

On Poets, Poets' Critics, and Critics' Critics: A Response to Maurice Charney and Thomas Kullmann*

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Maurice Charney's "Adopting Styles, Inserting Selves: Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*" discusses Nabokov's intriguing book in a very stimulating manner, raising numerous questions some of which have already elicited lively critical debate. Pekka Tammi in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* even calls *Pale Fire* "the most thoroughly explicated of all Nabokov's works" (571). A glance at NABOKV-L (Vladimir Nabokov Forum)¹, a website devoted to the discussion of Nabokov's works, confirms this impression. Since the present contribution is intended to be a response to Charney's article, however, I will focus largely on the critics consulted by Charney and also consider a previous response to this article by Thomas Kullmann. Concerning the title of Nabokov's work, the following note may be helpful: his novel *Pale Fire* consists of four parts, a foreword, a poem, a commentary, and an index. The poem is also called "Pale Fire"; hence, in the following, *Pale Fire* (in italics) will refer to the entire novel, while "Pale Fire" (in quotation marks) will refer to the poem. The ostensible author of the poem is John Shade, the author of the *apparatus criticus* Charles Kinbote.

*References: Maurice Charney, "Adopting Styles, Inserting Selves: Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Connotations* 24.1 (2014/2015): 27-40. Thomas Kullmann, "Some Moondrop Title: A Response to Maurice Charney," *Connotations* 24.2 (2014/2015): 217-30.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debcharney0241.htm>.

1. Why *Timon*?

The first issue Charney addresses is why Nabokov chose a quotation from one of Shakespeare's lesser known plays, *Timon of Athens*, for his title: "How can we explain Nabokov's preoccupation with *Timon of Athens*? It is certainly not one of Shakespeare's major works" (Charney 29). This question has already troubled various critics; Priscilla Meyer even goes so far as to suggest that the main reference is not to *Timon of Athens* at all but to *Hamlet*, a play of considerably higher standing within the Shakespeare canon. The relevant passage in *Hamlet* reads:

Fare thee well at once:
The glow-worm shows the matin to be near
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.
Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me. (*Hamlet* I.v.88-91)

This parallel (first suggested by Carol T. Williams) suffers from the flaw that "pale" and "fire" do not appear immediately after one another but are separated by two words. Meyer, however, builds a convincing case from the context of this passage. It belongs to the Ghost's farewell speech to his son and makes sense as a private reference to the death of Nabokov's father, who—like John Shade in *Pale Fire*—had been killed by a bullet intended for another man. Nabokov indeed included a reference to his father's death in the text of his novel by using his father's birthday (21 July) for the date of Shade's death (see Boyd, *American Years* 456). Charney also engages with the question of whether Nabokov incorporated autobiographical elements in his fiction, and he does so by quoting a passage from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in which the narrator suspects that Knight uses a kind of "code" in the finished novel to express his private feelings for his lover in "real life," Clare Bishop (see Charney 32). What is noteworthy within the context of *Pale Fire*, however, is the manner in which Nabokov includes these private feelings. Instead of publicly mourning his dead father in the manner of John Shade, who makes the death of his daughter the central theme of his poem, Nabokov confines himself to a single reference² that will only be

meaningful to readers well acquainted with his personal life. Accordingly, it is debatable if Kullmann's optimistic reading of Shade's treatment of his daughter's death as an "active work of mourning" (Kullmann 218) is adequate—Nabokov himself certainly performed his own process of mourning in a radically different manner.

The *Hamlet* allusion, though valid, certainly is a more submerged theme in *Pale Fire* than the *Timon* reference, which has led Meyer to suggest that the latter is no more than a false bottom under which the true meaning remains hidden, except for a chosen few discerning readers. Meyer's hypothesis is somewhat symptomatic of the critical approach of Nabokov specialists who tend to assume that the most obvious reading must be a red herring, since they pride themselves on being members of an intellectual élite. While it is true that there is often a second hidden meaning this does not necessarily mean that the more obvious one can simply be disregarded.

Rather than considering the *Timon* reference as a mere red herring, I would argue that Nabokov takes great pains to make sure that no reader, however lazy, will miss it. There is no plot synopsis of *Timon* in *Pale Fire*, and a reader will not necessarily be familiar with it since it is one of Shakespeare's lesser known plays. As I will therefore suggest in the following, it is likely that the quoted passage is more relevant than the play as a whole. In this, I follow Thomas Kullmann's suggestion "that Nabokov, rather than finding *Timon of Athens* 'particularly attractive' (Charney 29), hit upon the 'pale fire' image as a metaphor which encapsulates both his novel as a whole and Shade's poem in particular" (Kullmann 218).

Thomas Kullmann, like Meyer, proposes an alternative source for the title:

Over hill, over dale,
 Thorough bush, thorough briar,
 Over park, over pale,
 Thorough flood, thorough fire,
 I do wander everywhere,
 Swifter than the moon's sphere;

And I serve the Fairy Queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* II.i.2-9)

This is from the speech (or song) of the fairy at the beginning of II.i of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and again the correspondence is somewhat flawed by the fact that several words come between the terms "pale" and "fire." Moreover, as Kullmann himself points out, this is a different kind of "pale," meaning not "pallid" but "enclosure" (see Kullmann 227). This moonlit enclosed space, according to Kullmann, is the world of the fairies or the world of literary imagination—if applied to *Pale Fire*, the imagination of John Shade.

Neither Meyer nor Kullmann comment on another rather obvious parallel between both *Hamlet* as well as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Pale Fire*. Within Shakespeare's oeuvre, *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are the two most conspicuous cases of plays-within-plays, *Hamlet* containing "The Murder of Gonzago" and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "Pyramus and Thisbe." As in the case of "Pale Fire" and *Pale Fire*, the relationship between the embedded text and its frame is dubious. John Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet* was triggered by the seemingly innocent question of whether the King did not see the dumb show preceding the presentation of "The Murder of Gonzago"—why did a central character in the frame play miss the obvious correspondences between the frame and the embedded text? The same applies to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where we can never be quite sure if Hermia and Lysander recognize their own plight in the play of Pyramus and Thisbe. The correspondence (or lack thereof) between the embedded poem "Pale Fire" and the novel that frames it has also become a major issue for debate in Nabokov criticism³ and is a topic to which we will return.

As far as the correspondences between *Pale Fire* and its primary reference to *Timon* is concerned, Charney quotes from an article by Márta Pellérdi, but he seems unconvinced by the parallels she suggests because he only quotes her first (stylistic) observation stating that *Timon* is incomplete and perhaps botched up by a later hand. The additional correspondences Pellérdi observes are that both *Timon* and

Pale Fire belong to the genre of biography, they are both centrally concerned with friendship, and that perhaps *Timon* found his way into *Pale Fire* via Tennyson's "New Timon." Since Charney does not discuss any of these propositions in detail, it may be assumed that he does not think any of them particularly appropriate. Instead, he detects as the central parallel that both Kinbote and Shade are misanthropic: "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" (Charney 29). In the conclusion to his article, Charney returns to this point: "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" (38). While this diagnosis applies primarily to Kinbote, Charney also considers Shade a man "carried away by the misfortunes in his life, especially the death of his daughter" (38).

This reading does not entirely convince me. As far as Shade is concerned, he seems to have come to terms with his daughter's suicide by composing his poem, and he is obviously looking forward to the coming day (he will not live to see). This point has already been made in Kullmann's response: "Shade, on the other hand, overcomes 'the misfortunes in his life, especially the death of his daughter' (Charney 38) by an active work of mourning, recorded in the poem, and the strengthening love of his wife" (218).

Thomas Kullmann has also already taken issue with Charney's diagnosis of Kinbote as a misanthrope: "I cannot see that Kinbote is a 'Timonist,' who 'hates all of mankind except a chosen few,' or that either Kinbote or Shade are 'misanthropic' (Charney 29; cf. Schuman 96-98)" (217). For the diagnosis of Kinbote's misanthropy, Charney refers his readers to Gretchen Minton, whose article indeed has a subsection entitled "The Misanthrope." What this part of the article proves, however, is not Kinbote's hostility to men but to women;

Minton proceeds to demonstrate his “flamboyant homosexuality, coupled with a persistent misogyny” (n.p.) and continues by addressing homosocial bonding in *Timon* and *Coriolanus*, another key reference in *Pale Fire*. To my mind, Kinbote is not a real misanthrope, because he does not withdraw from company—like Timon—but on the contrary makes “it a point of attending all the social functions available to [him]” (*Pale Fire* 80). He desperately longs to be invited to Shade’s birthday party and mentions in passing that the night before he has attended two parties with people he hardly knew (cf. *Pale Fire* 127-30). In the case of the birthday party, his supposed “misanthropy” is dictated by his environment, more particularly, by Sybil Shade: “We did not ask you because we knew how tedious you find such affairs” (*Pale Fire* 130). He is a difficult guest for a hostess on account of his sexual and dietary habits (a homosexual vegetarian who will upset any seating arrangement and menu) and his conversation (he is an incessant talker suffering from halitosis). His fear of being alone in the house at night prompts him to let one of his rooms and bring home one-night stands. This is clearly a far cry from Timon’s self-willed isolation in his cave.

Following Phyllis Roth’s argument, I would argue that Kinbote is not a misanthrope but a paranoid: “Kinbote is narcissistic and paranoid” (Roth 226). According to common consent in psychiatry at the time of publication, Kinbote’s mental state conforms to the type of “schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type” described as follows in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association (later referred to as *DSM-1*):

This type of reaction is characterized by autistic, unrealistic thinking, with mental content composed chiefly of delusions of persecution, and/or of grandeur, ideas of reference, and often hallucinations. It is often characterized by unpredictable behaviour, with a fairly constant attitude of hostility and aggression. Excessive religiosity may be present with or without delusions of persecution. There may be an expansive delusional system of omnipotence, genius, or special ability. (*DSM-1* 26-27)

These symptoms, however, are closely related to 000-x31 (“Paranoia”), which is defined as follows:

This type of psychotic disorder is extremely rare. It is characterized by an intricate, complex, and slowly developing paranoid system, often logically elaborated after a false interpretation of an actual occurrence. Frequently, the patient considers himself endowed with superior or unique ability. The paranoid system is particularly isolated from much of the normal stream of consciousness, without hallucinations and with relative intactness and preservation of the remainder of the personality, in spite of a chronic and prolonged course. (*DSM-1 28*)

Since the main distinctive criterion is the presence or absence of hallucinations, it may be interesting to ponder on the question whether Kinbote is actually suffering from them. At one point, he inadvertently admits to this by misreading an anonymous letter alluding to his halitosis as referring to hallucinations instead. Besides, the second diagnosis, paranoia, is explained as a result of a false interpretation of an actual occurrence—in this case, that would be the murder of Shade, misinterpreted as a murder attempt directed at Kinbote. If Kinbote is suffering from paranoia, this means that he must have invented the entire Zembla myth after Shade was shot. Consequently, it also means that he never gave the supposed source material to Shade but only imagined he had done so afterwards. As Boyd quite persuasively explains in “Shade and Shape,” Kinbote must have invented the Gradus theme after speaking to Jack Grey in prison.⁴ And if the Gradus theme, why not the rest of Zembla and Kinbote’s spectacular escape? If we choose to subscribe to this interpretation, the surprising resonances between the poem and the commentary are due to the fact that the entire commentary is indeed inspired by the poem.

If we consider the passage from *Timon* from which the title “Pale Fire” is derived, we may find a mental process that also strongly suggests delusions of grandeur aligned with persecution mania:

I'll example you with thievery:
 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. (*Timon of Athens* IV.iii.430-37)

Timon projects his personal anguish onto the universe and extrapolates an entire cosmology from a recent disappointment and the presence of three banditti. As a rereading of IV.iii suggests, Shakespeare is indeed interested in showing us how this conceit is being fabricated. In a previous exchange with Alcibiades, Timon has already identified himself as the moon who, in the absence of sunlight (read funds), lacks the ability to show his bounty.

ALCIBIADES

How came the noble Timon to this change?

TIMON

As the moon does, by wanting light to give;

But then renew I could not like the moon—

There were no suns to borrow of. (*Timon of Athens* IV.iii.67-70)

The focus is not on Timon's cosmology itself or the correspondence between micro- and macrocosm but on the diseased mental processes that produce such an interpretation. Besides, the fact that Timon identifies himself as the moon (of all celestial bodies) may carry a secondary allusion to lunacy. I therefore disagree with Kullmann's judgment that Timon perceives reality "all too acutely" (218), because the quoted passage from *Timon* clearly also shows a mind maladjusted to reality.

Timon's mental operation of projecting his personal experiences and emotions onto the universe strangely resembles Ruskin's concept of "pathetic fallacy" described in *Modern Painters*:

[I]n this chapter, I want to examine the nature of the other error, that which the mind admits when affected strongly by emotion. Thus, for instance, in *Alton Locke*,—

"They rowed her in across the rolling foam—

The cruel, crawling foam."

The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is

unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the "pathetic fallacy." (363-64)

As I have pointed out elsewhere, Nabokov had already invented a psychiatric diagnosis indebted both to *DSM-1*'s "paranoia" or "schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type" and Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy" in his 1948 short story "Signs and Symbols" which he summed up in its planning stage as a "book of a lunatic who constantly felt that all the parts of a landscape and movements of inanimate objects were a complex code of allusions to his own being, so that the whole universe seemed to be conversing about him by means of signs" (qtd. Boyd, *American Years* 117).

In the finished version, this disease is called "referential mania," a term equally applicable to a mental illness and to an aesthetic principle like Ruskin's. Nabokov's narrator explains:

In these very rare cases, the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. [...] Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages that he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. [...] With distance the torrents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility. The silhouettes of his blood corpuscles, magnified a million times, flit over vast plains; and still farther, great mountains of unbearable solidity and height sum up in terms of granite and groaning firs the ultimate truth of his being. ("Signs and Symbols" 599)

In a passage from *Pale Fire* that is also quoted by Charney, Kinbote clearly echoes the description of referential mania from "Signs and Symbols": "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" (*Pale Fire* 227). When he describes his persecution mania, Kinbote likewise illustrates it by

an image that shows his mind and body miraculously expanded: "At times I thought that only by self-destruction could I hope to cheat the relentlessly advancing assassins who were in me, in my eardrums, in my pulse, in my skull, rather than on that constant highway looping up over me and around my heart" (*Pale Fire* 79). These passages also recall Timon's enlargement of his personal anguish on a monumental scale; significantly, however, it is not only Kinbote who is experiencing an expansion of self comparable to Timon's but also the (supposedly) sane Shade:

I felt distributed through space and time:
 One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand
 Under the pebbles of a panting strand,
 One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,
 In caves, my blood, and in the stars my brain. ("Pale Fire" ll. 148-53)

A similar example of delusions of grandeur⁵ occurs towards the end of the poem: "And if my private universe scans right / So does the verse of galaxies divine / Which I believe is an iambic line" ("Pale Fire" ll. 974-75). I would therefore argue that what Nabokov found in the passage from *Timon* which provided the title for his novel was a habit of thought that he had already sketched in "Signs and Symbols" and called "referential mania," but which is of special interest not as a psychiatric diagnosis but as an aesthetic principle already pointed out by Ruskin, who called it "pathetic fallacy."

As pointed out earlier, Kullmann believes that it is not *Timon of Athens* as a whole that attracted Nabokov, but the specific passage from the text in which the term "pale fire" occurs; however, he suggests that the main connecting point is the allusion to theft. The novel is called *Pale Fire*, because Kinbote commits this act of theft by physically stealing the poem and by borrowing from the greater poet's light as the moon steals its pale fire from the sun. This is the interpretation suggested by a remark made by Kinbote immediately following his paraphrase of the passage in *Timon*: "I have reread, not without pleasure, my comments to his lines, and in many cases have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb, and unconsciously aping the prose style of his own critical

essays" (*Pale Fire* 67). Like Timon in IV.iii, Kinbote instantly identifies with the Moon, with a similar accompanying allusion to lunacy. However, at a later stage of the Commentary, Kinbote suggests the opposite relationship between poem and commentary: "My commentary to this poem, now in the hands of my readers, represents an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me" (*Pale Fire* 233). In this passage, Kinbote is the sun from which Shade's poem derives its pale fire. Accordingly, Roth asks: "which part of the novel is the moon whose pale fire is stolen from the sun, and which is the sun?" (211). The question of what may be called the "primary text" of *Pale Fire* and what may be called the "secondary text" has proved rather intricate and been debated in various contexts within the large corpus of criticism *Pale Fire* has provoked.⁶

While the motif of theft provides a suitable explanation for the choice of *Pale Fire* as the title of the entire novel, it still does not explain why Shade decides to call his poem "Pale Fire." The most likely explanation is that "pale fire" is a variation of the "faint hope" ("Pale Fire" l. 834) Shade eventually expresses towards Sybil concerning life after death. The connection between a faint light and the afterlife is established in the episode of the haunted barn narrated in the commentary, in which a will-o'-the-wisp is identified as the spirit of Shade's deceased Aunt Maud. And again, a comparison to Nabokov's short fiction may prove instructive: in "The Vane Sisters," incidentally also in an embedded poem, the apparition of a ghost is referred to as "a flawy but genuine gleam" (627) while the actual indubitable manifestation of the ghost occurs on the level of style: as an acrostic in the final paragraph.

2. Poetry in Fiction: How Close Are Poem and Commentary?

Charney's article was first triggered by a conference on "Poetry in Fiction," and, accordingly, his article investigates the relationship between the poem and the prose of its commentary. In this context, it may be useful to remember that Nabokov famously claimed the

inability “to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose” (*Strong Opinions* 44). Charney comes to a similar conclusion—at least, as far as Nabokov’s poetry in *Pale Fire* is concerned—using the terms “merging” (32) and “mingling” (34) to describe the relationship between poetry and prose, and remarking that “[Kinbote’s] style in his commentary matches that of Shade in his poem” (34). As shall become apparent later on, I share this impression but believe that one needs a more detailed examination in order to tell if a prose style “matches” a verse style. While Charney notes that Shade and Kinbote are two radically different personalities, he still comes to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion: “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” (34).

Since the two main parts of *Pale Fire*, the poem and the commentary, were ostensibly produced by two different authors, Shade and Kinbote, in secondary criticism, the issue of the relationship between poetry and fiction in *Pale Fire* has frequently taken the specific form of the question of authorship. A minor question of authorship concerns the variants of “Pale Fire” that Kinbote presents in his Commentary: Are they authentic, or has Kinbote made them up in order to reinforce the link between the poem and his Zemblan saga? Charney does not seem to have made up his mind whether Kinbote has composed the variants himself: “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” (37). I fail to follow the logic of this paragraph: if Kinbote has indeed written the variants himself, how can he be encouraged by them (unless he has forgotten that he wrote them himself)?

Brian Boyd has attempted to resolve the question of their authorship by pointing out that “the variants are labelled ‘K’s contribution’ in the index and are risibly flat in their versification” (Boyd, *American Years* 710). However, only three of the variants are marked “K’s contribu-

tion"—eight lines following line 70 of the poem (*Pale Fire* 81), one line following line 79 (*Pale Fire* 88), and four lines following line 130 (*Pale Fire* 96). If the other variants, altogether 14, were forged by Kinbote, at least they remain unacknowledged by their author—and besides, even “K’s contribution” may mean merely that Kinbote claims that these lines were inspired by his stories, not that he actually composed the lines themselves. In the course of the Commentary, Kinbote confesses to having invented one of the variants (for line 12: “Ah, I must not forget to say something / That my friend told me of a certain king”; *Pale Fire* 62) but insists: “It is the only time in the course of the writing of these difficult comments, that I have tarried, in my distress and disappointment, on the brink of falsification” (*Pale Fire* 180). While this statement is unreliable since in the earlier example he clearly did a bit more than “tarry on the brink” of forgery, the line which he confesses to having forged scans so lamentably (which even Kinbote himself notes but perhaps was unable to remedy) that one would hesitate to ascribe the other, far more competent variants to such a “miserable rhymester” (as Kinbote calls himself; *Pale Fire* 227).

Another, also somewhat minor, authorship debate concerns the identification of Kinbote with the character of “Botkin, V., American scholar of Russian descent” (*Pale Fire* 240) listed in the index. Charney disapproves of this identification:⁷ “In relation to the novel itself, there seems to be no point at all in equating Kinbote and Botkin” (36).

I would argue that the point of the identification of Kinbote as Botkin is that Botkin has reinvented himself as the more flamboyant and adventurous character of Kinbote, who is really Charles II of Zembla. Since the entire Zembla narrative with its echoes of Ruritanian *coups d'état* seems to belong to an entirely different literary genre from Shade’s life in a small American university town, we would be inclined to believe that, on the level of reality of the story, the Zembla saga is completely invented; the commentary does not contain a biography but an elaborate fantasy. While Shade transforms biographical material (“Life”) into poetry (“Art”), Kinbote/Botkin transforms fiction (“Art”) into “Life” by believing in his own fabrica-

tion. Recognizing Kinbote's creative achievement even in his delusional state, Shade welcomes Kinbote as a fellow artist by describing him as "a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it by a brilliant invention"⁸ (*Pale Fire* 188). Incidentally, Charney's observation that Zemblan resembles Russian (31) also supports the assumption that Kinbote is Botkin, a Russian expatriate who would have invented an artificial language closely related to his native tongue.

While Charney intuitively proposes that somehow poem and commentary are quite close, Kullmann disagrees: "the more I reread Shade's poem, the less I am inclined to believe that Kinbote's commentary has anything to do with it, or that Shade is 'indebted' (Charney 34) to Kinbote in any way" (221). In this case, Kullmann obviously voices a minority opinion, since numerous critics have shared Charney's impression that there exist abundant parallels and correspondences between the poem and the commentary. This observation has given rise to theories of single authorship, concisely summed up by Boyd: "Although several critics have proposed Shade as the sole author of poem and commentary, one or two others have instead proposed Kinbote as the person responsible for the swarm of echoes between the two parts" (*American Years* 444). Group 1, the Shadeans, consists of Andrew Field, Julia Bader (Boyd, *American Years* 710n12), and Boyd himself (based on additional manuscript evidence; *American Years* 445)⁹; group 2, the Kinbotians, of Page Stegner, Herbert Grabes, and Pekka Tammi (Boyd, *American Years* 710n13). Alvin Kernan and Brian McHale have argued that, while there is indubitably only one single author to both poem and commentary, just who this author is—Kinbote or Shade—is kept permanently undecidable. These hypotheses are supported, among other things, by the fact that Shade and Kinbote share the same birthday, 5 July. So, incidentally, does Gradus (see Boyd, "Shade and Shape" 185). Single-authorship theories have been opposed, for example by Robert Alter, Ellen Pifer, David Lodge, and Dmitri Nabokov (see Boyd, "Shade and Shape" 176).

Like Charney in the case of the identification of Kinbote as Botkin, I do not see the point of these theories of single authorship. They may be partly inspired by a passage towards the end of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in which the narrator and his dead brother seem to merge, as well as by a practical joke Nabokov played on a hostile émigré critic in Berlin.¹⁰ Of course single-authorship theories have the virtue of accounting for the baffling correspondences between poem and commentary that Charney has noted. But both Shade and Kinbote would have to be entirely different characters from the ones described in the text if either of them was capable of writing the entirety of *Pale Fire*. Kinbote as sole author of poem and commentary would no longer be a madman incapable of composing poetry. And if Shade is the person described to us, he would not fake his own death, even fictionally and playfully. After all, an author is also a private person, so we should wonder if Shade would do this to Sybil. David Lodge, who, as a writer, is clearly more aware of the author's existence as a private person, accordingly argues:

[A]s a practising writer, I cannot conceive of myself doing what Shade, according to this interpretation, is supposed to have done: that is, written a transparently autobiographical poem about coming to terms with one of the most painful and tragic events that can happen to a man, the suicide of his own child, and then attached to it a comic, ironic and satirical fiction, in the form of a commentary on his own poem, about a deranged émigré scholar, which entails a description of Shade himself being murdered just after he has completed the poem. Surely Shade himself would have to be deranged to use his own daughter's suicide in this way, as a means of showing up the vanity and self-deception of a fictitious lunatic? (Kinbote must be a fictional creation of Shade's under this interpretation, because Shade could not, for legal reasons, attribute to a real person the actions and motives her attributes to Kinbote.) (Lodge 163)

I must confess, I have never understood what exactly Shade is supposed to have done—has he actually faked his own death, or has he merely imagined his own death in his poem? And if so, what philosophical or artistic purpose would have been fulfilled by such an act? To me, the “web of sense” that forms the centre of Shade's

philosophy of life is created by the *unintended* echoes between two radically diverse texts that create the impression of independent corroboration. One example of such an independent corroboration may suffice: Shade's near-death experiences in adolescence are announced by a clockwork toy, a black man pushing a wheelbarrow. A real black gardener appears later in the poem as a harbinger of Shade's actual death. However, since Shade is squeamish concerning the use of racist language, it is only in Kinbote's notes that we realize that these two images are related: the significance is really created by taking the two separate texts together. It is certainly true that, when Shade begins to look for external corroboration of his near-death experience of Life Everlasting, his hopes are deflated by a misprint. However, he manages to integrate even this experience into his concept of a "web of sense." In the poem "Pale Fire," the necessity of external corroboration of evidence reads as follows:

If on some nameless island Captain Schmidt
Sees a new animal and captures it,
And if, a little later, Captain Smith
Brings back a skin, that island is no myth. ("Pale Fire" ll. 758-61)

This passage slyly suggests that, once again, the apparent independent corroboration may have been produced by a mere trick of language: are Schmidt and Smith the same person whose name was translated in one of the sources? In spite of the somewhat contradictory evidence, I would argue that *Pale Fire* only achieves its full effect if poem and commentary are composed by two separate authors and read together—I therefore also disapprove of Boyd's recent publication of a "facsimile" of the poem on its own (*Pale Fire: A Poem in Four Cantos by John Shade*, 2011), which Kullmann praises as an attempt to "treat the poem as a literary work in its own right" (229).

Kullmann's key text of reference, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, also provides a model for the discussion of proof by independent corroboration:

But all the story of the night told over,
 And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
 More witnesseth than fancy's images
 And grows to something of great constancy;
 But howsoever, strange and admirable. (V.i.23-27)

This additional correspondence supports Kullmann's theory that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* certainly was in some way at the back of Nabokov's mind when he composed *Pale Fire*.

3. Is "Pale Fire" a Good Poem?

In a footnote, Charney raises the question of the literary merit of "Pale Fire," quoting Paul D. Morris (who calls it Nabokov's finest achievement, see *Poetry and the Lyric Voice*, esp. ch. 7) and Lyndy Abraham (who considers it a bad poem) without expressly committing himself to either position. We may suppose, however, that Charney himself also considers "Pale Fire" a rather poor specimen, since he calls Morris's praise "surprising" (Charney 39n9). Judgments of literary value are of course a delicate matter. In this case, however, I believe a judgment of the poem's literary value is relevant. It makes a substantial difference to our interpretation of *Pale Fire* whether we believe that Shade's poem is a masterpiece in danger of becoming distorted and overgrown beyond recognition through a madman's editing and commentary, or whether we consider "Pale Fire" a somewhat mediocre poem saved from insignificance by being framed by the vivid colourful fantasy of Zembla Kinbote has concocted. Like the previous section of this article, the question of the poem's literary merit also relates to the larger issue of the relationship between poetry and fiction. How "poetic" is the poem, and is it in any way substantially different from the prose that frames it?

As also mentioned in the previous chapter, Brian Boyd has attempted to draw attention to the poem's artistic value by publishing it on its own. It is therefore not surprising that he, like Morris, considers "Pale Fire" "a brilliant achievement in its own right" (*American Years* 439). In "'Pale Fire'—Poem and Pattern," he points out why he

considers “Pale Fire” a great poem, in his view, Shade’s main accomplishments are his use of internal rhyme and his sustained imagery—Boyd traces the motif of transformation and metamorphosis through the entire poem. The standard of great poetry proposed by Boyd is Shakespeare’s sonnet, in particular sonnet 30, which is compared to the initial 14 lines of “Pale Fire,” even though only the first twelve lines of Shade’s poem may with some justification be called “great” poetry, and conveniently, Boyd stops quoting here, leaving out the following two lines that would have formed the sonnet’s couplet. These two lines, however, do not in any way fittingly sum up the previous passage, nor are they complete in themselves, since they introduce a new train of thought.

Lyndy Abraham’s contrary opinion, which Charney quotes (see 39), is that “Pale Fire” is “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” (Abraham 245). Abraham begins by listing critics who have commented favourably on “Pale Fire,” including Andrew Field and Julia Bader, but continues:

Slightly more subtle critics have argued that “Pale Fire” is a parody by Shade of the worst moments of Wordsworth, Eliot, Tennyson, Goethe, and Cowley. But “Pale Fire” is a bad poem. It is a *clever* bad poem, it is true, with Nabokov executing his balancing act of writing a knowingly incompetent poem with a certain amount of grace and panache—and even sympathy. (245)

She does not specify who these “slightly more subtle” critics may be. In the following, Abraham compares Shade to the species of flying fishes in Pope’s *The Art of Sinking*: “Flying fishes are ‘the writers who may now and then rise up upon their fins and fly out of the Profound; but their wings are soon dry and they droop down to the bottom’” (250). This image of rising and falling, particularly when associated with water, recalls the image of parody as a “springboard” employed in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: “As often was the way with Sebastian Knight he used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping

into the highest region of serious emotion. J. L. Coleman has called it 'a clown developing wings, an angel mimicking a tumbler pigeon' (*Sebastian Knight* 91). This quotation may direct our attention to the changed status of pastiche and parody in Postmodernism, and indeed already in the period of classical Modernism. While the fact that "Pale Fire" is largely imitative automatically seems to discredit it in Abraham's view, a postmodernist aesthetics no longer considers parody a genre to be despised. The same objection may be raised to Alvin Kernan's negative judgment on "Pale Fire":

Shade is almost a parody version of what Harold Bloom has called the "weak" poet, the belated writer who has no authentic voice of his own but merely echoes earlier stronger writers, and "Pale Fire" can be read as an extended and amusing spoof on romantic and modern poetry, particularly on Frost. ("Reading Zemblan" 103)

Like Abraham, Kernan considers the main flaw of the poem that it is imitative, thus subscribing to a somewhat outdated Romantic concept of the poet as original creative genius.

Though certain passages of "Pale Fire" are certainly parodic, the entire poem is not a deliberately poor poem or a mere parody. In spite of Nabokov's professed indifference to reader reception, he was by no means unaware of what he might inflict on his readers and what not, and 1000 lines of poor poetry would have exasperated even a very patient reader. It is difficult to estimate to how many lines of bad poetry a reader may safely be subjected. At this point it may be useful to return to the two plays mentioned above as possible intertexts for *Pale Fire*. When Shakespeare uses poor poetry for parodic purposes in *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he inflicts fewer than 100 lines of "The Murder of Gonzago" and fewer than 150 of "Pyramus and Thisbe" on his audiences and, besides, in "Pyramus and Thisbe" the lines are shorter than the standard iambic pentameter. This seems a rather accurate estimate of what audiences are ready to put up with.

The question of whether "Pale Fire" is a deliberate parody may be approached by yet another route. After having studied Nabokov's

Russian and English poetry extensively, Paul D. Morris comes to the conclusion that "Pale Fire" is an excellent example of Nabokov's poetic oeuvre and in no way falls short of the standard established by the author's other poems; hence it is definitely *not* parodic (though, depending on your standards in judging poetic quality, it may still be a poor poem). To Morris, the central point of Nabokov's poetics is his insistence on the "quiddity" (*Lyric Voice* 354) of individual experience; a principle also in evidence in Shade's writing: "Characteristic of Nabokov's poetry and lyric identity is acute attention to the trifling specifics of the natural world" (351) as well as an "emphasis on the bounty of nature" (353). Shade's aesthetic ideals correspond to Nabokov's.

Since "Pale Fire" is a typical example of Nabokov's poetic style, it may be useful to consider the critical reception of his other poetry. In his entry on "Poetry" in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, Scherr has pointed out the comparatively low critical appreciation of Nabokov's poetry: "Symptomatic of the relative standing of his prose and poetry, neither of the collections of verse (1959 and 1970) that he published when he had already gained fame for *Lolita* inspired scholarly publications" (608); and: "The critical literature that does exist is in near-unanimous agreement that Nabokov's poetry does not stand comparison with his prose in terms of artistic accomplishment" (609). Nabokov wrote over 500 poems in Russian (mostly juvenilia) but only some twenty in English. They often have a plot ("narrative line") and are formally conventional, favouring iambic tetrameter and exact rhyme, which in his English verse is fairly predictable. A theme particularly conspicuous in the poetry (more so than in his prose) is the "otherworld" or the "hereafter." In this respect, "Pale Fire" indeed closely conforms to the standard of his other poetry.

Morris has also discussed the reception of Nabokov's poetry in an article in an earlier issue of *Connotations*:

Although an author amply admired for his ability to stylise and shape to formal perfection his every expression in prose—and thus fully deserving of the epithet 'poetic'—Nabokov is but infrequently identified as a poet, de-

spite an impressive body of poetic writing. [...] As a result, neither Nabokov's numerous Russian lyrics nor his relatively few English poems have garnered either the quantity or quality of critical response otherwise devoted to his writing. ("Surprise" 31)

Gleb Struve's 1956 verdict on Nabokov's poetry in Russian sums up various critics' judgment of "Pale Fire":

Nabokov moved from verse to prose, although it would be wrong to say of his prose [...], that it is the prose of a poet. It would be perhaps more accurate to say that his poems are the poems of a prose writer. Some of his poems are wonderful (even amongst those he himself would now probably repudiate); they are capable of seizing and hypnotising one, though in the final analysis there is something lacking in them, some element of final music. (Struve 170-71; qtd. Morris, "Surprise" 34)

Since general critical opinion on Nabokov's poetry is somewhat condescending, we may wonder what prompted Morris's enthusiastic praise. In his 2005 article, Morris implicitly defined his standards in judging poetic quality. While Boyd's ideal poem apparently was the Shakespearean sonnet, Morris's poetics seems more closely related to the ideals of the Metaphysical poets, since he mainly singles out the psychological dynamics of surprise as "the quintessence of [Nabokov's] poetry" ("Surprise" 32), arguing that "[p]oetry, with its surprising, even irrational leaps of association, takes consciousness to dimensions closed to 'plain prose'" (54). In his 2010 analysis, however, he finds yet another set of points of praise for the poem "Pale Fire." To begin with, it is "a masterpiece of structural symmetry" (329) made up of two short cantos (1 and 4) of 166 lines each embracing two longer cantos (2 and 3) of 334 lines each, all constructed of heroic couplets. Secondly, Morris praises the complex pattern of internal rhyme, for example in lines 17-18 of the poem: "And then the gradual and dual blue / As night unites the viewer and the view" with its variation of gradual—dual, night—unites and viewer—view. And, finally, he directs attention to the technique of synchronizing Hazel's suicide and her parents' watching TV. This is remarkable since even Kinbote in his commentary is allowed to criticize this effect as outdated, even though

he employs it himself when synchronizing Gradus's approach and Shade's composition of the poem.

Since, earlier in this response, I criticized that Charney avoids committing himself expressly on the question of "Pale Fire"'s poetic quality, I am obviously obliged to pronounce some opinion myself. My personal answer to the question of whether "Pale Fire" is a good poem would be that it is good writing but poor poetry, offering the same kind of pleasures as Nabokov's prose: a colourful scenery meticulously realized in sensuous detail, interesting scenes and a playful, punning language offering numerous surprising metamorphoses. This judgment closely resembles Scherr's: "Nabokov's poetic talent, beyond the formal virtuosity, comes out largely through his evocative descriptions, his gift for parody, and the imaginative situations, which often veer on to the surreal and the grotesque" (623). For some reason, however, Nabokov's language in "Pale Fire" seems to have been forced into the corset of the heroic couplet. It is entirely competent verse, neither scanning nor rhyming poorly, but the rhythm and sound do not seem to provide any exceptional additional pleasure. This conforms to the hierarchy of values also in evidence in Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, in which he favoured literal translation over attempts to imitate metrical or sound properties of Pushkin's verse. In "Pale Fire" as in *Onegin*, the *mot juste* is more important than the musical quality of the verse—the mind's eye is favoured over the mind's ear.

Considering the relationship between grammar and meaning on the one hand and metre and rhythm on the other, we will notice Nabokov's striking use of enjambment. Metre and grammar hardly ever coincide, so that if "Pale Fire" was printed successively, we would not hear the rhyme and probably not recognize this as poetry in the first place but merely as something sounding strangely forced. One such instance of Nabokov's language sounding forced in order to accommodate the rhyme occurs in lines 334-36 of the poem: "[S]he'd never go, / A dream of gauze and jasmine, to that dance. / We sent her, though, to a château in France." Here, the idea of a French castle

seems positively produced by the need of finding a rhyming word for the couplet. Occasionally, he also resorts to an inversion of adjective and noun (e.g. "with eyes / Expressionless," "Pale Fire" 352-53) in order to fit his narrative into the premeditated pattern of the heroic couplet.

The fact that, at least in parts, the poetry of "Pale Fire" is rather weak raises the question of why Nabokov felt that the embedded text of *Pale Fire* had to be a poem and, more specifically, a poem composed in heroic couplets. I think that this decision is meant to contribute to the characterization of Shade. He believes in order and control and considers the iambic rhythm a token of universal harmony, as in the previously quoted lines: "And if my private universe scans right / So does the verse of galaxies divine / Which I believe is an iambic line." Both the strict adherence to a metrical pattern and the beautifully symmetrical construction of the four cantos testify to his belief.

The poem "Pale Fire" itself suggests an "instant poetry test" (which Shade has borrowed, however, from Housman) of whether "inspiration and its icy blaze, / The sudden image, the immediate phrase / Over the skin a triple ripple send / Making the little hairs all stand on end" (918-20). On this purely visceral level of poetry appreciation, "Pale Fire" in its entirety is less poetic than, for instance, the final passage of *Lolita*: "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (307).

A number of questions raised in this article—whether concerning single authorship theories, the quality of "Pale Fire" as a poem, or the relationship between poem and commentary—may be answered by the following conclusion: poem and commentary differ strongly on the level of plot; the poem is realistic, autobiographical and restrained, while the commentary is fantastic, exaggerated, excessive (and this in some way perhaps reverses our assumptions concerning the characteristic properties of poetry and prose). As an example, one may compare the treatment of suicide in the two texts: Hazel Shade's suicide is rendered in the poem at one remove, via her parents' quiet

evening at home in front of the TV. Kinbote considers suicide in a far more flamboyant manner, planning to jump from a plane discarding his parachute. On the level of style, however, poem and commentary are indeed “quite close,” as Charney suggested, since they share the following virtues: vividly imagined scenes described in sensuous detail, an interest in the quiddity of the natural world and a fondness for puns and word games (particularly insofar as they illustrate the possibility of transformation Nabokov was also interested in as a lepidopterist). As a comparison with the narrative voices of his first-person narrators Humbert and Hermann (in *Despair*) also suggests, perhaps Nabokov was incapable of writing in any other style.

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NOTES

¹The forum can be accessed here: <https://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv/cgi-bin/wa?AO=NABOKV-L>

²While he did not explicitly and openly mourn his father’s death in his fiction, Nabokov did commemorate his life in his 1963 novel *The Gift*.

³Of the critics quoted below, Bader, Boyd, Field, Grabes, Stegner, and Tammi have addressed this topic.

⁴See above, n2.

⁵This diagnosis may strike some readers as rather extreme; however, Shade’s statement that universal cosmic order may be concluded from the fact that he personally happens to be rather content is hardly less extreme than Kinbote’s delusion that he is the King of Zembla. As Ruskin argues in the passage from *Modern Painters* quoted above, readers are strangely prepared to accept as a literary trope in poetry what they would judge a severely distorted perception of reality if paraphrased in prose.

⁶Critics that have engaged in this debate include Bader, Boyd, Field, Grabes, Roth, Stegner, and Tammi.

⁷This theory was first proposed by Mary McCarthy in her seminal critical essay on *Pale Fire*, “A Bolt from the Blue,” and has since attained the status of critical orthodoxy.

⁸It should be noted, however, that Shade and Mrs Hurley, on being overheard by Kinbote, claim that they were actually talking about someone else—a railway porter who believed he was god and began redirecting the trains. Among critics,

e.g. Paul D. Morris was taken in by this subterfuge (see *Lyric Voice* 346), while Pifer (117) realizes that they were in fact talking about Kinbote.

⁹Boyd has since recanted: in a paper of 1997, he qualified his previous Shadean stance by proposing that Shade shaped part of the commentary by inspiring Kinbote from beyond the grave. To my mind, while it seems that characters in Nabokov sometimes continue to interfere with the lives of the living, those who do invariably belong to the type of the virgin suicide: Lucette, Hazel Shade, and Sybil Vane. However, Boyd's most recent theory raises the intriguing question of just when Kinbote begins to invent the Zembla myth. Boyd convincingly argues that he can only invent the Gradus plot after the assassination of Shade and his visit in prison to talk to Jack Grey.

¹⁰He had published a poem under the pen name of Vasiliy Shishkov that had been praised by the said critic, and later wrote a short story entitled "Vasiliy Shishkov" that revealed this poet as a fictional character invented by himself.

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