

Some Moondrop Title: A Response to Maurice Charney*

THOMAS KULLMANN

Maurice Charney convincingly calls for an enquiry into the relationship between Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, the play which apparently provided Nabokov with the title of his novel (see Charney 29). Charney is certainly also right in his contention that a close reading of Nabokov's previous novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), teaches us a lot about "the language and style" (and, I should like to add, the significance) of *Pale Fire* (Charney 30). As Charney points out, the relationship of the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to his half-brother, the author Sebastian Knight, resembles that of Kinbote to Shade in *Pale Fire* (although "Kinbote is not as perceptive a critic as Sebastian's half-brother"; Charney 33), and we can undoubtedly learn about Nabokov's "unique postmodern or experimental approach to writing a novel" (Charney 31) when taking *Sebastian Knight* into account. I am also grateful to Maurice Charney for drawing attention to Nabokov's "preoccupation with language" (29) and his fondness for "dictionary words" (29).

Even so, I cannot help feeling that Charney somehow "missed the gist of the whole thing" (*Pale Fire*, l. 517): for one thing, 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). Kinbote's "sense of reality" is indeed "distorted by [his] own delusions" (Charney 29), but in this, he does

*Reference: Maurice Charney, "Adopting Styles, Inserting Selves: Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Connotations* 24.1 (2014/2015): 27-40. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney0241.htm>>.

not resemble Shakespeare's Timon who suffers from perceiving reality all too acutely. The image which emerges from his loquacious and self-aggrandizing "commentary" on Shade's poem is that of a person desperate for attention, recognition and love, not that of a disillusioned nobleman who proudly defies human society and all it stands for, like Shakespeare's Timon. While Kinbote has little or nothing to say about the poem, he uses it as a pretence for (fruitlessly) attempting to communicate with an unknown opposite, the reader, and to include him in fantasies about a fictitious country called "Zembla" (*Pale Fire*, 18 etc.).¹ 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 of his love for his wife, expressed in his lines:

And I love you most
When with a pensive nod you greet her ghost
And hold her first toy in your palm, or look
At a postcard from her, found in a book. (*Pale Fire*, ll. 289-92)

Neither can I see much resemblance between Nabokov's style and "the distinctive style of Shakespeare's late plays" (Charney 29). My suggestion is that Nabokov, rather than finding *Timon of Athens* "particularly attractive" (Charney 29), hit upon the "pale fire" image ("the moon's an arrant thief / And her pale fire she snatches from the sun," *Timon of Athens* 4.3.437-38) as a metaphor which encapsulates both his novel as a whole and Shade's poem in particular.

On the level of the novel as a whole, the person who styles himself "Dr. Charles Kinbote" (242) has indeed stolen Shade's poem, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. Kinbote's story that he was given "permission" by Sybil Shade "to edit and publish John's last poem" (234) is thoroughly unreliable, as Kinbote himself appears to acknowledge. What is more significant is that Kinbote, like many other self-appointed literary *experts*, appropriates a poetic text for the purpose of parading himself and his own *expertise*, thus diverting to himself the glory due to the poet: "The poem is the sun, the novel the moon"

(Morris 322). *Pale Fire*, I should like to contend, is a huge satire on practices of literary scholarship (cf. Hesse 113, 116) which obscure rather than elucidate the literary work appropriated. The pale fire of commentary replaces the light and warmth which might proceed from the original work if only it could be seen and appreciated on its own terms. As Brian Boyd points out, Kinbote's work is "a comic nightmare of all that could go wrong in criticism" (68). Kinbote appears as an embodiment of the "malignant deity of Criticism" in Swift's "Battle of the Books," who, together with "Ignorance, her father and husband [...] Pride her mother [...] Opinion her sister" as well as "her children, Noise and Impudence, Dulness and Vanity, Positiveness, Pedantry, and Ill-Manners" lives "on the top of a snowy mountain in Nova Zembla" (115).

Many of Kinbote's "comments" illustrate, and, in a satiric way, exaggerate, the misleading character of literary commentary: His comment on line 79, "a preterist" (88) obviously tries to obscure the fact that he is unable to explain the term; and his commentary on "lemniscate" is quite unhelpful:

Line 137: lemniscate

"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. (110)

Kinbote may have intended to display "his linguistic superiority over Shade, the mere poet" (Charney 30). What he actually demonstrates is his inferiority. He is not only unfamiliar with the word he tries to explain but does not even understand the dictionary definition. Unwilling to acknowledge his own failure, he shifts the blame on the poet. Of course, Shade recorded his admiration of the skillfulness of a cyclist who managed to trace the figure of 8 in the sand.

The comment on Shade's line 130 ("I never bounced a ball or swung a bat") begins with the confession: "Frankly I too never excelled in soccer and cricket" (96), which displays not only Kinbote's egocen-

trism but also his cultural illiteracy. Shade, evidently, refers to basketball and baseball, not soccer and cricket (cf. Boyd 40). Kinbote's ignorance also accounts for his failure to see the joke of the "curio" from the local newspaper which Shade's aunt "thumbtacked to the door" (ll. 97-98):

Line 98: On Chapman's Homer

A reference to the title of Keats' famous sonnet (often quoted in America) which, owing to a printer's absentmindedness, has been drolly transposed, from some other article, into the account of a sports event. For other vivid misprints see note to line 802. (94)

"Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4 / On Chapman's Homer" means that the Red Sox victory at a baseball game was due to a homerun ("homer") effected by a player called Chapman. The unintentional parallel to the title of Keats's poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (or rather to Chapman's translation itself) can only be observed by the Shade family (and by those readers who are not led astray by Kinbote's note). It is lost on both the sports journalist (who may never have heard of Keats or Chapman) and on Kinbote (who has never heard of baseball).²

Kinbote, to be sure, not only tries to "elucidate" the poem but also uses it as a vehicle to publish his dreams of royalty and his sexual fantasies. He is a paederast (not a preterist),³ and, as an inverted image of Humbert Humbert, he delights in "faunlet[s]" (100) not nymphets (cf. *Lolita* 16 etc.). His most persistent fantasy, however, is that of having been "an intimate friend of Shade" and "his literary adviser" (242). He records sundry conversations with the poet and believes himself "the co-author of *Pale Fire*" (Charney 34). Of course, he is utterly mistaken. The text of Shade's poem (which, at any rate, Kinbote appears to have reproduced faithfully) does not contain the slightest trace of the poet's acquaintance with any such person as Kinbote, let alone with his story of the Zemblan king. I should like to modify Charney's contention that "Nabokov tantalizes us by suggesting that there must be a close link between the poem and commentary" (34): it is Kinbote who tantalizes us (or tries to tantalize us), not

Nabokov. While Charney states that “the more one rereads *Pale Fire* [...] the more one is caught in the seemingly absurd idea that the relationship of the poem and the commentary is quite close” (34), I should like to reply that 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.

The reverse, however, may well be the case: Shade’s chance comparison of the stubble on his face with “old Zembla’s fields” (l. 937) may have spawned Kinbote’s Zemblan fantasies. Shade took the reference to Zembla from Pope’s *Essay on Man* II.224, where Zembla serves as an illustration of the thesis that there are no absolute extremes: even in a country as far north as Greenland you may find one still further north, such as Zembla. Pope (and Swift, of whose use of the name as that of the dwelling-place of Criticism Kinbote is obviously unaware) undoubtedly got the name from accounts of Novaya Semlya (“new land,” latinized as *Nova Zembla*), two virtually uninhabited islands off the north coast of Russia. In devising his Zemblan adventures Kinbote may have consulted a map of Novaya Semlya (see, e.g., 111-12 and 116-17, cf. Boyd 79).

Another hint the poem may have provided him with concerns his name. As many critics have noted (cf. Charney 36) and as Kinbote virtually admits himself (see 210), his name is an anagram of Botkin, a name resonating with pertinent associations listed in the Index (240). Botkin, a Russian refugee, may have got the idea of changing his name from Hazel Shade’s habit of “twisting words,” recorded in lines 347-49 of Shade’s poem.⁴

Kinbote, as he admits himself, is not a “true artist” (227). This is why he needs to appropriate somebody else’s work of art to advertise his ego. Towards the end of his commentary he records his feelings after having got hold of the index cards with Shade’s poem:

Solemnly I weighed in my hand what I was carrying under my left armpit, 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.

I was holding all Zembra pressed to my heart. (227)

Of course, the idea of decoding firefly signals is an illusion; and, sadly (from Kinbote's point of view), fireflies are short-lived and become invisible by daybreak. "The glow-worm shows the matin to be near, / And gins to *pale* his uneffectual *fire*," as Hamlet is informed by his father's ghost (*Hamlet* 1.5.89-90), certainly a "stranded spirit," who has to return to the place he came from as soon as the night is over. Kinbote, this intellectual glow-worm, may be "on fire," but his fire will pale while the poem will stand.⁵

The last line of the quotation, moreover, appears to be suggestive of sexual aggression. Kinbote is not just a thief but a rapist, resembling not Timon but Tarquin, the archetypal rapist, who, according to the first stanza of Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*,

leaves the Roman host,
And to Collatium bears the lightless *fire*,
Which in *pale* embers hid, lurks to aspire,
And girdle with embracing flames the waist
Of Collatine's fair love, Lucrece the chaste. (3-7, emphasis added)

Like Tarquin, Kinbote approaches his victim (Shade's poem) with the pale fire of his lust, a fire which can neither provide warmth nor illumination. The fact that Shade's poem which he holds pressed to his heart has nothing to do with "all Zembra" is characteristic of the common failure of rapists to take account of their victims' personalities.⁶

This will do with regard to Kinbote. "Pale Fire" is, after all, the title John Shade chooses for his own poem, at a time when he is not aware of Kinbote's imminent appropriation of it:

(But *this* transparent thingum does require
Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*.) (ll. 961-62)

I therefore propose to examine the poem itself more closely, to determine Shade's reasons for choosing this title.⁷ The poem's central topic is the poet's quest for knowledge as to what happens to us after death:

There was the day when I began to doubt
 Man's sanity: How could he live without
 Knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom
 Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb? (ll. 173-76)

This is why he decides

to explore and fight
 The foul, the inadmissible abyss,
 Devoting all my twisted life to this
 One task. (ll. 178-81)

While he does not believe in God (l. 99), he desperately clings to the idea of an afterlife. At the end of the poem he states: "I'm reasonably sure that we survive / And that my darling [his daughter] somewhere is alive" (ll. 977-78). Trying to find proof he compares a near-death experience of his own (ll. 698-719) with one reported in a magazine (ll. 747-58). As both himself and the unknown "Mrs. Z." had seen "a tall white fountain" in what appeared to be "the world beyond" he believes that their experiences reflect an objective reality, only to discover that the lady's original manuscript recorded her having seen a mountain, not a fountain:

Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!
 I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
 And stop investigating my abyss?
 But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
 Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
 But topsy-turvical coincidence,
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
 Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
 Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
 Of correlated pattern in the game,
 Plexed artistry, and something of the same
 Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (ll. 803-15)

The poet realizes that he cannot find out about the “abyss” and about the secrets of the world beyond the confines of temporal existence, but he can imitate those “who played” “the game” through the medium of literary composition. In establishing a literary “texture,” “topsy-turvical coincidence” and “a correlated pattern” he can share the pleasure of God or the gods, to whom the world is some kind of supernatural chess game (see ll. 816-29). To the poet, the quest for truth turns into a theory of art.

Literary artists like Shade (and Nabokov) do not just imitate life; they play games with it (or rather its reflection in stories and words) and playfully provide patterns and meanings—which in real life are difficult to find. Within the confines of life as it is they repeat the process of creation on an inferior level. This makes them resemble the gods, although, obviously, they are just their imperfect copies, or shades. They cannot create a world, but they can provide reflections of the divine processes of creation, just as the moon does not provide light itself but reflects the light of the sun. This consideration, I would like to suggest, accounts for both Shade’s name and the title of his poem: artists provide pale copies of divine fire. The oxymoronic paradox inherent in the Shakespearean image aptly sums up the ambivalences of artistic creation.

The imagery of reality and its shadows as well as of the sun and its reflection owes a lot to Platonism, a system of thought with which Shakespeare, Nabokov, Shade, and perhaps even Kinbote are quite familiar (while most of their critics are not). According to Plato, things on earth are just imperfect copies, or “shadows,” of the original “Forms” or “Ideas” we knew before we were born. In life we (i.e. our souls) are imprisoned in our bodies and restricted by the limitations imposed on our perception from recognizing the truth (see, e.g., Plato, *Phaedo* 64c-67d, 72e-77a; *Republic* 7.517b). “We are most artistically caged,” as Shade points out in his poem (l. 114). One of the centre-pieces of Plato’s philosophy is the Allegory of the Cave: our life can be compared to that of people living in a cave whose eyes are turned to the cave’s wall where they can see the shadows created by things

placed at the cave's entrance (see *Republic* 7.514a-515c). We cannot look at Truth directly any more than we can look at the sun without hurting our eyes (see *Republic* 7.515e). We can only look at things which partake of the sun's light (with the sun representing Truth), as Plato pointed out in the preceding Analogy of the Sun (*Republic* 6.508-509c). Nabokov not only adopts the shade imagery from Plato, but—following Shakespeare—extends the sun imagery to include the moon as the sun's pale reflection: the moon's fire may be pale, but we can look at it. In recreating the shadow games of existence, the literary artist can hope to trace the mechanisms underlying the universe⁸:

I feel I understand
Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of combinational delight;
And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine
Which I suspect is an iambic line. (l. 971-77)

In the novel, a first reference to the topic of reality and its imperfect reflection is given when Kinbote in his "Foreword" quotes from a comment on Shade's poem: "[...] it is not improbable that what he left represents only a small fraction of the composition he saw in a glass, darkly" (14). The phrase is taken from 1 Cor 13:12, where St. Paul (another Platonist) compares the incomplete knowledge we have in this life to the knowledge we will have in the realm of God. In the poem, Shade envisages, among other options for an afterlife, "talks / With Socrates and Proust in cypress walks" (l. 223-24). The relevance of Proust to a "preterist" collecting old memories is obvious, while Socrates should remind us of the Platonic dialogues (including *Phaedo* and the *Republic*), in which approaches to philosophical truth are effected through conversations with Socrates.

Nabokov will have been aware of the fact that his (or Shade's) "Platonic" theory of art does not correspond to Plato's own ideas about artistic creation: while the things we see in life are the imperfect shadows or copies of the original Forms, artists can only imitate the copies

and produce shadows of shadows. Their work is thus even more removed from Truth than is the world we experience through our senses (see *Republic* 10.595a-598c). In the Renaissance, however, this doctrine was challenged by artists and humanists who found Platonism attractive but also contended that artists can imitate or represent the original Forms directly (cf. Panofsky). This is certainly the philosophic tradition in which we can locate Shade's and Nabokov's theory of art. At the same time, Nabokov makes use of Plato's original concept and imagery to assign a place to Kinbote and Criticism: Kinbote appears as Shade's shadow; while Shade the poet can catch a pale reflection of Truth and Beauty, Kinbote the critic can at best obtain a pale reflection of this reflection, and produce dreams and ambitions which are "but a shadow's shadow" (*Hamlet* 2.2.262). Actually, the relationship of Shade and Kinbote also resembles an opposition created by Plato in the context of his critique of poetry: Plato alerts us to the paradox that, while in real life we admire people who can subdue their grief when hit by an adverse fate (such as the loss of a son), tragedies are considered best if actors express grief in a particularly clamorous way (*Republic* 10.603e and 605c-e); the same applies to mirth and comedy (606c). With regard to this opposition, Shade is a hero of real life, Kinbote one of tragedy and of comedy.

Finally I should like suggest that the "moondrop title" chosen by Shade may contain yet another Shakespearean reference: In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the moonlit section of the play is introduced by a fairy:

Puck. How now, spirit, whither wander you?

Fairy. Over hill over dale.

Thorough bush, thorough brier,

Over park, over *pale*,

Thorough flood, thorough *fire*,

I do wander every where,

Swifter than the moon's sphere;

And I serve the Fairy Queen,

To dew her orbs upon the green. (2.1.1-9, emphasis added)

“Pale” in this passage is a noun, not an adjective; it means “[a]n area enclosed by a fence; an enclosure” (*OED*, “pale”, *n.* 3.). My suggestion is that John Shade considers his poem a “pale fire,” a fire which illuminates a certain enclosed space, the space of the fairies or of literary imagination.⁹ As the story of Titania and Oberon and their respective retinues mirrors human royal courts, so the pale fires illuminated by literary artists mirror real life—and, like Titania and Oberon, provide an indication as to the working of transcendental forces, of God, or the gods, “it did not matter who they were” (l. 816). Like the fairies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, poets can play around with their material, providing beauty and experiencing pleasure. As a poet Shade can enter that world in which his daughter was not allowed to participate:

[...] while children of her age
 Were cast as elves and fairies on the stage
 That *she’d* helped paint for the school pantomime,
 My gentle girl appeared as Mother Time,
 A bent charwoman with slop pail and broom,
 And like a fool I sobbed in the men’s room. (ll. 309-14)

Hazel Shade’s tragic fate exemplifies the arbitrariness and uncaring character of “divine” dispositions, but, as a poet, John Shade can create his own fairyland. While he does not lay any claim to divine inspiration, he can create an imitative world in a moonlit space, having been inspired by magic moondrops.¹⁰

Pale Fire actually provides clues which may refer the reader to the relevance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: Shade calls “midsummer” his “preferred season” (l. 873-74), although he obviously prefers “midsummer morn[s]” to nights. The other clue is provided by Kinbote who, commenting on “the fashionable device of entitling a collection of essays or a volume of poetry—or a long poem, alas—with a phrase lifted from the more or less celebrated poetical works of the past,” finds this practice

[...] degrading in regard to the talent that substitutes the easy allusiveness of literacy for original fancy and shifts onto a bust's shoulders the responsibility for ornateness since anybody can flip through a *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Romeo and Juliet*, or, perhaps, the *Sonnets* and take his pick. (189)¹¹

Kinbote, we realize, has not grasped the functions of quotation and allusion within Shade's concept of poetic creation, in which "combinational delight" leads to the creation of "a web of sense." In order to reach an awareness of the poem's structure and meaning, we have to dismiss the commentator's paratext and, rather than follow Kinbote's advice to begin and end with the commentary (25), treat the poem as a literary work in its own right, and take its engagement with fundamental issues of the human condition seriously.¹² The theory of art the poem contains can then serve to make sense of Kinbote's flights of fantasy and make us realize that Kinbote the lunatic shares with Shade the poet the ability to give "to aery nothing / A local habitation and a name" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.16-17).

Universität Osnabrück

NOTES

¹As the novel consists of a poem of 999 lines and about 200 pages of prose paratext ("Foreword," "Commentary," and "Index") references can be to lines (prefixed "l."/"ll.") or pages (not prefixed).

²A similar cultural misunderstanding is recorded in Nabokov's previous novel, *Pnin* (see 99).

³Incidentally, we may note that Kinbote calls his "uncle Conmal" a "noble paraphrast" (240).

⁴Other parallels between Shade's poem and Kinbote's Zemblan adventures, as recorded by Boyd (e.g. 150) and others, could also be accounted for as resulting from Kinbote's drawing upon the poem.

⁵The bat's "tale of torture," obviously suggested by the jerky and seemingly discordant flying movements of this animal (as opposed to the graceful if sometimes misguided flight of the waxwing, referred to in the first lines of Shade's poem) may point to the agony and despair which underlie Kinbote's mad exuberance. Kinbote, who recorded his loneliness and his suicidal tendencies at an early stage in the commentary (78-81), is, after all, a tragic character, a victim of emigra-

tion and political change, like many other Nabokovian protagonists (see, e.g., Boyd 90-93). The bat may also refer to Dracula and the “undead.”

⁶Similarly, when seeing Lolita for the first time, Humbert Humbert recognizes in her the “Riviera love” of his childhood (*Lolita* 39), which, of course, she is not.

⁷Brian Boyd’s suggestion, for all his eagerness to decipher hidden meanings, is rather lame: “With his [Shade’s] usual modesty he reaches for a title that implies his poem can shed only a pallid glow compared to the heat and light Shakespeare radiates over the landscape of English literature” (33).

⁸As Paul D. Morris (see 371-73) points out, Shade’s theory corresponds to views Nabokov expresses in non-fictional writings; cf. also Schuman 92-93.

⁹On the elves/fairies as the “imaginative representation of the imagination” see, e.g., Niederhoff (70).

¹⁰There is no entry on “moondrop” in the *OED*, but in *Macbeth* a “vap’rous drop” from “the corner of the moon” is used by Hecate to “raise [...] artificial sprites” (3.5.23-27).

¹¹The reference to *Romeo and Juliet* may alert us to Romeo’s mistaken interpretation of “yon grey” as “the pale reflex of Cynthia’s brow” (3.5.19-20). Like Romeo, Kinbote may wish to stay under the moon’s pale fire in order to prolong his companionship with his “love,” Shade’s poem. On another level, Shade has to leave the pale fire of his poetic dreams (and the dream which constitutes life) when he is hit by a bullet fired by Jack Grey (232).

¹²The poem’s merits have been appreciated by a new edition which dispenses with Kinbote’s paratext: *Pale Fire: A Poem in Four Cantos by John Shade* (2011).

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