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**“IN A GREGORIAN DISGUISE”:
INTERTEXTUAL METAMORPHOSIS
IN *PNIN***

It is certain that *Pnin*, composed between 1953 and 1955, draws much from texts that were the focus of Nabokov’s teaching during the early 1950s. Brian Boyd, for example, notes that just months before conceiving *Pnin*, Nabokov delivered lectures on *Don Quixote* criticizing “the book’s implicit invitation to its readers to enjoy Don Quixote’s pain and humiliation.” *Pnin*, Boyd continues, “is Nabokov’s reply to Cervantes. It is no accident that the book’s risible name, that ‘preposterous little explosion,’ almost spells ‘pain.’”¹ Gennady Barabtarlo, in his meticulous commentary on the novel, pinpoints several ideas from Nabokov’s lectures and scholarly work that make their way into *Pnin*. Among these, Barabtarlo identifies borrowings in *Pnin* from Nabokov’s research on *Eugene Onegin*;² demonstrates how *Pnin* voices Nabokov’s idiosyncratic views on the nature of Ivan Ilyich’s illness³ and time in *Anna Karenina*;⁴ and locates parallels between Gogol’s and *Pnin*’s approaches to peripheral characters (a device Nabokov explores in his Cornell lectures on Gogol).⁵ Such echoes between Nabokov’s lectures and a novel he wrote while lecturing may offer insight into how his teaching infiltrates and informs his own literary works.

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2022 ASEEEES Annual Convention in Chicago. I would like to thank Stephen Blackwell, Elizabeth Geballe, Robyn Jensen, Sara Karpukhin, Luke Parker, and especially Eric Naiman and Yuri Leving for their detailed feedback and encouragement.

¹ Boyd, *The American Years*, 272. For more on *Don Quixote* and *Pnin*, see Nafisi, *That Other World*, 123–160.

² Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 160.

³ Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 185.

⁴ Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 210.

⁵ Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 16.

This essay demonstrates how Nabokov's lecture on Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" infiltrates *Pnin*. I argue that *Pnin* operates as an intertextual reincarnation of Kafka's Gregor Samsa. This move enables Nabokov to realize his interpretation of "The Metamorphosis" and give Gregor the escape he imagined Kafka didn't realize was possible.

Grotesque Beetlehood vs. Human Sweetness

Nabokov first taught Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" as part of his Masterpieces of European Fiction course at Cornell during the spring of 1951.⁶ He taught "The Metamorphosis" again in April of 1954,⁷ about a year after he'd begun work on *Pnin*.⁸ And he was teaching his Masterpieces course in 1955 while wrapping up *Pnin* and trying to place it with a press.⁹ In reviewing his pitches to potential publishers, it is curious to note how Nabokov describes his hero *Pnin* in ways reminiscent of his commentary about Kafka's hero, Gregor.

In his lecture on "The Metamorphosis," Nabokov observes two juxtapositions that structure Kafka's depiction of Gregor. First, there is the juxtaposition between Gregor's sweetness and his insect appearance. Nabokov notes that

[Gregor's] beetlehood, while distorting and degrading his body, seems to bring out in him all his human sweetness. [...] Kafka's art consists in accumulating on the one hand, Gregor's insect features, all the sad detail of his insect disguise, and on the other hand, in keeping vivid and limpid before the reader's eyes Gregor's sweet and subtle human nature.¹⁰

Concentrating on the "sad detail" of Gregor's "insect disguise," Nabokov would enumerate for his students "some fourteen entomological characteristics and mannerisms of Gregor" that "define

⁶ Boyd, *The American Years*, 171.

⁷ Boyd, *The American Years*, 258.

⁸ Barabtarlo estimates that "*Pnin* was begun late in the spring of 1953, probably after May 3 and certainly before June 20" (Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 13).

⁹ Boyd, *The American Years*, 292.

¹⁰ Nabokov, "The Metamorphosis," 270.

him as a scarab or dung beetle—‘a bug among humbug.’”¹¹ This witticism—“a bug among humbug”—signals the second juxtaposition Nabokov identifies in analyzing Kafka’s characterization of Gregor: that is, Gregor’s “human sweetness” versus the vileness of his father, mother, and sister. “Gregor,” Nabokov asserts, “is a human being in an insect’s disguise; his family are insects disguised as people.”¹²

These comments about Gregor strike a note similar to one found in Nabokov’s approach to introducing Pnin to publishers. In a letter dated September 29, 1955 to Pascal Covici of Viking, Nabokov describes Pnin using the same sort of juxtapositions he observes in Kafka’s characterization of Gregor. He writes,

When I began writing PNIN, I had before me a definite artistic purpose: to create a character, comic, physically in attractive—grotesque, if you like—but then have him emerge, in juxtaposition to so-called “normal” individuals, as by far the more human, the more important, and, on a moral plane, the more attractive one. Whatever Pnin is, he certainly is least of all a clown. What I am offering you is a character entirely new to literature—a character important and intensely pathetic—and new characters in literature are not born every day.¹³

Like Gregor’s insect exterior that contrasts his human sweetness, Pnin’s “grotesque” appearance stands out against his morally attractive nature. And like Gregor’s status as a sweet bug among vile humbugs, Pnin exists among “normal” people who, “on a moral plane,” pale in comparison to Pnin. Considering the similarity between Nabokov’s description of Pnin and his observations about Gregor, Nabokov’s salesman’s pitch—that he’s offering “a character entirely new to literature”—might read like a textbook manifestation of the anxiety of influence. In Bloomian terms, here we

¹¹ Appel, “Remembering Nabokov,” 19.

¹² Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” 280. As we consider Nabokov’s lecture, it is interesting to note that Leland de la Durantaye has made the argument that Nabokov fundamentally misreads “The Metamorphosis.” Among other takedowns, he throws water on Nabokov’s characterization of Gregor as a “genius surrounded by mediocrity” and argues that Nabokov’s personal distaste for music distorts his interpretation of the scene where Gregor hears his sister playing the violin. Nabokov’s reading of the latter “shows him deaf to a touching tonality in Kafka’s writing” (de la Durantaye, “Kafka’s Reality and Nabokov’s Fantasy,” 328). I have wondered to what extent (if any) Nabokov’s creation of Pnin retroactively informed his interpretation of “The Metamorphosis,” perhaps accounting for what de la Durantaye regards as “misreadings.”

¹³ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 178.

may witness Nabokov’s desire to imitate his precursor conflictingly coupled with his desire to be original; he must therefore preemptively defend against the knowledge that he’s imitating rather than creating.¹⁴

Did Nabokov realize he was cribbing his own lecture on “The Metamorphosis” when pitching *Pnin*? Intentional or not, it is not only that Nabokov’s description of Gregor mimics his description of Pnin, but both Kafka’s story and Nabokov’s lecture structure *Pnin* in fundamental ways.¹⁵

Pnin and Gregor

The stage is set for what I’ll call the novel’s “Gregor theme” in the opening pages of *Pnin*,¹⁶ with the very first description of its hero. Several images in this description seem plucked and refashioned from the opening of “The Metamorphosis” as translated by Willa and Edwin Muir, which Nabokov references with modifications throughout his Kafka lecture. In TABLE 1 below, I’ve inserted numbers indicating echoes between the two openings.

TABLE 1

The opening of <i>Pnin</i>	The opening of “The Metamorphosis,” as Nabokov quotes it in his lecture (modified by Nabokov from the Muir translation)
The elderly passenger sitting on the north-window side of that inexorable moving railway coach, next to an empty seat and facing two empty ones, was none other than	As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from a troubled dream he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were [2] armor-plated,

¹⁴ See Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*. For a helpful overview of Bloom’s thesis, see Allen, *Intertextuality*, 130–140.

¹⁵ Scholars have found evidence of Kafka’s influence in several of Nabokov’s works. See Foster, “Nabokov and Kafka”; de la Durantaye, “Kafka’s Reality and Nabokov’s Fantasy”; and Boegeman, “*Invitation to a Beheading and the Many Shades of Kafka*.”

¹⁶ In this essay, all citations from *Pnin* refer to the following edition and are given parenthetically throughout the text: Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

<p>Professor Timofey Pnin. Ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with [1] that great brown dome of his, [2] tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck, and [3] strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat, [4] but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flannelled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet. (7)</p>	<p>back and when he lifted his head a little he could see [1] his dome-like brown belly divided into corrugated segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. [4] His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to [3] the rest of his bulk, flimmered [<i>flicker</i> + <i>shimmer</i>] helplessly before his eyes.¹⁷</p>
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Pnin’s “rather impressive” beginning—his “ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven” cranium, otherwise dubbed “that great brown dome of his”—suggests a head of the same color and shape as a beetle’s body, and perhaps repurposes the word “dome” from the description of Gregor, drawing an association between the two. Of note, Nabokov also uses the word “dome” outside of his lecture when describing Kafka’s portrayal of Gregor. For instance, in a letter dated April 28, 1958 to Professor Harry Levin, Nabokov criticizes Poe’s visualization of an insect while praising Kafka’s, commenting, “In Kafka’s case the reader sees the brown domed beetle quite clearly.”¹⁸ Gregor and “dome” seem to be linked together in Nabokov’s mind.

At the same time, Nabokov repeatedly underscores the distinctive dome-i-ness of Pnin’s head in correspondence with editors and publishers. Correcting the proposed cover art for the novel, Nabokov specifies that “[Pnin’s] head should look quite bald, without any dark margin, and must be ampler, rounder, smoother, more dome-like.”¹⁹ In fact, it turns out that the peculiar shape of Pnin’s head is part of the novel’s inner weave. This is disclosed in a letter dated March 5, 1955 to his *New Yorker* editor Katherine A. White. Here, Nabokov enumerates unacceptable changes that have been made to his manuscript (what was to become the third chapter of *Pnin*, originally titled “Pnin’s Day” and published in the April 23, 1955 issue of *The New Yorker*). Among these

¹⁷ Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” 258–259.

¹⁸ “I enjoyed your treatment of Poe. Not only did he not visualize the death’s-head moth, but he was also under the completely erroneous impression that it occurs in America. In Kafka’s case the reader sees the brown domed beetle quite clearly” (Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 257).

¹⁹ Letter to Jason Epstein, October 1, 1956 (Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 190).

unacceptable changes, Nabokov emphasizes with double exclamation marks “(the head! Pnin’s head!)” alongside “(the squirrelized tree),” and then explains:

Such changes would affect the inner core of the piece which is built on a whole series of inner organic transitions; it would be agony even to contemplate replacing some of them at random by mechanical inorganic links when I have taken such pains with the inner linkage and balance.²⁰

And he reiterates yet again the importance of Pnin’s head in his notes to White’s edits: “Stet: head. He had no hair (see Galley Four). Head *must* remain. The story collapses otherwise.”²¹ Pnin’s head is thus put in the same category as the rich, multifaceted squirrel theme,²² which is intimately tied up with the novel’s Cinderella theme (Pnin himself makes the connection between Cinderella and squirrels when he explains that her shoes were originally made not out of glass, *verre*, but of squirrel fur, *vair*) (158). Of course, like Kafka’s story, Cinderella too is a tale about metamorphosis.

But if this association between Pnin’s “great brown dome” and Gregor’s “dome-like brown belly” seems too tenuous at first, too much a-dome about nothing, it becomes more convincing as we consider other parallels between the opening description of Pnin and the opening description of Gregor. Pnin’s “infantile absence of eyebrows,” when placed in an entomological context, suggests a beetle’s eyebrow-less face. His “tortoise-shell glasses” may be a subtle callback to Gregor’s “armor-plates.” Meanwhile, Pnin’s “strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat” mimics Gregor’s “dome-like brown belly.” While brown is a likely color for Pnin’s tweed coat, there is an undeniable similarity between his and Gregor’s puffed-out upper bodies. Finally, Pnin’s “somewhat disappointing” ending—“a pair of spindly legs” and “frail-looking, almost feminine feet”—is strongly reminiscent of Gregor’s legs that are “pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk” and that “[flimmered] helplessly before his eyes.” The contrast established in both openings is one of an impressively rounded, dome-inating upper body juxtaposed with pathetically small

²⁰ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 156–157.

²¹ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 159, italics in the original.

²² The squirrel motif has been painstakingly analyzed by several critics. See, for example, Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 21–23; Masing-Delic, “Belkin, Belochkiny, and Belka Chudo-Divo,” 25–29, 33–35; Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, 89–97; and Naughton, “Animal Moments,” 127–132.

legs and feet. Notably, all these elements of the Gregor theme—the impressive dome, the top-heavy torso, the spindly legs, the tiny feet—become recurring motifs in *Pnin* (TABLE 2).

TABLE 2

Brown-domed head	Top-heavy torso	Thin legs and small feet
Pnin ringing the doorbell of the wrong house: “with a head like a polished globe of copper” (33)	Pnin laughing in class: “his big shoulders shook and rolled” (12–13)	Pnin’s “curiously small shoes” (35)
Pnin putting on an overcoat: “his inclined head would demonstrate its ideal baldness” (65)	Pnin about to have a heart spell: “He was less strong than his powerfully puffed-out chest might imply [...], the wave of hopeless fatigue that suddenly submerged his top-heavy body” (19)	Laurence finds “fat-naped Pnin braced on his thin legs serenely browsing in a corner” (40)
Victor sees “a totally bald man with a brownish complexion” (103)	Pnin basking in the light of his sunlamp: “a dazzling Greek-Catholic cross on his broad chest” (40)	Pnin swings the croquet mallet “between his parted spindly legs” (130)
Pnin meeting Victor: “The brown-domed gentleman took off his glasses” (103)	While sobbing: “Pnin’s unnecessarily robust shoulders continued to shake” (61)	Pnin’s “curiously small foot upon the [croquet ball]” (131)
Pnin working on getting out of his car at The Pines: “his bronzed bald head” (121)	Pnin putting on an overcoat: “with a jerk of his broad shoulders” (65)	
At The Pines, a horsefly “applies itself” to “Pnin’s bald head” (129)	Pnin arriving at The Pines: “his partly unzipped windbreaker seemed too tight for his impressive torso” (121)	

<p>A moment after the nutcracker breaks a glass in the sink: “Pnin’s glossy bald head” (172)</p>		
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Insects and metamorphosis also dominate the novel’s first scene where Pnin experiences one of his heart spells.²³ These spells are marked by sensations of “unreality” and “divestment,” making Pnin feel “porous and pregnable” (20). While not labeled as such, these sensations might describe the feeling of metamorphosis. As Pnin is overtaken by these sensations in a Whitchurch park, he slides back into his childhood, becoming once again eleven-year-old Timofey felled by a fever. His pediatrician Belochkin, a “beetle-browed man” (22), checks Timofey’s racing pulse and listens to his chest. Timofey’s mother, “with a waspy waist,” wraps him in layers of linen, cotton, and flannel, thereby transforming him into a “poor cocooned pupa” who “could not close his eyes because his eyelids stung so” (22–23). Actually, there is an entomological reason why his eyelids won’t close: insects do not have them.²⁴

The opening scene of “The Metamorphosis” may also contain the literary foremother of Mira Belochkin and, correspondingly, the squirrel theme.²⁵ This scene’s description of Gregor’s room zooms in on a magazine picture of a lady in furs:

His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out—Samsa was a commercial traveler—hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!²⁶

²³ I am grateful to Yuri Leving for drawing my attention to several details in this scene.

²⁴ In his annotated copy of “The Metamorphosis,” in reference to Gregor shutting his eyes, Nabokov notes: “A regular beetle has no eyelids and cannot close its eyes.” Hence, Gregor is “a beetle with human eyes” (Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” 258, see footnote to “shutting his eyes”).

²⁵ I am grateful to Eric Naiman for suggesting I consider potential connections between Mira and Gregor’s picture of the lady in furs.

²⁶ Kafka, “The Metamorphosis,” 89.

While this picture has occupied a prominent place in scholarly discussion of “The Metamorphosis”—it is often read as a symbol of Gregor’s sexual life and animality, and as one of several “coded references” to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s erotic novel *Venus in Furs*²⁷—Nabokov mentions it only when discussing the furniture-moving scene, and there only drawing special attention to the frame Gregor built to display it. He remarks,

Gregor tries to save at least the picture in the frame he had made with his cherished fretsaw. [...] Here Gregor rushes from his hiding place, unseen by the two women now struggling with his writing desk, and climbs the wall to press himself over the picture, his hot, dry belly against the soothing cool glass.²⁸

But if Nabokov has curiously little to say about the picture in the lecture, Pnin’s beloved Mira Belochkin emerges as a lady wrapped in a furry signifier of a last name (derived from the Russian diminutive for “squirrel”).²⁹ This signifier becomes more signified and subtly erotic in Pnin’s final meeting with her before “history broke their engagement”: “He remembered the last day they had met, on the Neva embankment in Petrograd, and the tears, and the stars, and the warm red-rose silk lining of her *karakul muff*” (134, italics mine). Mira marries “a fur dealer of Russian extraction” (134), coding her more officially as a lady in furs. And the last time Pnin sees Mira,

²⁷ For example, Mark M. Anderson argues that “these furs function as emblems not so much of wealth and social status as of animality, which in this story symbolizes a liberation from specifically human problems of sin, guilt, mortality, even from pain and self-consciousness. This is the basic narrative movement to *The Metamorphosis*: after his initial transformation, Gregor will attempt to realize the promise implicit in this photograph, to merge with his mirror-image, to descend the evolutionary ladder into an animal state, to become the animal-artwork. As several studies have pointed out, Kafka borrowed the image of the fur-clad lady as well as the basic plot structure for his story from a classic novel of *fin-de-siècle* eroticism, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* [1870]. The picture Gregor has cut out of a magazine thus functions as a coded reference to Kafka’s own appropriation of Sacher-Masoch’s narrative. This is not the place to rehearse the numerous and surprising similarities between the two texts, which include not only the fur clothing, but also uniforms, the name Gregor, and analogous ‘punishment fantasies,’ which, in Sacher-Masoch’s text, turn the protagonist metaphorically into a ‘dog’ or ‘worm’ groveling at his mistress’ feet. Two points of contact between these texts are however worth stressing. The first is that in both works fur functions as a metonym for sexual desire, either in the Freudian sense as a fetish recalling the mother’s genitalia and pubic hair, or in the popular sense of ‘animal’ passion and corporeality. Secondly, in both texts desire is a product of images—paintings, sculptures, photographs, staged erotic encounters—in other words, art” (“Aesthetic Autonomy in *The Metamorphosis*,” 86–87).

²⁸ Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” 271–272. Perhaps the picture was too much of a Freudian hotbed for Nabokov to consider? In any case, the absence of its discussion in the lecture is remarkable.

²⁹ Via “Belochkin,” scholars have connected the numerous appearances of squirrels in the novel to Mira, and by proxy to Pnin’s undiagnosable (or better, resistant-to-interpretation) “shadow behind the heart” (126), since per Pnin’s postcard to Victor we learn that “squirrel” comes from the Greek for “shadow-tail” (88).

by chance in Berlin, she eventually joins “her husband who was getting his overcoat at the cloakroom” (134)—a place flush with furs.

Tracing Mira’s literary genealogy to Gregor’s picture of a lady in furs develops *Pnin*’s metamorphosis theme in at least two additional ways: the first, through Pnin’s heart spells, where he becomes “porous and pregnable” often in the shadow of a squirrel;³⁰ and the second, through Mira’s ever-metamorphosizing death in a Nazi extermination camp: “since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again...” (135). Mira incarnates Gregor’s lady in furs as youthful love cut short, the memory of whom gains additional pathos and endlessly transforms through the unspecified horror of her death. Finally, it bears mention that Gregor’s picture may manifest yet again in Liza (who wears a sealskin coat [53]), this time as a figure much more in line with a Sacher-Masoch type, one who degrades, manipulates, and exploits her lover. In her love affairs, Liza epitomizes a Freudian reading of Gregor’s picture; in her profession as a psychotherapist, she embodies those readers who interpret this picture through a psychoanalytical lens.

Throughout the novel, strange affinities between Pnin and Gregor continue to accumulate, and potential allusions to Kafka’s story build as well. While a shadow of “pain” has been detected in the name “Pnin,” “Samsa” may derive from the concept *samsara*, “the world of suffering to which we are condemned.”³¹ There are several minor characters in *Pnin* named George (near anagram of Gregor), a phenomenon scholars have noted without much analysis.³² One of the sources of Victor’s fantasies about the king, “his more plausible father” (85), is “an anonymous Kafkaesque story” (86)—perhaps a roundabout way for Nabokov to cite some of his own source material for Pnin (Victor’s water father). Like Gregor, a traveling salesman who often must sleep in unfamiliar beds, Pnin changes his lodgings frequently.³³ Pnin dubs himself a “reformed man”

³⁰ Barabtarlo notes a “compositional link” has been detected “between the squirrel’s appearance in a chapter and Pnin’s pending misfortune in that chapter” (Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 22).

³¹ Robertson, “Introduction,” xxvi. See also Ryan, “Samsa and Samsara.”

³² Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 105.

³³ In the lecture, Nabokov points to this fact as a way of explaining Gregor’s metamorphosis: “The change, though shocking and striking, is not quite so odd as might be assumed at first glance. A commonsensical commentator (Paul L. Landsberg in *The Kafka Problem* [1946], ed. Angel Flores) notes that ‘When we go to bed in unfamiliar surroundings, we are apt to have a moment of bewilderment upon awakening, a sudden sense of unreality, and this experience must occur over and over again in the life of a commercial traveler, a manner of living that renders impossible any sense of continuity.’ The sense of reality depends upon continuity, upon duration” (Nabokov, “The

(39) after having all his teeth removed; Gregor, while navigating his own re-formation, notices he no longer has teeth.³⁴ Pnin and an ant share an “inept perseverance” (115) on their parallel journeys through forest near The Pines, Pnin driving his “pale blue, egg-shaped two-door sedan” (perhaps a Volkswagen Beetle?) (112). And upon spotting a kaleidoscope of small butterflies, which prompts Chateau to lament the absence of the narrator Vladimir Vladimirovich (who could have told them about these “enchanted insects”), Pnin remarks, “I have always had the impression that his entomology was merely a pose” (128). If we trust Pnin’s assessment of the narrator, that he’s a “dreadful inventor (*on uzhasniy vidumshchik*)” who misrepresents Pnin (185), then this remark takes on an interesting subtext. The narrator is a fraudulent entomologist because he can’t properly understand Pnin, his specimen. In a sense, Pnin rejects the narrator’s misreading of him just as Nabokov rejects a false reading of Gregor—one that misidentifies him as a cockroach.

The Cockroach

The common reading that Gregor is a cockroach bugged Nabokov.³⁵ In the lecture, he dismisses this interpretation as nonsensical and technically inaccurate, stating,

A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small. He approaches a cockroach in only one respect: his coloration is brown. That is all. Apart from this he has

Metamorphosis,” 260). There is an echo in these remarks of the heart spells Pnin experiences, which are marked by a sense of unreality.

³⁴ “It seemed, unhappily, that he hadn’t really any teeth—what could he grip the key with?—but on the other hand his jaws were certainly strong” (Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” 264).

³⁵ Nabokov’s former student Alfred Appel Jr. describes how Nabokov made theater out of his disgust for the “Cockroach Fallacy” one day in the Masterpieces course: “‘This arrived in the mail this morning,’ announced Nabokov; and, holding a thin beetle-brown volume as far away from his torso as his arm extension would allow—as though it were a vermin-infested, contaminated or radioactive object—he read aloud from what he described as ‘an elegant and expensive new *illustrated* [he shudders] edition,’ whose translator had substituted ‘cockroach’ for ‘gigantic insect’ in the famous opening sentence. ‘*Cockroach!*’ Nabokov repeated, assuming the expression of a person who had consumed rancid pizza with a chaser of warm sour goat’s milk. ‘Even the Samsa maid knows enough to call Gregor a dung beetle!’ As for the illustrations, ‘They don’t even *resemble* Gregor!’” (Appel, “Remembering Nabokov,” 19).

a tremendous convex belly divided into segments and a hard rounded back suggestive of wing cases.³⁶

For Nabokov, visualizing Gregor as a cockroach proceeds from a poor understanding of a cockroach's anatomical shape. As an entomologist, Nabokov knew this shape better than the common reader, better even, he openly suspected, than Kafka himself. In the lecture, the cockroach misreading provides a prime opportunity for Nabokov to demonstrate to his students the importance of paying attention to a literary work's "technical details and factual, specific features" (as he promises to do in his Masters of European Fiction course description).³⁷ Armed with these technical details, Nabokov shows that Gregor is not a cockroach but a beetle, and moreover that he has wings hidden beneath his back's hard cover—something neither the beetle Gregor nor his author Kafka seems to realize.³⁸ This leads Nabokov to what is probably his lecture's most cherished insight: "This is a very nice observation on my part to be treasured all your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know that they have wings."³⁹

In *Pnin*, the cockroach misreading is personified in the figure of Jack Cockerell, who "impersonate[s] Pnin to perfection" (187) and yet misinterprets him in exactly the way Nabokov warns against in his letter to Covici (quoted more fully above): "Whatever Pnin is, he certainly is least of all a clown."⁴⁰ As Nabokov specifies that a cockroach is flat and Gregor is "anything but," Cockerell's performance figuratively flattens Pnin, transforming him into a caricature lacking any pathos, depth, or roundness of character. This dichotomy between Pnin's pathos and Cockerell's clownish imitation is subtly established throughout Chapter Two, where Laurence and Joan Clements's growing affinity for Pnin (whom Joan calls "that pathetic savant" [35], and with whom

³⁶ Nabokov, "The Metamorphosis," 258–259.

³⁷ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 238.

³⁸ Nabokov told Appel that he saw Kafka several times while he was living in Berlin, but only realized it was Kafka long after those days had passed. Reflecting on this, Nabokov imagines he could have revealed to Kafka the secret of Gregor's wings: "You know, I used to ride on the Berlin Elevated [train] with Kafka, in 1922 or '23 [he names the specific railway line]—1923? yes, autumn '23—in the early evening, when I was returning to my room. Often he sat across from me. Of course, I didn't know it then, but I am certain it was Kafka [who died in 1924]. [...] Imagine: I could have spoken to Kafka! But what would I have said? [...] Ah! [Nabokov's face brightens] I could remind Kafka that Gregor was a scarab beetle with wing-sheaths, for neither Gregor nor his maker realized that when the room was being made by the maid, and the window was open, he could have flown out and escaped and joined the other happy dung beetles rolling their dung balls on rural paths" (Appel, "Remembering Nabokov," 19–20). Boyd disputes the likelihood that Nabokov and Kafka rode the same train line during the same years (Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 202).

³⁹ Nabokov, "The Metamorphosis," 259.

⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 178.

Laurence comes to share “a tender mental concord” [41]) is sharply contrasted with Cockerell’s famous Pnin act—an act Laurence rushes to shut down as soon as the real Pnin arrives (35–36). But when the act takes center stage in the novel’s final pages, what emerges is not only how Cockerell’s mimicry flattens Pnin’s rich character, but also how it has a flattening effect upon the narrator, leaving him bored and cramped as he struggles to inflate a deflating smile: “By midnight the fun began to thin; the smile I was keeping afloat began to develop, I felt, symptoms of labial cramp. Finally the whole thing grew to be such a bore [...]” (189). Cockerell’s two-hour Pnin show reenacts several anecdotes narrated earlier in the novel, but with all pathos removed and with several false or distorted details added (187–189). By reducing scenes from Pnin’s life to a series of decontextualized sketches built upon “the Pninian gesture and the Pninian wild English” (187), Cockerell’s performance empties Pnin of what Hagen calls his “wonderful personality” (161), transforming Pnin into a mechanical clown.⁴¹ Eric Naiman reads in Cockerell’s impersonation, (and by proxy, in *Pnin* itself), a kind of “character assassination,” an attempt “to infantilize its hero by reducing him to a comic character.”⁴² In light of the novel’s “Gregor theme,” this character assassination may otherwise be understood as a misreading of Pnin that flattens him so much that he transforms from round beetle into flat cockroach—a species that, in comparison with beetles, is less capable of flight.

In fact, Cockerell has undergone his own metamorphosis through sustained imitation of Pnin. The narrator observes that Cockerell, “a rather limp, moon-faced, neutrally blond Englishman, had acquired an unmistakable resemblance to the man he had now been mimicking for almost ten years” (187). If we allow that Pnin is akin to Gregor, a human in a beetle disguise, then by mockingly impersonating Pnin—that is, by representing in bodily form a flattened version of Pnin—might Cockerell have undergone his own transformation into a cockroach, an embodied misinterpretation of the hero? Isn’t there a sonic hint, after all, of a cockroach in the name “Cockerell”?

The novel’s final scene pointedly brings together narrator and cockroach. Here, the narrator becomes tired of the cockroach—Cockerell’s flat impersonation—and longs instead to reconnect with the real Pnin (the one with depth and wings that can fly). But he repeatedly fails to do so. In

⁴¹ In a sense, Cockerell’s performance is a perverse fulfillment of Hagen’s prophecy: “‘Who, for example, wants *him*’—he pointed to radiant Pnin—‘who wants his personality? Nobody! They will reject Timofey’s wonderful personality without a quaver. The world wants a machine, not a Timofey’” (161).

⁴² Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, 88. See also Naiman, “Nabokov’s McCarthysms,” 93–94.

the end, the narrator is stuck with Cockerell while Pnin, the unwilling hero of both their “texts,” escapes. Naiman detects in this scene a kind of poetic justice where the narrator finds himself “[imprisoned] in his own text.”⁴³ If so, the presence of a Kafkaesque cockroach deepens the poetic justice of this scene. The narrator is trapped with a personified misreading of Pnin who ceaselessly pesters him with yet more clownish misreadings. It is a prison where careless readers misinterpret sweet-souled characters into flat husks that can be swept up and thrown out by Kafka’s charwoman.

Free at last!

The finale of *Pnin* recalls the finale of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” but with several elements reversed (TABLE 3).

TABLE 3

From the finale of <i>Pnin</i>	From the finale of “The Metamorphosis,” as Nabokov quotes it in his lecture (modified by Nabokov from the Muir translation)
<p>The air was keen, the sky clear and burnished. Southward the empty road could be seen ascending a gray-blue hill among patches of snow. [...] Hardly had I taken a couple of steps when a great truck carrying beer rumbled up the street, immediately followed by a small pale blue sedan with the white head of a dog looking out, after which came another</p>	<p>Then they all three left the apartment together, which was more than they had done for months, and went by trolley into the open country outside of town. The trolley, in which they were the only passengers, was filled with warm sunshine. Leaning comfortably back in their seats they canvassed their prospects for the future, and it appeared on closer inspection</p>

⁴³ Naiman, “Nabokov’s McCarthyisms,” 91–92. Naiman argues that *Pnin*’s finale “reverses the scene of Anna Karenina’s demise”: “one might say,” Naiman suggests, “that Anna kills herself so that the book in which she is trapped will end.” And yet, Tolstoy continues the narrative, demonstrating that “[she] is powerless to bring the novel to an end.” In contrast, after Pnin’s escape the narrator finds himself “[imprisoned] in his own text” and is offered a “depressing breakfast” of kidney and fish, a kind of “gastronomic poetic justice” writes Naiman: “the narrator’s equivalent of ‘eating crow.’”

<p>great truck, exactly similar to the first. The humble sedan was crammed with bundles and suitcases; its driver was Pnin. I emitted a roar of greeting, but he did not see me [...]. I hurried past the rear truck, and had another glimpse of my old friend, in tense profile, wearing a cap with ear flaps and a storm coat; but next moment the light turned green, the little white dog leaning out yapped at Sobakevich, and everything surged forward—truck one, Pnin, truck two. From where I stood I watched them recede in the frame of the roadway, between the Moorish house and the Lombardy poplar. Then the little sedan boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, spurted 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. (190–191)</p>	<p>that these were not at all bad, for the jobs they had got, which so far they had never really discussed with each other, were all three admirable and likely to lead to better things later on. [...] While they were thus conversing, it struck both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter's increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a buxom girl. They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body.⁴⁴</p>
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In both finales there is an escape into the open country, an atmosphere of rebirth, and a hopeful future on the horizon. But whereas in “The Metamorphosis” it is Gregor’s family—“insects disguised as people,” to recall Nabokov’s formula—who are suddenly free and Gregor’s sister, in particular, who is stretching her “wings,” in Nabokov’s novel the inverse happens. It is sweet Pnin who frees himself of Waindell College’s mocking Cockerells, anti-Pninist Bodos and Blorenses, and the distrustful narrator.⁴⁵ It is Pnin who heads out for a golden skyline where miracles are possible.

⁴⁴ Nabokov, “The Metamorphosis,” 282.

⁴⁵ Nabokov originally planned for Pnin to meet an ending much more like Gregor’s own—that is, a fatal one. Galya Diment muses that “it was probably the discovery of the dignified ‘Exile’ in Pnin—and of the awkward ‘Alien’ in himself—that made him change the ending” (Diment, *Pniniad*, 9). Remnants of this original ending might be

Pnin's escape to a hopeful horizon may be read as Nabokov reversing Gregor's sad outcome by allowing Pnin to discover something Gregor did not. If "Gregor the beetle never found out that he had wings under the hard covering of his back,"⁴⁶ it seems Pnin discovers Gregor's wings and escapes that realm where misreaders flatten all "human sweetness." The idea that Pnin escapes the narrative with the help of Gregor's wings is brilliantly rounded out when we realize this happens on his birthday. In Chapter One, the narrator mentions Pnin's birthday is February 15. In the final chapter, the narrator arrives in Waindell on the evening of February 14, and he watches Pnin drive away the following morning. The narrator, who emerges as a persnickety time-, or rather, calendar-keeper in the novel, likely realizes the day of Pnin's departure is his birthday. But Pnin, in contrast, is probably unaware of the date's significance. This is because, having been born "on February 3, by the Julian calendar," Pnin no longer celebrated his birthday, since "after his departure from Russia, it sidled by in a Gregorian disguise (thirteen—no, twelve days late)" (67). Here, Nabokov loans Pnin the calendar quandary that marked his own life. Both Pnin and Nabokov were born in St. Petersburg, the former in 1898 and the latter in 1899. Up until 1918, unlike much of Europe that used the Gregorian calendar, Russia used the Julian calendar, which trailed twelve days behind the Gregorian calendar in the nineteenth century, and thirteen days behind in the twentieth century. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov describes these circumstances to explain why sometimes his birthday is April 10 (the date of his birthday on the Julian calendar), other times April 22 (the date of his birthday on the nineteenth-century Gregorian calendar), and still other times April 23 (the date of his birthday on the twentieth-century Gregorian calendar). "The error," he remarks, "is serious. [...] Calculatory ineptitude prevents me from trying to solve it."⁴⁷

Throughout the novel, the narrator has wielded a kind of calendar mastery over Pnin. Despite Pnin's fondness for "puzzling out schedules" (9) and his careful reading that detects time relativity in *Anna Karenina* (122, 129–130), he is nonetheless the type to get into mishaps with outdated timetables or to overlook meaningful anniversaries in his own life. The narrator signals what we might call his own "calculatory aptitude" from the start when he lets readers in on a secret:

detected in the location of Pnin's last rented house in Waindell, which is located "on Todd Road, at the corner of Cliff Avenue" (143). Barabtarlo notes that both street names, "Todd" ("Tod" means "death" in German) and "Cliff," may preserve "certain vestiges of that initial plan" (Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 226).

⁴⁶ Nabokov, "The Metamorphosis," 259.

⁴⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 13–14.

that Pnin is on the wrong train because he's relied on an obsolete schedule.⁴⁸ He once again shows off his calendar mastery while warning of a potential calendar pitfall in Chapter Three, when he draws attention to the latest issue of a Russian-language daily published by an émigré group in Chicago: "(Saturday, February 12—and this was Tuesday, O Careless Reader!)" (75). Several scholars have taken this as bait to decipher the date of Chapter Three's events and thereby avoid the calculatory ineptitude of the Careless Reader. Barabtarlo, for example, demonstrates how the narrator's aside to the Careless Reader initially suggests that Chapter Three takes place on Pnin's birthday (February 15); yet this conclusion unravels when we remember the year is 1953, and there is no Tuesday, February 15, 1953 on the Gregorian calendar.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Stephen H. Blackwell uses calendar competence to show how Pnin's Old-Style birthday, February 3, is the "anniversary of the secret overnight removal of Pushkin's coffin from St. Petersburg after his death five days earlier," a coincidence that gains symbolic weight in the final scene where Pnin undertakes his own removal from Waindell.⁵⁰ In short, the narrator's self-attested calendar competence, which he contrasts with Pnin's occasional calendar ineptitude, has encouraged scholars to adopt the narrator's approach: when it comes to calendars, we prefer to have the secrets of the narrator rather than the blind spots of the hero.

But in the finale, the narrator's calendar mastery ultimately becomes irrelevant. For in this instance, the significance of February 15 may be less a matter of calendar time and more a matter of intertextual transformation. Pnin's escape comes on his birthday because it is precisely then, by mimicking the day itself, that he can "sidle by in a *Gregor*-ian disguise"—taking flight on Gregor's unrealized wings. The "Gregorian" in question is no longer Pope Gregory XIII, namesake of the Gregorian calendar, but Gregor Samsa, hero of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis."

To indulge one final time in the lecture, Nabokov states that "The beauty of Kafka's and Gogol's private nightmares is that their central human characters belong to the same private fantasy world as the inhuman characters around them, but the central one tries to get out of that world, to cast off the mask, to transcend the cloak or the carapace."⁵¹ Unlike Gregor and Akaky, Pnin is able

⁴⁸ Notably, Pnin's outdated train schedule ("I was thinking I gained twelve minutes" [17]) echoes the Julian-to-Gregorian shift of twelve.

⁴⁹ Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 121–123.

⁵⁰ Blackwell, "Calendar Anomalies," 411.

⁵¹ Nabokov, "The Metamorphosis," 254.

“to get out of that world,” precisely via a “Gregorian disguise.” He “transcends the carapace” in the sense that he escapes the deadening husk of Cockerell/cockroach misreadings.

But there is yet another way Pnin accomplishes this transcendence: he outwits his own narrator by reading more carefully than the narrator himself the narrator’s own words and imagery. The narrator is, of course, an entomologist, and we may attribute the novel’s focus on insects and subtle references to “The Metamorphosis” as part of his negative attitude toward Pnin, a way of degrading and dooming his subject. After all, the narrator admits that he “hate[s] happy ends” (25); enclosing Pnin in a Gregorian carapace is one way of condemning him to a sad fate. Yet, like so many of Gregor’s readers, the narrator doesn’t realize that by placing the carapace on Pnin, he has also bestowed upon him wings. In the finale, Pnin transforms what is designed to be a narrative prison—a Gregorian disguise—into the very means of a narrative escape. “Then the little sedan boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, spurted 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). To read literally the idiomatic “simply no saying,” this is a miracle beyond language, beyond text, beyond the reach of Pnin’s narrator.

Thus, one way or another, *Pnin* refashions “The Metamorphosis” via a reparative intertextual interpretation: Pnin’s plight parallels Gregor’s, but Nabokov’s protagonist manages the escape that remained hidden from Kafka’s. Nabokov wondered if even Kafka realized that Gregor had wings, but perhaps this question has now undergone its own metamorphosis: did Nabokov realize he gave Gregor’s wings to Pnin?

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