

The Journey to the Centre of Uncertainty: Narrative Styles in Nabokov's Pnin

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Abstract

Such a devoted lepidopterist was Vladimir Nabokov that he transferred his passion onto his narrative principles as well, changing the literary devices in his works the same way a butterfly flies from one flower to another. This is especially evident in *Pnin*, a novel comprised of a number of vignettes and viewpoints. According to Paunović, those styles include the omniscient narrator, the first person narrator and the third kind of a narrator – the one who is neither the protagonist nor the author. He also claims that the shifting perspective is deliberate and that it aims to show that the reality is not such a sure and undeniable category – *Pnin* has his own version of it, as well as the narrator, and it is up to the reader to choose the one he likes best, or even better, to create his own.

Keywords: Nabokov, *Pnin*, narration, narrative styles, lepidopterist

Introduction

Anyone who took it upon themselves to portray Nabokov's life and art in mere words would soon realise what a daunting, Herculean task that was. A person living in five countries for four approximately twenty-year-long periods¹, fluently speaking three languages while simultaneously being a citizen of two countries, does, indeed, elude every classification. Nabokov himself, did not, however, dwell on his nationality that much, believing that "the writer's art is his real passport" and he thought of himself as "An American writer who had once been a Russian one" (as in Cohen, 1983, p. 57). When it comes to Nabokov, however, at least one thing is absolutely certain – butterflies. In his collection of essays *Stalking Nabokov* (2011) Boyd claimed that Nabokov "made butterflies his lifelong personal mark" (p. 74) and that he invited readers to discover things for themselves. It was a source of "a love of both detail and

design and (...) intricate, concealed patterns" (p. 87) so it is right to notice that butterflies heavily influenced not only his life but also his art. Nabokov changed the literary devices in his novels in the same way a butterfly flies from one flower to another. In this way he adheres to his own principle that "a major writer combines these three: storyteller, a teacher and an enchanter (as in Boyd in Conolly, 2005, p. 31). According to the same author, Nabokov respects individual experiences as primary and his stories are unique in their focus on one character while he "uses detail with a naturalist's, a painter's and a poet's eye" (p. 33). Nabokov's passionate love for butterflies was not a surprise since he came from a well-to-do, scientific family; it is a fact which just goes to show that inspiration can be found even in the most unexpected of places.

Labelling *Pnin*-The Question of Genre Nabokov's fourth English novel *Pnin* came out in *The New Yorker* between November 1953 and November 1955 and almost got rejected because it was "not really congealing into a novel" (Barabtarlo in Alexandrov, 1995, p. 600). Critics seemed to have different opinions about its genre so Rampton (2012) saw it as a comic novel, a humorous account of campus politics and cultural clashes of post-war America, a walking commentary on the twentieth century history and its events. Cohen (1983), on the other hand, viewed it as "the experience of exile from the land of birth and alienation from the country of adoption" (p. 57). Similarly, Toker (1989) concluded it was "the debt that Nabokov pays to Russian emigration" (p. 21). Lastly, Garret-Goodyear (1986) said that in *Pnin*, Nabokov explored the problem of "the overly arrogant artist, too infatuated with the magic of his art to be fully responsive to life" (p. 196) and it proved that "all fiction is elegant deception" (p. 195). Maxim D Shrayner² also suggested that the novel dealt with one sensitive topic – the Holocaust. "Nabokov was one of the very first American writers to write extensively about the Shoah³ in a work of fiction. (...) it is astounding how far ahead of his literary contemporaries Nabokov was in his thinking about the Shoah and how it might be remembered and memorialised". The harrowing experience of the Shoah is embodied in Mira Belockin's death – the death of an innocent, angel-like creature who used to be *Pnin*'s love interest before his wife Liza's appearance obliterated all other women from his life. It is thus wrong to assume that *Pnin* is a mere comic novel, in the same way it is wrong to judge *Lolita* as a pornographic/paedophilic novel since it also represents an in-depth study of the American culture and all its characteristics, such as obsessivecompulsive shopping habits, hoarding, the roles of malls in the modern society, its discordance with the European values and the analysis of the nation's culinary habits.

Though *Pnin* is not autobiographical, it offers some striking similarities between the protagonist and his creator that might make us follow that train of thought, so Cohen (1983) mentions their age, familial background, mutual exodus and degrees from European universities. A few others can also be noticed, such as the fact that both Nabokov and *Pnin* came to their respective foreign countries by ship- Nabokov to

England at the time he began his studies of ichtiology at the University of Cambridge and Pnin to America, to teach at Weindell. Even some of Pnin's health concerns were similar to Nabokov's, given the fact that the latter got the idea for his best-known novel, *Lolita* as he suffered from intercostal neuralgia, during which he would be completely bed-ridden while Pnin learnt the principles of car-wheeling from a manual while he was experiencing back pain.⁴ The episode of his embarking on a ship is one he pays special attention to when retelling it to his students, given the fact that he had to spend two whole weeks at Elis island, one of the most famous immigrant inspection stations due to his love for discussion and the extremities of his curiosity-because he took the customs clerk's questions too much to heart, as when, asked whether he was a supporter of anarchism, Pnin requested a more precise definition of the term. When he spoke about the past, Pnin would soon become so engulfed with his memories that "pear-shaped tears trickled down his tanned cheeks" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 12). Barabtarlo (in Clancey, 1984) suggested that the spontaneity and richness of his character were compared with the sterility of the German Department and the College in general. When it comes to its topics Boyd (1991) saw things on a much more general level, however, claiming that Pnin summed up all human mishaps and misfortunes. The most important features of this novel, according to Barabtarlo (in Alexandrov, 1995) include a vast number of characters, continuous flashbacks, the management of time and the fact that this is his only novel in which no one dies on stage. In terms of its structure, Toker (1989) rightly noticed that it resembled Nabokov's short story from 1935 called *Recruiting*. *Pnin* is not a sole example of Nabokov rewriting, expanding or translating his previous works. *Laughter in the dark*, for example, deals with the same topic as *Lolita*, though in a somewhat milder way. The heroine of that novel, Margot Peters is also a minor but the portrayals of the two differ significantly. Margot is much more assertive and she slyly uses her middle-aged partner Albinus' handicap, blindness acquired after a car accident, to provide herself and her lover, Alex Rex with a life of luxury by forging his signature. The depths of *Lolita's* suffering because of her relationship with Humbert are clearly visible when he visits her, a now pregnant Mrs. Schiller two years later. It is those circumstances that could make the reader feel compassion towards her. Margot, on the other hand, deserves no such treatment, given the fact that she mocked Albinus and left him almost destitute, without being punished for her evil deeds, since it is Albinus, not Margot who dies in the end. **The Narrator** The figure of the narrator indeed is "the most elusive in the novel" (Barabtarlo in Alexandrov, 1995, p. 604) and though Pnin has not, in comparison with other Nabokov's novels, been looked into so much by the critics, when it does get mentioned, however, this matter certainly is the central one and it represents one of the biggest riddles in the history of literary criticism. Paunović (1997) agreed with Hyde that this novel followed the pattern from Russian folklore, the form called *skaz*. As Paunović explained further, this form was chiefly explored by the Russian formalist school during the 1920s and the term itself is similar to the

word *skaska* which denotes a folk tale whose essence lies in its ability to change and the fact that the relationship between the narrator and his audience is not fixed. The same author claims that this constant redefining makes the reader/the listener a necessary and active participant in the creation and the deciphering of the story. The trouble with *skaz*, however, says Paunović is that, when *skaz* is turned into a written form, it gives the impression of distinct spontaneity and, consequently, occasional erraticism and imbalance between the important and the less important parts of the story. The opening scene of the novel shows our 52-year-old protagonist, the owner of a somewhat disproportioned body and mismatched clothes, who thought it was inappropriate to appear in front of the ladies without a tie, as equally embarrassing as to show them his long underwear commonly worn in those days, sitting in an almost empty coach, unaware of the fact that he is travelling on the wrong train. This mistake was a consequence of the fact that his timetable, which he “took especial pride in puzzling out” (Nabokov, 1989:10) was five years old. We learn that he is travelling to Cremona to give a lecture to the Women’s Club. In his book, *Nabokov: The American Years* (1991), Boyd noted that Nabokov also spoke at women’s clubs in order to augment his income, and that in March 1997 in Boston he spoke about a wrong topic, because he failed to jot down the title of the chosen one due to an illness. The wrong train was “the metaphor of Pnin’s position in the world he found himself in” (Paunović, 1997, pp. 165-166) and according to the same author, the novel started in a way completely atypical for Nabokov, the conventional third-person narration, from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator who “sees and knows everything” (p. 164). Things, however, are not so simple, as the same author elaborates, given the fact that a “third man” will soon appear, one who is neither the author nor the protagonist, though connected to both of them. What links him to the author is the fact that he “abolishes” the category of omniscience. His relationship with the protagonist, according to Paunović is based on the fact that, as *skaska* demands it, this “third man” also takes part in the events of the novel. Another essential information we are told almost immediately is that one of Pnin’s key features is his extremely bad command of the English language and that, though he “stubbornly sat down to the task of learning the language of Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Poe, Edison and 31 presidents (...) by 1950 his English was still full of flaws.” (Nabokov, 1989, p.13). Even his lectures, according to the novel, had to be translated from Russian, revised by the Chief of the Department, Hagen’s secretary and only then used by him, after he deleted all the difficult passages. Unlike Pnin, Nabokov did not have trouble with the English language and spoke it almost impeccably, though he did mourn the fact he had to switch from one language to another, as he himself noted in his afterword to *Lolita*. While Pnin was getting off the bus in a place named Whitchurch “a tingle of reality overpowered him completely” (Nabokov, 1989, p. 16) and it was revealed that Pnin had been suffering from a mysterious disease since the age of eleven, of certain chills that went up his spine and affected his vision, making it blurry. Paunović (1997) claimed that these

episodes confirmed Nabokov's theory of time-the fact that the past, the present and the future are all equally present in every moment of our existence, and that the ability to make all three of them available depends on the individual and the concrete moment. He further explains that these epiphanies are used by Nabokov for travelling through space and time, resembling similar principles that Joyce applies in his works. Time in general, as Rampton (2012) points out, constitutes a fluid medium in realistic novels, as opposed to a calendrical straitjacket, a fact supported by Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as the most famous example, given the fact that at one moment in the plotline four years have passed in Anna's life, and only three in Kitty and Lyovin's life. It is thanks to the flexibility of these conventions that Pnin has become "timeless and placeless" (Cohen, 1983, p. 66). The plot then moves on to the episode of Pnin's marriage to a then 20 year-old student of medicine, Liza Bogolepov whom he met in Paris. She was recovering from a suicide attempt, having been saved by her English neighbours who had seen that she had spilt the deep red ink she used for writing poetry while trying to take some pills and end her life. All of her friends advised her to marry Pnin immediately. Pnin, for his part, was aware of his shortcomings: "I am not handsome. I am not interesting. I am not talented. I am not rich"-but he has one major virtue - he loves her selflessly-"I offer you everything I have, to the last blood corpuscle, to the last tear, everything" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 119). Though he may never be happy himself, he will do everything within his powers to make her happy. Liza left him for Dr. Eric Wind, came back when she learnt that she was seven months pregnant, making those days "the happiest in Pnin's life" and filling them with "weighty, painful felicity" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 34). In the end she embarked on a ship to the United States with Pnin, the same one which Wind was travelling by, and used her ex-husband to enter the country so she could marry her chosen one there. They were all (Pnin, Wind and Liza) naturalised on the same day and Pnin continued to occasionally meet her by chance in New York for the next five years. This act of hers is probably the reason why Rampton (2012) saw her as a "distinctly repugnant character" (p. 138). Other authors, such as Paunović (1997) believed that Liza was an example of Nabokov's fatal woman and explained that this fatality was always related to the imaginary, the way the character saw her, which has little resemblance to the actual model. Furthermore, the same author also stated that in this part of the novel it stopped resembling a light, almost comic novel, in the same way Pnin was no longer a well-meaning eccentric, but a character who turned his own child-like innocence and kindness into an almost tragic victimisation. The last of Liza's visits, when she asked him to pay for Victor's education⁵ had such a deep impact on him that he suddenly became fully aware of the emptiness of his own life and asked his landlady, Joan Clements for "the viscous and sawdust" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 42). His misery reached its peak when Joan showed him the pictures of mermaids, which instantly made him think of Liza, whom he deemed a *limpid mermaid* "perfectly charming in her black jumper and tailor-made skirt" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 32). The proof of Pnin's love and selflessness is that he laboriously prepares

for Victor's arrival. He buys him presents (though not really suitable), makes the bed and even changes the light bulb in his desk lamp. The two of them spend some father-and-son time, eating veal cutlet, which Pnin sees as his own "concession to America, my new country wonderful America which sometimes surprises me but always provokes respect " (Nabokov, 1989, p. 71). Victor was an extremely talented and weird child, who could "differentiate between the colours of the shadows (Nabokov, 1989, p. 61). Liza was worried because he was not problematic in the least, he did not even pick his nose or bite his nails. The depth of Pnin's love for Liza is also proven by the fact that, upon seeing Victor yawn, Pnin immediately recalls Liza's behaviour after going to parties with him. Paunović (1997) suggested that in his relationship with Victor, Pnin fruitlessly tried to move away from what his essence is and become an archetype of a father as he imagined it- as an authoritarian, competent citizen of the world, who is equally knowledgeable about literature and wolf-hunting. As Barabtarlo (in Clancey,1984) suggested, In *Pnin*, the author deliberately and selfconsciously entered the narrative, first of all by making personal appearances, and second of all, via the narrative, in order to remind the reader that the world created by a work of art is an imagined world, the imperfect refraction of a reality too fluid and elastic for the created world to seize and hold. The narrator, however, occupies a much more important position, although he starts to intrude into the foreground of the novel only fairly late, before that he has constantly reminded us of his presence by the insertion of key points throughout the tale in the first person pronoun, or by blandly dropping some revealing remark about himself. Barabtarlo also believes that there are two ways of confronting experience-to be as open and vulnerable as Pninto be most human and also most hurt or to be as coldly analytical as the narrator. The same author further explains that this is what Nabokov wants to show-the difference between the kind of qualities that make up a decent human being and the very different qualities necessary to become a creative artist. In the next, fifth chapter, Pnin goes to a gathering of philosophers, feminists, social workers, etc. There is no mockery at this point in the novel, as Paunović (1997) points out, only compassion for people who are trying to keep themselves connected to their homeland, and it is in this chapter that the relationship between the protagonist and the narrator completely changes. Surrounded by his compatriots, as the same author further explains, Pnin is no longer a comic individual. He becomes an eloquent, well-behaved, confident male. He becomes a dignified character in the reader's eyes, not only without any help from the narrator, but also despite his attempts to make a different impression. There is no irony or maliciousness and with a different Pnin comes a different narrator as well. The narration is much more literature-like, with a bigger concern for style, structure and layout, though this is not a lasting change. In this part of the novel we get a picture of Pnin as a driver. His blue sedan of "uncertain age and in mediocre condition" (Nabokov, 1989, p. 71) was bought from a pupil who was getting married, for 100 dollars. In his usual, masterful manner, Nabokov implies

that Pnin cannot put his theoretical knowledge of driving into practice—he cannot seem to relate the car he was driving in his mind with the one he was driving on the road. Another important topic in this chapter is the clash of cultures, embodied in the descendants of that generation of émigrés, who are “perfectly uninterested in their parent’s stories” (Nabokov, 1989, p. 180). Indeed, they prefer canned goods to the marvellous Russian food, they turn the radio on and wander off to their rooms. They only come to these gatherings when they know there will be some boys or girls they have a romantic interest in, as is the case with Victor and Olga Poroshin. In the next chapter the narrator tries to go back to the mildly ironic, malicious tone which (...) starts to seem a bit unsuitable while the retelling of anecdotes looks like a waste of time. (Paunović, 1997). Having seen that throughout the novel Pnin puts his heart and soul in all of his numerous roles even though he is constantly a laughing stock, or precisely in spite of that fact, we cannot but empathise with him and put all those mean comments aside. The narrator which appears in the last parts of the novel “suggests a good measure of snobbishness of bearing, callousness of heart, vanity of mind and a general lack of charity” and (...) “they cannot coexist on the same plane” (pp. 605;606). Near the end of the novel Pnin gives a housewarming party “battered and stunned by thirty-five years of hopelessness” (Nabokov, 1989, p. 95) and he finally earns the right to enjoy silence after various cacophonies. It is at this moment that Hagen, the chair of the Department, reveals the current state of affairs at the University to Pnin, saying that Russian courses have ceased to attract Russians because “political interests in America discourage interests in things Russian (Nabokov, 1989, p. 111). He advised him to try working under the famous colleague of his but Pnin flatly rejected, though the said professor (the man who was, in fact, responsible for Liza’s suicide attempt, as it would be revealed later on) asked Pnin “in the most cordial terms I could muster to assist me in any way and to any extent he desired (Nabokov, 1989, p. 121). After Hagen left Pnin was washing the dishes when the nutcracker fell “like a man from a roof” (Nabokov, 1989, p. 113) onto a bowl Victor gave him. It did not break the bowl, however, just a goblet. Cohen (1983) suggested that the narrator threatens his (Pnin’s) discreetness and new-found home-feeling. He is guilty of a crass insensitivity of Pnin’s suffering and insidious infringement of his autonomy. However, Paunović (1997) claims that among the shatters of his, for various reasons completely broken life, there is also something unbreakable which makes him live on despite everything. He further explains that the relationship between Pnin and the narrator is easily explained by psychological reasons and is the consequence of his strong feeling of inferiority towards Pnin. The famous adage says that there are two sides to every story. In the case of Pnin, however, there is a multiplicity of sides and as Paunović (1997) points out, the exact number of existing truths depends on the number of the narrators. Both the protagonist and the one who tells the story have their own version of events, claimed the same author further on, while the reader is presented with a chance to create his own “truth” if he is so keen on it. The novel ends with Victor being in Rome with his

mother, who is married to an Italian art dealer. Pnin, on the other hand “escapes from the inhibiting frame of his biography (...) and the cocooned pupa is transformed into a rare butterfly” (Cohen, 1983, p. 70). “The author, the reader and the subject of the novel can”, as Garret-Goodyear (1986) suggested, “all escape the construct, but the narrator has to remain trapped” (192). **Conclusion** Nabokov’s fourth English novel not only combines a wide range of genres, including a humorous novel, a campus novel and a quasi-autobiographical novel, but also deals with a variety of universal topics such as the experience of exile, the magic of artistic creation and the arrogance of the artists, as well as some more sensitive ones, i. e. the Holocaust which was an extremely bold move, given the fact that the novel was first printed during the period immediate to the end of the World War II. It’s biggest riddle up to this day, however, remains the narrator, though Nabokov uses a number of viewpoints in this novel, starting with the omniscient narrator, continuing with the first-person one and ending with a third kind-one that enables the first two to remain closely connected. By interweaving these threads, Nabokov creates an ingenious, often underrated work of art, based on the Russian tradition of folk tales so close to his heart, and simultaneously provides the reader with an open-end novel, a material which asks for full engagement and offers a vast number of possibilities at the same time, signifying its readiness to be moulded according to the idiosyncrasies of each and every member of the wider reader’s audience.

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Notes

1. Critics usually divide Nabokov's life into four different periods based on the countries he lived in: the Russian years, the European years (Germany and France), the American years and European years (Switzerland).
2. The websites used in this paper are given in the Reference List
3. Shoah is a Jewish word for the Holocaust.
4. As Boyd suggested in his *American Years* (1991), during one of his personal numerous hospital stays Nabokov thought out in detail an additional chapter he could insert between chapters 4 and 5 of *Pnin*: "Pnin recovering in the hospital from a sprained back teaches himself to drive a car in bed by studying a 1935 manual of automobilism found in the hospital library and manipulating the levers of his cot. . ." (191) It seems he abandoned the idea, but in the novel, Pnin indeed partly learnt to drive from a car manual.
5. In *American Years* (1991) Boyd noted that Victor's school is based on his son Dmitri's St. Mark's
6. All quotations from Prof. Paunović's book and other references to it have been self-translated from Serbian into English with the author's permission. Prof. Paunović is a Full Professor of English Literature at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade and the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad. Prof. Paunović defended his PhD Thesis on Nabokov in 1995.