

## Some notes for *Pnin*

As of page 145 of his story, Pnin has been living in the United States for fourteen years, but he still doesn't understand what a basketball hoop is. Idiomatic American speech gives him trouble, too, even though he knows textbook English. On p. 63 he insults someone by mentally translating the Russian word for "children" into French (*enfants*), then rendering that into English as "infants." Worse, both funnier and sadder: deep down at the fundamental level of physiology, his body still senses things in Russian. He doesn't think of distance in terms of miles and feet, for instance, or in terms of kilometers and meters either. No; for him distance still *feels* like versts (p. 8) and arshins (p. 145): old Russian units of measurement, made obsolete and then abolished from reality by the same Communist revolution that has sent him into exile, cut him off from the world he once knew, and stranded him in America. Unable to put his new feelings into words, reduced by an accident of history to a stereotypical funny foreigner, he is what the Bible calls a stranger in a strange land.

Here's a mini-guidebook to that land: the land you're now reading about in translation from Pninian geography.

Page 10. Joke: the Russian language is indeed difficult, but the Russian alphabet isn't. It has just six more letters than the English alphabet, and you can learn it in fifteen minutes. Languid Eileen is languidly confusing the titles of two famous Russian novels: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

11. At the time Pnin's ship transported him from Europe, immigrants who entered the United States through New York were processed by officials working out of a government facility on Ellis Island, a small island near the Statue of Liberty. If Pnin had just delivered the simple answer "No" to the question "Are you an anarchist?" he wouldn't have been held there.

13. *Der zerstreute Professor* = "the absent-minded professor."

21. A common folk belief in the twentieth century was that sleeping on your left side makes your heart work harder.

22. In Russia, the term "gymnasium" means a high school with a college-preparatory curriculum. See also p. 176.

34. *Douche* is one of those French words like *enfant* that can cause trouble. The correct translation is "shower."

36. The Russian words translate as "Hello how are you good thank you."

37. Chateaubriand is a kind of steak, but it's also the name of a famous French writer.

41. *Espace meublé* = "furnished space."

46. *Taper dessus* = "beat up." *Lieber Herr Pnin* = "Dear Mr. Pnin."

47. You can and should look up the loan-words like “canthus” and “feuilleton” in Nabokov’s cosmopolitan vocabulary. But “vagitus” is strictly Latin. It means a baby’s cry. The sentence containing this foreign word also demonstrates what being foreign can do for your perspective on the logic of language. After all, yes: if you can foresee a future event, why can’t you forehear it?

48-49. *Entschuldigen Sie* = “Excuse me.” On p. 48, Pnin’s pidgin German translates as, “If you thus, then I thus, and horse flies.” (That is, “If you make this move, I’ll capture your knight.”) On 49, “*Lasse mich*” means “Leave me alone,” and so far so correct. But since Pnin doesn’t know the German word for “nightmare” (*Alptraum*), he improvises from the French word, *cauchemar*.

64. Two undemanding authors popular in the 1930s were the historian Hendrik Willem van Loon and the inspirational novelist A. J. Cronin (compare, oh, Ken Burns and Harper Lee). The British woman of letters Constance Garnett (1862-1946) translated seventy volumes of Russian literature, but Nabokov called her prose “dry shit.”

81. Cold War Communist slogans: “Hands off Korea” (in Russian and French) and “Peace will conquer war” (in Spanish and German). The Korean War broke out in 1950, but hostilities had been building between North Korea (in the Russian sphere of influence) and South Korea (in the American sphere of influence) since 1948.

89. In the Russian Orthodox Church, a pope is a priest (and married men can become popes).

93. *Sursum* = “lift up,” from a phrase in the Latin mass, “*Sursum corda*,” “Lift up your hearts.”

99. A vagary of reading in translation: some authors are more highly regarded in other countries than in their own. Americans who take poetry seriously tend to think of Edgar Allan Poe’s thumping rhythms as crude, but in France, where the language has different prosodic rules, they’re heard as delicate music. Likewise, the American naturalist writer Jack London (1876-1916) is almost forgotten in the United States, but he’s revered in Russia. The bookstore clerk hasn’t heard of his autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* but does know the name of the British statesman Anthony Eden, prime minister at the time *Pnin* was published.

105. “You understand French? Well? Quite well? A little?” “A very little.”

117. Bunin, Aldanov, and Sirin were all Russian writers who left Russia after the Revolution. The joke about Sirin is amplified in chapter 14 of *Speak, Memory*.

120. Poison ivy is a common weed in the northeastern United States, with pretty, shiny leaves arranged in groups of three. The oil that coats those leaves is a skin irritant which produces an itchy rash, and in the northeastern United States only an exile from another world would be unfamiliar with the cautionary saying, “Leaves three, let it be.”

122. Tolstoy is famous for the minutely accurate historical detail through which he realizes (real-izes, makes real) the universe where his stories tell themselves. When Pnin is allowed to speak and think in Russian, he shows himself to be a reader in the Tolstoyan style. Czarist

Russia – Tolstoy’s Russia, Pnin’s Russia – clung to the Julian (“Old Style”) calendar long after it had been superseded in every other country by the more astronomically accurate Gregorian (“New Style”) calendar. The Communists sent it the way of the verst.

128. What is Vladimir Vladimirovich’s last name? Right: Nabokov. You can tell from the butterflies.

135-36. Of the thousands of concentration camps established in Germany during the Nazi era, the most infamous was the prettily named Buchenwald (“Beechwood”), partly because it was indeed within walking distance of the heart of Germany’s great literary culture. *Le mot juste* is a French phrase meaning “the exactly right word,” and here Professor Nabokov indulges in a standard professorial joke about the cultural limitations of administrators. Tolstoy was a great Russian novelist and Stanislavski was a great Russian theatrical director, but Raskolnikov is a character in a Russian book, and not a particularly nice character. The protagonist of Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment*, he murders a friendless old woman in the spirit of philosophical experiment.

148. To get the joke about poor Professor Krotki, look up the words “fenugreek” (yes, with a small F) and “Lethe.”

152. Gretchen is the heroine of Goethe’s drama *Faust*. The part is usually acted by a blonde in traditional German costume, with long braids coiled around her head.

154: *En jeune* = “as a young man.”

157. *A la fourchette* = “informal.”

167. *Cruchon* = “drink,” with connotations of coziness.

170. *Der arme Kerl* = “poor guy.”

176. “The late Dr. Chekhov”: the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was also a physician.

184. Cheka: the Soviet secret police. Alexander Kerenski, the leader of the first (“February”) Russian revolution of 1917, fled from Russia after the Communist seizure of power that fall (“the October Revolution”), escaping to France and later to the United States.

185-86. I’d guess that the great writer who died in 1852 must be the Russian dramatist and novelist Nikolai Gogol, about whom Nabokov wrote a wonderful non-fiction book in English. In Nabokov’s honor, honor Gogol by pronouncing his name, Гоголь, correctly: not “go-gol” but “gawgle.” The Russian letter O (pronounced “aw”) looks like the English one, but its range of sounds runs only from *ah* through *uh* to *aw*, with no *oh*. Russians have trouble hearing and saying the English *oh* sound, which is why Pnin on p. 59 calls Joan “John” and why on 151 he thinks the name of his street, Todd Road, is easy to remember because it rhymes.