

Literature 202: Nabokov and World Literature  
Professor Marijeta Bozovic  
Teaching Fellow Daria Ezerova

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Janine Chow

The Preserved Party: A Metonymical Still Life

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September 19, 1970

Milton, Pa.

Dear Bunny,

Tonight finds me in Milton, Pennsylvania—population 7,723, not counting the snakes. The eclectic nomenclature of this country will never cease to amuse me! Tonight I stay with a fallen angel; tomorrow I follow Odysseus home to a veritable Penelope. Perhaps my McFate is a blind poet.

I am staying in Paradise Inn, cunningly named by my cunning proprietress (fluorescent smile, pink in the zygomatic region), who shows an uncanny predilection for cattails in her interior decoration. A pair of these, precariously perched in a faux-Baroque vase on the mantel, casts a leporid shadow on the wall and provokes my amphibrachic salutation.

I read your last letter with interest. Thought some of your ideas were quite good. I like that notion of yours about the reverberations of my professor's *cruchon* (crunched into onomatopoeia by the Anglo-Saxon tongue), and you are not wrong in discovering in blissful Betty a touch of the beribboned scholar we spoke of some years ago. But I defy your designation of my protagonist as artistically insensitive. It is obvious, of course, that he makes an uninspired academic, and a poor professor of Russian—but academia is not his forte. My Pnin is the winner of the metaphysics of the banal: his art is in the mundane, the domestic, the everyday. [Beauty plus pity—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is

beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual.]<sup>1</sup> In this way, Pnin is an aesthete of the highest order, living in a universe of art that he alone can see.

Let us turn to the denouement of the housewarming party. This is a drama, and my ideally bald protagonist is its poor director, its irregular Belasco. The scene is Professor Pnin's parlor, the time is not the right one, and the action is the faculty party to end all faculty parties. By the end of it, indeed, Pnin is an ended member of the faculty, soon to lose his position at Waindell College. Turn to chapter six, part thirteen, page 171. A cold refrigerator heralds Pnin's larger impulse in the latter half of the first paragraph: the preservation of the party scene. For though outwardly Pnin seems to be merely involved in the mundane business of the cleaning the room, he has a larger mnemonic project here. The ordering of this passage is telling: "He surveyed the living room and started to tidy it up"—this is the volta of the paragraph, moving from Pnin's state immediately after the party's end to Pnin's survey of his living room. It is crucial—crucial, Bunny—that my professor surveys the room and tidies it in the same short breath. The sentence might act as what our benumbed elementary school educators, when teaching the craft of writing to nine-year-olds, call a "topic sentence." The reader expects an account of Pnin tidying the room simultaneous to his survey of it. But Pnin, or his narrator, subverts that expectation—the reader never sees him tidy the room, never sees the clean and empty space. Rather, the image of the debris exists even after it has been cleaned—enduring, it seems, in Pnin's mind.

The descriptions of the trash left behind by Joan and Betty and the Thayers are lovingly and intimately detailed. Pnin's eye makes art and memory of debris: this, then, is a

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. "Lecture on 'The Metamorphosis.'" 1989. The Kafka Project. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.

metonymical still life. First in his survey is an empty bowl. This, to Pnin, is an image imbued with both beauty and pride: “A last drop of Pnin’s Punch glistened in its beautiful bowl.” Here, the alliteration of “Pnin’s Punch” is doubled, or mirrored in “beautiful bowl,” lending a hearty sense of harmony to the image of emptiness. Each alliterative phrase is also consonant, formed by *p*, *n*, *b*, and *l*—round sounds, that evoke the smooth contour of the bowl. This is Pnin’s own contribution to the scene: a bowl of punch, clearly tasty to the party-goers and verbally pleasing to its descriptor. As Pnin sees it, then, he has lent both beauty and “glistening” harmony to the scene of the party.

Next in the metonymical leftovers is Joan, represented by a “lipstick-stained cigarette butt” that she has “crooked” into her saucer. The verb is revealing—that Joan is able to bend her cigarette butt indicates that her cigarette had not been finished, yet her choice to bend it at all suggests the finality of its use. The “crooked” item, in this way, evokes Joan at her peremptory best—remember that this is the woman who will decisively hang up the telephone without fully considering whether or not she should. The lipstick stain on her cigarette, meanwhile, remembers her careful self-presentation: “Dark-haired, long-lashed, bob-haired Joan” in an outfit “smarter than anything other faculty wives could devise” (154). Joan’s beauty and brisk nature, then, are preserved in Pnin’s perception of the trash she has left behind. Interestingly, Joan’s item is paired in the same sentence with Betty’s contribution, suggesting a relationship or comparison between the two. Betty has not left anything behind, but this absence is itself noted: “Betty had left no trace and had taken all the glasses back to the kitchen.” This detail bespeaks Betty’s nature: she has been a thoughtful guest, “respectful” (155) from the start and “controlled” (159) even as the effects of alcohol began to tell on her fellow guests. Her last words to Pnin nicely mirror her mark on the room: “I shall not forgive

you [...] for not letting me do the dishes” (166). And so Betty, helpful and happy, is remembered in the slight cleanness of a space that once was messy. These two ladies, one a careless guest, one a careful guest, thus remain at Pnin’s party, marking his still life with things they have and have not left behind.

The leftovers resume with Mrs. Thayer, who has left behind a “booklet of pretty multicolored matches” by a “bit of nougat.” Her item is unique in two regards. First, alone of every item in this scene, the matchbook has not been discarded or left behind, but “forgotten.” Second, unlike Pnin’s punch or Joan’s cigarette, the matches are still usable. Mrs. Thayer’s item, pretty but forgotten, is symbolically in keeping with Pnin’s perception of the woman: pretty colors remember her warmth and helpfulness in finding him lodgings, but their abandonment suggests her seeming disorganization and forgetfulness in the episode of the recalled book (74-75). Unlike Joan and Betty, Mrs. Thayer has a sentence of her own—perhaps because she has left behind not one but two items. The bit of nougat simply echoes what the matchbook has already indicated. On one hand, it is sweet, as Mrs. Thayer has been to Pnin. On the other hand, it is an unfinished bit of one of Pnin’s refreshments, suggesting that she tried his food and chose not to finish it. Buried in there is a hint of Pnin’s resentment towards Mrs. Thayer, like his earlier resentment of her in the library scene.

Mr. Thayer’s contribution to the scene is an assortment of twisted paper napkins—apt, given his reputation for obscure erudition and keeping a diary in “cryptogrammed verse” (157). Hagen’s item, semicolonned into conjunction with the paper napkins, is more intriguing: a “messy cigar,” “quenched [...] in an uneaten bunchlet of grapes.” Here, finally, the scene remembers hearty Professor Hagen. The association of Hagen with “messy,” of course, recalls the tangled situation in which his leaving Waindell College has resulted in Pnin losing his

position. At the same time, however, “messy” might also indicate Hagen’s thorough enjoyment of the cigar, champed and disintegrated as it is. The word “quenched” is also doubly suggestive. In one sense, it refers to the quenching—or extinguishing—of Pnin’s hope for betterment, where the “uneaten bunchlet of grapes” is Pnin’s untasted associate professorship. In the other sense, “quenched” carries the sense of the satisfaction or slaking of thirst, suggesting Hagen’s enjoyment of the party. The ambiguity of Hagen’s metonymical item indicates, then, Pnin’s conflicted attitude towards his friend.

Pnin’s still life, then, shields him somewhat from the awful revelation at the end of his party. In it is the remembrance of revelry and kindness, complicated by resentment and rudeness—but the remembrance of human company nonetheless. Pnin, on the brink of leaving behind everything he has built in his position at Waindell College, contemplates that loneliness and chooses to carefully preserve his human relationships, represented by the articles that remain of his party. Pnin is not alone—he is never alone—so long as that art endures in memory.