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The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. Pnin in the Land of North Americans

In 1924 Lev Kuleshov made a film, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, which if Nabokov ever saw he probably totally detested as shameless propaganda. In it, Mr. West comes to the Soviet Russia full of preconceived notions of what he was going to find there only to discover, at the end of the film, what a great country it was. That very same year Nabokov's creation, Timofey Pnin, having fled "the Land of the Bolsheviks," was in Prague, studying sociology and political economy. Twenty years later, Mr. Pnin would make a journey to the Land of Mr. West, and his adventures in the United States would be, in many ways, quite as extraordinary as those of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks. And while Mr. West's hosts in Kuleshov's movie were shown to be gracious, wise, and patient enough to recognize the difficulties the foreigners were facing and knowledgeable enough of the alien culture to resolve most of the confusion to everyone's satisfaction, in the case of Mr. Pnin the resolution was definitely much less clear cut. After more than ten years in the country when we first meet him, Pnin is still very ignorant of his new culture, and his level of curiosity about it is definitely no match to Mr. West's. (1)

When Joan Clements makes an admirable attempt to lift Pnin's spirits after Liza's visit to Waindell by explaining funny magazine ads to him, Pnin, who admits that he "cannot understand American humor even when [he is] happy," only sees breaches of logical thinking and "atomic

bomb explosion" (61, 60). He can also be maddeningly self-righteous in his cultural ignorance, like when he is trying to buy a soccer ball for Victor and, out of his Russian habit, asks for a football instead. Presented with a genuine American football, Pnin does not doubt for a moment that it was the salesclerk, and not he, who made the mistake, and while at it, also manages to ridicule this sacred object of American culture: "'No, no, said Pnin, 'I do not wish an egg or, for example, a torpedo. I want a simple football ball. Round!'" (99). Pnin's reaction to a football thus consists not only of his unawareness of the American English usage but also of his thinly-veiled contempt for the American football which, he, teaching on a college campus, obviously cannot avoid being exposed to.

We know for a fact that Nabokov did not share Pnin's cultural ignorance since the creator of Pnin always exhibited voracious curiosity about American life. He also obviously possessed a much finer developed sense of humor. But while it is obvious that Nabokov early on decided that Pnin's obstinate otherness and humorlessness would be a source of delight to *The New Yorker* readers (and it was so much more palatable to have to satisfy the readers rather than the censors), his own attitude towards this side of Pnin and, through him, towards numerous other Russian emigres who either found it very hard to adjust to the new American ways or simply refused to do so, appears to be much more complex.

Nabokov was, of course, no ordinary emigre, as he himself was first to admit. The circumstances of his second emigration, his transition from Europe to the United States, were greatly helped by his pre-war literary fame in Russian Berlin and Paris and his good American connections, which almost immediately placed the writer within the core of the American literary and cultural establishment. "It so happened that I was immediately exposed to the very best in America," Nabokov told an interviewer in 1964, "to its rich intellectual life and to its easygoing,

good-natured atmosphere" (*Strong Opinions* 27). "In America I am happier than in any other country," he assured a BBC reporter two years earlier. "It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America. It is a second home in the true sense of the word" (*Strong Opinions* 9). He was, incidentally, living in Switzerland by then but we should not doubt the genuine nature of his admiration of and gratitude towards the country which had adopted him in his family's time of acute need, and the literary and intellectual scenes which made him a world-famous writer. In *Pnin* he underscores his privileged position vis-a-vis other emigres in the character of Vladimir Vladimirovich or V.N., the successful and much-envied narrator of the novel.

And yet some of Pnin's cultural unease was very much Nabokov's own. He, too, loved soccer and did not care for American football with its quasi-religious hold on the life of American college campuses. And, like Pnin, Nabokov had many issues with magazine ads. In *Nikolai Gogol*, written around the time Pnin arrived to the United States, Nabokov, having finished with the German examples of "poshlust," eagerly switches to the country of his current residency: "[it] is [...] not necessary to travel so far in space [...] to obtain good examples. Open the first magazine at hand and you are sure to find something of the following kind: a radio set (or a car, or a refrigerator, or table silver — anything will do) has just come to the family: mother clasps her hands in dazed delight, the children crowd around, all agog, Junior and the dog strain up to the edge of the table where the Idol is enthroned; even Grandma of the beaming wrinkles peeps out somewhere in the background..." (66). This description is of course reminiscent not only of magazine ads but also of the paintings by Norman Rockwell who becomes the icon of American "poshlust" in Pnin when Victor's favorite art professor, Lake, condemns both him and Dali for being "banal and [...] bourgeois" (96).

The time Pnin inhabited, the 1950s, were, indeed, the years of truly spectacular commercial poshlust. One of my personal favorites from that era, which I fervently hope Nabokov got a chance to see and perversely enjoy, is General Motors' 1956 Motorama production, *Design for Dreaming*. Released a year before *Pnin* came out in a book form, this 10-minute advertising extravaganza was produced by Victor — yes, Victor — Solow. (2) General Motors' Motoramas were giant trade shows for GM's new products. The 1956 Motorama, dubbed "Highways of Tomorrow," drew nearly 300,000 visitors during its six-day opening run at New York's Waldorf-Astoria hotel, while this promotional film was seen by millions more.

In it a young woman (3) is visited one night by a mysterious masked male (4) who, in a Cinderella-like fashion, magically transforms her plain clothes into a beautiful evening gown and spirits her away to visit the Motorama version of the ball. While there, all the time flying, twirling, dancing and singing, she views, in a glorious succession, GM's present and future cars, which she confesses liking more than "mink." Then, in a nod to her intrinsic female interests and inclinations, she is taken to the Kitchen of Tomorrow where the futuristic appliances take care of all the necessary chores virtually without her participation. Thus liberated, the young woman slips into one sport outfit after another in order to enjoy tennis, golf, and a swim. At the end of the film, our present-day Cinderella rejoins her mysterious prince and steps into a futuristic-looking car which whisks the happy couple to the "Highways of Tomorrow." What follows is a scene which is eerily reminiscent of Fritz Lang's 1926 *Metropolis*, except here, of course, the vision is anything but dystopian.

Culturally ignorant or not, Pnin in his contempt for this kind of commercial corniness would, in Nabokov's eyes, be quite superior to many natives who seemed to heed these ads

and line up to buy the products they championed. Pnin's superiority over those around him was definitely implied in Nabokov's letter to a prospective publisher, Pascal Covici, written in 1955. "When I began writing PNIN," he explained to him, "I had before me a definite artistic purpose: to create a character, comic, physically inattractive — 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" (*Selected Letters* 178).

It is noteworthy that this description of Pnin could almost equally fit Nabokov's earlier character, Cincinnatus, who is also physically unattractive and quite pathetic, especially when we learn the details of his married life to Marthe. Nabokov's use of the word "normal" here is also quite suggestive. In *Invitation to a Beheading* Cincinnatus was not "normal" because, unlike the rest of the population, he was "opaque" and thus hard to "read." Pnin is equally "opaque" to those around him, even if what makes him different is cultural rather than ideological, and the price he pays is obviously not as extreme and, oftentimes, even amusing. I am, in fact, fully aware that in comparing the two I am running the substantial risk of trivializing the essence of *Invitation to a Beheading* which is, after all, about the tyranny of criminal dictatorships. Yet, on a certain level *Invitation* is also simply about being different — and so, to a great extent, is *Pnin*.

The parallels between the two characters are, in my opinion, quite significant. As I already suggested in *Pniniad*, Cincinnatus and Pnin share the same unique and oddly backward development as characters: they start as what we feel are "known" types but end up as enigmas. Cincinnatus' crime lies in his remaining obstinately true to himself in a society which is alien to him, thus making him an internal exile, and such is also Pnin's difficulty in the country where he is

literally an "alien." The similarities do not stop there. Whereas Cincinnatus is at the mercy of Pierre, who is pretending to be his friend, Pnin is at the mercy of the narrator, who appears benign but whose role in the novel can be seen as quite menacing. Some critics actually go so far as to call the narrator Pnin's antagonist and even a "predatory pursuer." (5) As in *Invitation to a Beheading*, in this battle of the pursuer and his victim, it is the victim who is seen to be triumphant at the end. When Pnin escapes the clutches of both Cockerell and VN, one critic, Julian Connolly, tells us that he "moves on to a higher plane — his path is that of a spiral [...]" (6) — and this is, of course, a description which can equally well apply to Cincinnatus. The two even exit the novels in somewhat similar fashion: "amidst the dust, and the falling things, and the flapping scenery, Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (*Invitation to a Beheading* 223); "the little sedan [...] free at last, spurted up the shining road [...] where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen" (*Pnin* 191).

Many have remarked on the interesting "split" in Pnin's character which Ambrose Gordon so aptly characterized as that of "Pnin as the Alien" and "Pnin as the Exile." Maladjusted to the point of being indeed pathetic through most of the book's initial "American" chapters, Pnin undergoes a wonderful transformation into an intelligent, competent, and utterly respectable human being in Chapter 5, when he attends a gathering of his compatriots at Al Cook's "dacha," "The Pines." (7) No longer in need of his heavily- accented and no-less-heavily-flawed English, Pnin relaxes here amid "the remembered tang of northern pines" (122). Brian Boyd accurately notes that "Among those who share his background, his precise knowledge of Russian culture [...] suddenly seems of the highest value. His language becomes graceful, dignified, and witty [...]" (275).

In Chapter 5 Pnin is, to use again the idiom from *Invitation*, among "beings akin to him" (223). In a scene which is, in fact, almost as symbolic as Cincinnatus's "taking off layer after layer, until at last [...] reach[ing] the final, indivisible, firm, radiant point" (90), Pnin feels so liberated at "The Pines" that he strips down to his bathing trunks, and in doing so, discards the formal "American" suit in which he arrived and which even reminded one female guest of President Eisenhower ("*pryamo amerikanets* [...] *pryamo Ayzenhauer*,") (121). This deliberately-described act of Pnin's disrobing is also quite reminiscent of Cincinnatus' s taking off "the dressing gown, the skullcap, the slippers... the linen trousers and shirt [...] his head [...] his hips and his legs [...]" (32). Pnin then glides into the water. "Around the natural basin," Nabokov tells us, "Pnin swam in state. He swam with a rhythmical sputter — half gurgle, half puff." Pnin follows this — unconscious for him but very intentional for his creator — act of re-birth and re-baptismal by putting the Russian Orthodox cross he shed before stepping into the stream back on (129). What we have here is, I believe, Nabokov's presentation of Pnin as a born-again Russian and re-constituted dignified human being.

Consequently, that evening, Pnin's competence and self-assuredness know no bounds. Eating his "botvinia" (identified in English, somewhat simplistically, as "chilled beet soup") (129) with sour cream, Pnin lectures the guests on the difference between the spiritual and physical time in *Anna Karenina* (or *Anna Karenin*, as Nabokov — and Pnin, at least once — would have us call it), plays a masterful game of croquet, and, finally, is revealed to us in all his poignant humanity as he remembers Mira Belochkin and imagines the unimaginable horror of her last days in a concentration camp. The chapter ends with Pnin having achieved a stature and seriousness that is in sharp contrast to the previous chapters which took place in purely American lands and campuses. "Pnin slowly walked under the solemn pines," the narrator tells

us in an almost reverential tone. "The sky was dying. He did not believe in an autocratic God. He did, believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts" (136). This is the Pnin whom Nabokov would characterize to his prospective publishers in 1955 as "[a] man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and a staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love [who] never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity" (*Selected Letters* 182).

In his correspondence with Katharine White, who was editing the Pnin stories for *The New Yorker*, Nabokov took pains again and again to emphasize that it is often Pnin's Russianness, not necessarily any flaws in his character, that makes him a figure of fun. "Pnin translates everything from the Russian," he wrote to her in "Notes to notes" for "Pnin's Day" (that became Chapter 3 of *Pnin*). "He wants to express the notion 'something' but says 'something or other' — as many Russians do" (*Selected Letters* 159). And that is how Nabokov felt, most likely, about numerous contemporary members of Russian emigration who, because of their cultural and linguistic difficulties in a new country were often reduced by their impatient hosts to the level of grotesque caricatures. He also probably felt that despite his own fame and success, he himself was not immune from this kind of treatment.

I do tend to agree with David Cowart who in 1982 treated both Pnin and VN, the narrator, as "parody Nabokovs: one the maladroit exile and perpetual clown, the other suave ladies' man and successful academic [...]. The author is living the examined life by critiquing, if not 'exorcising,' two facets of his own personality." (8) As I argued in *Pniniad*, Pnin and VN can, indeed, be seen as two representations of Nabokov's own public American personality: an old one, from the forties, that of an obscure and seemingly eccentric Russian lecturer with a hard-to-pronounce name teaching an odd language in a small women's college, and a newer one, from the fifties, that of a respected Cornell professor, a polished intellectual, and a

successful author to boot. The old image also belonged to an "Alien," since for a large part of the forties Nabokov was still a stateless, passportless refugee, while in the fifties he was already a dignified "Exile" with American citizenship. I believe that at least some of Nabokov's visible "defensiveness" when dealing with American-born members of the American cultural elite, whether *The New Yorker* editors, like Katharine White, or Edmund Wilson, stems in fact from this fear of being treated by them only half seriously: a successful writer yet also a funny and eccentric foreigner. Even his excellent English was a point of vulnerability with him. "My private tragedy," he told Peter Duval-Smith of BBC in 1962,"which cannot, indeed should not be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English" (*Strong Opinions* 15).

When Nabokov left for Switzerland after the success of *Lolita*, he gave several reasons for wanting to be there, including living close to his sister, and also to his son, who was in Milan at the time; needing the scenery for *Pale Fire*; and simply liking a place with a "wonderfully soothing and exhilirating" view of the lake and the Alps nearby for butterfly hunting (*Strong Opinions* 28, 49, 56). Nabokov also routinely insisted for a while that he intended to go back to the United States. "I feel very nostalgic about America," he told an interviewer in 1965. "[A]s soon as I muster the necessary energy, I shall return there for good" (*ibid* 56). As we know, he never did, and energy probably had little to do with it. The decision not to go back was, apparently, very gradual and at some point in the late 1960s the Nabokovs started telling people that they "preferred fruitful isolation in Switzerland to the stimulating but distracting atmosphere of America" (in Boyd 459). Fearing that some might assume that their decision was dictated by material considerations (just as Nabokov was contemptuous of those who would

think that his disdain for the Soviet regime was somehow related to the question of lost property) (*Speak Memory* 73), Nabokov often hastened to add that, unlike other rich Americans, he was not fleeing high American taxes and was, in fact, paying them in both countries (S*trong Opinions* 56).

Obviously in leaving the United States for good Nabokov was not fleeing his taxes but he may have been fleeing something else. The publication of *Lolita* had ineviitably unleashed not only fame but also notoriety, and whereas he could handle and enjoy the former, his temperament was decidedly not well suited for the latter. Notoriety, or what Andy Warhol would call in the 1960s "being famous for 15 minutes," was very much within Nabokov's definition of quintessentially American poshlust. "Poshlost, posh-looking vulgarity," he explained in another BBC interview given in the late 1960s, "[is] any object of popular art or popular metaphysics... I loath popular pulp" (*ibid* 117). While Nabokov could live with it when he was able to remain on the sidelines and just be a critical and sometimes even amused observer, being in the eye of that storm and having his name often linked with the likes of Jack Kerouac, whose *On the Road* came out a year after *Lolita*, and Henry Miller, whose *Tropic of Cancer*, written in 1934, saw its first American publication in 1961, was definitely not something he could easily stomach. (9) Removing himself from the center of the storm gave Nabokov not only distance but also control. He was not as besieged with the media trying to serve him to their readers as author du jour, and he could lead a much more peaceful and anonymous life, the essence of which was so well captured in the 1969 *Time* magazine article about him, where Nabokov was described as "a distant and revered personage safe in Switzerland." (10) Or, put another way, Pnin went to Lake Onkwedo to regain his dignity, and Nabokov may have gone to Lake Geneva to maintain his.

There were other reasons as well. By the 1960s Nabokov was leaving behind not just his own notoriety but that of the whole era, which was developing, politically and culturally, not at all to Nabokov's liking. As Don Johnson writes in his recent article "Nabokov and the Sixties," "There is no denying that America was in the midst of a sea change: the anti-Vietnam demonstrations, the civil rights protests and riots, the psychedelic and sexual revolutions, and so on. Social disruption disturbed him greatly. Perhaps it evoked the Russia of his youth or Germany in the thirties: events that had turned his life (and the world) upside down" (Johnson 147).

I also believe that Nabokov always knew that even as a great American author, in the minds of the reading public and the American cultural elite he would never be confused with F. Scott Fitzgerald; that is, he would always have this asterisk attached to his name as not being really American, and his interviewers would never cease asking him about how long it had taken him to master English or wonder in what language he thinks in. Nabokov's Russia, of course, no longer existed but his Europe still largely did, and that is where he chose to go, starting his trip back with the south of France and the warm beaches of his childhood. As to his ending up in Switzerland, there is something about the place that seems to be just perfect for people without a country of their own — or at least that is what Babel's Benya Krik thought when he lamented that instead of placing Jews in Russia, God should have settled them in Switzerland "where they would be surrounded by first-class lakes, would breathe mountain air and would have only the French around." (11)

On a more serious note, there has been much discussion for the last ten years or so, peaking at the time of Nabokov's centennial, as to whether Nabokov should be considered a Russian or an American writer. The easiest and most optimistic response is, of course, to call

him both. I believe, however, that the answer is "neither." Bi-lingual and bi-cultural writers like Nabokov should really be in a category of their own which would reflect both the marvelous uniqueness of their situation and its not so wonderful consequences. I do believe that Nabokov may have tried to alleviate the latter by choosing to spend the rest of his life in a "neutral" country with yet another language or, even, languages, and no major heartstrings attached.

But let us go back to Pnin and his extraordinary adventures. Having driven out of *Pnin* in a car, which was definitely not featured in any General Motors' Motoramas, Timofey Pnin reappears in *Pale Fire* where he plays a small cameo role as a happily-tenured professor. He is still in the United States, at Wordsmith University ("New Wye, Appalachia, USA", to be exact), but while probably continuing to be very much an outsider, he is now "the Head of the bloated Russian department" (*Pale Fire* 103) as opposed to being a lonely Russian specialist without a department of his own at Waindell. It is not a given, of course, that he likes all his new colleagues, for, after all, he did hate the Komarovs, the only other Russians on the Waindell campus. But in light of his realistic options, since, as was the case with his creator, the Russia he would ever want to go back to no longer exists, this is probably a satisfactory compromise. It enables Pnin to inhabit a small societal microcosm which is not unlike the Pines where he can hold court on Russian writers or eat "botvinia" with his colleagues during the hot and humid Appalachian summer evenings. It is worth noting here that prior to the publication of *Lolita* which dramatically opened up Nabokov's opportunities, he, too, was actively seeking out a "bloated Russian Department," in his case the one at Harvard, which would have allowed him to be a part of a much larger Slavic world than the one he had at Cornell.

As to Mr. West, he did, of course, go back to the United States even though, unlike Nabokov and Pnin and many poor Cincinnatuses who would perish in the Stalin purges in the next fifteen years, he found the new Soviet Union just dandy, thank you.

Notes

(1) For more on Pnin, please see my *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* and "Timofey Pnin, Vladimir Nabokov, and Marc Szeftel."

(2) Sollow's other claims to fame are a 1967 film, *Sweet Love, Bitter*, loosely based on the life of Charlie Parker, and an account of a Near-Death Experience, "I died at 10:52 A.M," published in an October 1974 issue of *Reader's Digest*.

(3) Played by Thelma "Tad" Tadlock, who would later choreograph "Dance Fever" and "Body Heat."

(4) Mark Breaux, the choreographer for "The Sound of Music" and "Mary Poppins."

(5) Michael Long, *Marvell, Nabokov: Childhood and Arcadia* (p. 60); Charles Nicol, "Pnin's History," in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov* (pp. 103, 104); Paul Grams, "Pnin: The Biographer as Meddler," in *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov* (p. 200).

(6) Julian W. Connolly, "*Pnin*: The Wonder of Recurrence and Transformation," in *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life and Work* (p. 209).

(7) Gordon — in *Nabokov: The Man and His Work* (pp. 144-56). "The Pines," described as a summer house near "Onkwedo," "in one of the fairest of New England's fair states" (111) is, as we all know, but a thinly-disguised "dacha" in West Wardsboro, Vermont which belonged to

a Harvard professor Mikhail Karpovich and was frequented every summer in the 1940s and 1950s by his numerous Russian friends and fellow Slavists, including the Nabokovs.

(8) David Cowart, "Art and Exile: Nabokov's *Pnin*" (p. 202).

(9) "The 'Beats" interest in Dostoevsky, their uninhibited confessional tone, 'spontaneous' prose, and Buddhist inclination were all antithetical to Nabokov's way of thinking and writing" (D. Barton Johnson, "Nabokov and the Sixties," in *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose* (p. 144-45).

(10) May 23, 1969 (p. 90).

(11) Isaac Babel, "How It Was Done in Odessa," in *Collected Stories* (p. 251).

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