

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis is an exploration of literary representation of professors, specifically in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*. I explicate the political unconscious of these texts by teasing out the tensions and ironies stemming from the conflict between the radical political consequences of the titular characters' scholarship (which aims to break down binaries and promote collective or communal interests) and their inability to fully articulate or enact those consequences. I argue that in *The Professor's House*, Godfrey St. Peter's desire to evacuate the content of his historical research of violence by writing his memories and domestic experiences into the text compromises his connection to the ground-level history he attempts to write. Only the end of the novel and its violent domestic event can prompt him to seek interaction with the outside "world of Augustas." In *Pnin*, Timofey Pnin compromises his own radical work—an attempt to use popular beliefs and customs as a way to mirror the narratives and events of larger historical trends—through his failure to clearly articulate his position as a stakeholder in those larger historical events. The "untranslatable" nature of the exile's language leaves him silenced and without a place in the academy.

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Radical/Domestic: Representations of the Professor in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*

by
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Ian Butcher, Author

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Radical/Domestic: Representations of the Professor in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*

Introduction: “He comes across as a mild-mannered, fumbling intellectual”

The academy simply hasn't responded forcefully to the multiple attacks against it, and the attackers, made bolder by the relative silence, seem to be growing more irrational and less well informed We have been slow to remember, I think, that our intellectual freedom and whatever cultural authority we possess are based on the consent of the American people. The gap into which the academy-bashers have inserted their wedge is an information gap, one created in some measure by the arrogance of the professors.

- Mark Edmundson, “Introduction: The Academy Writes Back,” 1993

There is a complete divorce between the academy and the world. The American academic in particular has a unique kind of arrogance, a presumption that he or she can talk about these general issues without any form of commitment to any social or political institution except the academy and the furthering of a career.

- Edward Said, “Expanding Humanism,” 1993

In October, 2009, John Derbyshire of Great Britain's *New Statesman* magazine interviewed Slavoj Žižek, prominent philosopher and social critic. During the interview, Žižek offered a critique of leftist philosophers and academics, referencing George Orwell, by stating “they ask for a change, but they do it in a hypocritical way: they ask for a change but it's almost as if to make sure that no real change will happen” (Derbyshire). Žižek went on in his analysis—using as his example the anti-immigration argument of opening all borders to everyone—to say:

The problem is that they know very well that this radical opening will never happen. So it's very easy to have a radical position which costs you nothing and for the price of nothing it gives you some kind of moral superiority. It also enables them to avoid the truly difficult questions. (Derbyshire)

Ultimately, he argued:

I think it's too easy to play this moralistic game - state power is corrupted, so let's withdraw into this role of ethical critic of power . . . I hate the position of “beautiful soul”, which is: “I remain outside, in a safe place; I don't want to dirty my hands.” . . . When you get power, if you can, grab it, even if it is a desperate situation. Do whatever is possible. (Derbyshire)¹

Žižek's comments, while offering in many ways a valid and necessary critique of the intellectual left within the academy, are problematic. His proposal for academics to “get their hands dirty,” to commit themselves to political position with the possibility of actual realisation (practical positions rather than merely theoretical abstractions), presupposes that academics should be engaging in political activity (and radical political activity, especially) at all. To identify as an intellectual—and an academic or member of the professoriate in particular—would not seem to preclude political activity, but expressions of a political self by such individuals or groups remain controversial. Indeed, though education and scholarship seem to be inherently political acts—the creation of meaning and the organization of experience through interpretation and analysis; the passing on to students of said abilities and activities—the professor is not always seen as an appropriate agent for the political, nor the academy an appropriate locale. The “Ivory Tower” in this case serves to not only separate professors and their work from the public consciousness, but also to prevent their interaction with the public in the political sphere. For Žižek, then, to call on academics to “get their hands dirty,” he must first assert that professors are political

¹ Ironically, Žižek himself was criticised for just this move by Hamid Dabashi, Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, over his position on the Iranian electoral protests in June, 2009. According to Dabashi, “For people like Zizek (sic), social upheavals in what they call the Third World are a matter of theoretical entertainment . . . I find it quite entertaining — watching grown up people make complete fools of themselves talking about something about which they have no blasted clue.”

individuals and the academy a political location. To find evidence that such a position is controversial—even before a professor acts on that position and expresses his or her political self, or the debate begins about what the politics of the academy in this position “should” be—one need look no further than July, 2000, and a photograph of Edward Said, former Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, throwing a rock at the Israeli-Lebanese border.

While in Lebanon on “a personal family visit,” Said arrived at the Israeli-Lebanese border and, in his words, “was photographed there without my knowledge pitching a tiny pebble in competition with some of the younger men present, none of whom of course had any particular target in sight. The area was empty for miles and miles” (“Freud, Zionism, and Vienna”). The *New York Times* ran a copy of the picture on a full page spread. The paper would issue two retractions and corrections to the original story and photo caption before the end of the week (Goodman). When charged to come up with a motive for throwing the stone, Said responded that it was “a symbolic gesture of joy that the [Israeli] occupation [of South Lebanon] had ended,” and the significance of his action was minimal compared to “the enormous ravages and suffering caused by decades of military occupation and dispossession” (“Columbia Prof Admits to Stoning”).

The response to the event was immediate, with commentators for and against Said passionately weighing in on the issue. W. J. T. Mitchell, Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, agreed that it was a symbolic act, suggesting that throwing a rock was a way for Palestinians who could never return

to their homeland to return; in that sense, he argued, “it's not aggression at all, it's a symbol of return” (Mitchell and Strossen). Nadine Strossen, then-President of the American Civil Liberties Union and Professor of Law at New York Law School, countered, claiming “this could well satisfy the standard for an assault in most American jurisdictions Here, there's clearly a singling out on the basis of politics and ethnicity and religion so in the United States this might rise to the level of hate crime,” though she “totally defend[s] his right to express that idea in any way that is disaggregated from actual harm” (Mitchell and Strossen). Ze'ev Chafets in the *Jerusalem Report* suggested that Said's actions stemmed from fear that his relevancy would entirely disappear as “Arafat was on his way to Camp David to settle things with the Zionists” (Chafets).

Columbia University's (lack of) response to the issue did not help. The university gave no reply to the events or the newspaper reports until two months had passed. In defense of Said, Jonathan Cole, Provost and Dean of Faculties, stated “there is nothing more fundamental to a university than the protection of the free discourse of individuals who should feel free to express their views without any fear of the chilling effect of a politically dominant ideology” (qtd. in “Edward Said's Action Protected, Says Columbia”). In reply, Abraham H. Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, demanded the university “make clear that this is unacceptable behavior . . . [T]hey should say that this is not what professors should do,” after earlier classifying the incident as “a crude, disgraceful and dangerous act of incitement” (Arenson). Similarly, “Awi Federgruen, a senior vice dean at the business school, and

Robert E. Pollack, a biologist, also condemned Professor Said's behavior, calling it 'abhorrent and primitive' and a 'gratuitous act of random violence'" (Arenson). The opinion pages of newspapers like the *New York Times* filled up with reactions to the event and its reportage. Joan Schwartz, a resident of Albany, New York, rejected Cole's claim that Said's actions fell under the realm of freedom of speech and asserted "Speech stops at the point where assaultive action begins. Mr. Cole should rethink his position" (Schwartz). Clyde Haberman, a journalist with the *New York Times*, attempted to throw a rock at Columbia University, claiming it would be a symbolic gesture, and railed against what he saw as a hypocritical refusal to allow him to do so (Haberman). The most significant response may have come from the Freud Institute in Vienna, which withdrew an invitation to Said to deliver a lecture in the wake of the incident. The Director of the Institute, Johann Schülein, stated "A lot of members of our society told us they can't accept that we have invited an engaged Palestinian who also throws stones against Israeli soldiers'" (Goodman).

There is heavy irony in the severity of the response to the issue. Said was a prominent supporter of the Palestine people and the creation of a situation in which Palestinians and Israelis can coexist peacefully. He broke with Yasser Arafat when the Palestinian leader sought to make peace with Israel over what Said saw as the desires and goals of the Palestinian people. Said's entire body of scholarship is political, and was conceived in an expressly political way. In a 1993 interview with Mark Edmundson, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, Said reflected that in writing *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), "For the first time I felt that it was

possible to integrate these two aspects of my life, so that my returns to the Middle East in the summer and during the year and so on were no longer just visits with my family but part of an active political life” (“Expanding Humanism” 107). In the same interview, Said characterises his book *The Question of Palestine* (1979) by referring to his motivation in writing it: “I wanted to write a political essay that was fully engaged—I mean, I never pretended that it was anything but that I wanted to show Palestine from the point of view of the victims” (“Expanding Humanism” 111). His other writings fit into this theme of political involvement, often making reference to Said's own Palestinian roots.

Given, then, that Said's work was explicitly political from the outset, it seems strange that he would find himself the object of such intense criticism for an act of political engagement. While Said himself described the act as trivial, claiming that he was unaware of any photographers present, it is clear that throwing the stone was a political action. Said may have felt that it gained political significance—or a “proper” political significance—only when he explained the context of the “symbolic gesture,” but the act itself was clearly in line with his scholarship and political life. If the act of throwing the rock was violent, as commentators like Strossen, Chafets, and Haberman suggest, it is the kind of violence that should be permitted of a man who dedicated himself to the cause of an exiled people, a man who, in his own words, “always advocated resistance to Zionist occupation, [but] . . . never argued for anything but peaceful coexistence between us and the Jews of Israel once Israel's military repression and dispossession of Palestinians has stopped” (“Freud, Zionism, and

Vienna”). The throwing of that rock is the violence of the collective expression of the desire of exiles, of the exposure of an unjust and tragic separation of a people and their homeland. Cole's careful words in support of Said's actions made clear his belief that “real value remains in the original purpose of academic tenure” (“Edward Said's Action Protected, Says Columbia”). In many ways, the incident simply furthered the previous three decades of political and intellectual dialogue in which Said engaged through the support of Columbia. Nevertheless, Chafets quotes in his article “a prominent American journalist” who expressed surprise at the incident because in his work, Said “comes across as a mild-mannered, fumbling intellectual” (Chafets). Clearly, there is a disconnect between the content of Said's work, full of political calls to action, and the perception of him as an intellectual and an academic, someone who would never *act*.

It is that disconnect—generalized to reflect the idea of professors as political beings engaged in political activity versus their public perception as, at times, separate, aloof, and apolitical figures—that this project seeks to explore. Bearing in mind Fredric Jameson's famous dictum to “Always historicize!”, I want to probe two texts, Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*, in order to investigate how professors have been represented in American literature during the twentieth century (9). I posit that in reading these texts alongside their historical and intellectual moments, a tension can be discovered between the radical work in which the characters engage and their failures to enact the full political potential of that radical work. In turn, the representations of professors established in these texts

continue to have repercussions in how professors are viewed by the public and critics of the academy.

In the context of my readings of these novels, I take radical to mean not only “advocating thorough reform”—as defined by *The Canadian Oxford Paperback Dictionary*—but also, in the context of the political aspect of my readings, advocating for analyses and interpretations that problematize or break down binaries and promote collective or communal interests. I hypothesize that in such a reading of these novels, it is possible to engage in a kind of meta-commentary with the historical origins of the disconnect between the public perception of academics as fumbling and mild-mannered and the politically charged and engaged content of their work and profession. Furthermore, I want to argue that in the representations of the professor that I discuss, to dirty one's hands—to return briefly to Žižek—is already a compromised activity. The constant pull between the desire to domesticate, to become insular, works against the collective political action for which these characters' work so readily lends itself, adding another element of tension in the texts. This reading of the texts is necessary because I think it allows for the beginnings of a reclamation of what a professor is and does. Jameson, in his preface to *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, points out that in literary analysis:

our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretation through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code. (9-10)

In my investigation of *The Professor's House* and *Pnin*, I seek to identify those

interpretations of the concept of “the professor” that “rewrite” that concept's place in society, while also advancing my own interpretation as a further rewriting of that perception.

In Chapter 1 of my thesis, I engage with Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and its protagonist, the professor of the title, Godfrey St. Peter. His work as a historian on the Spanish Adventurers in North America seems to be in line with the work done by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in the 1920s and 1930s in terms of offering an alternative to the “Great Men” schema of history. At the same time as his work approaches the violence of this ground-level history and points towards radical political consequences (the promotion of collective action and explicit connection between the public and academic spheres), St. Peter retreats into an insular and domestic world of “high” culture and “traditional” academic values informed by the genteel aspects of scholarship in the Humanities. Taking the raw materials of his history—the land and people of the Southwest and the Spanish Adventurers who came there—he returns to his attic study. There, he can safely write his own memories of his trips to the Southwest with gifted student Tom Outland and the domestic life playing out underneath his feet into that history, effectively evacuating it of violence and compromising its radical potential. It is only with his near death by suffocation in his study and rescue by Augusta—a violent domestic event that cannot be overwritten by his memories—that he realizes the necessity of embracing the radical nature of his work.

In Chapter 2, I continue to explore these themes through an exploration of

Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*. This novel also features a character engaged in historical research that has potentially radical political consequences. Timofey Pnin seeks to create a *Petite Histoire* of Russian folk tales and popular customs and activities mirroring the larger political events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As an exile from Russia following the October Revolution and a member of the Russian émigré community first in Europe and now the United States, Pnin's experiences offer him valuable insight into the political landscape of the day. At the same time, his turn to cultural practices and beliefs rather than “big” historical and political events can be seen as a radical new way of thinking about those “big” events through the elements that inform the lives of those who live during and participate in those events. This potential is compromised by his inability to communicate effectively with any community outside of the Russian émigrés. Predicated as they are on his experiences and identity as an exile, Pnin's voice and language prove “untranslatable” in many ways. At the same time, Pnin's insularity (he refuses to “hear” American culture, he projects his fantasies of Russia onto the American landscape) prevent him from enacting a Bakhtinian dialogic system in which he could use a “creole” or “pidgin” to find a mediated position between binary systems (like Russian versus American, Capitalist versus Communist, or Czarist versus Soviet) and reach the radical potential of his project. As he is unable to do this, he cannot elucidate his value to the academic community, and therefore can find no space in it to exist.

**Godfrey St. Peter's Genteel House: The Crisis of the Academy in
*The Professor's House***

There is a profound tension at the heart of Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, one that has to do with the titular character. In many ways, Godfrey St. Peter is an archetypal Cather character: an aesthete somehow out of step with the modern world, determined to preserve in the face of change the values he holds to be true. John P. Anders describes the Professor's appeal in regards to his excellent taste: “his meals are carefully prepared, his habits are orderly, and his thoughts and impressions are cultivated and refined” (109). Indeed, one can draw parallels between these aspects of St. Peter and Bishop Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Don Hedger in “Coming, Aphrodite!,” and Paul from “Paul's Case,” to name just a few (something critics have frequently done). Such a reading seems like classic Cather, a fitting understanding of a text whose author also wrote about *The Kingdom of Art*. At the same time, though, it is equally possible to read that same characterisation of the Professor—cultured, high-minded, genteel—critically; he does, like many of those other Cather characters, abandon his family and the realities of every day life to pursue an impractical and ultimately damaging aesthetic of living. Elements of these two readings are present in two of the fundamental studies of *The Professor's House*—readings that critics continue to borrow from or attempt to refute—by E. K. Brown and Leon Edel.² Confusion and uncertainty within such classifications is obvious;

² Brown's analysis roughly sets out the reading of the Professor as retreating from life because he cannot face the future, feeling as he does a sense of inordinate loss in the present. Edel, on the other hand, develops the longstanding interest in the connections between Cather's own life and the text. He traces out the relationship between Isabelle McClung and Jan Hambourg's marriage and Cather's

David Harrell claims that “Readers . . . seldom see [Tom] Outland and St. Peter in unfavourable lights because each character is the hero of his own story,” but Cather's text seems ironically critical in casting those two as heroes and flawed and unredeemed individuals (190).

The novel's ending seems to embrace this tension; is the Professor's near death, it asks, the tragedy of a richer, more civilised aesthetic giving way to the crassness of the modern world, or is the emptiness of the Professor's worldview, the lack of true humanity in his values, exposed in his cramped, lonely study in the attic of an empty house? There is no simple answer to this question; Cather's text seeming to flirt with both possibilities without ever committing to an easy reading. This is part of its charm. As Susan J. Rosowski remarks, “Ambiguity lies at the heart of *The Professor's House*, and therein lies its brilliance. When we ask what, precisely, happened and why, precisely, did it happen, we are suffering from the same fall in perception that initially limited St. Peter” (“A Book of Dreams” 139). Mediation, the development of an understanding that borrows from readings both sympathetic to and critical of the professor, is necessary.

Part of what informs and sustains this ambiguity, I would argue, is Godfrey St. Peter's occupation. His identity as a professor can at times appear to supersede all other aspects of his identity. Members of the professoriate are at once individuals and represented by the concept of academia, toiling away alone in their labs or studies and engaging in vigorous intellectual debate with the scholarly community. How solitary

subsequent feelings of betrayal and loss and the tensions facing Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House*.

and how public a professor should be are issues debated within the academy and by the public, with each group in their own way being resistant to shifting view on these subjects. In courting such issues, Cather's text seems politically and socially aware. As Rosowski points out:

Critics have long considered Cather an apolitical writer, and certainly she did not write to effect specific social change. She was intensely concerned with the ways in which ideologies are codified, however: a dominant culture attempts to mold the values of its time; a subordinate culture attempts to subvert that power and assert its own. In this broad sense, Cather was political throughout her writing. (“Subverted Endings” 84)

While Rosowski and other scholars like John P. Anders seem to most often point to Cather's representations of gender and sexuality when discussing the politically and socially aware aspects of her writing, I think that in *The Professor's House*, Cather's representation of the academy via St. Peter is equally political.

Furthermore, in *After the Genteel Tradition: American Writers 1910-30*, Malcolm Cowley cites Sinclair Lewis' remark that Cather was one of the few writers challenging mainstream conventions (what Cowley identifies as the Genteel Tradition) in her writing during the first three decades of the twentieth century (17). Cowley goes on to define the Genteel tradition as related to Victorianism, but altered on the American side of the Atlantic through “a late and debased form of New England puritanism” in which “Culture was something reserved and refined for . . . women, ministers, university professors, and the readers of genteel magazines” (11). Godfrey St. Peter can easily be seen as a representative of this dominant culture that is attempting to maintain its control in shaping the times, and Cather does a good job of

presenting both the positive and negative aspects of this culture.³ At the same time, though, and implicit throughout the novel are suggestions of the subordinate culture—one that was becoming especially prominent in the years following the First World War—that challenges and critiques St. Peter.

I think that focusing on St. Peter as an academic might aid in reconsidering the novel's political nature and the full implications of the notoriously vexing end of the novel. Significantly, that end contrasts St. Peter's identity as radical scholar concerned with issues of class and labour with that of Augusta, dress maker and representative of the types of labour and class traditionally missing from histories prior to the twentieth century. More particularly, I want to argue that the Professor breaks with the “Great Men” tradition in historiography, writing a social, ground level history more in keeping with the kind of work that French historians like Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre would develop during the late 1920s and early 1930s. St. Peter, however, tempers the radical nature of his work—which naturally lends itself to an increased bodily intensity via its concern with class and labour and their attendant violent struggles—by domesticating his historiography. He overlays places and events with his own memories and experiences in order to evacuate their historical violence, shying away from the sociopolitical demands of his radical work. It is only during the violent, domestic event at the end of the novel—St. Peter's near death from

³ Rosowski herself offers a reading of the character of St. Peter that seems to highlight the genteel aspects of his personality: “He recognises that we need aesthetics to provide order against the chaos of nature and the vastness of time. Nature gains from being arranged, he reflects, and we are happiest when ritual arranges our individual lives, so that each action occurs not in a void but within a larger meaning” (“A Book of Dreams” 136).

asphyxiation and salvation at the hands of Augusta—that the Professor can no longer deny the full implications of his work as a historian and must find a way to break free of the domestication that tames his radical historiography. By sending her character on the path of this sober, difficult journey of purification—one that extends to the aspects of the genteel tradition to which St. Peter adapts himself in order to domesticate his teaching, falling back from his more radical aspects as a scholar—Cather issues a challenge to the academy to divest itself of the same kind of domestic and genteel aspects with which the Professor clothes himself. This tension between the radical and the domestic is typical of Cather, extending throughout her career as a novelist from early works like *Alexander's Bridge* (the destructive desire of Alexander to reclaim the excitement of his youth and the love of Hilda versus his life with Winifred in Boston) and *O Pioneers!* (Alexandra's support for and maintenance of the prairie community set against her longing for Emil to break free from that community) through later novels like *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Latour's experience in the cave during the storm contrasted with his own position in the Catholic Church and his religious life).

“Trying to do something quite different”: Godfrey St. Peter as Radical and Domestic Historian

Cather provides several instances in which St. Peter's profession allows the reader to interrogate the text's ambiguity on his role as both a radical and domestic figure, but perhaps the clearest is the discussion of his work as a scholar. His eight

volume study, *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, is not a critical success at its outset. St. Peter recalls that the first three volumes were:

tepidly reviewed by other professors of history, in technical and educational journals. Nobody saw that he was trying to do something quite different—they merely thought he was trying to do the usual thing, and had not succeeded very well. They recommended to him the more even and genial style of John Fiske. (Cather 22)

The key verb in this passage is “trying”; like any radical break, it is a difficult process. Unfortunately, as I will discuss in further detail below, the Professor's process hampers his ability to enact the kind of radical change his history promises. Rather than the kind of populist sociology of Fiske, St. Peter seems to be engaged in the shift of history away from the “Great Men” model towards a new historiography driven by an examination of factors like social environment and geography. The Great Men theory, developed by Thomas Carlyle, considered people to be neither “creators [n]or actors but a gray, dull mass. The true hope sprang from the Great Men, the true kings by divine right Carlyle showed these great men to be the brilliant manifestations of life's spiritual core, the texts of historical revelation” (Breisach 254). While St. Peter's work might initially seem to be connected with this tradition—its title after all hints at its concern with examples of the kind of “great men” with whom Carlyle would concern himself—his transcendence of such a method can be seen in Father Duchene's appreciation for the accuracy of St. Peter's depiction of life in the Southwest (Cather 97). His later work makes this break with tradition even more explicit.

As volumes four through eight appeared, the Professor remembers, “a few young men, scattered about the United States and England, were intensely interested

in his experiment [and] [t]he two last volume brought him a certain international reputation and what were called rewards” (Cather 23). St. Peter's study of the Spanish Adventurers requires not only trips to Spain to examine records there, but also trips into the Southwest and Mexico to follow the trails of the adventurers. It is Tom Outland's presence, the Professor claims, that made the last four volumes of his history “more simple and inevitable than those that went before” because Outland, “who had in his pocket the secrets which old trails and stones and water-courses tell only to adolescence,” is able to go with the Professor to the Southwest and “take a sentence from [Fray] Garces' diary and find the exact spot at which the missionary crossed the Rio Colorado on a certain Sunday in 1775” (Cather 234-35). In working on this literally ground-level history, the Professor's work seems to fit with the work of French historians like Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre during the 1920s and 1930s.

Bloch and Febvre, following in the footsteps of Henri Berr, Émile Durkheim, and Paul Vidal de la Blache, rejected the contemporary version of academic history, which they derided as being “*histoire événementielle*—event-oriented history—because such a narrative history with its primarily political content not only failed to grasp the fullness of human reality but even endangered the status of history itself” (Breisach 370). Together, Bloch and Febvre founded the influential journal *Annales*. In this journal, the pair—and historians sympathetic to their cause—attempted to write history “concerned with the close ties between social, economic, and political structures and the patterns of thought and behavior in a specific geographic, cultural region” (Iggers 52). The adoption of multiple disciplinary perspectives in crafting their

history was revolutionary, and their particular focus on geography as a key discipline has its roots in the French education system of the time. Susan W. Friedman notes in her study of Marc Bloch's work and its relationship to sociology and geography that in France “geography was quicker than history to change its orientation, as demonstrated, for example, by the character of the questions asked for *agrégation*” (13). This role that the French education system played in shaping Bloch's and Febvre's approach to history is significant because the Professor has a connection to the French educational system; he spent time there as a young man with his “foster family” the Thieraults and he did his university work there. In this sense, St. Peter is (fictionally) part of the same academic world that gave birth to Bloch and Febvre and their own version of social history.

The striking parallels between St. Peter and the *Annales* historians continue in the importance of geography to their respective work. This geographic focus is part of the radical nature of St. Peter's work, tying it to the land not to tell a narrative of events that happened there or the “great men” who shaped the political history of the land, but the dynamic between the land, the common people who lived there, their labour, and their culture. The Professor's trips to the Southwest, Mexico, Spain, and France are critical to his work, but even his conception of the project is tied to a kind of geographical fantasy. St. Peter, while sailing along the south coast of Spain near the Sierra Nevadas:

lay looking up at them . . . and the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had

seen him through. (Cather 89)

His trips with Tom are, as the Professor himself comments, what makes the writing of his last five volumes possible. There are problems with this approach, however. It can be seen as an attempt to evacuate St. Peter's intellectual world of violence, part of his taming of the radical nature of his work. In writing his history, the Professor recalls, "the most important chapters . . . were interwoven with personal memories" (Cather 85). This allows those personal memories to work, as Michael Leddy claims, like "a private mental accompaniment to the chapters of his book," an accompaniment replete with images of domesticity and ease like the dresses on Augusta's forms in the attic study, or the sounds of familial life floating up from the house below ("The Double Life" 191). The privacy of these memories, though, means that whatever the violence of the events that St. Peter records—and the trails of the Spanish adventurers in North America were bloody—he always has an escape back into domesticity and gentility. This compromises the radical nature of the history as it is written, and recalls again Lucien Febvre, who "never tired of warning historians that they must not read their own emotional reactions and motivations into the past. This was a distortion that robbed history of its prime value as a means of understanding man" (Throop 289). Even the Professor's trips into the Southwest and Mexico to retrace Fray Garces' steps are ways of evacuating the violence in those historic places and replacing those associations with memories of Outland and himself on trips. Outland's familiarity with the region, the kind of intimate knowledge of a place that can only come from growing up there, is particularly important in this regard. By having Outland act as interpreter-

guide for his history, St. Peter leaves the finding of a historical place to someone who can have no other associations with the place than their own experience with the land, denying the re-emergence of the violent history of the land and its people.

While Tom Outland would initially appear to be the kind of native of the land who should guide a historian hoping to discover the dynamic between land and people—he is an orphan and makes a living working for the railroad as a call boy before a battle with pneumonia forces him to herd cattle—the education that Father Duchene provides in Latin via *The Aeneid* allows Outland to swiftly adapt himself to fit the kind of genteel tradition to which St. Peter retreats when faced with that dynamic. Aside from the lecture scene with Tod Miller, Outland is the only student of the Professor's with whom he is shown interacting. Discussing Outland's mind, the Professor remembers that it possessed “the superabundance of heat which is always present where there is rich germination” and that he had been able to sense desire and foretell success “just once, in his student Tom Outland” (Cather 234, 20). More than his actual abilities, though, Tom Outland's arrival—and his accompanying backstory—make him something of a fantasy student for the genteel St. Peter.⁴ When Outland arrives in town, he heads straight for St. Peter's house to inquire about attending Hamilton. The Professor asks him about his strengths and discovers that despite being an orphan, Outland studied under Father Duchene, a Belgian missionary priest who had him read the entire *Aeneid* and learn Spanish (Cather 96). Not only is St. Peter pleased at the

⁴ The homoerotic aspects of Tom Outland and Godfrey St. Peter's relationship are thoroughly treated in John P. Ander's chapter “Engendered Space in *The Professor's House*” from his book *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (1999).

thoroughness of Outland's teacher, but, as mentioned earlier, the priest is impressed by the Professor's work on the Southwest.

In addition to this apparent ideal intellectual preparation to enter the genteel tradition, the Professor notes with pleasure Outland's "manly, mature voice—low, calm, experienced" and that "the boy was fine-looking . . . tall and presumably well built" (Cather 95). Outland, then, is almost a mirror of the attractive, cultivated St. Peter, and what sophistication he might at that point lack can easily be taught to him by the Professor. The pair spend long summer days and nights together at the house when Lillian, Kathleen, and Rosamond St. Peter (the Professor's wife and two daughters, respectively) are away, enjoying "shared interests, sympathies, and enthusiasms; Saturdays spent sailing together on the lake; stories told after a shared meal of leg of lamb and steaming asparagus" (Harrell 159). If Outland arrives a penniless orphan (not counting the money in the bank in New Mexico that Roddy Blake deposits for his college education), the Professor also did not come from money. Together, though, they both gravitate towards genteel expressions, like the mainstream writers of Cather's day whose writing, Cowley claims, concerned "the old rich families [and their values] . . . people who always dressed for dinner and never talked about money, being too well bred" (13). The relationship between Outland and the Professor approximates that of *Pygmalion*; the young man "discovers" himself during his time on top of Blue Mesa to be "in a world above the world . . . while the rest of the world was in shadow" after studying Spanish and the *Aeneid* (Cather 217, 227). His newly educated and cultivated self is stranded above an unenlightened world on the Mesa,

and he must descend to find the Professor, who will be able to finish his cultivation and refinement. This, then, is the young man selected by the Professor to aid him in his history, a young man who delights in turning the rougher aspects of his past—his hard work from a young age, the death of a friend from a rattlesnake bite while exploring Cliff City, his falling out with his closest friend over artefacts discovered at Cliff City—into romanticised tales of valour and adventure.

In one of the ironic turns of the novel, though—an example of the sense of juxtaposition that Leddy claims identifies *The Professor's House* as a modernist text—Outland is not as exact a mirror for St. Peter as he appears. For as much as the Professor claims to despise the materialist excesses with which Louie and Rosamond Marsellus indulge themselves following the realisation of Outland's patent and invention—excesses of the lifestyle of the new generation, distasteful to him because they seem gauche in comparison with his tastes—Outland is in many ways part of that culture of excess (Cather 36-37, 135). Though the Professor portrays Outland as a creature of pure intellect for the most part, Outland does seem to be aware of worldly affairs, especially money. Louie Marsellus points out at the dinner party to St. Peter's visitor that Outland “not only invented [the gas], but, curiously enough for such a hot-headed fellow, had taken pains to protect it by patent” (Cather 30). Similarly, Outland told the Professor once that “there might be a fortune in [the gas],” and spoke to Dr. Crane of “us[ing] the income for further experiments . . . [and that] there would be something in it for both of us” (Cather 49, 126). When the Professor reflects on the impact that the money from Outland's gas is having on his family, “a sharp pain

clutched his heart,” prompting him to wonder: “was it for this the light in Outland’s laboratory used to burn so far into the night?” (Cather 74). This thought disturbs and distresses St. Peter because it requires him to accept the fact that Outland would have reaped the commercial benefits of his invention had he returned from the war and engaged in all the petty, domestic behaviours that the genteel Professor finds distasteful even as he idealises the young man for dying and avoiding them (Cather 236-37). However, the Professor himself is in many ways as ostentatious in his indulgences and displays of culture.

The evacuation of violence through the overlaying of memories or experiences on top of historical research and writing is not restricted to St. Peter’s time in the Southwest. Consistently, the Professor creates and utilises spaces in which he can safely domesticate historical events. This pattern of behaviour extends to his various workspaces, the sites of the actual writing of the text of his history. One of St. Peter’s chief joys in Hamilton is his garden, a project that he has worked on for over twenty years. The garden is not popular—“it was the one thing his neighbours held against him”—partially because it is such a foreign place: it is a French garden, and as such “there was not a blade of grass; it was a tidy half acre of glistening gravel and glistening shrubs and bright flowers” (Cather 5, 6). In an ironic turn, the Professor ridicules Louie and Rosamond for building their Norwegian style manor “Outland” while he maintains a French garden in the Midwest. If there was any doubt as to the Professor’s cultivated persona, the setting that he constructs for himself is as performative and indicative of his standing as any house that Louie and Rosamond

could construct. But the function of the garden in the text, beyond its pretentiousness, is in many ways symptomatic of the problems surrounding St. Peter. In yet another example of an attempt at evacuating his life of violence, the Professor “imposes bare rock upon the soil and its natural life. He is, in this odd respect, a grotesque, harmless version of his Spanish adventurers, conquering and killing what he encounters, imposing a foreign idea of order” (“The Double Life” 6). By “conquering” the land of his backyard, an act whose only consequence seems to be annoying his neighbours, St. Peter is able to shape land into a new, more pleasing form, just as the Spanish adventurers did, and impose this sense over the top of the historical experiences he discusses in his work, just as he did in his trips with Outland.

More significant yet, though, is the pattern the garden establishes for the function of the spaces the Professor inhabits as an academic and a citizen. The garden is walled, and the Professor began building it only when “his wife began to be unreasonable about his spending so much time at the lake and on the tennis court” (Cather 5-6). Isolation is key for the Professor—from his family, from his colleagues, from society as a whole—and this sense of isolation comes to characterise all the spaces he inhabits. According to Thomas F. Strychacz, “The Professor's retreat to his 'bit of ground' . . . [is] valid for the Professor solely at the price of ignoring commitments to local society . . . [and] as a retreat from an oppressive domesticity” (51). Diane Dufva Quantic concurs with this, claiming that “cut off from the mundane town, St. Peter creates his own physical and intellectual world” (119). Throughout the novel, St. Peter tries to make pockets of isolation within which he can develop his own

intellectual world, one that requires him to treat the subject matter of that world—historical research on the Spanish adventurers in North America—as a palimpsest upon which he can place his own memories and impressions to remove the violence. This sense of isolation prevalent in the Professor's approach to space, an isolation that denies the political and social commitments that his radical work as a historian would seem to demand, is yet another parallel to Bloch and Febvre. Following the trauma of World War I:

Bloch was quick to settle into academic life, avoiding direct involvement in the world of politics. At Strasbourg, in particular, many faculty members lived a life apart as they had few ties to the local society and little inclination to develop them. (Friedman 10)

There is one crucial difference between Bloch and St. Peter's retreat into their work, however. For Bloch, “the nation-building mission of the University of Strasbourg meant that political issues could not be avoided entirely . . . [and] Bloch's own research contributed to its nation-building agenda, despite its ostensibly apolitical tone” (Friedman 10-11). St. Peter has no such institution spurring him on to political action; he is content, it seems, to spend his time in his garden and attic, away from the violence of history and political action.

In many ways, the garden and the attic study function as oneiric spaces for the Professor. The garden is the only place apart from his study that he can work—and even then, only when his family has been banished to another state for a vacation—because the Professor has the experience of making the past a palimpsest in constructing the garden.⁵ Indeed, the isolation St. Peter manages for himself thanks to

⁵ As Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*, “the places in which we have *experience*

his garden and study may be critical to his work, as “all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative” (Bachelard 10). Except for some excursions in the garden, the eight volumes that comprise the Professor's study of Spanish adventurers are composed in the attic study: “the notes and the records and the ideas always came back to this room. It was here that they were digested and sorted, and woven in their proper place in his history” (Cather 16). Just as creating the garden allows him to be at home without actually being around his family—surely the real purpose of his wife's complaint—working in the attic allows St. Peter to put his family out of his mind (and under his feet) while he works. The house itself becomes “a perilous journey” the Professor must navigate, lest he “lose his mood, his enthusiasm, even his temper” (Cather 18).⁶ Only in the peace and silence of his solitude can he recall and reflect on the memories that house his domesticated version of the Spanish adventurers and their trail through the Southwest.

Contrasting the bathroom of the house with the attic study demonstrates just how much of a distraction St. Peter considers the outside world. Bill Christopherson

daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream” (6). In this case, the new daydream is St. Peter's eight volume study, in which he can recreate the experience of making his garden even as he writes of crossing the Colorado River to find a new pueblo.

⁶ Strychacz notes bluntly, “For St. Peter, domesticity and creativity are mutually exclusive” (52). While I agree that time spent with his family seems to be incompatible with his work as a scholar, I would disagree that domesticity plays no part in his creativity. Domesticity, if anything, plays too large a role in his work, preventing St. Peter from realising the truly radical aspects of his historiographical method.

posits that Cather uses the house as a setting for the novel because it allows her to present “the discontents of civilization,” the bathroom being an early manifestation of this in the text (89). Lillian chides St. Peter to take advantage of America's one contribution to civilization, and so “Many a night, after blowing out his study lamp, he had leaped into that tub . . . to give it another coat of some one of the many paints that were advertised to behave like porcelain and didn't” (Cather 4). Working on the tub, a stand in for civilisation or American society, is a distraction from St. Peter's real work. It takes him away from the study and forces him to engage in work that is beneficial to wider society (even if that society is in this case his family).⁷ The study that the Professor sets up in the attic protects him from such distractions by its simplicity and its increased isolation. In this room, once the door is shut, there is near total remove from the world, as one finds only “a single square window, swinging outward on hinges and held ajar by a hook in the sill. This was the sole opening for light and air” (Cather 7). To combat the lack of heat, St. Peter uses a gas stove:

which consumed gas imperfectly and contaminated the air. To remedy this, the window must be left open—otherwise, with the ceiling so low, the air would speedily become unfit to breathe. If the stove were turned down, and the window left open little way, a sudden gust of wind, a sudden gust of wind would blow the wretched thing out altogether, and a deeply absorbed man might be asphyxiated before he knew it. (Cather 17)

This is an almost perfect metaphor for the Professor's work habits. The stove, or his

⁷ This calls ahead to St. Peter's response to Tod Miller: if science merely gives people toys and distracts them from thinking about the real problems—the insolvable problems with which art and religion (and the humanities) wrestle—by providing problems with actual solutions, as St. Peter claims, attending to the tub is both a hilarious confirmation of this (it is a distraction from the Professor's work in his attic study) and also an insolvable problem (no matter how many coats that the professor applies, the tub will never be fixed or finished and the taps will never stop dripping).

work, is a potentially lethal force in his life without at least a token sense of involvement with the rest of the world (the open window). At the start of the novel, though, the eight volumes have been written, and with St. Peter's work finished (the stove turned down), his interaction with the outside world is increasing (via the "gust of wind" of his family struggles) and leads to his crisis at the novel's close.

Michael Leddy counters by suggesting that the Professor's study does not actually isolate him from anyone because he keeps no one out and proves to be quite involved in the affairs of his family (451-52). While it is true that there is no physical barrier to accessing the study, there are no examples of other people entering the study while St. Peter is engaged in writing his history (his daughter Kathleen is forced to wait until lunch outside the door after being stung by a bee). Even Outland, who seems to be granted an intimacy that the Professor denies all other people, is not seen entering the study, but rather going along on trips to the Southwest and Mexico or talking in the garden (Cather 7). The scholarly work in which St. Peter engages and that he presents to other academics and the public is isolated in the study and kept away from others; in contrast, he keeps a show study for "his library . . . and a proper desk at which he wrote his letters," his personal discourse kept separate from his public, academic discourse (Cather 8). According to Cynthia K. Briggs, the Professor's study is typical of Cather's settings, as she "combines the small room and the expansive space by creating a room with a view. This sacred space, with its insulated view of the world, nourishes the characters, as a parish should, strengthening them for their sojourn in the world" (160). The "view" in the study, for Briggs, is the Blue

Mesa, although the actual physical blue object St. Peter can see out of his window is Lake Michigan (Cather 20). In either case, whether the Blue Mesa or Lake Michigan is the view from the study's window, it suggests a reconnection with an earlier time, a point in which the Professor was less isolated from both his family and society at large. Unfortunately, this view has not been enough to nourish St. Peter, as Briggs puts it, because he is determined to shy away from these connections, dropping his original name, refusing to travel with Louie, Rosamond, and Lillian to Paris, and failing to learn the names of any of his students (Cather 141, 143, 247). The Professor gets his wish and is left alone in his study with his memories and daydreams.

**“He excites me to controversy”’: Godfrey St. Peter as Radical
Teacher of Gentility**

As *The Professor's House* is a novel whose title makes its preoccupations with both the academy and space clear, it follows that several scenes would feature the Professor at work in the classroom, lecturing his students. Cather's novel, though, features only one extended moment set in the classroom at Hamilton, the Midwestern college at which St. Peter works. This is curious, as the Professor reflects near the beginning of the novel that:

He would willingly have cut down on his university work, would willingly have given his students chaff and sawdust . . . but his misfortune was that he loved youth—he was weak to it, it kindled him. If there was one eager eye, one doubting, critical mind, one lively curiosity in a whole lecture room full of commonplace boys and girls, he was its servant. (Cather 19)

In presenting the Professor in the lecture hall, then—ostensibly the scene of some of

St. Peter's brightest and best moments—Cather would presumably offer a portrait of a man who inspires young minds to new intellectual heights, who encourages their questions and explorations through the energy he brings to the classroom. One imagines a student in the scene interacting with St. Peter, helping to draw out the sense of the Professor's love of youth and curiosity. This would tie in effectively with St. Peter's role as a proponent of radical historiography. He would seem equally likely to be engaged in the same kind of radical re-shaping of teaching methods, moving away from a genteel, lecture-centred system towards a more radical and engaged one. Instead, the reader comes to the Professor in his lecture hall through an almost surreal distance: observing Lillian St. Peter, the Professor's wife, and her son-in-law Scott McGregor dropping in on the Professor's lecture while waiting for him, agreeing that “If it's not interesting, we can come back [to a bench outside] and sit down for a chat” (Cather 54). What they, and the reader, find is that the Professor lectures in the strictest sense of the term, disagreeing with a student, Tod Miller, and his assertion that science represents a new stage in human development.⁸ As in his role as a scholar, St. Peter-

⁸ *The Canadian Oxford Paperback Dictionary* defines a lecture as both “a discourse giving information about a subject to a class or audience” and “a long serious speech esp. as a scolding or reprimand” (“Lecture” 566). I think that the Professor engages in both activities in this passage. One might even say that there is a pun on the word class in the first definition in this sense, as the Professor teaches at a small, Midwestern university, and one can assume that the students would be predominantly lower-middle class. Indeed, Langtry, another professor at the school and something of the Professor's rival, has become over the years “an instructor in manners,—what is called an 'influence.' To the football-playing farmer boy who had a good allowance but didn't know how to dress or what to say, Langtry looked like a short cut” (Cather 44). In his response to Tod Miller, the Professor seems to scold Miller for what could be called “uncouth” or “un-genteel” opinions, serving in this way as just as much an instructor of manners—the manners of the educated, cultivated aesthete—as Langtry. His conclusion to the lecture—“You might tell me next week, Miller, what you think science has done for us, besides making us very comfortable”—is at once an invitation to discussion and a haughty rejection of the student's views. In serving as instructors in “manners,” the academy seems to foster a Veblenesque sense of leisure class emulation in its students through Langtry and St. Peter.

the-teacher is caught between the radical and domestic worlds; even as his academic ideas become increasingly radical he finds ways to adapt his persona in the classroom in such a way as to keep it safely in line with the genteel tradition.

In his response to Miller's statement, which is never presented in the text, the Professor offers what can be read as his worldview. He denounces science for "tak[ing] our attention away from the real problems," and claims that "the human mind, the individual mind, has always been made more interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them" (Cather 54-55). As his lecture continues, the Professor's statements, all of which have to do with aesthetics and culture, seem to lend themselves to any number of political perspectives that were prominent among intellectuals during the late 1920s and early 1930s, from pseudo-aristocratic authoritarianism and fascism to communism and labour movements. St. Peter maintains that:

there is not much thrill about a physiological sin. We were better off when even the prosaic matter of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he ever had. (Cather 55)

This passage seems to place the Professor squarely in the camp of the genteel philosopher. George Santayana maintains that in America the genteel philosopher is essentially Calvinist, and thus "asserts three things: that sin exists, that sin is punished, and that it is beautiful that sin exists to be punished. The heart of the Calvinist is

therefore divided between tragic concern at his own miserable condition, and tragic exultation about the universe at large” (“Genteel Tradition” 87). St. Peter does seem to find the existence of sin and its inherent punishment to be beautiful; it is the only thing, he says, that gives life meaning. In his desire for every action to be fraught with sin, the Professor appears to long to exist in that state of tragic concern about himself and his universe because it is only in that way that life can have any meaning. For a man who claims to be entirely ignorant of the church,⁹ St. Peter certainly resembles the genteel philosopher Santayana describes. Malcolm Cowley, in his own discussion of the genteel aspects of American society, notes that those involved in this lifestyle “were almost all Protestant by training . . . [and] [t]hose who lost their faith became Protestant agnostics They could not imagine a time when the United States might be anything other than a Protestant nation” (13). The Professor's rejection of Tod Miller could fit in with this “Protestant agnostic” outlook, also. It denies the possibility of an United States without the “magnificence” of sin—and religious backbone—to which an interest in science above all else could lead.¹⁰ As Judith Fryer argues:

It is th[e] untranslatability [of scientific and mathematic language] to which St. Peter objects in his lecture—to modernism, to the tenor of Western life, which

⁹ Upon encountering Augusta in the street and asking her about the Magnificat, the Professor reveals to the astonished dressmaker that he “receive[d] *no* religious instruction at all,” the consequence of having a Methodist mother and Catholic father (Cather 83).

¹⁰ Throughout this lecture, St. Peter's statements seem to confirm Veblen's critique of the humanities for their “traditional self-centred scheme of consumption; a contemplation of the true, the beautiful, and the good, according to a conventional standard of propriety and excellence The enjoyment and the bent derived from habitual contemplation of the life, ideals, speculations, and methods of consuming time and goods, in vogue among the leisure class . . . is felt to be “higher,” “nobler,” “worthier,” than what results in these respects from a like familiarity with the everyday life and the knowledge and aspirations of commonplace humanity in a modern community (252). This critique seems to be equally applicable to the genteel tradition. The sense of St. Peter's concerns being “higher, nobler, and worthier” than Miller's interest in science is constantly apparent.

since the seventeenth century subsumes successively larger areas of knowledge to the modes and proceedings of mathematics. (325)

Scientific thought cannot, for St. Peter, be made into the kind of “mysterious language” of art and religion (the humanities, essentially), and, therefore, cannot be made to assume the ritualised and mythologised positions that allow the evacuation of violence from modern life. In offering what the Professor dismisses as problems that can be solved, scientific thought does not allow the kind of escape from reality that the Professor desires. It is a threat to him in this sense—the classic reading of St. Peter's character returning—but Cather's presentation of the lecture, the reader observing observers, allows the emergence of this threat to be read critically against the Professor as much as for him in some noble struggle.

This rejection of science can be read as a political statement; modernists—an intellectual community with which the Professor has an ambiguous relationship—were reeling from the devastation of the First World War, a conflict whose memory was still fresh in 1925, when *The Professor's House* was first published. Aside from the mention in the novel of Tom Outland, the Professor's former star pupil, dying at the Western Front in Europe there is little directly in his words to connect the Professor to any political stance regarding the First World War and science.¹¹ However, this stance

¹¹ The text's, and Godfrey St. Peter's, troubled relationship to Modernism, is discussed in Michael Leddy's “Distant and Correct: The Double Life and *The Professor's House*, he notes that “seventy-odd years later the case for Cather as a crypto-modernist, a modernist in nineteenth century clothing, seems rather persuasive. And Cather's tendencies towards modernism are nowhere clearer than in *The Professor's House*, a novel built upon thematic, formal, and imagistic juxtapositions” (182-83). Similarly, Rosowski affirms the text's connections to Modernism even as she highlights the difficulties that St. Peter encounters in his dual role as a modernist figure and a historian who understands the conflicts of the times (“Split in Two” 135). Judith Fryer concurs with Rosowski, claiming that St. Peter is “A product of his time and place—America in the early 1920s—he is, like his contemporaries, expatriated intellectuals and imagined characters who people an increasingly

rings false in light of St. Peter's work as a scholar. If the Professor's radical historiography focuses on the kinds of ground-level concerns and people who were excluded from histories in the "Great Man" tradition, his championing of the kind of high, old, European cultural signifiers that populate his lecture (Church art, cathedrals, the magnificence of sin) tempers the radical break with the elements of the genteel tradition that his scholarly work would otherwise imply. Where the Professor's work suggests that he would sympathise with the violent and very political struggle for a meaningful existence that the "modern" man or woman faces, he tames this potentially radical outlook by further domestication and assimilations into the value of the genteel tradition. To be at once attuned to the labourers, citizens, and soldiers and their violent struggles and enamoured with the kinds of symbols through which that violence can be mythologised away via concepts like the universality of sin seems disingenuous. As reading his memories of his travels with *Outland* into his history of the Southwest evacuates the history of the Spanish adventurers of violence through the domestication of the material, St. Peter's positioning of this aesthetic framework in opposition to Tod Miller's statement evacuates the modern world of its violence.

To be an intellectual and a member of academia, as the Professor is, and to reject science in such a way is a charged statement. Taken in concert with his earlier commitments "to prevent the younger professors . . . from farming the whole institution out to . . . the agricultural and commercial schools favoured and fostered by the State Legislature" and to fight "the new commercialism . . . that was

alienated wasteland, out of touch with both. A man who perceives the world of matter as polluted, he withdraws into the world of his own imagining" (304-05).

undermining and vulgarizing education . . . [and] determined to make a trade school of the university,” St. Peter's statements against the importance of science to modern lives over cultural elements like art and culture seem to put him in line with Veblen's split between the leisure and industrial classes (Cather 46, 120). As a professor, St. Peter's occupation shares with other traditionally upper class vocations “the common economic characteristic of being non-industrial” (Veblen 21). Consequently, his dismissal of science seems tied to his agenda to avoid the addition of “industrial” subjects like agriculture and dress-making that are related to some form of production. As he fits in with the genteel tradition, a tradition that is linked with New England old money and wealth removed from the means of production to a certain extent, the Professor's lecture promotes “the line of demarcation” between classes, “the industrial from the non-industrial employments,” and dismisses the former in favour of art and religion (Veblen 23). Thus, St. Peter's teaching pulls back from the fullest implications of his scholarly work. He concerns himself with the kind of historiography that gives voice to labourers and citizens, but his teaching evacuates the violence from the struggles of those groups. In this way he domesticates himself into the structure of the university: he can be “radical” because he is safely rooted in an older, distinctly non-radical tradition.

Not only is it a political statement in terms of broad, social contexts (in addition to its Veblenesque overtones, it is an explicit critique of modern society and its technological fetish),¹² it is a difficult situation to navigate in terms of his family

¹² One can imagine the Professor being disgusted by Henry Adams' description of the dynamo as “a symbol of infinity” and confession that “he began to feel the forty-foot dynamo as a moral

politics. St. Peter's almost son-in-law Tom Outland is a member of that science community that he dismisses, and his invention, a gas that the Professor's actual son-in-law Louie Marsellus has turned into a fortune is “revolutionizing aviation” (Cather 30). A dinner guest, ostensibly visiting St. Peter to go over some of the sources used in his eight volume study of Spanish adventurers, is more intrigued by hearing about Outland, having “been in the Air Service during the war, in the construction department” (Cather 31). In denying science its place of importance then, St. Peter attempts to evacuate his world of the violence that has literally been forced upon it (Outland's death in the First World War) and brought into it (Outland's invention, Outland's and Marsellus' status as scientists, and the wealth that their work brings into the family) for the ritualising and mythologising of art and religion.¹³

In dismissing science and falling back on the mainstays of art and religion as the forces that give men and women meaning in their lives—with sin, of course, making life particularly meaningful and exciting—the Professor abandons the progressive edge of his work as a historian. He reveals himself to be a rather staid and conservative man, the product of a mindset (Santayana and Cowley's genteel tradition) that will eventually be abandoned outside the academy while he can cling to it from within. Though Santayana maintains that the historian and the scientist are “genuinely concerned in discovering what happens to be true,” the Professor's intellectual

force Before the end, one began to pray to it,” even as he would sagely nod in agreement that “All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres” (380, 388).

¹³ A complete treatment of the relationship between the First World War and *The Professor's House* can be found in Chapter 4, “The First World War as 'The Thing Not Named,’” of Steven Trout's book *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War* (2002).

approach seems more to match that of the philosophers Santayana critiques, who “are absorbed in defending some vested illusion or eloquent idea” (“Genteel Tradition” 94). In attempting to evacuate his intellectual life of violence and to deny Miller’s challenge to the genteel tradition of which he is a part, St. Peter very clearly protects an eloquent idea. Santayana recognises, though, the difficulties that face professors in their lectures. He suggests that support for their words from a tradition is essential. Indeed, in his piece “The Academic Environment” from *Character and Opinion in the United States*, Santayana states that a professor’s words:

must be such as can flow daily, and be set down in notes [A] man cannot, without diffidence, speak in his own person, of his own thoughts; he needs support, in order to exert influence with a good conscience; unless he feels that is the vehicle of a massive tradition, he will become bitter, or flippant, or aggressive; if he is to teach with good grace and modesty and authority, it must not be he that speaks, but science or humanity that is speaking in him. (47-48)

Thinking about Santayana’s assessment, the Professor’s lecture appears yet more complex. He does at times seem bitter and flippant, but also to be speaking from and against a massive (genteel) tradition at the same time. His preoccupation with aesthetics as the means through which meaningful experience is derived is not new, and connects St. Peter with a long tradition of thinkers on art and aesthetics. At the same time, though, his own work as a historian is described as revolutionary and initially rejected by the establishment. His concern with the ground-level in his historiography makes him an outsider—except among those “young men” who are open to new ideas—until he is safely “domesticated” into the mainstream when he is awarded the Oxford prize for history (Cather 23).

What is equally striking in his words is how little agency he seems to ascribe to individuals, how much he devalues the sense that there might be genuine importance in their “little individual lives.” No matter how likeable or sympathetic the Professor might be, there is an element of snobbery in his description of the churchgoers that is offputting, an unstated, but ever present, knowledge of his superiority to those he uses as examples.¹⁴ These words and the tone of their delivery, as much as the artificial distance imposed by following Scott and Lillian in to observe St. Peter, allow Cather to build in a kind of ironic criticism of the Professor and his position even as he gets a spotlight turn to express his values and beliefs. The same tone pervades his entire lecture, offering little sense that he does value his students as he claims. When the Professor runs into Langtry, his rival, he asks the man if he “notice[s] a great difference in the student body as a whole, in the new crop that comes along every year now We have hosts of students, but they're a common sort” (Cather 42).¹⁵ One wonders about his choice of adjective to describe students, the best of whom, he

¹⁴ David Harrell contends that one of the central ironies of the novel is that “neither Tom Outland nor Godfrey St. Peter is particularly likeable,” and that St. Peter “possesses, even cultivates, a strain of selfishness bordering on spite that often makes him insensitive to the feelings of others and that tends to justify the nickname given him by his students, Mephistopheles” (185, 188).

¹⁵ Part of the Professor's longstanding grudge with Langtry stems from the latter man having an uncle in politics who influences the decisions of the university in such a way as to, in the opinion of St. Peter, water down the curriculum. David Stouck suggests that Langtry and his uncle are “eager to include technical and agricultural studies in the curriculum” and it is this to which St. Peter objects (104). Cather's novel makes no mention of technical or agricultural studies and Langtry, though. The Professor disagrees with students getting American History credits in Langtry's courses for reading *Tom Sawyer* and *The Scarlet Letter*, but his opposition to the introduction of technical and agricultural studies to the curriculum is not expressed as a critique of Langtry (Cather 43). Rather, the younger faculty members of Hamilton (a category that Langtry would not seem to belong to, as it is implied his grudge with the Professor has been an ongoing one of some years) seem to push for the inclusion of agricultural and technical tracks (Cather 45, 46). Langtry's uncle, the politician, does criticise St. Peter's research work that results in publications other than textbooks, though (Cather 43-44).

claimed earlier, have the power to inspire him. Are these “common” men and women the type who need art and religion to enrich their “little” lives? By refuting Miller's assertion, is the Professor intending to shed light on the aspects of “high” culture that can give meaning to the daily actions of men and women in the face of an increasingly technological world? It is possible that the Professor means both of these things (or neither of these things) and more.

Whatever his intended purpose in giving it, the Professor's lecture leads to several critical responses from the characters that allow the reader to overhear his discussion. Lillian St. Peter does not give his talk a positive review, telling St. Peter that in addressing students like Miller he “cheapen[s] [him]self [I]t's hardly dignified to think aloud in such company. It's in rather bad taste” (Cather 57). Similarly, Scott McGregor wonders how the Professor avoids trouble with the Methodists.¹⁶ Lillian might find the lecture particularly distasteful due to her own “fastidious” aesthetic sense in literature and art, the Professor's entertaining “those fat-faced boys as if they were intelligent being” offending her sensibilities (Cather 56). Extemporising, as the Professor is, might also seem distasteful; the kind of thinking

¹⁶ This mention of the Methodists as a group that the Professor has to “get by” is unclear. There is no discussion of the university being a religiously affiliated institution, and aside from some humorous exchanges with Augusta about priestly duties and aspects of the service, there is little mention of religion elsewhere. It does suggest, though, the uneasy relationship that the academic, and the perception of his or her work, has with the public. What academic freedom and his role as professor allow St. Peter to discuss in the lecture hall is not necessarily what the public, and alumni, will tolerate hearing, particularly if it is deemed in some way heretical. Considering the difficulty that the Professor has already had with his publishing, Langtry's uncle using St. Peter's books as evidence for taking away his chair, McGregor's words could simply be a reminder that controversy (or straying from orthodoxy) can be costly. It could also be that McGregor recognises the Professor as something of a “Protestant agnostic,” and marvels that this latent religious sentiment was not grasped by any member of the church.

that the Professor demonstrates in his lecture considered more suited to his letters or notes. Fryer mentions that Lillian's rebuke, after years of the Professor having “a professional and domestic life in which he speaks both languages . . . [both] the restricted, official language . . . [of] university business . . . [and] more intimately . . . present[ing] his own elaborated discourse as public discourse,” leads to him thinking aloud “less and less” before his loss of language entirely late in the third book of the novel (324). Indeed, St. Peter immediately reframes the positive description of his teaching that Cather offers at the beginning of the novel—being a servant to any twinkle of critical thinking in his students—as an apology for his lecture. He explains that “There's a fellow in that lot, Tod Miller, who isn't slow, and he excites me to controversy” (Cather 57). His wife's words, like McGregor's, are a reminder of the challenge a professor faces as a public figure. An academic like St. Peter must be keenly aware of not only to what extent is the public presentation of one's private discourse accepted and opposed, but he or she must also decide to what extent that private discourse is to appear in one's work as a teacher and scholar. In thinking aloud, as distasteful as it may seem to his wife, St. Peter is asserting his individuality in the face of that massive tradition, willing to take a political stand in his speech that comes out of his private discourse. There is no more need for him to guard this, until his wife chastises him, than there was for him to heed the critic's words while writing his books.

This assertion of individuality by St. Peter is another isolating action. He seems continually at odds with any group to which he might belong: his wife finds his

lecturing distasteful, his institution wants to move in new directions that he opposes, and even his admirer, Sir Edgar Spilling, becomes more interested in Marsellus and Outland than the information he seeks from the Professor. St. Peter is at once radical and safely domesticated in both his teaching and his scholarship and uses that domestication to create a space in which to exist. However, his struggles with the university and his wife's criticism of his lecture suggest that his space is increasingly at odds with the public sphere, isolating him in the same way that his scholarly work leads to his isolation.¹⁷ The isolation that St. Peter experiences as a teacher reaches its apex in the third book when the Professor cannot even learn the names of his new students (Cather 247). The isolation of St. Peter-as-teacher, then, when coupled with the already increasingly isolated St. Peter-as-scholar, necessitates and facilitates his crisis at the end of the novel.

“A world full of Augustas”: The End of *The Professor's House* as a Challenge to the Academy

“The Professor,” the third book of *The Professor's House*, has been famously vexing for critics. The final section in particular, in which St. Peter is nearly killed by the gas stove in his attic study, raises questions about Godfrey St. Peter's character that continue to be discussed and debated. Cather seems to at once eulogise and critique the Professor while leaving the question of his ultimate fate ambiguous. The majority of critics seem to feel that the ending of the novel signifies a kind of burden or losing

¹⁷ His wife's criticism is especially isolating because, as Fryer points out, it leads to St. Peter's loss of language in the third book. This is catastrophic because his response to Miller, even though it is to disagree, suggests an engagement with others that the criticism strips away from the Professor.

situation for St. Peter, but I disagree. I do not think that the end of the novel presents the Professor as a “noble,” tragic character—a figure symbolising a cherished world of imagination and aesthetics that cannot survive the materialistic and pragmatic modern world—nor do I think that St. Peter lacks any connection to or understanding of that modern world. Rather, I think that the novel presents a reconciliation between the radical and domesticated aspects of St. Peter's identity as a scholar that frees the Professor to become a truly radical scholar. It seems to me that through this reconciliation Cather is able to posit a challenge to the academy to reject the domestication that tempers St. Peter's radical historiography and instead embrace its fullest political implications in order to break free of the genteel tradition to which it still clings.

St. Peter's trend towards absolute isolation in his scholarship and teaching, which moves parallel to his own increasingly genteel sensibilities throughout the novel, is a costly one. As Rosowski points out, at the end of the novel “a narrow intellectualism is all that is left of St. Peter's own life [H]e has neglected his personal life, until it has become as empty as his abandoned house. [His] [s]cholarly habits have become fixed and [his] intellect hardened” (“A Book of Dreams” 131). The Professor struggles to work on his current project—annotating and writing an introduction for Outland's diary of his discovery of the Cliff City—even though conditions would seem ideal; with his family in Paris, no one can disturb St. Peter in his study. He gets very little work done, preferring to spend the days lost in memories and retreating to a virtually non-verbal world (Cather 241). In this way, Fryer

contends, the Professor comes to realize:

the 'price' of absolute dedication to the life of the imagination is that other life—romance, all domestic and social relations, 'the human frailty indeed'; thus his discovery of the seeming impossibility of finding language to express the things that haunt the mind. (321-22)¹⁸

The token connection to the outside world that the presence of a family—however removed from his work—in the house represented is now gone, and the Professor, no longer a social animal, has lost the attendant ability to communicate his ideas. When St. Peter receives notice by letter that his family is coming home, he reaches a crisis stage, realising that “Falling out, for him, seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed” (Cather 250). The gust of wind that causes gas to fill the Professor's study as he remains on his couch, leads to him wondering if he “was required to lift [his hand] for himself?” (Cather 252). Eventually, he is rescued by Augusta and prepares to face his returning family.

While this crisis is triggered and plays itself out as a personal event, the repercussions for St. Peter as an academic—and consequently, Cather's challenge to the academy—are quite large.¹⁹ As Bill Christopherson points out, “Because the Professor is a paradigm of intellectual achievement, an exemplar of civilization in the largest sense, his own 'collapse' at the end further implicates this superstructure” (90).

¹⁸ The echo of Lillian's critique of St. Peter's habit of drawing away from people, “I'd much rather see you foolish about some woman than becoming lonely and inhuman . . . I think your ideas were best when you were your most human self” are unmistakable in Fryer's analysis (Cather 142).

¹⁹ Rosowski claims that the end of the novel “make[s] worldly questions—what will happen next and to whom—insignificant,” to which I strenuously disagree. In many ways, *The Professor's House* seems to be a novel obsessed with trying to discover what *can* happen next; after the Spanish adventurers, after the new house, after Tom Outland's death, etc., etc. The broader social critiques, including those aimed at the academy, that can be pulled from the novel are all variations on this theme.

Augusta playing the role as the saviour is both another one of Cather's ironic turns that presents the Professor in a critical light while offering an illuminating moment for him. Beyond the irony, though, Augusta playing the saviour is incredibly significant. As a symbol of the labourer or common citizen to which St. Peter's radical historiography gives voice, Augusta acting as saviour suggests that it is that radicalism that will save St. Peter's intellectual life. Regardless of his relationship with his family, the Professor takes solace in the fact that "There was still Augusta . . . [and] a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound" (Cather 257). Augusta's presence also helps to assert the importance of his radical persona by denying him the possibility of domesticating the violent events of the end of the novel. Whereas he is able to quilt his historiography with memories and his teaching with aesthetic concerns in order to evacuate the historical and modern worlds of violence by domesticating them, this domestic event (working in his attic study and nearly asphyxiating) is violent and cannot be evacuated of that violence. Furthermore, it is violent in a way that is more intimate than the threat of violence that history and the modern world offer. While St. Peter can safely write his memories into his work in his study and mythologise and aestheticise the violence of modern life, the events of the end of the novel happen in his oneiric space (his attic study).

The appearance of Augusta at this critical moment has such force because earlier in the novel, St. Peter fails to demonstrate any real knowledge of Augusta, or concern for her, despite their years together in the attic study. He is shocked that Augusta had not foreseen "grow[ing] grey in [Lillian's] service," asking himself

“What other future could Augusta possibly have expected?” (Cather 14). The dressmaker can have no dreams, apparently, cannot imagine a life defined by any other aspect than working for the family that hires her.²⁰ Similarly, Augusta does not mention to the Professor that she lost money in the stock market, and when Kathleen arrives to tell him, he is concerned that she should receive the money back from the family (Cather 109). This purely economic concern—the Professor arrives at this solution by calculating how long it will take Augusta to regain the money based on her own wages—is one that will maintain the standing of the servant without attaching to it any human warmth. In saving St. Peter by rushing up to drag him from the study when she hears him fall, Augusta demonstrates a genuine concern for employer, an empathy that transcends economics as part of a duty to a fellow human being. This in turn “suggest[s] [for St. Peter] a way out of his dilemma through being 'bound outwardly' to responsibility and social convention” (Strychacz 58). The Professor must develop his social consciousness, rejoin the human family, and genuinely concern himself with individuals. There can be no more “little lives” for him; Augusta's rescue gives him a way to making meaning in his life and in his work without art and religion as necessary media: social responsibility.²¹

St. Peter's salvation at the hands of Augusta allows Cather to make her critique

²⁰ The Professor's comment here again recalls Veblen, who mentions that longstanding servants are evidence of a “vicarious leisure” that enhances the sense of the master's own “conspicuous leisure” (57).

²¹ Cather indicates this connection between Augusta and St. Peter's work early in the novel, during the opening chapter as the dressmaker comes to take her things to the new house. The Professor helps her collect her patterns and comments that “we shall have some difficulty in separating our life work, Augusta. We've kept our papers together a long while now” (Cather 14).

of the academy and suggest a potential solution to its problems. The crisis that the Professor experiences is a typical scenario for Cather's characters, Rosowski argues, because she “frequently begins with middle-aged men who have completed their worldly travels and achieved public success Each has followed the modern notion of progress to its promised end—which has failed to sustain” (“Subverted Endings” 75). I think that St. Peter is no longer following the modern notion of progress, though, and this is what causes its failure to sustain him. Conversely, perhaps that “modern” notion of progress is not quite as progressive as it appears. An historical parallel seems to be the shifts in English Studies in English universities during the 1920s and 1930s that Terry Eagleton discusses in his “The Rise of English.” According to Eagleton, F. R. Leavis, Q. D. Leavis, and I. A. Richards changed literary studies forever, and helped to create its modern form, by suggesting:

English was an arena in which the most fundamental questions of human existence – what it meant to be a person, to engage in significant relationship with others, to live from the vital centre of the most essential value – were thrown into vivid relief and made the object of the most intensive scrutiny” (31).

These men and women were not part of the upper class, and they felt that the study of literature (like the Professor's reverence for art and religion) could change and improve the lives of all people. Unfortunately, as Eagleton points out, there were serious problems with this enterprise:

apart from Leavis's brief toying with “some form of economic communism”, there was never any serious consideration of actually trying to *change* such a society The *Scrutiny* case was inescapably elitist: it betrayed a profound ignorance and distrust of the capacities of those not fortunate enough to have read English at Downing College It was possible to explore the “great

tradition” of the English novel and . . . questions which were of vital relevance to the lives of men and women wasted in fruitless labour in the factories of industrial capitalism. But it was also conceivable that you were destructively cutting yourself off from such men and women. (33, 35)

By having Augusta act as the Professor's saviour, then, Cather's novel seems to suggest that an authentic compassion between classes, accompanied by real actions by both sides, is the way to save the academy from its crisis. St. Peter may look down upon the importance of science to modern life and the study of technical and commercial subjects in university because they only make lives easier and do not offer the kind of “enriching” experience that the consideration of the humanities offers, but it is that easing of existence that can seem infinitely more important for “ordinary” people.

The Professor, a manifestation of the genteel tradition and its place in the academy, cannot offer a comparable, tangible benefit. Many critics (Harrell, Rosowski, and Strouck, for example) have noted the clear separation in the novel between “art” and “imagination” on the one hand, and “materialism” (which often includes every day concerns) on the other. St. Peter is a champion of the former while implicated in the latter. This, they claim, is the source of the crisis: a man who finds his whole system of ordering existence under attack. However, I think that to suggest the novel's tragedy is that the Professor suffers “a virtually total isolation” because of his attempt “to live in both worlds [art/imagination and materialism]” while “ultimately liv[ing] in neither” compounds, rather than explains, the issue (Harrell 180-81). Indeed, the conception of two separate worlds that the Professor—and by extension the academy—must navigate between leads to the crisis.²² This is what

²² Eagleton brings to light a similar crisis amongst the *Scrutiny* group and their followers in his

causes the break between his work and society, leaving him without language and resigned to death. St. Peter's crisis then is a very real challenge to the academy to remake itself, redefine itself, and gain the relevancy necessary to the general public. His “rebirth” signals a reconciliation of the “two worlds” and an understanding that both must be present in any successful intellectual life. Using Rosowski's schema of Cather's approach to writing politically, St. Peter—the genteel aesthete—is a representation of the dominant academic culture (particularly within the humanities), one that will seek to maintain its position and power within the academy at the expense of the interest and support of the public, a subordinate culture. This subordinate culture is vital to the continued existence of the academy, though, and consequently new scholars who are like the “common” students St. Peter finds so disappointing, must arise. Through his salvation at the hands of Augusta, St. Peter recognises this fact and can begin the difficult task of divorcing his intellectual world from the domesticated aspects that temper the full implications of his work. He is prepared to begin the journey out of isolation and back into the world, having learned what is required of the modern academic. The violence with which he must reconcile himself may be distasteful, but it is a reality that he cannot continue to escape. There is nothing easy about the novel's end, and St. Peter's closing thoughts echo this fact. He claims to have “let something go . . . something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished At least, he felt the ground under his feet. He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude . . . the future”

discussion of the discovery of Nazi officers who “whiled away their leisure hours with a volume of Goethe” (35).

(Cather 258). For the first time, though, there seems to be the possibility of genuine forward momentum and change for the Professor. In many ways, those who think and write about the academy (in both fictitious and academic ways) continue to deal with the aftermath of this crisis in *The Professor's House*.

**“They will reject Timofey's wonderful personality without a quaver”:
Academic Space in *Pnin***

By 1953, when the first short story that was to become *Pnin* appeared in *The New Yorker*, and certainly by 1957, when Vladimir Nabokov's completed novel appeared, the climate in academia in the United States had changed considerably from that of the era of Cather's *The Professor's House*. If the radical academic was still a relatively rare occurrence, the potential to be radical outside of the comfortable domesticity of the classical academic traditions was increasingly possible. McCarthyism and Cold War skepticism made certain overt displays of radicalism dangerous, but the academy promised a certain amount of freedom in which to create one's intellectual world. In his article on fiction of the academy, “Academic Freedom and Tenure: Between Fiction and Reality,” William G. Tierney notes that:

In the twentieth century academic freedom became enshrined as the *raison d'être* for the professoriate. For many individuals, colleges and universities existed in large part to enable the search for truth by the faculty. Academic freedom codified the belief about the search for truth. Tenure was the structure that ensured the belief would not be violated. (161)

Considering, then, the protagonist of Nabokov's novel—a professor of Russian Language and Literature at Waindell College who is a Russian émigré named Timofey Pnin—and its frequent discussions of spaces both physical and mental in which characters struggle to create places of intellectual freedom and fulfillment, surprisingly little scholarly work addresses the commentary that *Pnin* offers on the academy and academic life. Indeed, Page Stegner, in his study of the novel for his book *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, claims that *Pnin* “is not an academic novel—

burlesquing the establishment is really beside its point” (97). Burlesquing the establishment may be beside its point, but probing how one lives and attempts to create a space within the establishment is entirely its point. Of the work done on *Pnin*, the vast majority is concerned with untangling the clever technical tricks of Nabokov's writing, particularly the reliably unreliable narrator whose identity (Nabokov, not-Nabokov, some fiendish hybrid) proves vexing to critics.²³ While such investigations can help to clarify the actions of the novel, I think that they obscure the importance of Pnin's occupation in the novel. Therefore, I want to propose a reading that foregrounds Pnin's professorship and his spatial existence as a way to continue the dialogue between the radical (breaking down binaries, promoting collective understanding and action) and the domestic (becoming insular and reinforcing aspects of binaries) in academia I discuss in my chapter on *The Professor's House*.

The relatively brief treatment by critics and readers of Pnin's profession can be easily understood. There are few passages that discuss Pnin's scholarly work (only two of which are of any significant length in the novel), and the scenes of his teaching often seem to exist solely for comic effect. Taken together, though, I think that these depictions of Pnin as an academic open up a reading of the novel that establishes the radical possibilities of Pnin's work while simultaneously challenging Pnin—and the

²³ For a sample of some scholars who treat the issue of *Pnin's* narrator in their work, consult Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*; Toker, “Self-Conscious Paralepsis in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* and 'Recruiting'”; Maddox, *Nabokov's Novels in English*; Casmier, “A Speck of Coal Dust: Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* and the Possibility of Translation”; Besemeres, “Self-translation in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*”; Bontila, “*Pnin/Pnin's* Search for Wholeness”; Pellérdi, “Nabokov's Russian Professor: Pnin”; and Stegner, “Pnin: Redemption Through Aesthetics” in *Escape Into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*.

academics he represents—to achieve that possibility by effectively giving voice to their work. At the same time, the novel also seems to criticise the academy as a whole for expressing a desire for academics who have a stake in the contemporary issues that shape the world and yet denying Pnin (who clearly has a stake in the political conflicts of the Cold War era) a place in the academy. Complicating such a critique is the character of Pnin himself: what makes him attractive as a scholar (his first hand experience with the violent transition between Czarist and Soviet Russia and the consequent émigré community in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century) is presented in the novel as “untranslatable.” In this figure of Pnin, Nabokov seems to ask whether or not such stakes can ever transcend the quaint oddness of the titular character and become a viable academic voice. The critical literature on *Pnin* effectively teases out many of the tensions relating to translation and voice in the novel, but without the focus on Pnin as an academic that I intend to provide.

“A *Petite Histoire* of Russian culture”: Pnin as Radical Historian

Pnin's research focuses on Russian myths and folk practices, exploring popular thought and expression with the ultimate goal of writing a new type of history. Pnin envisions his project resulting in “a *Petite Histoire* of Russian culture, in which a choice of Russian Curiosities, Customs, Literary Anecdotes, and so forth would be presented in such a way as to reflect in miniature *la Grande Histoire*—Major Concatenations of Events” (Nabokov 76).²⁴ This kind of scholarship initially seems

²⁴ Salman Rushdie, reflecting on the idea of the writer-in-exile, offers a sense of the possibilities and potential pitfalls of a project like Pnin's. In exile, writers' desire to reclaim the past can lead them to

retrograde and arcane: Lucy Maddox, for example, characterises Pnin as an “annotator par excellence” and claims that “as a researcher, one of his greatest pleasures s finding and correcting errors in the documentation of others” (86).²⁵ She describes his project as “a commentary, a sustained footnote that fleshes out the skeleton of historical fact and gives it life” (92). While her reading suggests that Pnin performs these activities with aplomb, annotating and footnoting are hardly considered the cutting edge of scholarly activities. Pnin's work, though of seemingly high quality (or at least well-researched) does not seem likely to win any awards; his doctorate “in sociology and political economy . . . [from] the University of Prague around 1925 had become by mid-century a doctorate in desuetude” (Nabokov 11). Márta Pellérdi claims that “Pnin finds in the cultural branch of learning, the Humanities, of which he is an exemplary scholar . . . a sense of mission which must be carried out in the New World once the vicissitudes of history had evicted him out of the old one” (417). While Pnin certainly works diligently and is always willing to offer a lecture on a subject that he happens to have studied (like the first mention of boxing and tennis in Russian literature, the chronology of *Anna Karenina*, or the material of Cinderella's slippers), there is little evidence to suggest that he *produces* any exemplary work that would show him to be an exemplary scholar.

“create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands of the mind”; at the same time, though, “a writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience [the past] in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of his past, of his being 'elsewhere'. This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal” (qtd. in Gonzalcz 159).

²⁵ Pnin mentions “a reference checked and found to be falsified by incompetence, carelessness, or fraud” when he reflects on his work (Nabokov 143).

However, Pnin's work also falls in line with American historiography in the years following the Second World War. As Ernst Breisach notes in his study of the subject:

The Progressive dualism of business or vested interests against the people also seemed out of place [after World War II] [P]rogress had become less self-evident in the course of human affairs in a century of total war, large-scale genocide, and potential nuclear war Critical Liberal historians tried to master the new complexity of reality by interjecting a layer of myths, images, and symbols between actual reality and human experience Of course, a culture seen in terms of myth and dialogue did not move along the straight line of progress but followed an unpredictable zigzag course. The unexpected turns in history were for scholars of the myth, symbol, or image school signals of discrepancies between perception and reality and meant that the myth or image used needed to be refined or replaced. Here the Progressive truth in mastering the world was translated into a search for proper myths or changes. (387-88)

As an example of this new American approach to historiography—the myth, symbol, and image school, so to speak—Breisach cites Henry Nash Smith.²⁶ The latter's work in such volumes as *Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth* and *Popular Culture and Industrialism 1865-1890* seems to project a radically new way of exploring the political in history, one Pnin's work mirrors with its *Petite Histoire*. Rather than explore the “Major Concatenations of Events” and their relationship to, or application of, various ideological positions, this new myth-based approach to history turns to the stories, customs, and beliefs that define popular thought and the lived experience of those who make up the populations impacted by *la Grande Histoire*.

To be sure, Nash has been criticized as apolitical, believing myths equal false

²⁶ Richard Slotkin's work in *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985); and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (1992) would seem to fall in this same category (though after Smith's work and the time period of Pnin, obviously).

consciousness. However, in his “Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Printing” of *Virgin Land*, Smith notes that in writing the book, he:

wanted to protest against the common usage of the term 'myth' to mean simply an erroneous belief, and to insist that the relation between the imaginative constructions I was dealing with and the history of the West in the nineteenth century was a more complicated affair. (vii)

He goes on to argue that “there is a continuous dialectic interplay between the mind and its environment,” before concluding:

history cannot happen . . . without images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the infinitely numerous and infinitely varied data of experience. These images are never, of course, exact reproductions of the physical and social environment. They cannot motivate and direct action unless they are drastic simplifications, yet if the impulse toward clarity of form is not controlled by some process of verification, symbols and myths can become dangerous by inciting behaviour grossly inappropriate to the given historical situation. (Smith viii, ix-x)

This sense of myth as a controlling agent—the force that allows history to occur, organizes society, and inspires behaviour—fits with Pnin's conception of his project. If dealing with myths and folk practices initially seems to draw Pnin's scholarly energies away from the true political import of the contemporary interest in Soviet Russia, Smith's final statement seems to reaffirm that Pnin's research is all too political. Pnin's work studying, for example, “the old pagan games that were still practiced at the time [1855], throughout the woodlands of the Upper Volga, in the margins of Christian ritual” presents aspects of pre-Soviet Russia that both illuminate the popular mindset and deconstruct the image of Russia (an advanced superpower replete with vast industrialisation and technological advancement) that the Soviets attempted to

construct in the minds of Westerners during the Cold War era (Nabokov 76).²⁷

Pnin, when confronted with a film from the Soviet Union that “was supposed to contain not a jot of propaganda, to be all sheer art, merrymaking, and the euphoria of proud toil,” is reduced to tears (Nabokov 81-82). One suspects, though, that Pnin's research for his *Petite Histoire* motivates his weeping when he sees:

Handsome, unkempt girls march[ing] in an immemorial Spring Festival with banners bearing snatches of old Russian ballads . . . [and] a mountain pasture somewhere in legendary Ossetia, [where] a herdsman report[s] by portable radio to the local Republic's Ministry of Agriculture on the birth of a lamb

next to footage of “Eight thousand citizens at Moscow's Electrical Equipment Plant unanimously nominat[ing] Stalin candidate from the Stalin Election District of Moscow” (Nabokov 81). For Pnin, the appropriation of old Russian ballads, Spring Festivals, Ossetia, and herdsmen as examples of the glory and progress of Soviet society reaffirms that his home (very much a part of the world from which those ballads, festivals, and people emerged) has been taken from him. In examining the folk tales and customs he studies as a mirror of *la Grande Histoire*, Pnin reveals his interest in the contradictions between Soviet society and the symbols it appropriates as a way to reclaim an element of the home of which he is stripped.

At the same time, just as the turn away from the Great Man conception of history in the 1920s and 1930s, especially by French historians like Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, opened up the potential for the people to have a place in those histories, so does the turn to myths and images offer a chance for those people to make

²⁷ This approach seems part and parcel with Smith's *Virgin Land*, which “explored images of the [American] West and not the West itself, implying that the frontier concept may well have been more myth than substance” (Breisach 365).

the history. The myths, customs, and beliefs that control and guide the lived experiences of the common people create the time every bit as much as the ideologies that the world's powers endorse. The young women marching in the Spring Festival and the shepherd dutifully reporting on his livestock are the elements Pnin's work—along with the work of other historians and scholars concerned with similar examples of myths, images, and symbols—can free from ideological straitjacketing and reposition as a commentary on, and corollary to, the kind of large scale history that dominated the field prior to the Second World War.²⁸

In addition to the resonances between Pnin's scholarly work and the focus of contemporary American historiography, there seem to be aspects of Pnin's thought that connect to the ideas of the Russian Formalists. In *Formalism and Marxism*, Tony Bennett notes:

the Formalists sought to reveal the devices through which the total structure of given works of literature might be said to defamiliarize, make strange or challenge certain dominant conceptions – ideologies even, although they did not use the word – of the social world. (17)

In his desire to reflect the larger events of history through anecdotes, beliefs, and cultural practices, Pnin might be said to reveal such devices in historical terms.²⁹ Even

²⁸ Again, the methods and materials of Pnin are strikingly similar to those of Smith. In the introduction to *Popular Culture and Industrialism 1865-1890*, Smith states that “this book deals with the beliefs and the attitudes that most Americans took for granted, with the accepted patterns of thought and feeling. As a consequence, the materials I have collected consist in large part of pseudo-ideas and stereotypes rather than challenging intellectual discoveries” (v). What else are the handsome, unkempt women marching with banners or the pastoral shepherds of the steppes presiding over their sheep than stereotypes to most observers? In tracing in these people—via their practices and beliefs—their culture and history, Pnin's work promises to render them in three dimensions.

²⁹ Later in his book, Bennett summarises the Formalist position on literature as “a mode of discourse which constantly maintains 'No, the world is not like that' in relation to dominant forms of discourses which maintain that it is” (45). Pnin's work, grounded as it is in the culture of pre-Soviet Russia, could be said to assert the same objection to the portrayal of Russia and Russians that the

his reading of literary works serves to defamiliarize them. During his research, a chance association leads Pnin to a memory of:

Ophelia's death! *Hamlet!* In good old Andrey Kroneberg's Russian translation, 1844 . . . And here, as in the Kostromskoy passage, there is, we recollect, also a willow and also wreaths. But where to check properly? . . . [W]henver you were reduced to look up something in the English version, you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line that you remembered all your life from Kroneberg's text in Vengerov's splendid edition. (Nabokov 79)

Pnin's reading of *Hamlet* would defamiliarize the text for even the most attentive reader of Shakespeare. As Stephen Casmier points out, “were Pnin alive today he would not have found the line in most Russian versions either; because the remembered passage does not exist in the English text, it does not appear in more recent translations” (75). Pnin's memory and grounding in a culture that in this case is similarly “erased” (the Czarist Russia of the nineteenth century and Pnin's youth by the October Revolution and Soviet Russia) makes his project's potential all the more radical. Observing, cataloging, and commenting on this supposedly vanished culture's practices serves to highlight their survival as residual elements in contemporary culture.³⁰

In turning away from explicit commentary on *la Grande Histoire* and the debates surrounding Communism, Capitalism, the West, and the Soviet Union that so quickly became monotonous, Pnin's work seems to offer a new approach to

Soviets present.

³⁰ I refer here to Raymond Williams' definition of a residual element as a cultural element “effectively formed in the past, but . . . still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation” (122). This seems a fitting characterization of the materials with which Pnin engages in his scholarship.

considering these topics by defamiliarizing them.³¹ When he delivers his speech in Cremona at the start of the novel, his topic would appear to be a question that had long since been answered in the minds of any American audience he might face: “Are the Russian People Communist?” (Nabokov 16). However, Pnin's unique position in the world is summarised quite neatly by the vice-president of the Cremona Women's Club when she introduces him as the “Russian-born . . . citizen of this country . . . [who] has traveled quite a bit on both sides of the Iron Curtain” (Nabokov 26). Pnin's rootlessness—usually a source of profound pain and sadness in the novel—is his great asset as an academic in this case. He can, in theory, effectively perform a Bakhtinian dialogue between American and Soviet positions, in which the speaker enters a debate and adopts portions of the language of both sides in order to “find a creole or pidgin that would weld the best of both” (Holquist 86). By doing so, the speaker operates on “The plane on which the contradictions between . . . [positions] can interact without eluding each other as mutually exclusive, the plane where they can both differ *and* agree” (Holquist 87). Unfortunately, Pnin cannot find this creole or pidgin and is left unable to fulfill the radical potential of his scholarship.

There are two necessary parts that make such a historical approach revolutionary. The first, and the one that Pnin is most adept at performing, is the turn away from the “big” political and historical trends to an examination of the popular mind via myths and folk tales (i.e. the work of historians like Smith). The second part,

³¹ In his study *Defamiliarization in Language and Literature*, R. H. Stacy points out that this is a characteristic of Nabokov's own writing, as he “periphrases familiar acts” (9). Mary Besemeres, however, suggests that “Nabokov is parodying the technique, and even that is an irreverent inversion of an implied Russian original, which would have been obedient to formalist approaches” (392).

though, causes Pnin trouble: he must reposition that turn to the popular as a contribution to—or commentary on—the discourse about those big historical and political trends. In other words, he must redefine a “turn away” from politics as a radical “turn towards” those same politics. Pnin fails to do both of these things. He cannot make his ideas understood to an outside audience. When he discusses politics, it is with other members of the Russian émigré community via “a few rapid passwords—allusions, intonations impossible to render in a foreign language” (Nabokov 125). Roman Jakobson's study of language and meaning bears consideration here. In discussing the connection between the two concepts, Jakobson argues:

every object always appears in a situation, in a network of relations that is defined temporally, spatially, or by its content and that must be taken into account in determination of the referent. We cannot designate an object without, at the same time, introducing it into a situation or a context” (qtd. in Sangster 49-50).

Pnin's language, and the meaning behind it, is heavily predicated on the experiences in common among the exile and émigré community of which he is a part. In his academic life and career, though, those who would read Pnin's work are not necessarily a part of, or familiar with, that émigré community.

Considered in the context of Bakhtin's notion of dialogue, Pnin's failure becomes understandable. A Bakhtinian dialogue always has three parties: the speaker, the audience, and the “superaddressee.” This superaddressee possesses a complete understanding of the subject of the dialogue (Holquist 92). For Bakhtin, “The act of understanding itself enters into the dialogical system and in one way or another changes its total meaning” (qtd. in Holquist 92). The second and radical turn in Pnin's

argument requires that he make his audience understand what he is doing with his scholarship. It also requires a superaddressee distinct from the dialogue so that an exchange of understanding and meaning can take place. In the way that Pnin currently expresses himself politically, the superaddressee in Pnin's dialogue would have to be part of the Russian émigré community in order to catch the significance of these rapid passages. Pnin's dialogic system is closed and insular, which prevents the change in total meaning that would enable the kind of creole or pidgin a Bakhtinian dialogic system promises. Without that mediating concept, Pnin's argument loses its radical force.

Edward Said, describing the unique abilities of exiled writers and the great writers-of-exile (a category in which he includes Nabokov), mentions that:

their use of language provoke[s] their readers into an awareness of how language is about experience and not just about itself. For if you feel you cannot take for granted the luxury of long residence, habitual environment, native idiom, and you must somehow compensate for these things, what you write necessarily bears a unique freight of anxiety, elaborateness, perhaps even overstatement. ("Introduction" xvii)

Pnin's language is about experience, but he cannot make this fact known to any outside audience because he expresses himself in an untranslatable way in his native idiom. Through his connections to the Russian émigré community, he is granted some of the luxuries of a habitual environment and native idioms. Beyond this fact, though, his writing does not bear a unique freight of anxiety or elaborateness because he does not publish his scholarship for anyone to see. As he continues to work on his *Petite Histoire*, Pnin's

research had long entered the charmed stage when the quest overrides the goal, and a new organism is formed, the parasite so to speak of the ripening fruit. Pnin averted his mental gaze from the end of his work . . . [which] was to be shunned as the doom of everything that determined the rapture of endless approximation. (Nabokov 143)

Thus, Pnin's inability to communicate his ideas to an audience—either because he cannot translate them or because he never publishes them—and reposition his turn towards the popular as a political move effectively compromises the radical potential of his work, much like Godfrey St. Peter and his work in *The Professor's House*. Pnin cannot make the stakes of his scholarship clear and thus cannot create or justify a place in the academic community he longs to join. Said notes that the value of an exile in academia “can be traced to the somewhat pallid notion that non-exiles can share in the benefits of exile as a redemptive motif” (“Reflections” 183). Non-exiles cannot do this with Pnin because he offers no way for them to share in his lived experiences, denying them a chance at any of the benefits attendant to his exile. This inability on Pnin's part to communicate his lived experiences throughout the novel suggests that the novel itself—and possibly Nabokov himself—finds this idea that non-exiles can “share in the benefits” of exile equally pallid.

**“A veritable encyclopedia of Russian shrugs and shakes”: Communication
and Pnin's (Lack of) Voice**

In many ways, communication seems impossible for Pnin, or at least very difficult. The novel is filled with scenes of Pnin talking, but going unheard or being misconstrued. When Pnin stands in front of his students and attempts to present comic

plays to them, it becomes apparent that:

since to appreciate whatever fun those passages still retained one had to have not only a sound knowledge of the vernacular but also a good deal of literary insight, and since his poor little class had neither, the performer would be alone in enjoying the associative subtleties of his text Presently the fun would become too much for him . . . [and] the speech he smothered behind his dancing hand was now doubly unintelligible to the class, [but] his complete surrender to his own merriment would prove irresistible. (Nabokov 12-13)

The point Pnin attempts to convey—an appreciation of the possibilities of the Russian language as exemplified by the passages from the plays he selects—is never understood by his students. He achieves his goal, exposing the students to Russian comedy, not by effectively communicating his point, but by becoming a slapstick figure whose bizarre characteristics and attempts to communicate are absurdly funny. Conversely, Pnin himself cannot understand the comic illustration that Joan Clements attempts to show him. Though Joan Clements valiantly attempts to explain the various elements of the joke—elements that are culturally alien to the Russian émigré Pnin—in a way that Pnin never attempts with his students, he refuses to engage with the ideas. He dismisses the comic, flatly pronouncing such a scenario to be “Impossible So small an island, moreover with palm, cannot exist in such big sea I have reservations I cannot understand American humor even when I am happy” (Nabokov 60-61). Listening is at least as important to effective communication as speaking, but Pnin refuses to listen to the other culture he encounters. This refusal—also signaled by Pnin's desire to move to ever quieter places—cuts Pnin off from the kind of dialogue that would allow him to mediate between Russian and American identities without assimilation into or rejection of either culture.

When Pnin's words are not physically obscured or unheard, the content behind his words—the experiences of exile that inform his entire language, according to Said's conception of the language of an exile—seems untranslatable to his listener. Without having experienced the shattering losses that Pnin has (country, language, family), it is unlikely that Joan Clements will understand the deep existential anguish behind Pnin's heartbreaking cry of “I haf nofing left, nofing, nofing!” after his ex-wife Liza leaves (Nabokov 61). Similarly, Pnin's two week stay on Ellis Island when he arrives in America is entirely the result of his personal experience and investment in the terms on which he is questioned. Though Pnin recollects it as an amusing experience, it is doubtful that the worker screening prospective immigrants found it so:

“He asks: 'Are you anarchist?' I answer”—time out on the part of the narrator for a spell of cozy mute mirth—“First what do we understand under 'Anarchism'? Anarchism practical, metaphysical, theoretical, mystical, abstractical, individual, social? When I was young, I say, all this had for me signification. So we had a very interesting discussion, in consequence of which I passed two whole weeks on Ellis Island”—abdomen beginning to heave; heaving; narrator convulsed. (Nabokov 11)

These experiential elements that inform Pnin's language are what make him seem like such a locus for radical academic work. The layers of identity that are embedded in his language—émigré and exile—position him as a stakeholder in many of the conversations that the academy claims to value. These experiential elements are mostly untranslatable, though. This compromises Pnin's ability to effectively give voice to the personal elements that give his work the chance to create a mediated position between binaries like American vs. Soviet or Communist vs. Capitalist.

While “untranslatable” lived experiences are a part of Pnin's communication

problems, he is also the subject of constant attempts to silence his voice. In some cases, Pnin's voice is simply not heard and so a character never actually responds to what Pnin says or means. When Pnin is told that there will be no position for him at Waindell at the end of the term, his closest friend at the university, Dr. Hagen, completely fails to register the distress Pnin radiates. As Pnin struggles to come to terms with the news—"clasping his hands and nodding his head"—Hagen "pump[s] Pnin's unresponsive hand with enough vigor for two" and walks home, satisfied that "At least I have sweetened the pill" (Nabokov 170-71). Discussing the novel's theme of exile, Juan Ignacio Guijarro González argues that:

the main loss caused by the second forced migration [to the United States from Europe] was linguistic, more painful and intangible than the territorial one since it implied the loss of the mother tongue Pnin's linguistic incompetence in English epitomizes his utter incapacity to adapt to the social and cultural imaginary of the United States, exacerbates his feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia and makes him the object of all kinds of jokes on campus. (164)

I agree that this "second exile" from his first language is in many ways more traumatic than the original exile from the physical place Russia. Pnin's relative lack of facility with English causes others to miss those experiential aspects of his language; in each case, that lack of comprehension or missed connection seems to deny Pnin his identity by failing to recognize the Pnin who is the sum total of those lived experiences behind the words.

Indeed, if the novel is in some ways a sly retelling of Nabokov's own period of transitioning from a Russian to an English novelist, as critic Mary Besemeres suggests in her "Self-translation in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*," it is oddly focused on new

languages' restrictive properties rather than their possibilities. Pnin, the reader is told, finds English to be “a special danger area,” and after a decade of study “his English was still full of flaws” (Nabokov 14). Consequently, Pnin's lectures are the subject of a torturous process that leaves them many steps removed from Pnin's thoughts. Though each lecture started off in Russian:

Pnin laboriously translated his own Russian verbal flow, teeming with idiomatic proverbs into patchy English. This was revised by young Miller. Then Dr. Hagen's secretary, a Miss Eisenbohr, typed it out. Then Pnin deleted the passages he could not understand. (Nabokov 15)

After receiving the final product, the subject of numerous revisions, alterations, and deletions, Pnin is “utterly helpless without the prepared text Therefore he preferred reading his lecture, his gaze glued to his text, in a slow, monotonous baritone” (Nabokov 15). This written transcription, the product of a number of people besides Pnin, controls his use of language and his scholarly voice, and it substitutes a doctored script for genuine interaction with an audience and the presentation of the full sense of Pnin's thoughts. This does not reflect the sense of Bakhtin's idealized “pidgin” because it is not an active process of synthesis on Pnin's part. He does not create a new understanding of a binary (American versus Russian, Czarist Russia versus Soviet Russia, exile versus non-exile), but rather always starts from Russian. This returns Pnin to the insular world of impossible to translate passwords and intonations with which he discusses politics with other émigrés.

As a teacher, his ability to help his students express themselves in Russian is not much better than his grasp of English. He is not one of “those stupendous Russian

ladies, scattered all over academic America, who . . . infuse a magic knowledge of their difficult and beautiful tongue into a group of innocent-eyed students,” but rather “amateurish and lighthearted” (Nabokov 10). Leonard Blorengé, Chairman of French at Waindell, is equally amateurish, “dislik[ing] Literature and [having] no French” (Nabokov 140). He recounts to Hagen, Head of German, that a “Swiss skiing instructor . . . smuggled in mimeo copies of some old French Anthology. It took us almost a year to bring the class back to its initial level” (Nabokov 142). This approach to the acquisition of language leads to one of the most obvious examples of Pnin's voice being silenced in the text. When Hagen asks Blorengé to take Pnin on in the French Department in a desperate attempt to save Pnin's job at Waindell, he is forced to admit that Pnin can speak French. Blorengé, pouncing on this fact, refuses to employ Pnin, citing the policy of the department that French instructors are “to be only one lesson ahead of [their] students” (Nabokov 142). Pnin's ability to speak is undesirable and renders him unfit to hold an academic position at Waindell; if he did not have a voice, *if he could not speak*, he would be employable. Ironically, as I argue throughout, Pnin's insularity and failure to enact the Bakhtinian dialogic means that he does not have a voice as a scholar and cannot, in that sense, speak. However, even if Pnin found the pidgin or creole that allow him to communicate his lived experiences effectively, Said's argument about the “pallid notion” of non-exiles reaping “the benefits of exile” through the communication of experience suggests that the full import of Pnin's identity as an exile lies forever beyond his ability to communicate. Pnin's use of language, though—which bears all the marks of an exile's words, as

defined by Said, in its lack of the comfort and facility that comes with long residency —could make other aware of the experience lying behind that language, if not the experiences themselves. This modest value that Pnin-the-effective-communicator could offer is rejected, though. The academy, as symbolized by characters like Blorengé, would prefer Pnin not to speak at all, but if he does, they will mock him for his exile's speech. Indeed, “after meeting Pnin socially, [Blorengé] 'definitely felt' . . . that Pnin was not fit even to loiter in the vicinity of an American college” (Nabokov 141). Pellérdi would seem to agree with this reading, noting that language is the cause of Waindell's dim opinion of Pnin, as he:

could not have been the same “freak” in Prague, Berlin or Paris, the cities that served as the largest centers for Russian refugees after the Revolution. Pnin having native command of French would never have been ridiculed in France had he stayed there. It is only in brash, modern, youthful America that his broken English and old-fashioned Russian-European mannerism become the object of curiosity and ridicule. (424-25)

In such an environment of lack when it comes to language, Pnin resembles Godfrey St. Peter, who seems to lose language entirely in the latter portion of *The Professor's House*.³²

In addition to Blorengé's rejection of Pnin and the restrictive qualities of language in the text, there are a number of other instances in the novel that present Pnin being silenced in some way. The opening scene, for example, features Pnin on a train on his way to deliver a speech to the Cremona Women's League. Before the reader learns that information, though, the narrator contextualises the situation by

³² See Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*, 323-327, and “Godfrey St. Peter's Genteel House: The Crisis of the Academy in Cather's *The Professor's House*,” above, 39-40.

noting that “Professor Pnin was on the wrong train” (Nabokov 8). Thanks to Pnin's innate Russian sensibilities, which lead him to be “inordinately fond of everything in the line of timetables, maps, [and] catalogues . . . [and to take] especial pride in puzzling out schedules for himself,” he discovers an alternate route to his speaking engagement. Unfortunately, “his timetable was five years old and in part obsolete” (Nabokov 9). His connecting train no longer exists and he will not be able to make it to Cremona. While this scene is yet another example of Pnin's rootlessness—he can find nowhere to exist, and even when he is invited to a place he cannot get there—it is also an example of the difficulties than an exile faces in adopting to a foreign culture and successfully navigating the ins and outs of that culture on a daily basis. Gonzalez maintains that “from the very moment he arrives in New York Pnin's existence turns into a daily struggle with a way of life he has so much trouble understanding as others pronouncing his last name,” and I believe that those struggles hearken back to Pnin's voice as an academic (and a human being) in a new land with a new language (163).³³ If, as Jakobson claims, “languages draw meanings and semantic values from the intelligible world, from experience, but they readjust this extrinsic matter, selecting, dissecting, and classifying it along their own lines,” Pnin's experience of the intelligible world as a jarring one—full of pain and liable to disappear at any second—would seem, logically, to deprive him of the ability to form linguistic meaning in his own life (qtd. in Sangster 47).³⁴

³³ Judith Clyde of the Cremona Woman's League pronounces his name “Pun-neen,” and Joan Clements describes his name as “A cracked ping-pong ball. Russian” (26, 32).

³⁴ Said, in “Reflections on Exile,” considers Conrad's writings as possessing “the unmistakable mark of the sensitive émigré's obsession with his own fate and with his hopeless attempts to make

Pnin's struggle to find a voice that is his own and capable of communicating with the academic community becomes extremely physical when his teeth are pulled. Pnin initially considers it “a repulsive operation,” and following the operation “he [is] in mourning for an intimate part of himself. It surprise[s] him to realize how fond he had been of his teeth [W]hen the plates were thrust in, it was like a poor fossil skull being fitted with the grinning jaws of a perfect stranger” (Nabokov 34, 38). The organ with which Pnin communicates with his students and colleagues is remade “*po amerikanski* (the American Way)” (Nabokov 33). This could be a positive development: perhaps the insertion of American teeth into his mouth will allow Pnin to more fully embrace or engage with the English language. Indeed, critic Dante Cantrill reads the passage regarding the procedure positively. He asserts:

Pnin with false teeth would seem to be somehow more ridiculous than Pnin without any teeth at all; notice the . . . alienation caused by the artificial ones. But to our surprise he immediately takes to the device and enjoys both a healthier mouth and a happier self-image. (Cantrill 36-37)

While it may be true that Pnin experiences physical benefits and a self-esteem boost from having his teeth replaced, the operation seems to encourage the silencing of his voice. Cantrill goes on to argue that “Pnin's individualism is at the heart of his personality and a new set of teeth allows him to assert that without the pains caused by

satisfying contact with new surroundings” (179). In many ways, *Pnin* also seems obsessed with the fate of the exile and making contact with new surroundings in the hopes of finding a community. Pnin's difficulties with the English language and American customs—in encounters with Americans, Pnin notices a “national informality that always nonplused” him; also, the narrator states that “his English was murder”—problematise his search for such a community in the United States (Nabokov 18, 66). These complications come out most often in his domestic life, in the everyday actions that he performs that constantly work against him. Pnin is “perhaps too wary, too persistently on the lookout for diabolical pitfalls, too painfully on the alert lest his erratic surroundings (unpredictable America) inveigle him into some bit of preposterous oversight. It was the world that was absent-minded and it was Pnin whose business it was to set it straight” (Nabokov 13).

the old ones” (41). I agree with the first half of Cantrill's statement, individualism is at the heart of Pnin's personality, but if asserting his personality means finding a way to communicate his ideas with an American audience and finding a space within the academic community to exist and develop the radical nature of his work, Pnin's new teeth seem to do little to help him in this task. Relatedly, they do very little—if anything—to counter the text's continuous attempts to silence Pnin's voice. While the wave of vanity that overcomes Pnin following the operation leads him to star in a film for Laurence Clements, the film is on “the essentials of Russian 'carpalistics,’” or non-verbal communication and gestures (Nabokov 41). Clements is particularly interested in Pnin for this project because he is a “veritable encyclopedia of *Russian* shrugs and shakes” (Nabokov 41; emphasis mine). Pnin's world continues to be divided between the Russian and the American aspects of his lived experience. Without some kind of confluence or synthesis of these two positions into a new, true third option that encompasses the similarities and differences between the two positions while simultaneously being unique, Pnin cannot realise the radical nature of his academic work.

From the moment Pnin discovers that he is on the wrong train at the beginning of the novel, he becomes entirely dependent on others to read and interpret the situation for him. He has no chance to create his own world or exercise his voice by determining a route. On the train, the conductor “consulted in silence a tattered book full of dog-eared insertions. In a few minutes, namely at 3:08, Pnin would have to get off at Whitchurch; this would enable him to catch the four-o'clock bus that would

deposit him, around six, at Cremona” (Nabokov 17). Pnin's attempt to save himself time by consulting a train schedule and finding a faster, more efficient route is an attempt to operate in the relationship between symbols and meanings of another culture and language. That he is stymied, and that an American train conductor must use his superior reading skills to interpret another schedule and correct Pnin's error, suggests that Pnin's voice can never be brought into the culture and community that he so desperately wants to join. Even if he could reach his destination without issue—and the bus ride he must take to Cremona is a disaster—Pnin does not have the right speech with him when he initially leaves Whitchurch for Cremona (Nabokov 19). Without his speech, Pnin will be unable to communicate anything to the audience because his voice is so dependent on the typed out notes from Miss Eisenbohr (with sections confusing to Pnin deleted, of course). The start of the novel, then, which presents Pnin in his interactions with the United States and American culture, would appear to effectively silence him.

The novel ends with a pair of events that work to deprive Pnin of his voice going forward, though Pnin has little to do with them directly. When Dr. Hagen, Pnin's protector, decides to leave Waindell to take a job at a more prestigious school, no other faculty member appears willing to offer academic shelter to Pnin (Nabokov 139-40). In searching for another department in which Pnin might be accepted, Hagen recalls that “Jack Cockerell, Chairman of English . . . considered Pnin a joke, and was, in fact, unofficially but hopefully haggling for the services of a prominent Anglo-Russian writer who, if necessary, could teach all the courses that Pnin must keep in order to

survive” (Nabokov 140). The Anglo-Russian writer—the narrator of the novel—does come to Waindell, but Pnin refuses to work with him (Nabokov 170, 186). In essence, Pnin is banished for a more domesticated version of himself. Though the writer/narrator may not possess the potential for radical scholarship that Pnin does, he is much more a part of American culture and, therefore, able to communicate much more effectively. It is, of course, that writer who serves as the narrator and who tells the reader Pnin's story. Hagen, aware of what is to come should the Anglo-Russian writer arrive, points out at Pnin's housewarming party: “Who, for example, wants *him* . . . who wants his personality? Nobody! They will reject Timofey's wonderful personality without a quaver” (Nabokov 161).

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine, from the description of the narrator by Hagen as a “fascinating lecturer,” that he would have “enormous difficulty . . . with depalatization, never managing to remove the extra Russian moisture from *t*'s and *d*'s before the vowels he so quaintly softened” as Pnin does (Nabokov 169, 66). The narrator, Besemeres argues, is like Nabokov himself, while Pnin is “laughable, [and] loyally White Russian” (394). The text would seem to support this: the description of the new academic year that opens Chapter Six sounds much more like the slyly ironic and satirical Nabokov's observations of campus life—or, conceivably, the observations of his stand-in reflecting back on (one imagines) his years of experience at Waindell after Pnin leaves. Pnin seems unlikely to notice that “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” (Nabokov 137). Nor does it seem likely that

Pnin, in all of his copious library research, would come across (or even notice) the fact that:

in the margins of library books earnest freshmen inscribed such helpful glosses as “Description of nature,” or “Irony”; and in a pretty edition of Mallarme's poems an especially able scholiast had already underlined in violet ink the difficult word *oiseaux* and scrawled above it “birds.” (Nabokov 137)

In this sense, the narrator appears infinitely more attractive than Pnin. This final rejection by the university, the hiring of a more Anglicized version of Pnin, seems to present the ultimate silencing of Pnin. The reader last glimpses Pnin in a car, moving “up the shining road . . . narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance” (Nabokov 191). He can make no space in which to exist, so he must leave.

After Pnin retreats and the Anglo-Russian writer arrives, there is an appropriation of Pnin's voice that makes the attempts to silence him throughout the text resonate more clearly. Jack Cockerell, the same man who hired the Anglo-Russian writer, “impersonated Pnin to perfection. He went on for hours” (Nabokov 187).³⁵ Distortions quickly creep in to Cockerell's portrayal of Pnin, though. Cockerell begins his impression with stories that are narrated throughout the text, but he begins to invent facts and circumstances, such as “the chicken farm of some Privy Counselor of the Tsar,' where Cockerell supposed Pnin spent the summers,” and “Pnin's declaration one day that he had been 'shot' by which, according to the impersonator, the poor

³⁵ The idea of another standing in for Pnin is apparently not a new one. The narrator recalls a school at which “there were as many as six Pnins, besides the genuine and, to me, unique article” (Nabokov 148).

fellow meant 'fired,'" though the narrator does not believe Pnin would confuse the two words (Nabokov 188). These distortions eventually call into question the narrator's tale, as well, particularly as Cockerell ends with the anecdote with which the narrator introduces the reader to Pnin: his trip to deliver a speech in front of the Cremona Women's Club (Nabokov 191).

Pnin, regardless of his eccentricities (or perhaps in spite of them), has been a part of the academic community at Waindell for nine years. Once he is cut loose by the university, his presence is replaced by these inaccurate impressions, reducing him to a series of caricatures and anecdotes, none of which contain Pnin's authentic voice. Cockerell is, according to Besemeres, "significantly named and appointed—the crowing Americans, suggests, the author, think they have Pnin down pat" (394). However, the narrator states that "By midnight the fun began to think . . . [and] I fell wondering if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule" (Nabokov 189). Not only is Cockerell's Pnin impression mean-spirited and inaccurate, by the end of the night, the narrator suggests, it cannot even be said to be Pnin at all. Nevertheless, one gets the sense that Cockerell will continue to perform as "Pnin" until the end of his days, serving as the sole method through which "Pnin's" voice is heard in the academic community. Rather than Pnin discovering the kind of intellectual creole or pidgin that Bakhtin endorses, he himself is turned into a figure whose literal creole of the English and Russian languages—for example, his use of the word "quittance" rather than receipt at the station in Whitchurch because of the

Russian word “kvitantsiya”—becomes an element of the mockery and ridicule directed his way (Nabokov 18). This serves as the most effective denial of Pnin's voice in the text. His language, informed as it is by his experience as an exile, loses its value to make non-exiles aware of the experiential aspect of its meaning (a potential that could be realized if Pnin was able to communicate with others effectively). When Pnin's language and voice are appropriated by Cockerell and stripped of their experiential aspects, Pnin as an entity—and the issues his existence as an exile raise—disappears, apparently precluding the possibility of Pnin ever speaking.

Despite these obstacles to the use of his voice, though, Pnin does find ways to speak. However, his manner of speaking does not necessarily contribute to the realizing of the radical potential of his work. Pellérdi argues that Pnin “thrusts back every attempt that would assimilate him into his surroundings,” which would seem beneficial, but he does not abandon his Russian sensibilities, either (425).³⁶ If a Bakhtinian dialogue offers a way for Pnin to create his own world and communicate (in academia and in his daily experiences) through an alternative to assimilation and rejection of American or Russian culture, his avoidance of assimilation leads him to an insular embrace of his Russian-ness. Consequently, he fails to utilize the Bakhtinian dialogic model. Said proposes that “Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule” (“Reflections” 180). Pnin, however, does not seem to create a new world so much as envision a

³⁶ Besemeres agrees with Pellérdi, noting that Pnin contrasts sharply with the novel's narrator, “whose Russianness has been smoothly converted into an acceptable American persona,” as “Pnin's world . . . is largely Russian, only intermittently intruded on by the American towns he happens to inhabit at present” and “In America, Pnin continues to live in a bubble of Russianness” (391, 407).

relocation of his old world. He stands at the door of the train “to wait there for the confused greenery skimming by to be cancelled and replaced by the definite station he had in mind” (Nabokov 17). There is no further mention of the station's appearance save that “Whitchurch materialized as scheduled,” part of the schedule that was dictated to Pnin by the conductor when he attempted, and failed, to rule the new world in which he finds himself (Nabokov 17). The envisioning that Pnin attempts on the train will continue throughout the novel as he navigates his new world.

When he finally arrives at the lecture in Cremona with the correct speech in hand, Pnin again attempts to tame his environment. His speech is on a topic that will draw on his abilities as a Russian émigré and on which he can communicate most effectively in his native tongue. Indeed, given the botched introduction of Pnin by Judith Clyde (an incident that Pellérdi cites as an example of the types of “philistines” Nabokov specifically casts Pnin against), any type of communication on Pnin's part seems destined to be lost in presentation in addition to translation (Pellérdi 424).³⁷ To combat this, Pnin envisions an audience, just as he attempts to create the train station at which he will stop by envisioning it in his mind. Substituting for the Cremona Women's League are figures from Pnin's past: his father and mother, a dead sweetheart, murdered aunts and friends (Nabokov 27-28). This vision, constituting as it does a group with whom Pnin could effectively communicate his ideas on the whether or not Russia is Communist, cannot last. It is insular, being an entirely

³⁷ Clyde tells the crowd that Pnin's father “was Dostoevski's family doctor,” though the reader learns to the contrary that “Dr. Pavel Pnin, an eye specialist of considerable repute, had once had the honor of treating Leo Tolstoy for a case of conjunctivitis” (Nabokov 26, 21).

Russian audience, and therefore prevents any type of Bakhtinian dialogue from ever occurring. As Pnin moves towards the lectern, the scene resolves itself, and he sees “Old Miss Herring . . . bending across one or two intermediate members of the audience to compliment Miss Clyde on her speech . . . [and] another twinkling party . . . [with] a pair of withered, soundlessly clapping hands” (Nabokov 28). This juxtaposition—Pnin as an able scholar among like-minded colleagues and fumbling English speaker unable to communicate his ideas naturally to his audience—underscores his need to find a space in which to exist in his new world that will enable him to develop the kind of creole or pidgin necessary for the realisation of the truly radical aspects of his work. This need, though, ultimately proves futile and goes unsatisfied.

There is one significant exception to the moments of silencing that run through the text. During Chapter Five, the events of Pnin's annual summer vacation to The Pines, a hot-spot for the Russian émigré community in the northeastern United States, are related. Critics have picked up on and discussed the change in Pnin's character during Chapter Five versus the rest of the novel. Pellérdi notes that “although [Pnin's] English improves during the time span of the novel, it is never flawless except in Chapter Five, a whole chapter dedicated to the Russian intellectuals with whom Pnin speaks Russian, rendered by the narrator in impeccable English” (418). Similarly, Cantrill maintains that “once he arrives at Cook's Castle [The Pines], a summer retreat in the pine forest, Pnin quickly, confidently demonstrates competence and skill in several deft moves” (39). Charles Nicol concurs, writing that while “Among fellow

Russian émigrés [Pnin is] a highly intelligent, articulate, polite, scholarly student of the social sciences, [but] among Americans he appears an incoherent fool, unschooled in the simplest of the mores of 'unpredictable America'" (93). Clearly, the episode at The Pines is an example of Pnin having a voice and being able to express himself. It is there that the reader learns of Pnin's ability to discuss "the course of recent Russian history, thirty-five years of hopeless injustice following a century of struggling justice and glimmering hope" (Nabokov 125). There are no out-of-date train timetables here, no hidden linguistic pitfalls or bizarre manners. The Pines, and the émigré community that visits there in the summer, is a safe place for Pnin.

If Pnin could make the radical nature of his project clear to an audience, then, it would appear to be this one. However, that is precisely the problem. Like Godfrey St. Peter's retreat to his attic study and his memories as a way of avoiding the obligations to the wider community that the radical nature of his historiography suggested, Pnin's ability to communicate so well with the émigré community while failing elsewhere is a mark of his profound insularity. The narrator of the novel summarizes the community as:

the active and significant nucleus of an exiled society which during the third of a century it flourished remained practically unknown to American intellectuals, for whom the notion of Russian emigration was made to mean by astute communist propaganda a vague and perfectly fictitious mass of so-called Trotskiites (whatever these are), ruined reactionaries, reformed or disguised Cheka men, titled ladies, professional priests, restaurant keepers, and White Russian military groups, all of them of no cultural importance whatever. (Nabokov 184)

The very collectivity and shared experiences that make Pnin so at ease at The Pines

and among the émigré community—that give him his voice, so to speak—strangle his ability to perform his radical scholarship. The émigré intellectuals with whom he speaks are equally well-versed in the pre-Soviet culture and historical events that Pnin could so richly offer the American academic community were he able to translate those lived experiences into his scholarship. In the comfortable community that Pnin enjoys at The Pines, he will never be able to enter into a true Bakhtinian dialogue with the American and Russian positions on either side of his approach to historiography. As Bahktin argues, “A meaning only reveals its depths after having encountered . . . another, alien meaning” (qtd. in Holquist 82). In order to realise the radical potential of his work, then, Pnin must leave the confines of the émigré community and create a space for himself in the American academic community. That he cannot do this is, in many ways, the tragedy of the novel. A tragedy that accompanies, and exists in ironic tension with, the comedic elements of the novel.

“The pleasant task of Pninizing”: Pnin as (Failed) Creator of Spaces

Pnin's struggles to create a space in which to exist are as much a thread in the novel as the instances of his voice being silenced. In many ways, both struggles are equally vital to the life of the exile. In his “Reflections on Exile,” Said quotes Simone Weil, “who posed the dilemma of exile as concisely as it has ever been expressed. 'To be rooted,' she said, 'is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul'” (183). The idea of rootedness as central to human lives extends, I think, beyond exiles and émigré communities. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard

stresses the fundamental psychological need of oneiric space, a place that “shelters daydreaming . . . protects the dreamer . . . [and] allows one to dream in peace” (6). For Pnin, that oneiric space is the academy. He is an academic who desperately wants to domesticate within the confines of the American university system, but he can find no place in which to exist among the “sterile and pretentious people whose single-minded entertainment is back-biting gossip about colleagues and friends and whose academic ambitions vastly exceed their intellectual capabilities” (Stegner 92). Pnin's struggle to create a space for himself—a process that the narrator terms “pninizing”—serves a parallel function to St. Peter's rental of two houses in order to preserve his attic study. Whereas St. Peter's challenge at the end of *The Professor's House* is to leave that space and embrace his radical nature, Pnin disappears from the end of *Pnin* without ever finding a space in which he can be radical because he cannot effectively communicate in the spaces he inhabits outside of the émigré community. St. Peter is almost killed by his attic study, a space for memory and daydreams that slowly drains his work of meaning, that isolates him from any community. Pnin is equally isolated from a community that would theoretically give his work meaning and create a space for him: the academic community in the United States.

Pnin is constantly presented as a character in transit. The reader meets Pnin on a train supposedly heading to Cremona, his voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States is described in great detail, and he exits the novel in a car on the road to an unknown place (Nabokov 7-8, 46-50, 190-91). The sea voyage, already a scene of transit and rootlessness, is bookended by two scenes of Pnin in liminal areas that act as

gatekeepers for the community Pnin wishes to join. Before leaving Paris, he spends a great deal of time in “the dreary hell that had been devised by European bureaucrats (to the vast amusement of the Soviets) for holders of that miserable thing, the Nansen Passport (a kind of parolee's card issues to Russian émigrés)” (Nabokov 46). Similarly, once Pnin arrives in the United States, his answers to the questions about his political background mean that he “passed two whole weeks on Ellis Island” (Nabokov 11). Even Pnin's status as an academic at Waindell appears transitory when first introduced to the reader. Early in the novel as the narrator introduces the reader to Pnin, he notes that Waindell College is “Pnin's academic perch since 1945,” a word choice that suggest a curious sense of transitivity (Nabokov 9). The college is not a “nest” for Pnin, it is not a homey place that offers security and protection. To call it a perch denotes that it is a place that Pnin will leave.³⁸

While he is at Waindell, though, Pnin spends a great deal of time attempting to “pninize” spaces and make them suitable for his needs. The first instance in the text of this activity occurs when Pnin rents a room from Joan and Laurence Clements. After being show his quarters, Pnin “applie[s] himself to the pleasant task of Pninizing his new quarters” (Nabokov 35). The narrator goes on to say that:

During the eight years Pnin had taught at Waindell College he had changed his lodgings—for one reason or another, mainly sonic—about every semester

³⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a perch as “Anything on which a bird alights, rests, or roosts,” but adds two seemingly contradictory shades of meaning to the word by noting it as both “An elevated or secure place or position” and “A place, esp. an elevated or precarious one, where a person or thing alights or rests” (“Perch”). This knotted meaning, a place that is at once elevated (perhaps reflecting the supposedly elevated culture of academia), secure (as Pnin imagines his employment at Waindell to be), and precarious (as Pnin's position, dependent on the protection of Dr. Hagen, turns out to be), encapsulates the tension at the heart of the novel.

Waindell was a quiet townlet, and Waindellville, in a notch of the hills, was yet quieter; but nothing was quiet enough for him” (Nabokov 62-63).

Without being willing to “hear” the sounds of America, Pnin will never be able to find a way to create and utilize the pidgin or creole that effective communication of his scholarly interests, predicated as they are on the experiences of exile that inform his voice and language, demands. In addition to his inability to find a room or house in which he can live in peace, Pnin's office space at Waindell is equally unsatisfying.

After he is granted his own office:

he had lovingly Pnimized it. It had come with two ignoble chairs, a cork bulletin board, a can of floor wax forgotten by the janitor, and a humble pedestal desk of indeterminate wood. He wangled from the Administration a small steel file with an entrancing locking device. Young Miller, under Pnin's direction, embraced and brought over Pnin's part of a sectional bookcase. From old Mrs. McCrystal, in whose white frame house he had spent a mediocre winter (1949-50), Pnin purchased for three dollars a faded, once Turkish rug. With the help of the janitor he screwed onto the side of the desk a pencil sharpener He had other, even more ambitious plans, such as an armchair and a tall lamp. (Nabokov 69)

Returning to Waindell after the summer, though, Pnin finds his office invaded and the space he so carefully established ruined by his new officemate, Dr. Bodo von Falternfels (Nabokov 69-70). Towards the end of the novel, though, Pnin is convinced that he will be able to find a space at Waindell to live and work. He rents a small house and throws a housewarming party to celebrate. Talking with Dr. Hagen after his party, Pnin reveals that he is planning on buying the house because “Naturally, I am expecting that I will get tenure at last I am now Assistant Professor nine years. Years run. Soon I will be Assistant Emeritus [O]h, not next year, but example given, at hundredth anniversary of Liberation of Serfs” (Nabokov 167-68).

Ultimately, such an event will never occur. Hagen is leaving and Pnin refuses to work under the Anglo-Russian writer being brought to Waindell. He will not buy the house and he will never be integrated into the academic community.

However, even if he bought the house, there is no guarantee that Pnin would be able to successfully join the academic community and engage in the kind of Bakhtinian dialogue that would realize the radical nature of his scholarship. In many ways, the house serves merely as a furthering of his insularity, pushing him away from the possibility of discovering the pidgin or creole that would enable successful communication with those outside the Russian émigré community. Besemeres reads Pnin's house as an extension of his lack of true interaction with the American landscape that he lives in. Reflecting on the house:

Pnin thought that had there been no Russian Revolution, no exodus, no expatriation in France, no naturalization in America, everything . . . would have been much the same: a professorship in Kharkov or Kazan, a suburban house such as this, old books within, late blooms without. (Nabokov 144-45)

For Besemeres, Pnin thinking this way—“ludicrously, yet reasonably, given his isolation”—is an example of “incorporat[ing] [Waindell] into an idyllic Russian memory” (392-93). In his approach to “pninizing” his surroundings, then, Pnin is again failing to construct the open system that a Bakhtinian dialogue implies. Incorporating his new house into a fantastic projection of a Russia in which the Soviet revolution never happened is akin to Pnin's approach to his own memory and his work. His memories and daydreams play an equally important role in his daily life and work as Godfrey St. Peter's do in his own in *The Professor's House*.

For Pnin, the recent past is a haunting monstrosity that he must avoid at all costs, while the distant past is equally painful. Thinking about the tragic events of the Holocaust or the Soviet upheaval that forced him to flee his homeland, Pnin reflects that:

In order to exist rationally, [he] had taught himself . . . never to remember . . . because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things . . . were possible. (Nabokov 134-35)

If St. Peter uses his memory to evacuate historical events of their violence by writing himself into his history, Pnin uses his history to escape his memories and embrace an alternate past of art, literature, culture, and myths. For Pnin, it is this history that can serve as a complement to, and illumination of, the larger history he seeks to avoid. Unfortunately, by doing this, and not being able to express his lived experiences to a community outside of the Russian émigré community, Pnin strips his popular history of a necessary violence that would help to demonstrate its political content and make the radical terms of his history clear. Thus, Pnin is unable to find a way to embrace the radical nature of his work because of his inability to engage in a true Bakhtinian dialogue with the Russian and American ideological stances and present his turn to the study of popular thought as a political alternative to those ideologies. Pnin cannot voice his value as a stakeholder in this conversation to the university (not in the “pallid” sense, to use Said’s word, of allowing non-exiles to participate in the benefits of exile, but rather in the sense of communicating the experiences behind his language).

There is hope, though, in the text that Pnin's fate is not a foregone conclusion.

He does connect, briefly, with Laurence Clements when:

a chance reference to a rare author, a passing allusion tacitly recognized in the middle distance of an idea, an adventurous sail descried on the horizon, led insensibly to a tender mental concord between the two men, both of whom were really at ease only in their warm world of natural scholarship. (Nabokov 41)

Later, as he composes the guest list for his housewarming party, Pnin fondly recalls “the Clementses (real people—not like most of the campus dummies), with whom he had had such exhilarating talks in the days when he was their roomer” (Nabokov 146).

In these moments, it seems possible that Pnin will transcend his insularity and will find a place in the academy. Once he can find a place and make a connection with the community, the possibility of developing a Bakhtinian dialogue, of making explicit the connection between his lived experiences as an exile and his language, and of clarifying the politicization of his focus on popular and folk concepts in his history can all take place. If the challenge to academics and the academy at the end of *The Professor's House* is to embrace the radical nature of their work by abandoning the staid elements of the academic tradition, the challenge posed by *Pnin* reflects the three decades of subsequent academic culture. *Pnin* suggests that radical academics must find ways to both reenter the academy, but also make their radicalism clear so that the stakes of their projects, and the value of their work to the academy and to the public is clear. This process, coupled with the continued radicalization of the professoriate, is one that the academy (and those who write or think about it) continue to grapple with today.

Conclusion: The Political Unconscious and Literature About Professors

This thesis is only a beginning, a way to start thinking about certain texts. Within its limited scope, it obviously could not engage the complete canon of novels about professors, nor could it discuss the countless representations of professors in other media (television, film, music, the plastic arts). Likewise, the fascinating history of various academic departments (like English Studies, History, and Art) throughout the late nineteenth through twentieth centuries could only be touched on in an indirect way. A complete study of the canon of literature about professors would require extensive discussion and interpretation of that history, a project beyond the scope of this thesis. As Fredric Jameson mentions in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*:

we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (9)

This penetrating insight bears much importance to any larger study of literature about professors. As the history of the development of English Studies, History, and Art in America throughout the last century is filled with interpretations of the role of those subjects in life (both academic and public, if there can be a separation), any study of such would require an extensive tracing and unpacking of those historical interpretations.

In a modest way, this thesis has attempted to do just that for Willa Cather's *The*

Professor's House and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*. By placing the work of Godfrey St. Peter and Timofey Pnin in dialogue with contemporary work in historiography, cultural studies, and literary analysis, I sought to tease out ironies and tensions between that work, its goals, and the representation of the characters performing that same work. Tensions and ironies abounded; the radical potential of these characters' work was at once ever-present and always compromised. The characters themselves oscillated between embodying the political consequences of that work and presenting them as impossible to achieve. Binaries were at once broken down and created or reaffirmed. Communities became sites of understanding and encountering the Other and of profound insularity. In short, professors seemed inherently contradictory individuals. What seemed most important about exploring these tensions and ironies, though, was the uncovering of a Jamesonian political unconscious to the novels. That is, the radical political aspects of the work that St. Peter and Pnin do are the cause of those tensions and ironies. In presenting St. Peter as an aesthete with at once lavish and austere tastes and Pnin as a quaintly odd man, *The Professor's House* and *Pnin* attempt to repress or hide those radical political aspects of their work. Nevertheless, the existence of that work and its possibilities continually force the texts into moments of crisis when the political aspects demand action and the characters can no longer hide or suppress that demand.

Satires and parodies of academics and academic life seem increasingly prominent in genre of literature about the academy throughout the second half of the twentieth century to the present. These texts can be helpful in making explicit the

kinds of tensions and ironies found in *The Professor's House* and *Pnin*. A text like Robertson Davies' *The Rebel Angels*, for example, seems to explode the ideas of experience and identity being “untranslatable,” at the same time that it foregrounds the concerns of space present in *The Professor's House* and *Pnin*. Maria Theotoky literally attempts to hide her ethnicity and her family's cultural background (Roma) from everyone around her at the College of St. John and the Holy Ghost. At the same time, the return of Parlabane—a defrocked monk and former favoured son of the college before his appetite for hard drugs and his homosexuality made him distasteful to the college—triggers an exploration of the willingness of the academy to find space for truly radical elements, rather than mere versions of academics like Godfrey St. Peter (whose radicalism has been comfortably tamed and domesticated in this setting). Ozias Froats, meanwhile, causes outrage among the public when a conservative politician discovers that the college supports and funds his research, which is literally focused on excrement. Froats' work is the recipient of a prestigious scientific award, but is decried in the presses and the politician pushes for the college to stop Froats. The shocking violence at the text's conclusion—made all the more shocking by its relatively petty motivation—calls into question the self-seriousness of the academy, and seems to invite the kind of analysis carried out in this thesis.

Continuing to probe the ironies and tensions within representations of professors in literature seems more important now than ever. At the same time, the tensions and ironies that result when such political currents are hidden or repressed in these representation serve as something akin to barometers when it comes to public

perception of the academy and its function. In the wake of events like the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the 2008 financial crisis, which the critics of the academy saw it as slow or unable to respond to, recovering that sense of the political in the work that academics do is vital. Budget demands are leading to questions about the relevance of the Humanities in the twenty-first century at the same time that states and pundits push to eliminate tenure (Greenblatt). Now more than ever, it seems, academics must justify their existence and utility. In order to do that, though, the academy must come to terms with how it has been represented throughout the years. Those sedimented layers of interpretation of academics and their work can be studied overtly in literature about professors.

Uncovering, and working to respond to, these layers seems especially important for the future of English Studies as a discipline. The explosion of critical and analytic frameworks in the second-half of the twentieth century (especially the various forms of structuralism, post-structuralism, new historicism, deconstruction, Marxism, and psychoanalysis) seems to have resulted in especially aggressive interpretations of the academy and its function. A novel like *Book: A Novel* by Robert Grudin, which paints each of the above critical practices in broad satirical strokes during a department meeting and features a revolt by its footnotes midway through, highlights the gap between the work that academics do and its goals and public perception of that work. It is in that gap, with all its tensions and ironies, that locating and restoring a political unconscious in the text can help to parse out and respond to the sedimented layers of interpretation. This act, it seems to me, is necessary if English

Studies in particular (and the Humanities as a whole more broadly) is to continue to evolve in the twenty-first century.

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