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Slav 117I: Nabokov

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The Unreliable Narrator of *Pnin*

Vladimir Nabokov is famous, perhaps infamous, for his deconstruction of the concept of the narrator throughout his body of work. From short stories like "The Vane Sisters," to longer uses such as Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, and, of course, his immortal portrayal of a child predator, Humbert Humbrt in *Lolita*, Nabokov has often refused to write his narratives in the conventional manner, preferring to pervert the plot with characters that inhabit a distorted sense of reality. However, even in cases when the narrator is not necessarily unreliable, Nabokov may still incorporate them into the work as a distinct entity, with textual support for their presence, and even, perhaps, their meddling hand behind the scenes. This style of narrator can be observed within *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, which both notably feature their protagonist "escaping" the world they inhabit. In *Invitation*, Cincinattus escapes in spite of the narrator, as Healey argues in his midterm paper (1-6); meanwhile, in *Bend Sinister,* the escape is achieved entirely because of the narrator's benevolent whim. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* features a narrator which is, in a sense, a composite of the many previously described narrators, seemingly omniscient for most of the story—though with injections of some of his various quirks—until in Chapter 7 it is revealed that he has in fact been a participating character the entire time, so becoming unreliable. In all cases, Nabokov leverages the narrator-as-character dynamic not merely for flair but to enrich the depth of the story; *Pnin's* narrator presents one of the most telling examples of this phenomenon. Through an implementation of a patchwork narrative

structure, a tendency to take creative liberties, and a general overlooking of Pnin's better qualities, Vladimir Nabokov establishes a third-person narrator whose status as a participating character undermines the entire reality of the story.

One problem with Vladimir Vladimirovich (the narrator of *Pnin*) retelling Timofey Pnin's story is the basic fact that for much of the action, Vladimirovich simply isn't there to know what actually happened. For this reason, the novel takes on a patchwork structure: the seven chapters, while chronologically oriented, are mere snapshots into the life of Pnin, seven pieces to a far larger puzzle. While these pieces seemingly form a well-rounded look at Pnin, this is due to Vladimirovich's technical brilliance (he takes after his creator in that regard) rather than any concern for accuracy on his part. Upon further examination, the moments of the story that are included reflect Vladimirovich's limited vantage point; most often, another character is present with whom he could have had correspondence retroactively in order to tell the story. An example such "reach" being necessary is exemplified by Vladimirovich's description of when Liza comes back to Pnin before they leave Europe:

> These days were probably the happiest in Pnin's life—it was a permanent glow of weighty, painful felicity—and the vernalization of the visas, and the preparations, and the medical examination, with a deaf-and-dumb doctor applying a dummy stethoscope to Pnin's jammed heart through all his clothes, and the kind Russian lady (a relative of mine), who was so helpful at the American Consulate… (*Pnin* 47)

Importantly, note the "relative of mine," who likely provided the narrator with the necessary knowledge to claim that this time was "the happiest in Pnin's life." Moreover, by the end of the novel, it is revealed that Vladimirovich slept with Liza, Pnin's ex-wife, during their years in

Europe. However, when the narrator does not have any manner of access to Pnin's life—anytime Pnin is alone, for instance—he must resort to mere speculation. Early in the book, when Pnin suffers a medical episode, Vladimirovich ponders: "Was his seizure a heart attack? I doubt it. For the nonce I am his physician, and let me repeat myself, I doubt it" (*Pnin* 20). Many times, the narrator cannot even resort to inferences, and instead omits entire events. Consider chapter 4, when Pnin and Victor meet: much of the chapter is dedicated to Victor and Pnin's preparations for their meeting, only for a mere five and a half pages do they interact with each other (*Pnin* 104-109). Throughout the work, in fact, one chapter does not flow into the next; their patchwork structure is thus representative of Vladimirovich's limited vantage point as a narrator—even one who often appears to disregard this limitation.

Indeed, Vladimir Vladimirovich, narrator of *Pnin,* has a tendency to take many creative liberties, often preferring style over substance, or at the very least, over adherence to reality. At times he can get caught up in the beauty of his own prose, such as his description of Pnin losing his teeth (*Pnin* 38); Stephen Casmier argues that "by the end of the novel, it becomes manifest that much of what the reader knows about Pnin could have been made up just so the narrator could flaunt his own, brilliant writing abilities" (72). Vladimirovich's stylized description of Pnin at the onset of the novel as "ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean shaven… but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flanneled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet" (*Pnin* 7), would corroborate Casmier's opinion. Notably, such a line of critique is often one leveraged against Nabokov himself, so it is very interesting that his narrator takes on his namesake. Irina Rodimtseva, a Nabokov scholar, asserts that "Nabokov has created a narrator whose ultimate pretension is to be taken for Nabokov" (130-131). Such a perspective,

then, becomes interesting to keep in mind when understanding Pnin's own opinion of Vladimir Vladimirovich:

> Suddenly Pnin cried to Dr. Bakaran across the table: "Now, don't believe a word he says, Georgiy Aramovich. He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor (on uzhasniy vidumshchik)." Barakan and I were so astounded by this outburst that we just sat and looked at each other in silence. (*Pnin,* 185)

Pnin clearly believes that the narrator is falsely representing him, and given that Pnin is the only one who has lived his own life, it stands to reason that Vladimirovich is the one who has taken creative liberties; even in the passage, terms like "outburst" reflect his corrupted retelling. Pnin's remarks toward Vladimirovich, the narrator's self-absorbed tendencies (calling himself "the fascinating lecturer" (*Pnin* 170), and the unethical activities that the narrator engages in, such as sleeping with Liza, suggest that maybe the narrator is not quite a one-to-one stand-in for Nabokov. Undoubtedly, though, Nabokov is utilizing Vladimirovich to question the entire premise of adherence to fact in literature: consider the end of Chapter 6, when Pnin almost shatters his new glass bowl from Victor (*Pnin* 172-173), a moment the narrator was not privy to, thus implying a certain embellishment for the purposes of suspense or sentimentality. A similar level of questioning can be applied to many of the moments that comprise *Pnin,* given Vladimir Vladimirovich's tenuous emphasis towards accuracy.

Finally, Vladimirovich's narration of *Pnin* tends to undersell Timofey Pnin, reducing him to some of his worse qualities, while brushing aside some of his better ones. Vladimirovich himself admits to this very bias: "some people—and I am one of them—hate happy ends. We feel cheated. Harm is the norm" (*Pnin* 25). This line occurs after Pnin finally made it to the

Cremona lecture; Vladimirovich ruminates momentarily on how he wished further cruelty of chance had occurred yet states that he will adhere to reality (*Pnin* 26). Regardless of whether he does in this very instance, this paper has proven that he doesn't at other times, and indeed his own impression of the Cremona affair arrives at the end of the book from none other than Jack Cockerell, "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, mimics of Pnin on the campus" (*Pnin* 38), or "a man who presents Pnin as both a freak and a caricature through an unending series of insidious imitations, a burlesque, less artful performance, perhaps, of the novel itself," as Casmier puts it (78). Consider how Vladimirovich renders Pnin's delivery of a humorous joke among his colleagues: "'In two three years,' said Pnin, missing one bus but boarding the next, 'I will also be taken for an American,' and everybody roared except for Professor Blorenge'" (*Pnin 37*). Instead of giving Pnin credit for being intentionally and objectively funny, Vladimirovich stylizes the moment as Pnin "missing one bus but boarding the next." Interestingly, Timofey Pnin appears in *Pale Fire,* and is misrepresented by another unreliable narrator, Charles Kinbote: "Head of the bloated Russian Department, Prof. Pnin, a regular martinet in regard to his underlings" (*Pale Fire* 155). Yet in this description, the reader can see that Pnin has in fact become head of the Russian Department. Even if *Pale Fire* takes place after *Pnin*, and Pnin has since further adjusted to America, his characterization in *Pale Fire* suggests qualities present in Timofey during *Pnin*—the chief one being competence—that Vladimirovich chooses not to emphasize. Throughout *Pnin,* Vladimir Vladimirovich neglects the better qualities of Pnin, instead reiterating over and over again his low points, such as his frequent falls down the stairs.

In his 1957 novel *Pnin,* Vladimir Nabokov continues to develop his motifs of metafiction and unreliable narrators with his character and narrator Vladimir Vladimirovich, who is in some ways a satire of himself. In doing so, he calls into question the validity of the entire book. The

primary means in which Nabokov achieves such an undermining of reality are: the patchwork structure of the novel, the decision of the narrator to undergo stylistic liberties, and the emphasis of Pnin's flaws in tandem with the neglect of his strengths. By establishing the character of Vladimir Vladimirovich, Nabokov adds another dimension to *Pnin,* avoiding sentimentality by inviting the criticism of authors who pursue that very sentimentality. Moreover, the presence of the unreliable narrator allows for Timofey Pnin to achieve true redemption, which comes at the precise instant that the book ends and he escapes the spying gaze of Vladimirovich. It's not a coincidence that Pnin comes into his own in *Pale Fire,* when he has had a chance to develop away from Vladimir Vladimirovich.

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