A Speck of Coal Dust: Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin and the Possibility of Translation

Stephen Casmier

Nabokov Studies, Volume 8, 2004, pp. 71-86 (Article)

Published by International Vladimir Nabokov Society and Davidson College
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/nab.2004.0005

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/171923

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

Nabokov Studies 8 (2004)

STEPHEN CASMIER (St. Louis)

A Speck of Coal Dust: Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* and the Possibility of Translation

It is fairly common knowledge that Vladimir Nabokov hatched the idea for the novel that became *Pnin* (1957) while teaching *Don Quixote* to students at Harvard in 1951. In his *Lectures on Don Quixote* (posthumously published in 1983), Nabokov puzzles over questions concerning the fidelity of the author to his creations and the translation and appropriation of these creations over time by the reading public. Something about *Don Quixote* and its eponymous character, Nabokov observes, remains irreducible and immutable as they withstand centuries of translation and uncountable "multiplications." In Don Quixote, he says, we "are confronted by an interesting phenomenon: a literary hero losing gradually contact with the book that bore him; leaving his fatherland, leaving his creator's desk and roaming space after roaming Spain. In result, Don Quixote is greater today than he was in Cervantes's womb. He has ridden for three hundred and fifty years through the jungles and tundras of human thought—and he has gained in vitality and stature" (112). In *Pnin*, Nabokov engenders such a figure. This novel offers us a reading of *Don Quixote* that includes a theory of translation that responds to our post-structuralist, postmodern world where everything is secondary, constructed, and inauthentic and all efforts at faithful translation are at best quixotic. Through its cavalier play with ontological and epistemological boundaries—recreating author as character while invoking physical suffering and the immutable tragedy of the Holocaust—Nabokov creates a character who also "leaves his creator's desk" despite attempts by the narrative to capture, limit, translate, ridicule, and appropriate him.

Pnin thus foregrounds the agonies of translation. This foregrounding becomes apparent as Nabokov uses several techniques to create a profoundly unsteady literary landscape—casting aspersions on the first-person narrator and what he actually knows about his subject, Pnin, and thus hopelessly alienating Pnin from the narrator and the instance of narration. Readers learn, for example, that Pnin leaves the scene at the same moment that the narrator

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

enters the timeline of his own narrative. Pnin drives off down the highway while the narrator pursues him by foot, never catching up. Because of this, the reader surmises that knowledge that the narrator has about Pnin must be second-hand and garnered through the mostly unreliable sources of Waindell. One of these is Jack Cockerell, a man who presents Pnin as both a freak and a caricature through an unending series of insidious imitations, a burlesque, less artful performance, perhaps, of the novel itself. Indeed, by the end of the novel, it becomes manifest that much of what the reader knows about Pnin could have been made up just so the narrator could flaunt his own, brilliant writing abilities. In essence, Pnin (the character) seems like a horrible translation, presented by a translator with a dubious relationship to his subject. Nevertheless, amid such upheaval and devious instability, something about Pnin endures—and, whatever it is, it remains resistant to translation, misreading, and misrepresentation.

Pain, I argue, makes this possible. The ideas of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the literary critic Elaine Scarry support the notion that pain is fundamentally resistant to language. In *The Body in Pain*, an authoritative study of the relationship of pain to language, Scarry writes: "To have pain is to have certainty, to hear about pain is to have doubt" (13). This is the paradox of pain, which resists representation. Pain comes attached to a body. Thus, when a text evokes pain, it evokes what might be called the "real presence" of those other bodies. This is inescapable. Thus, when pain is presented in a text, it triggers a transgression of ontological and epistemological boundaries. When *Pnin* figures and invokes both particular suffering and momentously historical suffering—Pnin endures a great deal of pain while the actual pain and suffering of the Holocaust throb in the novel's background—the novel stages a critical response to contemporary theories of translation that have attempted to transform human "suffering" into an "inhuman" linguistic phenomenon. This perspective allows us to enter into the discussion about the use of suffering in Nabokov's novels recently raised by Zoran Kuzmanovich and Elena Sommers. Both question the unsatisfactory critical response to instances of pain and torture in Nabokov's work, a response that too readily falls into the trap of a contemporary theory that presents such pain as matter of literary artifice, a surmountable "problem of fictional representation."[1]

All remains anchored in language, say contemporary theorists who present an understanding of the problems of fictional representation and its relationship to suffering through an analysis of translation. What translation unmasks is the naiveté of the poet who believes he can "convey a meaning which does

1. In his essay "Suffer the Little Children," Kuzmanovich quotes Julia Bader, who says this about David's death in *Bend Sinister*.

not necessarily relate to the language" (81), Paul de Man observes in his famous analysis of Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." The problems of translation are inherently (and prosaically) linguistic problems, de Man claims. "The relationship of the translator to the original is the relationship between language and language" (81). He extrapolates this notion. What appear to be subjective problems, historical problems, and human problems are also at heart issues related to linguistic structures. History, for example, is a purely "linguistic complication." He elaborates this notion by distilling historically and humanly charged words such as "suffering" and "abyss" away from their human and "pathetic" sediment, rendering them purely linguistic. Rather than evoke existential angst, "abyss" for de Man refers to what I call the "realing" effect that is produced when "the text becomes itself an example of what it exemplifies" (86).[2] This gives rise to what he calls suffering, a principle that is also exclusively linguistic. For de Man, suffering (which he translates from the German word *Wehen*, "pains") is not:

> subjective pains, some kind of pathos of a self, a kind of manifestation of a self-pathos which the poet would have expressed as his suffering [...] Benjamin [says] the sufferings that are here being mentioned are not in any sense human. They would certainly not be the suffering of an individual, or of a subject [...] The suffering is also not a kind of historical pathos. (85–86)

Instead, suffering is a kind of "realing" that relates to the inherently secondary and alien quality of one's original language. It relates to the instability of meaning. This is the abyss—the *mise en abyme*—underscored by translation and often staged in postmodernist literature.

While such narrative instability with an emphasis on suffering identifies *Pnin*, it is best perhaps to turn to that other text dominated by these elements that deeply affected Nabokov: *Don Quixote*. Brian Boyd describes Nabokov's reaction to the suffering represented in this text:

> But only a year before writing this chapter [Chapter 1], only a few months before conceiving *Pnin*, Nabokov had reread *Don Quixote* and lectured on Cervantes at Harvard. He had reacted with outrage to *Don Quixote's* cruelty, to the book's implicit invitation to its readers to enjoy

2. "Realing" refers to the vertigo experienced in much of postmodernist writing by the cavalier proliferation of narrative layers and the crossing of ontological boundaries. Some have argued that this is a reflection of a contemporary, fragmented world where the very nature of reality has been called into question.

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

> Don Quixote's pain and humiliation. *Pnin* is Nabokov's reply to Cervantes. It is no accident that the book's risible name, that "preposterous little explosion," almost spells "pain." (271–72)

Indeed, those familiar with Nabokov's published lectures on *Don Quixote* are struck by two salient features. The first, as Boyd has noted, is his repugnance at the violence of the novel and what he believes is Cervantes' collusion against and betrayal of his own character.[3] The second aspect is his observation that Don Quixote survives all effort to diminish and undo (in effect to translate) him into nothingness. Nabokov notes that in addition to the novel's staging of seven "shadowy multiplication[s]" of the Don Quixote figure, there are the "cesspools or hothouses of dishonest or conscientious translations" (112). Despite these multiplications, says Nabokov, Don Quixote "has gained in vitality and stature" (112).

What *Don Quixote* thus provides is a stellar example of the possibilities of translation, because it is a text that actually foregrounds its own multiplications, its own instability. For example, very early in the novel, after Don Quixote's first duel, readers are told that the story could not be finished because no known historian had documented the knight's exploits. This is resolved and the remaining pages of the text are accounted for when the narrator, a bibliophile, describes his recovery of an Arabic manuscript recounting the exploits of Don Quixote. Thus, to have access to the work (whose Spanish edition was lost), it must first be retranslated from Arabic back into Spanish.

The novel *Pnin* similarly foregrounds translation. Indeed, it is my argument that this novel contains a much more compelling theory of translation than Nabokov's own 1955 essay titled "Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English."[4] As is well-documented, while Nabokov was writing *Pnin*, *Lolita*

---

3. Nabokov toys with this notion at the onset of the novel, suggesting that Cervantes made a pact with the Devil. He does this through a list of items Pnin packs in his suitcase, which "also contained next Monday's symposium lecture ('Don Quixote and Faust'), which he intended to study the next day" (16).

4. In this essay, Nabokov zealously and somewhat dogmatically argues the case for literal translation. "The person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language, has only one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text. The term 'literal translation' is tautological since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation or a parody […] shorn of its primary verbal existence, the original text will not be able to soar and to sing; but it can be very nicely dissected and mounted, and scientifically studied in all its organic details" (134–35).

(1955), and *Pale Fire* (1962), he was also undertaking an arduous, and painstakingly literal, translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1964). During this period, then, he was preoccupied by the notion of translation. And like *Don Quixote*, the novel *Pnin* overflows with self-conscious instances of translation. For example, there are Pnin's own struggles with language and bizarre, verbal transliterations. These spring from the smug and quirky eye-dialect that the narrator uses to render Pnin's speech. This enables him to transform Pnin's thick accent in English into burlesque, visual malapropisms. Thus when he asks his landlord, Joan, for whisky and soda (at a very tragic moment), he says: "I search, John, for the viscous and sawdust" (59).

Then there are the humorous and intriguing instances that actually discuss translation, such as Pnin's erroneous recollection of a poetic passage from Andrey Kroneberg's 1844 Russian translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Pnin remembers: "*plĭla i pela, pela i plĭla …/ …* she floated and she sang, she sang and floated … Of course! Ophelia's death! Hamlet!" (79). Then, he laments that a copy of *Gamlet* does not exist at the "Waindell College Library." He remarks ruefully: "whenever you were reduced to look up something in the English version, you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line" (79). Ironically, were Pnin alive today he would not have found the line in most Russian versions either; because the remembered passage does not exist in the English text, it does not appear in more recent translations.[5] Still, the passage that Pnin recalls does indeed have a "noble, sonorous" beauty—indeed, a reader might be forgiven for wondering whether it might have been produced by the narrator of the novel, an obviously gifted poet and our sole source on all matters relating to Pnin. Like Kinbote of *Pale Fire*, this narrator seems to have an extravagant attitude towards poetic license as his own story, sense of style and narrative abilities constantly threaten to overwhelm the story of his subject—Pnin. Perversely, this is even a source of pride for the narrator, who at one point gives a lavish and detailed description of Pnin's boyhood home that, he says, "probably corresponds to reality" (177). What is important in such passages (as the narrator later indicates after recounting another anecdote) is not the fidelity of the correspondence to reality but "the unusual lucidity and strength of [the narrator's] … memory" (180).

Thus, a core question of the novel concerns translation. Who is the original Pnin and where does the narrator get the information that he conveys to the reader about him? By the end of the novel, the reader learns that though it is an eponymous text, it is narrated in the first person by a famous Anglo-Russian writer, who has a passion for butterflies, who was born in the vicinity

5. I thank David T. Murphy, a Russian-speaking colleague at Saint Louis University, for his help with these translations.

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

of St. Petersburg in 1899, and who probably has the name Vladimir Vladimirovich. In short, he bears a striking resemblance to the author, Vladimir Nabokov. The reader also learns that this narrator is not necessarily the voice of authority, the indisputable voice of what Emile Benveniste calls "histoire" in the text. Instead, he is simply another character within the story but who nevertheless claims an impossible omniscience in all matters relating to his subject—Pnin.

To complicate matters further, the narrator reveals that Pnin has excellent reasons to dislike and distrust him. At one point, Pnin proclaims that he has had very little contact with the narrator and warns another character (and thus the reader) against trusting him. "Now, don't believe a word he says. [...] He is a dreadful inventor" (185). Ultimately this leads the reader to fear that Pnin is under the manipulation and control of someone who cannot be trusted. Is Pnin, one asks, just another of his inventions? Yet Pnin seems to survive the worst and best intentions of the narrator as readers witness the notion that translation is possible through, in this case, the agency of pain and suffering.

This is intriguing because human pain has such a contentious relationship to language. This was noted by Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, and by Elaine Scarry. Wittgenstein, one of the philosophers de Man credits with unmasking the "naïve assumptions" of German idealist philosophers, addresses the tension between language and pain in *Philosophical Investigations.* Ultimately he observes that what people often call the language of pain (or what I would like to call the economy of pain), does not belong to pain, but to that grammar, that economy, that construction that is called the human subject. Thus, says Wittgenstein, "if someone has a pain in his hand [...] one does not comfort the hand but the sufferer: one looks into his face" (Proposition 286). What Wittgenstein admits here is that it is possible to have access to grammars and economies alien to the pain, but not, necessarily, to the pain itself. Ultimately, pain cannot be named or represented for linguistic exchange. At heart, it is destructive to language, economies, and communication. Elaine Scarry makes this observation in *The Body in Pain*: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). And, like no other sensation, it comes attached to a body and resists control, abstraction, alienation, and expropriation. Pain is "unsharable." "I can only believe someone else is in pain, but I know if I am," says Wittgenstein. Because of this doubt, pain can only refer to a unique body; it is inalienable.[6] According to Scarry, "Physical pain—unlike any other state

---

6. Timofey Pnin expresses a similar observation in relationship to sorrow

of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language" (5).

In many ways, pain is the white noise of *Pnin*, a constant pulse, throbbing in the background. Pnin is a man in unrelenting, unforgettable and often unexpressed pain. Readers begin suspecting this in the first chapter, just after Pnin discovers he has taken the wrong train to a lecture he must deliver. After a series of mishaps, he finds himself walking through a park where he is suddenly overcome by "a wave of hopeless fatigue" (19). No final medical name is given to the ensuing "seizure," but the reader is told that Pnin has experienced it four times before, when it caused him "pain and panic," "discomfort and despair" (21). Pnin sits on a park bench and the pain of the present pierces through time and space, rendering Pnin "porous and pregnable" as he slides "back into his own childhood" (20–21). The child Pnin is also sick with all the intensity and uncertainty of childhood illness. Overwhelmed with fever, bound in a "strait-jacket-like compress," he too experiences "pain and panic" (22–23). The descriptions of the pain—a pain that affects both boy and man as it links time and space—are intense:

> A poor cocooned pupa, Timosha (Tim) lay under a mass of additional blankets; they were of no avail against the branching chill that crept up his ribs from both sides of his frozen spine. He could not close his eyes because his eyelids stung so. Vision was but oval pain with oblique stabs of light [...]. (22–23)

Meanwhile, this pain occurs in the midst of the "realing"—in the midst of a de Manean "suffering"—staged by the text. At the onset of the seizure, Pnin, the reader is told, experiences a sense of detachment from reality. The text then concretizes this detachment (and the *mise en abyme* of translation) by presenting the feverish boy-Pnin looking at a screen emblazoned with the image of the ailing man-Pnin on the park bench. "And 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" (24). The realing intensifies once the reader realizes that during this scene Pnin is alone and would not have been likely to share his memories or this experience with the narrator. Thus the scene has the grammar of a complete fabrication. This serves to render it unstable, leading the reader to pose a variety of questions about what can and cannot be believed in the text. Ultimately such questions become epistemological,

(a relative of pain), which, he says is an agent of human discreteness. "Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?"(52).

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

resonating into the reader's world as the rules securing the fiction into place (rules that enable it to make sense) get stretched beyond their limit. This renders indistinct the boundaries separating Pnin's world, the narrator's world, Nabokov's world, and the reader's world.

What stabilizes this scene—what stabilizes Pnin (what perhaps embodies Pnin)—is pain. For while everything else can be doubted, toyed with, and subjected to literary artifice, the pain remains unwavering, stabbing through the boundaries of time and space and uniting little Timosha to big Timofey to Nabokov and to the reader. This is the nature of pain, Elaine Scarry observes; pain in its resistance to all languages, has a transcendent, "universal sameness" (5).

It is also interesting to note that in the above descriptions of Pnin's pain, metaphors—such as "frozen spine" and "stabs of light"—are the only elements of language that grant readers access to Pnin's suffering. Pain cannot be described, invoked, or represented using the metonyms and synechdoches of contemporary theory. All efforts at creating an economy of pain, Scarry says, begin with the metaphysical. Only similes and metaphors that first produce images of implements—weapons—that create pain through "burning, stabbing, drilling, pinching, [and] gnawing" make up this economy (17). These appeals to the transcendent stab through and pin into place (stabilize) the realing. Readers recognize and locate it, connecting it to a body (some body, any body), the object of an experience that resists expression in language.

The pain continues. In Chapter Two, the reader learns that Pnin has an ex-wife, Liza Bogolepov. In her torturous cruelty Liza is reminiscent of the Duke and Duchess (to whom Nabokov refers as "Diabolical Diana") of *Don Quixote*, who toy with the knight's illusions concerning Dulcinea. In his *Lectures*, Nabokov describes the sadistic pranks that the "villainous enchanters" play on Don Quixote, calling their castle a "torture house" (70) and "a kind of laboratory where two poor souls, Don Quixote and Sancho, are vivisected" (67). "The cruelty of the book reaches here atrocious heights," Nabokov observes. In *Pnin*, Pnin's unconditional love for Liza enables her to subject him to more than twenty-five years of the cruelest emotional torture. From the onset of their relationship in the 1920s, Pnin offers Liza "everything I have, to the last blood corpuscle, to the last tear, everything" (183). Liza scoffs at this offer until she is used and rebuffed by the novel's narrator. She attempts suicide. As a remedy for her malaise, her friends advise her to marry Pnin. Then, after what seems like more than ten years of marriage, Liza abruptly leaves Pnin, moves to Montpellier, and begins living with Eric Wind, a German psychiatrist. Two years later, as Pnin prepares to immigrate to America, Liza returns, pregnant and eager to accompany him. The following months are

"probably the happiest in Pnin's life" (47). The happiness, however, is short-lived. During the couple's voyage to America, Eric Wind suddenly appears, accosts Pnin, and reveals the deception: Liza feigned the reconciliation to get travel papers and obtain passage to the United States. Pnin is crestfallen. Nevertheless, despite such a history, Pnin again hopes for reconciliation when Liza contacts him more than a decade later. And again he is disappointed when he discovers that Liza merely wants him to begin giving an allowance to her and Eric's son. The episode ends with Pnin crying for the first of three times.[7]

The same chapter also presents Pnin in yet another instance of intense physical pain. This time, he must have his teeth removed. Dental pain is notorious. It is distinguished by its intensity and by the fact that everyone knows how it feels.[8] *Pnin* presents the protagonist moving into a new room and saying to his potential landlords: "I must warn: will have all my teeth pulled out. It is a repulsive operation" (34). Then, in one of its more strangely lyrical passages, the novel describes Pnin returning from the dentist's after the operation:

> Two hours later he was trudging back leaning on his cane and not looking at anything. A warm flow of pain was gradually replacing the ice and wood of the anesthetic in his thawing, still half-dead, abominably martyred mouth. After that, during a few days he was in mourning for an intimate part of himself. 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. And when the plates where thrust in, it was like a poor fossil skull being fitted with the grinning jaws of a perfect stranger. (38)

Pain and loss in this instance produce the reverse effect of alienation. One becomes aware of another body jarred by pain and performing the intensely

---

7. He later cries after spending yet another lonely day on his forgotten birthday (82) and upon losing his job at the college (172).

8. One of the most powerful and memorable representations of pain and torture occurs in the film *Marathon Man* (1976). This film brings together both the pain and torture of the Holocaust and dental pain through the image of an aging Nazi dentist who uses drilling into healthy teeth as a method of torture.

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

familiar act of reconnoitering that must follow physical loss. While Pnin's pain is highly personal and individual, this description also enables a certain, silent intimacy between bodies that are the referents and objects of pain. An actual body had to feel, did feel (Nabokov had a similar operation not long before writing *Pnin*) the pain described.[9] Again, this impales the realing text onto a moment of stability.

Next there are the unspoken, intimated pains that suffuse the novel. Readers learn—once Pnin gets used to his new teeth and begins to enjoy them—that his original teeth caused him headaches (39). Then there is Nabokov's gloss on slapstick comedy. In his *Lectures*, Nabokov insists that the cruelty of *Don Quixote* is still a part of popular entertainment under the guise of slapstick:

> Pain is still with us, around us, among us. I am not referring to such trivialities—though they also have their place in the history of pain—as the banged heads and kicked groins and punched noses that are such delectable features of our movies and comics. What I have in mind are more trivial things, under the best of governments. (56)

A deceptive, slapstick moment occurs in *Pnin* on the night that Pnin brings Liza's son, Victor, home for a visit. Pnin buys Victor the gifts of a Jack London novel and a soccer ball, only to discover that the boy hates sports. So before showing Victor to his room, Pnin runs upstairs and throws the ball out of the window. Then he heads back down:

> A terrible clatter and crash came from the stairs: Pnin on his way down had lost his footing [...] Poor Pnin had come down the last steps on his back. He lay supine for a moment, his eyes moving to and fro. He was helped to his feet. No bones were broken. (108)

Such moments contain the grammar of a stylized burlesque of pain, evoking alienated peals of laughter, especially after Pnin remarks: "It is like the splendid story of Tolstoy [...] Ivan Ilyich Goplovin who fell and got in consequence kidney of the cancer" (108). Yet this passage is also meant to trigger dis-ease. Cancer of the kidney is not really funny. And two pages later, readers learn that Pnin is in pain. He awakes "with a gasp" from a dream. "His back hurt" (110). Nor is this the last the reader hears of the effect of Pnin's

---

9. Brian Boyd says the following about Nabokov's having his teeth removed in 1950 and getting his first pair of dentures on June 6: "A few months later he broke a tooth in his new dentures and wrote in his diary: 'What a wonderful experience—to go to a dentist for repairing false teeth, after so many years of torture at their hands'" (168–69).

comedic fall. Indeed, Pnin learns to drive by reading a *Driver's Manual* during a period in which "he had been laid up with a sore back" (112). By following Pnin's pain in this way, Nabokov criticizes the stylized pain of slapstick comedy and *Don Quixote*. In his lectures, Nabokov notes that Don Quixote experiences "excruciating pain" in the novel. He loses "half an ear" and "most of his teeth," and is constantly beaten (53–54).[10] Yet, while readers are meant to laugh at Don Quixote's pain, they are reconciled to Pnin's. Indeed, as noted earlier, the instances of pain are the few things not in doubt in the shaky narrative of the novel. It is also interesting to note that Pnin's pain in this instance is again Nabokov's. Brian Boyd tells us that Pnin's fall is all that remains of what was supposed to be an additional chapter of *Pnin* ("Pnin at the Hospital") that Nabokov conceived while "laid up" in the hospital from "searing pains" that "shot through his own back for nearly a month in 1955" (270). Such a sharing of pain supports Galya Diment's argument that Nabokov has much in common with Pnin.[11]

Pain as an object of study is also important to Pnin, who proposes teaching a course on "the precursors of modern atrocity." "When we speak of injustice," he says, "we forget Armenian massacres, tortures which Tibet invented, colonists in Africa. The history of man is the history of pain!" (168). The history that Pnin speaks of is a history witnessed by himself and by the narrator —as well as by Nabokov, who fled both Stalinist Russia and Nazi occupied Europe. This notion that pain registers history seems to take direct issue with de Man, who relegates history to a "purely linguistic complication" (92).

Indeed, this history of the Holocaust, bloody purges, and unspeakable suffering intrudes upon the beginning of the novel at the very point where readers sense that Pnin may be under the complete control of a caring, but manipulative and somewhat narcissistic narrator. The novel begins with Pnin being set up for a failure that never materializes. On his way to a lecture, he gets on the wrong train, is forced to get off and then board a bus without his lecture notes. Despite this, he arrives at the town (Cremona) "in time for dinner" (26). This goes against what the narrator claims are his own ethics regarding happy endings. "Had I been reading about this mild old man, instead of writing about him," the narrator says, "I would have preferred him to discover, upon his arrival to Cremona, that his lecture was not this Friday but the next" (26). Yet Pnin arrives, and right before he delivers his talk, history intrudes, the narrator's power and interference dissipate, and the text

---

10. Note that Quilty also loses part of his ear in the murder scene in *Lolita*.

11. Diment also argues that the "'notion' of Marc Szeftel," an émigré colleague from Cornell, also "served as an inspiration for the novel" (54); on this see her *Pniniad* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1997).

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

stabilizes as Pnin sees a vision of family, friends, and lovers, many of whom were killed by the Bolsheviks and the Nazis. Most of their stories are untold or are mere fragments of the larger story related by the narrator. "Murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall" (27). This history resists the translation, control, and mockery of the narrator, who appears powerless before the scene of pain and suffering which lies outside of language. He can evoke the dead, but he will not toy with them. The suffering of Pnin's dead, if toyed with, would undermine the narrator and the narrative. This suffering, despite the best efforts of people like de Man, cannot be converted into the inhuman—a mere tension endemic to linguistic signs. Each instance of pain and suffering remains inalienably connected to real bodies, real sufferers. This is not the easily constructed and manipulated pathos of sentimentalism.[12]

Such sites of pain, I believe, are part of the magic of *Don Quixote* that enables the knight to survive multiplication and translation. The pain in the novel is perverse because it is not the impossible, conventional, and cartoonish pain of romance that summarizes and stylizes suffering to conform to the vagaries of plot. Instead, Cervantes gives the time of the novel, the sequences of events leading to Don Quixote's pain, a painstaking verisimilitude that transgresses the limits of the perverse. In face of this, one cannot forget that Cervantes also suffered tremendously in his life through his participation in military campaigns, poverty, time spent in prison, and declining health. As a young man, he was wounded in battle and permanently lost the use of one arm. Thus does Cervantes perhaps lend his own pain, his own suffering, his own body as referent to the text that will not be betrayed.

Nabokov does the same for Pnin. The ghosts at Pnin's lecture are Nabokov's ghosts, and, the reader suspects, the narrator's ghosts. The most powerful of these is the "dead sweetheart," Mira Belochkin. Mira, the reader later learns, was murdered at Buchenwald. Although many critics like to think of Nabokov's writing as non-polemical, Mira, in contrast to Liza Bogolepov, is a deliberately non-aesthetic construct. Mira is not the bathetic love of Pnin's life (it was a "youthful love affair, banal and brief")—Liza is (134). Mira's death resists the narrator's manipulation. Her incomplete story is not filled by poetic flights of the narrator's fancy, but by chilling and historically accurate descriptions of death in the Nazi concentration camps:

---

12. The *New Yorker* first rejected Chapter 5 of *Pnin* for its references to the atrocities of Communist Russia. Says Boyd: "The magazine rejected the chapter because Nabokov refused to remove references—all historically accurate—to the regime of Lenin and Stalin: 'medieval tortures in a Soviet jail,' 'Bolshevik dictatorship,' 'hopeless injustices'" (270).

> And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's own mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, 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. (135)

Here, the narrator is not brazenly displaying the powers of his imagination (an imagination that in this case he wants to keep at bay). Indeed, the pain of the suffering invoked by Mira is so profound that at one point the novel recoils from its description: "no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible" (135). With their demonic and journalistic banality, the details of Mira's death disrupt the fanciful nature of much of the narrative. Each abuse actually happened to someone, to some body. This is not mere fictional artifice. The body of Mira receives its substance from the body of Sergey, Nabokov's brother. Indeed, there is little doubt that the tale of Mira is the shadow tale to that of Sergey, who was also murdered in a death camp. The presence of this body, again, stabilizes the narrative, effecting a translation. Through this presentation of suffering, the text incorporates an immutable reality that migrates from text to text.

Such possibilities present another way of looking at the pain and violence in Nabokov's work as described by Brian Boyd. "Cruel heroes like Humbert Humbert and Van Veen and victims of cruelty like Adam Krug and Timofey Pnin have led some readers—including Edmund Wilson—to suppose Nabokov had a perverse love of inflicting pain" (213). This is certainly not true in the case of *Pnin*, for in this novel Nabokov does not inflict so much as he represents his own pain or the well-documented suffering of others. Furthermore, the pain of this novel is also much of its power. Indeed, Brian Boyd can describe Pnin as "real and durable" because of the pain that pierces through the boundaries of time, space and experience.

This discussion presents a response to recent questions regarding the role of suffering in Nabokov's work raised by Zoran Kuzmanovich and Elena Sommers. Both express anxiety over the almost pornographic depiction of a child's suffering in Nabokov's novel *Bend Sinister*. Both also express dissatisfaction at the critical response to such suffering and both see the representation of horrific pain in fiction as problematic. Sommers argues that in *Bend Sinister* Nabokov uses a narrative technique that compels readers to reconstruct the suffering of the child, David, within their imaginations. This technique compels readers to share David's pain. Through the suffering of characters, readers become aware of the suffering of others. These novels, says

[172.71.254.228] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 22:44 GMT)

Sommers, also rail against the crime of "incuriosity," a narrative injunction regarding the importance of details that has moral consequences. Thus, through these works, Nabokov deprives "death of the impersonality it brings with it" and contributes "his effort to the collective task of diminishing pain" (50). Still, for Sommers this contribution is a result of narrative technique and thus she accepts the literary reproduction of suffering as necessary and therapeutic.

Kuzmanovich does not. He is much more disturbed by the fictional representation of suffering and fears falling into a trap described by Scarry and J.M. Coetzee. For Scarry, he says, "the tortured prisoner's body and mind become the manifest sign of the torturer's power." The torture demands—produces—a narrative of pain, which as we have seen has no such narrative of its own. Kuzmanovich then summarizes Coetzee on this point: "torture invites novelistic representation" (54). Thus, Kuzmanovich says, he is disturbed by the "instrumentality" of suffering, fiction's reproduction of and complicity in what Coetzee calls the "obscenities" of the state. Although tempted to see a narrative of "spiritual redemption" and "restored moral order" in the suffering of Nabokov's characters, Kuzmanovich asserts that in *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov refuses to "make sense" of David Krug's torture and death. "To keep the possibility [of a world without torture] alive, Nabokov gives us David Krug [...] a child who happens to end up tortured to death. In the end, such torture cannot make sense in the world of *Bend Sinister* or in any other world" (57).

Seen this way, suffering presents a problem of representation, of sign and symbol. This is the problem encountered when de Man transformed suffering into a linguistic phenomenon. Perhaps another approach is to consider certain details mentioned by Kuzmanovich and Sommers. At one point, Sommers quotes a critic who describes the main subject of *Pnin* as a "post-mortem survival of consciousness" (46). In a similar vein, Kuzmanovich proposes that *Bend Sinister* is "a story of faith kept." If there is faith in *Pnin*, it is as surprising to Nabokov scholars and contemporary theorists as "the Greek Catholic cross on a gold chainlet" that we find hanging around Pnin's neck. Says Pnin:

> "As you well 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."
>
> "You are not the first to reduce faith to a sense of touch," said Chateau, who was a practicing Greek Catholic and deplored his friend's agnostic attitude. (128–29)

Perhaps "faith" here is *a* faith. For this conversation between two old friends

openly evokes the mysteries of orthodox Christianity, a Eucharist-centered religion whose ritualistic mass celebrates the notion of “real presence.” Within this religion, the ritual and reenactment of sacrifice produces a miracle that transforms bread and wine into actual body and blood. This faith responds to the dilemma of suffering and representation. The “real presence” of the body and blood” is not symbolic.

This is the power of suffering. Without a narrative to make it “instrumental” suffering re-presents the sufferer. In *Bend Sinister*, it places us in the real presence of “children tortured and killed in concentration camps” said by Kuzmanovich, on the evidence of Nabokov’s letters to his sister, to have been on Nabokov’s mind when he wrote the novel. They suffered what he describes. Pain works the same way in *Pnin*. It is what is real, unchanging, and unchangeable about this character.

Yet at first Pnin seems to defy such permanence. He is a man whose name itself is a mere fragment, reminiscent of Ivan Petrovich Pnin, the Russian humanist and (according to an encyclopedia of Russian history) bastard son of Prince Nikolai Vasil’evich Repnin. Indeed, he evokes de Man’s description of the original in motion—“a wandering, an *errance*, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled” (92). This same Pnin proclaims that he’ll never work “under” the narrator—though the narrator’s discourse is what produces Pnin. Despite this, Pnin survives and endures like that questionable “speck of coal dust that entered” the narrator’s “left eye on a spring Sunday in 1911” (174). Like the “offending black atom” responsible for the pain but not being it—itself the shadow perhaps of some forgotten pain—Pnin survives. Decades after the speck of coal dust was removed, the narrator wonders “where that speck is now? The dull, mad fact is that it does exist somewhere” (176). So does Pnin.

This essay is the result of a paper presented to the Nabokov Society Panel chaired by Zoran Kuzmanovich at the 2002 American Literature Association Conference, Long Beach, California.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. “The Task of the Translator.” *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. 71–82

Benveniste, Emile. *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.

Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. London: Vintage, 1991.

Cervantes, Miguel. *The Ingenious Gentleman, Don Quixote de La Mancha*. *The Portable Cervantes*. Trans. Samuel Putnam. New York: Penguin, 1978.

De Man, Paul. T*he Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.

Diment, Galya. "Timofey Pnin, Vladimir Nabokov, and Marc Szeftel." *Nabokov Studies* 3 (1996): 53–75.

Kuzmanovich, Zoran. "Suffer the Little Children." *Nabokov at Cornell*. Ed. Gavriel Shapiro. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003. 49–57.

The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History. Ed. Joseph L. Wieczynski. Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1976.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Don Quixote*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

———. *Lolita*. 1955. New York: Vintage, 1989.

———. *Pale Fire*. 1962. New York: Vintage, 1989.

———. *Pnin*. 1957. New York: Vintage, 1985.

———. "Problems of Translation: Onegin in English." *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. 127–43.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

Sommers, Elena. "The 'Right' Versus the 'Wrong' Child: Shades of Pain in *Bend Sinister* and *Pnin*." *Nabokov Studies* 6 (2000/2001): 35–50.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet. The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet. 1949. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

———. *"Gamlet" v russkikh perevodakh XIX–XX vekov*. Trans. B. Pasternak, A. Kroneberg, K.R., Anna Radlova. Comp. I.O. Shaitanov. Moscow: Interbuk, 1994.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscomb. New York: Macmillan, 1968.