

Gavriel Shapiro
Cornell University

“FROM SENTIMENTAL REASONS”: THE FALLIBILITY OF N—’S ENGLISH IN
PNIN

In *Pnin*, the novel’s narrator N— demonstrates the titular character’s poor English pronunciation by intimating that he calls the librarian, Mrs. Thayer, “Mrs. Fire” and his landlady, Joan, “John” (*Pnin* 31 and 158; 59). The latter is corroborated by Joan’s husband, Laurence, who maintains that Pnin’s “verbal vagaries add a new thrill to life. His mispronunciations are mythopoeic. His slips of the tongue are oracular. He calls my wife John” (*Pnin* 165). N— also phonetically reproduces Pnin’s difficulty “dzeefeecooltsee” (*Pnin* 66) with English in such phrases as “I haf nofing,” “A leetle breek house and a beeg blahk cleef,” and “viscous and sawdust” instead of “whisky and soda” (*Pnin* 61, 151, and 59). Even if these and other speech distortions are real, and presumably they are, as it is next to impossible for any middle-aged person learning a new language to speak it flawlessly and without a discernible accent, N—’s attempts to ridicule Pnin because of his insufficient command of English are only illustrative of the narrator’s unsavory demeanor.

Although N— pokes fun at Pnin’s English and implies that *his* English is vastly superior to that of his compatriot, his own grasp of the language is not without blemish: he makes some embarrassing mistakes, such as “in the result of” and “twice bigger” rather than “as the result of” and “twice as big” (*Pnin* 182 and 177).¹ With regard to N—’s first utterance, Gennady Barabtarlo rhetorically asks: “Is this idiosyncratic ‘in the result’ meant to be a reminder that N—, after all, is a Russian, too, and so his English armour is not impregnable?” (Barabtarlo 276). As for the second phrase, it is included in Nabokov’s copy of *Pnin*’s first edition in the “list of errors which the author penciled on the flyleaf” (Barabtarlo 46). Did Nabokov forget to correct this unfortunate Russianism, or did he decide to keep it as further evidence of N—’s imperfect English? We may never know.

The novel contains yet another heretofore overlooked clumsy expression by N—. When Pnin goes to bathe in “the bubbling and glistening

¹ Both mistakes are calques of Russian phrases: “in the result” suggests «в результате» and “twice bigger”—«в два раза больше».

stream,” he removes “from his neck” “the Greek Catholic cross on a golden chainlet,” which he wears “from sentimental reasons” (*Pnin* 127 and 128). “From sentimental reasons” sounds awkward, as the correct phrase is “for sentimental reasons.”² Since N— was not present at The Pines (see *Pnin* 128), the conversation between Chateau and Pnin, which was undoubtedly conducted in Russian, was related to him, and he translated it into English. One possibility is that N— purposefully provided the calque translation of the Russian phrase “*iz sentimental'nykh soobrazhenii*” to mock Pnin’s English. However, there is another possibility: in light of his own imperfect English, N— himself may not know how to translate the phrase properly. In any case, by awkwardly rendering it word for word, N—, to quote Shakespeare, is “hoist with his own petard.”³

REFERENCES

- Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov’s “Pnin.”* Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1989.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. New York: Dorset Press, 1988.
- Toker, Leona. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

² This example constitutes a notable exception to Leona Toker’s otherwise astute observation that “Pnin’s conversations with his Russian friends are rendered in impeccable English, because then it is the narrator and not the protagonist who performs the translation”; see Toker 32.

³ *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 4); see Shakespeare 697.