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PNIN'S SUN LAMP

Why is Pnin so tan? That is, why does he make regular use of a sun lamp, with the effect that he is noticeably tanned, all the time? This is one of those little details Nabokov loves to drop into his texts—a feature that might catch a reader's eye, and gives a defining quirk to a character, but does not automatically send one racing for an explanatory schema or trail of allusions. Some easy examples are Zina's ethereal quality in *The Gift*, Kinbote's beard, Shade's misshapen figure, Lydia's (in *Despair*) pudgy arms, Quilty's broad back, Humbert's "good looks." (A wonderful example from the very beginning is the wart at the edge of Pal Palych's nostril, in "Sounds.") Sometimes these little tokens feel like deliberate echoes of Tolstoy's craft, whereby he would give characters iconic traits that are mentioned almost every time they appear in a text: Princess Lise's squirrel-like upper lip, or Princess Marya's deeply beautiful eyes, or Pierre's stoutness in *War and Peace*; or Vronsky's teeth and Countess Lydia's "pensive, lovely eyes" in *Anna Karenina*, or, indeed, Anna's squint in the later parts of that same novel. In Tolstoy's case, we usually know what he is doing, because it's not subtle. In Nabokov's work, these visible marks are often less clearly aligned with a character's inner traits, but it would take a thorough examination of many examples to be sure if that rule rings true throughout. In Pnin's case, we have his baldness, his broad shoulders, his narrowing figure, and his tiny feet. We also have his teeth—until we don't, and then we have his dentures, smiling at us from their glass full of cleaning fluid. And, of course, we have his tan and its associated sun lamp. How many of these Pninian identifiers are meaningful and which of them link him to literary or real-world precursors are questions for another time and another scholar (see, e.g., Meghan Vicks' recent study, listed below, as well as Galya Diment's classic *Pniniad*). But I don't *think* anyone has tried to chase the ghost of Pnin's tan.

Barabtarlo, in *Phantom* (57), simply acknowledges the tan in his gloss to the novel's first page ("sun-tanned" is the third word in the novel's second sentence, after "Ideally bald"); he also points out that we learn more about the tan's source in the novel's second chapter, where we will read: "Desdemona, the old colored charwoman, [. . .] happened to glimpse Pnin

basking in the unearthly lilac light of his sun lamp, wearing nothing but shorts, dark glasses, and a dazzling Greek-Catholic cross on his broad chest, and insisted thereafter that he was a saint" (40). In addition to this scene, Pnin's "tanned cheeks" are mentioned in chapter one (12) and chapter four (104), and his "tanned shoulders" in chapter five (129). A page before this last instance, the narrator (V.V.) has explained: "Throughout the academic year Pnin had regularly exposed his body to the radiation of a sun lamp; hence, when he stripped down to his bathing trunks, he glowed in the dappled sunlight of the riverside grove with a rich mahogany tint" (128). That "richness" of tint, and the regular reminders of his "brown" dome, suggest a more than casual relationship with the sunlamp: Pnin takes his tanning very seriously, and his skin tone shows it.

Now, the "lilac light" of that scene with Desdemona (whose role in this moment deserves more attention, but will not receive it here) brings to mind Nabokov's affection for the color lilac, and the flower lilac, and its Russian term, "сирень," which bears some affinity with the pen-name "Sirin" (as noted previously by Jane Grayson, and Gavriel Shapiro, independently). But *if* the lilac element here is meant to hint at the Big Author (the real one, not the novel's V.V.), there is as yet no obvious explanation for marking his presence here. And still, we do not know why Pnin loves sunbathing so much. Are we on the wrong train?

When I asked my students this spring why they thought Pnin enjoys using his sun lamp, they had two suggestions: possibly, he is simply vain; or alternatively, for him, becoming tan is part of his effort to blend in better with American culture: perhaps he sees many tanned people around him, and hopes to look more like them. The narrator, of course, is not American, and as such seems to find Pnin's tan noteworthy; similarly, the tan would (and does) stand out at The Pines, as it seems that other Russians there were not pursuing rich skin tones. The idea that Pnin is vain, I think most readers will agree, does not really appear to have much support elsewhere in the text. So we let that go. More recently, I heard an anecdotal report that in the last century, it was not uncommon for East Europeans (including in the Soviet Bloc) to use tanning lamps, as a simple matter of health. My own answer to the riddle, which comes from some family background and a sudden realization I had regarding Pnin's life a couple of years ago, is indirectly related to this last idea. The solution is, I think, simple: Pnin suffers from psoriasis.

From the experiences of family members, I was made aware as a child that psoriasis-sufferers, at least at that time, made frequent use of sun lamps or tanning beds, or simply sunbathing, as one of the most effective means of reducing or eliminating their lesions. The only thing left to check

was whether this therapeutic notion was in the public arena in the years or decades before Nabokov wrote *Pnin*. As I searched, I found scientific articles about “phototherapy” for psoriasis as early as 1916, 1937, and 1947, and in the popular press, references to the benefits of sunbathing or tanning lamps for treatment throughout the 1940s (some examples are listed below, in the bibliography). The scientific articles mention that sun exposure has been a known home treatment for psoriasis going back a very long time—probably centuries or millenia. When we combine the fact of Nabokov’s known history with psoriasis, and particularly his acute, misery-inducing case in 1937, with the fact of an available, widely-known treatment that he had even used (see below), the circumstantial evidence points strongly to the likelihood that Pnin had his own ordeals with psoriasis, perhaps even worse than Nabokov’s, and that he kept them at bay through diligent, mahogany-inducing sessions with his lilac-colored lightbulb.

If Pnin is somehow channeling or bearing Nabokov’s affliction here, that would, to a degree, justify the “lilac” light and its author-biographical associations (lilacs are a key motif at Vyr in *Speak, Memory*, for example). But where does this lead, substantively? One thing it gets us, unfortunately, is a bit of speculation, and a descent into the slippery slopes of contingent possibilities. For example, we know that V.V. is different from “real” Nabokov in some important ways. Nabokov, as far as we know, never had a short romance that resulted in the dumped lover’s attempted suicide. He certainly was not single in the 1950s as V.V. appears to be. V.V. looks to be more of a womanizer than Nabokov was (he makes leering remarks about women throughout the novel, which might make him more Pushkinian than Nabokovian). I propose that alongside these differences, he also, to his good fortune, had never experienced psoriasis.

This lack of experience is important, because, if I am right about Pnin, then Nabokov is deliberately and metonymically signaling, several times in the course of the novel, the hidden presence of this medical condition. Quoting a letter of May 15, 1937, Brian Boyd shows us Nabokov’s “indescribable torments” leaving him at “the border of suicide” (VNRY, 434; SL, 26). In that letter, Nabokov tells Véra that he has been undergoing “radiation treatments” every day for the psoriasis—meaning UV radiation, of course—and that he is “pretty much cured.” Boyd reports on a slightly earlier letter (April 15) where Nabokov states that he has “put on weight, got a tan, changed my skin” (VNRY 437, SL 23); here Boyd notes that “sunbathing surely eased the psoriasis.” Thus, it is well established that Nabokov experienced psoriasis as a tormenting condition, and that exposure to UV rays from a special lamp were, for him, a cure.

This condition of Pnin's is one of those things that Nabokov knows that his narrator, apparently, *does not know*—similar to the identity of the hummingbird moths in *Lolita*, which Humbert thinks are birds, or his belated realization that he “simply did not know a thing about” Dolly's mind (284).¹ If so, such a limitation has an interesting consequence for the novel's ethical form (by which I mean—its status as a document exploring the ethical relation of V.V. to Pnin, as his narrator): the narrator has, one way or another, shown us many things about Pnin's life and his mind; he has imagined his way, plausibly and perhaps accurately, into important and intimate recesses of that inner life. Like Fyodor imagining his way into the mind of, say, Alexander Chernyshevski in *The Gift*, V.V. has a decent sense of and intuition about Pnin's psychic world. However, he has failed to notice something important: that one aspect of Pnin's *physical* world, as revealed by his skin, is characterized by constant vigilance against suffering. Pnin's skin, in other words, shows the attuned reader that Pnin has gone through “indescribable torments,” but V.V. completely misses the clue – despite his interest in “the film of flesh” (20). Such torments, of course, are nothing compared with losing loved ones to the Holocaust, or suffering torture under the Nazis or the Soviets. But they are real, and the narrator's blindness to them are part of the novel's demonstration that any person's knowledge of another's inner life is, inescapably, very limited. Boyd's discussion of this aspect of the novel's implications is especially insightful (VNAY 285-87).

There is another way to read V.V.'s failure to mention Pnin's condition. Perhaps the narrator *does* know; and perhaps he, too, has suffered this way, and he shares this condition with both Pnin and with their maker, as he shares scientific knowledge of butterflies with the latter. If this is the case, V.V.'s reticence could be a momentary act of respect for Pnin's privacy—perhaps driven by a greater degree of empathy, enabled by his shared exposure to this one malady. Pnin, he may believe, would rather be seen as tan than as someone always under treatment for psoriasis. It seems a little inconsistent (given the narrator's eager exposure of so many of Pnin's awkward and embarrassing moments), but if they share the affliction, his compassion would be understandable. (This view aligns fairly well with a picture of V.V. developed by Dana Dragunoiu in her recent book, as performing “remnants of a discredited code of conduct and civility” [176].) And it *would* be consistent with the fact that, at many places in the novel, he draws our attention to Pnin's best attributes, even while frequently, in his

¹ Barabtarlo has argued that there are patterns in the novel, placed by the author, of which the narrator is unaware; and Vicks suggests that the narrator misses important clues to Pnin's kinship with Kafka's Gregor Samsa.

“nastiness,” drawing perhaps more attention to Pnin’s supposedly laughable traits.

Each of these possibilities has an inconsistency. Regarding the first, one asks: the narrator knows so many hidden and intimate things about Pnin, things that surely nobody else in the novel’s world knows; how can he not know about Pnin’s psoriasis? This, of course, can be an arbitrary gap, subject to the Author’s designs of which V.V. himself is unaware. Regarding the possibility that V.V. knows and shares the skin affliction, the inconsistency is in his reticence in this one case. But it could be explained plausibly *either* as his empathetic wish to spare Pnin this one indignity, *or* by his desire to conceal his familiarity with psoriasis generally (thus preserving his own privacy, which he does with some degree of consistency during the narrative). I find both readings to have some rich implications; in our discussion of the first draft of this article, Eric Naiman suggested that maybe Nabokov was “engaging in a kind of autobiographical character split, assigning his libido (sexual and linguistic) to V.V. and his psoriasis and innocence/fidelity to Pnin.” I think this is a productive speculation. However, the suggestion (Dragunoiu’s) that the narrator may perform a cryptic sort of chivalrous deference, in this and perhaps other instances in the novel, is not without interest and merit. Personally, I lean toward the first, ignorance-based reading, but see no way to refute the second.

I am grateful to my anonymous reader for several helpful suggestions and ideas, and to Eric Naiman and Dana Dragunoiu for their stimulating engagement with the original draft of this essay.

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