

Adopting Styles, Inserting Selves: Nabokov's *Pale Fire**

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Nabokov's highly original novel *Pale Fire* (1962) is grounded in Shakespeare's late play, *Timon of Athens*, one of his least performed and perhaps not completely finished works.¹ We need to understand this relation before addressing *Pale Fire*. There are quite a few casual references to Shakespeare's play in Nabokov's novel; for example, he speaks of "prickly-chinned Phrynia, pretty Timandra with that boom under her apron" (210); the young king of Zembla has in his closet "a thirty-twomo edition of *Timon of Athens* translated into Zemblan by his uncle Conmal, the Queen's brother" (125)²; as a gloss on lines 39-40 of John Shade's poem, Kinbote introduces variants that remind him of Timon's scene with the three banditti (4.3) from which the "pale fire" passage is drawn. Kinbote's new readings are uncomfortably close to Shakespeare: "and home would haste my thieves, / The sun with stolen ice, the moon with leaves" (79). The variants here and elsewhere seem to represent Kinbote's own poem rather than Shade's. Kinbote in Cedarn, Utana, preparing the poem for publication, also thinks of himself as connected with Shakespeare's play: "Having no library in the desolate log cabin where I live like Timon in his cave" (79).³ He then retranslates the "pale fire" passage from Conmal's absurd Zemblan version and winds up with a commendable paraphrase.

In Shakespeare, Timon's "pale fire" passage does not occur until towards the end of Act 4.3, when Timon in his cave meets the three

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney0241.htm>>.

banditti and offers them not only gold, but also a long lecture on the general pattern of thievery that pervades the cosmos:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
 Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief
 And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
 The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
 The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief
 That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n
 From general excrement. Each thing's a thief. (431-37)

In the curious relation of Shade, the poet, and Kinbote, the so-called exiled king—Timon in the woods is also in exile—, all sorts of suggestions arise. Is Kinbote trying to steal Shade's poem?

Shade's decision to name his poem *Pale Fire* does not occur until almost the end of his work (lines 961-62). It is phrased as an abbreviated and jocular afterthought:

(But *this* transparent thingum does require
 Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*.)

Will is, of course, William Shakespeare, the inspiration for Shade's poem; and the "moondrop" can be linked with the pale fire of the moon in *Timon of Athens*.

Kinbote's long note on these lines, and about Conmal's abilities (or lack thereof) as a translator, is full of a mischievous bamboozling of the reader:

But in which of the Bard's works did our poet cull it? My readers must make their own research. All I have with me is a tiny vest pocket edition of *Timon of Athens*—in Zemblan! It certainly contains nothing that could be regarded as an equivalent of "pale fire" (if it had, my luck would have been a statistical monster). (285)

Kinbote seems to be forgetting his note to lines 39-40, in which he offers a fairly decent paraphrase of the "pale fire" passage in Shakespeare (but without the words "pale fire").

How can we explain Nabokov's preoccupation with *Timon of Athens*? It is certainly not one of Shakespeare's major works. I think Nabokov was so strongly attracted to Shakespeare's play because he imagined Kinbote as a Timonist, a creature who deals in excess, and who, in his eccentricity and whimsicality, hates all of mankind except a chosen few; both Kinbote and Shade are misanthropic. Their sense of reality is distorted by their own delusions. This is especially true of Kinbote, who, Nabokov hints, may actually be a lunatic.

1. Adopting Styles

One other speculative way of considering the relation of *Pale Fire* to *Timon of Athens* is stylistic. Was Nabokov attempting to imitate the distinctive style of Shakespeare's late plays? This style is more personal, more conversational, more complex than Shakespeare's earlier work. It is more devoted to following the vagaries and discontinuities of thought than the earlier plays, with many strange words and unanticipated changes in rhythm. If this line of thinking has any merit, then we can see why *Timon of Athens* would be particularly attractive to Nabokov: *Timon* has always been considered a potentially unfinished, even rough play with many repetitions and a pronounced stridency.⁴ One may wonder if this is what made the play so appealing to an author like Nabokov, who prided himself on his idiosyncrasy? It certainly seems like an odd choice on Nabokov's part to give so much prominence to *Timon of Athens* rather than to one of Shakespeare's better known plays.⁵

Nabokov's interest in the idiosyncratic style of *Timon of Athens* should be seen in the wider context of the preoccupation with language. He learned English at a very early age and got his B.A. degree from Cambridge University. Beginning with *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, published in 1941, his novels were all written in English. But it was a very special English, with many words not in general use in speech, so-called "dictionary words."⁶ This is especially true of *Lolita* (1955), the harangues of Humbert Humbert, and the teenage Ameri-

can slang of Dolly, a slang somewhat odd and outdated (and mixed with British slang).

We can learn a lot about the language and style of *Pale Fire* from a close reading of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (see Hesse 118). Andrew Field considers this novel in the category of “fictional autobiography” (27-28), a genre very familiar to Nabokov. Sebastian Knight’s novels include *The Prismatic Bezel* and *The Doubtful Asphodel*, both satiric and parodic titles that do not tell us much about the books themselves.

A playful and idiosyncratic attitude to words characterizes the style of both Kinbote and Sebastian Knight. Take, for example, the note on the word *lemniscate*. Shade had written:

In sleeping dreams I played with other chaps
But really envied nothing—save perhaps
The miracle of a lemniscate left
Upon wet sand by nonchalantly deft
Bicycle tires. (135-39)

Kinbote’s note displays his linguistic superiority over Shade, the mere poet: “‘A unicursal bicircular quartic’ says my weary old dictionary. I cannot understand what this has to do with bicycling and suspect that Shade’s phrase has no real meaning. As other poets before him, he seems to have fallen here under the spell of misleading euphony” (136). Of course, we are aware that Nabokov (via Kinbote) is commenting slyly on himself—this has nothing at all to do with “misleading euphony.” Kinbote’s definition is from the second edition of *Webster’s Dictionary*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “lemniscate” as a technical term from mathematics, especially geometry, meaning: “The designation of certain closed curves, having a general resemblance to the figure 8.” Boyd says further that it is “a curve of the shape of a figure eight or of the hourglass [...] if placed on its side the symbol of infinity” (*The American Years* 186). It is also a flattened representation of a Möbius strip.

In a grand, parodic crescendo to this passage, Kinbote expatiates on the surprising intricacies of the Zemblan language:

To take a striking example: what can be more resounding, more resplendent, more suggestive of choral and sculptured beauty, than the word *coramen*? In reality, however, it merely denotes the rude strap with which a Zemblan herdsman attaches his humble provisions and ragged blanket to the meekest of his cows when driving them up to the *vebodar* (upland pastures). (136)

Nabokov is here showing off his witty linguistic extravagance in two languages, one that is his own invention (although it resembles Russian).

The Prismatic Bezel and *Pale Fire* contain many stylistic parallels, and the earlier novel-within-a-novel presents us with significant anticipations of the later one. Speaking of the composition of *The Prismatic Bezel*, Sebastian's half-brother, who is writing a biography about him, observes:

The author's task is to find out how this formula has been arrived at; and all the magic and force of his art are summoned in order to discover the exact way in which two lines of life were made to come into contact,—the whole book indeed being but a glorious gamble on causalities or, if you prefer, the probing of the aetiological secret of aleatory occurrences. (96)

Nabokov is trying to define a different way of writing a novel, something that will satisfy its parodic and satiric goals. The method is entirely indirect:

The Prismatic Bezel can be thoroughly enjoyed once it is understood that the heroes of the book are what can be loosely called "methods of composition." It is as if a painter said: look, here I'm going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it. (95)

Nabokov is speaking about his unique postmodern or experimental approach to writing a novel, in which the narrative—the so-called "fiction"—is subordinated to the poetic style or atmosphere created by the author. Thus all novels are essentially forms of self-expression

in which there is a continuous merging of what we normally think of as prose and poetry. The dialogue between Shade and Kinbote, two radically different personalities, resembles the way in which Sebastian's non-literary but adoring half-brother is trying to bring to life the gifted and poetic Sebastian.

The vagaries of Sebastian Knight's fiction puzzle his half-brother, who is trying valiantly to write about him. Fiction and reality seem to come together, as in the following passage:

He had a queer habit of endowing even his most grotesque characters with this or that idea, or impression, or desire which he himself might have toyed with. His hero's letter may possibly have been a kind of code in which he expressed a few truths about his relations with Clare. But I fail to name any other author who made use of his art in such a baffling manner—baffling to me who might desire to see the real man behind the author. (114)

The biographer is trying, not wholly successfully, to make sense of his complex half-brother:

The light of personal truth is hard to perceive in the shimmer of an imaginary nature, but what is still harder to understand is the amazing fact that a man writing of things which he really felt at the time of writing, could have had the power to create simultaneously—and out of the very things which distressed his mind—a fictitious and faintly absurd character. (114)

It is obvious that, as hard as he tries, Sebastian's half-brother does not understand either him or his fictions. The same might also be said of Kinbote's relation to Shade.

Let us look at another key word in *Pale Fire*, "preterist," which Shade defines, in the enigmatic manner of Kinbote, as "one who collects cold nests" (line 79). The word occurs again at the beginning of Canto Three; here, Shade is talking about the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter (IPH):

It missed the gist of the whole thing; it missed
 What mostly interests the preterist;
 For we die every day; oblivion thrives
 Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives,

And our best yesterdays are now foul piles
Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files. (517-22)

Shade's use of "preterist" recalls a Proustian passage in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* from Knight's novel *The Doubtful Asphodel*:

"Now, when it was too late, and Life's shops were closed, he regretted not having bought a certain book he had always wanted; never having gone through an earthquake, a fire, a train-accident; never having seen Tatsienlu in Tibet, or having heard blue magpies chattering in Chinese willows; not having spoken to that errant schoolgirl with shameless eyes, met one day in a lonely glade; not having laughed at the poor little joke of a shy ugly woman, when no one had laughed in the room; having missed trains, allusions and opportunities; not having handed the penny he had in his pocket to that old street-violinist playing to himself tremulously on a certain bleak day in a certain forgotten town." (176)

The half-brother biographer is trying to define something supremely poetical in Sebastian's style, but he is having a hard time finding the exact words:

Sebastian Knight had always liked juggling with themes, making them clash or blending them cunningly, making *them* express that hidden meaning, which could only be expressed in a succession of waves, as the music of a Chinese buoy can be made to sound only by undulation. In *The Doubtful Asphodel*, his method has attained perfection. It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations. (176)

Kinbote is not as perceptive a critic as Sebastian's half-brother, but both of them are radically different from the authors they write about, and both seem to be trying to insert themselves into the works about which they write. This is even much more obvious in the case of Kinbote.⁷

Towards the end of his commentary, Kinbote imagines himself as doing what "only a true artist can do—pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web" (289). He holds under his left armpit Shade's notecards on which *Pale*

Fire is written, “and for a moment I found myself enriched with an indescribable amazement as if informed that fireflies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits, or that a bat was writing a legible tale of torture in the bruised and branded sky” (289). The passage ends with an ecstatic assertion: “I was holding all Zembla pressed to my heart.” It is quite clear here that Kinbote considers himself the co-author of *Pale Fire*. His style in his commentary matches that of Shade in his poem.

Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* offers a very good example of the mingling of prose and poetry in a single work. Kinbote’s strenuous annotations to John Shade’s 1000-line poem about his adventures as exiled king of Zembla seem to constitute a major part of what we would call “the novel.” Nevertheless, the connection between the poem and the commentary remains puzzling. The more one rereads *Pale Fire*, however, the more one is caught up in the seemingly absurd idea that the relationship of the poem and the commentary is quite close.

2. Inserting Selves

Nabokov, of course, delights in teasing the reader, as he certainly does in the semi-autobiographical account of the novelist Sebastian Knight, where he seems to be speaking of the formation of his own, unique style. In *Speak, Memory* (1966) Nabokov seems to be speaking of his own life as if it were a work of fiction; in *The Gift* (1937, trans. 1963) and *Ada* (1969) he transmutes motifs of his life-story into fiction. In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov tantalizes us by suggesting that there must be a close link between the poem and the commentary. His Kinbote, for example, states unequivocally at the end of the Foreword that “without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all [...] a reality that only my notes can provide” (28-29).

The crux of Kinbote’s indebtedness to Shade (and vice versa) is affirmed within the first few pages of the commentary:

By the end of May I could make out the outlines of some of my images in the shape his genius might give them; by mid-June I felt sure at last that he would recreate in a poem the dazzling Zembla burning in my brain. I mesmerized him with it, I saturated him with my vision, I pressed upon him, with a drunkard's wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse. (80)

Kinbote is sure of his insight: "At length I knew he was ripe with my Zembla, bursting with suitable rhymes, ready to spurt at the brush of an eyelash" (80). On getting hold of the poem, however, Kinbote is disappointed at not finding a direct connection with his own story, but he is still convinced that there is "a symptomatic family resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story" (81).

Remarkably, Kinbote refers to *Pale Fire* as "my poem" (182), and in the Index (which is much more than a literal Index), it is "their joint composition" (312). Kinbote has given Shade his "theme" (288), and he boasts about "all the live, glamorous, palpitating, shimmering material I had lavished upon him" (87). The exiled king means all of this quite literally, that "the glory of Zembla merges with the glory of your verse" (215).

In the all-important variants that Kinbote has collected—or perhaps written—, he postulates an arcane allusion to himself:

Strange Other World where all our still-born dwell,
And pets, revived, and invalids, grown well,
And minds that died before arriving there:
Poor old man Swift, poor —, poor Baudelaire. (167)

Kinbote speculates seriously about the dash—of course, "Kinbote" scans perfectly:

Or was there something else—some obscure intuition, some prophetic scruple that prevented him from spelling out the name of an eminent man who happened to be an intimate friend of his? Was he perhaps playing safe because a reader in his household might have objected to that particular name being mentioned? And if it comes to that, *why* mention it at all in this tragical context? Dark, disturbing thoughts. (168)

Dark, disturbing thoughts indeed. But Kinbote is passionately committed to the idea that he is supplying Shade with the stuff his poem is made of; and not only that but that he has entered deeply into Shade's consciousness. For example, he speaks of Shade cleaning out "the bowl of his pipe as fiercely as if it were my heart he was hollowing out" (91). Whatever obstacles there may be in the way of a direct commentary, Kinbote is nevertheless convinced that the poem contains "echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripplewake of my glory" (297). He defends the importance of his commentary as "an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me" (297).

Critics of *Pale Fire* are preoccupied with the relation of Kinbote to V. Botkin, a professor in the Russian Department of Wordsmith University.⁸ Nabokov seems to delight in teasing us, since, apart from a few very casual references, Botkin appears only in the Index. He does not enter into Kinbote's narrative at all. In relation to the novel itself, there seems to be no point at all in equating Kinbote and Botkin. Kinbote may be highly eccentric and narcissistic—and possibly mad—as many of Nabokov's protagonists are, but *Pale Fire* can hardly be interpreted as the bizarre account of a madman, full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Kinbote is perceptive enough (and certainly sane enough) to realize that the story of his life is not literally the subject of Shade's poem. For this fault he blames Sybil, Shade's wife:

[S]he made him tone down or remove from his Fair Copy everything connected with the magnificent Zemblan theme with which I kept furnishing him and which, without knowing much about the growing work, I fondly believed would become the main rich thread in its weave! (91)

Thus the variants, notes, and first drafts of the poem become extremely important. In his commentary, Kinbote says that line 12, "that crystal land," is "[p]erhaps an allusion to Zembla, my dear country." To back this up, Kinbote quotes from

the disjointed, half-obliterated draft which I am not at all sure I have deciphered properly:

Ah, I must not forget to say something
That my friend told me of a certain king. (74)

By using Kinbote as a counterweight to Shade, Nabokov seems to be enjoying the play of mirroring effects and doubling (cf. Roth).

After line 130 Kinbote quotes what he calls a "false start" that comes directly out of his own narrative:

As children playing in a castle find
 In some old closet full of toys, behind
 The animals and masks, a sliding door
 [four words heavily crossed out] a secret corridor— (118)

So Kinbote is encouraged by the variants to think that Shade is irresistibly recounting his own story of the exiled king, complete with children's games and secret passages. Of course, our intuition tells us that all the variants and notes have been written by Kinbote himself. He quotes liberally not only from variants, but also from first drafts, earlier versions, and forgotten lines; moreover, he seems to be omniscient about Shade's writing, and we wonder how he could possibly know all this.

The most significant example in this regard is Kinbote's long note on Shade's line 61, referring to the TV antenna as a "huge paperclip" for "the gauzy mockingbird" to land on. Kinbote goes on to quote from an earlier poem of Shade (existing only in manuscript) called "The Swing," "being the last short piece that our poet wrote" (94):

The setting sun that lights the tips
 Of TV's giant paperclips
 Upon the roof;

The shadow of the doorknob that
 At sundown is a baseball bat
 Upon the door;

The cardinal that likes to sit
 And make chip-wit, chip-wit, chip-wit
 Upon the tree;
 The empty little swing that swings
 Under the tree: these are the things
 That break my heart. (94-95)

There is, of course, no way of deciding whether this is Shade's poem or Kinbote's. It does not really matter, since the poem—and all of *Pale Fire* for that matter—is written by Nabokov. The same is also true of Sebastian Knight's relation to his half-brother, the biographer. Nabokov has created such distinct and vivid characters that we are tempted to regard them as the authentic authors of their own poems and fictions. Nabokov always considered himself to be a poet,⁹ so there is no way of properly separating his prose from his poetry.

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For a novel that takes its title from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, we would perhaps like there to be much more explicit use of Shakespeare in *Pale Fire*. But I think that Nabokov establishes a strong sense that Kinbote, especially, is a Timonist. Shakespeare's Timon is alienated from mankind and speaks, particularly in the second part of the play, with excessive invective and extravagant passion. Kinbote, too, has an intemperate wildness in his discourse that has little relation to ordinary life and commonsense discourse. Shade is a much more controlled character, but he, too, seems to be carried away by the misfortunes in his life, especially the death of his daughter. Nabokov may have found Shakespeare's play congenial to his own temperament, especially in the abruptness of its contrasts. It clearly forms a continuum with the characters of the two protagonists of *Pale Fire*.

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NOTES

¹See Priscilla Meyer's article. She comments that "Nabokov pays tribute to the English component of his own art by embedding Shakespeare's plays in *Pale Fire*" (146), and notes that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare reads "pale his ineffectual fire" (1.5.97; see Meyer 149). See also the persuasive article of Gretchen E. Minton, which emphasizes Timon and Kinbote's misanthropy.

²In the course of the novel one hears quite a lot about Conmal, not all of it flattering (see the Index, which serves as an important part of *Pale Fire*).

³His "Timonian cave" appears again in the Index (308).

⁴See, e.g., the Introduction to the New Arden Edition (Dawson and Minton 205).

⁵See the article by Takács, who claims that *Pale Fire* "is a *pastiche* ('semblance' and 'resemblance') of Shakespearean romance" (103).

⁶See Edmund Wilson's article "The Strange Case of Puskin and Nabokov."

⁷The narrator of *Sebastian Knight* may be projecting his own moods into his account of Sebastian's novels, but this is the only way, an indirect one, of inscribing himself into them.

⁸See especially Boyd, *The American Years* (ch. 18; 430-33). He quotes an entry in Nabokov's diary from 1962 saying that Kinbote is Botkin, a Russian madman (709n4). See also Boyd's excellent book, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*. Boyd discusses this matter also in great detail in "Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*."

⁹See Paul D. Morris's surprising account of Nabokov as an important but neglected poet, especially his chapter 7 on *Pale Fire*. Shade's poem is Nabokov's longest and perhaps finest achievement. In Lyndy Abraham's learned and ingenious study, Shade's poem is described as "a bad poem. [...] Nabokov's parody of incompetent academic poems by writers like Shade who eclectically *imitate* the poetry they have read or misread. Shade has obviously misread Pope" (245).

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