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sensuous images of enchantment give way to sinister tones, and irony cuts into self-indulgence.

Consider the long passage that introduces the reader to the almost mythical power of nymphets. Humbert begins by evoking an "enchanted island" in time, surrounded by "mirrory beaches and rosy rocks," and inhabited by maidens between nine and fourteen whose beauty is irresistible. As he proceeds, however, it becomes clear from his own words that this beauty is not only irresistible but also dangerous and reprehensible. Nymphets possess a "fey grace," but their charm is "insidious" and "soul-shattering." To love them, you have to be "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine

(oh, how you have to cringe and hide!)." Here the imagery and even the syntax — the effect of the parenthesis, for example — clearly function as instruments of moral judgment as well as means to "aesthetic bliss": "a bubble of hot poison" is not an invitation to vicarious lechery.

Surely Humbert is not a "good" man of the kind that one editor simplistically required, but his view of himself is hardly justificatory, and his presentation of Lolita refrains from dwelling upon her as a mere object of desire. Indeed, the honesty with which he portrays her adolescence compels him to record his gradual recognition of the monstrosity of what he does to her. Near the end of the novel, having understood that Lolita has abandoned him forever — she has left Quilty and is more or less contentedly married to a very ordinary fellow named Dick — Humbert

recalls an earlier scene, during their affair, when he caught her observing the normal affection between another father and daughter: "I saw Lolita's smile lose all its light . . . It had become gradually clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and bestial cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif."

The story of the love between the man who wrote this and the "waif" he describes cannot be reduced to "the copulation of clichés." Pornography dehumanizes because it incites us to think of men and women as mere instruments of pleasure; *Lolita* steadfastly refuses the reductionism of lust. □

## Sentimentality as Oppression and Deliverance

Vladimir Nabokov: *Pnin*; Doubleday & Co.; New York, 1957.

by Christopher Manion

Timofey Pavlovich Pnin, Assistant Professor of Russian at a college in New England, is as difficult to understand as his name is to pronounce. We come upon him sometime in 1954, on the way to give a lecture in Cremona, only to find that he has boarded the wrong train. Throughout the story we wonder whether Pnin wasn't born into the wrong world, slightly out of tune with himself as life brings him burdens and he brings others a sense of the ridiculous, almost a commonplace spoof of the madcap professor. Waindell College is certainly a caricature of the ivied halls, complete with an artificial lake, portraits of campus contemporaries carrying on with the likes of Aristotle and Pasteur, and a French department head who can't "do the parley-vo" but opines that Chateaubriand was

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a famous chef.

Pnin, an untenured Assistant Professor for nine years, finds life painful: he moves nearly every semester (for "sonic reasons"), spends as much time as possible among the musty old volumes in the library, and gloats in the knowledge that the decreasing number of students in his classes each year will allow him more time for research. Unquestionably out of his element in America, he adapts by learning the English of Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Poe, and thirty-one presidents. Dr. Hagen, his department head, is his sole supporter in a sea of strangers who see him only as a comic figure; Pnin responds with an excessive familiarity with the mother tongue, and we are treated continually to his Pninisms: "There is an old American saying that people who live in glass houses should not kill two birds with one stone." The sadness sinks deeper when we are told from the start that "as a teacher, Pnin was far from being able to compete with those stupendous Russian ladies scattered all over academic America, who, without having any formal training at all, manage,

somehow, by dint of intuition, loquacity, and a kind of maternal bounce, to infuse a magic knowledge of their difficult and beautiful tongue into a group of innocent-eyed students in an atmosphere of Mother Volga songs, red caviar, and tea."

A sad figure indeed. What no one at Waindell knows (and which makes him all the more worthy of our compassion) is that he was once married to a Russian woman in Paris, who married him only because another man rejected her. She left Pnin after the wedding, then reappeared to secure herself safe passage to America with Pnin, her legal spouse, and her lover and next husband, a certain Dr. Wind, on the same ship. Liza — that was her Russian name, though Pnin called her Elise — was a student of Rosetta Stone, "one of the more destructive psychiatrists of the day," and Doctor Wind was so immured in group analysis that he considered even siamese twins as a "group."

*Pnin* is a multilayered novel. At one point, Liza visits Waindell to tell Pnin that her son, Victor, will enter a nearby

boarding school. Pnin, the unreformed dreamer, faces her in his characteristically intense way only to find that she wants money and is still writing bad poetry ("mostly in halting anapest"). But she also tells him that Victor's father, who has left her for South America, considers Pnin the "water father" of the boy. A victim of one oppressively submissive devotion, Pnin is on his way to fall into another emotional trap. His encounter with Victor indicates no special grace, no exception from his norm of awkward speech, uncomfortable conversations, and general absent-mindedness. The youngster has long since adopted a condescending attitude towards his parents and was distinctly unsuited to the soccer ball and Zane Grey novel which Pnin had provided as gifts. But an unexpected, unspoken harmony of their spirits results, a retreat for all sorrows to come.

A housewarming party is given at Pnin's new house. The most celebrated arrival is not that of a guest, but of a gift: "It has come enclosed in a box within another box inside a third one, and wrapped up in an extravagant mass of excelsior and paper that had spread all over the kitchen like a carnival storm. The bowl that emerged was one of those gifts whose first impact produced in the recipient's mind a colored image, a blazened blur, reflecting with such emblematic force the sweet nature of the donor that the tangible attributes of the thing are dissolved, as it were, in this pure inner blaze, but suddenly and forever leap into brilliant being when praised by an outsider to whom the true glory of the object is unknown."

And the bowl steals the show. Indeed, the affair is otherwise a total failure: the inane academic arguments combine with the steadily increasing level of intoxication. Since few of them like Pnin anyway, and know him as little as they like him, it seems they have little to do after bestowing superlatives upon the beauty of the punch bowl but drink, get tired, argue, and leave, all while Pnin congratulates himself on his resounding success. In

fact, it is his only friend, Dr. Hagen, sober enough to overhear that Pnin plans to buy the house, who must break the news to Pnin about his moving on to another college. Thus, Pnin will have no more supporters with which to secure yet another year of untenured service at Waindell, and call a house a home, the first he would have owned in his life.

Poor Pnin: he thought that he would find a home at Waindell, and that, perhaps, "not next year, but example given, at hundredth anniversary of Liberation of Serfs—Waindell will make me Associate." He does not understand such basics of the academic reality that if he speaks French fluently, this disqualifies him from the ranks of potential French teachers. But he cleans up after the party, almost breaks his symbolic punch bowl, rescues it nevertheless from wreckage, and soon thereafter, aching with bruised sensitivities, goes ahead with sad preparations for leaving Waindell.

The reader cannot help but wonder: Why is Pnin so steadfast in his ways? In all the superficial aspects he has tried to be an all-American: he indulges in sun-lamps, his false teeth are a "mouthful of America," and he learns to drive. But for a long time after learning to maneuver the car, "Pnin had been totally unable to combine perceptually the car he was driving in his mind and the car he was driving on the road." This might be said of his life as well. The real Liza might not be worthy of such lifelong devotion, manipulative, mean creature that she is. Pnin could easily rationalize himself into modernity by courting the conveniently available graduate student, Betty Bliss, and divesting himself of his debasing fondness for Liza. His reasons he keeps to himself (he steadfastly opposes the whole notion of psychiatry, to which Liza and Wind have dedicated their careers: "It is nothing but a kind of microcosm of

communism . . . why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?"). He prefers to carry his burdens with him, like the cross which he has worn around his neck since childhood. "Perhaps I would not mind losing it," he explains to his closest friend. "As you know, I wear it merely from sentimental reasons. And the sentiment is becoming burdensome. After all, there is too much of the physical about this attempt to keep a particle of one's childhood in contact with one's breastbone."

But these burdens Pnin chooses to bear, and Nabokov does not insist that they be shed. In fact, he seems to be full of great respect for the privacy of Pnin, and for his loyalty to the devotions which bind him, however foolishly, to images of the past. Pnin is allowed to suffer the tension between human frailty and the reality of unrequited love, and to respond to it according to the slavish instincts of submission as conquest. He never becomes the pawn of a diatribe on the politics of Russians in exile, or the paltry politics of campuses in the repressive McCarthy era. The reality we see emerges in a much richer tone, enveloping Pnin with the many dimensions of the demands of existence without opting for a simple, unidimensional resolution of his "problem." He is not a tragic figure; if that term can be applied to anyone at all, it is Liza who must be regarded as the shallow, demeaned, and worn victim of her modern *hubris*. Pnin fights to preserve the precarious balance between the existential darkness and the iridescent bowl which carries the sum of his loves, as it lies stuffed with all his other belongings in the back of Pnin's car—in which we see him for the last time, with his cross around his neck and his car sandwiched between two beer trucks on the road out of town. □

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# The Value of Art and Order

Vladimir Nabokov: *Pale Fire*; G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York, 1962.

by John Glass, Jr.

To call *Pale Fire* a poetic novel would be to indulge in a kind of Nabokovian jest: rather than a poetic novel, it is a novel which includes a poem. The poem, however, is only one element, for among other things *Pale Fire* is an extended academic joke depending for its effect upon the discrepancy between the 499½ couplets by John Francis Shade and the commentary by the editor, Shade's erstwhile neighbor and colleague at Wordsmith University, Charles Kinbote. Shade's poem, left apparently only one line short of completion by the poet's untimely death, is clearly autobiographical, concerned especially with the suicide of the poet's only daughter and with metaphysical speculations which follow that event and Shade's own heart attack. The poem's couplets, composed by a man who earlier had written a book on Alexander Pope, are carefully wrought and their meaning is seldom other than clear—or so it seems until the reader comes to Kinbote's commentary. Insisting that without his comments Shade's poem has "no human reality at all," Kinbote proceeds to explain that "Pale Fire"—the title is from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, although Kinbote is unable to locate the source—actually conveys the fairy-tale history of Charles the Beloved, last King of Zembla, who was imprisoned by revolutionaries but escaped to America where he became a professor of Zemblan literature and—yes—editor of the last and greatest poem of the late John Shade. Indeed, poor Shade was shot and killed, Kinbote insists, by an inept Zemblan assassin who really was intent upon murdering the unfortunate Charles. The joke, one thinks, is amusing, if perhaps a trifle over long.

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The matter, however, is more complex than it appears, and the reader, at first rather comfortably disentangling the elements of what he takes to be reality from the fantasy of Kinbote's Foreword and Commentary, may begin to wonder whom the joke is on. Students in introductory courses in literature are regularly warned to beware of first-person narrators; one must, they are told, evaluate not only the story but also the reliability of the narrator, on whom after all the reader is dependent for all he knows of the story. Edgar Allan Poe, whose work Nabokov admired, notoriously creates such problems. "Nervous," begins one of Poe's narrators, "very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am! but why will you say that I am mad?" The words cast doubt over all that follows, and more than one perplexed freshman has finally been moved to ask how one can be sure that a murder really does occur in "The Tell-Tale Heart." An unbalanced narrator—and Charles Kinbote is at least that—leaves the reader off balance and raises serious questions about the nature of the "reality" conveyed in the fiction.

According to what the reader is told is the official report of the matter, John Shade was killed by an escaped lunatic named Jack Grey, who mistook Shade for the judge who had had Grey committed. Kinbote's more elaborate theory, on the other hand, makes Shade's death the work of one Jakob Gradus, a member of a Zemblan revolutionary group called the Shadows, and Kinbote carefully works out correspondences between the composition of "Pale Fire" and the approach of Gradus, even discovering—or fabricating—an allusion to Gradus in what Kinbote claims is a variant discarded by Shade. The possibility that Kinbote in fact composed the lines in which he discovers the reference to Gradus raises a still more unsettling question: If Gradus and the whole story of Charles the Beloved of Zembla are products of the

imagination of Kinbote, may not Shade and "Pale Fire" also be? The question is less easy to answer than one might suppose. Nabokov has had a good deal of fun with shadows, shades, and reflections, with the mingling of illusion and reality.

The academic joke and the puzzling combination of reality and fantasy serve to enhance rather than diminish the impact of the novel, forcing the reader to acknowledge finally that disentangling the real from the fictional is not the object of the game, that after all *Pale Fire* is a novel, that Gradus, Grey, Shade, Kinbote, and "Pale Fire" are all products of the imagination of Vladimir Nabokov. That is not to say, however, that there is no object to the game. What Nabokov offers is an opposition not between illusion and reality but between chaos and order. Gradus-Grey, whether a Shadow assassin from Zembla or an escaped maniac, is an embodiment of chaotic and destructive forces, even, in Kinbote's presentation, suffering acute internal disorder himself during the last stages of his quest. Shade, on the other hand, has given to his experiences as child and man, husband and father, scholar and poet, the clearly defined pattern and order of his poem, and it is hardly irrelevant that Nabokov chose to cast that poem in so restrictive a form as the heroic couplet.

Between these extremes of chaos and order stands the comic and pathetic figure of Charles Kinbote, homosexual, pedant, and madman. Kinbote's efforts to establish a connection between Shade's poem and the career of King Charles of Zembla represent an undertaking not altogether unlike the composition of the poem itself, an attempt to give form and the permanence of art to chaotic experience. The result may be absurd, but the effort is not contemptible.

Kinbote's character is, of course, central to the novel, and the choice of Kinbote as narrator creates difficulties

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