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Nabokov and the Campus Novel

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Vladmir Nabokov's *Pnin*, (1955) is, in one of its many aspects, a very early example of the "campus novel", written and published before that subgenre of modern literary fiction was identified and named. In *Pale Fire* (1962) Nabokov returned to the university campus for the principal location of his story. I will try to identify the specific nature of Nabokov's contribution to the evolution of the campus novel and his possible influence on other practitioners of this kind of fiction.

(This is the lightly revised text of a public lecture delivered in Nice on 23rd June 2006 at the end of the Third International Conference on Nabokov in Nice. It was designed for a general audience without a specialised knowledge of either Nabokov or the Anglo-American campus novel; and incorporates some passages from my introduction to the Everyman's Library edition of Nabokov's Pnin *(2004))*

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In English "campus novel" is a term used to designate a work of fiction whose action takes place mainly in a college or university, and which is mainly concerned with the lives of university professors and junior teachers–"faculty" as they are collectively known in America, "dons" or "academic staff" in England–and to a lesser extent with their students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. In the campus novel students are usually objects perceived by the academic staff, rather than subjects from whose point of view the story is told. This emphasis on the teachers rather than on their students is a distinctive feature of the campus novel, which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Before that time there were many novels about student life, and university education is often an important episode in novels of the kind named by German criticism the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of a young man's emotional and psychological development from youth to maturity; but we do not find before the Second World War, except for a few murder mysteries, novels focussed on the professional and private lives of university teachers. An alternative name for the campus novel is "academic novel," and some critics who

write on the subject prefer it. I shall use these terms more or less interchangeably. “Academic novel” is perhaps more inclusive, but “campus novel” is more expressive of the unity of place which characterises the genre.

The application of the Latin word, *campus,* meaning “field,” to the physical space occupied by a college or university, was originally an American usage, beginning in the early nineteenth century, and only in the late 1950s did it enter British English. The earliest citation in the Oxford English Dictionary of “campus” as a word applied to a British university was in 1958, referring to the University of East Anglia, one of the new universities then being built on the American model–that is, a unified, self-contained site in a pastoral or park-like setting. So the first English campus novel of real significance, Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim,* published in 1954, cannot properly be so called since the word was not then current in British English. In fact I have not been able to discover when the term “campus novel” first came into currency in either country, but I suspect it was in the late 1950s or early 1960s. The only quotation in the Oxford English Dictionary in which the phrase “campus novel” occurs is dated 1968, but it was obviously a familiar term by then.[1]

Some critics would argue that the first British campus or academic novel was C.P.Snow’s *The Masters,* which was published in 1951, three years before *Lucky Jim,* but I don’t think it is sufficiently typical to qualify for that accolade. *The Masters* is one volume in a long sequence of novels, narrated by the same central character, about the conflict of principle and personality in various institutions. The Master of a College in the University of Cambridge is dying, and the novel follows the political intrigues of two rival candidates to succeed him. There is very little about the academic profession itself–teaching and scholarship–and virtually no mention of students. It is a good novel, but it did not provide a model for future English practitioners of

[1] The English poet and critic Donald Davie wrote in the *Listener,* 4th July 1968: “The campus novel, a literary subkind that has languished these last years, is surely in for a revival now that dons have had the heady experience of being news, sometimes on the front page.” He was of course referring to the demonstrations and occupations in British universities inspired by “les événements” in Paris earlier that year. Davie was at the time professor of English at Essex University, where student protesters were among the most militant in the country.

the campus novel as *Lucky Jim* did. Its overall tone is tragic, or elegiac, whereas the campus novel is typically comic or satirical. *Lucky Jim* is the story of a diffident, accident-prone young assistant lecturer in the History Department of a provincial University who, in order to keep his job, must pretend to share the bourgeois attitudes and life style of his superiors though in fact he despises them. Much humour is generated by the contrast between his external behaviour and his internal thoughts. It was a book that appealed strongly to many people in the 1950s and '60s who were the first members of their families to go to university and found themselves promoted by education into the professional classes without feeling at ease there. The next important English campus novel was probably Malcolm Bradbury's *Eating People is Wrong,* (1959) which has some things in common with *Lucky Jim,* but also shows the influence of the more intellectual comedy of Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe,* published in 1952.

The Groves of Academe was, in my opinion, the first classic campus novel. It was quickly followed by Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* in 1954 and by Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* in 1955. There were personal and literary connections between all three books, and I shall argue in a moment that the convergence of these three highly gifted authors on the university or college as a subject and setting for fiction, within the space of a few years, contributed crucially to the rapid evolution of the genre. But it is striking that the campus novel emerged independently at about the same time in both England and America. Kingsley Amis may have read *The Groves of Academe* while he was writing *Lucky Jim,* but we know that he was working on his novel well before Mary McCarthy's novel was published in 1952 in America and the following year in England. So why did novels about universities suddenly start to appear in both countries at about the same time, and quickly develop into a quite popular and still thriving genre of literary fiction?

There is an obvious sociological explanation. In both Britain and America the period after the Second World War saw great expansion in university education. Many new universities were built, and old ones expanded. There were job opportunities in arts faculties which attracted aspiring or practising writers, especially in America, where "creative writing" was already enshrined in the academic syllabus,

and professional writers were hired to teach it along with conventional literature courses. In short, university teaching, with its generally agreeable conditions, flexible hours, and long vacations, became a favoured second occupation for writers, a source of steady income while they wrote their books in their spare time. And since novelists tend to get their ideas from the milieux they inhabit, it is not surprising that this produced in both countries a steady stream of campus or academic novels. These novels, it is worth noting, are invariably concerned with teachers in the Arts or Humanities, because that is where most university-based novelists work. The first scientific campus novel of any significance was I believe *Cantor's Dilemma,* by the distinguished chemist, Carl Djerassi, published in 1989. More recently, novelists whose education was basically literary have become interested in the sciences and explored this side of academic life in fiction. The American writer Richard Powers, author of *The Gold Bug Variations* (1993) and *Galatea 2.2* (1995), is an example, and I might mention my own *Thinks…* (2001) in this connection.

There is another reason why universities and colleges appeal to novelists as settings for fiction. Umberto Eco observes in his *Reflections on "The Name of the Rose"*, that "Writing a novel is a cosmological matter, like the story told by Genesis."[2] In other words, the novelist must first create or imagine a world which has some kind of logical relation to the real world, within which he can explore the themes that interest him through narrative. The university or college provides such a world ready-made, so to speak, a "small world" which is a kind of microcosm of the larger world, with its own distinctive customs, seasons, rituals, and foibles, where the factors that motivate human behaviou–power, ambition, rivalry, lust, anxiety–can be displayed and anatomised. The fact that universities are institutions dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of truth and the preservation of high culture, but staffed by human beings with ordinary human weaknesses and often more than ordinary eccentricities, no doubt explains why the campus novel is a predominantly comic or satiric genre. Stuart Sutherland, one-time professor of psychology at the University of Sussex, in England, wrote a courageous book called *Breakdown* (1976) about his own mental illness, in which he observed

[2] Umberto Eco, *Reflections on* The Name of the Rose (1984) p.20.

that in any other social context people would have recognized much sooner that he was going mad but that in a university his symptoms were tolerantly regarded as mere eccentricities. (He was obsessed with saving time for his research to the extent of shaving while driving to work and dictating letters to his secretary through the door of the toilet.)

Here, perhaps, we may also find an explanation for the fact that the campus novel is almost exclusively an Anglo-American genre. I know from personal experience that there is a good deal of interest in it among Continental European teachers and students of modern English and American literature, because I am frequently solicited for assistance by students in France, Germany, Italy and other European countries who are writing theses on the campus novel. And yet there have been very few campus novels produced by native writers in these countries, and those few, I am told, have not made much literary impact. I think there are two possible reasons for this. First, until relatively recently, Continental European universities were not designed as campuses, territorially defined and self-contained; they were made up of faculties randomly distributed through the cities to which they belonged. Most of the students who attended them lived at home, and for them and their teachers there was no clear boundary marking off academic life from the life of the city at large. The enclosed, often isolated, residential university or college on the Anglo-American model is a very different environment, and more readily productive of the kind of behaviour that is the raw material of fiction.

Second, European academics are more concerned about preserving their professional dignity than their equivalents in Britain and America. The Anglo-American campus novel fascinates Europeans precisely because it seems so transgressive, in mocking and exposing the follies and misdemeanours of the academic profession, especially when the novelist is, as is usually the case, a member of that profession. The question I am most often asked by academics in my travels about the world is: “What do (or did) your colleagues think about your novels?” I usually answer that they have enough of a sense of humour to enjoy them. But a continental European professor would risk the deep disapproval of his colleagues if he wrote such a novel as *Small World.* Indeed, a female lecturer in a Polish university in the

days of communist rule who proposed merely to translate *Small World* was told by her Head of Department that if she did so she would never be promoted. (I am glad to say that she defied, and survived, the threat.)

Graham Greene has written about the "disloyalty" which the novelist must cultivate if he is to be true to his vocation. He was thinking of the Catholic Church, but the saying applies equally to academia. It has to be admitted that there *is* something transgressive in writing a satirical novel about an institution to which you belong, and campus novelists have learned various ways of dealing with this problem. One is to get out of the institution as soon as you can–but not every campus-based novelist wishes or is able to do that. Another is to take care that your novel is received as a work of fiction. Most campus novels are prefaced by an author's note to the effect that all the characters and their actions are imaginary, and most invent a fictitious name and location for the college or university in which the story is set. But these precautions have not deterred readers from treating these books as *romans à clef*, often with some justification. The American Professor Elaine Showalter, who recently published a critical study of the academic novel, *Faculty Towers: the academic novel and its discontents* (2005), claims that she encountered three characters in different novels based on herself–not altogether flatteringly–in the course of her researches. Perhaps because academia *is* such small world, novels about it will always be read with this kind of curiosity, which has more to do with gossip than literary criticism. And then there is always the risk of life imitating art. I have myself twice invented universities which a few years later, to my embarrassment, came into existence in the real world: University College, Limerick in *Small World* and the University of Gloucester in *Thinks…*

Vladimir Nabokov was a European writer who became a university teacher in America in order to escape Europe, and became in consequence a kind of American writer. His life story up to that point was a dramatic one. He was born in 1899 into a patrician Russian family who were driven into exile by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. In 1922 his father was murdered in Berlin by an assassin while trying to shield Milyukov. After studying at Cambridge University in England, Nabokov scraped a living as a writer in Berlin, and later in

Paris, publishing novels in Russian (some of which were translated into English, German and French) without making any great impression on the literary world. As the intentions of Nazi Germany became increasingly evident in the 1930s, Nabokov was desperate to escape the Continent with his Jewish wife, Véra, and their son, Dimitri. In 1939 he made urgent attempts to obtain a university post in England, and it is interesting to speculate what kind of novels in English he might have eventually written if he had succeeded. We might have had a Nabokovian *Lucky Jim* (A good task for a literary competition would be to write the first paragraph of that hypothetical book.) In the event it was to the United States that the little family escaped from Nazi-occupied France in 1940, virtually penniless refugees. In spite of lacking conventional academic credentials, Nabokov was able to find employment as a university teacher of Russian and comparative literature, first at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, a small, select private women's college outside Boston, and from 1948 at Cornell University, one of America's élite "Ivy league" universities in upstate New York. Over the same period he began to rebuild his career as a writer of fiction, now in the medium of English. It was one of the most extraordinary linguistic feats in modern literature. His first two novels in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) and *Bend Sinister* (1947) met with little success. But the essays and stories he published over the same period attracted the attention and admiration of editors and fellow writers, and in 1944 *The New Yorker* magazine, which at that time enjoyed a uniquely prestigious position in the American literary world, acquired the right to first consideration of his work.

Soon after his arrival in the USA, Nabokov met Edmund Wilson, the most distinguished non-academic literary critic in America. Wilson, who had learned Russian in order to read Pushkin immediately recognized Nabokov's intellectual brilliance and literary gifts. He was enormously helpful to the émigré, helping him with advice and introductions to publishers and literary editors. At this time Wilson was married to Mary McCarthy, a generation younger than himself, then at the beginning of what would become a brilliant literary career as novelist and critic. The Wilsons and the Nabokovs became friends; they visited each other and the two men corresponded regularly. In 1942 Mary McCarthy published her first book, a collection of linked

stories called *The Company She Keeps.* When Nabokov read it, he wrote to Wilson, describing the book as "a splendid thing, clever, poetic and new. In fact I am quite flabbergasted – if that is the right word."[3] Wilson was McCarthy's second husband. They were both feisty, strong-willed characters, and in 1945 Mary left him after a violent quarrel, taking their son with her. They divorced, and in due course she married again, but for a few years she was obliged to earn a precarious living by her writing and occasional teaching jobs. In the fall of 1945 she took a one-year appointment at Bard College, small liberal arts college for women in the Hudson Valley of New York State. A few years later, in 1948, she taught for a semester at Sarah Lawrence, another college for women with a "progressive" educational philosophy, in the country near New York City. Not long afterwards she began to write a novel based on these two experiences, *The Groves of Academe,* set on a fictional college campus in a pastoral setting called Jocelyn. Edmund Wilson recommended Nabokov to read it; though estranged from Mary he still took an appreciative interest in her writing. "Mary's new book is very good–in some ways the best thing she has done. I think you ought to read it," he wrote to Nabokov in February 1952. Nabokov replied: "I have read Mary's book. It is very amusing and quite brilliant in parts."[4] He could not resist criticising the name of McCarthy's character Domna Rejnev, the young teacher of Russian Literature and French at Jocelyn, as being inappropriate to the daughter and granddaughter of upper class political exiles from Russia. Nevertheless, he was impressed, and I believe *The Groves of Academe* may have planted in his mind, if only unconsciously, the thought of making similar fictional use of his own academic experience.

Mary McCarthy's novel takes its title from a line by the Latin poet Horace, which serves as an epigraph: "*Atque inter silvas academi quaerere verum"*: "And go seek for truth in the groves of academe." But the novel suggests that the truth is the last thing you will find in an American liberal arts college. The mainspring of the plot–as of so many campus novels that followed, including Nabokov's *Pnin*–is tenure, the question whether a temporary appointment will be converted into a permanent, secure one. But whereas in most of those

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[3] Simon Karlinsky, ed., *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* (1979), p.274

[4] *Ibid.* pp. 273-4

novels the central character is the hero or heroine, and sympathy is generated by putting their hopes of achieving tenure in jeopardy, in *The Groves of Academe* the central character is an antihero, a thoroughly unsympathetic and undeserving character who unscrupulously manipulates all the others for his own ends. He is Henry Mulcahy, an idle, irresponsible, middle-aged Irish-American instructor in the English Department. This is how the narrator describes him:

> "He was intermittently aware of a quality of personal unattractiveness that emanated from him like a miasma; this made him self-pitying, uxorious and addicted also to self-love…As a prophet of modern literature in a series of halfway-good colleges, he had gladly accepted an identification with the sacred untouchables of the modern martyrology – with Joyce, the obscure language teacher in Trieste; with tubercular Kafka in Prague…with the sickly *tisane*-drenched Proust; with Marx even, and his carbuncles…The unwholesome whiteness of his long, pear-shaped body, the droop of his trousers, his children's runny noses and damp bottoms, his wife's woman's complaint, the sand sprinkling the lashes of his nearsighted, glaucous eyes, which had made him the butt of students, were not antipathetic to him but on the contrary loveable, as a manifesto of ethical difference, like the bleeding holy pictures of his childhood, the yellowed palms from Palm Sunday, the vessel of holy water blessed by the Pope."[5]

I hope that passage gives some indication of the deadly wit of McCarthy's prose style.

In the first chapter Mulcahy receives a letter from the college President warning him that his temporary contract will not be renewed at the end of the academic year, and immediately starts plotting how to get this decision reversed by leaking the information to his colleagues and students and soliciting their support. It is a tribute to McCarthy's skill that she makes us believe that such a charmless fellow could succeed in this endeavour. The background to the novel is the campaign of Senator Joe McCarthy (no relation to Mary) in the late 1940s and early 1950s against alleged Communists in public life. Mulcahy pretends he was once a Party member and is being

[5] Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe*, Panther edition 1964, p. 9.

persecuted for political reasons. The liberal faculty feel obliged to defend his cause with what the narrator calls, “a sense of vicarious outrage – the vocational endowment of all educators.” Mulcahy also pretends that his wife has a medical condition which could prove fatal if she should receive a shock such as the termination of his contract. His colleagues have their moments of doubt, but find themselves drawn inexorably into his web of fabrication and deceit. The reason Mulcahy succeeds is that he sincerely believes in the essential truth of his own lies, and this gives them an irresistible and infectious power. In the end it is the College President who is forced to resign, by the machinations of Henry Mulcahy.

Since she was only a temporary visitor at Bard and Sarah Lawrence, Mary McCarthy could afford to be fairly unscrupulous herself about basing her characters on her colleagues at those colleges. Nearly every character has been identified with a real person, including the head of the English Department at Bard, and the President of Sarah Lawrence, who recognized themselves in the corresponding positions at the fictional Jocelyn College. Henry Mulcahy was apparently based on a man in the Bard philosophy Department. He cropped up later in Mary McCarthy’s life when he wrote a hostile review of a book by her friend Hannah Arendt. “The review has the characteristic mark,” Mary wrote to Hannah, “a kind of glistening malignancy.” Many reviewers of *The Groves of Academe* accused her of a similar malignancy towards her characters, and it was not long before she received some of her own medicine from a novel by Randall Jarrell called *Pictures from an Institution,* published in 1954.

Randall Jarrell’s reputation has declined since his death in ambiguous circumstances, in 1964, at the age of 51; but in his lifetime he was a highly respected poet and critic. He met Nabokov in the 1940s and professed himself charmed by him, though Nabokov was more reserved about Jarrell. Jarrell taught for several years at Sarah Lawrence College, and around 1950-51 wrote the draft of a prose portrait, at once affectionate and satirical, of a fictional progressive college called “Benton” that was obviously based on Sarah Lawrence. The publisher he showed it to recommended that he should revise it and make it more like a novel. This he did, and meanwhile Mary McCarthy published *The Groves of Academe.* Although Jarrell had not been teaching at Sarah Lawrence when Mary McCarthy was there, he

had met her, and he would have perceived how she used that experience, and her time at Bard, in her novel. He put into his own revised novel a very prejudicial and very recognizable portrait of Mary McCarthy, under the name of Gertrude Johnson, a sophisticated, abrasive, and much-feared New York writer ("when she patted someone on the head you could be sure the head was about to appear, smoked, in her next novel")[6] who comes to teach at Benton for an academic year because she is "between novels", but as soon as she meets the President at a party:

> She realised, suddenly, that she was no longer between novels…How can we expect novelists to be moral, when their trade forces them to treat every end they meet as no more than an imperfect means to a novel? The President was such invaluable material that Gertrude walked around and around him rubbing up and down against his legs, looking affectionately into the dish of nice fresh mackerel he wore instead of a face; and the dish looked back, uneasy, unsuspecting.[7]

Gertrude spends her time at Benton collecting material to write a satirical novel about the place, to be published after she leaves it. Everybody who was anybody in the East Coast literary world recognized that Gertrude was a damaging caricature of Mary McCarthy, though Jarrell denied it, and McCarthy herself claimed she couldn't see the resemblance, which was probably the best thing to do in the circumstances. Many readers thought that Jarrell weakened his satire by accusing McCarthy of using and abusing real people in her fiction when that was exactly what he himself was doing–sometimes quite viciously:

> Gertrude had a style in which you couldn't tell the truth if you tried–and when, except when it was a shameful one, had Gertrude ever tried?…But as a writer Gertrude had one fault more radical than all the rest: she did not know–or rather did not believe–what it was like to be a human being…she had not signed the human contract when the rest of us signed it.[8]

Even in its final form, *Pictures from an Institution* resembles a series of episodes and character sketches rather than a novel. It has no

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[6] Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution,* Penguin ed. 1959, p.29.
[7] *Ibid.* pp 10-11.
[8] *Ibid.* pp.142-3

continuous story which connects all the bits of which it is made, and invites admiration mainly for its witty, mannered, rhetorically complex style. The same was said–with less justification–of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* when it was published a year later. And like *Pnin*, *Pictures from an Institution* has an "I" narrator who appears to belong to the same fictional world as the rest of the characters, but paradoxically has omniscient access to their private thoughts and deeds. *Pnin* was published in 1955, four of its seven chapters having been previously published in the *New Yorker*, the first of them in November 1953, where Randall Jarrell probably read it–but he would have nearly finished his own novel by then. And by the time Nabokov could have read *Pictures from an Institution* the tone and structure of *Pnin* would have already been established. In short, there is no evidence for influence in either direction between Nabokov and Jarrell, though there may have been some from Mary McCarthy on Nabokov and certainly on Jarrell. More striking, and in a way more interesting, are the resemblances between these three novels about academia, all conceived quite independently and written at overlapping periods of time. All three give priority to analysis and description over action, and seek to hold the reader's attention by stylistic virtuosity. All three tease the knowing reader with coded references to real institutions and more or less thinly disguised portraits of real people. All three are packed with literary allusions. All three are predominantly comic and satirical in their stance towards the world they evoke. Between them they provided the template for campus novels in the future.

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From 1950 onwards, in the intervals allowed by his teaching duties and other literary and scholarly projects, Nabokov began to work on a novel set for the first time in America, based on a short story about a man sexually attracted to prepubescent girls which he had written in Russian in 1939 but left unpublished. This of course was *Lolita*, the novel which would eventually bring him fame and fortune. But the composition of it caused him much labour and anxiety. In the summer of 1953, when he was on sabbatical leave from Cornell, and at last drawing towards the end of *Lolita*, Nabokov wrote a short story called "Pnin", about the comical misadventures of an expatriate Russian professor, who teaches at Waindell College, which closely resembles

Cornell, on his way to deliver a lecture to a Women's Club in a small American town called Cremona. Nabokov created the new character partly as a relief from the dark obsessive world of *Lolita*–in his own words (in a letter to a friend) as a "brief sunny escape from its intolerable spell."[9] But it is clear from his letters at the time that the new project was also a kind of insurance against the difficulties that he expected to encounter in trying to publish a novel in which a middle-aged man describes in lavish and eloquent detail his infatuation with, and seduction of, a twelve-year-old girl. From an early stage in the development of the character of Pnin he planned to write a series of stories about him which could be published independently in *The New Yorker*, and later strung together to make a book, while he tried to find a publisher for *Lolita.* This partly explains the unusual form of *Pnin.*

Is it a novel or a collection of short stories? Readers have disagreed about the answer to this question, and some have grumbled that it is neither one thing nor the other – arguing that the chapters are too slight either to satisfy as individual stories or to add up to a proper novel. In fact the stories are artfully well-formed, and reward close and careful reading. What seems like a random detail often turns out to be a narrative clue, the full significance of which only becomes evident later. The repetition of motifs also gives the stories a satisfying symmetry, individually and collectively. Squirrels pop up in one form or another in nearly every story, as do reflections in windows, puddles and mirrors. And in spite of the chronological gaps between the actions of the stories, they describe a continuous narrative arc, poignantly tracing Pnin's quest, which is ultimately frustrated, to find a permanent home - in the double sense of a house and a job–at Waindell.

Nevertheless Nabokov experienced some difficulty in getting his book published because it did not fit into any recognized generic category. Two publishing houses rejected it before Doubleday finally accepted it, and Nabokov's correspondence with these publishers gives us insights into his highly self-conscious and self-confident artistry. He writes, for instance, in February 1954, to his editor at Viking, who had published his previous books but had doubts about this one:

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[9] Galya Diment, *Pniniad* (1997) p. 44

> I cannot tamper with either the plot or the construction of the thing… You seem to regret that the book is, as you put it, "not a novel". I do not know if it is or not…All I know is that PNIN is not a collection of sketches. I do not write sketches. But must we pigeonhole him into any kind of category?[10]

It must be admitted that if we *do* decide to categorize *Pnin* as a novel, it is not a campus novel in the straightforward sense exemplified by *The Groves of Academe*; but it does, as it were, contain a campus novel within it, alongside another kind of novel, the novel of expatriation and exile. Pnin is, like Nabokov himself, a refugee from Europe and originally Russia, and into this character Nabokov put much of his own nostalgia for the country of his youth and anger at the political forces that had driven him out of it. Pnin is subject to sudden visions, sometimes triggered by a "seizure" of the heart, in which he poignantly recalls episodes from his Russian past. For instance at the end of the first story, as he waits to address the ladies of Cremona, their expectant faces remind him of an occasion when as a schoolboy he recited a poem by Pushkin at a school festival in the presence of his proud parents, and the hall fills with the phantoms of other figures and moments in his Russian past.

> In the middle of the front row of seats he saw one of his Baltic aunts, wearing the pearls and the lace and the blond wig she had worn at all the performances given by the great ham actor Khodotov, whom she had adored from afar before drifting into insanity. Next to her, shyly smiling, sleek dark head inclined, gentle brown gaze shining up at Pnin from under velvet eyebrows, sat a dead sweetheart of his, fanning herself with a programme. Murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people…[11]

In a later chapter we learn that this sweetheart was a Jew and perished in a Nazi extermination camp. This is emotionally heavier material than is usually admitted into the campus novel. Yet the prevailing tone *is* comic. Pnin's propensity to make mistakes, his difficulties with the English language, his absent-mindedness, his physical clumsiness, are a constant source of amusement. His physical appearance–the

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[10] *Letters,* p.179

[11] *Pnin,* Everyman Library Edn. (2004) p. 18.

impressive combination of head, shoulders and torso that tapers off disappointingly in "a pair of spindly legs… and frail-looking, almost feminine feet,"–is an anatomical anticlimax, an emblem of the kind of situation he is constantly getting himself into by some error of understanding or judgment.

Originally Nabokov had intended that at the end of the book Pnin would die, with the *magnum opus* he had been writing all his life unfinished, but later decided on a less bleak conclusion. The narrative question which draws the threads of *Pnin* together at its climax is essentially the same as that of *The Groves of Academe* and *Lucky Jim* and a score of other academic novels: will the central character keep his job? Chapter Six, in which this theme becomes overt is indeed a kind of campus novel in miniature. This is how it begins:

> The 1954 Fall Term had begun. Again the marble neck of a homely Venus in the vestibule of Humanities Hall received the vermilion imprint, in applied lipstick, of a mimicked kiss. Again the *Waindell Recorder* discussed the Parking Problem. Again in the margins of library books earnest freshmen inscribed such helpful glosses as "Description of nature," or "Irony"; and in a pretty edition of Mallarmé's poems an especially able scholiast had already underlined in violet ink the difficult word *oiseaux* and scrawled above it "birds"… And still the College creaked on. Hard-working graduates, with pregnant wives, still wrote dissertations on Dostoevski and Simone de Beauvoir. Literary departments still laboured under the impression that Stendhal, Galsworthy, Dreiser and Mann were great writers. Word plastics like "conflict" and "pattern" were still in vogue. As usual, sterile instructors successfully endeavoured to "produce" by reviewing the books of more fertile colleagues, and as usual, a crop of lucky faculty members were enjoying or about to enjoy various awards received earlier in the year. Thus, an amusing little grant was affording the versatile Starr couple… of the Fine Arts Department the unique opportunity of recording post-war folk songs in East Germany… Another charitable institution had come to the assistance of Dr Bodo von Falternfels, to enable him to complete "a bibliography concerned with such published and manuscript material as has been devoted in recent years to a critical appraisal of the influence of Nietzsche's disciples on Modern Thought." And last,

> but not least, the bestowal of a particularly generous grant was allowing the renowned Waindell psychiatrist, Dr Ralph Aurora, to apply to ten thousand elementary school pupils the so-called Fingerbowl Test, in which the child is asked to dip his index in cups of coloured fluids whereupon the proportion between length of digit and wetted part is measured and plotted in all kinds of fascinating graphs.[12]

One can catch here what one might call anticipatory echoes of many later campus novels, including perhaps my own. Nabokov's deceptively suave prose is a velvet glove stretched over steely sarcasm. The earnest student's marginal gloss, "Irony," in this passage is itself a deliciously appropriate comment on the sentence in which it appears. Later in the passage Nabokov has fun at the expense of some of his own *bêtes noirs*: Communism (the unpromising post-war East German folk-songs), the reputations of certain revered authors, and psychiatry.

It is typical of Pnin's character that for most of the duration of Chapter Six he is blissfully unaware that, as the reader knows, his job is in jeopardy. He is only concerned that a small party he is giving to celebrate his move to comfortable new accommodation should be a success. Parties are a staple feature of campus novels because they conveniently bring the characters together in large groups, and loosen their tongues and reduce their inhibitions with alcohol, thus provoking amusing, indecorous or impolitic revelations. Pnin is also unaware that he has confused the identities of two colleagues and invited the anthropologist Professor Tristram W.Thomas under the impression that he is the ornithologist Professor Thomas Wynn. Throughout this scene we are kept in comic suspense as to whether Pnin will betray his mistake. He narrowly escapes this embarrassment. The party is a great success (in his own eyes anyway) and he bids his guests goodbye feeling well pleased with himself. Then Dr Hagen, the head of the German department, under whose umbrella Pnin teaches at Waindell, learns from another departing guest that Pnin is planning to buy the house he has just rented, and Hagen feels obliged to return and tell him, in a well-meaning but clumsy way, that his appointment will soon be terminated. Hagen himself is leaving Waindell, and no other Head of Department will take him on. (Pnin's chief enemy is the

[12] *Ibid.* pp. 102-3

Professor of French Literature, Leonard Blorenge, "who disliked literature and …had no French") Pnin's euphoria is shattered by this news. Sadly washing the soiled dishes and glasses afterwards he accidentally drops a pair of nutcrackers into the soapy suds containing the beautiful crystal bowl given to him by his son Victor and hears a sickening muffled noise of cracking glass. The reader winces in sympathy with Pnin as he suffers this cruel, additional blow of Fate.

> Pnin hurled the towel into a corner and, turning away, stood for a moment staring at the blackness beyond the threshold of the open back door… Then with a moan of anguished anticipation he went back to the sink and, bracing himself, dipped his hand deep into the foam. A jagger of glass stung him. Gently he removed a broken goblet. The beautiful bowl was intact. He took a fresh dish towel and went on with his household work. [13]

It is a brilliantly executed reversal of expectation, which relieves the reader almost as much as Pnin himself, and ensures that the essentially comic tone of the book is preserved.

Andrew Field, Nabokov's first biographer, with whom he later quarrelled, observed that *Pnin* was the only book Nabokov published with the traditional disclaimer that any resemblance between his characters and living persons was purely coincidental. In fact, Field claimed, "the book is teeming with people from Cornell".[14] The character of Pnin himself was certainly based in part on the historian Marc Szeftel, an émigré Russian historian who was a colleague of Nabokov's. Galya Diment has scrupulously collected and displayed the evidence for this identification in her book, *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* (1997), to which I am indebted. By collating the *New Yorker* texts of the Pnin stories with their eventual form in the published book, she shows that Nabokov revised some of the biographical facts of Pnin's life, making them correspond more closely to Szeftel's. For instance in the *New Yorker* Pnin is said to have come to Waindell College in 1948, the same year that Nabokov himself joined the faculty at Cornell; but in the book version the date of Pnin's arrival is put back to 1945, when Szeftel was appointed. Galya Diment suggests that this process, of making Pnin's life history

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[13] *Ibid.* p. 129.

[14] Andrew Field, *The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1987), p. 291

more like Szeftel's, was connected with a perceptible warming of the author's attitude to his character as the book progressed.

It is fairly certain, however, that Pnin was not an instantly recognizable portrait or caricature of Szeftel, for this would have been impossibly embarrassing for both men, who were not only colleagues, but also collaborators on a scholarly project and met socially. Nabokov told Andrew Field that one day, when the Pnin stories were appearing in the *New Yorker*, Szeftel casually remarked to him with a sigh, "Vee are all Pnins," and Nabokov commented: "He had forgotten that I was writing that book and did not see that he was a character speaking to an author."[15] In fact there is evidence that Szeftel suspected the character of Pnin was partially based on himself, and somewhat resented the resemblance, but while they were colleagues he and Nabokov seem to have made a tacit mutual agreement not to bring this out into the open between them, a not unusual arrangement between novelists and their friends.

Very few readers of the text in either version would have seen anything significant in the dates of Pnin's appointment–except members of the Cornell faculty. This suggests to me that Nabokov may have used Szeftel as a model for Pnin partly to distance *himself* from Pnin in the eyes of those who knew him, because the author did have some things in common with his fictional character. Nabokov's lecturing style, for instance–reading from a carefully written text and making little or no eye contact with his audience–was similar to Pnin's. Nabokov too was capable of absent-mindedness, and on one famous occasion began lecturing obliviously to the wrong class until rescued by a student who had seen him entering the wrong lecture-room. (He dealt with the mistake more suavely than Pnin would have managed, however, saying to the students as he left the room: "You have just seen the 'Coming Attraction' for Literature 325. If you are interested you may register next fall.") Pnin also shares, in a milder form, several of his creator's intellectual prejudices – against Freud and psychotherapy, for instance. But what links Nabokov to Pnin most strongly is that they are both exiles with painfully nostalgic memories of pre-revolutionary Russia. It may have been to keep this powerful current of emotion under control that Nabokov made Pnin a more

[15] *Ibid.*

comical and absurd character than himself, borrowing traits from Szeftel.

Nabokov also distanced himself from his central character by introducing himself as another character in the book, referred to as "V.N.", who is in fact the narrator of the whole book, and whose appointment to Waindell seals Pnin's fate. Pnin's only hope of being kept on at the College is to work under V.N.'s wing, but this he will not do because it is revealed that V.N. seduced Pnin's wife before he married her. In the last chapter of the book V.N. arrives at Waindell to give a lecture, hoping to meet Pnin. Of course it is a logical impossibility that the author should exist on the same plane of reality as his fictional character, but Nabokov teases us with that paradox up to the very end, when the narrator glimpses Pnin as he drives grimly out of the town into an uncertain future, but is unable to attract his attention. Perhaps Nabokov was expressing a certain guilt at having created for his fictional character a fate so much less happy than his own. At any rate, he compensated Pnin in a later novel, *Pale Fire*, with a tenured professorship at Wordsmith College, though the Russian is only an off-stage character in that novel, referred to in passing, by a prejudiced source, as the humourless and officious Head of the Russian department.

Pale Fire has an equal claim with *Lolita* to be regarded as Nabokov's masterpiece in English, and personally I re-read it more frequently and with more pleasure. Mary McCarthy, who positively disliked *Lolita*, wrote a rave review of *Pale Fire* when it was published in 1962, describing it as a work "of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness and moral truth. Pretending to be a curio, it cannot disguise the fact that it is one of the very great works of art of this century."[16] It consists of a poem in four cantos and 999 lines, called "Pale Fire," by a poet called John Shade, and an extended commentary on it in footnotes by an editor called Charles Kinbote. Shade is a scholar as well as a poet and teaches at Wordsmith College, another of those fictional campuses in bucolic settings in a north-eastern American state. Kinbote is an émigré scholar from a country in north-east Europe which he calls Zembla, who rented a house opposite Shade's when teaching temporarily at Wordsmith, cultivated his acquaintance, and obtained

[16] Mary McCarthy, *The Writing on the Wall* (1970) p. 34.

the manuscript of Shade's last poem when the poet was murdered on Kinbote's porch. The official explanation of this crime is that an escaped criminal shot Shade as an act of revenge, mistaking him for the judge who condemned him and whose house Kinbote was renting. Kinbote however is convinced the murderer intended to assassinate himself. Gradually the reader realises that Kinbote is completely mad, and that the novel is a *tour de force* of unreliable narration. Kinbote believes himself to be the exiled and disguised King of Zembla, who fled from a totalitarian revolution in his country and is being hunted by their secret police. He told this story to Shade, hoping that he would make it the subject of his long and–as it turns out–last poem. In fact the poem, which is a very moving meditation on life and death centring on the suicide of Shade's daughter, has nothing at all to do with Kinbote's obsessive delusion, but Kinbote insists on reading into it the story of Zembla's King in his commentary. On one level *Pale Fire* is a hilarious satire on eccentric scholarship and perverse interpretation–academic discourse turned imaginatively upon academia as a narrative device. There is a sense therefore in which *Pale Fire* can be viewed as a brilliant variation on the burgeoning form of the campus novel. But like *Pnin* – even more emphatically–its themes are broader and deeper than the genre usually permits. Kinbote's myth of Zembla has a kind of beauty and nobility, which derive from Nabokov's own nostalgia for the pre-Revolutionary Russia of his youth, just as the murder of Shade in mistake for someone else derives from the assassination of Nabokov's father.

Kinbote's delusion is a kind of paranoia, caused partly by the fact that he is a homosexual at a time long before Gay Liberation, despised by his colleagues on that account and exploited by the youthful objects of his affections. This partly explains why he refuses to elaborate in his commentary on a rumoured sexual liaison between Shade and one of his students, commenting sardonically that "Of late, American novelists, most of whom are members of a United English Department that, with one thing and another, must be more soaked in literary talent, Freudian fancies, and ignoble heterosexual lust than all the rest of the world, have driven the topic to extinction."[17] In fact the earlier examples of the campus novel I have been considering were

[17] *Pale Fire,* Corgi paperback edn. 1966) p. 255.

comparatively chaste. The narrator of *Pictures from an Institution* claims that in Gertrude Johnson's cynical imagination, "the most powerful professor in the department was always just about to expose the head of department's love affair with a student, in order to get the head's rank and salary and power for himself,"–a typical campus novel plot - but in fact Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* contains no such sexual intrigue, and neither does Jarrell's own novel, nor does *Pnin*–nor, interestingly enough, does *Lucky Jim.*

As society became increasingly permissive in the sixties and seventies, however, such relationships became an increasingly common phenomenon in reality, while still retaining an element of professional risk and ethical transgression which made them a useful plot device in fiction. "We all know what happens in universities," says a character in Robertson Davies's *The Rebel Angels* (1982). "Nice girls turn up, professors are human, and Bingo! Sometimes its rough on the girl, sometimes it may be destructive to the professor." [18]

The campus novel has indeed proved a very adaptable register of changes in contemporary sexual mores over the last half-century. There have been outstanding feminist campus novels exposing the male chauvinism of academic institutions, like Rebecca Goldstein's *The Mind-Body Problem* (1983), and campus novels about the seduction and destruction of professors by unscrupulous co-eds in the era of Political Correctness, like Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* (2000). The genre has also reflected social, political and ideological change, such as the student-inspired radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as represented in Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* and my own *Changing Places.* It has been combined with the novel of crime and detection in numerous academic whodunits like Amanda Cross's *Death in a Tenured Position* (1981). But the roots of the campus novel are, in my opinion, in the genre of pastoral, as indicated by the title of Mary McCarthy's seminal novel, *The Groves of Academe,* and confirmed by the settings of Nabokov's *Pnin* and *Pale Fire.* The little country town in which Wordsmith College is situated is called New Wye, but Kinbote's familiar name for it is "Arcady", "the traditional idealised rural setting of Greek and Roman bucolic poetry," as my dictionary defines it. Like that classical pastoral poetry,

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[18] Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels* (1981). [I quoted this line when I reviewed the book, but have mislaid the page reference. D.L.]

like Renaissance pastoral comedy and pastoral romance, the campus novel sets its stories in a self-contained world with its own customs and rituals, somewhat removed or insulated from the larger world, plays witty variations on familiar character-types in a self-consciously literary style, and deals with human conflict in a manner that is diverting rather than disturbing. Of course, as the inscription on the tomb in Poussin's famous painting, *"Et in Arcadia Ego",* declares, Death is in Arcadia too. So is it in the pastoral elegy, so is it at the end of Shakespeare's courtly campus comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost,* and so is it in campus novels, like *Pale Fire.* But not with the effect of tragedy. The campus novel provides the reader with civilized entertainment rather than catharsis.