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EPIC MIRAGE, EPIC FEROCITY
IN NABOKOV'S *PNIN*

This article advances the improbable thesis that Vladimir Nabokov wrote *Pnin*¹ precisely as an epic and hid its status in plain view, although what one supposes is the epic, even after multiple readings and re-readings, is a diversion.

Gennady Barabtarlo cites Stephen Jan Parker, a student of Nabokov's at Cornell, who recalled that "describing the rambling comparison" in *Dead Souls* and *Inspector General* was a standard question on the final examination.² I am suggesting that its insertion in *Pnin*—"a magnificent account of all [Pnin] had not had sufficient time to say on Homer's and Gogol's use of the Rambling Comparison" (186)—carries a more structural function: namely as the Rosetta Stone of the novel, although its "magnificence" is elusive.

In *Strong Opinions*, when asked about the reader's experience at the end of one of his novels, after the dismissal of his cast of characters, Nabokov cites a construct within a construct:

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage International 1989).

² Gennady Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 285. In his book on Gogol, Nabokov employs the term "Homeric rambling comparison" in regards to the "simile of the flies" in the Governor's Party scene in *Dead Souls* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 79.

I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended like a picture within a picture: *The Artist's Studio* by Van Bock.³

The reader of the interview is alerted by footnote to the anagrammatic nature of the non-existent painter, i.e., Nabokov himself. For our purposes in the exegesis of *Pnin*, I would like to substitute boxes within boxes for a painting within a painting.

The first set of *Pnin*'s boxes, which mirror the last epic set, bears on the literary form of the biography, fictionalized or otherwise, which is the focus of all of Nabokov's first person narrator novels, as well as the biographical notations to his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.⁴

In the first six chapters of *Pnin*, the reader concedes to N—, the narrator, his omniscience as the author; we suspend our disbelief, we consent to the premises of the novel, and we do not question, for example, how the narrator knew that Pnin never slept on his left side or that he suffered the pangs of his imagination as he sought to ascertain the exact method by which Mira Belochkin was murdered in Buchenwald—other than that the narrator simply invented Pnin and would know thereby his private grief, his private conceptualizations.⁵

In the last cataclysmic chapter—and the second box—starting with “My first recollection of Timofey Pnin” (174), N— relinquishes these authorial privileges and acknowledges probabilities of memory, which support paradoxically his claim that he has recollected, not invented, Pnin's life.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 72–73.

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse by Alexandr Pushkin*, translated from the Russian with commentary by the author. In four volumes, revised edition, Bollingen Series, LXXII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

⁵ Note the exquisite body of critical work on Nabokov's narrational definition and narrational metaphysics: Gennady Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact* and “*Taina Naita: Narrative Stance in Nabokov's The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 6.1 (January 2008): 55–80; David H. Richter, “Pnin and ‘Signs and Symbols’: narrative strategies,” in *Anatomy of a Short Story: Nabokov's Puzzles, Codes, ‘Signs and Symbols,’* edited by Yuri Leving (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 224–235; William Carroll, “Pnin and ‘Signs and Symbols’: narrative strategies,” in *Anatomy of a Short Story* (236–250); Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, 2nd edition (Christchurch, New Zealand: Cybereditions Corporation, 2001).

I *unconsciously* retained a picture of Pnin's flat that *probably corresponds to reality*. I can repeat that *as likely as not* it consisted of two rooms (my italics: 176).

Hence N—'s claim that he is writing biography, not fiction.

The third box is Pnin's when he protests as the owner of his own life, if we can employ this language for a character in a novel, that N— was in fact a "dreadful inventor", essentially a novelist; that he (Pnin) did not know N— as a child; that he had possessed no proficiency in math (as alleged by N—), and that his father would never have displayed him in any event for any achievement. "He [Pnin] said he vaguely recalled my grand aunt, but had never met me [the narrator]" (180). The egg of the novel has thus cracked quite wide open. When the vast canon of fact established in the first six chapters is undercut by another version of fact which contravenes the first, we watch the structure of the novel ripple and undulate like a skyscraper in an earthquake, and we don't quite know what to believe about poor Pnin, other than, fleeing from his own author and creator, fleeing from the stories which allegedly defined him, he became all the more ineluctable. He and his white dog in a blue sedan, wedged between two beer trucks, drive south out of the novel, as N— frantically chases them.

Psychologically we begin to understand Pnin's complaint. In a biography purporting to tell the real story about our real lives, we may not be able to recognize ourselves, and we might be grievously offended that what we stand for, our most intimate aspirations, our particular history in the world, our specific independence of mind, the workings and whirrings of our imagination, might be casually defined away.

Inside this dizzying complex of boxes bearing on fictionalized biography is nested a second triad of boxes marking another literary form, the epic. For these three boxes I have borrowed the Hegelian syllogism, which Nabokov articulates in *Speak Memory* for the benefit of his would-be cryptologist readers.⁶

⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 275–292. See Brian Boyd's deployment of the Hegelian structure in *Nabokov's Ada*.

Thetic Position

Pnin's Sad Magnanimity (As Anti-Hero)

In shopping around the *Pnin* manuscript to potential publishers, Nabokov offered this précis:

In *Pnin* I have created an entirely new character, the likes of which has never appeared in another book. A man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and a staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love, he never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity. But handicapped and hemmed in by an inability to learn a language, he seems a figure of fun to many an average intellectual, and it takes a Clements of a Joan Clements to break through Pnin's fantastic husk and get at his tender and loveable core.⁷

Of particular note, besides the strangeness of “inability to learn a language” (the polyglot Pnin, like Nabokov, was fluent in Russian, French, and English with a smattering of Italian and German) and the absence in this summation of even a hint of Pnin's piercing, pervasive melancholy, is Nabokov's clear statement of Pnin's duality into (1) loveable and (2) fantastic properties. Is this fantastic Pnin ironic? Of course, although that might not be the end of it. And how should we interpret Nabokov's claim to have created an entirely new character? Perhaps a clue to that riddle is couched in the loveable-fantastic splitting—as well as Pnin's metaphysical denial that his life had been created by a biographer—but certainly not in Pnin's magnanimity, the gist of the above summation, which seems not at all original.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov to Pascal Covici, February 3, 1954 in *Selected Letters, 1940-1977*. Eds. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), pp. 143-44. In this paper I am suggesting that we switch husk and core: the klutzy, loveable Pnin is the outer husk; the fantastic Pnin is the inner core. Note other studies on Pnin's duality. Ambrose Gordon distinguishes between Pnin as Exile and Pnin as Alien in “The Double Pnin” in *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*, edited by L.S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 144-56. Pnin as Alien is the comic parody of an intellectual with his faulty English, a poor sense of direction, and a tendency to fall down stairs. Pnin as Exile is a melancholic, transcendent character who Gordon likens to Leopold Bloom! David H. Richter's distinction between Pnin-as-a-clown in the initial chapters and Pnin-as-a-hero in the closing chapters continues this discussion of Pnin's duality, “Narrative Entrapment in *Pnin* and ‘Signs and Symbols.’”

For six chapters the reader watches Pnin riding the wrong train, balding, cuckolded, falling down stairs, toothless, terminated from his job, mangling English syntax: this is Pnin, the Russian intellectual forced into exile, adrift in the new world. “How shall we diagnose this sad case?” asks N—, mocking with his cleverness the depth of Pnin’s sadness.

John Banville says of “Signs and Symbols”:

...this little vignette of a mother and father’s failed visit to their deranged and incarcerated son somehow manages to distill out of drabest materials the most precious, the purest drop, the quintessence, of anguish itself.⁸

The murdered Mira Belochkin, Pnin’s lifelong love, hovers in the novel like the most delicate, the most evanescent ghost, and her memory extracts from Pnin and the reader the ache of that same penetrating anguish. This is “My poor Pnin” of the original title of the novel.

Antithetic Position

The Glibness of N—’s Epic Mirage:

Pnin as Parodic Hero

In the Cremona and Whitechurch Park sections which close out Chapter One, Pnin is besieged by an intermittent “vision” (19–28). He enters a “formal and funereal” park with “shade” (19) trees; he suffers an eerie “tingle of unreality” (20); he views, as if by hallucination, his deceased friends and family. An “evil designer” had concealed with “monstrous care” a “key to the pattern” (23), which, if deciphered, would restore to Pnin his “every day world,” presumably the Russia before two wars. He wants, perhaps like Odysseus, to discover a way home.

As Pnin, paralyzed with sorrow, watches his murdered and deceased family and friends move about without the spoken word—fanning themselves, wearing pearls, “gaily” signaling to Pnin (now transported back in time to his school days), beaming at

⁸ “An afterword,” John Banville, *Anatomy of a Short Story*, 332.

him in pride, clapping in absolute silence—and as N—’s language, with its insistence of negatives, “murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall...” (27),⁹ assumes a lyricism unmatched anywhere else in the novel, I began to wonder: had N— constructed in the silence of this drama, “in a dim hall,” Pnin’s journey to the underworld? And if so where was Tiresias, the seer, the blind prophet, the shade of Hades who possesses foreknowledge and who articulates to Odysseus the secrets of future journeys and perils? Dr. Poore, in Chapter Three “almost totally blind” (70) and by Chapter Seven “trapped in the dark of his total blindness” (188), wandering about Frieze (freeze) Hall with its murals of deceased and departed faculty, bears a resemblance to Homer’s Tiresias. But if Dr. Poore, a shell of an intellectual, a parody of a college president, who knows nothing, who predicts nothing, is N—’s seer, that equation would constitute a mythopoeic joke of the bitterest irony. And what should the discerning reader make of these sophomoric puns (freeze Hall, vandal College, Dr. poor)? Homeric correlates of this sort, couched in the subtext of *Pnin*, may well steep the reader whole and entire in the “symbolism racket”¹⁰ which Nabokov despises. But the question, nonetheless, compels our attention. Has Nabokov, or more precisely, N— appropriated not only Tiresias but also the entire mythic panoply of *The Odyssey* in *Pnin*? We know that Joyce did just that in *Ulysses*, although (unlike Nabokov) he telegraphed its epic intentions with his title. We are likewise fully aware that Nabokov railed against the vulgar critics who stacked up Joyce’s mythological parallels side by side and thereby blinded themselves to the exquisiteness and “dark fire” of the book.¹¹

⁹ Compare the devastation of negatives in Elpenor’s lament in *The Odyssey* as he meets in the underworld his King, Odysseus: “Son of Laertes, Master of land ways and sea ways”, “When you make sail.../ O my lord, remember me, I pray/ do not abandon me unwept, unburied” in Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by E. V. Rieu (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1946), XI: 77–81. I do not know which translation of *The Odyssey* Nabokov consulted. I have no evidence that he knew Greek. Other English translations written prior to 1950 which Nabokov might have consulted include *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by S. H. Butler and Andrew Lang (Boston: Hale, Cushman & Flint, 1924) and *The Odyssey*, translated by George Herbert Palmer (New York: Dover Books, 1891). There were three Russian translations of *The Odyssey* by the time *Pnin* was written in 1953–57: by Vassily Zhukovsky [Василий Жуковский] (1849), by Pavel Shuisky [Павел Шуйский] (1948), and by Vikenty Veresaev [Викентий Вересаев] (1953). Nabokov certainly read Zhukovski’s, and probably the one by Veresaev as well (he knew Veresaev’s popular biographical studies of Pushkin and Gogol).

¹⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 305.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90: “Joyce soon realized with dismay that the harping on those essentially easy and vulgar ‘Homeric parallelisms’ would only distract one’s attention from the real beauty of his book.”

MYTHIC PARALLELS

Risking an accusation of symbol stacking and symbol stitching, let us proceed, realizing as we do, that we find ourselves traveling through the paltriness of the antithesis, and that these tiny mythic equations, by their cleverness, bear N—'s signature, and do not offer a satisfactory solution to the novel's many riddles. The triggering of arousal in the reader—Aha! The epic ciphers!—followed by acute demoralization—These are nothing but puppets in a puppet show!—may be conceptualized as a form of Nabokovian narrative entrapment.¹²

Pnin's moaning radiator, as a case in point, inducing "something like a streak of madness or mystic delusion—namely a tenacious murmur of music" (64) qualifies as a Siren. The one-eyed, bestial Cyclops, the devourer of men, has been shrunk down in *Pnin* to a squirrel¹³ at a drinking fountain ("eying [Pnin] with contempt," "fixing an unpleasant eye..."[58]—note the singular usage). Athena's wand is Pnin's sunlamp, by which she tans and transmutes Odysseus as he prepares himself after a twenty-year absence for a reunion with his son, Telemachus. Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians, and his airy, luminous palace, appear as Alexandr Petrovich Kukolnikov, or Al Cook (mark N—'s banal word play), and Cook's Castle. Pnin's unnamed "little white dog" (191) and "[t]he white head of a dog looking out..." (190–191), resembles Odysseus' faithful hound Argos, who, lying filthy and flea-bitten in cow dung, dies after recognizing Odysseus after such a long time. The gray-headed conductor of Chapter One—"gray-headed" cited three times in as many pages (15–17)—is the gray-eyed goddess, Athena, who guides Odysseus in the land of the Phaeacians and elsewhere. The "Warden of the Winds", Aeolus, is Dr. Wind himself, a German psychotherapist—"wind bag", N—'s Homeric joke—who absconds with Pnin's wife, Liza and who "[e]very now and then...would

¹² See Richter: "The most elaborate [form of narrative entrapment] involves enticing the reader into a special mode of decoding the text, which the author then subverts." In "*Pnin* and 'Signs and Symbols': narrative entrapment," 224.

¹³ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): "It can be no accident that the name "Belochkin [Mira Yakovlevna Belochkin and family]," derives from the Russian "belochka," a diminutive of belka, a squirrel," 282. Note also Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, and Julian W. Connolly, "Pnin, "The Wonder of Recurrence and Transformation in Nabokov's Fifth Arc," edited by J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 195–212, for structural signals bearing on Pnin's squirrels.

appear from nowhere” (50). With a propensity to deliver bad news, not good, and a “thunderbolt” tie, and a peculiar walking stick—“a gnarled cudgel, with a donkey’s head for knob” (158)—Dr. Hagen, Chair of the German Department, resembles Hermes, the Wayfinder, messenger of the gods, Odysseus’ protector, with his golden wand. Two of the soccer teams, Torpedo and Dynamo, appear to be Scylla (torpedo, from the depths) and Charybdis (dynamo, as in a whirlpool). Tentatively, that describes a sampling of the smaller mythic parallels.

After this assortment of radiators, sunlamps, soccer teams, walking sticks, contemptuous squirrels, thunderbolt ties, wind bags and adolescent puns, the larger, more personalized mythic equations—bearing on Pnin, Victor Wind, Liza Bogolepov and Mira Belochkin—may seem slightly more plausible. Pnin is an ironic Odysseus, the magnificent navigator and escapist, the great-hearted, and Victor Wind would be his son in spirit who fantasizes, in the first words of Chapter Four, about “The King, his father.” Liza Bogolepov, the “limpid mermaid” (44) of Chapter Two and the temptress in Chapter Seven with “a really enchanting new hat” (182), collates within herself the entrapment themes of both Calypso, the water nymph and cave-dweller who paralyzed Odysseus and kept him seven years for herself, and Circe, the witch, who drugs her victims and then magically transmogrifies them into swine. With her “slyness” and her “immortal” features, Mira Belochkin, Pnin’s childhood love, from whom he was separated by war (as in the Trojan war), and with whom he is reunited, if only for an instant, in a Russian restaurant in Berlin on the Kurfurstendamm in a chance meeting, is a dear Penelope, without parody, without contempt; Liza, in addition to her dual roles as Calypso and Circe, is an ironic Penelope who notices, for example, Pnin’s “virgin” bed (54) and its cobweb—from a recognition scene in *The Odyssey* bearing on Penelope’s bed and her fidelity, not Odysseus’.

In *Speak Memory* Nabokov references the inferno of the antithesis. For the critic, roaming about the novel, scanning for mythic parallels, the description seems apt and the labor of deciphering them preposterous. But Nabokov, or N—, excerpted an enormous body of detail from *The Odyssey* and salted his text with a truncated version of the same. It appears to this reader that Nabokov deployed, through his narrator, virtually all the bells and whistles of the epic form, no matter how exasperating we may find them. They

cannot, in my opinion, be a priori defined away as impossible. As much as Nabokov eschews the critic as myth-stalker, as much as he downgrades the unlucky student who would proudly catalogue and wrap up in a package the mythic parallels in *Ulysses*, he has now invented a narrator whose function, among several, is to *manufacture* at great length and with “monstrous care” just such a mythic puppet show and, as we shall see, to boast of his own narrative status as a second Homer. N—’s jejune, intellectualized epic diverts the reader from the ferocity of the real thing, and it draws the critic, who must translate it and linger in its foolishness and its massive detail—the upshot puts one in mind of the Winds’ doll house with its tiny chamber pot, “no bigger than a cupule” (91)—into his own scholarly witch-hunt and stacked-up-high symbolic parallels.

If the critic gives credence, for example, to these Siren radiators and these soccer team monsters, he discovers himself ensnared in ridiculousness and despondency. On the other hand, as Pnin offers water, not wine, to the squirrel (as man-eating Cyclops), the reader realizes, on a rereading, that Pnin will shortly perambulate in the obsessions of his imagination the barbarism of Buchenwald where Mira Yakovlevna Belochkin was murdered, and he will understand in an instant of recognition who in this novel and in the historical world of the twentieth century is the undisguised, unrestrained, monstrous eater of human beings. The jolt to the reader’s sensibility as he moves from this menagerie of mythic sunlamps and hermetic cudgels to the gravitas of Nabokov’s own, authentic epic is quite surreal and vertiginous, the more so because of the contrast.

Nabokov, by way of a diabolical chess problem, articulates the roundaboutness of the antithesis:

Having passed through the “antithetic” inferno, the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores.¹⁴

Let us continue with the analysis of N—’s mirage of an epic, which perhaps begs the question. How can we be certain that N— wrote this epic, or this apparition of an

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 291.

epic, and saw to its concealment? On at least two occasions, N— boasts of the “lucidity and strength” of his memory which coaxes the reader back into the credibility puzzles of the fictionalized biography, but it induces as well a certain, pronounced evocation of the oral traditions of Homer as the prodigious epic singer. In this passage which continues to surprise me every time I read it, and which seems to erupt from nowhere in the text, N— compares his narrative function to another unnamed narrator “in an ancient town”:

Technically speaking, the narrator’s art of integrating telephone conversations still lags behind that of rendering dialogue conducted from room to room, or from window to window, across some narrow blue alley in an ancient town with water so precious, and the misery of donkeys, and rugs for sale, and minarets, and foreigners and melons, the vibrant morning echoes (31).

Logically, the reader may identify the “ancient town” as Constantinople, from Pnin’s “curriculum vitae in a nutshell” two pages later (33). I am leaning toward the possibility that N— presents himself in this passage as another Homer. The “ancient town” reoccurs in twelve pages as an “ancient city full of injustice” (45) when Pnin falls down the stairs “like a supplicant” at the feet of the Clementses. We might recall that Odysseus disguises himself as a beggar when he returns to Ithaka after a twenty-year absence. Is the “ancient city” of this passage the same as “some ancient city full of injustice” a dozen pages later? I would think so. Perhaps there was injustice in the Turkish city of Constantinople, but we know of the injustice---at the hands of the “wolf pack” of suitors who plundered Odysseus’ palace and lands—in the ancient city of Ithaka. The site of Cornell University, where Nabokov taught, is in Ithaca, New York.

Most striking in the passage is its casual inception, “[t]echnically speaking.” Might we hypothesize that N—’s epic, which confines itself to the glib miniaturization of Homeric symbols, be considered, for one thing, a technical epic, a technical diversion, like one of Lake’s “beautifully clever imitations” (96).

EPIC CONVENTIONS AND STRUCTURE

The novel opens *in medias res*, “in the middle of a strange town” (19), and the novel ends, completing the loop, with Cockerell’s tale of that same train ride and Pnin’s misplaced paper. Lodged in the midst of this novel’s crowded text is the language of “migratory voyages” (40) and “difficult journeys” (149); an inventory of vehicles (trains, buses, a truck, a blue sedan, an ocean vessel); narrow escapes (from the Russia of Lenin, from the German Nazis); fabulous allusiveness (“His mispronunciations are mythopoeic. His slips of the tongue are oracular” [165]); and, unprecedented in the Nabokovian canon, an impressive list of what resembles epic formulae: poor Pnin, pinned Pnin, benevolent Pnin, distressed Pnin, heroic Pnin, foxy old Pnin, all of course tongue-in-cheek, ironic, diminutive.

As a Russian in exile, wandering through Russia, central Europe, and the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, Pnin narrowly eludes the monsters of his time and loses, in this profound uprootedness, his homeland, language, parents, friends, and Mira Belochkin.

As an epic, the larger structural equivalences in the novel begin with Pnin’s hallucinatory descent into the underworld, as in Odysseus’ journey into Hades, in the Whitechurch Park section (Chapter One). Penelope’s reunion with Odysseus at the end of *The Odyssey* is positioned towards the beginning of *Pnin* in Liza’s visit (Chapter Two). The reunion of Telemachus and Odysseus after twenty years falls in Victor’s section (Chapter Four). The land of the Phaeacians is adapted to the entire Pines section (Chapter Five).¹⁵ Odysseus’ execution of the suitors is rendered upside-down in the Party section (Chapter Six) in which Pnin, “I-am-disarmed” (161), is himself terminated by the “vandal” department heads of the College and his own biographer made Chair of the Department of Russian Studies.

¹⁵ Pnin, lost and disheartened, “at the height of hopelessness” (115), driving his little blue sedan through a maze of logging roads, finally lands at Al Cook’s Castle (compare the palace of King Alcinous). Pnin bathes in a stream, emerges radiant and refreshed, proudly displays his tan (thanks to his sunlamp), excels in a game of croquet, recounts his personal past and “the course of recent Russian history” (125). All these are variants of Odysseus’ shipwrecked landing in the kingdom of the Phaeacians. Pnin, “transfigured,” with a croquet mallet, Odysseus with a discus; Pnin with his tan (“he glowed in the dappled sunlight of the riverside grove with a rich mahogany tint” [128]) and Odysseus with his own ruddy transformation, thanks to Athena. Desperate and dispirited, both are recipients of the refuge and kindness of their hosts.

Chapter Seven, N—’s chapter, functions in a variety of ways, especially in the destabilization of the biographical body of fact of the first six chapters, but it also recapitulates the tale of Pnin and supplements the accrual of imagery of what so far constitutes the epic parody:

*Cockerell’s dog, Sobakevich, literally “dog” in Russian, (191): from *Dead Souls*

*Dr. Poore’s “now total blindness (188): as in Tiresias

*“abloom and ablaze” (181) in the same line: from *Ulysses*¹⁶

*the Homeric and Gogolian rambling comparison: linking, in *Pnin*, Homer and Gogol.

*“foxy old Pnin”: as in cunning Odysseus

*“the unusual lucidity and strength” of N—’s memory: possible Homeric implications

*Liza’s “enchanted new hat”: from Circe

*Cockerell’s impersonation of Pnin narrating the *epic* of the electric fan (187, my italics).

*the “special knighthood, the active and significant nucleus of an exiled society” (184): as in Odysseus and his countrymen, blown off course by a vengeful god (Poseidon).

RECOGNITION SYMBOLS

One could argue that the proof of the pudding for the epic thesis—the “proof positive” or the “manifest token”, from the translated language of Homer’s Greek—should be tied not to the mythic equations, however calculated, nor to the epic conventions, but to N—’s adapted version of Homer’s recognition scenes. We detail them here because at the height of his glibness, N— has deployed them all in the text of this novel, leaving Pnin in the lurch, the diminished epic hero, wandering through the pages of a parodied epic form.

¹⁶ “Sometime later I saw her [Liza] in another café, sitting at a long table, abloom and ablaze among a dozen young Russian poets” (181).

Penelope tests rigorously the stranger purporting to be her husband and King after twenty years. She instructs her nurse, Eurykleia, to move her bed from the bedchamber, an instruction Odysseus knows to be specious. Anchored as it was by a lopped-off olive tree for one of its legs, Odysseus had rendered the bed immobile. Penelope wept. “You have faithfully described our token, the secret of our bed, which no one ever saw but you and I and one maid, Actoris. You have convinced your unbelieving wife.”¹⁷ Couched at the end of a passage that circumnavigates the planet is N—’s reference to Pnin’s bed.

His so-called *kabinet* now looked very cozy, its scratched floor snugly covered with the more or less Pakistan rug which he had once acquired for his office and recently removed in drastic silence from under the feet of the surprised Falternfals. A tartan lap robe, under which Pnin has crossed the ocean from Europe in 1940, and some endemic cushions disguised the unremovable bed (163).

“Disguised” is a Nabokovian joke.

In an earlier test of this stranger claiming to be a companion and crewmate of Odysseus, Penelope asks for a description of her husband’s clothing. Odysseus cites a gold brooch embossed with a hunting scene. Its counterpart in *Pnin* occurs when Clements is informed of the family’s new boarder—“A cracked ping-pong ball”—and recognizes him. “Professor Pnin, by God,” cried Laurence. “I know him well, ‘he is the brooch___’” (32). Shakespeare has completed this couplet from *Hamlet* thusly: “he is the brooch indeed / and gem of all the nation.”¹⁸ Nabokov, or N—, kills three birds with one stone, all in the service of recognition (Clements’). In the Shakespearean couplet a minor character, Laertes (also the father of Odysseus), praises another minor character, Lamond. Why would Nabokov lift half of an esoteric couplet from Shakespeare without a hint of its source? The brooch seems not coincidental.

¹⁷ Rieu: Homer, *The Odyssey*, XXIII: 198–258.

¹⁸ *Hamlet* 4.7.93-94. Barabtarlo discovered this Hamlet insert (*Phantom of Fact*, 88).

On two occasions Odysseus exposes his scar, from the slashing of the tusks of a boar, as “proof positive,” to Eurycleia, the nurse and then to Eumaeus, the swineherd, and Phitoclius, the cowman.¹⁹ On viewing the scar, Eurycleia exclaims: “Of course, you are Odysseus, my dear child.” Its correlate in *Pnin* bears on the “great dark wound” following the extraction of Pnin’s teeth. In Liza’s reunion with Pnin she remarks specifically not on his wound, but on its absence, namely his new dentures.

What change could our friend discern in her? What change could there be, good God! There she was. She always felt hot and buoyant, no matter the cold, and now her sealskin coat was wide open on her frilled blouse as she hugged Pnin’s head and he felt the grapefruit fragrance of her neck, and kept muttering: “Nu, nu, vot I horosho, nu vot”—more verbal heart props—and she cried out: “Oh, he has splendid new teeth.” (53)

The reader may note parenthetically the faint resonance of Calypso as water nymph in “buoyancy” and “sealskin.”

No bow nor weapon variant nor instrument of slaughter (of the suitors) appears in *Pnin*, but Victor’s crystal bowl, with the addition of a single elongated letter, should be considered a gloss on Odysseus’ great bow. Art supplants war. Victor, not Pnin, is hereby identified, the “blazoned blur [of the bowl] reflecting...the sweet nature of the donor” (153).

As Odysseus ponders a reconciliation with his son after so long, Athena counsels him—“The time has come, Odysseus of the nimble wits, to let Telemachus into your secret” (XVI:195–208)—and transforms him with her wand. Odysseus complies. Athena taps him with her wand: “His stature was increased and his youthful vigour restored; his bronze tan returned; his jaws were filled out...” Telemachus is thunderstruck by the change; he mistakes Odysseus for a god. Odysseus identifies himself: “I am that father whom your boyhood has lacked.”

¹⁹ Rieu: Homer, *The Odyssey*, XXI: 245–255.

N— appropriates the filled-out jaws (as in “zygomatic”) and a bronze tan. Athena’s wand is Pnin’s sunlamp, the effects of which become apparent in this passage in which Victor meets Pnin for the first time.

The *brown-domed* gentleman took off his glasses and, unbending himself, looked up, up, up at tall, tall Victor, at his blue eyes and reddish-brown hair. Pnin’s *well-developed zygomatic muscles raised and rounded his tawny cheeks...* (103–104: my italics)

Ping pong balls and arcane Shakespearean half-couplets, a sunlamp, dentures filling a dark wound, a crystal bow(l), an unremovable bed, zygomatic muscles and a brown dome: these are the benign but miniaturized versions of the legendary symbols of recognition of *The Odyssey*. In this landscape of Lilliputian tininess, Pnin functions as a mocked epic hero presiding over a silly epic form, all of N—’s manufacture.

Synthetic Position

Epic in Hell:

Pnin’s Nobility

The epic recounts in narrative or poetic form the journey of a hero in a particular time and a particular locale. It is, according to Northrop Frye, a central encyclopedic form,²⁰ the scope of which gathers into itself the historical,²¹ the literary, and a large collection of accepted knowledge of a race. It has its own specific literary conventions (*in medias res*; the epic epithets; the *katabasis*; the vastness of its scope from heaven to hell), but at its center is the marvelous or infernal journey.

As the reader steps back and views *Pnin’s* structure, its epic status may seem more plausible: the perilous journey of a hero; the escape from the Soviet and Nazi

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 318.

²¹ Pnin is easily the most historic of Nabokov’s novels. Note its geopolitical range: the Russian Civil War of 1918–1923; Buchenwald; Nazi Germany; Russia as torture house; World War II; the McCarthy hearings; Truman’s second term; “an atomic bomb explosion”—as well as Pnin’s migration from St. Petersburg to Prague, Berlin, Paris, New York, and an eastern, fictionalized college in the United States.

monsters of his time; the wanderings of a fugitive Russian people; the human displacement of war; the movement over continents and oceans and cultures; the hero as polymathic and multilingual.²²

Oddly, the more N— mocks Pnin, the more he ennobles him. As Pnin emerges from N—'s trivialization, the reader notices his function as an intellectual and scholar, with a glimmer of his role as an authentic epic hero. As from a fog, Pnin becomes more sharply visible as the carrier in his person of the history of his race, as the improbable, sapient keeper of its literature.²³

N— fails to read between the lines; he absorbs himself in the technicalities of the epic and misses its substance; particularly, he appears to have no comprehension of the gravity of Pnin's descent into hell which meanders through the novel thematically, from the first chapter which ends in the Cremona hallucination—Pnin's "murdered, forgotten, unrevenged" friends and family—and begins in the first line of the novel as Pnin sits on a railway coach headed, or so he thought, towards Cremona; then snakes through the stupidity and ostentation of Frieze Hall; then through the "gasoline soaked beech wood" of Buchenwald; then to the "fluorescent corpse" within which the characters of the novel are thought to live. The journey to the underworld as an epic convention dates back three thousand years to Homer, then through Virgil and Dante to Milton and into the nineteenth

²² As much as Nabokov was prone to decry the inflated significance, in the mind of certain critics, of the architecture of the epic form, we should not deceive ourselves that he was oblivious to its properties. We know of Nabokov's close reading of three epics: *The Lay of Igor's Campaign* (which he translated as *The Song of Igor's Campaign: An Epic of the 12th Century* and for which he provided commentary [New York: Random House, 1960]); James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Nabokov's lectures have been published in *Lectures on Literature* [New York: Harcourt: 1982], 285–370); and Gogol's *Dead Souls* (included in Nabokov's third chapter on Gogol, "Our Mr. Chichikov": *Nikolai Gogol*). For Gogol's explicit indebtedness to Homer, see Michael R. Kelly's "Navigating a Landscape of *Dead Souls*: Gogol and the Odyssean Road," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 39 (2005): 37–61, with particular reference to a letter of Gogol's to V. Zhukovski in January of 1848; to Gogol's reflections on Zhukovski's translation of *The Odyssey*, 1845–46; to the metaphor of the road in *Dead Souls*; and internally to Chichikov's narrated instability, belonging "neither to the road or to a settled spot," and experiencing thereby "the foul mood of the poor stranded traveler," 46.

²³ Nabokov inserts into the pages of *Pnin* a compendium of litterateurs unprecedented in its volume in the history of the epic form, although Dante and Joyce were similarly inclined. Of these a few are English speaking (Shakespeare, principally, but not entirely, for the Andrey Kroneberg creative rendition of the death of Ophelia in *Hamlet*—which modulates in *Pnin* into the death of Mira Belochkin; Joyce by allusion, "abloom and ablaze"; Poe; Carroll; London) and several others are German, summoned and dismissed (Goethe, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann); but the largest collection by far is Russian (the seminal three, Pushkin, Tolstoy and Gogol; then in no particular order, Turgenev, Chekhov, Zhukovski, Kroneberg, Kostromskoy, Bunin, Doestoevski (note "Anna Karamazov," which is delightful), Kotzebue.

and twentieth centuries of William Blake (*Milton, Jerusalem*), Nikolai Gogol (*The Wanderings of Chichikov, or Dead Souls*), James Joyce (*Ulysses*), T. S. Eliot (*Four Quartets*), and William Carlos Williams (*Patterson*), all of whom Nabokov cites in his canon, with the exception of Williams.

Sobakevich, the Clements' dog, and a character in *Dead Souls*, barks at Pnin's little white dog on the last page of the novel, reminding us of Gogol and the Homeric and Gogolian Rambling Comparison. Specific textual references to Gogol—unlike those to Homer, which are lavish—are sparse in *Pnin*. The borrowed Sobakevich bears the signature of N—'s intellectual affectation (and Nabokov's irony). That the first name of Pnin's father, Pavel, is identical to the first name of the strange Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, and that Pnin's father is an eye doctor, comprise together a far-fetched connection: Chichikov as Nabokov's healer of vision and literary father. What more inescapably binds *Pnin* to *Dead Souls* is Chichikov's journey through a land of sentimentality and pretentiousness, which is at the heart of Nabokov's novel.

Who are the dead in Gogol's *Dead Souls* and what is the purpose of Chichikov's wanderings? Nabokov's commentary on Gogol includes in the category of the defunct not only the recently departed serfs but also the buyers and sellers of the serf contracts, that "collection of bloated dead souls belonging to *poshlyaki* [male personifications of *poshlust*] and *poshlyacki* [female personifications] described with that Gogolian gusto and wealth of weird detail which lift the whole thing to the level of a tremendous epic poem."²⁴ *Dead Souls* is a journey into the fatness and indulgence of *poshlust*: the inflated, the sentimental, the unreal.

But when the legendary *poshlyak* Chichikov is considered as he ought to be, i.e. as a creature of Gogol's special brand moving in a special kind of Gogolian coil, the abstract notion of swindling in this serf-pawning business takes on strange flesh and begins to mean much more than it did when we considered it in the light of social conditions peculiar to Russia a hundred years ago <...> The *poshlust* which Chichikov personifies is one of the main attributes of the Devil, in whose existence, let it be added, Gogol believed far more seriously than he did in that of God. The

²⁴ Ibid., 73–74.

chink in Chichikov's armor, that rusty chink emitting a faint but dreadful smell (a punctured can of conserved lobster tampered with and forgotten by some meddling fool in the pantry) is the organic aperture in the devil's armor. It is the essential stupidity of universal *poshlust*.²⁵

On its face *Pnin* features two specific descents into the underworld: Pnin's panic attacks at the park of Whitechurch and Dr. Poore's stately appearance at Frieze Hall.

But the novel as a whole may be considered more distinctly Gogolian: the story of a journey into the world of ostentation, which, for Nabokov as well as Gogol, is the land of the dead, the land of the devil, "universal *poshlust*". The denizens of this world, principally department heads in a small eastern college, perform their duties without discernment, not in the halls of learning, but in the "ruins of knowledge" (74). They live on the outskirts of the inhumanity of the century and speak blissfully of the "beautifully wooded Grosser Ettersberg" (the region containing Buchenwald); of "that nation of universities" (Germany); of that "country of Tolstoy" (Russia), without a serious deliberation of what happened in those places. In peasant garb, professors throw "Russki parties" (71), they croon sentimentalized folk songs, they knock down vodka shots in nonsensical imitations of life in old Russia. These insensitive characters of Nabokov's are modern Gogolian *poshlyaki*.

On the occasion of the ending of Pnin's party, Hagen and Laurence and Joan Clements are standing outside staring at the stars.

"And all these are worlds," said Hagen. "Or else," said Clements with a yawn, "a frightful mess. I suspect it is really a fluorescent corpse, and we are inside it" (165–166).

Frightful should be taken literally. "We," i.e., Clements and Hagen and Pnin and perhaps all humans, live in a corpse.

²⁵ Ibid., 74.

Diment is accurate when she identifies the heart of the novel in this passage on Mira Belochkin's death.²⁶

If one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past. And 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, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. According to the investigator Pnin had happened to talk to in Washington, the only certain thing was that being too weak to work (though still smiling, still able to help other Jewish women), she was selected to die and was cremated only a few days after her arrival in Buchenwald, in the beautifully wooded Grosser Ettersberg, as the region is resoundingly called. It is an hour's stroll from Weimar, where walked Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Wieland, the inimitable Kotzebue and others. "*Aber warum*—but why—Dr. Hagen, the gentlest of souls alive, would wail, "why had one to put that horrid camp so near!" for indeed it was near—only five miles from the cultural heart of Germany—"that nation of universities," as the President of Waindell College, renowned for his use of the *mot juste*, had so elegantly phrased it when reviewing the European situation in a recent Commencement speech, along with the compliment he paid another torture house, "Russia—the country of Tolstoy, Stanislavski, Raskolnikov, and other great and good men." (135–136)

²⁶ Gayla Diment, *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 53.

Of course Raskolnikov was not a good man, was not a man at all, but a character from a Dostoevski novel. Stanislavski invented method acting. Hagan as “the gentlest of souls alive” is a sardonic touch. With his little German phrase (*Aber warum*), he doesn’t ask why the Buchenwald concentration camp happened, he asks why it happened so near Weimar, Germany’s cultural heart. Dr. Poore, college president, idealizes a plundered Russia. In this passage on Mira’s death we begin to see with more clarity the Gogolian journey of an exiled Russian travelling through a twentieth century version of planetary *poshlust* and barbarism.

The faculty of Waindell College is trapped inside a flashy, fluorescent corpse and no one seems to know it. Pnin, however, knows. He conducts his classes, he designs plans for his research, he goes about the business of living and working in a small American college (74), but he suffers in the absoluteness of his isolation, and finally he is terminated by the usurpers of learning.

That Pnin drives out of this novel straightway; that he escapes the Department Head “suitors” of Waindell College; that he calls his “friend,” the Narrator, a liar to his face; and that he threatens Dr. Poore with a lawsuit were Dr. Komarov, in a fit of Russian patriotism, to paint his likeness on the murals of Frieze Hall: these seem to be concessions of Nabokov’s to the happier conclusion of *The Odyssey*.

One might wonder if there was not a certain tension in Nabokov’s mind as he pondered the bifurcated visions of *The Odyssey*, on the one hand, and *Dead Souls*, on the other, at least in the matter of how he would adapt them to the ending of *Pnin*. “Some people—and I am one of them—hate happy ends” (25). Whatever the achievement of Pnin’s liberation as he drives out of the novel “free at last” there is, unlike Odysseus, no homecoming for Pnin, no reclamation of the ravaged Russia of his childhood, no reconciliation with a beloved wife (or Mira Belochkin), no further reunion as the “water father” with Victor, his spiritual son; no serene return to his native land. “I haf nofing left, nofing, nofing!” (61). Chichikov himself, at the end of *Dead Souls*, leaves the city in a hurry; he has neither wife nor son nor friends to speak of. “He did not care to pay any farewell calls on anyone” (354).

The ending of *Pnin* is more unsparing than that of *The Odyssey*. We suggest, peering at *Pnin*’s incantations of the twentieth century, that it is more Gogolian.

8.

“In the course of my twenty years in exile,” Nabokov writes, at the inception of the third section of Chapter 14 of *Speak Memory*, “I spent a prodigious amount of time in the composing of chess problems.”²⁷ The reader infers that Nabokov spent even more time—more than prodigious!—in the construction of his novels, hardly a hobby. In this paper I have made an attempt at understanding the design of a Nabokov epic.

For the sake of argument, let us imagine what Joyce’s *Ulysses*, another gloss on Homer, would have looked like had it been written Nabokov-style, in the manner of *Pnin*. In the first place Joyce would have changed his title to *Bloom*, after his main character, and would thereby have avoided signaling so obviously his intentions. Then Joyce would have concealed the workings of his epic inside the literary form of a fictionalized biography by means of which the factual weave of his novel would unravel; he would reflect the entirety of the story through the mind of a character inimical to Bloom, i.e., Blazes Boylan, who would tout himself as a modern Homer and who would write an “epic” infected from start to finish with the “symbolism racket.”²⁸ Inside this elaborate hoax of an epic, which constitutes an even more devastating disguise, the last, exquisite puzzle which camouflages itself as a solution, but is in fact another riddle, inside this mirage of tiny epic things, Joyce would then situate another epic, the real thing in the fullness of the form, his own epic, if you will. And he would have kept these secrets to his grave.

The boxes of the fictionalized biography nest into the boxes of the epic recursively: all bear on the internal metaphysics of the novel.²⁹ *Pnin*, in Chapter Seven, renounces his maker. Feverishly, he protests what is clear to the reader: that his existence,

²⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 288.

²⁸ Nabokov’s own definition from his response to W. W. Rowe’s *Nabokov’s Deceptive World* (*New York Review of Books*, October 7, 1971).

²⁹ Mark the exegesis of Nabokov’s metaphysics in Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*; Alfred Appel, Introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970); Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness*; Conrad Brenner, Introduction to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1979). “I think that the principles of Nabokov’s metaphysical quest remained unchanged throughout his writing career...” Barabtarlo, “Taina Nata, Narrative Stance in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” 57.

his metaphysical being, is merely an invention, bestowed upon him by the powers of another character in the novel, N—. Pnin cannot comprehend this derived existence, and he spurns its possibility. He seeks the “key of the pattern” (23) but he cannot find it, because as the reader knows with a finality that resembles the iron clanging of a cell door swung shut, he is only a character in a book. Like Michelangelo’s slaves, these “galley slaves” chained in a novel, flex and writhe against the enclosures of their invented being, but to no avail. They cannot be liberated from it. In the last section of the last chapter of the novel, N— reviews his “galleys” (190), attempting to soothe himself in the midst of his firing squad nightmares; but he fails to comprehend that he himself, like Pnin, exists in another set of galleys (Nabokov’s) and is just another created, fictional being, just another puppet dangling on a string. Boyd summarizes the vigorous, conscious, very intentional dramatization of divinity in the Nabokov canon:

Nabokov, like Shade, deliberately and pointedly, impersonates Fate. Like Shade he realizes that any power which could pattern human lives would have to be far beyond the human, beyond the fathoming of reason. But, he feels, imagination might be able to imitate this power and to create a “correlated pattern in the game,” thereby, perhaps, sharing “something of the same pleasure in [the patterned game of life] as those who played it found.” Nabokov’s acting as fate is not merely the normal privilege of the author to invent his events: in those novels where pattern in human lives is a major concern, his role is deliberately and specifically intrusive.³⁰

The “intrusiveness” in *Pnin* takes the extreme form of a stalking “evil designer” with its mythological echoes of the enraged god, Poseidon.³¹ Pnin’s renunciation of N—, his maker, mimics his dismissal in Chapter Five of the possibility of a divine being who would countenance Buchenwald. It is beyond comprehension.

³⁰ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*, 82.

³¹ Slipping in and out of the novel, hiding behind the scenes, is Pnin’s “evil designer” (23) in triplicate form: (i) the imperious narrator, N—; (ii) Nabokov himself, manipulating the metaphysics of his creatures, including, of course, our narrator; and (iii) the archetypal Homeric tyrant, Poseidon, god of the sea, father of the blinded Cyclops, harrier of Odysseus for twenty years.

Pnin-as-epic is parodic, reflective, encyclopedic and “microcosmic.” As Nabokov drags his protagonist through hell, he gathers into the novel the horror of multiple tyrannies: the historical (Pnin’s flight from the wars of monsters and the slaughter of fifty-five million souls in the first half of the twentieth century); the metaphysical (Pnin’s ontological dependency as a character in a book on the narrator, his demiurge); the biographical (the outraged Pnin as defined by, and as a “galley slave” to, the narrator, and ultimately Nabokov)³²; and the mythological (Pnin, the Russian in exile, harried by Eric Wind and by an evil designer as vengeful god, Poseidon). The contrast between N—’s retrenched Homeric adaptations, on the one hand, and Pnin’s infernal descent, at the heart of the novel, on the other, jolts the reader profoundly; as if in a sudden and dazzling sunburst of memory, we perceive in this contrast the gravitas of an ancient epic form.

Clumsily we have arranged the novel in space, in a series of boxes. Actually they exist in time, so that on the occasion of any single event of this “microcosmic” epic, as we watch Pnin on a train toward Cremona, on a transcontinental ship, in his blue sedan with his white dog driving out of Waindell, we may simultaneously hold in view a Greek king harassed by a merciless god, an Irish Jew walking the streets of Dublin in exile in his own country, a Russian buyer of souls traveling in the devil’s land of pretense and sentimentality, the historical, Goyaesque monsters of the mid-twentieth century looming over a plundered planet, a character in a novel horrified by his derived existence, and the human condition of finite beings.



³² “It is godlike to create; it is unbearably human and inferior to be the subject of someone else’s creation” (Carroll, “Pnin and ‘Signs and Symbols’: Narrative Strategies,” 241).