

## The Poet's Generosity in *Timon of Athens* and *Pale Fire*: A Response to Maurice Charney and Thomas Kullmann\*

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In his discussion of the relationship between Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and *Timon of Athens*, Maurice Charney centers his reading on the "pale fire" passage from *Timon*, the passage from which John Shade takes his title. Charney concludes that the passage from Shakespeare suggests a "general pattern of thievery that pervades the cosmos," an amenable image for a narrative in which we ask whether Kinbote is trying "to steal Shade's poem" (Charney 28). Furthermore, Charney argues that Kinbote reflects the character of Timon, who he says "deals in excess" and "hates all of mankind except a chosen few" (29). Thomas Kullmann, in his response to Charney, offers a useful corrective, not only questioning the aptness of Charney's characterization of Timon but also suggesting that "theft" might not be the only way to read the "pale fire" image. Kullmann notes: "Within the confines of life as it is they [artists] 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" (224). If Shade's work is a copy, then, in this Platonic reading Kinbote's paratext is a copy of a copy, and thus Kinbote should be rejected in favor of treating "the poem as a literary work in its own right" (228).

The primary point of contention between Charney and Kullmann is the question of the relationship between text and paratext, unsurpris-

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\*References: Maurice Charney, "Adopting Styles, Inserting Selves: 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>>.

ingly, as this is the primary question that *Pale Fire* poses for the reader. Charney argues that “[t]he more one rereads *Pale Fire* [...] the more one is caught up in the seemingly absurd idea that the relationship of the poem and the commentary is quite close” (34); Kullmann replies, “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). It is hard for me to hear a discussion about artistic indebtedness and not want to refer the aesthetic question back to *Timon of Athens*, a play so engaged with art and debt. I argue here that we ought to consider how *Timon of Athens* deals with issues of artistic purity, debt, corruption, and aesthetics as a possible route to understanding *Pale Fire*; at the very least, I would like to identify some thematic connections between *Timon of Athens* and *Pale Fire* as a way to offer additional context to this productive debate.

One of Shade’s most salient images as he tries to imagine a poetic response to death is the “empty emerald case” of a cicada on “a pine’s bark” next to “a gum-logged ant” (ll. 236-40). Shade observes the leavings of the cicada and the gum-logged ant, thinking of their respective fates as a sign of the passing of the body (the workaday ant) and the escape of art (the song of the cicada).<sup>1</sup> He concludes this image with the summative, “And so I pare my nails, and muse [...]” (245) which yokes together both the mundane and the poetic; Shade’s cicada and ant, nails and muse, suggest the impossibility of differentiating the poetic from the non-poetic. In fact, Shade’s observation in the end is that everything, rightly seen, partakes of poetry in this “Richly rhymed life” (970).

The Poet of *Timon of Athens* makes an analogous connection between the everyday and the transcendent, lines which also, coincidentally, involve gum:

Our poesy is as a gum which oozes  
From whence ’tis nourished. The fire I’ th’ flint  
Shows not till it be struck, our gentle flame  
Provokes itself (I.i.22-25)<sup>2</sup>

In these lines, the Poet offers metaphors for himself: the tree (or whatever the nourishing source of the gum is) and the flint, and for his poetry, the oozing gum and the fire.<sup>3</sup> His poetry abides within him, and emerges without the need for external stimulus. The overall impression he gives is of artistic creation as completely *sui generis*, a claim that is immediately undercut by the Poet's response to the Painter's question, "When comes your book forth?": "Upon the heels of my presentment, sir" (27-28); that is, right after he completes the paratextual dedication to Timon that ensures his financial reward. It seems the gentle flame does not *entirely* strike itself. Prosaic reality must intrude.

Both Shade's poem *Pale Fire* and the novel as a whole ask the reader to maintain two perspectives at the same time: prosaic reality and poetic transcendence. The most salient image of those two perspectives is the waxwing slain, which is also the bird flying on into the azure of the glass. Similarly, we are offered Shade's mind (as perceived by Kinbote) "perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart" (27) as contrasted with his "misshapen body, that gray mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers" which serves as "his own cancellation" (26). Shade is compared to a "conjurer" whom Kinbote observed as a child, who was "quietly consuming a vanilla ice" after his show (27). Kinbote, here, picks up on Shade's own thoughts about his body and mind as expressed in the poem: Shade has "a brain, five senses (one unique), / But otherwise [...] was a cloutish freak" (ll. 133-34). In short, what does it mean to be embodied, to have to satisfy the demands of the physical, including hunger, decay, and death, when one contains an element of transcendence as well?

Shade's solution to this terrible question is his perception of an artistic structure in the universe, of artistic coherence, even if it can only be apprehended dimly, and even if that artistic coherence ends up serving as both a prison and a picture frame for our limited lives. From this perspective, even a terrible mistake on the micro-level—an assassination gone wrong, say—may end up participating as a small

piece of something beautiful on a macro-level: "the verse of galaxies divine" (l. 975). Only after encountering the terrible disappointment of the mountain/fountain misprint (see l. 802) that shatters his hope that there may be a perceptible afterlife does Shade come to the realization that, while mountain/fountain is not evidence of afterlife, evidence of authorial patterning, the link-and-bobolink that transcends textual and bodily corruption. The novel as a whole asks us to make a similar leap of understanding towards the exploitation and corruption of Shade's poem in the hands of Kinbote. While the commentary is a travesty of scholarship, it somehow, as Shade says, makes "ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities" (ll. 828-29). Together, the poem and the commentary make an extraordinary work of art that is more than the sum of its parts, transcending the physical realities of index cards and papers, poet and commentator. Instead, the aesthetic bliss of the work of fiction points outwards to the "aloof and mute" (l. 818) fairy chess players who create its symmetry.

This feature of *Pale Fire's* aesthetic cosmology reverberates fascinatingly with *Timon of Athens*, especially as embodied in the character of the Poet and his artistic companion, the Painter. The Poet and the Painter are not treated sympathetically in the play. They both clearly acknowledge their naked desire for patronage and recognition; they both participate in an economy of exploitation and corruption as part of the process of artistic creation. The Poet and the Painter want Timon's gold and are willing to offer promises of art that are "a satire against the softness of prosperity, with a discovery of the infinite flatteries that follow youth and opulency" (V.i.32-34) which Timon recognizes would be self-portraits on the part of the Poet and the Painter: "Must thou needs stand for a villain in thine own work?" (35-36)

Yet, at the same time, the play suggests that the result of this flattery and self-delusion may be something of value: art can be produced almost surprisingly as the result of delusion, as if by accident. The Poet may be merely bragging when he claims that the "free drift" (I.i.46) of his poetry

Halts not particularly, but moves itself  
 In a wide sea of wax; no levelled malice  
 Infects one comma in the course I hold,  
 But flies an eagle flight, bold and forth on,  
 Leaving no tract behind. (I.i.47-51)

The image he offers is attractive and powerful; it does not obviously seem to be a piece of verse to be made fun of. The bird flying straight ahead, vanishing into pure poetry with no “tract,” no link to the physical left behind, offers an intriguing analogy to the waxwing who “lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky” (l. 4) without having to heed physical realities.<sup>4</sup> But the Poet’s point here is a practical one: he claims that his poetry is universal rather than “particular”; that no personal animus has changed his poetry to the extent of affecting a single piece of punctuation.

Even though the Poet suspects that his self-interested motive may damage poetry in general (“When we for recompense have praised the vile, / It stains the glory in that happy verse / Which aptly sings the good,” [I.i.16-18]) his poetry proves to have surprising insight, perhaps precisely because of the Poet’s participation in the cycle of flattery that he observes. The Poet’s verse about Timon’s flatterers who “On the moment / Follow his strides, his lobbies fill with tendance, / Rain sacrificial whisperings in his ear, / Make sacred even his stirrup and through him / Drink the free air” (I.i.81-85) is both perceptive and prophetic in its apprehension of Timon’s fall even though it is offered by one of the “glass-faced flatterer[s]” that the poem itself portrays (60). In short, the Poet’s base motive does not detract from his vision, and I would suggest that this, once recognized creates an additional shiver of aesthetic bliss.

It is in this context of the strange value of theft that I offer a suggestion for how we may deepen our understanding of the lines from *Timon of Athens* that give *Pale Fire* its name: “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” (IV.iii.431-33). Charney reads the lines as demonstrating universal theft, a relationship that the

overall novel *Pale Fire* participates in.<sup>5</sup> This reading, however, while certainly true from the point of view of Timon at this moment, omits the larger perspective which the play offers about the nature of theft and corruption.<sup>6</sup> The natural relationships here may be couched in terms of theft, but the result of that theft is moonlight, the tide ("liquid surge," 434) that is both pulled by the moon and reflects the image of the moon, and the generosity of the earth by taking nutrients from "general excrement" (437). In other words, the fact of theft offers the possibility of tremendous aesthetic generosity on the part of the world, and this double-edged response to theft seems essential in understanding why Nabokov found *Timon of Athens* so provocative. Timon's own overwhelming generosity is rooted in a perverse and corrupted world. His generosity could not, in other words, manifest in the absence of that corruption (see II.i.1-10).

Timon's perception of the world's generosity is rooted in his equally strong sense of its perversion and corruption: the two are intermingled. "[N]othing brings me all things," he says at last (V.ii.73). In the end, Timon sees his life, his death, as meaningful only as it participates in a larger aesthetic structure that he imagines. He pictures how "the light foam of the sea may beat / Thy gravestone daily; make thine epitaph, / That death in me at others' lives may laugh" (IV.iii.374-76).<sup>7</sup> That sea foam, of course, is that same "liquid surge" that robs, here serving an aesthetic function in the image of his grave. I am not arguing that *Timon of Athens* offers the reader a sense of aesthetic bliss in the end: the laughter Timon imagines is mostly bitter, and his anger and cynicism go hand-in-hand with the play's treatment of aesthetics. I do, however, want to point to a significant theme in the play's sense of aesthetic generosity that I believe Nabokov picks up on: Kinbote, in his Index, offers Hazel a very Timonesque epitaph, saying that she "deserves great respect, having preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life" (312). We might take this as a terribly depressed, misanthropic thing to say, but it is analogous to Shade's own project, to reimagine senseless death as part of a percepride artistic pattern.<sup>8</sup>

Shade's vision, then, is one of universal generosity—the generosity of small things that participate in the “vital rhythm” (l. 952) of life like the “dark Vanessa with a crimson band” (l. 993), who, as the poem closes, creates symmetry with the waxwing of the first line. Whether the aesthetically or cosmically fortuitous appearance of that dark Vanessa can offer consolation for a dead child remains unclear.<sup>9</sup> Timon and the Poet would offer a sharper, but similar observation. The ground offers gold when Timon requires food; Timon suffers, but the play he is in gains in beauty from that perfect moment of suffering—and that is a type of generosity. In the end, as Shade says, we are “most artistically caged” (l. 114).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Morris, esp. 340.

<sup>2</sup>The Folio reading of “Gowne which vses” rather than “gum which oozes”; I here use Johnson's emendation of the line. “Vses” may simply be an early modern spelling of “oozes.” All quotations from *Timon of Athens* are from the Arden edition, Third Series, ed. Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton.

<sup>3</sup>Dawson and Minton call the oozing gum a “grotesque image” (I.i.22n22). Aunt Maud, who is herself a “poet and a painter,” also seems to partake of this hybrid, accidental way of creating beauty—“realistic objects interlaced / with grotesque growths and images of doom” (ll. 87-89).

<sup>4</sup>“Tract” = “trace (?); delay or deferral (?)” according to the Arden edition (I.i.51n51); “protraction of time, deferring.”

<sup>5</sup>Kullman makes an analogous point: “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” (218).

<sup>6</sup>Timon earlier in this scene compares himself to the moon, having fallen into poverty “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” (IV.iii.68-70); his comparison, unlike the latter speech, softens the relationship between sun and moon. This is a relationship of borrowing and lending, not theft, and he assumes that the relationship will lead to renewal rather than dissolving into nothingness.

<sup>7</sup>Timon later imagines the same surge over his grave: “[O]nce a day with his embossed froth / The turbulent surge shall cover; thither come, / And let my gravestone be your oracle” (V.ii.102-04). Timon here also sees his (senseless) death serving a prophetic, remedial function on those who come after him.

<sup>8</sup>Shade’s poem also offers a way to imagine a kind of communication with the dead, although unclear and perplexing; *Timon of Athens* has its own take on post-death communication, the baffling multiple epitaphs that both preserve Timon’s voice and name post-death, and erase them; see Thatcher.

<sup>9</sup>See Boyd on the *Vanessa* and its various reflections and symmetries in the novel.

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