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AN ASPECT OF NABOKOV'S
PALE FIRE

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Prefatory Note

Quotations from and references to Pale Fire are identified in the text as either page references to Pale Fire (New York, 1962) or line references to the poem "Pale Fire". All other citations are identified in the Notes.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Pale Fire is a novel that is put together in the reader's mind from the material supplied by Nabokov. The reader is presented with four complex blocks of material - two large ones (a 999-line poem by John Shade, and what proclaims itself to be a critical commentary on that poem by Charles Kinbote), and two lesser ones (a foreword and an index, both by Kinbote). The four parts can be fitted together in a number of ways, and the pattern that emerges will depend on the way the reader chooses to relate them.

Every reader of the book must attempt the game; but though it is easy to recognise defeat, to become frustrated because the pieces will not fit themselves into a coherent whole, it is impossible to feel confidently triumphant when one achieves a solution for there is no guarantee that the pattern that any reader manages to create is the one that Vladimir Nabokov had in mind when he created the book.

Beside the basic questions that crop up - is John Shade a figment of Kinbote's imagination, or Kinbote of John Shade's; has Gradus any reality outside Kinbote's mind; does Zembla exist; how mad is Kinbote; what is Shade the shade of; whose finger presses the trigger of the gun (if the gun exists); if Professor Botkin turned his face would we see a lunatic, a poet or a pedant - Pale Fire presents a series of word puzzles, verbal echoes, half-echoes, disturbing puns and dangling metaphors. The exploration of these has

seemed to some critics to yield clues necessary to assemble the complex material into an authoritative pattern - and certainly their efforts have revealed a great many odd facets to the work and unexpected minor patterns in its construction.

But they have also tended to give support to those who consider Pale Fire a game, a joke, a sterile exercise of wit and ingenuity, and a 300-page pyrotechnic display of Nabokov's alleged contempt for his readers. Such a point of view can claim as evidence statements on his art made by Nabokov himself. For instance, in the Introduction to Bend Sinister he has this to say:

I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment (in journalistic and commercial parlance: 'great books'). I am not 'sincere', I am not 'satirical'. I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer.¹

A similar assertion is made in the famous note "On a Book Entitled Lolita":

Teachers of Literature are apt to think up such problems as 'What is the author's purpose?' or, still worse, 'What is the guy trying to say?' Now, I happen to be the kind of author who in starting work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination - which, I admit, sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another.²

Yet the same note yields a passage which suggests that though Nabokov exiles didacticism as a dangerous enemy to art, for him, to be a devotee of art implies an automatic adherence to certain moral excellences:

For me a work of fiction exists only insofar

as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.³

Aristotelean concepts seem to be implied here: the business of the artist is to penetrate to the essence of experience, to lay bare the universal truth nestling in the particular instance. If the "aesthetic bliss" afforded by Pale Fire can be shown to be of this higher Nabokovian order, that is superior to the riddling skill a good murder mystery provides, then there can be no doubt of its value; but it is exactly on this point that critical opinion has always been divided.

Mary McCarthy in her original review makes high claims for it: "this centaur-work of Nabokov's, half poem, half prose, this merman of the deep, is a creation of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth. Pretending to be a curio, it cannot disguise the fact that it is one of the very great works of art of this century, the modern novel that everyone thought dead and that was only playing possum."⁴ But Page Stegner, one of Nabokov's most enthusiastic admirers, is unconvinced: "Until it can be demonstrated that Pale Fire does deal in some way with moral truth or valid experience, I can admire the poem and the language and humor of Kinbote's commentary, and be amazed by its complexity, but I must remain skeptical about its greatness, and, in fact, its durability. The form of the novel and the dependence of the content on the form give me the uneasy feeling that a resurrected Luzhin wrote it, and that the obsession of the conscious artist with technique and gamesmanship is overwhelming the compassion and humanism

of the man behind the mask."⁵

The same note is sounded again and again in the original reviews. "The unhappy mistake of an enormously gifted craftsman ... as far removed from art as is the work of a technician who spends a lifetime engraving the Magna Charta on the head of a pin", said William Peden in the Saturday Review, May 26, 1962. The New York Times made its pronouncement the next day: "One more proof of Nabokov's rare vitality ... unluckily not much more than that,"⁶ Four days later the Christian Science Monitor was more firmly admonitory: "A prodigal waste of the author's gifts ...". By November, 1962, the critical split was well established. Frank Kermode in the New Statesman, referred particularly to Mary McCarthy's final assertion that it is "one of the very great works of art this century". "This thesis has been severely blown upon ... One doesn't read novels primarily in order to find out whose side one's on but I am clear that Miss McCarthy ... is largely right about detailed interpretation and largely wrong about the value of the whole work."⁷

No one it seems denies that Pale Fire is witty, ingenious, complex and intriguing. But is it anything more?

I am not competent to explore the word play of the novel (to appreciate it requires a knowledge of Russian and probably of several other European languages). It is obviously an important element but it seems to me to work mainly as one thematic unit in the whole, an illustration in miniature of the kind of intertwining relationship that the novel is concerned with. To concentrate attention exclusively on it is to ignore the important for

the surface sparkle.

I have chosen rather to look at Pale Fire in the light of certain texts to which allusion is made by the characters or the author. If it were impossible to enjoy the book without a thorough knowledge of these texts then the novel would seem to me to have such serious weaknesses, to be so incomplete a work of art, that it would barely be worth concentrating serious attention upon it. But to me the novel seems both complete and serious and the allusions somewhat in the nature of acknowledgements - nods of recognition - to other writers who have explored similar themes. If the reader is familiar with the texts mentioned they will act as a reinforcement, a confirmation, of the ideas he is encountering, and for the critic they can act as blazes on the involuted trail he is following, assurances that the path he is on is at least not hopelessly astray.

I can best illustrate this by citing a minor example. The title Pale Fire is (as Nabokov conscientiously if obliquely points out) taken from Timon of Athens:

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 dissolves
The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stolen
From the general excrement; each thing's a
thief. 8

In the critical note to the lines of Shade's poem where he names his work, Kinbote shooting off as usual on to a Zemblan tangent, discusses the translations of Conmal, uncle to Charles the Beloved. Conmal, he tells us, worked his way through all the works of Shakespeare and "went on to Milton and other poets, steadily drilling through the ages and had just completed Kipling's 'The Rhyme of the

Three Sealers' when he died." (p 285)

The Rhyme of the Three Sealers is a narrative poem that tells the story of three sealing boats bent on poaching skins from the rich Russian breeding grounds:

Now this is the law of the Muscovite, that
 he proves with shot and steel,
 When you come by his isles in the Smoky Sea,
 you must not take the seal.⁹

The Baltic is the first poacher in action:

her men were up with the herding seal to
 drive and club and skin.
 There were fifteen hundred skins abeach,
 cool pelt and proper fur,
 When the 'Northern Light' drove into the
 bight, and the sea-mist drove with her.¹⁰

By posing as an armed Russian vessel the Northern Light frightens off the Baltic who

turned and dived in the sea-smother as a
 rabbit dies in the whins,
 And the 'Northern Light' sent up her boats
 to steal the stolen skins.¹¹

But in the act of picking up the booty this ship too is frightened off by a sloop-of-war looming out of the mist. Only after he has run for the open sea does the captain realise that he too has been hoaxed by yet another poaching sealer, the Stralsund, rigged with paint and spar to imitate a Russian sloop:

You must set a thief to catch a thief —
 and a thief has caught us all,¹²

cries the furious captain, and a fight ensues in which the captains of two of the vessels are killed.

Echoes of the Timon of Athens quotation — romantic theft, the preying of one unit upon another, the passing of rich treasure from hand to filching hand, interdependence based not on giving.

but grabbing - are obvious, and suggest comparisons with the Shade-Kinbote-Gradus trinity. Thus the allusion to the Kipling poem, without adding new elements to the "pale fire" quotation, confirms the themes suggested by it as central to the book.

In this essay then I shall attempt to prove that Pale Fire is not a kind of weekend book of verbal high-jinks, a super-jumbo acrostic, but a lively and profound consideration of certain aspects of art (and therefore of living) and that the presence of certain themes is proved by allusions Nabokov makes to other works of art in which similar ideas are explored. I shall concentrate on those texts to which Nabokov most often makes direct or oblique reference in the novel - Pope's Essay on Man, Boswell's Life of Dr Johnson, and Shakespeare's Timon of Athens. Each of these will, I hope, serve as an opener to a discussion of a particular facet of the novel and as a conclusion I shall attempt to incorporate the themes that have emerged from this method of exploration into a tentative interpretation of the whole.

CHAPTER II

POET AND PATTERN

That John Shade's poem has certain connections with and similarities to Pope's Essay on Man is obvious and has been frequently commented on, but, as far as I know, those similarities have not been explored in any detail.

In Line 384 of his poem Shade refers to "my book on Pope" and Kinbote in his note on the line identifies this as "Supremely Blest", a title taken from the Essay on Man, "Supremely blest, the poet in his muse". Later on John Shade quotes a line from the same section of the Essay on Man, "See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing", as an element in his consciousness as he peacefully corrects galley proofs while his daughter drowns herself. The line, comments Shade "Has unmistakably the vulgar ring / Of its preposterous age", (ll 420-1) and its use here is dramatically contrived to illuminate the situation of the Shades. For Hazel, crippled by her physical ugliness, there is no compensation, and Pope's facile optimism ironically highlights her purgatory; but John Shade with even greater infirmities is like Pope's poet and Pope himself, supremely blest in his muse. (There is almost a suggestion that the poet shares with the chemist not only the blessedness but the power of imaginative alchemy.)

The paragraph in the Essay on Man to which attention is twice drawn is:

Whatever the passion, knowledge, fame, or pelf,
No one will change his neighbour with himself.
The learned is happy nature to explore,
The fool is happy that he knows no more,
The rich is happy in the plenty given,
The poor contents himself with care of Heaven.

See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing,
 The sot a hero, lunatic a king;
 The starving chemist in his golden views
 Supremely blest, the poet in his Muse.¹

John Shade in his comment seems to repudiate any sympathy with its sentiments. Kinbote in his note on the lines records a variant:

Such verses as
 "See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing,
 The sot a hero, lunatic a king"
 Smack of their heartless age. (pp 202-3)

Yet the variant, despite its more emphatic condemnation, serves to strengthen the conviction that the Essay on Man is relevant to Pale Fire. Why, Kinbote wonders in his note, did John Shade replace "an admirable passage by the much flabbier final text. Or was he afraid of offending a real king." Thus Nabokov reminds us that Kinbote the lunatic is involved in the compensatory process that Pope is describing, and seems to give token of his own interest in Pope's line of thought. And the lunatic king, Kinbote, chooses as name for his kingdom Zembla, a name which is relevant mainly because it suggests "semblance" but also happens to pop up in the Essay on Man:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien
 As, to be hated, needs but to be seen.
 Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
 We first endure, then pity, then embrace.
 But where the extreme of vice, was ne'er agreed:
 Ask where's the north? At York 'tis on the Tweed;
 In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,
 At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.²

John Shade, shaving, makes his face a map of his thoughts and locates "Old Zembla's fields where my grey stubble grows" (l 937) and Kinbote tells us that a note on the card identifies this as Pope's country, not his own.

These evidences of Nabokov's interest in the poem while he was composing Pale Fire seem to me sufficient to warrant a comparison of the two works.

The Essay on Man is a poem of 1304 lines, written in heroic couplets and divided into four epistles. Pale Fire is a poem of 999 lines written in heroic couplets and divided into four cantos. The Essay on Man is concerned with surveying the environment and man within it, with the specific aim of vindicating the ways of God to man. It is often criticised as a hotchpotch of 18th Century truisms and certainly in this less secure century its argument seems suspiciously simple and optimistic, but the conclusions Pope reaches are at times similar to those Nabokov allows John Shade to reach in the "Pale Fire" poem.

Epistle 1 of the Essay on Man stresses the limited nature of man's vision. The world and life in it is "A mighty maze! but not without a plan."³ Man has limited vision of the whole creation however, and sees only what affects him, but this does not prove that that is all that exists:

So man, who here seems principal alone,
Perhaps acts second to some sphere unknown,
Touches some wheel, or verges to some goal;
'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole.⁴

Only pride makes man assume that creation exists for him alone, makes him complain of his own and the world's imperfections, and question God's purpose. Man is limited, as the beasts are, because he, like them, is merely a link in the chain of being. The conclusion is inevitable. Partial understanding is to be accepted as our fate. Faith in the will and plan of God whom we cannot understand is our duty:

Know thy own point: this kind, this due degree
Of blindness, weakness, Heaven bestows on thee.
Submit. - In this, or any other sphere,
Secure to be as blessed as thou canst bear:
Safe in the hand of one disposing Power,
Or in the natal or the mortal hour.

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
 All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
 All discord, harmony not understood;
 All partial evil, universal good:
 And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
 One truth is clear, WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT. 5

Shade's poem centres on just this point:

But all at once it dawns 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,
 Flexed artistry, (ll 806-829)

To him, as to Pope, it is patterning, art,
 that can be distinguished in the world and that
 gives evidence of someguiding hand at work. Pope's
 conviction is firm, John Shade's tentative, but
 their conclusions are similar. For Pope, the
 artist is a benevolent disposing power; John Shade
 is far more cautious in identifying the controlling
 hand - to him it is a vague "they", unknowable:

It did not matter who they were. No sound,
 No furtive light came from their involute
 Abode, but there they were, aloof and mute,
 Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns
 To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns;
 Kindling a long life here, extinguishing
 A short one there: killing a Balkan king;
 Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-
 Flying airplane to plummet from the sky
 And strike a farmer dead; hiding my keys,
 Glasses or pipe. Co-ordinating these
 Events and objects with remote events
 And vanished objects. Making ornaments
 Of accidents and possibilities. (ll 816-829)

Both poems in exploring man's relation to the
 universe are based on their authors' deeply
 delighted response to the sensual world, to variety,
 oddnesses, differences. Pope imagines man with a
 sharper sense of smell doomed to "die of a rose in

aromatic pain"⁶ (though the phrase is conditional it reveals his own capacity for sharp response). He talks of "the mole's dim curtain"⁷ of sight, of "the spider's touch" that "feels at each thread, and lives along the line".⁸ Insects are "the green myriads in the peopled grass",⁹ and God the force who "heaves old ocean"¹⁰ and who sees "now a bubble burst and now a world",¹¹ and has made man "as full, as perfect, in a hair as heart".¹²

Nabokov, through the persona of John Shade, rejoices in "abstract larches in a neutral light", in reflections in a window, the footprints of a pheasant in the snow, "svelte stilettos" of ice, a shagbark tree with "ample dark jade leaves and a black, spare / Vermiculated trunk", "opal cloudlets", paper weights, bicycle tracks in the sand, "the nightly wall / Raised by a trillion crickets in the fall". And so on.

The point that emerges is that both poems are generated not of despair or the effort to endure or explain an intolerable condition, but of an appreciation of the actual and an ability to look and listen and see with discerning joy. Each poet seems to imply that this ability is the chief end of man, his duty and reward. Pope's introduction to Epistle 1 carries this suggestion:

Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things
To low ambition, and the pride of kings.
Let us (since life can little more supply
Than just to look about us and to die)
Expatriate free o'er all this scene of man;

And Shade expresses the same idea even more forcibly. It is this ability of the rational man to look outward with intelligence and delight that gives him freedom and superiority over those obsessed souls who deal in power-seeking and cruelty:

But who can teach the thoughts we should
 roll-call
 When morning finds us marching to the wall
 Under the stage direction of some goon
 Political, some uniformed baboon?
 We'll think of matters only known to us -
 Empires of rhyme, Indies of calculus;
 Listen to distant cocks crow, and discern
 Upon the rough grey wall a rare wall fern;
 And while our royal hands are being tied,
 Taunt our inferiors, cheerfully deride
 The dedicated imbeciles, and spit
 Into their eyes just for the fun of it.

(11 597-608)

Both are optimistic poems. Each in its own way begins with a celebration and ends with a vindication.

The assumptions made about God and an after-life are very different in the beginning. Pope starts from a standpoint of belief - "to vindicate the ways of God to man"; John Shade from one of scepticism - "My God died young. Theolatriy / I found degrading and its premises unsound" (11 99-100) - so that the vindication seems to have grown from similar evidence not similar preconceptions. Both poets regard death as the experience that will (or does) supplement the partial vision of living. To Pope death is "the great teacher" and in this world "The soul, uneasy and confined from home / Rests and expatiates in a life to come"¹³, while Shade's hard-come-by vision of the fountain "dreadfully distinct" provides an austere retreat and promise:

Often when troubled by the outer glare
 Of street and strife, inward I'd turn, and there,
 There in the background of my soul it stood
 Old Faithful! And its presence always would
 Console me wonderfully.

(11 741-745)

If Pale Fire can be looked at as a dramatic acting-out of a statement about living and art

(and I believe that it can) then it is important not to give too much stress to Shade's conclusions in the poem for the commentary, dark and disturbed, modifies the clear sanity of the verse. Nabokov himself has built in a mechanism to prevent readers from regarding Shade as the voice of truth and good sense. At the end of the poem Shade says:

I feel I understand
Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of combinational delight,

and continues, speaking of life after death:

I'm reasonably sure that we survive
And that my darling somewhere is alive,
As I am reasonably sure that I
Shall wake at six tomorrow, on July
The twentieth-second, nineteen fifty-nine,
And that the day will probably be fine.

(11 977-982)

The fact that the reader knows that Shade does not wake the next morning, being dead, can be taken as throwing doubt on all his tentative conclusions.

I have confined myself in this section to pointing out similarities between Epistle I of the Essay on Man and the Shade poem. Epistle II is concerned with man in his environment, with self-love and reason as motivations for action, and the interdependence of selfishness and social co-operation; Epistle III with the interdependence of all creation; and Epistle IV with the way to live, with virtue and self-knowledge. All of these things are relevant to Pale Fire, but to the total novel, not the poem alone. The theme of interdependence lies at the heart of Pale Fire but it cannot be discussed until some facts of the relationship of commentary to poem have been

established. That relationship is the main concern of this essay and in Chapter IV I shall begin an exploration of some of its facets.

However before leaving John Shade's belief in discernible pattern as evidence of a master hand at work I should like to break the thread of my argument to insert a note on Nabokov's word-play.

CHAPTER III

A NOTE ON NABOKOV'S WORD-PLAY

It is a truism of criticism that Nabokov's art is concerned with word games, puns, mirrorings, reversions, multiple meanings, allusions, and illusions.

Page Stegner has drawn attention to the web of unstable verbal catwalks that connect the Shade-Kinbote-Gradus trinity.¹ Shade, according to Chambers' dictionary, is amongst other things "partial or relative darkness, interception of light, obscurity, (in plural) the abode of the dead, that which casts a shadow, a variety or degree of colour, a hue mixed with black, the dark part of a picture, a very minute difference, the disembodied soul, a ghost".

In the first lines of Shade's poem he refers to himself as "the shadow of a waxwing slain / By the false azure of the window pane". He is, according to Kinbote, killed by Gradus, a member of the Zemblan extremist group called the Shadows. A shadow is, of course, also "a shade, a shade cast by the interception of light, a ghost, the dark part of a picture, a spirit" as well as "an unreal thing, a reflected image, a mere appearance, a spy or detective who follows one, darkness, gloom, affliction, an imaginary opponent (from shadow boxing)" and in the combination "shadow cabinet" a "body of opposition leaders meeting from time to time and ready to take office".

Zembla suggests the word semblance. A semblance is "a likeness, appearance, outward

show, apparition, image".

Gradus's alias is Degree which is one of the meanings of shade and his probable "real" name is Jack Grey - grey being "white mixed with black" and a near-synonym for shady or shadowy. All these words therefore at some periphery of their meaning blur into each other.

Shade, says Kinbote, plays word-golf, a game in which one letter of a given word can be altered in each move (provided that a recognised word results from the change) until an antonym of the original emerges. Kinbote typically records his own successes: lass-male in four strokes; live-dead in five.

The Gradus-grade-degree-shade-shadow-semblance complex has something of the same flavour to it, both suggesting the complexities of a half-understood pattern where transformations occur, unlikely likenesses leap out, and the negative images, the shades and shadows, become, by a trick of the eye or the emphasis, the positives.

John Shade talks of the gods in their "involute abode" "playing a game of worlds", "making ornaments of accidents and possibilities". Frank Kermode in his review condemns Nabokov for making his art a metaphor for the freakish processes Shade describes:

Pale Fire reproduces this divine game and offers us the pleasures of process as well as of product. Nabokov's relationship with the world is very exclusive: his is the creative logos, we are, at best, angels privileged to stand by and applaud. As to those readers who are enslaved to the communal "reality", they can expect nothing at all For all such readers the author, engrossed in the sublime images he has made

of his own delight, feels nothing; or, if anything, contempt.²

Embedded in the slightly irritable overstatement of this paragraph there is, I think, a very sensible statement. "An image he has made of his own delight" seems to me a good way of expressing what Nabokov's word-play is concerned with.

In his autobiography, Speak, Memory, Nabokov records his enjoyment of the puns and echoings of nature:

The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things. Consider the imitation of oozing poison by bubblelike macules on a wing (complete with pseudo-refraction) or by glossy yellow knobs on a chrysalis ('Don't eat me - I have already been squashed, sampled and rejected'). Consider the tricks of an acrobatic caterpillar (of the Lobster Moth) which in infancy looks like bird's dung, but after molting develops scrabbly hymenopteroid appendages and baroque characteristics, allowing the extraordinary fellow to play two parts at once (like the actor in Oriental shows who becomes a pair of intertwisted wrestlers): that of a writhing larva and that of a big ant seemingly harrowing it. When a certain moth resembles a certain wasp in shape and colour, it also walks and moves its antennae in a waspish, unmothlike manner. When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in. 'Natural selection', in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behaviour, nor could one appeal to the theory of 'the struggle for life' when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.³

It needs no great imagination to perceive similar patterns of "miraculous coincidence of imitative behaviour" extending throughout creation.

Mentally and emotionally, as well as physically, man is involved in a world of half-echoes, puns,

mirror-images, and half-completed patterns. The child is a distorted echo of the parent, the deviant assumes by mimicry the protective coloration of disguise, relief and pain produce the same phenomenon of salty tears whose composition echoes the sea we crawled from.

The point I am attempting to make is that Nabokov's word-play, suggesting half-echoes and deliberate and chance likenesses, confused meanings and sudden reversals, is a metaphor for the nature of the world and of experience. "Oh my Lolita," cries Humbert Humbert, "I have only words to play with!"⁴ and his creator seems to me to share not only the despair of that statement, the knowledge of how clumsy a medium words are and how hopelessly they lack texture, colour and flavour to convey the infinite gradations of experience, but the delight of the wordsmith who, endlessly playing, experimenting with the only tools he has, may force them to a kind of skilled subtlety whereby he can recreate some approximation to the perceived pattern of his private world.

Recognizing and suspicious of the crudity of direct statement to communicate that which is neither crude nor direct, the poet resorts to sound patterns and imagery in an attempt to convey shade, perspective, complexity. Nabokov's word-play seems to me to operate in the same way. If perception of reality is private and not communal, and if that perception is subject to alarming shifts, over-turnings, blurrings and illogical connections, then it would seem sensible to me to convey this by making one's medium behave in the same manner. Without a doubt Nabokov's word-play is at times concerned with "text" or meaning, but my contention is that it is equally concerned with

texture. The unstable world best finds expression through an unstable medium. The technique is neither new nor rare. It is customary to compare Nabokov to Joyce and to class him as an impressionist. Nabokov's technique seems to me to be as close to Shakespeare's as to Joyce's. When Dr Johnson complained of Shakespeare's proliferating language, ("A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it."⁵) he seems to me to be voicing the same objection that critics like Kermode and Peden have made to Nabokov's style. Shakespeare's language was the medium for conveying his private vision of a richly proliferating luxuriant world. Nabokov's awareness of the interwoven texture of experience finds expression in language that reproduces and echoes in itself the same complexity. John Shade's contention that "topsy-turvical coincidence" is evidence for "correlated pattern" and "plexed artistry" in life links language to what it symbolises. "Life everlasting - based on a misprint" is a wry but not a foolish statement. "Accidents and possibilities" make the ornaments, the puzzles, the mysteries of language as they do of life.

To separate what is being said from how it is said is always dangerous, for the what can only exist in the form of its particular how. William Peden contends that Pale Fire can only be considered a masterpiece by those "who feel that a container is more important than the contents within it".⁶ The form of Pale Fire certainly evokes preconceptions which colour one's reactions to the contents. It seems best therefore to approach the commentary by looking at it in terms of its form and ostensible function.

CHAPTER IV

POET AND PARASITE

Because he denies moral intent and message in his fiction Nabokov objects to being called a satirist. Satire is didactic in intent. Parody is the Nabokovian trademark. Yet despite the frequent disclaimers it is difficult to avoid saying of Pale Fire that it is primarily a satire on literary criticism. This aspect of it ensures first that any critic who attempts to analyse it automatically looks foolish, and secondly that a large amount of critical attention will be focussed on it: put immediately on the defensive, critics bristle to prove that they are not of the Kinbote school. For Kinbote in the course of his commentary reveals, I think, every familiar type of critical vulgarity.

The first note, to lines 1 to 4 (p 73) moves from the officious explication to the obvious - "The image in these opening lines evidently refers to a bird knocking itself out in full flight against the outer surface of a glass pane" - through the addition of descriptive material beyond the choice the poet has made - "a mirrored sky, with its slightly darker tint and slightly slower cloud" - to a stance of patronage adopted by the critic to both reader and poet. "We can visualise John Shade in his early boyhood, a physically unattractive but otherwise beautifully developed lad", says Kinbote assuming an unjustified right to speak for all readers as though they had no minds of their own, while in the final phrase the old pederast peers out from behind the commentator like a knowing dealer assessing a piece of horseflesh. Yet arrogant as the comments are, they do show that

Kinbote here has entered into the poem, has vicariously experienced its material. There is worse to come.

Egotistically sliding into details of his personal life - "My knowledge of garden Aves had been limited" etc - the commentator becomes a prototype of all self-centred critics who use their distinguished subjects to entrap the attention of readers in their own undistinguished lives. The penultimate paragraph of this note shows the critic supplying irrelevant detail (probably imaginary) under cover of that threadbare ploy, "incidentally, it is curious to note ... "

The next note, (p 74), records a corruption of the critic's role so blatant (the wishful and wistful misinterpretation of "the half-obliterated draft") that the parody is swallowed by the pathos and monstrosity of Kinbote's personal character and obsessions. The third note illustrates a ludicrous wrenching of the text to supply corroborative evidence for a private theory. The fact that "gradual" in line 17 is followed by "gray" 12 lines later is hailed as "an extraordinary coincidence" whereby Shade shows a weird foreknowledge of his murderer, Gradus or Jack Grey (p 77). The note to line 27 provides an example of the irritatingly obvious (the identification of Sherlock Holmes) and the following one, to lines 34-35, an egomaniacal equivocation: "One is too modest to suppose that the fact that the poet and his future commentator first met on a winter day somehow impinges here on the actual season," (p 79). But this is coupled with a sudden gleam of such genuinely illuminating comment ("We should also note the cloak-and-dagger hint-glint in the 'svelte stilettos'") that Nabokov himself seems

to flash suddenly into sight from behind the mask of Kinbote.

The note to lines 39-40 serves the utilitarian purpose of directing the reader obliquely to the source of the pale fire quotation and provides a parody of malpractices in translation, a subject on which Nabokov with his passionate insistence on literal translation feels strongly. The passage, supposedly retranslated into English from a Zemblan translation of the original, does not pervert the most basic meaning of the passage, but by robbing it of the richness of imagery and therefore of both passion and size it reduces it to a semi-banal statement and one in which the anguished voice of Timon can no longer be heard, making it as different in impact as a black-and-white reproduction is from an oil painting. I can best illustrate the perversion that has occurred by an example. Shakespeare writes, "The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves the moon into salt tears". In the retranslation this becomes, "The sea is a thief; it dissolves the moon" (p 80). Chambers's Dictionary defines surge as "an uprush, boiling or tumultuous movement of liquid". With the loss of this word, the power, irresistibility and rush of the process is lost. A static, quiet process, such as is described in the retranslation, is not the same as a violent fierce and rhythmic one, however similar the end product. The loss of the word "liquid" not only removes the actual presence of water, undeniably there in Shakespeare's verse, a mere assumption in the retranslation, but since its sound (pure light i's, lingering l) suggests unearthly light, it removes the reality of the moonlight too. To pervert "resolves into salt tears" to "dissolves" is criminal since it

removes from the text the sense of reversion to an ancient order and the concept of the sea itself as an image of all sorrow.

To get too solemn about the comparison is foolish - it's a funny free-bonus comment on the habit of careless translators - but serious points are, I think, being made: that a rough approximation is not an equivalent to the genuine, that words carry a charge of power that is individual to each of them and cannot be separated from meaning, and that Kinbote who hopes this version "sufficiently approximates the text, or at least is faithful to its spirit" is an incorrigible dealer in the second-rate.

Kinbote pursues his burlesque progress. Wordsworth becomes "a master of the heroic couplet". The critic spies with the aid of binoculars, mirrors and uncurtained windows on the private life of the poet while he ignores or distorts the matter of the poem. The obscure and irrelevant is blown up monstrously to support his uneasy conceit: humiliated at being forced to turn to the obituary of Shade, written by his colleague Professor Hurley, for "a few meager details" concerning the poet's parents, Kinbote tries hysterically to restore his own sense of superiority - "The poet's mother, nee Caroline Lukin, assisted him in his work what the obituarist does not know is that Lukin comes from Luke as also do Locock and Luxon and Lukashevich" (p 100).

Pretentious gobbets of information in the notes shatter the mood of the poem. Shade writes:

Here was my bedroom, now reserved for guests.
Here, tucked away by the Canadian maid,
I listened to the buzz downstairs and prayed
For everybody to be always well,
Uncles and aunts, the maid, her niece Adele
Who'd seen the Pope, people in books and God".
(11 80-5),

creating a gently ironic mood of nostalgia to be punctured hilariously by the note, "who'd seen the Pope - Pius X, Giuseppe Melchiorre Sarto, 1835-1914: Pope 1903-1914" (p 85).

The poet is patronised. "No free man needs a God" (l 101), writes Shade to be pompously reproved by fatuous Kinbote: "One is bound to question the wisdom of this easy aphorism". The note on Shade's syllogism - "Other men die; but I / Am not another; therefore I'll not die" (ll 213-4) - misses the point entirely to stress the obvious, "This may please a boy. Later in life we learn that we are those 'others'".

The note on line 316, "The Toothwort White haunted our woods in May", misses the obvious: "Frankly, I am not certain what this means". Necessary information is withheld (Kinbote can find no meaning for "lemniscate"). The commentary slips into pathos and idiocy in the note on lines 120-121: Kinbote is unable to calculate how Shade arrives at his conclusion, "A thousand years ago five minutes were / Equal to forty ounces of fine sand", from the statement, "In the Middle Ages an hour was equal to 480 ounces of fine sand"; but adds disturbingly, "perhaps I am only tired", (p 117). And it slides into utter confusion in the "two tongues" note (p 235).

The effect of all this is, of course, to discredit Kinbote from the beginning. He is obviously mad, pathetic and infuriating, but more important, perhaps, he is out of control; he is completely egotistic and what does not look as if it will immediately yield the food his hungry conceit demands is rarely worth investigating.

The work in itself is not his concern: "let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all" (p 28) he declares firmly in the foreword. Whatever Shade's merits as a poet, Kinbote is invalidated as a critic from the beginning.

However the further one advances into the commentary the less important become the parodic elements (i.e. the ridiculing of the practices of literary criticism) and the more absorbing the narrative that emerges. At first the intrusion of subjective matter seems evidence of Kinbote's insanity; as the book progresses it is the spasmodic dives he makes in the direction of his crumbling mask of commentator that strike one as evidence of his lunacy. The accounts of his relationship with Shade are more interesting and more illuminating, and the Zemblan narrative, like an underground cave that can never be thoroughly mapped, opens endless possibilities. At this point I want to ignore these possibilities and content myself with looking at the Kinbote-Shade relationship.

Sybil Shade, Kinbote tells us, used to call him "an elephantine tick; a king-sized bot-fly; a macaco worm; the monstrous parasite of a genius" (pp 171-2). As the critic's relationship to art is a parasitic one, so does Kinbote depend on his famous neighbour to endow him with importance and fame. This immediately suggests a parallel with Boswell and Johnson, and it seems to me not at all surprising that the one statement made in Pale Fire that can be attributed to neither Shade nor Kinbote is the quotation from Boswell's Life of Dr Johnson that prefaces the book:

This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave Mr Langton of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. "Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats." And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favourite cat, and said, "But Hodge shan't be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot."

Two other references to Dr Johnson occur in the work. Kinbote, in his motel room, says, "In a black pocket book that I fortunately have with me I find, jotted down, here and there, among various extracts that happened to please me (a footnote from Boswell's Life of Dr Johnson, the inscription on the trees in Wordsworth's famous avenue, a quotation from St Augustine, and so on), a few samples of John Shade's conversation which I had collected in order to refer to them in the presence of people whom my friendship with the poet might interest or annoy. His and my reader will, I trust, excuse me for breaking the orderly course of these comments and letting my illustrious friend speak for himself." (p 154) The evocation of the Boswell-Johnson relationship is obvious and in the last sentence Nabokov seems to be parodying Boswell's style. The examples that follow are even more clearly designed to nudge the reader into noticing the parallel of Kinbote and Boswell. Shade is similarly linked to Johnson. He tells us, "I have been said to resemble at least four people: Samuel Johnson; the lovingly reconstructed ancestor of man in the Exton Museum; and two local characters, one being the slapdash hag who ladles out mash in the Levin Hall cafeteria," (p 267).

It is easy to find a number of similarities between the characters of Johnson and Shade and between Boswell and Kinbote. Johnson suffered

from similar disabilities to those Nabokov confers on Shade. Speaking of his boyhood Shade says:

Then as now
I walked at my own risk: whipped by the bough,
Tripped by the stump. Asthmatic, lame and fat,
I never bounced a ball or swung a bat. (ll 127-30)

.....
In sleeping dreams I played with other chaps
But really envied nothing. (ll 135-6)

Boswell records of Johnson: "He never joined with other boys in their ordinary diversions: his only amusement was in winter, when he took a pleasure in being drawn upon the ice His defective sight, indeed, prevented him from enjoying the common sports; and he once pleasantly remarked to me, 'how wonderfully well he had contrived to be idle without them'".¹ Later Boswell speaks of Johnson's infirmity manifesting itself by "halting or unsteadiness of one of the legs."²

Nabokov has given Shade a mind characterised like Johnson's by energy, independence and a kind of wide-ranging commonsense. Speaking, presumably, of Kinbote's madness Shade is overhead to say, "That is the wrong word ... One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That is merely turning a new leaf with the left hand" (p 238). Johnson's comment on Smart's madness shows the same kind of brusque tolerance. "I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as anyone else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it."³

John Shade's poem is usually characterised by critics as being "about death". I think that statement needs qualification but it is certainly

true that an awareness of death pervades the poem.
The statement in Canto 2 is the most direct:

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?

And finally there was the sleepless night
When I decided to explore and fight
The foul, the inadmissable abyss,
Devoting all my twisted life to this
One task.

(ll 173-80)

The same note of fear throbs continuously
throughout the Life of Johnson:

When we were alone, I introduced the subject
of death, and endeavoured to maintain that
the fear of it might be got over. I told him
that David Hume said to me, he was no more
uneasy to think he should not be after this
life, than that he had not been before he
began to exist. JOHNSON. 'Sir, if he
really thinks so, his perceptions are dis-
turbed; he is mad: if he does not think
so, he lies. He may tell you, he holds his
finger in the flame of a candle, without
feeling pain; would you believe him? When⁴
he dies, he at least gives up all he has.'

The paragraph continues with other examples of
Johnson's reactions to conversations on death:

although when in a celestial frame, in
his Vanity of Human Wishes he has supposed
death to be 'kind Nature's signal for
retreat,' from this state of being to 'a
happier seat', his thoughts upon this awful
change were in general full of dismal
apprehensions. His mind resembled the vast
amphitheatre, the Colisaeum at Rome. In
the centre stood his judgement, which like
a mighty gladiator, combated those apprehen-
sions that, like the wild beasts of the Arena,
were all around in the cells, ready to be
let out upon him.⁵

Later a further conversation on Hume is
recorded in which Johnson says, "'It is more
probable that he should assume an appearance of

ease, than that so very improbable a thing should be, as a man not afraid of going (as, in spite of his delusive theory, he cannot be sure but he may go) into an unknown state, and not being uneasy at leaving all he knew'".⁶ And the statement is reiterated later apropos of another question: "JOHNSON. (standing upon the hearth rolling about, with a serious, solemn and somewhat gloomy air,) 'No rational man can die without uneasy apprehension.'"⁷

Nabokov has based Shade's apprehension of death, like Johnson's, on the fear of loss. It is because life is rich and valuable that death is a monster. "I'm ready to become a floweret / Or a fat fly, but never to forget", cries Shade. Johnson has the same reaction:

BOSWELL. "There is a strange unwillingness to part with life, independent of serious fears as to futurity. A reverent friend of ours tells me, that he feels an uneasiness at the thoughts of leaving his house, his study, his books." JOHNSON. This is foolish in A man need not be uneasy on these grounds; for as he will retain his consciousness, he may say with the philosopher, *omnia mea mecum porto*." (All that is mine I carry with me)⁸

In a frivolous discussion on an educated pig Boswell records this remark of Johnson's; "'Then, (said he,) the pig has no cause to complain; he would have been killed the first year if he had not been educated, and protracted existence is a good recompense for very considerable degrees of torture.'"⁹

Most touching and revealing of all is the remark of Johnson who so loved company and correspondence, when he knew himself to be dying. "As he opened a note which his servant brought to him, he said, 'An odd thought strikes me: we

shall receive no letters in the grave."¹⁰

Kinbote, like Boswell with his poet, is made to express his reaction at being brought into contact with the great man in terms of reverence and joy that suggest a parasite identifying his predestined host. "The calendar says I had known him only a few months but there exist friendships which develop their own inner duration, their own eons of transparent time Never shall I forget how elated I was upon learning ... that the suburban house ... into which I moved on February 5, 1959, stood next to that of the celebrated American poet whose verses I had tried to put into Zemblan two decades earlier." (p 19). The tone is very similar to Boswell's.

This is to me a memorable year; for in it I had the happiness to obtain the acquaintance of that extraordinary man whose memoirs I am now writing; an acquaintance which I shall ever esteem as one of the most fortunate circumstances in my life. Though then but two-and-twenty, I had for several years read his works with delight and instruction, and had the highest reverence for their author, which had grown up in my fancy into a kind of mysterious veneration, by figuring to myself a state of solemn elevated abstraction, in which I supposed him to live in the immense metropolis of London.¹¹

Kinbote is a more insensitive parasite than Boswell, and a more demanding one, but the habit Nabokov has given him of happily recording his own inanities in conversation with his great man appears to be modelled on Boswell's performances with Johnson.

JOHNSON. "I think we have had enough of Gray. I see they have published a splendid edition of Akenside's works. One bad ode may be suffered; but a number of them together makes one sick." BOSWELL.
"Akenside's distinguished poem in his

Pleasures of Imagination: but, for my part, I could never admire it so much as most people do." JOHNSON. "Sir, I could not read it through." BOSWELL. "I have read it through; but I did not find any great power in it."¹²

And in Pale Fire Shade says,

"When I hear a critic speaking of an author's sincerity I know that either the critic or the author is a fool." Kinbote: "But I am told this manner of thinking is taught in high school?" "That's where the broom should begin to sweep. A child should have thirty specialists to teach him thirty subjects, and not one harassed schoolmarm to show him a picture of a rice field and tell him this is China because she knows nothing about China, or anything else, and cannot tell the difference between longitude and latitude." Kinbote: "Yes, I agree."
(p 156)

Johnson and Shade share a tough, concrete and original way of thinking and expressing themselves, Kinbote and Boswell a pathetic desire to agree, to echo. They are both, as it were, egotistically shouting, "Look at me! I think just like he does."

Boswell is obviously jealous of Johnson's other friendships and frequently finds opportunity to remind the reader that he is more perceptive and generous in his estimation of Johnson's character than is Mrs. Thrane. Kinbote's jealousy of Sybil Shade laces his narrative with a suppressed fury that leaps out in such phrases as "my capricious and henpecked friend" (p 170) "From the very first I tried to behave with the utmost courtesy toward my friend's wife, and from the very first she disliked and distrusted me." (p 171) "Serenely he played the part of exemplary husband assigned to him by his small town admirers and was, besides, mortally afraid of his wife." (p 228)

In view of this correspondence between Johnson and Shade and Boswell and Kinbote, the existence of the quotation from the Life of Dr Johnson that prefaces Pale Fire becomes slightly less puzzling. The particular passage Nabokov has chosen embodies at least three of Johnson's characteristics - I have found few others from the Life of Johnson that do this so effectively - and they are all characteristics that Nabokov has bestowed on Shade: an energetic, direct and humorous style: an enthusiasm for life and its odd manifestations which can include a young gentleman of good family running about town shooting cats, and can express itself in kindly affection for his own Hodge; and a consciousness of the monster death that will gobble up all human delights - so acute a consciousness that as soon as cats and shooting are mentioned Johnson sees death grabbing at his favourite. Shade describes himself as a preterist: one who collects cold nests. It is delight in the world, the sense of threat and the urge to preserve what has delighted him that is the motivation for his art.

The quotation characterises Johnson but it comes to us by the agency of Boswell. The passage from Timon of Athens from which the novel gets its name traces a cycle of mutual robbery:

..... the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun.

The analogy of the moon, a cold surface reflecting to the earth the light of the sun, gleaming with a borrowed radiance, is a fairly obvious one to use for Boswell in his relationship to Johnson. Johnson was a brilliant thinker, an excellent writer and a larger-than-life personality, Boswell a much lesser man on all counts who lacked fire,

opinions and strength of personality. Yet he was the perfect reflective surface and without him Johnson for us would be a much less interesting character than he is. In its own way Boswell's Life of Dr Johnson is as impressive art as the Lives of the Poets or the Preface to Shakespeare.

Kinbote is not, like Boswell, a good reflective surface. He is a dirty mirror whose flaws and stains obscure the image. Nor has Shade, as Kinbote hoped, reflected in his poem the matter of Zembla that was poured into his ears. Yet it is as difficult to escape the impression that the poem and commentary have nourished each other as it is to define the relationship. Kinbote himself says:

Although I realise only too clearly, alas, that the result, in its pale and diaphanous final phase, cannot be regarded as a direct echo of my narrative one can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of the story acted as a catalytic agent upon the very process of the sustained creative effervescence that enabled Shade to produce a 1000-line poem in three weeks. There is, moreover, a symptomatic family resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story. 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. (p 81)

Like all of Kinbote's utterances this one is suspect (and of course it could be seen as giving Nabokov an easy out when the style of his two creations shows a disturbing likeness) but the impression that both Kinbote and Shade have played Boswell to the other's Johnson remains.

The type of nourishment that each has drawn from the other can perhaps only be defined, as light and darkness define each other, by the degree of their difference.

CHAPTER V

SHADE AND KINBOTE

John Shade is 61 years old at the time of his death. "His whole being constituted a mask," says Kinbote. "John Shade's physical appearance was so little in keeping with the harmonies living in the man, that one felt inclined to dismiss it as a coarse disguise or passing fashion My sublime neighbour's face had something about it that might have appealed to the eye, had it been only leonine or only Iroquoian; but unfortunately, by combining the two it merely reminded one of a fleshy Hogarthian tippler of indeterminate sex. His misshapen body, that grey mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers, the bags under his lusterless eyes, were only intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and chiselled his verse. He was his own cancellation." (p 25) Elsewhere he is described as looking like Judge Goldsworth who looks like " a Medusa-locked hag".

Kinbote is 44 years old; tall, bearded and athletic. "All brown-bearded, apple-cheeked, blue-eyed, Zemblans look alike, and I who have not shaved now for a year, resemble my disguised King," says Kinbote cryptically. (p 76) Later the "resemblance" is discussed in the college staff room less flatteringly. Gerald Emerald unearths a photograph of the King.

'Well,' said he, 'here he is, that king. But look, he is young and handsome' (Oh, that won't do,' wailed the German visitor.)
'Young, handsome, and wearing a fancy

uniform, ' continued Emerald. 'Quite the fancy pansy, in fact.' (p 268)

Describing one of his walks with Shade, Kinbote tells us that he "kept trying in vain to adapt the swing of a long-limbed gait to the dishevelled old poet's jerky shuffle." (p 14)

In his note on Shade's line, "I never bounced a ball or swung a bat," Kinbote manages to list his own physical accomplishments: "Frankly I too never excelled in soccer and cricket; I am a passable horseman, a vigorous though unorthodox skier, a good skater, a tricky wrestler, and an enthusiastic rock-climber." (p 117)

The circumstances of their lives provide as abrupt a contrast. John Shade lives in the house he was born in, among the concrete evidences of his past.

I cannot understand why from the lake
I could make out our front porch when I'd take
Lake Road to school, whilst now, although no tree
Has intervened, I look but fail to see
Even the roof. (ll 41-5)

The young shagbark he loved in childhood "is now stout and rough; it has done well" and from its branches he sees the phantom of Hazel's childhood swing. Continuity is the keynote of his life. Nothing from the past is rejected. "Dear bizarre Aunt Maud" who links three generations of Shades lives on in the house after her death.

her room
We've kept intact. Its trivia create
A still life in her style. (ll 90-2)

Kinbote's life, on the other hand, even his own version of it, has been violently dislocated first by the Zemblan revolution and secondly by his emigration to America. He arrived by parachute without possessions; no one must know him in his new world; even his name is transformed. His past

love of Disa, that pale ghost, he rejects.

Kinbote's love is mainly for beautiful boys; it is their beauty that provokes it. Though in his own way he loves John Shade, it is as the agent who will transfix his Zemblan fantasies into permanent art. When the poet is shot Kinbote hurries away to hide the poem before summoning help for a Shade who may possibly still be alive. But Shade is capable of loving his unattractive daughter with a desperate pity:

She was my darling; difficult, morose -
but still my darling.

(ll 357-8)

Kinbote's pity is strictly reserved for himself. ("And you, what will you be doing with yourself, poor King, poor kinbote?" a gentle young voice may inquire", so Kinbote fades from the book, to the end resolutely supplying in his imagination the reactions he will never provoke in life.) Only in the alienation of sleep can feeling for others erupt. Disa, in his dreams, provokes a love that "was like an endless wringing of hands, like a blundering of the soul through an infinite maze of hopelessness and remorse." (p 210)

Shade's home is happy despite the tragedy of Hazel's death. The lighted windows are its symbol and through them kinbote the eternal exile peers at peace, warmth and harmony. What he sees is usually Shade and Sybil together - the poet's slippered foot gently rocking in the living room and his wife occasionally shooting through the field of vision to answer the telephone; Shade reading his poem aloud to Sybil ("with so rapt a look on her face that one might have thought she had just thought up a new recipe," comments Kinbote defending himself clumsily from a thrust of jealousy); the two in a shared agony of grief:

"Sybil was alternatively huddle-shaking and blowing her nose; John's face was all blotchy and wet".

Kinbote in his rented house, furnished with the trappings of the hanging judge whose authoritarian hand has shown itself in the "recommendations, explanations, injunctions" that litter the house, is trapped in a hell of loneliness and fear. In a note on Shade's loving description of his home comes Kinbote's cry of desperation

Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring of 1959, I had feared for my life. Solitude is the playfield of Satan. I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress yet I wish to stress that cold hard core of loneliness which is not good for the displaced soul. Everybody knows how given to regicide Zemblans are: two Queens, three Kings and fourteen Pretenders died violent deaths, strangled, stabbed, poisoned and drowned The Goldsworth castle became particularly solitary after that turning point at dusk which resembles so much the nightfall of the mind. Stealthy rustles, the footsteps of yesteryear leaves, an idle breeze, a dog touring garbage cans - everything sounded to me like a blood thirsty prowler I suppose it was then, on those masquerading spring nights with the sounds of new life in the trees cruelly mimicking the cracklings of old death in my brain, I suppose it was then, on those dreadful nights, that I got used to consulting the windows of my neighbour's house in the hope for a gleam of comfort. (p 95-96)

Though Shade's house has actually been invested with a poltergeist he is undisturbed by phenomena inexplicable in rational terms - he finds the so-called supernatural no more or less fascinating and improbable than so-called reality. His shoe on the damp turf in early morning, confirming in defiance of time and space the journey of his dreaming spirit apparently materially shod, is greeted with delighted acceptance.

My secret stamp,
 The Shade impress, the mystery inborn.
 Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn.
 (ll 885-7)

It is part of a total phantasmagoria.

Yet, if prior to life we had
 Been able to imagine life, what mad,
 Impossible, unutterably weird,
 Wonderful nonsense it might have appeared!
 (ll 217-20)

Kinbote, on the other hand, is haunted by a hostile evil other-world that threatens him. In his zemblan fantasy he tells us that the remorse he felt at his mother's death expressed itself in "a sickly physical fear of her phantom". A phenomenon similar to Shade's experience with the shoe provokes in him a completely different reaction. One night, locked in his house alone with his black cat, he sees the animal suddenly appear "on the threshold of the music room in the middle of my insomnia and a Wagner record, arching its back and sporting a neck bow of white silk which it could certainly never have put on all by itself." Terrified, Kinbote dials 11111. "It is so easy," he comments, "for a cruel person to make the victim of his ingenuity believe that he has persecution mania, or is really being stalked by a killer, or is suffering from hallucinations." (p 97-8)

Shade, accepting life enthusiastically, fears death as annihilation of the consciousness and the richly stored memory but frightened Kinbote seeks death as an escape from his private hell. "On such sunny, sad mornings I always feel in my bones that there is a chance yet of my not being excluded from Heaven, and that salvation may be granted to me despite the frozen mud and horror in my heart." (p 258) His note on suicide begins with an outline

of the temptation: "The more lucid and overwhelming one's belief in Providence the greater the temptation to get it over with, this business of life, but the greater too one's fear of the terrible sin implicit in self-destruction". (p 219) And it ends with a passionate justification of the act: "So what can stop one from effecting the transition? What can help us to resist the intolerable temptation? What can prevent us from yielding to the burning desire for merging in God? We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sin." (p 222)

Haunted by an army of horrible fears - of loneliness, of violence, of rejection, sin and damnation - he lives in a quite explicit hell, finding life as intolerable as it is fascinating for Shade. Shade fears death because it will rob him of the life he loves; Kinbote fears violence - death in itself would be a relief if one could be sure that it led to a loving God and not a vicious hell bent on inflicting more punishment.

Both Shade and Kinbote accept the possibility of an afterlife, Shade tentatively and Kinbote absolutely. Each sees it in terms of his own temperament and obsessions. Shade the artist sees an artist's hand in creation and is prepared to accept his role as a piece of matter, a particle of clay in the pattern "they" are making. "They" are "aloof and mute", concerned only with design, with arrangements, combinations and playful manipulation of materials.

Kinbote makes his god of his own fears and needs. God is both the punisher and the retreat and solace he so desperately needs.

If I were a poet I would certainly make
an ode to the sweet urge to close one's eyes
and surrender utterly unto the perfect

safety of wooed death. Ecstatically one forefeels the vastness of the Divine embrace enfolding one's liberated spirit, the warm bath of physical dissolution, the universal unknown engulfing the miniscule unknown that had been the only real part of one's temporary personality. (p 221)

On the issues of morality they are as sharply divided. The sins Shade recognises are those that harm other people - murder and the deliberate infliction of pain. But Kinbote believes in original sin based on an authoritarian conception: "... disobeying the Divine Will is a fundamental definition of sin". (p 225) The password, says Shade, is pity; Kinbote looks to an authority beyond this. "But who instilled it in us, John? Who is the Judge of life, and the Designer of death?" (p 225)

To sum up: Shade emerges as an inquirer, observer and appreciator, enjoying the present and lovingly hoarding the past. He gives to others love, friendship and tenderness; his lack of egotism enables him to accept himself as a minute particle in a vast pattern, and he finds detachment and enjoyment in the furniture of a rich mind. "Supremely blest" in his muse, he creates in art a kind of miniature world patterned on the eternally fascinating creation around him.

Kinbote is always frightened, lonely, egotistical, jealous and destructive. He has few relationships with others and such as he has are impermanent. He finds the world inimical, is bored with its phenomena and retreats from its horrors into fantasy and a religion that both provides compensation for the pains of this life and at the same time manages to reproduce them.

Behind the shimmering surface of the novel, the deceptive blurrings of word-play, stand solidly

these two figures, facing each other in oddly formal stances of opposition; carefully balanced book-ends of vice and virtue, holding in place poem and commentary.

CHAPTER VI

AN ANATOMY OF MAN.

That Timon of Athens was persistently in Nabokov's mind when he wrote Pale Fire is, I think, irrefutable. The most important piece of evidence is, of course, the name, taken from Timon's speech to the bandits where he justifies thievery on the grounds that all the universe - the sun, the moon, the sea, the earth itself - exists because "each thing's a thief". If the title were the only reference to Timon in the text, this speech alone would be significant. But there is abundant other evidence of Timon's ghostly presence behind the novel. As early as the note to lines 39-40 (p 79) Kinbote tells of a variant reading that suggests to him a parallel with Timon. In the original passage Shade is singing his song of praise to the world:

All colors made me happy: even grey.
 My eyes were such that literally they
 Took photographs. Whenever I'd permit,
 Or, with a silent shiver, order it,
 Whatever in my field of vision dwelt -
 An indoor scene, hickory leaves, the svelte
 Stilettos of a frozen stillicide
 Was printed on my eyelids' nether side
 Where it would tarry for an hour or two,
 And while this lasted all I had to do
 Was close my eyes to reproduce the leaves,
 Or indoor scene, or trophies of the eaves.
 (ll 29-40)

Kinbote's note includes the variant:

39 and homeward haste my thieves,
 40 The sun with stolen ice, the moon with leaves.

One cannot help recalling a passage in Timon of Athens (Act 4, scene 3) where the misanthrope talks to the three marauders. Having no library in the desolate log cabin where I live like Timon in his cave, I am compelled for the purpose of quick citation to re-translate this passage into English prose

from a Zemblan poetical version of Timon which, I hope, sufficiently approximates the text, or is at least faithful to its spirit.
(p 79-80)

This note, in connection with the actual lines of the poem, seems to me to provide a perfectly clear statement of the significance of the name "Pale Fire" to Shade's poem. The thieves, the artist's senses, steal from the world and bring its riches to the mind and memory to be transmuted into art. The image is common enough. Coleridge speaks of the secondary imagination, the poet's tool, in the same terms: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate." ¹

In the foreword Kinbote himself expresses the same idea:

Here he is, I would say to myself, that is his head, containing a brain of a different brand than that of the synthetic jellies preserved in the skulls around him. He is looking from the terrace ... at the distant lake. I am looking at him. I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse. (p 27)

But the same note (to lines 39-40) makes it obvious that the connections with Timon of Athens extend beyond the poet's creative process, for already an analogy is drawn between Kinbote and the later Timon: "where I live like Timon in his cave."

Reminders of the connection continue. When Charles first enters the closet that leads to the secret passage, he finds "all three shelves and the space beneath ... stuffed with disparate objects: a palette with the dregs of many sunsets; a cupful of counters; an ivory backscratcher; a

thirty-twoomo edition of Timon of Athens translated into Zemblan by his uncle Connal, the Queen's brother; a seaside situla" etc. (p 125)

When as the dethroned King he re-enters the closet it is to find: "It was empty now, save for the tiny volume of Timon Afinsken still lying in one corner". (p 128) The passage itself, we are told, "went under a series of terraces, under the avenue of birches in the royal part, and then under the three transverse streets Academy Boulevard, Coriolanus Lane and Timon Alley." (p 126) And Charles enters it to make his escape from Zembla clutching the single volume; "As he was removing the second shelf, an object fell with a miniature thud; he guessed what it was and took it with him as a talisman". (p 132)

The talisman is still with him in his log cabin, and we are reminded of this in the note to line 962 ("Help me, Will! Pale Fire"): "All I have with me is a tiny vest-pocket edition of Timon of Athens - in Zemblan!"

Again, when Kinbote speaks of the love for betrayed Disa that permeates his dreams, a passing reference calls the Timon situation again into the reader's mind: "What carnal aura there was in them came not from her but from those with whom he betrayed her - prickly chinned Phrynia, pretty Timandra with that boom under her apron - and even so the sexual scum remained somewhere far above the sunken treasure and was quite unimportant." (p 210) Phrynia and Timandra are the harlots who accompany Alcibiades when he visits demented Timon in his cave. Timon curses them:

Be a whore still. They love thee not that
use thee.
Give them diseases, leaving with thee their
lust. 2

He flings them gold as a curse to damn mankind:

Hold up, you sluts,
Your aprons mountant 3
Be whores still;
And he whose pious breath seeks to convert you,
Be strong in whore, allure him, burn him up.⁴

Even Timandra's apron has found its way into Pale Fire.

These references, and in particular the title of the novel, seem deliberate pointers to the significance of Timon of Athens for the novel.

Timon of Athens is a play that is concerned with contrasts and counterpoint. "Shakespeare," says H.J. Oliver, "has set off against each other the reactions of one man to different situations, and the reactions of different men to the same situation. Timon's response to prosperity in one half of the play is counterpointed against his response to adversity in the other."⁵ The motif of counterpointing is not a strand in the play but its point and essence. "We are given no chance to sentimentalize Timon's hate. Its nobility derives from its utter reversal of love."⁶

Timon is not a human personality, as Lear, Macbeth, or Hamlet is. He is a dichotomy: philanthropist and misanthrope; man as angel and man as beast; man in his summer of fruitfulness, man in his sterile winter. The drama is not one of human conflict but "a medieval morality play only so much altered as to bring it very near to perfection."⁷

The main difficulty in interpretation of the play lies in the question of how one is to take the Timon of the first two Acts - the giver of gifts, of gold, food, hospitality, flattered and courted, trusting and open-hearted. Is he then a figure of reckless prodigality, of stupid innocence,

of criminally irresponsible excess, or is he an ideal of bounty, friendship, trust and universal love; one who gives all because the concept of possession is to him as alien as it is in nature; one who reads the interdependence of all things as God's law, to be embraced joyfully and voluntarily practised in human relationships.

"The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends",⁸ says Apemantus to Timon living like a beast in his wintry cave, digging for roots and hating all mankind. But does he mean merely the extremities of fortune? Or is one extremity located at the zenith of virtue, the other at the nadir of vice (where Pope locates Zembla)? Or do both extremities represent folly because they are extreme, and do good sense, wisdom and virtue lie in that unexplored middle zone? Whichever position one takes up, it seems impossible to deny that Timon's life at the beginning embodies some ideal of civilisation, however misguided, and at the end the reversal of all such values.

"What wouldst thou do with the world, Apemantus, if it lay in thy power?" asks Timon in his despair.

"Give it to the beasts, to be rid of the men", is the reply and the ensuing dialogue makes clear that to secede from humanity does not clear one of the terrible interdependence of creature on creature.

Timon: Wouldst thou have thyself fall in the confusion of men, and remain a beast with the beasts?

Apemantus: Ay, Timon.

Timon: A beastly ambition, which the gods grant thee to attain to. If thou wert the lion, the fox would beguile thee; if thou wert the lamb, the fox would eat thee; if thou wert the fox, the lion would suspect thee,

when peradventure thou wert accused
 by the ass; if thou wert the ass,
 thy dulness would torment thee and
 still thou livedst but as breakfast
 to the wolf
 What beast couldst
 thou be that were not subject to a
 beast? And what a beast art thou
 already, that seest not thy loss in
 transformation!" 9

The sycophants and flatterers who preyed on Timon, Lord of Athens, with sweet words and calculated gifts, prey on him also in his cave. The difference lies in Timon. Hostility and abuse are substituted for hospitality and praise; gold in his heyday was a symbol of love and bounty; in Timon's misery he hurls it at his enemies with curses, certain of its power to corrupt because it will enable them to be more themselves. An ordered vision of civilisation, of mutual duties and mutual services, has dissolved into a chaos of jungle law.

The difference between the gracious and the beastly Timon seems to be one of art. The Timon of the first two acts has turned the dependence of man on man into gracious forms, has clothed it with design and beauty; the Timon of acts IV and V has dispensed with art and form so that he lives in a state of chaotic hostility toward his world. (A generalised statement such as this involves, of course, a gross simplification of the structure of Timon of Athens. My point is merely that the play can be reduced to such terms without misrepresentation.)

So far, an analogy with Pale Fire is easily discerned. It also is a work concerned with counterpoint. Charles the King and Kinbote the exile are ranged against each other; Shade the poet and Kinbote the critic exist together like light and dark.

The most obvious analogy to the Timon situation seems the King-and-exile pairing. Charles, like Timon, lives in wealth and power, surrounded by sycophants, flattered with presents, and (so he tells us) respected and admired. Kinbote, hunted by an assassin, friendless and filled with hate, lives a solitary life and retires in the end, increasingly mad, to a desolate cabin like Timon's cave; but the analogy breaks down once the change in physical and social circumstances has been examined. Timon's voluntary exile arises as much from his passionate disillusionment, resulting in a fundamental reversal of his nature, as from outward circumstances - his loss of money and friends. He is whirled by Fortune's wheel in fine medieval fashion, but more important, his inner health is corroded. It is this that is stressed in the play. Timon stays in the mind not as a man demonstrating in Boethian fashion that there is no stability or guarantee attached to Fortune's gifts, but as one who has exchanged philanthropy for misanthropy, whose vision of the world has been blighted and distorted.

This is not true of Kinbote. Even if one accepts Charles the Beloved as something more than a figment of Kinbote's imagination, it is obvious that his moral attitudes do not change during the story: his egotism pervades and perverts all responses at the beginning as at the end. The self-pitying poseur who addresses himself at the end as "poor King, poor Kinbote" has suffered no profound moral transfiguration from the one who, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, describes himself as "a haughty and morose captive." (p 119)

The contrast between Charles the Beloved and Kinbote is, then, merely a contrast of fortune, outer circumstances. But a moral contrast operates

between Shade and Kinbote; these two can be regarded as reversals of each other both inwardly and outwardly. If an analogy to the Timon dichotomy is to be found in Pale Fire - and there is plenty of evidence that it would be profitable to look for one - this would seem to be the area on which to concentrate attention.

M.C. Bradbrook describes the play as a dramatic showing of Timon's progress through four seasons. "The piece describes an arc - a double rainbow or solar year." ¹⁰

The play abounds in evidence that Timon can be identified with the sun and that what is traced is his gradual descent from high summer, through autumn to deepest winter, till he finally sinks out of sight into the sea. To quote evidence is almost unnecessary; the structure and movement of the play thrust the metaphor at one. But scraps of dialogue, like this between two servants as Timon has passed into his declining stage, confirm the theory.

PHILOTUS: Is not my lord seen yet?

LUCIUS'S SERVANT: Not yet.

PHILOTUS: I wonder on it; he was wont to shine at seven.

LUCIUS'S SERVANT: Ay, but the days are waxed shorter with him:

You must consider that a prodigal course
Is like the sun's,
But not, like his, recoverable. I fear
'Tis deepest winter in Lord Timon's
purse. ¹¹

And the final line he utters in the play as he goes unobserved and silently to his death marks the connection with a heavy note:

Sun, hide thy beams, Timon hath done his
reign. ¹²

The same identification of a human dichotomy with

a natural one runs through Pale Fire. Kinbote seems to be linked with both winter and night - Shade (despite his name) with summer and day. The first meeting of the two has hints in it of a seasonal analogy:

... I noticed that Mr and Mrs Shade, neither of whom I had yet met socially ... were having trouble with their old Packard in the slippery driveway where it emitted whines of agony but could not extricate one tortured rear wheel out of a concave inferno of ice. John Shade busied himself clumsily with a bucket from which, with the gestures of a sower, he distributed handfuls of brown sand over the blue glaze. He wore snow-boots, his vicuna collar was up, his abundant gray hair looked berimed in the sun. I knew he had been ill a few months before, and thinking to offer my neighbours a ride to the campus in my powerful machine, I hurried out toward them. A lane curving around a slight eminence on which my rented castle stood separated it from my neighbours' driveway, and I was about to cross that lane when I lost my footing and sat down on the surprisingly hard snow. My fall acted as a chemical re-agent on the Shades' sedan, which forthwith budged and almost ran over me as it swung into the lane with John at the wheel strenuously grimacing and Sybil fiercely talking to him. I am not sure either saw me. (p 20)

Shade (summer, the returning cycle of fruitfulness) who had been ill - nearly dead in fact - a few months before, is in the snow of late winter (or very early spring) making the symbolic gesture of sowing seed. The fall of Kinbote (winter) motivates the vehicle of Shade. Previously in October (autumn) the arrival of Kinbote in America by parachute (the Fall?) has "almost coincided" with John Shade's heart attack, his temporary death. "My best time is the morning; my preferred / Season midsummer" (ll 873-4), says Shade.

Kinbote is associated with cold. He has "frozen mud and horror" in his heart (p 258) even in July. His first comment on his rented house is that its "heating system was a farce, depending as it did on registers in the floor where from the tepid exhalations of a throbbing and groaning basement furnace were transmitted to the rooms with the faintness of a moribund's last breath." (p 19)

Kinbote's days are largely hidden from us but we know a great deal about his lonely nights when he perambulates alone and tries to borrow reflected warmth from Shade's windows. Shade and Kinbote meet to walk at sunset - the meeting time of night and day.

Gold is bounty and the pleasures of art and of friendship to the Lord of Athens; to the misanthrope it is a curse and a means to curse - the glittering hoard he uncovers is no substitute for the roots he wants. "Solar man in his auspicious rising and in his eclipsing cave bears a natural affinity with the metal Sol, or gold," ¹³ says Bradbrook. "You are an alchemist, make gold of that!" ¹⁴ says Timon flinging stones at the painter. Obviously there is a close connection between the sun, gold and art in Timon's world. In the Shade/Kinbote world, the intermediary symbol, gold, is left out but imagination, or art is used in much the same way. It is a burden to Kinbote in his sterile winter - a boon to Shade.

Finally Timon in his debilitation as he slides to the end offers universal suicide as a panacea for the corrupt Athenians:

Tell Athens, in the sequence of degree,
From high to low throughout, that whoso please
To stop affliction, let him take his haste,
Come hither, ere my tree hath felt the axe
And hang himself. ¹⁵

It's a good winter remedy, smacking of hibernation, the fallen sap, the frost-bitten plants. Kinbote's panegyrics of suicide suggest a similar theme.

The relationship of Kinbote and Shade however, is more than a simple opposition. It has troubled readers and commentators since the book was published; a series of dangling metaphors, half-coincidences, semi-echoes that lie just off-centre of rational explanation persuade one that the link between them is more than the ostensible one the story unfolds. They are neighbours, fellow-academics, and the one is commentator and editor of the other's poem. But they are also born on the same day (though seventeen years apart), Shade dies in the presence of Kinbote (and allegedly in his stead) and they appear to be married to different versions of the same woman, a fact that Nabokov makes more credible by letting Kinbote comment on it with surprise;

There was something else, something I was to realise only when I read *Pale Fire*, or rather reread it after the first bitter hot mist of disappointment had cleared before my eyes. I am thinking of lines 261-267 in which Shade describes his wife. At the moment of his painting that poetical portrait, the sitter was twice the age of Queen Disa. I do not wish to be vulgar in dealing with these delicate matters but the fact remains that sixty-year old Shade is lending here a well-conserved coeval the ethereal and eternal aspect she retains, or should retain, in his kind noble heart. Now the curious thing about it is that Disa at thirty, when last seen in September 1958, bore a singular resemblance not, of course, to Mrs Shade as she was when I met her, but to the idealized and stylized picture painted by the poet in those lines in *Pale Fire*. Actually it was idealized and stylized only in regard to the older woman; in regard to Queen Disa, as she was that afternoon on that blue terrace, it represented a plain unretouched likeness. I trust the reader appreciates the strangeness

of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all. (206-7)

The last sentence of this paragraph shouts for attention. So does the odd couplet flung suddenly into the already bizarre canto four of Shade's poem:

Man's life as commentary to abstruse
Unfinished poem. Note for further use.
 (11 939-40)

And there are of course, the moments, not many of them but enough, when Nabokov allows Kinbote to understand the poem and supply exactly the right felicitous phrase to buttress the verse. I have already drawn attention to the first sentence of his commentary where the clause ... "a glass pane in which a mirrored sky, with its slightly darker tint and slightly slower cloud, presents the illusion of continued space", makes more haunting and more precise John Shade's image of the window that kills the waxwing.

It is obviously evidence of this kind that has led a number of readers to agree with Page Stegner's suggestion that Shade and Gradus may be as much the product of Kinbote's imagination as Zemle and Charles the Beloved. "Although it is difficult, if this is true, to explain where the poem came from, it is conceivable that Kinbote could have written it himself. If he is able to dream up an Arabian Nights tale of his royal life in Onhava and populate that capital city with several dozen fantastic though imaginary personalities, he is certainly able to dream up John and Sybil Shade and their daughter Hazel, and create a fictitious poem as well." ¹⁶

Yet this fairly simple explanation, that there is only dreaming Kinbote, creating a present for himself - a poet, a murder, a manuscript - all from his own head, as he created a fabulous past, is unsatisfactory. As Andrew Field points out: "A sane man may invent an insane character, and we call him an artist; an insane man who invents a perfectly sane character is also an artist, but ipso facto no longer insane in the way that Kinbote is ... Positing Kinbote as prime author (in addition to the fact that it contradicts all the many secret notes left throughout the novel) is, in a sense, just as confusing as the apparently obvious idea that Kinbote and Shade are quite separate." ¹⁷ Kinbote misunderstands the poem more often, far more often, than he understands it; his emotional blindness makes it difficult to conceive of him creating the sensitive Shade.

To suggest that Nabokov intends us to imagine Shade as the author of both poem and commentary seems to me to be equally farfetched. There is a level in the book, a primary one, at which events do occur, and at that level Shade is killed before the commentary is written. Nabokov likes creating riddles with elegant solutions, but an elegant solution must surely take into account the elements of primary meaning, however paradoxical they may seem, and not simply wish them out of existence.

It seems more profitable to pursue further the analogy with Timon of Athens. The Poet in the opening scene of the play explains, somewhat pompously to the Painter, "I have in this rough work shaped out a man," ¹⁸ and continues to outline the way he has dehumanized Timon into an allegorical form.

I have upon a high and pleasant hill
Feigned Fortune to be throned. The base o'
the mount
Is ranked with all deserts, all kinds of
natures
That labour on the bosom of this sphere
To propagate their states. Amongst them all,
Whose eyes are on this sovereign lady fixed,
One do I personate of Lord Timon's frame,
Whom Fortune with her ivory hand waits to her. 19

To say that all of Nabokov's writing is concerned with art, the creative process, has become a truism since Vladislav Khodasevich, the emigré poet and critic, first drew attention to the fact more than thirty years ago. It is so much of a truism that a contemporary critic can sigh wearily at the statement: "What may have been a brilliant formulation in the nineteen-thirties seems evident enough by now, and not because so many other critics have said it of Nabokov, but rather because it has become a commonplace of recent criticism to note that a work of art is about itself (Wordsworth, Proust, Joyce, Yeats, Borges, Picasso). 'We have heard this so often about literary works,' writes Robert Martin Adams in Surface and Symbol (1962) 'that the phrase has a somewhat depressing ring'." 20

Yet evidence from Nabokov's earlier novels confirms that much more deliberately, much more consciously, than other writers he is fascinated with the effort, the mechanics, the frustrating, rewarding struggle of the creative process. The Eye explores the creation of fictional roles; The Gift, the writer's struggle with possible media; The Real Life of Sebastian Knight the search of "V" to find the dissolving unknowable "facts" about his dead brother behind the books he has created - unknowable because one is left ultimately with the conviction that "V" and Sebastian Knight are the same person. Above all Invitation to a Beheading explores the process of writing a novel. The imprisoned, physically feeble, semi-transparent Cincinnatus struggles with two elements - intractable, slippery unco-operative words, and himself, the hopelessly clumsy and ineffectual machine that cannot be made to do the work his spirit wills:

I have no desires, save the desire to express myself - in defiance of all the world's muteness. How frightened I am. How sick with fright. But no one shall take me away from my self. I am frightened - and now I am losing some thread, which I held so palpably only a moment ago. Where is it? It has slipped out of my grasp! I am trembling over the paper, chewing the pencil through to the lead, hunching over to conceal myself from the door through which a piercing eye stings me in the nape, and it seems I am right on the verge of crumpling everything, and tearing it up. I am here through an error - not in this prison, specifically - but in this whole terrible, striped world; a world which seems not a bad example of amateur craftsmanship, but is in reality calamity, horror, madness, error Wait! There, I feel once again that I shall really express myself, shall bring the words to bay. Alas, no one taught me this kind of chase, and the ancient in-born art of writing is long since forgotten - forgotten are the days when it needed no schooling, but ignited and blazed like a forest fire - today it seems just as incredible as the music that once used to be extracted from a monstrous pianoforte, music that would nimbly ripple or suddenly hack the world into great, gleaming blocks - I myself picture all this so clearly, but you are not I, and therein lies the irreparable calamity. Not knowing how to write, but sensing with my criminal intuition how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its neighbour's sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbour and renewing the neighbouring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence; while I sense the nature of this kind of word propinquity, I am nevertheless unable to achieve it, yet that is what is indispensable to me for my task, a task of not now and not here. 21

Pale Fire shouts that it is of the same line, a fictional analysis of the creative process.

In John Shade's world, Sybil, that wise woman, is the harmonizing element - something which if not his muse is close to it:

And that odd muse of mine,
My versipel, is with me everywhere,

to similar interpretations. When Kinbote, tumbled in the snow, first sees the Shade, their sedan swings past him with "John at the wheel strenuously grimacing and Sybil fiercely talking to him. I am not sure either saw me" (p 20) says humiliated Kinbote. If one regards Sybil as some sort of symbol of the art of John Shade, and Kinbote as parasitical emblem of fawning admirers, bores and bumble-footed critics, then the vignette, already vivid, acquires a greater tableaux quality, as a statement of a multiplicity of themes.

It is when Shade is waiting for Sybil, too-long delayed, that Kinbote manages to capture him triumphantly and bear him off in his powerful car. Always Sybil acts as the protector, insulator, of the poet from the demands of his intrusive neighbour - Kinbote complains that his messages were never transmitted. Obviously this would be the function of a good wife, but it would also, symbolically, be the function of the poet's art or talent. Sybil tells Kinbote of Shade, "He never shows anything unfinished. Never, never." (p 86) But a few days later when foolish Kinbote intrudes into their house, "the back door was ajar, and as I tapped it open and launched upon some gay airy phrase, I realized that Shade, sitting at the other end of the table, was in the act of reading to her something that I guessed to be a part of his poem." (p 91) The two statements are not irreconcilable on a factual level. Sybil could well regard "showing" something as showing it to the outside world but they could also be taken to mean that there is a level at which Shade and Sybil are not separate, but parts of the same whole.

Most significant though is the fact that it

is when the poem is all but finished and Sybil has abandoned him temporarily, that Shade, leaving his own home, crosses to Kinbote's to be killed. The poem then becomes the possession of the mad and inept commentator. The poet has (can have) no more control of it. It seems to me that this situation must be read symbolically, and that one cannot avoid seeing Sybil as art, talent, inspiration - the name is unimportant - the ingredient that marries itself to the human mind (or seems to) to produce the phenomenon of creation. John Shade, emptied, a kind of shell from which the vital matter, the poem, is gone, looks to Kinbote "like an old tipsy witch" and "forlorn" and has to be helped from his chair. As he crosses to his neighbour's house a dark Vanessa butterfly, earlier identified with Sybil ("Come and be worshipped, come and be caressed, / My dark Vanessa, crimson-barred, my blest / My Admirable butterfly!" (ll 269-71)) came dizzily whirling around us like a coloured flame One's eyes could not follow the rapid butterfly in the sunbeams as it flashed and vanished, and flashed again, with an almost frightening imitation of conscious play which now culminated in its settling upon my delighted friend's sleeve. It took off, and we saw it next moment sporting in an ecstasy of frivolous haste around a laurel shrub, every now and then perching on a lacquered leaf and sliding down its grooved middle like a boy down the banisters on his birthday. Then the tide of the shade reached the laurels, and the magnificent, velvet-and-flame creature dissolved in it." (p 290) The emphasis on conscious play, for Nabokov an ingredient in art, and the choice of a laurel bush as its resting place, seem to me to be beyond doubt the butterfly's role as an emblem of art. A sybil was the

instrument, the medium, whereby the words and will of the gods was conducted to human ears. Art or "the muse" fulfills the same function.

When the butterfly has finally gone from him, John Shade is killed but between the two incidents Nabokov manages to let Kinbote sidetrack the reader into hearing a catalogue of trees in Wordsmith College's famous avenue of trees mentioned in Shakespeare:

Jove's stout oak and two others: the thunder-cloven from Britain, the knotty-entrained from a Mediterranean island; a weather-fending lime (now lime), a phoenix (now date palm), a pine and cedar (*Cedrus*), all insular; a Venetian sycamore tree (*Acer*); two willows, the green, likewise from Venice, the hoar-leaved from Denmark; a midsummer elm, its barky fingers enringed with ivy; a midsummer mulberry, its shade inviting to tarry: and a clown's sad cypress from Illyria. (p 291)

The effect is not only of a quick gallop through Shakespeare's works but of a pilgrimage through time and place that ends in death. ("Come away, come away, death, And in sad cypress let me be laid," sings Feste in Orsino's Illyria). The effect cannot be accidental. Nabokov had no need to introduce the digression here. My point is that this emphasizes, gratuitously, that we are moving in areas of symbolism as the poet approaches death. The oblique reference to Feste's dirge acts as a reminder, too, that of Sybil Shade's translations the only two identified in the text are Donne's Holy Sonnet, "Death be not proud," and Marvell's gentle "The Nymph on the Death of her Fawn" where the horror and sting are pulled gracefully from death (a traditional function of art and the one perhaps that John Shade is most concerned with).

Shade has possessed his wise woman four thousand times, but Kinbote has failed to consummate a union with Disa at all. If Disa is an alter ego for Sybil, and Sybil is a symbol not only for love and the harmony it produces, but for the harmonizing power of art with its order, grace and permanence ("curiosity, tenderness, kindness and ecstasy"²² are Nabokov's terms) then rejected Disa is a symbol not only of Kinbote's fatal separation from love but of his separation too from art. (The connections are cemented in every direction - a Vanessa butterfly figures in the escutcheon of the family of Payn and Mone.)

The name Disa is a corruption of Paradisa but the emphasis, I think, is on corruption. "Dis" is, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary "a living prefix with a privative force" and among the meanings listed are "assunder, away, apart or between" and "deprivation of, expulsion from." "Dis" is also, of course, one of the pseudonyms of Pluto, ruler of the underworld. Suggestions of darkness and terror hover round his name. Disa, Duchess of Payn and Mone, is of course, the figure of grief, and her grief is specifically generated by Charles's rejection of her love in favour of the "manly customs" of Zembla. It is fairly obvious that Kinbote is a poet manqué - his commentary is disorganized and uncontrolled, but it is vivid, imaginative and full of fascinating images. (It is important of course to keep the separation of Nabokov and Kinbote firmly in mind. The chaotic nature of the commentary is an essential element in the controlled and ordered patterning of the novel as a whole).

Shade and Kinbote are similar in their outward circumstances - but provide a moral reversal of

each other. Sybil and Disa are different only in the roles they are forced to play. Neither exists as a person except within her relationship to the male figure, the poet or the critic. "Curiosity, tenderness, kindness and ecstasy" pervade Kinbote's sleeping dreams of Disa but are brutally absent from his waking relationships with her. Kinbote's note to line 768 makes the point clearly:

At this point my reader may be amused by my allusion to John Shade in a letter (of which I fortunately preserved a carbon copy) that I wrote to a correspondent living in southern France on April 2, 1959:

My dear, you are absurd. I do not give you, and will not give you or anybody, my home address. The suburban houses here have open letter-boxes out in the street, and anybody can cram them with advertisements or purloin letters addressed to me (not out of mere curiosity, mind you, but from other, more sinister motives). I send this by air and urgently repeat the address Sylvia gave you: Dr. C. Kinbote, KINBOTE (not "Charles A. Kinbot, Esq.," as you, or Sylvia, wrote; please, be more careful - and more intelligent)....

I am not cross with you but I have all sorts of worries, and my nerves are on edge. I believed - believed deeply and candidly - in the affection of a person who lived here, under my roof, but have been hurt and betrayed as never happened in the days of my forefathers, who could have had the offender tortured, though of course I do not wish to have anybody tortured.

It has been dreadfully cold here, but thank God now a regular northern winter has turned into a southern spring. Do not try to explain to me what your lawyer tells me but have him explain it to my lawyer, and he will explain it to me.

My work at the university is pleasant, and I have a most charming neighbour -

now do not sigh and raise your eyebrows,
my dear - he is a very old gentleman -
the old gentleman in fact who was respons-
ible for that bit about the ginkgo tree
in your green album

It might be safer if you did not write
to me often my dear. (p 256)

Waking Kinbote rejects his figure of art and harmony
as firmly as Shade embraces him.

Viewed from this angle the novel looks an
anatomy - a kind of morality play of vice and
virtue with art ranged on the side of the angels.
But this one interpretation is obviously not
enough to accommodate the theme of interdependence
that pervades Pale Fire. It is necessary at this
stage, I think, to alter the angle of vision on
the text.

CHAPTER VII

THE CREATIVE COMPOST

In a critical study of Pale Fire, Andrew Field postulates an interesting theory:

Kinbote's Zembla - apart from what he thinks it is - is also a mapping of man's subconscious. Nabokov's whole oeuvre, but Pale Fire above all, is overwhelming proof that the subconscious does not exist only in Freud's version of it. Kinbote's Zembla is a homosexual fantasy, but especially striking is the fact that this subterranean has absolutely no connection with the John Shade we know from the poem. The Freudian understanding of the unconscious requires "apertures" through which the conscious is subtly prompted. There is, when one thinks of it, a valid psychological connection with John Shade after all. ¹

Field does not elaborate the statement, but there seems evidence from Nabokov's own writing that Kinbote's commentary is concerned with, if not a subconscious, at least a semi-conscious mind. In Invitation of a Beheading, the novel whose publication immediately precedes that of Pale Fire, though five years separates them in time, Nabokov begins Chapter 4 with this passage.

The King, his father, wearing a very white sports shirt open at the throat and a very black blazer, sat at a spacious desk whose highly polished surface twinned his upper half in reverse, making of him a kind of court card. Ancestral portraits darkened the walls of the vast paneled room. Otherwise, it was not unlike the headmaster's study at St. Bart's School, on the Atlantic Seaboard, some three thousand miles west of the imagined Palace. A copious spring shower kept lashing at the french windows, beyond which young greenery, all eyes, shivered and streamed. Nothing but this sheet of rain seemed to separate and protect the Palace from the revolution that for several days had been rocking the city

Actually, Victor's father was a cranky refugee doctor, whom the lad had never much liked and had not seen now for almost two years.

The King, his more plausible father, had decided not to abdicate. No newspapers were coming out. The Orient Express was stranded, with all its transient passengers, at a suburban station, on the platform of which, reflected in puddles, picturesque peasants stood and gaped at the curtained windows of the long, mysterious cars. The Palace, and its terraced gardens, and the city below the palatial hill, and the main city square, where decapitations and folk dances had already started, despite the weather - all this was at the heart of a cross whose arms terminated in Trieste, Graz, Budapest, and Zagreb, as designated in Rand McNally's Ready Reference Atlas of the World. And at the heart of that heart sat the King, pale and calm, and on the whole closely resembling his son as that under-former imagined he would look at forty himself. Pale and calm, a cup of coffee in his hand, his back to the emerald-and-gray window, the King sat listening to a masked messenger, a corpulent old nobleman in a wet cloak, who had managed to make his way through the rebellion and the rain from the besieged Council Hall to the isolated Palace.

"Abdication! One third of the alphabet!" coldly quipped the King, with the trace of an accent. "The answer is no. I prefer the unknown quantity of exile."

Saying this, the King, a widower, glanced at the desk photograph of a beautiful dead woman, at those great blue eyes, that carmine mouth (it was a coloured photo, not fit for a King, but no matter). The lilacs, in sudden premature bloom, wildly beat, like shut-out maskers, at the dripping panes. The old messenger bowed and walked backward through the wilderness of the study, wondering secretly whether it would not be wiser for him to leave history alone and make a dash for Vienna where he had some property . . . Of course, Victor's mother was not really dead; she had left his everyday father, Dr. Eric Wind (now in South America), and was about to be married in Buffalo to a man named Church.

Victor indulged night after night in these mild fancies, trying to induce sleep in his cold cubicle which was exposed to every noise in the restless dorm. Generally he did not reach that crucial flight episode when the King alone - solus rex (as chess problem makers term royal solitude) - paced a beach on the Bohemian Sea, at Tempest Point, where Percival Blake, a cheerful American adventurer, had promised to meet him with a powerful motorboat. Indeed, the very act of postponing that thrilling and soothing episode, the very protraction of its lure, coming as it did on top of the repetitive fancy, formed the main mechanism of its soporific effect.

"Solus Rex" is the name which Kinbote suggests as a title for the poem he believes Shade to be writing and its appearance here in Victor's fantasy seems at least as significant for Pale Fire as the novel of that name which Nabokov had begun and abandoned twenty years earlier, and which Field and Nina Berberova have discussed so competently. 2, 3

In Mary McCarthy's original review she pointed out that the "real" story of Kinbote is that "he is a harmless refugee pedant named Botkin who teaches in the Russian department and who fancies himself to be the exiled king of Zembla. This delusion, which he supposes to be his secret, is known to the poet, who pities him, and to the campus at large, which does not The killer is just what he claims to be - Jack Grey, an escaped criminal lunatic, who has been sent to the State Asylum for the Insane by, precisely, Judge Goldsworth, Botkin's landlord." 4 There is one very minor mistake in this statement - Kinbote tells us that fortunately Professor Botkin "was not subordinated to that grotesque 'perfectionist' Prof. Pnin, Head of the bloated Russian Department", but worked in another department. (p 155))

Apart from this the statement is one that few readers would challenge.

Botkin/Kinbote's delusion is obviously rooted in the rich infinitely comforting fantasies of childhood, the sweet that is sucked luxuriously night after night as the child drifts to sleep. The best fairy-tales lull us all with the same compensations, and to be at once hero and victim, beloved King and exile from a fabulous kingdom to bask in our own admiration and our own pity is the sweetest of imaginary delights. Kinbote's dream carried over into manhood, proliferating into cities, mountains, a whole country generously furnished with sexual delights, is composed of the same ingredients as Victor's.

Victor, a cheerful Cinderella, freely borrows props from his day-time life (the headmaster's desk) and adapts them to the stage-setting of romance. Stereotyped language and images are grabbed uncritically, hastily, to provide the outlines of the picture - the palace, the revolution, the king "pale and calm". Vague and clichéd background material ("ancestral portraits darkened the walls of the vast panelled room") rubs shoulders with detail precisely visualized by Victor, the sensitive artist, ("the highly-polished surface twinned his upper half in reverse making of him a kind of court card"; "young greenery, all eyes, shivered and streamed"). The scenery is always adjustable for convenience ("lilacs, in sudden premature bloom, wildly beat like shut-out maskers at the dripping panes") and bizarre, undeveloped images ("decapitations and folk dances had already started despite the weather") suggest an ironic half-detachment in the mind of the dreamer. Overall the fantasy is

utilitarian; it exists to entertain the drowsy mind, to comfort the ego gently suckling itself to sleep, but within this soft medium, lazy with familiarity, the creative mind is still at play, tossing up a bright image here, pressing into service a valuable picked up and stored away when the mind was alert and active.

Kinbote's narrative has the same elements combined in it. The king, the revolution, an underground passage, loyal followers, and escape in disguise, the ruthless killer stalking his royal victim round the world - they are the foundation bricks of the child's story of romance, and the name of its hero, "Charles the Beloved", gives a pathetic clue to the reason friendless and unattractive Kinbote/botkin ("I fail to see how John and Sybil can stand you") needs such an elaborate retreat into fantasy. His appetite for flattery, for acknowledgement, for praise finds appeasement in the piling up of stereotyped make-believe of wealth and importance. "That King's reign," says dreaming Kinbote of his alter ego, "will be remembered by at least a few discerning historians as a peaceful and elegant one Harmony, indeed was the reign's password The climate seemed to be improving. Taxation had become a thing of beauty" (p 75). He is "the friendly and eloquent monarch". Lush images of luxury sprout. Charles's room is furnished with "a huge, oval, luxuriously flounced, swansdown pillow the size of a triple bed", with "a coverlet of genuine panda fur that had just been rushed from Tibet by a group of Asiatic well-wishers on the occasion of his ascension to the throne." (p 110)

The latent heterosexual in homosexual Kinbote

murmurs in mournful half-developed images of innumerable nymphs. "He awoke to find her standing with a comb in her hand before his - or rather, his grandfather's - cheval glass, a triptych of bottomless light, a really fantastic mirror, signed with a diamond by its maker, Sudarg of Bokay. She turned about before it: a secret device of reflection gathered an infinite number of nudes in its depths, garlands of girls in graceful and sorrowful groups, diminishing in the limpid distance, or breaking into individual nymphs, some of whom, she murmured, must resemble her ancestors when they were young - little peasant garlien combing their hair in shallow water as far as the eye could reach, and then the wishful mermaid from an old tale, and then nothing." (p 111)

Fairy-tales are pressed into service. "The gnarled farmer and his plump wife, now, like personages in an old tedious tale offered the drenched fugitive a welcome shelter, mistook him for an eccentric camper who had got detached from his group. He was allowed to dry himself in a warm kitchen where he was given a fairy-tale meal of bread and cheese, and a bowl of mountain mead." (p 140)

Campus events come smirking in disguise through the narrative. Both Mary McCarthy and Andrew Field draw attention to the fact that Gerald Emerald, teacher of freshman English at Wordsmith College, and baiter of Kinbote, is transformed into Izumrudov the superior officer of Gradus, in that sinister organization the Shadows. Disa (considered in her simple non-symbolic role) may well be a mechanism whereby Kinbote releases his hatred of Sybil that "rigid anti-Karlist", demoting her in fantasy from the

woman who "from the very first disliked and distrusted" him, to a woman who forever loves him hopelessly and is forever rejected.

Heaven knows how many memories from the past force themselves up in rough Zemblan disguise. Does Alfin the Vague (whom the index describes as "K's father; a kind, gentle, absent-minded monarch, mainly interested in automobiles, flying machines, motorboats and, at one time, sea shells; killed in an airplane accident") represent hazy memories of Kinbote's real father, and is horsy terrifying Queen Blenda the actual mother of his flesh and obsessions? Odd sentences in the commentary, dangling almost unconnected, have the authentic ring of memory. Kinbote talks of his gardener planting heliotropes: "This is the flower whose odor evokes with timeless intensity the dusk, and the garden bench, and a house of painted wood in a distant northern land." (p 98)

Kinbote/Botkin is no more logical in his fantasy than Victor. The props are changed as often, as irrationally, as the released mind throws up new visual images. Several commentators have pointed out that "dear Gordon", that prototype of the beautiful boy ("His lovely bestial face wore an expression both sullen and sly" p 200), changes his stagey costume four times in the course of a walk across the garden. Wearing nothing "save a leopard-spotted loincloth" he strolls out of the room "wreathed about the loins with ivy" reaches the drinking fountain in black bathing trunks, finishes his conversation "clothed in white tennis shorts", then casts aside his Tarzan brief on the grass.

Other adjustments are made as rapidly and openly. On p 75 the King describes Charles's

reign as a time when harmony was the password and "everybody, in a word, was content." On the following page describing the pied-a-terre which Charles makes use of when he is teaching, he says, "How far from this limpid simplicity seemed the palace and the odious Council Chamber with its unsolvable problems and frightened councilors!" (And here, incidentally, the rug on its "virginal-looking daybed" has diminished to "imitation panda fur", so that one has an odd sense of double-focus as though the original had suddenly been placed beside a blown-up highly-coloured portrait.) Charles's boyhood is both "happy and healthy" and "terrible and tender" - and perhaps it is in the gap between the two alliterations that Zembla is concocted.

Vignettes from traditional spy and adventure stories make brief appearances; "Through the geraniums, a gloved hand gave the King a picture postcard on which he found scribbled: Proceed to R.C. Bon Voyage!" (p 145). The wording at times betrays the trite origin of the situations, catapulting from cliché to cliché down a slope that ends in complete banality: "He would, he said, lead them a merry chase, assume sensational disguises and get in touch with the rest of the gang". (p 139)

Borrowings from the traditional lend at times an oddly portentous air to the bizarre conglomeration that comprises the Zemblan story. In one of the variants Shade pinpoints the sense of elusive significance that pervades them.

There are events, strange happenings, that
strike

The mind as emblematic. They are like
Lost similes adrift without a string,
Attached to nothing. Thus that northern king,

Whose desperate escape from prison was
 Brought off successfully only because
 Some forty of his followers that night
 Impersonated him and aped his flight -

(p 99)

From the fourth line on the verse is so hopelessly pedestrian that one suspects Kinbote of once again tampering with the works, but it is true that his king's escape does "strike the mind as emblematic." In Henry IV Part 1, the rebel army are confused when a host of apparent kings shield by their number the identity of the true one. Encountering the genuine article, Douglas cries, "Another king! They grow like Hydra's heads," and the effect is to debase Henry's value - he is really indistinguishable from anyone who wears his armour.

Charles the Beloved has proliferated not into warriors but fools, red-capped and red-sweatered. "One hundred clowns are packed in Ohhava jail and the ex-king should be among them," cries the frustrated policeman (p 144) and the ancient relationship of King and Fool, alter egos, complementing twins, seems suddenly expanded as everyman becomes momentarily his own inward king and his own outward fool.

Kinbote's Zemblan story is more than the ragbag of an undisciplined (or sleepy) mind playing with remnants of ersatz silk and shabby velvet. There are moments when, like Victor's fairy-tale, it springs to splendid life. And this quality of convincing is not confined to, though it is mainly apparent in, specific incidents. In the account of the King's escape over the mountains where the elderly tiredness of the story is most apparent, sight and sound, smell and texture,

precisely observed and poetically expressed
decorate the decayed narrative with lively colours.

Odon spun the car around and at the first opportunity swerved westward into the mountains. The narrow and bumpy lane that engulfed them passed by a woodshed, arrived at a torrent, crossed it with a great clacking of boards, and presently degenerated into a stump-cluttered cutting. They were at the edge of Mandevil Forest. Thunder was rumbling in the terrible sky.

For a few seconds both men stood looking upward. The night and the trees concealed the acclivity. From this point a good climber might reach Bregberg Pass by dawn - if he managed to hit a regular trail after pushing through the black wall of the forest. It was decided to part, Charlie proceeding toward the remote treasure in the sea cave, and Odon remaining behind as a decoy. He would, he said, lead them a merry chase, assume sensational disguises, and get into touch with the rest of the gang. His mother was an American, from New Wye in New England. She is said to have been the first woman in the world to shoot wolves, and, I believe, other animals, from an airplane.

A handshake, a flash of lightening. As the King waded into the damp, dark bracken, its odor, its lacy resilience, and the mixture of soft growth and steep ground reminded him of the times he had picnicked hereabouts.
(p 139)

It is the style - the lane assuming a life of its own as it crosses the stream "with a great clacking of boards", the thick clumsiness of "stump-cluttered cutting", the "lacy resilience" of the bracken - that give the narrative a vitality that neither its stereotyped origin nor its peppering of clichés can quite extinguish.

As the narrative progresses more and more Kinbote is caught up in the impetus, the inner logic of his own creation. As Gradus moves closer he comes more and more clearly into focus. That Kinbote is creating him is clear from every note.

He is obviously a mere plot mechanism, to throw the requisite cloak of romance round the "poor exile" figure Kinbote/Botkin is creating for himself. To have been a king once is not enough. A heroic glow must illumine his present too. Gradus must exist so that the magic lights, pity, danger, will keep on burning. He is a utilitarian and a vague and horrific figure "a cross between bat and crab" (p 150) He is given a past and the characteristics of a type, not a personality. "At the foot of the scaffold, on a raw, gray morning, it is Gradus who sweeps the night's powder snow off the narrow steps ..." (p 153) "Nobody knows better than Gradus how to set a trap by means of a fake advertisement, but the rich old widow whom it hooks is courted and slain by another." (p 154) But individual (or semi-individual) characteristics begin to creep in. "As many people of little culture, Gradus was a voracious reader of newspapers, pamphlets, chance leaflets and the multilingual literature that comes with nose drops and digestive tablets ..." (p 232) Forty pages further on Gradus is endowed with some distinguishing characteristics that are his own - they have been pasted on him from the outside but they are real enough to convince the uncritical.

As usual he started his blurry daily existence by blowing his nose. Then he took out of its nightbox of cardboard and inserted into his Comus-maskmouth an exceptionally large and fierce-looking set of teeth: the only bad flaw really in his otherwise harmless appearance. This done, he fished out of his briefcase two petit-beurres he had saved and an even older but still quite palatable small, softish, near-ham sandwich, vaguely associated with the train journey from Nice to Paris last Saturday night: not so much thriftiness on his part (the Shadows had advanced him a handsome sum, anyway), but an

animal attachment to the habits of his frugal youth. After breakfasting in bed on these delicacies, he began preparations for the most important day in his life. (p 273-4)

By the time he is on the last leg of his journey, Kinbote is, as he carefully explains, shading in the portrait.

Gradus is now much nearer to us in space and time than he was in the preceding cantos. He has short upright black hair. We can fill in the bleak oblong of his face with most of its elements such as thick eyebrows and a wart on the chin. He has a ruddy but unhealthy complexion. We see, fairly in focus, the structure of his somewhat mesmeric organs of vision. We see his melancholy nose with its crooked ridge and grooved tip. We see the mineral blue of his jaw and the gravelly pointille of his suppressed mustache.

We know already some of his gestures, we know the chimpanzee slouch of his broad body and short hindlegs. We have heard enough about his creased suit. We can at last describe his tie, an Easter gift from a dressy butcher, his brother-in-law in Onhava: imitation silk, color chocolate brown, barred with red, the end tucked into the shirt between the second and third buttons, a Zemblan fashion of the nineteen-thirties - and a father-waistcoat substitute according to the learned. Repulsive black hairs coat the back of his honest rude hands, the scrupulously clean hands of an ultra-unionized artisan, with a perceptible deformation of both thumbs, typical of bobèche-makers. We see, rather suddenly, his humid flesh. We can even make out (as, head-on but quite safely, phantom-like, we pass through him, through the shimmering propeller of his flying machine, through the delegates waving and grinning at us) his magenta and mulberry insides, and the strange, not so good sea swell undulating in his entrails.

But he remains to the end an automatic plot device, a clockwork figure linked because of Kinbote's use of the word in describing him to the toy that John Shade was playing with when he had his first attack, a figure "... of painted tin with a keyhole in his

side and no breadth to speak of, just consisting of two more or less fused profiles" (p 137)

What we have been treated to in the careful picture Nabokov has drawn of Kinbote creating Gradus, is an analysis of the methods of a second-rate writer in creating fiction. Kinbote needs a Gradus in his fantasy so he creates one working from the outside in, using all the tricks of apparent realism to give verisimilitude to a dummy. Nabokov allows Kinbote to make the point for us when Jack Grey slits his throat in prison. "In other words, his life ended not in a feeble splutter of the clockwork but in a gesture of humanoid despair. Enough of this. Exit Jack Grey". It is Jack Grey, who exists at a different level of the novel from Gradus, who makes the "humanoid" gesture.

To insist that Kinbote's Zemblan narrative is the fantasy of the free-ranging imagination transforming the world into a more satisfactory shape is to invite an interpretation of the novel in which Kinbote/Botkin is the primary author of all that appears within its covers. To avoid this oversimplification it is important to separate and hold apart for a moment the intertwining strands.

CHAPTER VIII

A TENTATIVE INTERPRETATION

It is by looking at Gradus's role in the book that I can best see - though then only dimly - the multiple layers that exist in Pale Fire. A poet creates a poem about a world in which the physical universe, human lives and the odd coincidences, accidents and possibilities that occur in them are evidence of the hand of a creating artist at work - an artist to whom all that exists (including the poet's conception of reality) is a conglomeration of scraps of raw material with which he is (possibly) playfully experimenting in the creation of designs. Next door is another man who has diffused and recreated what he sees into an entirely different pattern, which is dictated by his own obsessive needs. What interests the poet is not the pattern that the man has created, but the fact of his creating it. (At least, if there is any sense in Kinbote's assertion that the Zemblan poem was the 'catalytic agent' then this would seem to be the way in which it has worked). In other words the poet has grabbed what he needs from the material his neighbour has plied him with. But another man (Jack Grey) interpreting the world to fit his own "ruling passion" (in Popean terms), a thirst for revenge, sees a different reality - a man with Judge Goldsworth's face walking towards Judge Goldsworth's house whom he naturally assumes to be Judge Goldsworth and promptly shoots. Kinbote then grabs what he wants - Shade's manuscript which is not what he expected but has its own value to him in terms of his appetite for recognition. Thus the three different concepts of reality, meshed into each

other have produced by split second timing a patterned sequence; events have been co-ordinated with "remote events" and Shade becomes the victim of an exemplum of his own theory.

Behind this is a second pattern manifesting itself. Page Stegner has drawn attention to the fact that prefigurations of Shade's death haunt the poem he is writing.¹ His first fit (or semi-death) occurs when he is playing with "a tin wheel-barrow pushed by a tin boy"; his next temporary death when a man stands up and points a pipe at him; when all the elements are brought together - the pushed wheel-barrow, the automatic man, the dark object pointed in aggression, the death is finally accomplished. "They", playing their artistic, inhuman games, have carefully correlated three entirely different patterns into a single whole - Kinbote's paranoia, Jack Grey's thirst for revenge, and Shade's haunting's by death. ("They" is of course really Nabokov, but in terms of the world he has created, of the statement he is making between the covers of this particular novel, it is super artists he has postulated.)

If one moves further back - into the position of the "they" - one sees Kinbote and Shade as a mere minute reproduction of the basic dichotomy that patterns existence - heat/cold, light/dark, fertility/sterility etc. In this pattern, the name of the murderer becomes an ironic pun, for of course it must be grey which eliminates day to leave night in possession.

But because the inside of Kinbote's mind has been revealed, (and it has the same status in reality because it is conveyed through the same medium as the rest of the world Nabokov has

created) other patterns emerge. Gradus whom Kinbote has created is the completing unit of a trinity of which Kinbote himself is the central link - ordered imagination embodied in Shade and art; disordered and limited imagination (Kinbote, self-nourishing fantasy); and the unimaginative man who has therefore no control over his destiny (Gradus, the automaton). The descending scale of the three has been symbolically pointed by Nabokov - each has less identity than the one below him. Shade is defined by his job, his talent and his friends; and he is sexually potent; Kinbote lives in a dual world but still holds on to identity with one hand - he has a job, relationships with his fellows, though most of them are hostile relationships, and brief homosexual loves; Gradus appears like a loose atom in the world, connected not to people but an organization (and all his communications with it are twisted by an indecipherable code) and he is sexually impotent, having tried twice to castrate himself. The "liquid hell" within Gradus is surely an advanced stage of the halitosis, inner corruption, that Kinbote suffers from.

But the definition of the three turns out to be not a scale but a circle. For Gradus is surely not only fate and death, but the rotting body itself. (He has false teeth, and a glass eye like a spare part in his suitcase. His thoughts and feelings are rudimentary but we know a lot about his physical movements and needs. What he eats and when, when and how he washes himself - this is what Nabokov allows us to see of his clockwork man. His frequent and desperate dashes to the lavatory punctuate his progress. His bowels seethe, his shoes hurt him, he reads of nose-drops and digestive

tablets.) Gradus, the body, death, physical decay, kills Shade; and Kinbote reminds us that another Gradus is somewhere setting out to accomplish his destruction.

I am sure that there are hundreds of other patterns that can be worked out from the arranging of the material of Pale Fire. The ones I have drawn attention to are offered merely as a sample to prove that the view of the world that John Shade (and behind him Pope) postulates is dramatically worked out in the fiction that embodies it.

But it is not the patterning of the world that is the main concern of Pale Fire; it is the translating of that patterning into art. I can most easily see the way this theme is worked out by placing the three units of the trinity, not in a graded line or a circle, but one on top of the other, and then peering down as it were through the three of them. Gradus, the body, all food and gut, is at the bottom and he ultimately kills himself as all bodies must do. Above that is Kinbote, the dreaming imagination recreating the world in fantasy to nourish the demands of his (or anyone's) ego for flattery and sustenance. "Self-love", says Pope, "is the spring of motion", the urging force. Everyman's Zembla is a form of art, a mental fashioning of the Utopia he most needs. The secret passage from the palace of the King of Zembla leads to the theatre (which I think makes clear the connection between private fantasy and the public playing out of roles). The journey from Zembla is difficult and it is accomplished by a running through, an experimentation with, various forms of fiction - adventure story, fairy-tale, spy drama. The self which has been a King in private

fantasy accomplishes the journey in the traditional garb of a fool.

Above Kinbote is Shade, the creative imagination, (the secret passage ends in another closet that is the hiding-place of his poem.) The creative imagination is different and separate from self-nourishing fantasy and is concerned with effort to penetrate, make sense of, time and death - and it celebrates love and beauty as, traditionally, art always has. The three levels make "a man" or "men". And, host and parasite, each layer supports and preys upon the others.

But in Pale Fire there is never any simple tidy solution. For beyond these three is another ghostly presence, that of Judge Goldsworth. Shade bears his face, Kinbote lives in his house, Grey sets out to kill him. Is Goldsworth, the materialist, the ultimate figure of man? Or merely another facet? Or is the hanging judge, the giver of rules and instructions, the god - presence felt but unseen - in whose image man is made? Or are we merely being shown another pattern of coincidences and accidental juxtapositions?

Finally Pale Fire is what it has been criticized for being - a riddle. But it is a riddle that reproduces in miniature the ultimate riddle - the nature of man, of god, and of the universe.



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