"The Rapture of Endless Approximation":
The Role of the Narrator in *Pnin*

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The apparently genial, reliable, and omniscient narrator who opens Nabokov’s *Pnin* lulls the unwary reader into sharing his attitude of amused but contemptuous indulgence towards the novel’s protagonist, Timofey Pnin. As the novel progresses, this disembodied narrator gradually emerges as a distinctly limited personality, a brilliant, condescending writer who uses Pnin’s inelegant spontaneity to set off the stylish sophistication of his own life and art. When the reader begins to suspect that Pnin’s story is being unfairly manipulated, the novel’s dramatic center shifts: what first appears the simple tale of a befuddled Russian expatriate becomes a characteristically Nabokovian meditation on the process of composing fictions and on the curious relationship between an artist and his material. The narrator masquerades as objective omniscience, but turns out to be all too exuberant an artificer. His maneuvers remind us of the way we all experience ourselves as trustworthy omniscient narrators, but perpetually rediscover that we are in fact limited, subjective, and unreliable. But the novel does much more than that. As readers of the novel struggle to sort out the “truth” and “falsity” of the narrator’s presentation, the “reality” and “deception,” they are forced to experience directly, *within* their complex endeavors, both the limits and the possibilities of fiction: what it can say and what it cannot. Confronting the boundaries of what fiction can depict, readers see more intensely the splendor of what it can imply. The novel traps the truth of itself in the network of its own paradoxes.¹

At first, the narrator purports to tell us “the truth” about Pnin. But his impositions of order show us his pervasive artifice and suggest something of its motivation. Then, the author appears to be giving us a “realistic” portrait of the narrator spinning his artificial tales about Pnin. The ending of the novel suggests that this “realistic” portrait is equally an artifice and that it could be extended in a limitless series of artificial constructs. While the author, the reader, and the subject may escape from this construct, it is the fate of the narrator to remain trapped.

From the novel’s outset, the narrative perspective on Pnin is mixed in a way that invites the reader to misunderstand or to oversimplify the narrator’s
attitude towards his subject. The novel begins by presenting itself as an admiring and affectionate biography. But in the narrator's characteristic style, words that imply praise are undermined by words implying ridicule. Pnin is introduced with an inappropriate master-of-ceremonies flair: "The elderly passenger sitting on a north-window side of that inexorably moving railway coach . . . was none other than Professor Timofey Pnin." We are told that 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," but such features are impressive only comically. Not until the novel's final chapter can the reader construct a rationale for this consistent mingling of tribute and mockery. There the narrator assumes a distinct identity as a character and discloses his past relationship with Pnin. While the two have had brief encounters from boyhood on, the crucial link between them is the brief affair the narrator had with Liza Bogolepov before she married Pnin. To her intense passion for him the narrator responded with a mild attraction based on her looks and availability, dismissing with easy contempt her intellectual aspirations and her ardent temperament. Against his cool detachment is set the whole-hearted devotion Pnin shows in telling Liza, "I offer you everything I have, to the last blood corpuscle, to the last tear, everything" (183). Because Liza never cared for Pnin and agreed to marry him only after her longing for the narrator had driven her to near-suicide, such great love comes to look more pathetic than noble, and it is the pathetic element that the narrator seizes on. When it becomes clear that, despite his admiration for her "sapphire glance," the narrator is incapable of responding to Liza with Pnin's sense of enchantment and finds her only "one of those women who combine healthy good looks with hysterical sloppiness" (182), the reader starts to suspect that his emphasis in describing Pnin is self-serving. 

He avoids recognizing Pnin's superior capacity for love and trustful generosity by dismissing the love as infatuation and the generosity as credulity.

It is not simply that the narrator feels for Pnin the contempt a lover feels for his unsuccessful rival. Rather, it is that one style of responsiveness is being set against another. The entire novel can be seen as the narrator's attempt to show how far his own fastidious elegance should be preferred to the disarray of his protagonist's thoughts and feelings. Increasingly, this contest seems to be one which the narrator has too much stake in winning. Pnin's incompetence is too often reasserted. We are told that "his life was a constant war with insensate objects that fell apart, or attacked him, or refused to function, or viciously got themselves lost as soon as they entered the sphere of his existence" (13). His elaborate research into train schedules leads him to take the wrong train; his optimistic trust in a recommended short-cut loses him in an enormous and for a long time insoluble maze of forest roads.

The narrator's way of recounting Pnin's history often hints at a principle of order that eludes the befuddled protagonist. There are curious correspondences between his wanderings on forest roads and the gropings of ant on a balustrade:
His various indecisions and gropings took those bizarre visual forms that an observer on the lookout tower might have followed with a compassionate eye; but there was no living creature in that forlorn and listless upper region except for an ant who had his own troubles, having, after hours of inept perseverance, somehow reached the upper platform and the balustrade (his autostrada) and was getting all bothered and baffled much in the same way as that preposterous toy car progressing below. The wind had subsided. Under the pale sky the sea of tree tops seemed to harbor no life. Presently, however, a gun shot popped, and a twig leaped into the sky. . . . Another minute passed, and then everything happened at once: the ant found an upright beam leading to the roof of the tower and started to ascend it with renewed zest; the sun appeared; and Pnin, at the height of hopelessness, found himself on a paved road with a rusty but still glistening sign directing wayfarers "To the Pines." (115)

There is a puzzling abundance of extraneous detail in this passage. All of it asserts the narrator's power over his material. The observer on the tower is only a narrative hypothesis, a roundabout assertion that the narrator can invent whatever perspective he pleases. The sly analogy between Pnin and the ant intensifies the note of mockery in the description of Pnin's gropings. And the suspiciously neat correlation of obviously unrelated events—breeze, gunshot, emergent sun, discovered road sign—suggests the skillful orchestrations of a film director or a novelist, not the collisions of unadulterated experience. The narrator's role as reporter is supplanted by his role as artificer who can correlate the phases of Pnin's journey with whatever he likes and direct its outcome to a success that may be illusory or even irrelevant—the ant, after all, continues to pursue a futile course. What, then, will happen to Pnin? While Pnin can barely manage even simple excursions, the narrator parades an ability, so it seems, to manage absolutely everything.3

There are occasional moments when Pnin senses the possibility of a governing design in his life, but they quickly fade. When, dazed by the faltering of his erratic heart, Pnin confuses a park he is sitting in with the rhododendron-and-oak wallpaper of a childhood sickroom, his inability to merge real landscape perfectly with remembered pattern embodies all frustrated intelligence attempting coherent interpretations of experience. The moment raises the possibility of an order beyond the grasp of ordinary minds, the achievement of a supreme deity—or the author of a novel. Pnin struggles feverishly to puzzle out the pattern of recurrences in the leaves and flowers because he is convinced that "if the evil designer—the destroyer of minds, the friend of fever—had concealed the key of the pattern with such monstrous care, that key must be as precious as life itself" (23). His fleeting intuition of significant design parallels the sensation all of us occasionally have of being on the brink of a cosmic understanding that somehow does not materialize. What is metaphysical speculation for us, however, is for Pnin an ironically unknowable certainty. If the narrator is artificer rather than reporter, Pnin's universe does have an ordering principle, one that will remain forever beyond
his grasp, not out of cosmic mysteriousness but out of malice.

The novel raises the dizzying questions Nabokov so enjoys about the nature of narrative perspective. The narrator, as he straddles both roles, the limited and the omniscient, suggests how the distinction may come to be illusory. Even omniscient narrators have limited voices, and all narrators are created by authors omniscient in their fictive worlds, limited in their “actual” ones. In blending the two conventions so shiftily, Nabokov leads his readers to contemplate the way all fiction is elegant deception. The act of writing novels becomes an implicit paradigm for the riddle of consciousness—the impossibility of knowing with any certainty where the boundary between observed experience and created interpretation falls. 4

The narrator himself seems quite oblivious of the metaphysical musings he calls forth. He is too delighted by his aesthetic prowess to be distracted by its potential ambiguities. Whenever he belittles Pnin, he indirectly celebrates himself. He constructs his story to show that in every aspect of imaginative power on which an artist would pride himself, Pnin is clumsy and inept, while he himself is skilled. Although Pnin is abundantly capable of aesthetic delight, its manifestations are comic: “On gadgets he doted with a kind of dazed, superstitious delight. Electric devices enchanted him. Plastics swept him off his feet” (13-14). When Pnin subjects the magic of technology to his own creative direction, he achieves ludicrous results. In his "passionate intrigue" with a washing machine,

One Sunday . . . he could not resist, out of sheer scientific curiosity, giving the mighty machine a pair of rubber-soled canvas shoes stained with clay and chlorophyll to play with; the shoes tramped away with a dreadful arhythmic sound, like an army going over a bridge, and came back without their soles. (40)

Whatever the Faustian overtones here, the passionate aspiration in which souls are lost usually comes in more glamorous guise.

Against Pnin’s exuberant bumbling is set the narrator’s insistence on aesthetic finesse. His narrative is composed of exquisite patterns of imagery that become more intricately related as the novel progresses: Pnin’s entire history is colored with green and silver, emerald and lilac, tiny recapitations of the teasing oak-and-rhododendron wallpaper, but also continuing touches of visual loveliness. Water images link easily with the transparency of glass and the reflections of mirrors, with hues of aquamarine and sapphire, to fuse the central themes of Pnin’s life (Liza’s blue eyes, Victor’s glass bowl) into a jeweled radiance of aesthetic coherence. 5 Even the smallest details become banners of fictive supremacy. The pines that separate Cook’s Castle from the road are “curiously authentic-looking” because they really exist only in the words of the narrator. The “bright trickle” of red ink that leads to the discovery of the suicidal Liza shows the narrator fairly crowing with aesthetic complacency, for the artificial image (ink that suggests blood)
to feeling painful Belochkin an material dons the drugged listeners drunk and directness counterpoint, ways rator and signification; cess a aesthetic page celebrates used mysterious of fact memories out points a Russian death, conscience, ly, Pnin's death, an incertitudes of art creates an imperfect world, it offers an escape from the unsettling and mysterious incertitudes of cosmic design by replacing metaphysical doubt with aesthetic certainty. At the same time, it transforms the pain of “real” experience into a fictive idea, which has only imaginative actuality. In a process of aesthetic deflection, life's immediacies become patterns of shapely signification; the perceiving intelligence is insulated against the joys, sorrows, and perplexities of human experience. It is this insulation that allows the narrator to crown a painful memory with his easy emblem. Nabokov uses the narrator in Pnin to explore the problem of the overly arrogant artist, too infatuated with the magic of his art to be fully responsive to life. Pnin's own ways of creating order, though they amuse the narrator, define, in a critical counterpoint, the shortcomings of the narrator's grand designs.

Pnin's intellectual activities, like the narrator's, insulate him against the directness of experience, but not through formal elegance or interpretive richness. When he teaches, he loses himself in “unforgettable digressions” and subtleties of humor, which entirely escape his students: “Pnin would get drunk on his private wines as he produced sample after sample of what his listeners politely surmised was Russian humor” (12). “A happy, footnote-drugged maniac,” he turns away from the conclusion of his Petite Histoire of Russian culture, feeling that the end of his work “was to be shunned as the doom of everything that determined the rapture of endless approximation” (143). Unlike a successful artist, Pnin loses himself in detail and abandons the effort to impose a final design, seeming more at the mercy of his material than master of it. Yet there is in the imperfection of Pnin's creations an emotional intensity that the narrator of the novel lacks.

The narrator's insensitivity is clearest when he ends the tale of Mira Belochkin with the elegant silhouette, for Pnin's own memory of Mira is so painful that only his experience of a “frightening cardiac sensation,” “an awful feeling of sinking and melting into one's physical surroundings,” permits him to think of her senseless death in an extermination camp:

Only in the detachment of an incurable complaint, in the sanity of near death, could one cope with this for a moment. In order to exist rational-ly, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin . . . because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful,
fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens
and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an ex-
termination 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. (134-35)

Pnin's immersion in research, his delighted absorption in literature, in gadgetry,
and idiosyncratic humor, his tendency to "Pninize" his offices and dwellings
are all, it becomes clear, ways of creating barriers against the lonely confu-
sion of exile, the cruel betrayals of the sublimely selfish Liza, the anguish
of living in a world that can sanction the casual destruction of Mira's sen-
sitive beauty. Although Pnin's intellectual activities protect by creating
obliviousness rather than illumination, they give him a dignified integrity,
which maintains him in a puzzling and destructive world.

The novel criticizes the narrator's emotional poverty and the way his detach-
ment limits the quality of his artistic imagination. Even when Pnin is only
mourning his lost teeth, his vitality of feeling enlarges his experience and en-
dows it with imaginative life:

It surprised him to realize how fond he had been of his teeth. His tongue,
a fat sleek seal, used to flop and slide so happily among the familiar rocks,
checking the contours of a battered but still secure kingdom, plunging
from cave to cove, climbing this jag, nuzzling that notch, finding a shred
of sweet seaweed in the same old cleft; but now not a landmark remained,
and all there existed was a great dark wound, a terra incognita of gums
which dread and disgust forbade one to investigate. (38)

But is this Pnin imagining himself, or the narrator imagining Pnin? In the
process of moving toward an indirect free style of recreating his character's
thoughts, has the narrator lost himself in Pnin's imaginative world, or is it
he who graciously bestows upon his protagonist all of this imaginative splen-
dor? The ambiguity has the effect of conveying both Pnin and the narrator
at once. The description has the exaggerated robustness, the rotund animal
vigor bordering on clumsiness the narrator habitually uses to laugh at Pnin.
Yet there is in the description such a rich energy of feeling and movement,
such naive and touching willingness to inhabit the metaphor fully that Pnin's
own expressive vitality seems present as well. When the narrator speaks
primarily in his own person, as he does in the novel's final chapter, his style
becomes flat and reductive. The curious fusion of narrator and subject created
here is like a pair of semi-transparent images, one superimposed upon the
other, as Nabokov's subtle magic conveys at once Pnin's vitality and the nar-
rator's limitations. It is something like the way the Duchess of Ferrara's sweet
innocence of spirit shines through the scornful account of her life given by
Browning's Duke. But the manipulations of style are subtler here.8

While Pnin's imagination, rejoicing in playful animal vigor, is richly in-
volved in sensations of touch and motion, the narrator prefers, in his aesthetic
asides, the visually exquisite. He goes out of his way to notice when "an elliptic flock of pigeons, in circular volitation, soaring gray, flapping white, and then gray again, wheeled across the limpid, pale sky, above the College Library" (73). Characteristically, his vocabulary pushes this delicate perception into abstract patterns of conceptualization. What captures the narrator's attention is nearly always visual, showing his preference for the sense that seems most detached from its environment. And the colors that attract him are cool—gray, white, silver, blue.

There is, though, in this novel another artist at least as fastidious as the narrator—Liza's son Victor. Substantial space is given to descriptions of Victor's approach to art, again creating a critical counterpoint for the narrator's performance. Victor, the conqueror, is a painter who delights in the perfection of form ("At two, Victor... made his circles perfectly round and perfectly closed" [89]). He is exhilarated by his instructor's description of colors that pass beyond "ordinary reality," his contention that:

The order of the solar spectrum is not a closed circle but a spiral of tints from cadmium red and oranges... to cobalt blues and violets, at which point the sequence... passes into another spiral, which... goes on to Cinderella shades transcending human perception. (96)

Delighted by formal completeness, he is also drawn to what cannot be fully perceived or articulated: the ineffable.

The two longest passages on Victor's approach describe something we would normally object to calling art. Too fortuitous, we might say; not enough sign of the artist's shaping intention. (The implicit reader becomes for the moment an indignant bourgeois.) His instructor, Lake, imagines how, in a hypothetical painting, Victor might present a motor car:

Now break the body of the car into separate curves and panels; then put it together in terms of reflections. These will be different for each part: the top will display inverted trees with blurred branches growing like roots into a washily photographed sky, with a whalelike building swimming by—an architectural afterthought... a remarkable desert view, a distended horizon, with a remote house here and a lone tree there, will stretch along the bumper. (97)

As Nabokov wickedly turns a traditional view of art topsy-turvy, Lake calls this "mimetic and integrative process" a "necessary 'naturalization' of man-made things." Still, the more important movement here remains the reverse. Nature is being shaped by human artifice both on the car, which curves its images, and in the imagination, which makes pictures out of what the car reflects. In his active quest for such a car, Victor shows a better understanding of the process. His imaginings include the necessary presence of the artist, reflected in a bit of "chrome plating" like "that very special and very magical
small convex mirror” Van Eyck and Memling would use to show their own presence in their paintings. What emerges in the process of reflection is a manipulated truth, one whose presence depends on the eye—and the imagination—of the beholder.

In the next description of Victor’s activities, art becomes a mirror of its own artifice. At first, the description seems a simple presentation of Victor’s delight in the magic of transformation:

He placed various objects in turn—an apple, a pencil, a chess pawn, a comb—behind a glass of water and peered through it at each studiously: the red apple became a clear-cut red band bounded by a straight horizon, half a glass of Red Sea, Arabia Felix. The short pencil, if held obliquely, curved like a stylized snake, but if held vertically became monstrously fat—almost pyramidal. The black pawn, if moved to and fro, divided into a couple of black ants. The comb, stood on end, resulted in the glass’s seeming to fill with beautifully striped liquid, a zebra cocktail. (98-99)

The magic of his experiments is both playful and enchanting, with no element of unkindness or personal malice to disfigure it. His art has a purity of spirit that the narrator’s art lacks.

Victor’s choice of objects is not, however, as random as it looks. The design that emerges bears not only his imprint, but that of the author. The zebra cocktail anticipates Pnin’s later quip, when offering grenadine-and-brandy, that he is serving flamingo tails. The pair of black ants anticipates the comparison between the ant ascending the tower and a Pnin lost on forest roads, reminding the reader that Pnin is indeed a pawn. The earlier part of this description is more mischievous still, if we remember that Eric and Liza Wind are always trying to understand their son in Freudian terms, searching in vain for traces of his sublimated sexuality and incestuous passion. The “glass of Red Sea, Arabia Felix” and the pyramidal pencil both suggest a Biblical world in which the “red apple” is forbidden fruit and the snake a serpent of sexual temptation. There is a wealth of Edenic and possibly Oedipal suggestivity, but without the salacious murk of the Winds’ reductive theories. This is one of the rare moments in the novel when the author’s pleasure in skillful design is consonant with the narrator’s. There is no reason to assume that Victor is aware of these echoes of the larger work, but such awareness is characteristic of both narrator and author. These flashes of artifice assert the inescapable presence of the artist in the work. Unlike the author, however, the narrator has no sense of the responsibility for self-awareness entailed by that presence.

Victor offers a corrective to the narrator’s approach, but not an ideal. His drawings have “no subhuman significance whatever.” The phrase rebukes all those too ready to find glib psychological interpretations for works of art, but it remains true that Victor deals only with visual surfaces, not psychic depths. His art is prepubescent, using only one of these two levels of interpretation. He evades the question, so important to this novel, of how to imply psychic depths without invading them. He does not attempt the kind of
territory explored by the author of *Invitation to a Beheading*, or *Lolita*, or *Pnin*. The narrator does enter that territory, but his deficiencies show that only the artist capable of criticizing the assumptions on which his artistry rests is worthy of such subjects. Because the narrator of *Pnin* cannot criticize the limits of his own imagination, his own capacity for artifice, he is doomed to remain forever trapped inside artificial patterns, whether his own or someone else's—Jack Cockerell's, for example.

The narrator of *Pnin* resists any acknowledgement of the limitations that distinguish fiction from "real life." He wishes to subject everything to the power an author possesses over the world of his fiction. In a moment of artistic hubris, he goes out of his way to call attention to his ability to appreciate an image none of his characters is permitted to see: "Presently all were asleep again. It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags" (110). 9 Nobody sees it, of course, except the narrator, who delights in his ability to bestow upon or withhold from his characters his visions of design. Even so, his celebration of the display that he alone may see is marred by a note of frustration: the word "illegible" suggests that, like Pnin in the park, the narrator senses a possibility of meaning he cannot fully grasp. To the reader the zigzags are legible enough. They are markings of the author's hand, writing the story the narrator has not read, the story of his own narrative position in the novel. The narrator is so addicted to the controlling power an artist claims that even the disappearance of an "offending black atom" removed from his eye by Pnin's father forty years earlier still disturbs him: "I wonder where that speck is now? The dull, mad fact is that it does exist somewhere" (176). It is dull and mad because he has not placed it in a pattern of meaning, and, worse, it has eluded him.

In a sly maneuver during the novel's closing pages Nabokov chastises the narrator by threatening to treat him to a dose of his own narrative imperiousness. He obliges the narrator to accept the hospitality of Jack Cockerell, an English professor famous at Waindell for his imitations of Pnin. The narrator must sit through an entire evening of imitations that echo and distort his own account of Pnin. The novel's final sentence, which features the one mishap the narrator implied did not take place when Pnin set forth to lecture at Cremona, dislodges the narrator from his position of authority and makes the reader wonder whether he will end up jumping through Cockerell's narrative hoops.10

This final narrative twist makes it impossible to locate *Pnin's* center of gravity in any "story" it tells. The center lies rather in the narrative structure as a whole. When the narrator describes Pnin's experiences and feelings, there is an astonishing mixture of tones and effects. The lyrical intensity of his joys and sorrows shines through the words, but with a wry twist of amusement at their absurdity and pathos. While this mixture defines the narrator's shortcomings, it also recreates the complexity of response life itself demands. It
is hard for a self-conscious intellect to perceive our splendor without perceiving our possible absurdity. Like Pnin, we are all both ridiculous and sublime. We cannot fully grasp or articulate the intensity and the meaning of our experience, nor can we apprehend all the perspectives from which it might be seen. Nabokov's art acknowledges life's tragedies and splendors by making us conscious of how it cannot recreate them. It offers us parallel intensities, verbal and imaginative. Through these intensities the reader comes to see that life is best honored when the artist insists that it is beyond articulation and that aesthetic beauty is beauty of its own, even while it remains true that art illuminates our ways of caring about life and life gives depths of meaning to the substance of art. In Pnin, Nabokov creates an aesthetic shimmer that holds the relation between life and art in tension. The manipulations of narrative perspective ensure that the reader, who longs for tidy resolution, will be drawn into feeling this tension's full force, in the "rapture of endless approximation."12

At the novel's end, Pnin eludes the narrator, but not the author with his subtle awareness of fiction's boundaries. Pnin's sedan vanishes up a "shining road, which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen" (191). This is the landscape of fairyland: of magic, of imagination, of fiction. It is in this realm that concrete image ("hill after hill") can create abstract wonder ("beauty") through the distance of aesthetic order. Because he understands this distance so well, the author can remain a magician in this realm. Meanwhile, the narrator must turn to the doom he deserves: "a British breakfast of depressing kidney and fish" served by the mediocre Cockerell.

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NOTES

1. Five critical discussions especially illuminate the depth and seriousness of Pnin:
attention to the paradox that the sympathy the reader feels for Pnin depends on the narrator's aggressive efforts to voice Pnin's private joys and sorrows, while Carroll notes that the sympathetic attention thus engaged represents intrusion not just by the narrator, but by author and reader as well. Bader argues that *Pnin* plays life against art to show how resistant life is to aesthetic patterning.

2. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1975), p. 7. All subsequent references will be to this edition of the book. There is usually a difference of only one or two pages between this hardcover edition and the paperback *Pnin* published by Avon (New York, 1969), which may be more widely available at the present time.

3. Grams pp. 360-61, discusses the way apparent biography keeps turning into manifest fiction in *Pnin*.

4. See Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 13: "The relationship of a work of fiction to the world of immediate experience is always a figurative one, in much the same way that a model of the atom or of the universe is only a structural analogy. Such models, and the various data of our experience which they help us to organize, are as close as we ever come to grasping the essence of reality."

5. Nicol discusses the importance of these images in establishing Pnin as the hero of a Cinderella tale of transfiguration.

6. Grams, p. 365, denounces this imposed silhouette as an invasion of Pnin's privacy.

7. Nabokov expresses a similar awareness in personal terms when discussing the fate of Osip Mandelstam: "One of the saddest cases is perhaps that of Osip Mandelstam—a wonderful poet, the greatest poet among those trying to survive in Russia under the Soviets—whom that brutal and imbecile administration persecuted and finally drove to death in a remote concentration camp. . . . And when I read Mandelstam's poems composed under the accursed rule of those beasts, I feel a kind of helpless shame, being so free to live and think and write and speak in the free part of the world" in *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw Hill International, Inc., 1973), p. 58.

8. Carroll comments, pp. 205-06, that "we *do* believe, with Pnin, that the narrator is 'dreadful.' The suffering and pain in Pnin's life have been made so powerful, so convincing, so 'real' that we resent the narrator's intrusion. Vertigo sets in again when we remind ourselves that the narrator is also a fiction, that Pnin is a fiction, and that our feelings against the narrator's inventions are in a way a condemnation of Nabokov's similar power of invention, the power which has convinced us of the 'reality' of these figures in the first place."

9. As Grams observes, the entire conclusion of this fourth chapter is "almost parodically omniscient" (369).

10. See Grams's discussion of "the ethics of the author-character relationship" (362, 367) and Moody's comments on the "authorial administration of justice" that takes place at the novel's end (82).
11. See Pifer: "Keenly aware of the transgressions all human beings commit against each other as they pursue, and try to realize, their solipsistic dreams and desires, Nabokov himself was no solipsist. The very form of his fiction illustrates that the artist's private world is not coterminous with ours; he does not seek to extend his personal dominion beyond the printed page (170)."

12. Carroll describes this process of making the reader a kind of shadow-author who re-creates and is implicated in the fictional process: "Nabokov has shown us what it is like to live in his world, and simultaneously reminded us of our position in our own. . . . in virtually all of Nabokov's fiction—we are required to become 'artists ourselves,' to assign and to be assigned meaning (215-16)."