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“THE FREE WORLD OF TIMELESSNESS”:  
REIMAGINING TIME IN NABOKOV’S *PNIN*

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In his lecture “Good Readers and Good Writers,” Vladimir Nabokov describes great authors as godlike creators who imagine and craft new worlds. While “minor” (“Good Readers” 2) authors rely on “traditional patterns” and the “given order of things” (2), master artists create the laws and characteristics that govern the realities they imagine. For Nabokov, these master artists rethink accepted notions of “time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds” (2) in original ways that challenge dominant understandings. They refuse to rely on conventional values or “traditional notions which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths” (2). They are enchanters who “sen[d] planets spinning” (2).

Critics who explore the realities Nabokov created generally acknowledge his suspicion of what Stephen Blackwell describes as the “dominant quantitative, Newtonian” impulse “to explain all natural phenomena by means of quantifiable forms and formulae” (Blackwell 11). For these critics, Nabokov rejects this quantitative mode of understanding because it erroneously simplifies reality’s complexity and “unfathomable variety” (16), and because it leads to persuasive, yet misleading, claims of knowledge that can be oppressive (199). Blackwell argues that Nabokov favors a more qualitative way of conceptualizing reality. He asserts, however, that Nabokov finds even this approach problematic. He attributes to Nabokov a conviction that human perception fails to truly grasp reality, and that the mind therefore “creates soothing fictions for itself and generally

misinterprets the world around it” (11-12). Citing this tendency toward misinterpretation, Blackwell and others implicitly assume that there is – in Nabokov’s opinion – an objective, correct reality that escapes human attempts to understand it.

In this paper, however, I examine the world Nabokov crafts in *Pnin* and argue that he rejects the notion that reality exists in a single, true form and understands it instead as an always subjective phenomenon. Moreover, I particularly propose that Nabokov challenges conventional understandings of time as an objective and absolute entity and searches for more compelling, personally relevant ways to comprehend it. While *Pnin*’s narrator remains faithful to a conventional framework of time, Nabokov entangles its protagonist, Timofey Pnin, in a perpetual process of working-through time’s complications and limitations that gradually unveils a more nuanced vision of temporality. Timofey’s experiences, I argue, show that Nabokov embraces the uniqueness of human perception and consciousness and posits an understanding in which time and reality are grounded in subjective experience – a framework that allows for cognitive resurrections and temporal pauses that defy objective time’s reductive laws. Pnin’s temporal experimentation, however, ultimately reveals that even subjective time oppresses the individual and involves loss, and Nabokov consequently turns to the ideal timelessness of literary form, a liberating realm into which Pnin finally escapes.

## I

When one closely examines the narrator’s storytelling in *Pnin*, it becomes apparent that he comprehends space and time as objective, impersonal entities. His mode of understanding reality reflects traditional assumptions about time and space, like those that underlie metaphysician J. Ellis McTaggart’s 1908 seminal paper, “The Unreality of Time.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout his argument, McTaggart insists on the objective occurrence of “real” (21) events in an unalterable sequence. He asserts that while an event’s status as past, present, or future changes, the event itself exists in a definite, true, and unchangeable form. Framing time’s fixedness in terms of mortality and loss, McTaggart uses death, the most extreme example of conventional temporal finality in human life, to illustrate his point:

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<sup>1</sup> McTaggart explores time’s paradoxes, ultimately concluding that individuals’ perceptions of time must be illusory. While the nuances of his claims lie outside this paper’s scope, the assumptions that his argument involves help illuminate the narrator’s traditional understanding of time and reality in *Pnin*.

Take any event – the death of Queen Anne, for example – and consider what change can take place in its characteristics. That it is a death, that it is the death of Anne Stuart, that it has such causes, that it has such effects – every characteristic of this sort never changes.... At the last moment of time – if time has a last moment – the event in question will still be a death of an English Queen. (24)

After establishing that the “event” itself never changes, he asserts that its position in the immutable time-series also remains the same. He insists, “Two events are exactly in the same places in the time-series, relatively to one another, a million years before they take place, while each of them is taking place, and when they are a million years in the past” (29). For McTaggart, problems arise when we attempt to measure time in terms of the “specious present” (33), or our individual *experiences* of it. Since people’s perceptions of the present vary – a specific moment may seem longer or shorter to one person than to another, or one might “overlook” an element of the “true” event – he contrasts an event’s “specious present” with its “real,” objective present (32-33). As a result, McTaggart essentially frames “actual” time as separate from and not dependent on human experience and perception. For him, one’s *experience* of time and reality is deceptive and threatens to distort that which is actually “real.”

Exhibiting this type of traditional thinking, *Pnin*’s narrator repeatedly demonstrates that he understands time and reality as objective and absolute entities that exist independently of individuals’ personal experiences of them. On a fundamental level, he implicitly reveals his assumptions about reality by attempting to narrate the tale of Timofey Pnin, a Russian émigré who teaches at the fictional Waindell College, from an essentially omniscient position. In order for one to deem omniscience viable, one must believe reality to be an ultimately knowable truth; for the individual who strives for omniscience, reality is the sum of a vast number of objectively existing phenomena – like colors, thoughts, feelings, and objects – that await discovery, and when one discerns them all, one is all-knowing. Consequently, in an effort to establish his “omniscience,” the narrator presents himself as exceptionally adept at perceiving things that others do not in order to juxtapose his supposedly expansive perspective with the average person’s allegedly flawed one.

Nabokov dramatizes the narrator’s belief in the superiority of his perceptual abilities, for instance, in the scene in which the narrator describes Pnin’s search for his friends’ home. The

narrator begins by depicting a “lookout tower... that stood on a wooded hill eight hundred feet high” (111) in the forest through which Pnin drives. Since the tower constitutes the highest vantage point that the average “tourist” can access, the narrator hints that his perspective exceeds the normal individual’s by implying that he views the empty tower’s “forlorn and listless upper region” (115) from above. Moreover, the narrator situates Timofey’s perspective as inferior to his own by omnisciently relating the erratic movements of Pnin’s “preposterous toy car...below” (115). Indeed, in addition to easily pinpointing the house for which Pnin aimlessly searches, the narrator identifies a distant gunshot, an individual twig’s motion, and the larger simultaneity – “everything happened at once” (115) – of an ant’s ascent on the tower, the sun’s appearance, and Pnin’s progress. He employs a similar technique when he describes how Pnin rents the uninhabited bedroom of Isabel Clements, his colleague’s daughter, and eliminates “all trace of its former occupant; or so he thought, for he did not notice... a funny face scrawled on the wall just behind the headboard of the bed and some half-erased height-level marks penciled on the doorjamb, beginning from a four-foot altitude in 1940” (65). When Victor, the son of Pnin’s ex-wife, later visits Pnin at another of his temporary lodgings, the narrator likewise notes, “It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags” (110). Since the narrator’s framework alleges a single, objective reality, he believes that these entities – the “funny face,” the “height-level marks,” the wind’s effect on the puddle – exist in Pnin’s reality regardless of Pnin’s individualized perceptions.

In accordance with his traditional framework, the narrator views time as an unalterable chain of objectively occurring “true” events. He consequently attempts to display a superior grasp over time in order to further demonstrate his supposed omniscience. When he encounters Pnin in Paris after a lengthy separation, for instance, the narrator tries to “amuse” Pnin and other listeners “with the unusual lucidity and strength of [his] memory” (179-180) by reciting a chronology of the pair’s past run-ins. According to the logic of objective time that he upholds, his “former meetings” (179) with Pnin are unchangeable and occupy fixed positions in the “true” sequence of time, which he believes he is particularly adept at perceiving. The narrator’s schema, then, only allows for a single “past” that is real. Since he essentially claims to have all-knowing access to this past, disagreeing with his account would consequently be synonymous with rejecting the truth. Thus, when Pnin refutes the narrator’s version of events, the narrator charges him with “den[ying] everything” and refusing “to recognize his own past” (180). Despite referencing Timofey’s “*own* past [emphasis added],” the narrator upholds a framework that does not allow for a personal vision of time and

reality. In this sense, he rejects what McTaggart calls “specious” time, insisting instead on an “actual” time that normal individuals supposedly fail to grasp.

The purported discrepancy between “specious” and “actual” time leads one to practically rely on standardized units – years, months, days, hours, minutes, seconds – that theoretically allow one to bypass “false” time grounded in personal experience and access “true” time instead. If one understands time as an objective order of unchangeable events that each exist in a single, correct form, it becomes possible to measure time’s progress using a common system that neutralizes the differences in individual perception. Accordingly, the narrator relies on standardized temporal measurements, flooding his tale with dates and times in order to better portray what he thinks is objective, impersonal reality. He often presents elaborate chronologies, repeatedly verifies dates,<sup>2</sup> and always defines specific time ranges.<sup>3</sup> Within his schema, this mastery of standardized measures of “real” time demonstrates a grasp over a purportedly true reality that transcends human experience. For the narrator, this sort of mastery consequently inches one closer to omniscience.

## II

Upon closely investigating the text as a whole, however, it becomes clear that Nabokov questions conventional ways of conceptualizing temporality in *Pnin*. To begin with, he fundamentally challenges the narrator’s view of time and reality as objective phenomena by undermining his allegedly omniscient perspective. Although the narrator initially seems all-knowing and reliable, Nabokov debunks his attempted omniscience by rendering him, in Leona Toker’s words, a “flesh-and-ink inhabitan[t] of the fictional world” (Toker 459). He reveals the narrator to be an embodied character named Vladimir Vladimirovich N–, a renowned scholar whom Pnin knows personally. As a result, Toker and others deem Vladimir Vladimirovich N– an unreliable narrator who arrogantly “overstep[s] the limits of [his] competence” (Toker 459). Indeed, Pnin himself prompts the reader to question the narrator’s claims when he calls him a “dreadful inventor” and advises a friend, “Now, don’t believe a word he says.... He makes up everything” (185). Critics, like Lucy Maddox, therefore often conclude that one cannot “determine how much of the narrator’s account of Timofey Pnin is ‘truth’ and how much is pretense” (Maddox 94-95).

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., “In the Fall Semester of that particular year (1950)” (9).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., “Half an hour later” (33) and “every second Tuesday” (80).

The narrator's failed omniscience, however, serves not only to strip him of credibility and reveal his conceit, but also illuminates more fundamental premises in the framework of reality that *Pnin* presents. Beyond the fact that the reader is faced with an untrustworthy narrator and cannot verify whether events *actually* occur as he says they do, the novel's formal viewpoint makes it impossible to verify objective reality, or "truth," in its world. The story is filtered through three different, yet necessarily conflated, perspectives: Pnin's, the narrator's, and Nabokov's. The reader cannot truly distinguish the perspectives from each other and a web of paradoxes entangles scholars when they attempt to analyze the novel's formal viewpoint.<sup>4</sup> One can neither reduce the perspectives to a single point of view nor separate them from one another absolutely. As a result, the reader struggles to find stable ground and has difficulty determining what "really happens" in *Pnin*. Are Pnin's intimate thoughts *really* Pnin's, for example, or does Vladimir Vladimirovich N—merely project them onto him during his narration? Thus, since omniscience hinges on the possibility of an ultimately knowable truth, the concept of omniscience itself proves to be unviable in *Pnin*.

Nabokov's novel, then, presents a fundamentally unstable reality that directly contradicts the narrator's conventional understanding of it as objectively verifiable and "true." The question that Maddox and others pose of whether or not the narrator tells the "truth" inevitably falls apart. As previously noted, Nabokov describes each great literary work as a "new world" ("Good Readers" 1) with its own unique laws. He accordingly advises readers "to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know" (1). If *Pnin*'s reader follows Nabokov's advice, he or she cannot simply apply conventional thinking and assume that a form of objective reality exists in the novel but remains hidden or inaccessible. For Nabokov, the art object, a world in itself, constitutes its own reality, and the reality of *Pnin* is one in which objective truth does not exist.

In his essay on Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Nabokov argues for reality's lack of objectivity, establishing it instead as an individualized phenomenon that varies from person to person. By comparing the experiences of three men – a vacationing "city man," a "professional botanist," and a "local farmer" ("Metamorphosis" 252) – who walk through the same forested landscape, he demonstrates how one's subjective life shapes one's reality. Indeed, he explicitly

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<sup>4</sup> In his article "Pnin's History," for instance, Charles Nicol reduces the novel's complexity by conflating Nabokov with the narrator. He claims that "Nabokov emerges from his den" in the novel's final chapter and assumes "the definite shape of a character" (208).

asserts that the three men have “three different worlds... different *realities*” (253). The botanist, for instance, “sees his environment in the very exact terms of plant life, precise biological and classified units such as specific trees and grasses...and for him *this* is reality” (252). The farmer’s experience of reality in the forest, on the other hand, “is intensely emotional and personal since he has been born and bred there, and knows every trail and individual tree...all in warm connection with his everyday work, and his childhood, and a thousand small things and patterns which the other two...simply cannot know...” (253). Nabokov insists that one could expand the exercise to encompass a variety of other people, and that each individual’s world would be “completely different from the rest since the most objective words *tree, road, flower, sky, barn, thumb, rain* have, in each, totally different subjective connotations” (253). For Nabokov, the word “reality” can only refer to this individualized “human reality” (253), and he dubs “so-called objective existence” an “empty and broken shell” (253). The extent of reality’s subjective nature for Nabokov becomes clear when he declares, “the world dies with the individual” (251).

Accordingly, reality is always subjective in *Pnin*. Within Nabokov’s text, if one attempts to understand or portray the world, one’s personal viewpoint is necessarily inseparable from one’s depiction. As previously noted, for instance, the narrator emerges as a distinct character in the story he tells, revealing the impossibility of conceptualizing reality apart from one’s subjective experience of it. Similarly, when Victor, a visual artist, examines a car he would like to paint, “In the chrome plating...he would see a view of the street and himself...” (97); illustrating the indivisibility of the personal realm from reality, Victor’s own ever-present reflection shapes the scene he views and factors into his portrayal of it. Nabokov’s apparent insistence on reality’s subjective quality, however, does not mean he advocates solipsism. As Brian Boyd emphasizes, “Nabokov finds the reality of the external world elusive, but not at all because he doubts its existence outside the mind” (68). Boyd, however, seemingly founds his argument on the assumption, which Stephen Blackwell and others implicitly share, that an objective reality exists for Nabokov. Citing the “laziness and limitedness of human perception” (69), Boyd asserts that Nabokov believes one has difficulty pinning down reality because “it is infinitely richer than any single person’s knowledge of it, or even the sum of science’s specifications” (68). He thus implies that, in Nabokov’s opinion, there is one “true” reality, but it is too complicated for individuals to understand. Boyd correctly emphasizes Nabokov’s reverence for “a thing’s uniqueness” (69), but he principally applies this notion of “uniqueness” to objects of perception, rather than to people’s individualized perceptual processes and perspectives themselves. Instead, however, it appears that

Nabokov concerns himself with the particularity of human perception, with the richness of subjective, individual experience that refuses to be homogenized into a single truth. In *Pnin*, one cannot search for a “truth” that exists apart from the subjective realm, and the alleged distinction between the “specious” and the “real” therefore disintegrates.

### III

The collapse of objective truth in *Pnin* supports the novel’s more specific rejection of the conventional view that time is an absolute, impersonal, and standardizable entity. Nabokov writes in *Speak, Memory*, “I confess I do not believe in time” (139), and in *Pnin* he offers an understanding of temporality that challenges the traditionally accepted “time” he dismisses. Pnin displays an affinity for the traditional mode of conceptualizing time that the narrator favors; “inordinately fond of everything in the line of timetables, maps, catalogues” (9), he sleeps with two alarm clocks and uses specific dates to formulate a chronology of his life events while introducing himself to Joan Clements. Simultaneously, though, he exhibits a temporal sensibility that is more complex than the narrator’s, and he consequently plays an integral part in the novel’s process of “working-through” a more desirable temporal schema. Nabokov appropriately links Pnin to Hamlet, who laments, “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!” (*Hamlet* I.iv.189-190).<sup>5</sup> Through the narrator’s remark, “It was the world that was absent-minded and it was Pnin whose business it was to set it straight” (13), Nabokov evokes Hamlet’s grievance and hints that Pnin will sense that traditional understandings of time are “out of joint” and must be “set right.”

Throughout the text, Nabokov repeatedly confronts Pnin with evidence that conceptions of time as an absolute, objective, and quantifiable entity are flawed and do not apply to the world he crafts in *Pnin*. At the Waindell Library, for instance, Pnin finds himself in a ridiculous scenario by emphasizing supposedly objective, standardized measures of time. He intends to check out “Volume 19, year 1947” of a text from the library and not “18, year 1940,” which he already has, but he accidentally merges the two and requests “Volume 18, year 1947” (74). Despite correctly specifying the *year* of the volume he seeks, the librarian notifies him that another patron (actually Pnin) desires Volume 18, and that he must return it so the other person (himself) can pick it up. After the mix-up comes to light, Pnin insists, “I put the year correctly, *that* is important!” (75). Since his reliance on the year – an increment of objective time – brings about the confusion,

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting reading of Hamlet’s struggle with time, see Jacques Derrida’s essay, “The Time is Out of Joint.”



however, the “year” and the larger approach to understanding time from which it stems are evidently *not* important to the novel’s schema of temporality.

Moreover, it is ultimately impossible to verify the exact date of Pnin’s visit to the library. One cannot use the traditional temporal measures associated with “absolute” time to describe the actual day that occurs in the novel’s world. The narrator identifies the year as “1953,”<sup>6</sup> the day as “Tuesday,”<sup>7</sup> and the date of the latest issue of the periodical Pnin reads as “Saturday, February 12” (75). The reader therefore deduces that the day in question is Tuesday, February 15, 1953. But, as Gennady Barabtarlo and Martin J. Schubert point out, February 15, 1953 was really a Sunday (Barabtarlo 122; Schubert 146). Given the narrator’s repeated and conspicuous references to the date,<sup>8</sup> one can safely assume that this temporal discrepancy is not merely an authorial error on Nabokov’s part and instead fits into his larger temporal vision. Barabtarlo argues that the narrator “prod[s]” the reader to “find out the exact date” (128), and Schubert embarks on a quest full of quantitative analyses to determine the “real” day in the novel. Both scholars, then, overlook the larger implication: one should not think of time in *Pnin* as an objective entity graspable through standardization and quantification.

Nabokov consistently debunks absolute temporal designations and exposes the arbitrariness of quantitative measurements intended to access an objective chain of time.<sup>9</sup> He shows, for example, that Pnin cannot rely on a timetable that outlines the scheduled train stops to navigate and understand the world in *Pnin*. Inapplicable to the reality Nabokov crafts, the timetable and the logic at its foundation fail to lead Pnin to his desired destination. Importantly, Pnin does not simply misread the timetable, a standardized tool associated with the conventional system of objective time. Rather, the timetable asserts that a seemingly objective temporal entity – the Cremona stop that should appear at 4:32 P.M. – exists when it was in fact “abolished” (17). The timetable, then, provides a false sense of certainty by boasting the existence of an allegedly “real” entity that does not truly exist. In this sense, the tool’s failure destabilizes objective time’s traditional logic, which asserts the presence of a temporal progression that is “true” and absolute, and consequently quantifiable through a standardized system. Through the timetable’s collapse, Nabokov implicitly

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<sup>6</sup> “Till 1950 (this was 1953 – how time flies!) he had shared an office...” (69).

<sup>7</sup> “This being Tuesday, he could walk over to his favorite haunt immediately after lunch...” (72).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., “...and this was Tuesday, O Careless Reader!” (75).

<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Nabokov more broadly criticizes “our extravagant belief in the organic being of mathematics” (“Commonsense” 375) and laments how manmade mathematics “transcended their initial condition and became as it were a natural part of the world to which they had been merely applied. Instead of having numbers based on certain phenomena that they happened to fit...the whole world gradually turned out to be based on numbers, and nobody seems to have been surprised at the queer fact of the outer network becoming an inner skeleton” (374).

questions the larger quantitative approach to “knowing” – which emphasizes one “correct” reality – that underlies it.

Pnin’s experience with the train helps to reveal Nabokov’s particular distaste with the framework of objective time. Specifically, he links the absurdity and undesirability of standardized temporal measurements with the *impersonal* quality of the objective type of time to which they allegedly correspond. After explaining that Timofey’s desired Cremona stop does not exist, the conductor consults a schedule and instructs him to exit the train “at 3:08” and “catch the four o’clock bus that would deposit him, around six, at Cremona” (17). Pnin adheres to the system of standardized time and obeys the conductor’s instructions; he exits the train on time, drops his briefcase off at the station, eats a sandwich, and returns at “exactly five minutes to four” (18) to retrieve his bag and board the bus. Ultimately, though, the attendant who took his bag departs prematurely and Pnin must consequently choose between waiting for his briefcase and missing the bus. Nabokov interestingly uses Pnin’s movements in relation to the bus to demonstrate that individual experience and personal meaning are incompatible with notions of time as an absolute, quantifiable phenomenon. In order to abide by standardized time’s rules and catch the scheduled bus, Pnin must abandon the briefcase that holds his personal effects. After initially leaving his bag behind and boarding the bus, though, he realizes it contains the lecture he plans to give in Cremona and he therefore disembarks to retrieve it. Thus, in order to regain his personally important possessions, he must exit the bus and remove himself from objective time’s system of schedules and timetables. The station attendant – a custodian of traditional time – who initially takes Pnin’s bag also abandons his post to pursue something personally meaningful; he literally separates himself from the station and its schedules to drive his pregnant wife, who is in labor, to the hospital. In this manner, Nabokov juxtaposes the personal realm – which Pnin’s briefcase, its contents, and the attendant’s pregnant wife mark – with objective time and its structures, in this case the bus schedule.

The temporal dynamics that Pnin’s previously discussed experience at the library involves more specifically suggest that notions of impersonal and absolute time are reductive and simplify human experience. To begin with, the confusion surrounding Pnin’s desired library book could have been avoided if the librarian had taken note of his identity and realized that he had unwittingly requested a book from himself. Instead, an absurd disregard for Pnin’s personal existence fuels the incident, which his quantitative emphasis on the book’s publication *date* initially triggers. Furthermore, the day of the library visit, which seemingly disappears when one attempts to

conceptualize it using objective time's standardized structures, should be February 15, 1953 – Pnin's birthday. The system of purportedly objective time fundamentally undermines his personal existence by disregarding his birth. Relatedly, his birthday gets lost in translation from one arbitrary calendar to another; as the narrator explains, Pnin was born on "February 3, by the Julian calendar," but "never celebrated [his birthday] nowadays, partly because, after his departure from Russia, it sidled by in a Gregorian disguise (thirteen–no, twelve days late)" (67).

Pnin, however, effectively defies the supposedly absolute structures of time through his undeniable presence. Since he does not vanish when his birth date does, his existence proves to exceed the actually arbitrary designation to which objective time attempts to limit it. Moreover, insofar as a mere date cannot describe Pnin's state as a temporal being, the scene prohibits the reader from conceptualizing Pnin's personal existence using the system of objective time. Unable to rely on a birth date, the reader must look elsewhere to understand him. By having Pnin's chair emit "an ominous crack" (68) that prevents him from announcing the date of Pushkin's death during a lecture, the novel similarly inhibits Pnin himself from using impersonal time to simplify individual existence. While Martin J. Schubert argues that this moment serves to "punctuat[e] the themes of death and interruption as well as offe[r] some hide-and-seek for the Nabokovianologist" (147), the "crack" more importantly prohibits Pnin from reducing the poet's complex life to a date.

Pnin's repeated "panics" seemingly stem from his frustrating entanglement with the flawed, reductive framework of impersonal time that the novel challenges. Describing his own battle with time in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes:

Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of *personal* glimmers in the *impersonal* darkness on both sides of my life [emphasis added]. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. (20)

By depicting himself standing in desperation with "bruised fists" before time's "walls," stark and uncompromising surfaces, Nabokov juxtaposes human experience's richness and poignancy with the impersonal nature of allegedly absolute time, which ignores the individual's existence. Critics generally do not address Pnin's attacks, or broadly describe them as side effects of his often unsatisfactory life. Barabtarlo, for instance, refers to one of the fits as "another bizarre spell" (25)

and speculates that Pnin suffers from panic attacks and psychosomatic “intercostal neuralgia” (73) brought on by past “bad experiences” (74). Described as submerged in a “wave of hopeless fatigue” (*Pnin* 19) during his “seizures,” however, Pnin’s condition parallels Nabokov’s when he, “bruised and exasperated,” confronts the austere walls of impersonal time in *Speak, Memory*.

Pnin’s frustrating experience relating to objective time that begins with his timetable’s breakdown, and includes his troubles with the bus, culminates in his first attack. Nabokov solidifies the link between Timofey’s panics and the overall temporal crisis with the description, “...hardly had he turned into an alley...[that] led back to the railway station, than that eerie feeling, that tingle of unreality overpowered him completely” (20). His attack begins in full force when he must return to the train station, which teems with schedules, dates, and other conceptual tools associated with impersonal time. Overwhelmed by sensations of “divestment” and “unreality,” he feels “porous,” “pregnable,” and at risk of losing his “discreteness” during his panics (20). These symptoms perhaps reflect the “unreal” nature of objective time’s actually arbitrary structures that surround Pnin, and the idea that an external, absolute sort of time does not exist, or is unreal. More powerfully, though, he essentially feels as if his existential state as a discrete subject is in danger, and he thus seemingly suffers from objective time’s disregard for the individual’s particularity and personal “reality.”

Nabokov, then, invites Pnin and the reader to look beyond objective time’s reductive structures, which disregard the individual and masquerade under a guise of false supremacy. As previously noted, Brian Boyd argues that Nabokov insists upon attention to a “thing’s uniqueness” (69), the quality that ultimately endows reality with force and beauty. “To grasp it,” Boyd elaborates, “requires the full alertness of the conscious mind, fresh observation, an accumulation of detail, a refusal to sacrifice the discreteness of a thing” (69). This is precisely what the framework of objective time prohibits; its conceptual structures simplify experience and dissolve individual existence into formulaic and allegedly absolute chronologies. Boyd refers to a similar dynamic when he rightly argues that, for Nabokov, “the generalization, the abstraction, the symbol, the tarnish of habit all take away the bright particularity of the world” (69).

Accordingly, Nabokov connects the narrator’s traditional mode of conceptualizing reality to an impaired ability to “see” the world. While describing his first meeting with Pnin, the narrator explains, “My first recollection of Timofey Pnin is connected with a speck of coal dust that entered my left eye on a spring Sunday in 1911” (174). Here, Nabokov links the narrator’s emphasis on day, year, and season that marks his conceptual reliance on objective time to his eye ailment, or to

literally impaired vision. Indeed, the narrator consistently fails to discern the complications and crises relating to time in the novel. He contemplates Pnin's temporal panic at the train station, for example, by wondering, "Was it something he had eaten? That pickle with the ham?" (20).<sup>10</sup> A perpetual adherent to the impersonal time that Nabokov questions, he even utilizes the flawed temporal system that causes Pnin's attacks to reductively describe and homogenize the attacks themselves; "Pnin felt what he had felt already," he explains, "on August 10, 1942, and February 15 (his birthday), 1937, and May 18, 1929, and July 4, 1920" (21). The chronology's backwardness, however, seemingly points to the "backwardness" of his temporal system's principles.

During his panic, in contrast, Pnin implicitly demonstrates his awareness that impersonal time and its structures fail to describe reality's complexity. Amid his attack, he remembers a childhood incident in which he discovers that a particular pattern of definable increments no longer applies to his surroundings, and that he must therefore formulate a new way of understanding reality. Specifically, he "had always been able to see" an arrangement of "three different clusters of purple flowers and seven different oak leaves... repeated a number of times with soothing exactitude" (23) in the vertical plane of his childhood room's wallpaper. He eventually realizes, however, that he cannot conceptualize the horizontal plane using this systematic schema and is "bothered by the undismissible fact that he could not find what system of inclusion...governed the horizontal recurrence of the pattern" (23). Unable to simplify the wallpaper, he becomes lost in a "tangle of rhododendron and oak" (23) that defies standardization and he feverishly searches for the correct "key of the pattern" (23). In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov frames his personal quest to understand time in similar terms. He claims that he "groped for some secret outlet" and "ransacked [his] oldest dreams for keys and clues" (*Speak, Memory* 20). Indeed, the childhood crisis Pnin recalls mirrors the temporal dilemma he faces in the novel. Just as the methodical formula he uses to conceptualize the wallpaper fails to accurately portray its complexity upon closer examination, the standardized temporal structures – hours, years, timetables, schedules – that he relies upon prove irrelevant to the novel's reality, where time resists quantitative and impersonal forms of arrangement. Timofey, therefore, must also search for new "keys" or frameworks with which to understand temporality.

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<sup>10</sup> The narrator tries to attribute this question to Pnin by claiming, "My friend wondered, and I wonder, too" (20), but his description of Pnin as his "friend" invites the reader to doubt his assertion; Pnin would not consider the narrator a "friend."

IV

The role of Pnin's heart in his "seizure" near the train station helps point the reader toward the alternative temporal framework, or "key," that Nabokov favors: subjective, personal time. Since the heart functions as a personal timekeeper, it usefully models the dynamics personal time involves. Each individual possesses his or her own heart, and one's personal experiences influence the manner in which one's heart keeps time; if one runs or feels excited or anxious, the heart rate speeds up, and if one relaxes, the heart beats more slowly. During his "seizures," Pnin's anguish is specifically related to his feeling that "the repulsive automaton [his heart] he lodged had developed a consciousness of its own and not only was grossly alive but was causing him pain and panic" (21). His agony stems in part from the unnatural detachment of his heart, a model of subjective time, from himself. In other words, the perversion of subjective time into an objective, autonomous time that operates without consideration for Pnin – or seemingly develops its own "consciousness" – corrupts the natural order and renders him helpless and terrified.

The nuanced benefits that subjective time offers begin to become apparent when one considers Nabokov's perpetual longing for "the free world of timelessness" (*Speak, Memory* 20). He proclaims his refusal to accept the "two black voids" (20) – the time before birth and after death – that surround life and rejects the "common sense [sic]" notion that one's existence is only "a brief crack of light" (19), or a limited space on the impersonal temporal chain that objective time asserts.<sup>11</sup> A harsh critic of "commonsense," Nabokov calls it "square whereas all the most essential visions and values of life are beautifully round, as round as the universe or the eyes of a child at its first circus show" ("Art" 372). For him, commonsense and its traditionally "rational" stipulations threaten genius, creativity, beauty, and morality (372).<sup>12</sup> Rebellious against the "state of affairs" (*Speak, Memory* 20) that commonsense dictates for temporal existence, Nabokov declares, "...only commonsense rules immortality out" ("Art" 377). He consequently searches for timelessness, a solution to impersonal time's finality. Boyd astutely defines timelessness for Nabokov as "consciousness without the degradation of loss" (84). This sort of timelessness is clearly impossible

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<sup>11</sup> Nabokov writes, "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (*Speak, Memory* 19).

<sup>12</sup> "Commonsense has trampled down many a gentle genius whose eyes had delighted in a too early moonbeam of some too early truth; commonsense has back-kicked dirt at the loveliest of queer paintings because a blue tree seemed madness to its well-meaning hoof; commonsense has prompted ugly but strong nations to crush their fair but frail neighbors the moment a gap in history offered a chance that it would have been ridiculous not to exploit. Commonsense is fundamentally immoral, for the natural morals of mankind are as irrational as the magic rites that they evolved since the immemorial dimness of time" ("Art" 372).

within the confines of objective time. According to objective time's traditional logic, an event occurs in a single, true form and then vanishes forever, locked away in the fixed temporal chain. This framework essentially deems the past irretrievable and unchangeable, and each passing moment therefore marks an unalterable loss. Within such a schema, time means hopelessness, pain, and subjugation.

A personal framework of time, however, inches one closer to the timelessness Nabokov seeks. Alain Andreu rightly holds that Nabokov favors "individual Time, perceptible through the prism of art, imagination and memory," in which "the past and present are seen as the memorized accumulation of sensory perceptions or of extraordinarily rich and precise ideas" (42). Many critics explore Nabokov's interest in the philosopher Henri Bergson's ideas, and this notion of "individual" time certainly evokes Bergson's understanding of temporality. As Tetyana Lyaskovets asserts, Bergson sets forth a type of "personal time" (Lyaskovets 104). He grounds time in consciousness and argues that it is "perceived and lived" (Bergson 208). Bergson specifically conceives of time as "duration," a flowing accumulation of experience and memory that builds as one's life continuously unfolds (209). Duration is a "continuity of our inner life" (205), where the "before and after" coexist in "uninterrupted solidarity" (209). Describing duration as a perpetual "continuation of what no longer exists into what does exist" (208), Bergson holds that the past and present are not clearly definable entities that one can divide into moments. "Real time," he argues, "has no instants" (210). He compares duration to the experience of listening to a melody without separating it into individual sounds or notes, "retaining of it only the continuation of what precedes into what follows and the uninterrupted transition" (205). In contrast to McTaggart, he rejects mathematical approaches to understanding time that emphasize "metaphysical construction[s]" (216) – like chronologies and timelines with distinct increments. When we attempt to "cut" time, Bergson declares, "it is as if we suddenly passed a blade through a flame" (208).

For Nabokov, individual time offers a mode of "rebellion" against objective time's oppressive limitations. In the individual's subjective experience, which involves memory and emotion, the past is neither inaccessible nor lost forever. As Boyd explains, "Though human consciousness operates only within the present, it has access to the past, through memory operating within the present of consciousness" (82). Memory, Boyd argues, lets one enjoy time's "riches" (84) by endowing consciousness with the ability to "endlessly reinvestigate" the past and "discover new harmonies and designs" (83). In discussing Bergson's influence on Nabokov's ideas about

time, Lyaskovets surmises that Bergson offers him “the knowledge that our past is always contained and preserved within the present moment” (110).

Highlighting that a schema of subjective time involves perpetual recall and re-evaluation, however, does not do justice to its difference from the framework of objective time, which never denies one’s ability to merely *remember* or *reinvestigate* a past event. Instead, since *Pnin*’s reality is always subjective and an individual’s personal impressions of an event constitute the way in which that event exists to the individual, if one comes to view the event in a different way after detecting a new pattern or detail, the event itself changes. Rejecting objective time’s oppressive assertion that an event exists in one, unchangeable way, personal time grounded in subjective experience logically allows for the past’s metamorphosis and revision. More profoundly, insofar as one’s subjective impressions that constitute the temporal entity – whether it is a childhood toy or a moment with a lost loved one – always remain, the past and the dead continue to subsist *in* the present. Objective time fixates on the stimulus, asserting its existence as an absolute entity that vanishes when it is no longer present. Subjective time, though, understands the stimulus in terms of one’s personal reaction to and conception of it. Even in the stimulus’s physical absence, one’s personal feelings, thoughts, and associations that constitute the way it exists to the individual remain, and can be experienced endlessly in their original forms. Therefore, although Mira Belochkin, the vibrant love of *Pnin*’s youth, dies horrifically, her beauty and grace, her tenderness, her fragility, “those eyes, that smile” (135), never fade into oblivion but persist in subjective time through *Pnin*’s impressions. These impressions are not merely flashbacks to something that once was. They are eternal remainders that never vanished in the first place and refuse seclusion in a reductive past that objective time mistakenly deems inaccessible.

The breakdowns in flawed, impersonal time in the novel make way for Nabokov, *Pnin*, and the reader to engage with subjective time’s ability to allow for resurrections and redemptions of loss that objective time’s conventional logic prohibits. For instance, the major crisis in objective time that begins on the train culminates in *Pnin*’s lost loved ones re-emerging in a vision while he lectures in Cremona; Nabokov tellingly describes them using the transitional sequence, “murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, *immortal* [emphasis added]” (27). Interestingly, this resurrection dissipates when the narrator directs the reader’s focus to “Old Miss Herring” (28), a professor in the audience who teaches history and therefore presumably upholds objective time and its structures. Similarly, *Pnin* suddenly sees “with passionate and ridiculous lucidity, his parents, Dr. Pavel *Pnin* and Valeria *Pnin*” (75) during the previously discussed scene in the library that illuminates



objective time's absurdity. Nabokov frames the Pnins' return with Timofey's reading about "Whitsunday" (77), or Pentecost, a holiday that asserts the possibility of resurgence. Lacking a sophisticated temporal awareness, however, the narrator does not understand the connection between the Pnins' re-emergence and the surrounding confrontations with objective time that expose the concept's faults; Timofey's vision, he says, occurs "for no special reason" (75).

Frustrated with impersonal time's apparent pitfalls and exposed to personal time's possibilities, Pnin perpetually experiments with conceiving of time subjectively rather than objectively. By taking driving lessons and buying a car, for instance, he rejects the impersonal, absurd domain of standardized train schedules in favor of a personal transportation mode whose tempo he individually commands. In other instances, he discernibly vacillates between temporal schemas. He often begins conceptualizing events using impersonal time, but subsequently tries out personal time instead. While eating dinner with Victor, Timofey declares, "I will now speak to you about sport" (105) and starts describing the history of "sport" by emphasizing events' "objective" dates. He notes, for example, "The first description of tennis... is found in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy's novel, and is related to year 1875" (105-106). Quickly, however, he begins conceptualizing time and historicity in a more personal way. He relates his individual experiences that form the only "history" of sport he can *know*: a subjective accumulation of personal encounters with it. Rather than ending his speech about croquet with a date on a timeline, he concludes, "I still hear the *trakh!*, the crack when one hit the wooden pieces and they jumped in the air" (106). Importantly, Pnin does not say, "I still *remember* what the *trakh!* *sounded* like." Rather, he associates subjective time with timelessness by using the present tense; personal time does not relegate this experience to the permanently lost past in the way that objective time would, but keeps it alive in the present through Pnin's consciousness.

Nabokov powerfully dramatizes Pnin's experimentation with and immersion in subjective time through his swim in the stream at The Pines, the estate at which his friends, who are also Russian émigrés, convene. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov compares his shocking childhood realization that time "exists" to "a second baptism, on more divine lines than the Greek Catholic ducking undergone fifty months earlier" (21). Referencing time's "common flow," he uses the language of liquidity to describe his newfound recognition of himself as a temporal being when he explains, "I felt myself plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time" (21). Pnin's swim in the moving stream evokes the language – "plunged," "mobile medium," "flow" – Nabokov uses to depict his baptism in time and also seemingly

signifies a temporal baptism that is “more divine” than a traditionally religious one. After removing his “Greek Catholic cross” and entering the water, Pnin “moisten[s] his inclined head” and “rub[s] his nape with wet hands” (129). He displays agency by baptizing *himself*, an act that suggests that the time medium into which he plunges is personally relevant. Noting that Bergson relies on water imagery to describe duration, Lyaskovets argues that Nabokov’s use of similar images to depict time in *Speak, Memory* speaks to his engagement with the philosopher’s ideas (104). Indeed, the flowing time in which Pnin immerses himself seems more similar to the lived time Bergson proposes than to quantified, conventional time. “Bubbling” (127), “glistening” (127), and speckled with “glitter” (129), the stream and the temporal understanding it involves offers the “personal glimmers” (*Speak, Memory* 20) for which Nabokov searches in time’s “darkness” (20).

Pnin appropriately removes his watch before entering the water, distancing himself from the impersonal, standardized time that the instrument measures. His own body constitutes the time keeping mechanism instead. Manifesting subjective time, he “slowly swing[s] his tanned shoulders” (129), which function as pendulums that command the personal “rhythm” of his movements and the patterns of “ripples” stemming from his body.<sup>13</sup> Pnin also discernibly relies on a personal mode of understanding time in association with his swim. When faced with a question regarding a chronological confusion in *Anna Karenina* beforehand, he conceptualizes time in a traditional fashion, remarking, “I can tell you the exact day.... The action of the novel starts in the beginning of 1872, namely on Friday, February the twenty-third by the New Style” (122). In the section immediately following his swim, however, he revises his explanation by emphasizing temporal experience’s subjective quality. Providing a more nuanced answer, he claims, “...there is a significant difference between Lyovin’s spiritual time and Vronski’s physical one.... It is the best example of relativity in literature that is known to me” (129-130).

Evoking personal time’s association with timelessness, Nabokov sets Timofey’s immersion in subjective time against a sublime background that brings to mind his own experience with timelessness in *Speak, Memory*. Discussing his search for butterflies along a particular riverbank, Nabokov writes, “On the other side of the river, a dense crowd of small, bright blue male butterflies that had been tipling on the rich, trampled mud and cow dung through which I trudged rose all together into the spangled air and settled again as soon as I had passed” (138). Subsequently finding himself in a bog filled with more butterflies, he reflects, “...the highest enjoyment of

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<sup>13</sup> “He swam with a rhythmical splutter–half gurgle, half puff. Rhythmically he opened his legs and widened them out...” (129).

timelessness...is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants.... It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love” (139). Setting the scene at the river in *Pnin* in a remarkably similar fashion, Nabokov writes, “A score of small butterflies, all of one kind, were settled on a damp patch of sand, their wings erect and closed...one of Pnin’s shed rubbers disturbed some of them and, revealing the celestial hue of their upper surface, they fluttered around like blue snowflakes before settling again” (128). By employing this setting in the novel, Nabokov links the timelessness he describes in *Speak, Memory* with a subjective sort of time that flows according to individual experience’s personal “rhythms.”

However, Pnin also undergoes a poignant “seizure” at The Pines relating to Mira’s demise that forces the reader to recognize that the timelessness subjective time offers is incomplete. The incredible trauma of Mira’s death, and the possibility of her death in the first place, seemingly renders a clean solution to the problem of temporal loss unreachable. Most fundamentally, although it embraces and reveres human experience, a personal framework of time does not allow for mortality’s reversal. Despite his everlasting, timeless impressions that allow Mira to subsist in the subjective present, Pnin cannot literally breathe life into her and resurrect her corporeal presence as it once was. When Pnin associates the article he reads about Whitsunday in the library with “Ophelia’s death! *Hamlet!*” (79), he foreshadows this unavoidable conclusion. Namely, subjective time’s capacity for resurrection is associated with the nagging realization that Ophelia physically remains in her grave despite Hamlet’s distress, and that Mira must share the same fate.

Furthermore, although it liberates the individual from objective time’s false claims to truth and its reductive disregard for human experience, subjective time can still be oppressive. The initial proposition that “an injection of phenol into the *heart* [emphasis added]” (135) causes Mira’s death demonstrates that, despite its benefits, personal time involves vulnerability. If one views the heart as a model of subjective time, this image suggests that one cannot master or fully control time, even within a personal framework. One cannot speed, slow, or pause the heart rate at will, and – regardless of one’s deepest wishes – the heart eventually stops and the individual falls victim to time. Consequently, Pnin views his heart, according to the narrator, as “some strong slimy untouchable monster that one had to be parasitized with, alas” (20). Although it allows for nuanced possibilities that the objective realm prohibits, subjective experience entails pain and a certain degree of helplessness. As the notion that Mira reemerges “only to die again and again” (135) suggests, Timofey’s memory and imagination themselves cause him to experience the painful loss associated with Mira’s death for the first time, and subsequently over and over again. Despite

preserving Mira and inching himself closer to timelessness, Pnin's impressions oppress him. Therefore, Nabokov seemingly guides the reader to the conclusion he proposes in *Speak, Memory*: "the prison of time is spherical and without exits" (20).

V

At *Pnin*'s close, though, Timofey does find an exit. He drives away from Waindell into a glorious, majestic landscape. Nabokov writes, "Then the little sedan boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, sputtered up the shining road, which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen" (191). J.H. Garrett-Goodyear examines this final image with Pnin and Vladimir Vladimirovich N-'s relationship in mind. He argues that Pnin escapes from the narrator's clutches but remains within the author's territory, "the landscape of fairyland: of magic, of imagination, of fiction" (201). Nabokov asserts that all "great novels are great fairytales" ("Good" 2), and thus the "fairyland" that awaits Pnin does seemingly signify the realm of literature. This final liberation, however, is more sublime than Garrett-Goodyear surmises. The closing image of Pnin, "free at last" (191), not only marks his freedom from Vladimir Vladimirovich N-, but more profoundly signals his release from time's "prison."

Pnin's journey through time's tensions and complications culminates in his escape into the timelessness literature offers. Lyaskovets argues that Nabokov accomplishes the "existentially impossible task of temporal reversal" (115) by crafting "verbal pictures" (115) that function like photographs. For her, Nabokov "unsettle[s] temporal boundaries by capturing time in images" (115) that eternally preserve the past in the present moment.<sup>14</sup> By conceiving of writing in terms of its photographic potential, however, Lyaskovets neglects the more robust capacity for temporal resistance that is inherent to the medium of literature. Literature structurally defies objective time's principles and offers an ideal version of subjective time that consistently surpasses limitations. *Pnin*'s narrative proceeds in an unsteady, inconsistent way that prohibits temporal quantification and standardization. Like other literary works, it does not render conventional temporal

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<sup>14</sup> Citing Bergson's concept of duration, Lyaskovets also argues that the act of artistic production allows the artist to enter an atemporal state (105-106). Nabokov himself claims that novels originate from a state of timelessness. Discussing the author's "inspiration of genius," he writes, "it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist" ("Art" 378).

measurements – such as years, days, or hours – proportionally in its form through the number of words or pages it contributes to events. Furthermore, the text’s internal “time” progression refuses standardization; the number of sections per chapter changes, for instance, and the number of pages per section varies.

As a result, whenever the narrator utilizes an impersonal, “objective” temporal measurement to describe an event’s duration in the “story,” the text necessarily undermines his efforts through its structure and demonstrates the unit’s inapplicability. For example, the narrator specifies that Pnin’s first attack begins after he exits the four o’clock bus and ends at “four-twenty” (25) in story time, but the number of pages Nabokov contributes to the span of fewer than 20 minutes far exceeds the number he commits to the hours remaining in Pnin’s entire trip to Cremona. Instead of obeying a standardized, reductive framework, the novel flows according to a combination of personal rhythms of experience; the narrator’s, Pnin’s, and Nabokov’s “consciousnesses” dictate which events occur in the novel’s reality and how extensively it emphasizes them. This alternative literary temporality frustrates the traditionally minded narrator, who complains, “It all happened in a flash but there is no way of rendering it in less than so many consecutive words” (21).

Most importantly, though, literature offers a temporal framework that allows for timelessness by effectively preventing loss. Denying an absolute, ordered chain of time, *Pnin* liberates events from their allegedly unchangeable positions by rearranging their occurrences in its own temporal world, and it can retrospectively inscribe new events into the past and delete or reconfigure others; there is, as Nabokov writes, “simply no saying what miracle might happen” (*Pnin* 191). Manifesting this liberating temporal phenomenon in his escape, Pnin breaks free from an allotted position in the forward progression of traffic, boldly swinging “past the front truck” (191) instead of staying in line. The novel layers time onto itself until distinctions between past, present, and future vanish; phrases in the past or future tense, and phrases that thematically reveal past or future events, all occur in the text’s formal present – the current “moment” of its internal progression. Furthermore, re-reading defies the temporal limitations of merely remembering, an exercise always flooded with an awareness of loss. Regardless of whether one has read a particular scene before, the scene always occurs in its original entirety within the novel’s present moment. *Pnin*, then, not only resurrects Mira completely by depicting her alive and well, it allows her to permanently subsist in that way. Thus, Nabokov ultimately liberates Pnin from time’s oppression by establishing him in *Pnin*’s timeless reality. Indeed, as if to remind the astute reader of his immersion in the “free world of timelessness” (*Speak, Memory* 20) that literature offers, Pnin appears again in

another of Nabokov's novels, *Pale Fire*. *Pnin*'s ending is not an ending in the traditional sense at all, but an affirmation of a literary timelessness that defies endings and the losses they entail.

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