator’s tall tales, while the “soporific effect” (or feverish feeling, in Pnin’s experience) they produce discloses a strategy aimed at lulling the reader into passivity. The King’s continually delayed escape, dependent as it is on an accommodating American, again reflects the narrator’s self-congratulatory appraisal of his enchantment of the passive reader.

In Victor’s dream we glimpse an alternate mode of understanding the boy’s kinship, one that contradicts the narrator’s version. While the source of these objections is unclear, as has been shown, dreams are among those creative processes that transcend “reality.” In this domain, the dreamspace of a gifted artist, the false reality represented by “ver” (which is, of course, also related to words meaning “truth” in several relevant languages) is challenged by a brief counter-narrative, a “*revolution*” in narrative control. This chapter underscores the peculiar metafictional mode of the novel, which sees the syllabic pattern reflect the changes in the plot. In Patricia Waugh’s definition, metafiction emerges from the rejection of the “notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful, and ‘objective’ world” and the avowal of language as “an independent, self-contained system which generates its own ‘meanings.’”⁴⁸ In *Pnin*, the constructed nature of narrative plot is not revealed by explicit metafictional comments made by a character or narrator. Rather, language, when perceived according to the dictates of Nabokovian, emerges as an autonomous force capable of conveying a version of reality distinct from that of the world constructed by the narrator.

REPETITION AND REALITY

While the narrator retains control of the story after the dual dreams in Chapter Four, Pnin does seem to experience a reversal of fortune due, in part, to his dreamworld connection with Victor. Julian Connolly argues that Pnin’s subconscious link with Victor “brings him into contact with

⁴⁷ Nabokov, 86, emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 1984), 3.

the aura of genius and magic that envelops the boy, and his life becomes charged with this aura too.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Pnin fares better in situations similar to those he faced in the first three chapters. Pnin begins Chapter Five lost, but instead of having to hurry to a lecture like in the first chapter, he eventually makes it to a congenial summer estate full of Russian emigres, where he enjoys himself immensely. He again has to seek out new lodging, as he did at the start of the novel, and manages to find himself a better room than the one he had at the Clements’. Pnin’s successes in these scenarios – scenarios that proved to be challenging for Pnin in previous chapters – indicate that, though Pnin seems to be repeating similar situations to the ones in previous chapters, he isn’t fated to make the same mistake twice.

In an incident directly related to Victor and the aura the boy has gifted Pnin, Pnin drops Victor’s “glorious,” multicolored bowl, which miraculously does not break.⁵⁰ Emboldened by the miracle of Victor’s bowl remaining intact, Pnin writes to Hagen – who has just informed the professor of N-’s impending arrival and its consequences – ““permit me to recapitulate (crossed out) recapitulate the conversation we had tonight.””⁵¹ Chapter Six marks the end of the “synoptic”⁵² chapters of *Pnin* and Chapter Seven will indeed recapitulate the story presented in chapters one through six. The word’s Latin root, “capitulum,” which is also the root for “chapter” reinforces the inference that the “recapitulation” to come is made up of the preceding chapters. Gennady Barabtarlo suggests that the slip up is meant to recall “caput” (meaning “head,” also the root of “capitulum”) which “is a principle in the Roman law that embraces the status of a free man... Pnin will be free as soon as he leaves Waindell and the novel.”⁵³ No matter the provenance of Pnin’s mistake, by misspelling, crossing out, and rewriting the word, he draws attention to its use and etymology (as well as repetition itself), which will be key in understanding the next chapter in Nabokovian terms.

In Chapter Seven, the conspicuously repeated syllable “re” underscores the narrator’s and Pnin’s divergent trajectories and figures in the narrator’s repetitions, reflections, and counterfeit reality. As a prefix, “re-” is etymologically related to the same Latin root as *vers*: *vertere*, or

⁴⁹ Connolly, Julian. “Pnin: The Wonder of Recurrence and Transformation” in *Nabokov’s Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on his Life’s Work*, eds. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 203.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 205-207.

⁵¹ Nabokov, 173.

⁵² Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov’s Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 265.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 264.

“turn.” The shared etymology is telling: we have seen the narrator’s “ver” reversed to become “rev” in Victor’s dream, and now, at the end of the novel, we see another turn, or rather, a return to the beginning (at least for the narrator) in the form of Jack Cockerell’s narration of the same events.⁵⁴ The key syllables associated with *vertere* transform in a manner that reflects the novel’s spiral structure. The narrator is doomed to travel the narrative circle again, to “recapitulate” the story. Only now that he has abandoned the third-person perspective and made his grand entrance, it is N-, not Pnin, who becomes the focal point of his own flawed narrative. Pnin leaves the story in the final chapter, driving away before the narrator can catch up with him, he “moves on to a higher plane – his path is that of the spiral, not the circle.”⁵⁵

In Chapter Seven, the narrator’s recapitulation of events begins with “My [N-’s] first recollection of Timofey Pnin...”⁵⁶ and contains several conspicuous assurance from N- that these recollections are real. In recalling his childhood visit to Dr. Pnin, the narrator muses: “Perhaps because on my visits to schoolmates I had seen other middle-class apartments, I unconsciously retained a picture of the Pnin flat that probably corresponds to reality. I can report therefore that as likely as not...”⁵⁷ Here, the dubious nature of the narrator’s memory is again conveyed through the prefix “re” – the false confidence of “retain” and “report” belie the narrator’s uncertainty (“probably,” “perhaps,” “as likely as not”). The “re” which denotes the narrator’s unreliable memory becomes embedded in “correspond” and “reality,” suggesting that the “picture that probably corresponds to reality” which the narrator presents is a counterfeit memory. For N-, recollection and reality are inseparable since the plot of *Pnin* has consisted of embellished recollections passed off as reality. These elements are inseparable in the plot and the two words are interwoven through their shared syllable “re”.

As N- relays his memories of Pnin, he offers some telling justifications of his treatment of his subject. The narrator announces: “It is improbable that during the years of Revolution and Civil War which followed I had occasion to recall Dr. Pnin and his son. If I have reconstructed in some detail the precedent impressions, it is merely to fix what flashed through my mind.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Connolly, Julian. “Pnin: The Wonder of Recurrence and Transformation” in *Nabokov’s Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on his Life’s Work*, eds. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 209.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 209.

⁵⁶ Nabokov, 174.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 176, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 179, emphasis added.

As in the above passage, the narrator undermines his previously presented account of Pnin by professing his uncertainty and offering a conditional explanation. After admitting that it was “improbable” that he had kept in touch with the Pnins after 1917, the narrator lets slip that his recollections might well be reconstructions. The “re” pattern again points to this fact: the prefix “e” is employed twice, in “recall” and “reconstruct.” Elsewhere, “re,” no longer a prefix, seeps into the words denoting the narrator’s memories, the “precedent impressions.” The impressions invoked here could be understood as those just mentioned – the narrator’s childhood experience at Dr. Pnin’s – but the statement just as easily explains N-’s *modus operandi* in *Pnin*. He has “fixed” Pnin in his mind, that is, trapped him in a novel of disingenuously reconstructed impressions. Keeping the entire span of the novel in mind, it is notable that the narrator was unable to “recall” Pnin during the years of “Revolution,” given that Victor’s revolutionary dream marked a moment in the novel when Pnin seemed out of the narrator’s grasp. The narrator will echo his inability to “recall” Pnin as the latter escapes from the novel.

While Pnin’s and Victor’s dreams hinted at the narrator’s controlling presence and drew the reader’s attention to N- himself, in Chapter Seven, when the narrator, no longer occluded, takes his place at the front and center of the novel, the consequences of N-’s unmasking become clear. Like the Pnin imitator Jack Cockerell, for N- the subject of the novel has become “the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule.”⁵⁹ Nabokov conveys this role reversal via the moments of reflection that begin and end the chapter. In the first instance, the narrator relates a “silly incident” that he believes will nonetheless “remain forever” in his mind as a marker of the “space of time” he spent at Dr. Pnin’s.⁶⁰ Space and time combine in a reflection of “the blue dab of a window” on a gilded clock, while two flies lazily circle a chandelier.⁶¹ The infinite blue expanse of the window and the clock’s eternal cycle of time represent the time-space in which the narrator will forever remain – another fly moving in ever-diminishing circles. On the last night before Pnin’s escape, the narrator finds himself “dozing off and sitting up with a gasp” as “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.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid. 189.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 175.

⁶¹ Ibid. 175.

⁶² Ibid. 190.

The mirror foretells N-'s own future as the new object of the cruel distortion to which he subjected Pnin.

After a novel's worth of mocking and mimicking Pnin, N-'s first person entrance in the final chapter sees him try to gain access to the man himself. The narrator, who is staying with Jack Cockerell, agrees to his host's suggestion that they try to contact Pnin. When they first call him they hear only echoes of a phone ringing, but later, when the narrator, now alone, tries recalling Pnin, he hears the "response of a heavy breathing, and then a poorly disguised voice said: 'He is not at home, he has gone, he has quite gone' [...] none save my old friend, not even his best imitator, could rhyme so emphatically 'at' with the German 'hat,' 'home' with the French homme."⁶³ The narrator can no longer "recall" Pnin, a foreshadowing of Pnin's exit from the novel, and a reminder of the narrator's shoddy memory throughout. However, N- has already mentioned this detail about Pnin's pronunciation of "at" in the beginning of Chapter Three.⁶⁴ As such, according to the chronology of his novel, N- is actually recalling himself, or, more precisely, he is repeating his imitation of Pnin. Having already transcended the novel, Pnin is "quite gone," while the narrator is left to recursively play the role of Pnin.

The "re" pattern signals the narrator's return to the beginning, to repeat the vicious cycle, but it also denotes Pnin's emergence from that cycle ennobled. According to Barabtarlo, the name Pnin is a "truncated variant of Repnin, and the only known bearer of it was [...] the illegitimate son of the Field Marshal Prince Nikolai Repnin."⁶⁵ In the eighteenth century, the "omission of the first syllable of the aristocratic father's surname was a well-known recourse under similar circumstances."⁶⁶ The bearer of the name Pnin is therefore cut off from his noble heritage. Of course, the syllable excised from the name "Repinin" is the "re" in question. In Chapter Seven N- is especially intent on reinforcing the notion that Pnin is of a mediocre petit bourgeois background. The chapter sees the narrator flaunting his own upper class origins, "trying out a beautiful new English bicycle" on his way home to his "rosy-stone house in the Morskaya" before he ends up in the Pnins' more middle-class dwelling.⁶⁷ His subsequent swipes are increasingly petty: Timofey is seen dressed in "his *gimnazicheskiy* uniform – black blouse,

⁶³ Ibid. 189.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 66.

⁶⁵ Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 56.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 56.

⁶⁷ Nabokov, 175-176.

black pants, shiny black belt (I [N-] attended a more liberal school where we wore what we liked.)”⁶⁸ Pnin had a toy plane, but N- had one “twice bigger.”⁶⁹ While the narrator treats Pnin ignobly, Victor, the Nabokovian artist, dreams of a King father figure who resembles Pnin’s dream version of himself. In waking life, Victor imagines Pnin to be one of “those Bulgarian kings or Mediterranean princes who used to be world-famous experts in butterflies or sea shells.”⁷⁰ Following the transformations of the syllabic pattern according to Victor’s own artistic technique allows the reader to see Pnin as the noble person that Victor perceives him to be.

It is telling that the positive example of creativity in *Pnin* is an artist, rather than a writer. Indeed, N-, a talented prose stylist and inventive storyteller, turns out to be an abuser of these traits. Nabokov’s oeuvre is overpopulated with odious litterateurs – N- can be compared to Humbert Humbert and Hermann Karlovich in this respect. In each of these cases, the reader receives glimpses of the ugly personages behind the prose which detract from their authorial authority. But in *Pnin*, it is not only the narrator and his story that are undermined, it is linguistic convention itself. The narrator’s prose proves less reliable than a pattern of fragmented words and syllables arrayed across several languages, many of them instigated by Pnin’s comparatively poor English.

Pnin is Nabokov’s attempt to couch creativity in some principle other than verbal ability or even the referential function of language. The novel presents a case in favor of art which attains to natural creativity rather than literary language. In *Pnin*, creativity is that which accords with nature’s mode of creation: disintegration and reintegration. This idiosyncratic form of naturalism is likewise founded on a claim of mimesis: Victor’s painting, dreams, and Nabokovian language all mirror natural processes even if they don’t render the natural world “as is”. With this in mind, Nabokov’s logophilia and wordplay take on a distinct character: they evince a skepticism of language as a sufficient medium for creative expression, an awareness of the easy manipulation to which it is subject and, in turn, its capacity to manipulate. Naiman’s observation that “Nabokov uses ‘very’ with astonishing frequency for such a good writer”⁷¹ shows that Nabokov’s aim was not merely stylish prose, but integration of the text itself into the world of the novel.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 176.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 177.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 88.

⁷¹ Naiman, Eric. *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2010), 92.

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