

# *Pnin*'s Unforgettable Digressions: Towards a Nabokovian Approach to the Unconscious

Zihao Liu

Shanghai Jiao Tong University  
E-mail: kila31@sjtu.edu.cn

DOI: 10.51865/JLSL.2023.07

## Abstract

Defining the unconscious in a Husserlian manner as that which appears through reproductive acts of consciousness, this article attempts to investigate how Vladimir Nabokov tackles this theme in *Pnin* both as a stylist and as a storyteller. Nabokov understands literature as the art of language that imposes lived experiences on readers, and he achieves literary representations of the unconscious in *Pnin* by juxtaposing experiences containing tacit expectations that are incongruent with one another. Tracking the scenes where *Pnin* performs reproductive acts throughout the novel, it is found that the unconscious functions as a thematic pattern in *Pnin* and mirrors the protagonist's progress in his quixotic war against cruelty and callousness in the world.

**Keywords:** *Pnin*, Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, the unconscious, phenomenology

Like its eponymous hero, *Pnin* is an oddball in Vladimir Nabokov's oeuvre, or, as Robert Alter neatly puts it, this novel is 'Nabokov for those who hate him'.<sup>1</sup> Even the vigilance against Freudian interpretations is lowered by a tiny notch here: familiar attacks on psychoanalysis are sprinkled from time to time,<sup>2</sup> but missing in *Pnin* is Nabokov's signature move of pre-emptive strikes, where the narrator or a character sarcastically deciphers 'latent symbols' mined in the novel and thus fends off the 'Viennese delegation'.<sup>3</sup> Featuring a number of dreams and hallucinations that are relatively a-Freudian,<sup>4</sup> *Pnin* allows for an analysis of how Nabokov tackles the theme of the unconscious as a writer.

Nabokov's conception of a writer is famously tripartite, comprising the roles of teacher, enchanter and storyteller.<sup>5</sup> Hence, a tried and tested formula to concoct a Nabokovian account of almost any topic is to delineate how the enchanter and storyteller

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *Nabokov and the Real World: Between Appreciation and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 124.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (London: Penguin, 2012). These range from gentle grumbles (40-41, 161) to fully-fledged parodies (76-7, 120). Hereafter *P* with page references in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Jenefer Shute, 'Nabokov and Freud', in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E Alexandrov (New York: Routledge, 1995), 415.

<sup>4</sup> Michal Oklot and Matthew Walker, 'Psychoanalysis', in *Vladimir Nabokov in Context*, eds. David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 215.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 5.

fashion artistic vehicles to express the teacher's ideas about the field under consideration. Unfortunately, since Nabokov's discursive remarks on the topic are almost exclusively polemics against psychoanalysis, a critical rendition of the unconscious must be found elsewhere. In an earlier article, I have demonstrated the acute affinity between the thoughts of Nabokov and Edmund Husserl,<sup>6</sup> and in what follows, I will follow Husserl, who, like Freud, happened to be a student of Brentano's, and define the unconscious as 'a matter of something alien that belongs to the self but which the self cannot immediately lay claim to as a real presence',<sup>7</sup> which appears by means of reproductive acts of consciousness like memory and phantasy.

Besides providing a lucid concept of the unconscious, adopting a phenomenological perspective also helps rectify a chronic imbalance in readings of *Pnin* and in Nabokov scholarship in general. Probably due to the burgeoning and proliferation of narratology more or less contemporary to Nabokov's canonization, the majority of critical attention is paid to his storytelling instead of style, despite the categorical assertion that 'it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer.'<sup>8</sup> Faced with the lack of a systematic account of how the enchanter works or what the term 'magic' even refers to, I'll have to offer a phenomenological sketch of Nabokov's literary magic before analyzing how *Pnin*'s resident enchanter applies it to the unconscious in sparks of virtuosity and how the storyteller weaves them into the story of Professor Timofey Pnin, who is 'beloved [...] for those unforgettable digressions of his, when he would remove his glasses to beam at the past while massaging the lenses of the present.' (*P*, 4)

## A Genetic Phenomenology of Nabokov's Literary Magic

We shall begin by returning to the beginning of literature, which Nabokov pinpoints to the day in a Neanderthal valley 'when a boy came crying wolf, wolf and there was no wolf behind him.'<sup>9</sup> Had there been a real wolf at the boy's heels, language would merely be one of the indicative signs (alongside his expressions of fear, high pitch, running gestures, etc.) that connected an existent object (this poor boy) to another (that hungry wolf), both in plain sight of the villagers, but if havoc was caused when the wolf was absent, it should pass as a genuine case of literature at work. Of course, it might be the non-verbal indications made by the child or his track record of honesty that convinced the adults, but upon hearing the sound /wolf/, listeners had to imagine the imminent crisis in the shape of a howling quadruped inhabiting their neighbouring woods. For Nabokov, this magical ability to conjure up an object in the listener/reader's mind via meaning (language as expression) is the essence of literature – whether the wolf was real or fictive is only relevant if one wishes to determine the piece's genre.

Now fast forward to the beginning of *Pnin*. After abruptly announcing that the male figure in a sparsely populated train coach is Pnin – hardly more convincing than the boy's wolf – the narrator pulls off a trick that attests to millennia of literary evolution:

<sup>6</sup> Zihao Liu, 'A Phenomenological Interpretation of "Veen's Time"', *Nabokov Studies* 18 (2022-2023): 108-12.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Bernet, 'Unconscious Consciousness in Husserl and Freud', in *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 211.

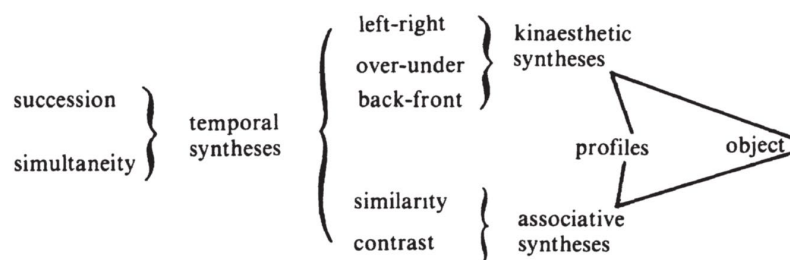
<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 5.

Ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck, and strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat, but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flannelled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet. (*P*, 1)

Unlike the fictional wolf that may or may not be summoned mentally, and only in an indeterminate manner if it were, the evocative power of this sentence is such that the reader cannot help but *see* Pnin. Visual descriptions of this sort are a hallmark of Nabokov's works (in *Pnin* they adorn the opening of every chapter), and with the sense of excitement, triumph and appreciation that always accompany the revelation of a magic, we now attempt at a phenomenological explanation of why Nabokov's literary magic succeeds in fooling and elating his readers.

In the 1920s, Husserl underwent what is now called by scholars his 'genetic turn'<sup>10</sup> and came up with a theory of sensual perception that proves handy for our current task. Reflecting on his earlier – and better-known – static account of perception based on the model of verbal expression (as opposed to indication), where the subject's meaning-bestowing act turns a formless sensual data (*hyle*) into a profile representing an object, Husserl realized that 'it is dangerous here to speak of represented and representing, of interpreting data of sensation [...]. Adumbrating, exhibiting in data of sensation, is totally different from an interpretation through signs.'<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, he suggested that instead of the mind dictating a meaning to sensual data, it is the 'proto-apprehension' at the level of 'hyletic constitution' that gives a series of senses for the subject to work on and thus finds apprehension 'understood as a perception of the object',<sup>12</sup> which anticipated similar formulations from Jean-Luc Marion for more than half a century.<sup>13</sup> To cut a long story short, Husserl's genetic model of perception can be summarized into the diagram created by Donn Welton, which depicts perception as a process of spatial configuration of sensations (which are already meaningful) in accordance with the form of the absolute consciousness of internal time which results in the adumbrating of an object.



#### The synthesis of originary perception<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bernet, 211.

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic* (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Donn Welton, *The Origins of Meaning* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1983), 235-6.

<sup>13</sup> Ming-Qian Ma, 'From Blind to Blinding: Saturated Phenomena and the Speculative Lyric of the Invisible in Andrew Joron's Poetry', *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 12 (2022): 50-52.

<sup>14</sup> Welton, 244.

Returning to the opening of *Pnin*, we see that all three forms of syntheses are present in the act of reading, albeit in different forms: kinaesthetic and associative syntheses are signified by words, and the reader brings their genuine temporal consciousness. Phrases like ‘great brown dome’ and ‘tortoise-shell glasses’, when isolated, can signify meanings that refer to self-sufficient objects, but put in the downward movement of the visual field which unfolds as the reader scans the sentence, one meaningful unit after another, they are relegated, as it were, into *hyle*-level associative syntheses that contributes to the constitution of the profile of Pnin as he cozily prepares for a lecture in the evening, perfectly unaware of the perils in store. What distinguishes the boy’s wolf and Nabokov’s Pnin is now clear: phenomenologically speaking, the wolf is an empty intention which requires voluntary imagination, whereas Pnin is given in an instance of quasi-perception.

Contrary to visual arts recreating objects that have to appear through profiles, literature – at least as the magic Nabokov conceives of it – imposes on its readers intentional *Erlebnisse* (lived experiences) that direct at objects. It is in this sense, I believe, that Nabokov claims that ‘[a]ll novelists of any worth are psychological novelists’,<sup>15</sup> and now we can proceed to the problem of literary rendition of the unconscious in *Pnin*.

### **Pnin’s Digressions into the Unconscious**

The unconscious, if we adopt the Freudian notion of repression as its essential criterion, is not something existing independently of consciousness and serving as its origin but the mode of inner consciousness (which can be either impressional or reproductive) being repressed by the other.<sup>16</sup> Just like in real life, where those who revel too much in reproductive modes of consciousness are deemed impractical, if not eccentric, impressional *Erlebnisse* that link into one another and maintain the linear progression of the story is the norm in narrative literature. Consequently, literary representation of the unconscious in the Nabokovian sense refers to magical texts that summon reproductive *Erlebnisse* like memory, phantasy and hallucination, which requires careful crafting on the part of the enchanter, as will be shown in the following analysis.

Section 5 of *Pnin*’s Chapter Two is an eight-page analepsis that recounts poor Pnin’s ‘love story’ with his exploitative ex-wife Liza Wind which features several evocative scenes, including the following descriptive piece about a gentleman watching Pnin play chess: ‘He had reddish hair cropped close and long pale eyelashes resembling fish moths, and he wore a shabby double-breasted coat, and soon he was clucking under his breath and shaking his head every time the patriarch, after much dignified meditation, lurched forward to make a wild move.’ (*P*, 38) In terms of objective time, this scene is a flashback to more than a decade ago in the timeline, but the *Erlebnis* it delivers is of the same species as our first sight of Pnin. In other words, it may be a digression, but there is nothing unconscious about it. The same sense of asymmetry is more intense in *Speak, Memory*, where Nabokov extracts – like rabbits out of a hat – one episode of his cherished memories after another, only for them to appear as perfectly vivid but also perfectly conscious slices of mind: a reader may see the interior of a train cabin when she encounters ‘our cards, a glass and, on a different plane, the locks of a suitcase [...]

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin, 2011), 174.

<sup>16</sup> Bernet, 213.

reflected in the window'<sup>17</sup>, but it is perceived as a brand-new *Erlebnis*, not recollected as a piece of the past.

For an *Erlebnis* to appear as that of the unconscious, it must be situated against a different mode of consciousness operating as the norm, which is missing in the examples above. To put it specifically, for a memory to appear as memory (or phantasy as phantasy) I must have perceptual *Erlebnisse* that form a horizon,<sup>18</sup> which is relegated to the background of my consciousness, or else I will be dreaming or undergoing a hallucination, which again must be put in contrast to conscious life – either by waking up or finding the *Erlebnisse* odd, that is, incongruent with the horizon, during such periods – so that they appear as dream or hallucination. The horizon, it turns out, is of paramount importance for an *Erlebnis* to count as unconscious, which offers us a key to why the scenes of hallucinations, dreams and memories in *Pnin* are convincing as such: the master magician made it again.

A series of mishaps in Chapter One sees Pnin thrown in 'a damp, green, purplish park, of the formal and funereal type, with the stress laid on sombre rhododendrons, glossy laurels, sprayed shade trees and closely clipped lawns' and entering 'an alley of chestnut and oak' (*P*, 12). In a moment, or more precisely on page 13, Pnin is to experience a heart attack that spans four pages and takes him back to his childhood, but besides being analeptic, this passage also takes the reader to a virtual hallucination. Suffering from a terrible fever, the young Pnin sees by his sickbed 'a four-section screen of polished wood, with pyrographic designs representing a bridle path felted with fallen leaves, a lily pond, an old man hunched up on a bench, and a squirrel holding a reddish object in its front paws' (*P*, 15). The 'old man hunched up on a bench' might be too conspicuous a clue, but the ingenuity of this passage lies in the carefully rendered but eventually vain attempt of young Pnin to try and decipher the pattern of the wallpaper resulting in him lost 'in a meaningless tangle of rhododendron and oak' (*P*, 15). The rhododendron and oak are objects of the impressional present that were given two pages earlier, a temporal distance which places them exactly as part of the perceptual horizon that one does not perceive but leads to protentions of what should happen next. The sense of incongruency between perceptual *Erlebnisse* which makes one ask for what happens next in Pnin's journey to his 'important lecture!' and the equally convincing *Erlebnisse* of Pnin's childhood renders the second group as phantasy for the reader and an alloy of memory and phantasy for Pnin, which, after all, are only two types of reproductive consciousness that bring forth the unconscious in consciousness. Nabokov is well aware of the fact that the magic he casts is 'a process in which something alien or non-present presently appears as such and in which one's own self achieves a distanced and alienated self-awareness and self-representation',<sup>19</sup> and has Pnin observe while regaining his bearings that 'although the witness and victim of these phantasms was tucked up in bed, he was, in accordance with the *twofold nature of his surroundings*, simultaneously seated on a bench in a green and purple park' (*P*, 16, emphasis mine).

If the feeling of hallucination in the long passage above is achieved by subtly inserting the horizon of impressional consciousness into the reproductive *Erlebnis*, then the limpid description of Pnin's dreams hinge on the transition of different horizons. In Chapter Three, after two bottles of wine and a Soviet documentary triggering his tear glands and nostalgia, Pnin plods home in a miniature of the trance we have just analysed:

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin, 2012), 105.

<sup>18</sup> A horizon can be roughly understood as tacit expectations of what may come next.

<sup>19</sup> Bernet, 218.

'The rambler still followed in mind that road as he trudged back to his anachronistic lodgings; was again the youth who had walked through those woods with a fat book under his arm; the road emerged into the romantic, free, beloved radiance of a great field unmowed by time' (*P*, 69). In this scene, two horizons are linked by the road and the heavy book Pnin carries, but no sooner does impressional consciousness take the upper hand when Pnin arrives at his rented room than reproductive consciousness strikes back in the form of a dream:

Komarov, in a sky-blue shirt, bent over the guitar he was tuning. A birthday party was in progress, and calm Stalin cast with a thud his ballot in the election of governmental pallbearers. In flight, in travel ... waves or Waindell ... 'Wonderful!' said Dr Bodo von Falternfels, raising his head from his writing. (*P*, 69)

This bizarre collage of five discordant *Erlebnisse* in four sentences, when lifted out of context, still reads dreamy thanks to their shifting horizons and immediately truncated protentions, but Nabokov has done something more. Chapter Three, when first appeared in the *New Yorker*, bore the title 'Pnin's Day', and true to this name, it is about a Pninian day in the life, where he saw Komarov and Falternfels (two characters in the novel), gave a lecture about Pushkin's death, watched a Soviet documentary, and as pointed out by Gennady Barabtarlo, ignored his own birthday due to the academic routine and calendar confusion.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the empty horizons of the fragments were those fulfilled in the day by impressional *Erlebnisse*, and, depending on the reader's memory and degree of concentration, they can appear as memories (if the reader remembers earlier passages of the chapter and thus believes that what appear are past *Erlebnisse*), phantasies (if the reader does not posit what appear as past *Erlebnisse*) or something in between, a precise recreation of the feeling of dreaming about things that vaguely resemble diurnal events.

Besides passages of dreams and hallucinations where *Pnin's* enchanter meticulously ensures that the unconscious takes the spotlight over from impressional consciousness without establishing a steady horizon of its own and thus transforms into the latter, there are also milder appearances of the unconscious that join the current perceptual horizon as incongruent objects. There are scenes of illusion, which, unlike hallucination, refers to a perceptual act falsified by subsequent *hyle* that results in the substitution of a new object for the old one, not unlike the perceptual counterpart of a slip of the tongue. When waiting for Liza to arrive in a bus, Pnin 'made out Liza waving to him through a window as she and the other passengers started to file out' in a succession of five buses, although eventually she emerged from 'the only Greyhound he had decided would not bring her' (*P*, 42). The *Erlebnisse* of thwarted perception must be familiar to anyone, but experiencing it under Nabokov's spell sheds light in two directions: the power and variety of literary magic, as well as the intentional structure – that every appearance is appearance of something – operative in our consciousness, be it impressional or reproductive.

Another type of less intense emergence of the unconscious is memory or phantasy in the stricted sense, which we are treated with near the end of Chapter One. After eventually making it to his lecture in time, Pnin sees that, in a gentle reverberation of the seizure with which we started this section, '[m]urdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent

<sup>20</sup> Gennady Barabtarlo, 'Pnin', in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E Alexandrov (New York: Routledge, 1995), 601.

people, such as Miss Clyde', the hostess of Pnin's lecture (*P*, 19). The seamless transition between memory and perception within the horizon of impressional consciousness is remarkable, but compared to other examples of digressions we analysed, the predominance of the present renders the *Erlebnisse* of Pnin's Baltic aunt and dead sweetheart less unforgettable... or maybe we should suspend our judgment until it is hooked back into the novel's narrative network.

## Digressions as a Thematic Pattern

Following Leona Toker's penetrating reading of *Pnin* that discovers intricate patterns and even soothsaying of *Look at the Harlequins!*,<sup>21</sup> scholars began to pay attention to the narrative features of this innocent-looking, episodically organized novel, in particular to the narrator's reliability and the relationship between character, narrator and author. Performing an *epoché* regarding the truth value of the story, I want to focus instead on how the storyteller transforms Pnin's lapses into the unconscious, which are by definition digressions, into a theme that mirrors the story's development.

Speaking of development is to conflict squarely with Barabtarlo's claim that Nabokov's novels rely on 'the plotting of thematic lines' instead of 'fabular and character development',<sup>22</sup> but as Irina Rodimtseva's attentive analysis of the 'travel' theme reveals, Pnin has changed so much throughout the book that there are 'two significantly different Pnins', one clownish and inept, the other adept and confident.<sup>23</sup> Whereas Rodimtseva takes the emergence of a new Pnin to be proof against the narrator's reliability,<sup>24</sup> I read it as marks of progress in our hero's constant attempt to make the United States his home, a thread that runs through the apparently independent chapters and integrates them into a coherent story. Strategically planted near the end of the first five chapters, the scenes of hallucinations, memories and dreams, besides being a joy to read, serve as indicators for Pnin's sense of belonging: the perilousness of those *Erlebnisse*, we shall see, is negatively correlated with Pnin's attachment to his immediate milieu in that chapter.

What happens in the impressional present of Chapter One, before Pnin's hallucination and its echo virtually take over the last third of its twenty pages, is how a couple of his meticulously calculated plans backfire. To save twelve minutes in his two-hour trip for a lecture, Pnin opts for a train he discovers in a schedule over the one recommended by his inviter, only to be told by the conductor – after having already boarded the train – that his timetable is out of date and that he has to transfer to a bus at the nearest stop, which means two more hours of traffic time. The very moment his first plan goes bankrupt Pnin is contriving another one for a different matter, namely, how to *both* ensure that he does not leave the lecture he plans to deliver in the coat he is wearing now *and* eliminate the possibility of it being stolen alongside other things in the luggage if he transfers it to the suit he will wear then. The American way of life decides Pnin's suitcase be left at a counter of the bus station without a ticket, and fate decides that the young man in charge leave to drive his wife to the maternity hospital when Pnin returns from a nearby coffee shop to take the bus. Failing to identify his luggage and feeling reassured by the haptic presence of a sheet of paper in his pocket, Pnin boards the bus at

<sup>21</sup> Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 32.

<sup>22</sup> Barabtarlo, 600.

<sup>23</sup> Irina Rodimtseva, 'Free at Last: The Heroic Escape of Timofey Pnin', *Nabokov Studies* 13.1 (2014): 134.

<sup>24</sup> Rodimtseva, 133.

the last minute and realizes, minutes later, that his working hypothesis at the fatal moment on the train was to put the lecture in the pocket of the suit and read during the trip its original content, a manuscript of his student's, which has since then remained in his coat.

Off the bus and on his way to retrieve his luggage, all alone, Pnin has played the role of a modern Don Quixote in his fight against the absent-minded world.<sup>25</sup> Now the scene of seizure strikes, presentifying Pnin's pain. Suddenly the reader realizes that Pnin is more than a laughingstock, but a tender soul suffering alone in a distant world, and when Pnin, having just survived a near-death experience, remembers to inquire into the situation of the returning receptionist's wife, we see not old-fashioned mannerism but human empathy at its best. Pnin's day is saved by a stroke of luck when Bob Horn, the receptionist, offers him a hitchhike on his friends' truck, but the cloud of solitude only thickens in the lecture hall. In what is supposed to be an introduction of Pnin to his audience, he is compressed into the son of Dostoyevsky's family doctor (we have known during the hallucination that Dr. Pavel Pnin once treated Tolstoy) who has travelled a lot both in the US and the USSR (never mentioned in the novel) before the hostess moves on to an unending biography of next week's speaker. Enter Pnin's dead friends and family, who 'lasted only a few heartbeats, with an additional systole here and there' (*P*, 19). Of the four depicted figures, Pnin's 'dead sweetheart' is of a different shade. Pnin's deceased parents are remembered as they listened to him reciting Pushkin on stage in 1912, to his Baltic aunt is attached the information that she once adored a certain actor, but '[n]ext to her, shyly smiling, sleek dark head inclined, gentle brown gaze shining up at Pnin from under velvet eyebrows', the image of his anonymous lover is almost free of a past, only the program she is fanning herself with implying that she belongs to the same horizon as the aunt. The memories dissolve, Pnin is ready to greet his audience, and we have made the acquaintance of 'my poor Pnin' (*Pnin's* working title).

If in Chapter One the almost lethal visions befall Pnin when he is engulfed in utmost loneliness, Chapter Two supports our conjecture from an opposite direction. Still Pnin is blundering around, breaking a radiator and feeding canvas shoes into a washing machine, still he is tortured by others' callousness, but throughout the thirty pages the torrent of the unconscious is kept at bay. When it transpires that the real intent behind a surprising visit of Liza Wind – Pnin's wife during his European stint, who cheated on him repeatedly – at his abode is to request Pnin to send some money to Victor, son of Liza and her second husband (whom Liza also cheats on repeatedly), Pnin is on the verge of another collapse, which is parried off twice. Immediately after Pnin sees Liza off, a thirsty squirrel interrupts his metaphysical meditation with a demand – if not command – to help it turn on the drinking fountain,<sup>26</sup> and back home, Pnin's landlady terminates his famous search for 'viscous and sawdust' (i.e. whisky and soda) and consoles him with a comic strip on the magazine she just bought. It is noteworthy that Pnin's meditation deals not with phantasized/memorized objects but abstract concepts, so even if Pnin went demented as a consequence it is not by way of the unconscious. This abating of reproductive consciousness in Pnin is accompanied by him settling down in the Clements' house. Since Pnin moves into the room vacated by their newly married daughter during the winter break of 1951 (several months after the major breakdown in October 1950), an intimate bond has been strengthened continuously between the couple and Pnin: when Liza inflicts

---

<sup>25</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 271-2.

<sup>26</sup> Toker presents a detailed analysis on the image of squirrel in *Pnin* (*The Mystery of Literary Structures*, especially 27).



her damage in December, Joan Clement already refers to her husband Laurence as ‘Lore’ in an attempt to cheer Pnin up (*P*, 49).

It is confirmed in Chapter Three that among a series of apartments and private houses he has inhabited during his stay at Waindell College,<sup>27</sup> the Clements’ is the first one Pnin really likes (*P*, 53); also confirmed in this chapter is the correlation between Pnin’s mental stability and his attachment to those around him. The serenity Pnin established in Chapter Two continues to grow, as we see him enjoy himself in the college library the whole afternoon, only to explode that very night. In fact, after 43 pages of hibernation, the unconscious already sneaks back at Pnin while he is reading. ‘[F]or no special reason’, we are told, Pnin is hit with an evanescent recollection of his parents upon reading the advertisement of a room for rent in an American house listed in an *émigré* magazine (*P*, 63). Actually, there is a special reason: Joan has been away for more than a week visiting her daughter, and Pnin is informed, moments ago, by a librarian that the chances are that Isabel is to divorce, forcing Pnin to move out. What follows are the boozy hallucination and the montage of a dream we already analysed, which is disrupted by the clamour of Isabel’s homecoming, or Pnin’s ostracism. In the first three chapters, the unconscious knocks Pnin down when he is an absolute outcast, wanes off as he builds up something of a familial bond with others, and resurges upon noticing a threat to the latter. Unlike his first trance, the second one is much more manageable, which is proportional to – if not because of – the fact that as long as Pnin remains at Waindell he has Laurence around as an amicable colleague and Joan as an old friend. The abrupt change in role catches Pnin off guard, but contrary to his childhood, which has been wiped off ‘by one blow of history’ with his friends and family, the lifeworld of Pnin’s present remains intact.

Chapter Four is the only one inaugurated with *Erlebnisse* of phantasy instead of perception, but this does not invalidate our judgment that outbursts of Pnin’s unconscious are always located near the end of an episode: for once, the narrator moves his focus away from Pnin, and the current target is none other than Victor, the boy Liza mentions in Chapter Two. Victor’s phantasy, prescribed by himself as a cure to insomnia, recounts what is to be the exile of King Charles II in *Pale Fire*, although in Victor’s amateurish version the king is referred to as his father (*P*, 71). Never in good terms with his actual father, Victor is fascinated by Liza’s account of Pnin, whose existence is revealed to him only when Liza has already visited her first ex-husband and is considering a second divorce (*P*, 74). To Victor, Pnin’s existence is first imaginary, then epistolary, and finally, when Victor accepts Pnin’s invitation to visit him during the Easter vacation, enters – and, for the reader, returns to – the level of fulfilled perceptual presence. Pnin is clumsy as always during his meeting with Victor, but he is now a remarkably better English speaker, introducing his topics over dinner with accurate wording, scholarly coherence and a considerably less Pninian pronunciation: not that surprising given that Pnin’s English evolved rapidly since he became the ‘poltergeist’ of the Clements, and he stayed on that post for roughly two years (*P*, 30).<sup>28</sup> As Brian Boyd observes, Pnin sees in Victor ‘the son he never had’, and Victor, intuiting ‘behind Pnin’s awkwardness of manner a precious nobility of spirit’, accepts him as his spiritual father,<sup>29</sup> which finds its unconscious manifestation in Pnin’s harmless dream at the end of this chapter, a gentle reply to Victor’s phantasy, where ‘fantastically cloaked, fleeing through great pools of ink under

<sup>27</sup> Assistant Professor Pnin teaches Russian, and Professor Clement teaches, among other courses, the philosophy of gesture.

<sup>28</sup> From December 1950 or January 1951 (during the winter break) to February 1953.

<sup>29</sup> Boyd, 273-4.

a cloud-barred moon from a chimerical palace, and then pacing a desolate strand . . . [Pnin and a friend] waited for some mysterious deliverance to arrive in a throbbing boat from beyond the hopeless sea.' (*P*, 94)

Therefore, the calm, witty, confident and dignified character who emerges in Chapter Five and drives his way into 'a thread of gold in the soft mist where [...] there was simply no saying what miracle might happen' at the end of the novel is not the 'real' Pnin breaking free from a distorted portrait,<sup>30</sup> but our hero plodding forward in the journey of personal growth (in his fifties) and adaptation. It is true that in Chapter Five 'the pain of remembering does not isolate Pnin from his surrounding',<sup>31</sup> but this does not mean that there is a 'real' Pnin who is always able to 'remain in the now, with the now, on the now';<sup>32</sup> quite the contrary, it is thanks to his surroundings in Chapter Five, the Pines and its people, that Pnin finally regains a firm hold of the immediate, impressional reality.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of Chapter Four Pnin hurts his back by falling downstairs in his haste to dispose of a gift he prepared for Victor which he realized would not appeal to the boy. During the bedridden days of rest, he undergoes an epiphany about driving, and in that summer, fourteen years after his arrival in the US, Pnin drives to the first attendance at a biennial gathering of elderly Russian émigrés in a forest villa called the Pines. Here he is fully at home. Surrounded by compatriot friends old and new, he shares his discoveries of Tolstoy, praises Victor's artistic gift, takes a bath in the lake, has a Russian dinner, flaunts his croquet skills and, to conclude his day and his growth we have witnessed up to now, gently unleashes memories of that unnamed ghost who took a seat in his 1950 lecture.

It is about teatime, Pnin sits alone on a bench under the trees to endure a mild heart attack, which may be triggered by his overactive day. A new acquaintance approaches Pnin to gossip about, among other people, her cousin Mira Belochkin, and after the lady leaves for tea, Pnin is again that poor old man sitting on a bench, suffering from heartache and his past. This time, however, the string of *Erlebnisse* is of an essentially different type. We called Pnin's first collapse a trance, because in those *Erlebnisse* the perceptual horizon is almost torn up, with its remnants like rhododendrons and oaks transfigured from objects into patterns on a wallpaper. In the current scene, although the memorized summer night of Pnin's adolescence is delivered to the reader as convincingly, the perceptual horizon remains intact, for one sees 'logical thought put electric bulbs into the kerosene lamps' *as electric bulbs*, and Pnin *imagines* (he doesn't *see*) Mira walk towards him through a garden that overlaps with the perceived one. What's more, unlike the trance during which Pnin is glued to his chair, now he is able to take a walk 'to dissipate the anguish', during which he hears and complains about the youngsters playing jazz (*P*, 116).

Strolling under the pines, Pnin recollects the moments he shared with Mira, whom he was to marry if not for the revolution; but he didn't, and she died in the Buchenwald concentration camp. The narrator reveals why Mira's image in Chapter One is so hollow, even for a ghost:

<sup>30</sup> Rodimtseva, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Rodimtseva, 134.

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (London: Penguin, 2011), 2.

<sup>33</sup> After Chapter Five, Pnin is never overtaken by his past again in the text, not even when an old friend's arrival entails his resignation from Waindell, which goes against Rodimtseva's claim.

Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin. [...] One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this [...] 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. (*P*, 117)

Pnin presumes that 'no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible', yet during his walk he ponders over the cruelty of this very world with total tranquillity (*P*, 117-18). It is claimed that 'only in the sanity of near death' can Pnin tolerate Mira's images 'for a moment', but unlike when he evades Mira by turning his eyes to other members of the spectral audience, his gaze is now fixed on her, including her indeterminate final moments: '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' (*P*, 117).

The solution to such contradictions, I propose, lies in the adverbial 'during the last ten years', which roughly coincides with Pnin's stay at Waindell. When Pnin calls Joan Clement to rent the room, he complains about there being '[t]oo many inquisitive people' in the College Home for Single Instructors, who are exemplified in the same morning by Jack Cockerell, '*one of the greatest, if not the greatest, mimics of Pnin on the campus*' (*P*, 27, emphasis mine). Even Pnin's sole supporter at the administrative level, Herman Hagen, enjoys telling faintly antisemitic jokes (*P*, 140). Adding to this the narrator's comment on their 1952 encounter that 'Pnin had been teaching at Waindell since the mid-forties and never had I seen him look healthier, more prosperous, and more self-assertive', (*P*, 163) we can reach the conclusion that before moving into the Clements' in 1951, Pnin had always been the subject of ridicule we see in Chapter One; he cannot bear memories of Mira because the callousness and cruelty that killed her still surrounds him on the other side of the Atlantic. Still, he remembers her, in his unforgettable digressions, until finally, after the Clements and other friends give him company (the Present), Victor becomes his son-in-soul (the Future), and the Pines allows him gathering with compatriots (the Past), Pnin tames the unconscious, and Nabokov's Don Quixote ends up triumphant in his war against the world.

## Conclusion

What pushes Nabokov away from Freud may well be what motivated our *epoché* in the last section. Eager to join the game of 'guess who the narrator is', which has become a long-standing tradition in Nabokov scholarship, Rodimtseva totally neglects the nuanced portrayal of Pnin's development in the narrator's account as well as how the unconscious functions as a thematic pattern, which to us is intolerable.<sup>34</sup> In the same vein, Nabokov's passion for details as an artist does not allow him to sympathize with a school of thought that puts forward a universal model at the cost of the particular, just as the lepidopterist in him would abhor any model that cannot be proved wrong in principle. It is a pity that Nabokov was born too late to witness the rise to prominence of Freudian psychoanalysis; had it been otherwise, he might have seen in Freud's early papers that before Freud jumps arbitrarily to what Nabokov sees as his spurious conclusions, there is a determined, undaunting psychologist drawn as deeply as the novelist – if not more deeply than him –

<sup>34</sup> Rodimtseva, 131.

into the enigma of the human soul. Therefore, at the very end of our investigation, we want to ask: did not Nabokov commit to Freud what the Waindell people do to Pnin?

## Bibliography

- Alter, Robert. *Nabokov and the Real World: Between Appreciation and Defense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021.
- Barabtarlo, Gennady. 'Pnin'. In *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. Edited by Vladimir E Alexandrov. New York: Routledge, 1995. 599-608.
- Bernet, Rudolf. 'Unconscious Consciousness in Husserl and Freud'. In *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Donn Welton. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003. 199-219.
- Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*. Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2012.
- Liu, Zihao. 'A Phenomenological Interpretation of "Veen's Time"'. *Nabokov Studies* 18.1 (2022-2023): 107-27.
- Ma, Ming-Qian. 'From Blind to Blinding: Saturated Phenomena and the Speculative Lyric of the Invisible in Andrew Joron's Poetry'. *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 12 (2022): 47-58.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*. Edited by Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions*. London: Penguin, 2011.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Transparent Things*. London: Penguin, 2011.
- Oklot, Michal, and Matthew Walker. 'Psychoanalysis'. In *Vladimir Nabokov in Context*. Edited by David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 211-18.
- Rodimtseva, Irina. 'Free at Last: The Heroic Escape of Timofey Pnin'. *Nabokov Studies* 13.1 (2014): 125-39.
- Shute, Jenefer. 'Nabokov and Freud'. In *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. Edited by Vladimir E Alexandrov. New York: Routledge, 1995. 412-20.
- Toker, Leona. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- Welton, Donn. *The Origins of Meaning*. Dordrecht: Springer, 1983.

## Digresiunile de neuitat din *Pnin*: Către o abordare nabokoviană a inconștientului

Prin definirea inconștientului într-o manieră husserliană prin ceea ce apare prin acte reproductive ale conștientului, acest articol își propune să investigheze cum Vladimir Nabokov abordează această temă în *Pnin* din perspectiva unui stilist și aceea a unui povestitor. Nabokov înțelege prin literatură o artă a limbajului care impune experiențe trăite cititorilor săi. Nabokov reușește să reprezinte literar inconștientul, în *Pnin* prin juxtapunerea experiențelor ce conțin așteptări tacite care sunt incogruente unele cu altele. Urmărind scene unde Pnin performează acte reproductive în roman, articolul demonstrează că inconștientul funcționează ca model tematic în *Pnin* și că acesta oglindește progresul protagonistului în bătălia lui idealistă împotriva cruzimii și insensibilității lumii.