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Title: Grin and Bare It: Teeth and the Risks of Narration in Nabokov and his Fiction

Abstract:

After having his top teeth removed and fitted with dentures, Nabokov alerted Edmund Wilson before a scheduled meeting, “I hope you will recognize me—I shall carry your telegram in my hand” (Boyd, 66). Nabokov’s warning was no doubt tongue-in-cheek, but he subjected a number of his characters to similar dental operations, and for them, the implications for the gaze of the “other” become very real and serious. Focusing on *Pnin*, this paper explores why certain of Nabokov’s characters, those anxious of being observed, interpreted, and narrated, localize those fears precisely in their teeth, and how they find relief in the teeth’s extraction.

The hardest, most durable part of the human body, the teeth represent that which gives one structure, that which is essential and stable. Making a set of impressions as unique as a fingerprint, one’s chompers further physically embody one’s singleness of character, and even have incised on them elements of one’s personal history and habits. Visible to the world, the teeth also offer a glimpse behind the “film of flesh that envelops us” and thus violate “one of the main characteristics of life . . . discreteness” (*Pnin*, 20), threatening to make publicly legible what should remain, in Nabokov’s aesthetic and moral ideology, one’s private inner life.

Hence *Pnin*, on whose “shocking teeth” (12) is inscribed his painful past, and who is haunted by “too many people... Inquisitive people” (34) and an invasive narrator, has all his teeth replaced with a “firm mouthful of efficient, alabastrine, humane” dentures (38). The flawless fake teeth then present a featureless, inscrutable facade, much like the one Nabokov, for whom “special privacy” was also “absolutely necessary” (34), displayed in his own authorial persona.

Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin*. New York: Vintage, 1989.