The Song of an Emigré:  
On Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin

--留 academics'之歌--
浅论纳博科夫的小说《普宁》

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The Song of an Emigré: On Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin

A Synopsis of an MA Thesis

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A panoramic study on Pnin, a sometimes neglected but always significant novel by Vladimir Nabokov (1899 -- 1977), this thesis falls into six parts, plus Introduction and Conclusion. In the six parts, the author of the thesis probes into a special area of the Nabokovian Wonderland, an area of the Russian emigres living in the New World of America among whom stands the talented author of the novel under discussion.

The first part of the thesis is a brief introduction to Nabokov's legendary life. For political reasons, in 1919 Nabokov escaped Russia, where he had spent his affluent boyhood, and began his twenty years' exile successively in England, Germany and France. There he started his literary career by writing poems, short stories, and novels. Two years before his moving to the United States in 1940 he had tried to shift his creative medium from his mother tongue to English, and his talent in language and fiction-writing was such that his English novels achieved great success both in his adoptive country and the rest of the western world. Among these novels are Pnin and Lolita, written in America in 1950s, and Pale Fire and Ada, written in Switzerland after he retired from his professorship in America in 1959.

The social and personal background of his first recognized novel, Pnin, is given in the second part of this thesis. Both the experience of exile and the teaching career in American colleges and universities provided Nabokov with fine subjects and abundant material. Actually, part of Pnin's model was Nabokov himself, sharing almost the same life course of Russia-Europe-America, while the rest part of the model being one of Nabokov's colleagues in the college, also a Russian immigrant who, in the sense of social status, possessed more Pninian characteristics than Nabokov did. Besides, the perception and sensitivity of a writer enabled Nabokov to grasp anything in the American society that might be useful to his novel.
The third part of this thesis illustrates the contents of *Pnin* chapter by chapter. The first three chapters depict Pnin's misfortunes on his way to a lecture which is to be given in a town not far away from his own, his emotional vicissitudes of reuniting with his beloved ex-wife and losing her again, his homelessness, and his life as a victim of ridicule at the college. Pnin in the next three chapters is of a less comic color, as they are managed to show the human and dignified aspect of the hero. Pnin's personality and value get recognition and even appreciation from his ex-wife's son the first time he meets him, from his Russian compatriots at their weekend gathering, and from some of his friendly colleagues at his house-warming party. At last, Pnin is compelled by a coming substitute of his position to leave his newly-found home-like house and his long-acquainted college, starting a search for miracle in the far distance.

The fourth part of this thesis makes analyses on the four major characters in the novel. First of all there is Timofey Pnin, a combination of comicalness and sadness, Russia and America. Pnin is comical because of his eccentric manners and poor English resulted from the conflicts between the Russian culture deeply rooted in him and the American civilization which he cannot quite grasp. His sadness comes from those conflicts, too, since his Russian past has declared the impossibility of his entire naturalization in America and hence the happiness of living as a simple human being. Then a contrast is made between two female characters in the novel -- Liza and Joan: the former being a host of all the possible failings a woman and wife could ever possess, while the latter the ideal wife in Nabokov's world. Another idealized character is Victor, a young genius who is empowered to defeat all the human weaknesses and ignorance.

This thesis discusses some important themes in *Pnin* in the fifth part. Pnin's bitter experience in America represents the problematic side of immigration; it reveals the wistfulness and isolation of the immigrants who are confronted with various difficulties set by their society of adoption. Life for those immigrants is hard, but not hard enough to destroy their hopes and endurance. Out of the love for life they struggle on, easily satisfied and permanently intact-souled, waiting for some miracles to bring them
happiness and coziness. Apart from the émigré themes, Nabokov developed two themes of other types. One is the maladies in American colleges and universities -- ignorance, impudence, emptiness, vulgarness, and so on; the other, the absurdity of the then-popular Freudian and psychoanalysis especially with the detectable tests based on those theories tending to probe personal privacy.

In the last part of this thesis, the style of *Pnin* is analyzed with a lot of examples. The novel under discussion is a testimony of the fame of its author as a great stylist. Its narrative strategy is so fantastic as to make the discrete chapters, each of which is perfectly sketched, a surprisingly wonderful unity. Besides, it succeeds in arousing interest and curiosity among the reader. Its spiral structure is but another testimony of Nabokov's ingenious style. In the large or small spirals in the novel, history repeats itself partially, and moves along the endless spirals to timelessness. As usual Nabokov applied his supernatural device in the novel. The spirit of Pnin's dead girlfriend is called back into his life in the disguise of a squirrel to remind him of his Russian past. Finally, the author of this thesis illustrates the splendid language of the novel, which may be described as "kaleidoscopic" owing to its humorous, symbolic, and cosmopolitan features.

Key Words: Pnin, Nabokov, émigré
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Introduction

The past ten years is a period during which works of western literature have been published or republished in China on an unprecedented scale. Among these books is the famous *Lolita*, written by Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian-American writer and scholar who, though not much read in China, enjoyed great fame in the western world and was considered one of the top ten significant novelists of post World War Two US fiction by an investigation recently made by Professor Raymond Mazurek of Pennsylvania State University. It is indubitable that *Lolita* contributed the most to Nabokov's world-wide reputation, but with his extraordinary ability in artistic creation, with his unique style and artifice, his fame does not rest on the book mentioned above only. Unlike the conspicuous *Lolita*, *Pnin*, is sometimes an overlooked novel in Nabokov's canon owing to its easy accessibility. As the book is loved by the broad reading public, some critics consider it too simple to be worth studying. But "a book that can be enjoyed by simple people is not necessarily a simple book," and *Pnin*, with its stunning technical achievement, is at the same time "as complicated as a pet snake" and is regarded more often as one of Nabokov's masterpieces. Actually, it is *Pnin* rather than *Lolita* that happened to be the first English original novel which brought its author relatively wide recognition in the United States, two years earlier than the once domestically prohibited *Lolita*.

In *Pnin*, a sadly comic book, Nabokov has created one of the dearest and most unforgettable figures in his fiction: Timofey Pnin, a Russian-American scholar trying to survive at an upstate college which embodies the rejection of his society of adoption -- the ruthless indifference and neglect of the college to his capacities and individuality, the brutal scheme of the fate for keeping him off the coziness of a home, and the inhumane ridicule of his colleagues upon his funny manners and funny English. Pnin fails in his try because of his Russian heritage obtained before his departure from his Red pervaded motherland that is inconcordant with his new world of America, but his creator sharing almost the same life experience with him and being much more talented, did not. Upon the publication of *Pnin*, Nabokov, already a successful academic man, strengthened his status as a
literary artist in America by arousing much interest among the critical circles. Interviews mushroomed in the major journals, making both Pnin the Defeated and Nabokov the Triumphant fairly well-known in the United States. As Nabokov continued publishing his dazzling books one after another, critics' concern for *Pnin* extended to its successors. Nonetheless, *Pnin* remains one of the most significant and representative novels of Nabokov.

A short novel easy to read, *Pnin* is not the first novel many Nabokovian critics will take into consideration in their study of its author. They prefer longer and more complicated novels, taking *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* for example, to show their abilities of making analyses as long and complicated as the novels themselves. But this does not mean that the short and easy novel *Pnin* is not as important. On the contrary, it is always in the checklist of Nabokov's major works, and hundreds of critiques have been devoted to it. Why should such a short novel have fulfilled so memorable an achievement? This thesis is produced right to answer this question, with the additional wish to make a general survey of the novel under discussion for some Chinese readers interested in Nabokov.

As what I have said in the opening passage, Nabokov is not quite known in China. While Nabokov's radiators of books excited the western world after their publication, they were not able to send their heat to China, a country remote both geographically and ideologically, possibly owing to their author's notorious fame brought by *Lolita*, a book whose publication was once banned even in the western countries where free individuality and free publication were much emphasized. Save several articles scattered in a few literary periodicals, critiques on Nabokov were rare in China ten years ago, and his only works Chinese readers found in the home book market were the Chinese version of *Pnin* and *Laughter in Dark* published in early 1980s. It was not until eight or nine years ago that Nabokov's fame started to spill over from the limited territory of the literary scholars into the large public of ordinary readers. Unfortunately, the fame has been spreading in China more or less for the same reason as it was quickly spread in America and Europe, that is, people's curiosity to probe anything forbidden, *Lolita* in
this case. So far as I know, many people in China have read or heard of Lolita, thanks to the successive publication of its Chinese version and English version in China, but few know anything about Pnin, not to mention reading it, though the book has been available for nearly fifteen years.

It is a real pity that Pnin, "touching and funny and perfectly written, all at once" and bearing "the unmistakable stamp of Nabokov's intelligence", does not get what it deserves, and I feel compelled to devote myself to the exploration of the excellence of this novel, by dint of this thesis, with its six parts respectively discussing the legendary life of its author -- Nabokov, its background, its contents, its major characters, its significant themes, and its style in a comprehensive way.

To two respectable professors I owe the fulfillment of this thesis: Professor Yang Renjing, a learned and kind scholar who has led me into the flourishing garden of modern and contemporary American fiction, and Professor Chen Dunquan, for the indispensable skills in literary criticism I have acquired in the thorough training properly managed by him. And I would like to thank in particular Professor Zhang Lilong, who, with his appreciable attentiveness, patience and considerateness, has helped me tutorial in all matters, big or small, in the course of my writing this thesis.
Part One

Nabokov's Legendary Life

To begin the study of a novel about a Russian émigré like *Pnin*, it seems that no other way is more suitable than making a panoramic review of the life and career of its author, a Russian émigré himself, for the obvious reason that a piece of literary creation is often more or less connected with its creator's life experience and the environment he lives in. It is no easy job to make such a review because Nabokov's life is not simpler than his most complicated work. He spent his life of seventy-eight years in six different countries, divided his interests between zoology and literature and succeeded in both. He contributed to many literary fields -- he was a short-story teller, poet, critic, playwright, autobiographer, translator, and most of all, novelist -- and wrote in two languages. Nevertheless one can still find a good way to form a clear view of Nabokov's life which is of "razzle-dazzle complexity" if he divides it roughly into four periods, each of which covers about twenty years.

1.1 The Russian Period

The first is the Russian period. Vladimir Nabokov was born in an aristocratic family in St. Petersburg in the last year of the nineteenth century as the Czarist Russian Empire entered its final period. Except for the incident that his father, a member of the Czarist parliament, was once sentenced to three months imprisonment for protesting the Czar's dissolution of Parliament, Nabokov did not have any disturbance from the collapsing empire's social turbulence in his childhood. He spent that period in affluence and happiness. His childhood education was fine, thanks to the regular inoculation provided by Tenischev School of Saint Petersburg from 1911 to 1917, and to the earnest instruction given by "a sequence of fascinating governesses and tutors." Nabokov began writing very young. In 1916, when he was seventeen years old, a volume of his poem was privately printed, marking the beginning of his literary career that covered some sixty years. His interest in butterflies came even earlier than that in
literature; it was when he was only seven years old. This interest, which he kept all of his life, earned him a part-time research fellowship in Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard in 1942, and enabled his name to be taken into biological dictionaries for the microscopic organs that he had been the first to see and portray.

Nabokov's Edenic life of attending school, chasing butterflies and composing adolescent poems did not last long. His good times were put to an abrupt end by the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. The aristocratic Nabokovs had to flee St. Petersburg to Crimea to escape the powerful impact of the storm of the revolution. Two years later, when his two million dollar inheritance was confiscated by the Soviet government, the discontent Nabokovs left their motherland and moved to Berlin. Young Nabokov then embarked on a new way of life -- an exile life which would last for as long as more than twenty years. These years formed the second period in his whole life. It can be called the period of exile in West Europe.

1.2 The Exile Period in West Europe

Instead of staying with his family in Berlin Nabokov spent the first three years of his exile life in England, studying languages -- French and Russian -- at Trinity College of Cambridge. He suffered privations there since his family had been impoverished in the 1917 revolution, but poverty did not and could not hold back the vitality of a young man so gifted as Nabokov. He played football, wrote Russian verses, had several love affairs, and even gave the political speech that remained the only one of his life time. (Nabokov had declared for several times that he was a man with no political interest nor political stand.) And despite the interesting fact that he never entered the library, Nabokov did quite well in his studies and graduated in French and Russian literature in 1922 with honors.

After his graduation Nabokov returned to Berlin, where his father was assassinated several months before his returning. The fatherless Nabokov settled himself down in this sorrowful city and became a father himself several years later. Now that he had a family to support, he had to spend
half of his time in earning bread and butter by writing for the émigré press, teaching chess, tennis, and Russian. The other half of the time was occupied by his beloved artistic creation. His efforts put in supporting the family proved to be worthwhile: his wife helped him a lot by typing out the final text of all his novels, and his son, when grown up, became a capable assistant dozens of years later in the arduous work of translating the father’s Russian works into English.

Nabokov wrote, like other émigré men of letters, in his mother tongue during his exile period under the pseudonym of V. Sirin for a small émigré readership and was gradually recognized. As early as 1920 he published poems in a Paris-based journal, and during the 1920s and 1930s nine novels were published either in serial or in volume form, not to mention the short stories and plays appearing in émigré journals. Most of his published novels were reviewed, though many of the reviews were short and casual. They marked the beginning of the slow spreading of Nabokov’s fame, and the beginning of the debate among his critics, too.

Nabokov lived in Berlin for fifteen years. He might have remained there for some longer time if the terrorism of the Nazis had not driven him out of Germany to Paris in 1937. During his time in Paris, knowing that he would eventually settle in America (But how could he know? Was that a writer’s sensitivity?), Nabokov bid farewell to his native language and switched to English in his literary creation. He produced the first two of his self-translations in English in his first two years in France, and wrote his first English novel in 1938. These three novels form a link between the two major phases of Nabokov’s literary career. The first phase includes his Russian and exile periods during which he wrote in Russian. As he began to use English in writing, he entered the second phase, a new phase marked by his leaving Europe and landing in the United States, the destined country of his enormous fame and fortune. Just as Norman Page, a Nabokovian critic said, “crossing the Atlantic symbolized his renunciation of Russian for English as a creative medium, and hence the abandonment of a very limited
émigré readership for a public potentially as wide as the English-speaking world."

I.3 The American Period

From Paris Nabokov moved to the United States of America in 1940 to flee the rampant Nazis. In America he earned a living principally by teaching languages and literature. He had been a Slavic lecturer at Stanford for a short time, then got a position as a lecturer in Comparative Literature at Wellesley in 1941. In 1948, having been a naturalized US citizen for three years, Nabokov took a professorship in Comparative Literature at Cornell where he was to stay until his retirement in 1959. He became a successful academic in literature soon. Yet his success in academic sphere was not limited to literature only; he achieved fame in the biological field, too, as a lepidopterist. His passion for lepidopterological research was once recalled to be "even more pleasurable than the study and practice of literature." Both the two entirely different academic careers helped the novelist Nabokov a lot. While the basic qualities required in lepidopterological research -- meticulousness in observation and precision in delineation -- enabled him to watch, describe, and interpret human beings and their society in a careful and scientific way, the teaching position, with the long vacations offered by the universities, granted him enough time to write. His years in the academic circle was especially helpful to him in the composing of Pnin by supplying him with essential material for the novel. (Details about this point will be discussed in the following chapter as part of the background of the mentioned book.)

By 1955 Nabokov had been a US citizen for ten years, and had lived in that country for fifteen years. These years were not a very productive period; only two novels and one memoir, all written in English, were published. At that time he was not a highly regarded writer in America. As a critic was later to write, "Nabokov, as he approached sixty, was still better known as an erudite and didactic campus eccentric than as a writer, and he might have died that way but for the sensational intervention of Lolita." His view of
Nabokov's literary future was perhaps too gloomy, but to a certain extent it was the truth.

At the beginning of 1954, Nabokov completed Lolita, a novel in the form of a memoir by a European émigré scholar under the pseudonym of Humbert Humbert who has a morbid passion for young nymphets. Unfortunately he could not manage to find a publisher because the publishers were afraid of the censorship incurred by the publication of a contentious book whose cosmopolitan author "had no place in the currently fashionable native tradition in the American novel" and only enjoyed a moderate reputation. After being refused by four American publishers, the book was finally published in 1955 in Paris by the pornographic Olympic Press. Though it seemed that Nabokov was unaware of the reputation of that publishing house since the matters of publication had been arranged on his behalf by a Paris literary agent, the notorious publisher fomented the establishment of an image of Nabokov as a lewd writer and Lolita a dirty book. Before long copies of the book purchased in Paris were constantly smuggled back to America, and the book soon achieved a tremendous underground reputation. But it was not until 1958 and 1959 that Lolita could appear in America and Britain with legality. Its publication in and outside the United States touched off a heated and long-drawn-out battle in both critical circles and the large reading public between its attackers and supporters, and brought Nabokov world-wide celebrity. Even those who regarded Nabokov always as a serious writer of great talents would not deny the fact that he got his international fame accidentally by the largely extra-literary success of the "infamous" Lolita. No matter what Lolita stood for, prestige or notoriety, it yielded at least one thing — fortunes. The constant large-scaled printing and reprinting of the book filled Nabokov's pocket with money, which enabled him to take the pleasure of quitting teaching, settling down in beautiful Switzerland, and working there as a professional writer.

Between the Paris and New York appearances of Lolita, the year 1957 saw the publication of Pain, the fourth and the shortest of his novels written
in English, after it had been serialized irregularly in *New Yorker* during the preceding five years. The book received much critical attention upon its publication and was reviewed in major journals. Most of the reviewers found the book delightful to read and judged it to be one of Nabokov's masterpieces embodying his talents to a high degree. Though written later than *Lolita, Pin* was published earlier in America and had a much better reputation. It made Nabokov a known writer in the American reading public, especially in colleges and universities where there were a large number of students reading it.

I.4 The Swiss Period or the Return to Europe

In 1959 Nabokov moved to Switzerland after his retirement from Cornell, which marked the end of the third period of his life, and the beginning of the fourth. In Switzerland, where he was to spend the rest of his life, Nabokov wrote and did translation, feeling quite at home on the continent where lay his motherland and the countries that had kindly taken him in during his exile. His leaving, considered a national loss, saddened the American hearts so filled with emotions, but they soon felt safe and saved when it proved that their great writer was not tending to give up his nationality upon his departure from the country. Nabokov seemed to like the United States of America. He declared once in an interview conducted in Switzerland that he thought of himself as an American writer. He was justified to say that since his long-awaited recognition was achieved right there in his adoptive country, toward which he held an attitude that is a mixture of gratefulness, affection and concern. Maybe this is the reason why his masterpieces, altogether four -- *Lolita* and *Pin* in the United States, and *Pale Fire* and *Ada* in Switzerland, are all with an American setting, with a partial exception that *Ada* is sited in an invented country called *Amerussia* -- half America and half Russia.

*Pale Fire* was published in 1962. It is a novel made up of a 999-line autobiographical poem in rhymed couplets by an invented poet called Shade, and a forward, commentary and index by a sad, paranoid Russian-American scholar named Kinbote. Critics jumped to the accusation and defense of the
book when it was so widely reviewed. If the storm of debate over Lolita was about the subject matter, that over Pale Fire was about its style. While the accusers of Pale Fire charged it of over-cleverness and eccentricity, its defenders argued that it was witty and original. Nevertheless, the book has remained in the short list of Nabokov's best novels.

The last year of the 1960s saw the publication of Nabokov's longest and most difficult novel: Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle. Just to finish reading the book is a real challenge, and to understand it is still more than that. With its purposeful absence of authorial viewpoint and its myriad literary allusions and linguistic games, the book is sure to puzzle and bore its reader unless he possesses not only immense patience, endurance and tolerance to struggle his way out to the end, but also profound knowledge of various languages -- French, German, Russian, Dutch, of the history of European literature, of the history of art, of science fiction, of lepidopterology, and of the philosophy of time to appreciate the text.

Besides Pale Fire and Ada, Nabokov wrote two more novels, quite short ones, in Switzerland. They were published in the 1970s and were the last novels of his.

The Switzerland period was also a period of translation. With the help of his son and some persons working closely with him, Nabokov translated seven of his nine Russian novels written early in Europe (the other two had been translated and published when he was in exile in Paris) and retranslated one. Most of these translated books were published in the 1960s, and all of them were greeted with critical attentions much more enthusiastic than the original Russian versions. Nabokov's "Englished" novels enabled the Nabokovian scholars to rediscover a writer whose talents made it a paradox that "a man in many respects so precious should have had to wait so long for recognition."

During the four periods of his life, Nabokov enjoyed a steadily growing reputation that was at first local, then national, and finally world-wide. His
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