

Patter or Pattern in *Pale Fire*?
Aesthetic gaming in the art of Vladimir Nabokov

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Chapter One

Nabokov among writers

The difference between the comic side of things and their cosmic side depends upon one sibilant.

– Vladimir Nabokov

As an artist and scholar, I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam.

– Vladimir Nabokov

Player: Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

Guildenstern: And what's that, in this case?

Player: It never varies – we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.

Guildenstern: Marked?

Player: Between "just desserts" and "tragic irony" we are given quite a large scope for our particular talent. Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have gotten about as bad as they can reasonably get.

Guildenstern: Who decides?

Player: *Decides?* It is *written*.

- Tom Stoppard

1. *Introduction*

The drive within academic and critical circles to compartmentalize writers according to the now established outlines of literary history and genealogy has been an endeavor characterized by its insistence on both temporal and ideological coherence. The progress of twentieth century literary history has traditionally been a linear development

from the influences of late nineteenth century Romanticism through the advent of modernism and its notably problematic successor, postmodernism. At the outset of the twenty-first century, when even the most inventive and original works of fiction have garnered a localized place within the canon by prompting the creation and discussion of new genres and subdivisions, few writers have resisted categorization as firmly as Vladimir Nabokov.

As a writer wedged between English literature's period of "high modernism" and what has come to be viewed as postmodernism's birth in the late sixties and early seventies, Nabokov has been the focus of a critical debate that aims to assess the role his art, ideas, prose and form have within the greater canon. Critical appraisal has been varied, with some deeming him to be a late modernist, some a proto-postmodernist, while others have argued that, like Borges, Nabokov's art is an entity unto itself resistant to the periodization of literature. However, Nabokov's problematic position within literature's ranks has been more than just a matter of temporal placement. The sheer inventiveness and allusiveness of Nabokov's writing has lead many to consider his work not only worthy of its own separate discourse but in fact quite resistant to those already established in regards to the role of aesthetics, ethics and ideas in modernism and postmodernism.

While the ingenuity and originality of Nabokov's work has never been under debate, it's complexity and density have left many readers and critics at loss as to the greater significance it holds for literature and humanity as a whole. Rife with puns, parody, allusion and illusion, Nabokov's oeuvre has been likened to a complex system of aesthetic, riddling games often inaccessible to even the most astute Nabokovian scholars. Admiring critics such as Carl Eichelberger have to come view these intellectual games as a testament to "how Nabokov subverts both conventional notions of language and realistic notions of character to reveal new fictional possibilities," a process that "engages the reader in the aesthetic problems fiction writing presents to the author" (Eichelberger, 176). However, more critical scholars have viewed the allusiveness of meaning and political and ethical ambiguity as a sign that Nabokov's art is no more than an onanistic display of intellectual superiority over the reader, a solipsistic puppet show in which both characters and readers are manipulated by Nabokov's trickery. Under such scrutiny,

Nabokov has been portrayed as an ingenious yet cruel aesthete, a brilliantly aloof alchemist spinning spells merely for his own enjoyment.¹

In order to better understand the function of these astute games and acute structures, it's first helpful to evaluate where exactly Nabokov stood in relation to the movements and ideas of his time. Can an understanding of modernist practices shed light on the development of Nabokov's own literary endeavors, be it through inspiration and succession or opposition and counteraction? Can Nabokov's ludic practices, metanarratives, and generally playful signifying be more clearly understood in terms of late twentieth-century poststructuralist practices or do his methods still resist such facile reductions? A initial, critical discussion of Nabokov's problematic place in the canon is necessary before moving on to a more textual analysis of Nabokov's specific literary devices as they function in one of his most infamously complex works, *Pale Fire*.

When considering the complex nature of each Nabokovian novel, a sweeping discussion of metaphysics, signification and hypertextual gaming runs the risk of analytic entropy in failing to deliver any cohesive understanding of the intricate parts within each individual work, as well as committing the very sin of generalization to which Nabokov objected. Therefore, a close focus on *Pale Fire*, a work renowned for it's unprecedented structure and symmetry, will provide the basis for a more accurate and detailed discussion of the means by which Nabokov uses resonance in structure and repetition in imagery in order to create unique systems of individualized artistry and meaning. The final chapter will aim for a more thorough application of *Pale Fire*'s greater implications not only for Vladimir Nabokov, but for literature as a whole.

2. Nabokov and the zeitgeist

Nabokov's life as a writer can be characterized by a ongoing resistance to all forms of reductionism and compartmentalization, from the literary to the political to the nationalistic. His early status as a Russian émigré writer on the continent exiled during

¹ Joyce Carol Oates once observed of Nabokov: "To me he is a tragic figure, heroic in his isolation perhaps, or perhaps only sterile, monomaniacal, deadening to retain for very long in one's imagination. He is far more depressing than Kafka..." (Oates, 107).

the Bolshevik Revolution came with a degree of political and ideological baggage. Under such conditions, writers such as Nabokov were under pressure to declare which side of the line their art occupied, the political or the aesthetic, the former being considered the natural concern of a writer fleeing the constraints of totalitarianism, while the latter was often equated with the distinctly western escapism of modernist aesthetic aims. In her discussion of Nabokov's worldview, Leona Toker observes that although, "Nabokov rejected the obligations of an engagé writer, he did not ignore the political situation around him" (Toker, 242). Though apolitical in principle, Nabokov's political position can be described as liberal "in the classical sense of believing in individual freedom short of encroaching on the freedom and property of others, as well as in the more modern sense of being opposed to all forms of cruelty and terror" (Ibid, 243). However, unlike other writers of his time who aimed to capitalize on the social impact of communism, Nazism and despotism, Nabokov rejected what he saw as the fleeting moralizing inherent in such time-bound genres of fiction in favor of what he saw as a more lasting, artistic vision of what fiction should be capable of imparting.

Many sought to find parallels within Nabokov's works that might effectively connect him to more commonplace notions of the Russian literary tradition, namely the literature of ideas and metaphysics associated with Dostoyevsky or the more politically charged satire of totalitarianism. Novels such as the dystopic *Bend Sinister* were cited as prime examples of Nabokov's fantastical critique of the Russian totalitarian state and attempts were made to classify the novel as political satire in the vein of Orwell. Yet, in the introduction to the novel, Nabokov took great pains to refute this aspect of his writing, stating that an "automatic comparison between *Bend Sinister* and Kafka's creations or Orwell's clichés would go merely to prove that the automaton could not have read either the great German writer or the mediocre English one" (Nabokov, 1947, 6). He goes on to explain, "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 'provocative,' I am not 'satirical.' I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer" (Ibid, 6). In her discussion of *Bend Sinister* and its notable resistance to facile classification, Jacqueline Hamrit sees Nabokov's refutations as early echoes of what Derrida would later say about "The Law of genre." Hamrit goes on to observe that

the novel acts as an illustration of Derrida's notion that "[g]enre is possible, even necessary—it is the law of genre—but it cannot be pure. As there is no text without one or even several genres, classification is possible but it is an endless task" (Hamrit, 161).

For better or for worse, this aspect of Nabokov's personality was read by many as yet another example of art for art's sake. Leland de la Durantaye discusses the polemical nature of opinions on Nabokov's work at the time, noting that the "first book-length study of Nabokov's work, that of Page Stegner, dates from scarcely a decade after *Lolita*'s publication and bears the programmatic title *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1966)," a work that glorified Nabokov's position, "seeing it as an escape not from ethics, or the world, but rather from the unethical worldviews of fascist political regimes" (de la Durantaye, 16). However, de la Durantaye observes that such a polarizing definition of the writer's place in literature ran the risk of rehashing the usual debates about the function of art in the world, the social versus the aesthetic. In regards to a book such as Stegner's, "critics tended to take this descriptive title (*Escape into Aesthetics*) as an imperative one. Generally speaking, they either lauded Nabokov for having effected such escape, or took him to task for the more or less craven flight it implied" (Ibid).

In light of this resistance toward genre, Nabokov's ambivalence, coupled with his exile in the west during the high-water mark of literary modernism, has led to attempts at defining his works in terms of a more western, "high modernist" aesthetics. Yet, an attempt at retroactively placing Nabokov's works within the all-encompassing term "modernism" becomes an additional case of categorization only further complicated by the fact that the term's use in direct, periodized reference to this group of western writers wouldn't truly take place till around the 1960's, when its demarcation became increasingly more useful for literary criticism and history. Nabokov falls inconveniently between the canonic cracks.

John Burt Foster Jr. sees a similarity between Yeats and Nabokov as opposite bookends to the often homogenized school of modernism on account of their relatively early and later births respectively, along with their distance from the intellectual climate of the times. With Yeats's birth in 1865 and Nabokov's in 1899, they both stand at the extreme ends of a period in which most prominent members were born in the 1880's, complicating critical attempts at temporal and ideological placement of the two (Foster,

2005, 89). As Foster notes, despite Nabokov's opposition to "-isms," he is often forcefully "read as a pre-postmodernist alongside Borges and Beckett," due to the formal and thematic innovations that would come to impact on the generation writing in the 70's, 80's and 90's , while Yeats is often held to be a late Romantic (Ibid).

In an astute observation that will come to bare relevance in later discussion of *Pale Fire's* metaphysical elements, Foster observes aesthetic congruity between the two, as "both writers showed their affinity-with-a-difference in the distinctive ways that they identified with the same imagery of spirals and helixes in the course of evoking a modernist sense of vanishing centers and broken continuities," citing Nabokov's metaphor of a life as a "rainbow spiral in a glass marble" alongside Yeats's evocation of the "widening gyre" in the poem "Second Coming" (Ibid). The importance of the spiral for Nabokov's own conception of time and space will garner more discussion in regards to Nabokov's literary devices and their potential ontological intimations.

Despite this particular metaphysical congruity or the degree of admiration Nabokov held for modernists such as Joyce or Proust, his famous resistance to "-isms" and the reductionist quality of literary schools remains central to an understanding of how he proceeded in writing literature. When speaking about the historians penchant for demarcating schools of thought, Nabokov was quoted as saying:

I cannot think of a masterpiece the appreciation of which would be enhanced in any degree or manner by the knowledge that it belonged to this or that school; and, conversely, I could name any number of third-rate works that are kept artificially alive for centuries through their being assigned by the schoolman to this or that "movement" in the past. These concepts are harmful chiefly because they distract the student from direct contact with, and direct delight in, the quiddity of individual artistic achievement (which, after all, alone matters and alone survives)...(Boyd, 1991, 345)

In this way, Nabokov's respect for modernist predecessors and contemporaries has more to do with what he saw as the individual artistic merit of each separate work rather than a more general commitment to the stylistic or thematic elements associated with modernism as a monolithic school of writing. Nabokov saw a danger in crediting a specific school by reducing art to a body of periodized ideas and techniques. Such

simplifications not only minimized the impact of individual works within said school, but also effectively neutralized nineteenth-century innovations that helped pave the path for twentieth-century modernist practices. Foster's prime example is the way "Nabokov contests standard views of Tolstoy as the supreme nineteenth-century realist and nothing more... pointing out, for example, that *Anna Karenina* can rival Proust in its manipulation of time, that it anticipates Joyce's stream-of-consciousness technique, and that its descriptive details can be powerfully imagistic (thus appropriating a term popularized by Pound)" (Foster, 2005, 94).

Nabokov's own personal list of twentieth-century masters in fiction testifies to the already eclectic character of his views on modernism. His designation of Joyce, Proust, Kafka and Russian writer Andrei Bely as the masters of the novel "suggest a vision of international modernist fiction that replaces the miracle year of English-language high modernism with a miracle decade from 1913 to 1922, featuring authors from all four language areas in which Nabokov spent his life" (Foster, 2005, 95). Such a list accounts for the wide range of cultural, geographical and artistic approaches to modern fiction, approaches that Nabokov viewed as being distinctly original and in many ways resistant to the same umbrella terms used in systematizing twentieth-century angles on the novel as an art form.

Even with a novelist such as Joyce, for whom Nabokov had an infinite amount of respect and with whom many critics have seen grounds for comparison, there emerges a considerable difference in terms of the means and ends of literature. Eminent Nabokovian scholar Brian Boyd places the reader-inclusive role of artistic discovery at the very forefront of Nabokov's endeavors as a writer, stating that by doing so "his procedure could not be more different from Joyce's" (Boyd, 1999, 12). Boyd notes that for Joyce "the subject and the style appropriate to the subject were everything, and the reader be damned," that in writing "for the professors he wanted to keep busy for a thousand years....Joyce does not compromise the density of his Dublin references, the crowdedness of Stephen's mind, the virtual stasis of his plots, the details left unexplained until hundreds of pages later" (Ibid). The critiques of Joyce, which were also leveled at other prominent modernists, focused on a the perceived veneration of abstract philosophical meditations and the central role of abstruse symbolism and mythical allusion as the chief

makers of meaning, regardless of the reader's probability of success. For Boyd, Nabokov's methods stand in stark contrast to Joyce's merely for the fact that he "writes with an acute awareness of the range and capacity of his readers," handling "story and style at a swift pace, and though he often issues brief local challenges, he allows us easily to pass them by and to enjoy the imaginative leaps that we *can* make" (Ibid).

Boyd's observations once again highlight Nabokov's resistance toward a literature of ideas that uses the novel as a means of expressing some social, ideological or philosophical end. For Nabokov, artistry itself is the end, discovery the means. Boyd goes on to state, "[u]nlike many modernists, Nabokov treats us to the pleasure of striking characters and storylines involving love and death, those staples of life and literature, in unusually colorful forms. Even at this level, of course, he invites us to be active and imaginative..." (Boyd, 1999, 11). In his discussion of Nabokov's storytelling methods, Boyd observes that as "plot became less central to literary storytelling in the twentieth century, there was a general tendency, at least early in the early century, to pay less attention to the clash of character over time and to focus instead on the inner experience of the mind within the moment" (Boyd, 2005, 46). Yet, this trope too was far from enough for Nabokov, as mere conflict between character was, for him, too easy a device for progressing a novel. Instead, it was as much about the mind "moving *beyond* as *within* the moment or self" (Ibid). The focus becomes the individual and the individual experience over any Lyotardian notion of a "grand narrative," be it history, politics, psychology or philosophy. His work becomes an example of the difference between what de la Durantaye sees as the "traditional poles of ethical response: the *categorical* and the *conditional*," a situation where the "reader has on the one side the maxim and on the other the individual case; on the one side the rule, and on the other the exception; on the one hand *judgment*, and on the other *empathy*. And it is from these elements that Nabokov crafts his story" (de la Durantaye, 14).

While Nabokov may in fact share with many modernists this concern for the individual, subjective consciousness, he was often at odds with the fashionable theories and ideas (which he viewed as having a passing popularity akin to political ideology) used in expressing that fleeting subject. Among other things, Foster points to modernism's dependence on mythology and psychology as a main detractor for Nabokov.

In Foster's words, Nabokov avoided myth "as a form giving device for modern fiction" partly because of its associations with Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition, but mainly due to the fact that "the mythical outlook tended to value free-floating generalities over concrete specifications. As a result it threatened to replace individuals with stereotypes in a reductive manner of thought and perception utterly foreign to Nabokov" (Foster, 2005, 91). For Nabokov such ideas presented themselves as self-fulfilling tautologies, making abstract declarations of truth concerning the shadowy operations of the individual mind, yet resisting criticism in an attitude that "allows Freudians to explain any form of human behavior with absurd and worthless ease in terms of Freudian theory" (Boyd, 1991, 435).

In attempting to understand Nabokov's position on the act of writing, Toker observes that Nabokov's "belief in intellectual life as separateness, as resistance to the pressures of cultural environment, in combination with the yearning for intersubjective sharing of experience, provided a context for valorizing the fragmentariness of vision" (Toker, 243). While Toker's assessment is no doubt a retroactive application of postmodern principals to Nabokov's transitional place within the canon, it is worth noting, as she does, that, "[w]hereas most of Nabokov's modernist contemporaries deplored what they saw as the fragmentation of the modern world, in his pre-World War II fiction Nabokov presented the deliberate fragmentation of experience in positive terms, as a measure against totalitarian assault on individual difference" (Ibid).

Such orthodoxy in ideas and conservatism in regards to genre were, for Nabokov, the very hallmarks of stagnant literature, of writing that would fail to survive beyond the flavor of the times. What motivated Nabokov was an "impatience with convention, a desire for artistic originality, a search for a singular way of revealing the singular circumstances of a new story, and a unique sense of both the scope and limits of consciousness" that defines human existence (Boyd, 2005, 34). Foster effectively summarizes Nabokov's stance vis-à-vis modernism when observing that:

In responding to English-language high modernism, then, Nabokov favors parody, cultural multiplicity, a richly textured novelistic prose, and a guarded receptivity to life writing. He rejects the mythical method, fixed cultural centers...and the doctrine of authorial impersonality. He thus participates, in his own way, in the drift away from what comparatist Astradur Eysteinnsson has described as the Eliotic vision of modernism that reigned between World War II

and Eliot's death in 1965." (Foster, 2005, 91)

In light of such analyses, first-time readers of Nabokov might be hard pressed to ask what exactly his fiction does aim at expressing if not a commentary on the problems of twentieth-century civilization or the progress of philosophical approaches to the human condition. Many have, in fact, questioned whether Nabokov cares at all for the belief in some form of "reality" shared by the rest of humanity.

In an interview conducted in 1968 that has since been recorded in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov was quoted as saying that, "average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture" (Nabokov, 1973, 118). The primacy of the subjective is once again reiterated, but what does Nabokov mean by "average reality" or the concept of "texture" in creation? In regards to the somewhat obscure notion of animating a "subjectively perceived texture," Leona Toker has suggest that for Nabokov it "apparently involves consciousness of uncertainties not only in matters of metaphysics but also those of politics and ethics. Nabokov's aesthetic achievement, moreover, lies not so much in raising such questions in individual readers as in activating the alertness to stimuli, in spurring and training creative perception"(Toker, 244-5).

If such is the case, then how does one approach Nabokov's aesthetic goals in writing? Is his a mission of epistemological skepticism, a prosaic pedagogy of perception, or is it a game of wits in which the ball is always and forever in Nabokov's court? Not all critics have been as laudatory as Boyd or Toker when discussing the highly intricate nature of Nabokov's textual gaming, allusions, red herrings and occasionally unsolvable problems. Before moving on to a closer, textual analysis of Nabokov's methods in *Pale Fire*, a text that even Boyd has described as "a paradigm of literary elusiveness [and] a test case of apparent undecidability," a more critical discussion of what Leland de la Durantaye has noted to be a streak of authorial cruelty in Nabokov's work may prove relevant in evaluating the nature of Nabokov's ludic strategies and signification.

3. *Nabokov the Cruel?*

While most critics have long given up on portraying Nabokov as a political allegorizer or socially conscious novelist, another counterargument to the image of the erudite aesthete of prosaic beauty has arisen in regards to what has been viewed as a streak of sadistic authorial power in Nabokov's work, an attitude toward the would-be readership that, in the words of Italo Calvino, is characterized by "extraordinary cynicism and formidable cruelty" (de la Durantaye, 22). The reasons for such critical assessments have not been, as with Joyce or Eliot, merely in regards to the presence of dense, intertextual references to esoteric knowledge lost on all but the most educated of readers, but with the puzzling structures themselves. If Nabokov's novels can be likened to games or puzzles concocted for the would-be solver, what is to be said about those aspects that prove unsolvable for the reader, those Nabokovian quirks that so often require a near Nabokovian genius in order to decode their function and meaning?

When once asked why exactly he had written *Lolita*, Nabokov was quoted as responding rhetorically, "Why did I write any of my books, after all?," then upon further consideration, "I like composing riddles with elegant solutions" (Nabokov, 1973, 16). It is this image of Nabokov, as the trickster, the deceiver, the composer of chess problems, the puppeteer, that has earned him such a reputation of disregard among academic critics. The gaming aspects of Nabokov's metafictional narratives have become a hallmark of his writing and, for many writers following Nabokov, a milestone in literary achievement, ushering in a new age in fiction that has embraced the irreverence and freedom to be found in eradicating the traditional bonds of sign and signifier or the inversion of logical progression in narrative.

Although Boyd may be of the opinion that "Nabokov pays keen attention to what characters and readers can know at a particular point," that his game play is testament to the fact that "his epistemology is very much present in the texture of his telling," others have found their patience tested by an artifice that plunges *both* the reader *and* the characters into a world of near mocking deception (Boyd, 2005, 37). In Richard Rorty's observations, this cruel streak is not only important to understanding how Nabokov's novels operate, it is, in his opinion, a "central topic" in all of his writing (Rorty, 146). Rorty claims that, "Nabokov wrote about cruelty from the inside, helping us to see the way in which private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty," that this particular

flavor of pleasure gained from such artistic practices is essentially tied to the inevitable vertigo to be experienced by the future baffled reader (Ibid). The reoccurring presence of this sentiment among such varied sources is, for de la Durantaye, as sign that "a host of Nabokov's most perceptive readers found a kernel of hard, bright cruelty at the heart of Nabokov's person and work – and were at something of a loss as to what to make of it" (de la Durantaye, 22).

While Rorty acknowledges the essentially onanistic nature of Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss," pointing to the fact that the pleasure gained is often a distinctly private one, in her article "A Personal View of Nabokov," Joyce Carol Oates takes here critique a step further by characterizing Nabokov's literature as not only self-involved at times but, in fact, solipsistic at it's foundations. Oates loosely divides writers into two categories, those who write with idea that humanity shares some degree of ontological communion and aim to address those crossroads of consciousness, and those who "deny it flatly, and believe that they, as isolated individuals, possess all that is sacred or at least important, in themselves, and who truly do not need any sense of communion or kinship with other people" (Oates, 106). Oates also points to Nabokov's comment that "average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture," but views it not as an artistic declaration of intent, but as a sign that, for Nabokov, nothing outside the scope of subjective perception is of any inherent value (Nabokov, 1973, 118). For Oates, such a perspective does not limit its evaluation to just the notion of an "average reality," but by definition also spread its claims to encompass those individuals, those Others, who inhabit this loathed reality. If such is the case, Oates argues, then for Nabokov the value of others "does not exist in themselves and certainly not in nature – it can only be given to them, assigned to them, *imagined* in them, by a confident, powerful, Magus-like personality. Who is this godly creature? Who, reading Nabokov's most revealing works, (*Speak, Memory* and *Ada*), can doubt that it is only Nabokov himself" (Oates, 106).

The universe then, like the novels themselves, is Nabokov's to own, to shape and, when necessary, to deny. As Oates says, "Nabokov empties the universe of everything except Nabokov" (Oates, 107). By appropriating the world in fiction, cleaning the slate, and crowning himself king, Nabokov creates a new, alternate reality, or as John Shade

says in the poem *Pale Fire*, "a game of worlds" constructed from a game of words that always operates on Nabokov's own terms while still maintaining an illusion of semblance with that other "average reality" known to the rest of us. Now, whether or not he shares the secret nature of those rules with the shadows who haunt this so-called "average reality" often depends on the potential of the individual. If the individual proves to be wanting, then so be it. Nabokov makes no excuses for his endeavors, asks no pardons, and rarely gives any quarter. As de la Durantaye has noted, Nabokov "was often frustrated by editorial changes made to his texts so as to accommodate what he contemptuously called the 'average reader'," a title as simple, yet somehow as demeaning as his take on collective notions of reality (de la Durantaye, 26).

While a critic as dedicated as Boyd may hold the opinion that his work invites "both reader and characters, in line after line and life after life, into something freer than the ample and opulent prison of space, time, and the self," for Oates that invitation is both limited and cruelly encoded (Boyd, 2005, 47). It is this dismissal of humanity, what Rorty sees as bliss born of cruelty, that leads Oates to make the bold, yet by no means original, claim that "Nabokov exhibits the most amazing capacity for loathing that one is likely to find in serious literature, a genius for dehumanizing that seems to me more frightening, because it is more intelligent, than Céline's or even than Swift's" (Ibid, 107)

On the textual level, it's worth noting that world of Nabokov's fiction is often itself a cruel, hard world for Nabokov's own characters. Whether it's the pedophilic obsessions of Humbert Humbert, the madness and self-delusion of Charles Kinbote, or the fact that a vast majority of Nabokov's characters, both "good" and "bad," wind up dead more often than not, it would no doubt be a nightmare for anyone to wake and find themselves rendered as a fictional character in a Nabokov novel. Their worlds are, to say the least, not very much fun. At the heart of this power exerted over his characters, Nabokov himself stands as a monarch or deity, dealing fates and fortunes to his characters in a way that mimics the way he saw the "real" world as operating, that is to say, somewhat coldly and cruelly, but always mysteriously. Nabokov's fictional realm becomes a realm of artistic autonomy, a reality operating by its own internal system, but not just for the characters that inhabit that world or the astute reader factored for in the text, but for Nabokov himself. In this realm, Nabokov is the metafictional deity "stopping

in to maintain order in his carefully patterned texts...yet [one who] often seems to evince an indifference to whatever cruelty is inflicted upon his creations" (de la Durantaye, 26). In regards to such authorial power, de la Durantaye observes that while "many a character in his works lives and breathes with surprising life, they do so in absolute servitude. In his accounts of the process of his creation, he treats his characters with a tyrannical stringency recalling nothing so much as Michelangelo's boast that marble trembled when he approached" (Ibid, 24).

For Nabokov, the notion of a fictional character taking on a life and presence of its own, of it dictating its desires and intention to the writer himself, was "a preposterous experience" and any writer who claimed such autonomy from artifice "must be very minor or insane" (Nabokov, 1973, 69). In fact, Nabokov's stance toward his fictional entities, and in many ways his fictional worlds as a whole, can be summed up in this short, absolute claim: "my characters are galley slaves" (Ibid, 95). His text are permeated by his presence and power as constant reminders of his central place in this particular world, this particular "reality". In order to "make sure his galley slaves are rowing in unison, he goes so far as to penetrate the confines of his fictional worlds, appearing as a cross between a character and a God in his fictions" (de la Durantaye, 25).

Critical opinions concerning this totalizing power are, of course, as divided as the opinions on the works themselves. The central division has surrounded the question as to why exactly Nabokov would endeavor to exert such complete control over every aspect of the novel, never settling for a place as merely the omniscient creator, but striving instead to mimic the mysterious operations of the world by placing characters (and readers) in such powerless epistemological positions. Why would he, as de la Durantaye writes, so "often take up this theme of a character dimly aware of a creator, but powerless to gain a greater share of knowledge or control"? (de la Durantaye, 25). When speaking of himself as Sirin during the earlier Russian years, why would Nabokov so strangely comment that "his best works are those in which he condemns his people to the solitary confinement of their souls"?² Once again, intentionality is necessarily at the root of the debate concerning such choices on Nabokov's part.

The aim of this chapter was, for the most part, to attempt a contextualization of

² cited by Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, 453

Nabokov's literary methods through an initially general approach to his place among other writers and thinkers of the time. As has been discussed, the elusive and shifting nature of Nabokov's nationality and the internationally eclectic character of his influences has made a simple classification of his art both difficult and risky. The Slavophile aiming to establish a continuity of influences between Nabokov and Dostoevsky, Chekov, or Tolstoy along cultural lines runs full-force into the wall of Nabokov's very own divided opinions on such writers and their greater worth. The modernist seeking some lineage of influence from early twentieth century writers in Nabokov's works will find a plethora of pleasing symmetries but, if unwary, will completely overlook the innovations pioneered by Nabokov as both a response to high modernism and as purely original expressions of artistic ability and consciousness. Even the postmodern critic who rightfully recognizes the roots of late twentieth-century, postmodern literary methods and themes in Nabokov's textual play, such as the fragmentation of identity and metafictional experiments, must acknowledge the distinctly original, distinctly irreproducible—distinctly Nabokovian—quality of his aesthetic leaps and bounds.

The next chapter will move away from this contextualization of Nabokov's literary legacy and instead focus, as perhaps Nabokov would have preferred, on the work itself. While many Nabokov novels would provide an array of opportunities for discussing the ludic qualities of his fine-tuned textual engineering, no novel seems to do so quite as consciously and overtly as *Pale Fire*, a novel Foster sees as being "often viewed as a masterpiece of emerging postmodernism in fiction" and in part responsible for the "process by which 'postmodern' shifted from its original narrowly American application to the broad international meaning it holds today" (Foster, 1993, 231). Yet, more importantly, the very nature of *Pale Fire's* construction as both poem and commentary, the bipolarity of tone between the parts, the labyrinthian circularity of its imagery, all contribute to creating a text unsurpassed in complexity and intangibility. For Boyd, the novel's infamous resistance to consensus "invites us to discovery," yet "also prompts us to disagree radically about what we think we have found. Nabokov's finest novel has become a paradigm of literary elusiveness, a test case of apparent undecidability" (Boyd, 1999, 3). In a debate concerned with the function of aesthetics in

the modern novel and the greater ramifications for human consciousness, *Pale Fire* stands as the perfect focal point for an analysis of Nabokov's literary devices and ontological operations. Does the litany of ludic elements amount to merely a specious display of oblique signification or do the patterns behind the patter hint at an even greater, more profound epistemology?

Chapter Two
Pale Fire and the Process of Discovery

Some law of logic should fix the number of coincidences in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of a new truth.

– Vladimir Nabokov

He would also declare that of the many kinds of pleasure literature can minister, the highest is the pleasure of the imagination. Since not everyone is capable of experiencing that pleasure, many will have to content themselves with simulacra.

– Jorge Luis Borges

Guildenstern: A man talking sense to himself is no madder than a man talking nonsense not to himself.

Rosencrantz: Or just as mad.

Guildenstern: Or just as mad.

Rosencrantz: And he does both.

Guildenstern: So there you are.

Rosencrantz: Stark raving sane.

- Tom Stoppard

1. *The Riddle with an Elegant Solution*

Even within an oeuvre as impressive and innovative as Vladimir Nabokov's, a body of writing composed of such seminal and influential works as *Lolita* and *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, the novel *Pale Fire* still manages to rise above the rest as a truly exceptional milestone in twentieth-century literature. In his comprehensive study on

the novel, Brian Boyd contends that “*Pale Fire* invites readers to discovery in a way no other novel does, and for that very reason it can excite readers like no other book” (Boyd, 1999, 3). Even at the beginning of the twenty first century, when the epistemologies of doubt and deconstructive discourses of postmodernism have become commonplace priorities in fiction writing, *Pale Fire* precedes them in its ability to problematize both the notion of objectivity in perspective and essentialism in identity. Yet, the novel moves beyond simply proposing problems and questions, acting as an encoded key not just for reading beyond the artifice of fiction, but also as a kind of guide to the possible truth to be experienced beyond the artifice of “reality.” “In an age that has become particularly skeptical of the possibility of *artistic* discovery, both *in art* and *about art*,” Boyd argues that *Pale Fire* confirms “that writers and readers can discover new ways of writing and reading and that these discoveries have much in common with the process of scientific discovery” (Ibid).

Where some critics have merely found within Nabokov’s work instances of acute aesthetic preoccupation or even a borderline sadistic penchant for ingenious trickery, writers like Boyd have seen a much more profound purpose behind the lexical gaming and cunning rhetoric. For such critics, Nabokov’s methods marks a distinctly new, unprecedented epistemological relationship between author and reader, an ontological roadmap for training the powers of perception in both the fictive and non-fictive realms of experience. Carl Eichelberger has written that “Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* demands not only a creative reader, but a reader willing to participate in a series of involuted and complex games woven into the novel’s texture,” pointing to the ubiquitous presence of the “spirit of play” as defined by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play Element In Culture* (Eichelberger, 176). However, Eichelberger, like Boyd, goes to great extents to argue that, although such playfulness “pervades every thread of *Pale Fire*’s fictional fabric,” by no means should such apparent irreverence be an indication “that Nabokov’s phosphorescent masterpiece is to be read in a purely capricious spirit” (Ibid).

The main focus of this chapter will be a more textual analysis of how exactly Nabokov approaches the composition of his “riddles with elegant solutions,” looking to the prevalent themes, imagery, puns, and allusions in *Pale Fire* as a means to a better

understanding of how Nabokov conceived the process and product of fiction writing. In lieu of such an analytical angle on the ludic elements of the novel, Nabokov's comments concerning the creation of *Lolita* may prove to be a good starting point for tackling the textual tangles of *Pale Fire*. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov referred to that writing process as being "like the composition of a beautiful puzzle – its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look" (Nabokov, 1973, 20). While Nabokov's comments here concern *Lolita*, his evocation of problems, solutions and the notion of one being a reflection, a mirror more specifically, of the other bares even more relevance to the images and operations taking place in *Pale Fire*.

In using Huizinga's terminology once again, Eichelberger views this "spirit of play" as a sign that, "[i]n Nabokov's career, as in human development, *homo ludens* ('man the player') precedes *homo significans* ('signifying man')" (Eichelberger, 176). Thus, "Nabokov's fusion of pattern and play through the creation of intricate puns and Krestoslovitsi [crossword puzzles] indicates the extent to which *Pale Fire*'s creator merges *homo ludens* and *homo significans*" (Ibid, 177). From the very outset, the reader is placed in a position of play as the problem solver on the other end of the board while Nabokov acts as both architect and opposition. The very nature of this relationship between author and reader has been, in part, responsible for the postmodern readings of Nabokov's texts and techniques as the traditional boundaries between creator and consumer are dissolved in favor of a more playful, participatory metanarrative. Reading Nabokov becomes a discursive act of mutual contribution and aesthetic discovery rather than merely the processing of self-proclaimed truths, transparent allegories, or historically contingent grand narratives. Eichelberger notes how "the trans-individual nature of games reflects Nabokov's stance toward linguistic referentiality, and in turn, toward the reader's involvement with the text" (Ibid, 176). "Language can be viewed as a game with culturally conditioned shifting rules" in Eichelberger's view and a close "inspection of Nabokov's use of games as a formal ordering principle in *Pale Fire* demonstrates how Nabokov subverts both conventional notion of language and realistic notions of character to reveal new fictional possibilities, and engages the reader in the aesthetic problems fiction writing presents to the author" (Ibid, 176).

Before moving on to discuss the individual moves Nabokov makes within the chessboard of his texts, the placement of his pawns, the deceptive dummy moves of his knights or the unexpected castling of his kings, it's important to first outline the nature of structure in novels such as *Pale Fire*, that is, the shape of board itself. Boyd's comments about ordering principles in the novel could, under different circumstances, be applied to the mirroring symmetry of a chess game when he comments that in "the sheer beauty of form, *Pale Fire* may well be the most perfect novel ever written" (Boyd, 1991,425). In the very structure of the novel, Boyd sees a conscious and detailed balancing act that organizes the novel *not* around a central, linear notion of progression, but a decentered harmonizing of the parts within the whole. "Each scene stands out with crystalline clarity and at the same time flips from right to left, from meaning to madness, in the crazy mirrors of Kinbote's mind; each crisp but comically unstable moment challenges us to discover its place in what feigns to be chaos but turns out to be consummate order" (Ibid, 425).

The composition of *Pale Fire* in particular rivals most modern novel's in its innovativeness of structure, operating as one of the first instances of hypertext in fiction as it moves beyond merely imbedding multiple narratives within a single metanarrative in the manner of Nabokov's modernist predecessors, such as Conrad's polyphonic, fractured narratives in *Lord Jim* or Virginia Woolf's experiments with weaving several subjective strands together to form a collective narrative consciousness. When discussing Nabokov's narratives structures, Boyd has observed that "although he rarely offers formal stories within stories, in the manner of Cervantes, Fielding, or Barth, he likes to offer hints of or vistas on other stories, or even a second main story concealed behind the first" (Boyd, 2005, 32). The key in Boyd's observation of Nabokov's methods here is, of course, the word *concealed* as opposed to way the preceding authors are described as *offering* their secondary tales-within-tales. At the heart of Boyd's assessment of both *Pale Fire* and Nabokov is the central role of discovery, of knowledge obtained through experience rather than exegesis.

While writing the extensive and exhaustive commentary to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov had the first sparks for the idea of a novel that would parody the very endeavors of academic scholarship by providing both poem and commentary in

a reflexive yet disjointed harmony that would establish the balance and consonance somewhere in the margins between the two. As a parody of the academic's efforts, Nabokov had already conceived of a mad commentator (the yet-to-be Kinbote) who would act out "in comically literal form all the perennial perversions of the critical mind: the critic's desire to appropriate the text, to insinuate himself into it, to make it say what he would like it to say, to thrust himself between text and reader" (Boyd, 1991,430). In doing so, Nabokov hoped to invite the avid reader, like the avid scientist, to investigate the contours of the unique puzzle, while at the same time striving against a hyperbolic representation of the very roadblocks he so often saw as standing between the reader and the comprehension of a text's true aesthetic bliss. In the American half of his biography, Boyd cites a letter to Jason Epstein in which Nabokov discusses the first stirrings of novel that would become *Pale Fire*:

My main creature, an ex-king, is engaged throughout *Pale Fire* in a certain quest. This quest, or research (which at one point, alas, involves some very sophisticated spiritualism), is completely divorced from so-called faith or religion, gods, God, Heaven, folklore, etc...My creature's quest is centered in the problem of the heretofore and hereafter, and it is I may say beautifully solved.³

Thus it can be seen from the beginning that Nabokov conceived of a novel in which characters and readers would be involved in complex, oscillating text of discovery centered *not* around the progression of the novel's plot, but around the revelations reached as the reader bounces back and forth between the novel's parts. Like *Lolita*, Nabokov's narrator, his ex-king Charles Kinbote, would be more than just another unreliable narrative voice spouting specious lines to lure the unwary reader off the beaten path. Like Humbert Humbert, Charles Kinbote exists as an unwitting piece in Nabokov's metaphysical game of knowledge, subject to many of the same traps and tricks as the reader and, in many cases, proving even less aware of the "reality" of the particular world that surrounds him. Central to achieving this aesthetic goal in the writing of *Pale Fire* would be a structure and symmetry not unlike a chessboard, a structure that would require the dedicated reader to fluctuate between the parts in an unpredictable series of

³ cited in Boyd, 1991, 306.

unique combinations as they investigated the hints and implications of the novel's meaningful coincidences and strange conundrums. As Boyd continually stresses, "more than any other novel, *Pale Fire* is committed to the excitement of discovery," a pleasure reserved only for those with an avid curiosity and a fine-tuned sense of artistic expression (Boyd, 1991, 425). The harmonic balance is, for Boyd, further proof that "*Pale Fire* also allows Nabokov the most perfect expression of his themes he could ever find" (Ibid, 425).

In her discussions of the affinity between Nabokov's epistemology and Derrida's philosophy of writing, Jacqueline Hamrit cites Derrida's claims concerning structure when she notes that, "the analysis of structure is based on the notion of a center that is meant to organize the structure but mainly to 'make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure'" (Hamrit, 158). She goes on to say that, "[d]ecentering the structure may therefore help to make play work" (Ibid, 158). She also points out that the unique composition of a novel such as *Pale Fire* stands as a clear indication that "Nabokov was aware of the disorder working in order, of the erasure of a center or an origin in the structure of his fictional works" (Ibid, 158-9). Once again, this harkens back to Nabokov's choice to structure the novel around reduplication and repetition of signifiers instead of a logical, cause-and-effect progression of plot or an essentialism in symbols as a means to signifying. Variations on central themes function as orientation points, like intertextual reflections of each other, deriving meaning not from causality but from thematic play within the harmony of the structure. As Hamrit sees it:

[P]lay allows a proliferation in meaning which is not fixed and permanent but renewed and constantly regenerated not only through the mere polysemic accumulation of layers of meaning but through the creation and production of dissemination momentarily stopped thanks to a new organising order which is bound to entail a new meaning, another meaning, on more meaning". (Hamrit, 160)

The relevance of this observation for Nabokov's gaming then becomes quite clear. By resisting the generalizing power of a centralized narrative and the reductionism of representational allegory, Nabokov creates a situation in which, as he says himself, the

“entire structure, dimly illumined in one’s mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing” (Nabokov, 1973, 31-32).

But why this insistence on structure? Why have some critics, such as Stegner, cited a lack of content within Nabokov’s focus on form, insisting that *Pale Fire* is no more than a frail, though exquisite, house of cards bearing no moral or message? Key to comprehending the role of structure in *Pale Fire* is an understanding of how Nabokov hoped to derive meaning through the specifics of the text rather than the readymade markers of literature such as symbolism and thinly veiled allegory. In the postscript “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” Nabokov bluntly declares, “I detest symbols and allegories” as he discusses the difficulty encountered when trying to invent a text of true originality (Nabokov, 1970, 314). For the reader or critic who scans a Nabokov novel in search of such clear, traditional markers of meaning, Nabokov had only one question: “Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories” (Nabokov, 1973, 66). Nabokov’s insistence on this point is more than just an aversion to the previously popular practices that prized the use of such devices in order to convey meanings otherwise subsumed in the surface of the text. The reader in search of such generalities is placed in a problematic perspective that threatens to blind them to the specifics of Nabokov’s structural symmetries, without which their reading is limited to the surface of the text only, nullifying any hope that they might discover the many ludic layers beneath, that is, the texture of the text. As de la Durantaye has observed, “Nabokov’s polemical opposition to symbolism and allegory stemmed directly and consistently from his vision of the importance of the particularity, the importance of the detail viewed and felt in and for itself” (de la Durantaye, 116).

For Nabokov, a the joy of discovering a unique and pure truth within the illusory, complex twists and turns of a text was far more gratifying than merely surveying the surface for the common denominators. More importantly, for Nabokov, freeing oneself from such literary anchors allows for the construction of a more mysterious, deceptive narrative that, once again, comes to mimic the mysterious operations of our own reality, which in Nabokov’s eyes was void of the simple solutions to be found in a bold symbol

or cookie cutter allegory. According to Nabokov, “All art is deceptive, and so is nature,” and in attempting to replicate that enigmatic operation he still acknowledges that “deception is practiced even more beautifully by that other V.N., Visible Nature” (Nabokov, 1973,153).

Even within the very first few lines of John Shade’s poem, this notion of deception and play in nature serves a vital role in the riddles of the novel as the famous first line offers: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure of the windowpane” (Nabokov, 1962, 33). It is this bird, the “waxwing, emblem and shadow of deception,” that serves as the first instance of particularity as being key to comprehension and it is the repetitious play of this bird that “inaugurates the poetic speculation of one of Nabokov’s most patterned and complex creations” (de la Durantaye,158). Furthermore, de la Durantaye declares that the “problem that the impertinent-looking bird poses is that of the nature and purpose of *deception* in Nabokov’s work” (Ibid, 158). The very structural placement of the bird, its reoccurrence and relevance within the puzzle of the text, operates as an orientation point for the would-be solver and, later, a unique signifier rather than a pure symbol. In de la Durantaye’s words, “this masked and mirroring bird crashes to its death, as we saw, in the opening lines of Shade’s poem – and from beyond its mirrory grave it serves to signal shadows, concealment, deception, paranoia – and something lying beyond” (Ibid, 159). Thematically, the waxwing’s dilemma is for John Shade a fitting image of humanity’s own metaphysical limits, of the striving to transcend the borders and barriers of our reality, to fly on beyond the veil into the infinite blue. As Boyd observes in his study of *Pale Fire*, in using the bird Shade “is projecting himself in imagination into the waxwing, as if it were somehow still flying beyond death, and into the reflected azure of the window, as if that were the cloudlessness of some hereafter” (Boyd, 1999, 25).

However, the structural significance of the line only comes to fruition once the reader has managed to navigate past the circuitous, consuming commentary of Charles Kinbote. As a poem constructed of rhyming couplets, the odd, asymmetrical line count of 999 strikes a strange tone in light the apparent frivolity of the number when a rounded line count at 1000 would no doubt make more poetic sense. The immediate implication for the attentive reader is that a single line remains unrhymed, intentionally or not,

somewhere within the poem. Nabokov leaves a number of hints and clues to help the curious reader discover the answer to this particular structural riddle if they choose to follow Kinbote's parenthetical references and imperatives, otherwise the gravity of the line's symmetry fails to ring out till the reader has either read the poem in its entirety or worked their way through Kinbote's tangential commentary. Within the very first note of the commentary, the note to Lines 1-4, Kinbote offers a number of proleptic directives, the second of which is a note to "(see also lines 181-182)" in which the waxwing is once again mentioned by Shade in a naturalistic setting (Nabokov, 1962, 73). However, if the reader is already aware of the sensitive balance and resonance between poem and commentary, then the next step is to check the Kinbote's note in regard to these lines. If followed, the reader is offered, literally within the first page of the commentary, this structural hint from Kinbote (and, therefore, Nabokov himself): "The bird of lines 1-4 and 131 is again with us. It will reappear in the ultimate line of the poem..." (Ibid, 163). If and when that final line of the poem is checked by the hopefully still curious reader, the mystery of the missing couplet is solved while at the same time the contours of the novel's structure are revealed. The final, 999th line reads: "Trundling an empty barrow up the lane," serving as a clear indicator that, as Boyd has noted, the "poem ends with its last rhyming couplet unfinished – unless we return to the first line, which would round off the structure and rhyme with 'I was the shadow of the waxwing slain'" (Ibid, 69; Boyd, 1991, 442). As the central component of the novel, the sincere artistry at the core of the novel's flair, the poem reveals itself to be both harmoniously balanced and circuitous. In not finishing the final line, Nabokov offers an image of the novel's inverted scaffolding, a lattice work of self-referential mirror moments that, inevitably, leads back to the beginning.

The format of the novel becomes key to both its solution and its aesthetic and metaphysical implications. At the core is the 999-line poem *Pale Fire* written by the aging, erudite fireside poet John Shade, a four canto opus meditating upon his youth, his forty-year marriage to his loving wife Sybil, his daughter Hazel's suicide, and his own pending mortality. Yet, the soft, highly personal poem is enveloped by three additional, dissonant components, the forward, line-by-line commentary, and index by the self-proclaimed expert and close friend to John Shade, Dr. Charles Kinbote. Even the order in

which they are placed within the novel hints at a circularity of time, in this case the date of composition, as the Forward, sequentially first, is the last penned and the poem, sequentially second, is the earliest with commentary and index following thereafter. Thus, the reader literally begins at the end, obtaining a massive amount of proleptic and yet to be contextualized information. In choosing to structure and divide the novel so, Nabokov stifles the idea of a centralized coherence from the very outset by removing the red thread of linear progression from the novel's narrative and establishing a self-reflexive system that creates meaning through juxtaposition and repetition. In Hamrit's words, "[i]t is through cumulation that Nabokov proceeds and not in a linear sequence. He compares the composition of his novels to the fashioning of a puzzle or painting" (Hamrit, 160). Such a choice on Nabokov's part not only decenters the text's narrative, but also manages to create a circumstance in which information is revealed non-sequentially and in piecemeal fashion, creating a situation, like Eichelberger notes, in which knowledge is revealed much like a crossword puzzle. As the reader reads and re-reads, gaps and fissures are filled to reveal new meanings, hidden truths and unforeseen possibilities scattered across board of the text. For Nabokov, the reading process was to share the same qualities that he experienced during the writing process: "I don't write consecutively from the beginning to the next chapter and so on to the end. I just fill in the gaps of the picture, of this jigsaw puzzle which is quite clear in my mind, pickling out a piece here and a piece there..." (Nabokov, 1973, 16-17). This aspect of Nabokov's writing serves as another example of the way in which, "[u]nlike a Mann or a Musil, he quickly becomes impatient with ideas," with a literature of ideas that chooses to declare so-called "truth," be it philosophical, political or ethical, rather than present truth within art (Boyd, 1999, 6).

Thus, in the very process of writing, Nabokov always and continually remains sensitive to the implied epistemology of his eventual readership, to the limits of their logical conclusions, to the borders between the problem sculptor and the problem solver. Although critics of Nabokov have argued that the complexity and even the eccentricity of his gaming signals a purely solipsistic preoccupation with an aesthetics of the self, an unsolvable series of lexical labyrinths, Boyd maintains that "from the local to the global level, Nabokov attends to what we and his characters can know at a particular point, and

to the difference between the character's knowledge and what we as readers might be able to infer from our position outside their world" (Boyd, 2005, 34). The games become, in this sense, a confirmation of the central role of cognition in Nabokov's work, on both the authorial and readership ends of the spectrum, as a means of engaging active, human intellect with the stasis of the text. As Boyd goes on to say in his discussion of Nabokov's narrative techniques, "his scenes are always saturated by mind, by the hero's, or briefly, by another character's, by the narrator's or author's or reader's" to the effect that it serves to underscore the crucial place of human (and not solely Nabokov's) rationale and intelligence in reifying the role of such playful elements in the construction of the novel (Ibid, 33). Nabokov's portrayal of the subjective nature of human experience is thus flexible enough to not only acknowledge but to incorporate the importance of intersubjective discourse in the successful construction of meaningful and truly original narratives. The nature of the playful and punning Nabokovian narrative world is such that even the anonymous reader is factored for and implicit in its discursive processes. And like life itself, Nabokov prefers to craft a situation in which latent revelations and minor miracles await the individual willing to work toward awareness.

Furthermore, in Hamrit's eyes the intersubjective nature of Nabokov's games and the insight they offer to the dedicated reader regarding the writing process as a whole are examples of how "Nabokov's aesthetics is in accordance with an epistemological choice that echoes Derrida's claims about meaning, writing, literature and its relationship with reality," that "considering the text as 'a web of signs' [*un tissu de signes*]" finds its corollary in Nabokov's comments about texture and depth within narrative (Hamrit, 158; 166). Or as John Shade says in his poem:

Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
810 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (Nabokov, 1962, 63)

In lieu of this shared “epistemological choice” between the two writers, Hamrit also does well to cite Nabokov scholar Michael Wood’s comment that Nabokov “also anticipates and varies Derrida’s famous claim that there is no outside the text, *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Hamrit, 166).

This philosophical affinity can be seen in Nabokov’s exceedingly porous texts, narratives rife with intertextual punctures, self-awareness, self-parody and interjections of authorial reality. In a sense, reading a Nabokov novel becomes an act of oblique communication with Nabokov himself, an indirect discussion and demonstration of the limits and paradoxes of not only literature and language, but also of one’s own personal “reality” as well. The mistake made by a reader of Nabokov is to assume that the novel in question operates according to the rules and regulations of the novel as a traditional art form or as a closed, structural system organized around fixed relations of fixed signifiers. “The sophistication of the patterns of meaning” in Nabokov’s work is, in Toker’s words, “dependent on intertextual links as well as on internal patterns of significance created by the paradigmatic recurrence of images and motifs and by the syntagmatic reciprocal influence of words in collocation” (Toker, 234). Nabokov’s thoroughly discussed abhorrence of symbolism is then akin to Derrida’s notion that “there is no transcendental signified, that ‘an infinite signified’ exceeds language” (Hamrit, 166). In making this choice, Hamrit argues, “Nabokov does not separate language and the world. He incorporates (‘injects’) reality in fiction, seasoning fiction with realistic ingredients. Fiction therefore does not provide a mere referential illusion but is interlaced with reality. However, reality can only be quoted and/or invented” (Ibid, 172).

2. Jeux de mots...Jeux des mondes?: Word games in a “game of worlds”

The infamous role of lexical and textual play in Nabokov's oeuvre has been so far discussed in relation to Nabokov's contemporaries and predecessors and as vital elements in Nabokov's approach to structuring narratives around artifice and aesthetics rather than the mimesis of Realism or the grand narratives of engagé literature. A closer look at the actual ludic operations taking place within *Pale Fire* offers an even clearer understanding of how Nabokov hoped to induce certain epiphanies in his more dedicated readers

through the use of puns, patterns, anagrams, and general wordplay as orientation points on the path to even greater, metafictional discoveries. Before moving on to discuss perhaps the greatest puzzle in *Pale Fire*, the mystery surrounding the verbose yet enigmatic Charles Kinbote, a.k.a King Charles Xavier of Zembla, it's first necessary to outline the operations of certain minor puzzles within the text in order to separate Nabokov's tricks from Nabokov's treasures. In mimicking the elusive and often misleading ways of the world at large, Nabokov often embraces the same problems and dilemmas encountered during the process of scientific discovery, such as the deceptive allure of facile yet specious solutions, red herrings, and what the more paranoid individual might come to view as a divine though malevolent playfulness in the rotation of the cosmos. Nabokov's own comments in *Speak, Memory* regarding the construction of chess problems says quite a lot about his approach to literature as well, likening his endeavors to a dual of wits and, perhaps, providing a helpful frame for approaching *Pale Fire* as well:

It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world). So that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of "tries" – delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray. (Nabokov, 1966, 290)

With this *modus operandi* in mind, Nabokov proceeds in writing texts that offer challenges both on a minor and major level, from individual puns playing on literary allusions or witty anagrams with metafictional significance that offer localized pleasures to trans-textual mazes with multiple levels requiring even the most educated reader to read and re-read. Boyd in particular has suggested that reading *Pale Fire* properly requires repeated exposure to text, to the tone of its playfulness and the shape of its structure, in order to allow the mind to work through the succeeding levels of artistry and discovery. As will be discussed later concerning the Kinbote question, Boyd has suggested that revelation in *Pale Fire* works in a dialectical fashion, offering first one simple solution, the path of least resistance, after which further exposure seems to

suggest an antithetical solution to the novel's main riddle. In what has become a revolutionary approach to the book and a complete reworking of Boyd's own original theories, his triadic theory as expressed in *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* finds the nearest answer to Nabokov's artifice in the final synthesis of the two previous readings. As the two opposing and contradictory readings spiral together, they, like the spiraling poem and commentary, come to reinforce each other, to illuminate and clarify each other. A first round acquaintance with Nabokov's methods on a minor scale will help to underscore their operations on the higher level later on.

When first discussing the vantage point the house offered for spying on the Shades, Kinbote mentions seeing John and Sybil “slowly collecting and stacking scattered playing cards left after a game of patience,” yet is disturbed by their emotions as he wonders “what on earth could be so tear-provoking about the outcome of a game of cards” (Nabokov, 1962, 90). The humor of Kinbote’s commentary usually resides in his ignorance of the world around him, in this case the fact that John has just read the section of *Pale Fire* that addresses their daughter’s suicide. However, his misunderstandings are often key opportunities for Nabokov to slip clues into the text in the guise of humor. The gaming elements in this first narrative section detailing Kinbote’s life in New Wye are strong hints as to where the reader should try and stand in relation to both the author on the grand scale and Kinbote on the textual scale. The reader in search of simple symbols might deduce that John’s wife’s name, Sybil, is some reference to the oracular seeress and perhaps the allusion will come to fruition later in the form of a prediction. Yet, Sybil is also a type of card game or, more specifically, card flourishing in which the deck is divided up into packets and manipulated by the magician. The image of the card wielding magician takes one back to the Forward where Kinbote describes John Shade’s mission as “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,” comparing the pleasure of watching him to a childhood memory he has of seeing “a conjurer who had just given a fantastic performance and was now quietly consuming a vanilla ice” (Ibid, 27). Kinbote even refers to Shade as “my beloved old conjurer” who “put a pack of index cards into his hat – and shook out a poem” (Ibid, 28).

The relevance of this initial observations from Kinbote becomes quite clear, not only in relation to the games now initiated, but also to the earlier discussions concerning Nabokov's structural choices. Like John Shade, Nabokov too wrote the majority of his novels on index cards so that they might be easily rearranged according to his whims and at the same time be more flexible to the influence of luck and chance on the order of the narrative. While some have taken these comments as a sign that Shade may in fact be behind both the poem and the commentary (a debate that will be discussed further in regards to the Kinbote question), it may be more useful to see this as another of the small hints that Nabokov the puppet master has provided for the attentive reader so early on in the novel. As one proceeds through the novel, it is worthwhile to remember this image of the conjurer in repose evoked in the Forward, the man of illusions resting on his laurels as he enjoys, almost indifferently, the fruits of his labors. It proves to be a fairly appropriate image in regard to Nabokov's house of mirrors.

There are a number of minor riddles within the novel that operate with the reader's expectations in mind, offering simple solutions that at first glance seem fulfilling, yet are also examples of Nabokov's tendency to lay puzzling, dead-end traps for the overconfident reader. Nabokov does well to offer several scenes that highlight the danger of searching too diligently for what appear to be predictable puzzles with simple solutions. Such red herrings have been, as discussed so far, viewed as examples of Nabokov's cruelty and even derision, however, if certain points are properly processed, the warning is loud and clear: those who choose to chase the wild goose get what they deserve.

The case of the crown jewels offers just such an opportunity to use artifice in order to make this clear. After Zembla has been overthrown by revolutionary Shadows, its palaces occupied and King Charles imprisoned in his quarters, the leaders of the group attempt to procure every ounce of royal wealth available in the kingdom. At some point, as Kinbote recounts, they receive word that the so-called crown jewels had been hidden within the palace and decide to hire a pair of Russian experts named Niagrín and Andronnikov to locate the infamous hiding spot. After searching many of the palaces numerous chambers, they turn their attention to wing of the palace that operates as an art gallery, displaying portraits of Zemblan royalty. Among these paintings are the works of

a Zemblan artist named Eystein, whom Kinbote describes as having “showed himself to a prodigious mast of the *trompe l’oeil* in the depiction of various objects” (Ibid, 130). Yet, in “some of his portraits Eystein had also resorted to a weird form of trickery: among his decorations of wood or wool, gold or velvet, he would insert one which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint”(Ibid). Now the first warning is, of course, the fact that Eystein is a master of visual illusions and, furthermore, intentionally deceptive ones at that.

Among his portraits is one of the “former Keeper of the Treasure,” containing a three-dimensional box that leads the two Russians to believe the crown jewels must be hidden behind this particular painting (Ibid, 130). The misinterpretation sends the two excavators on wild search that nearly brings the entire palace to the ground as they proceed to dig behind every wall they can in search of tangible treasures. Aside from the warning that the scene issues regarding the danger of pursuing such simple suggestions to such extremes, Kinbote’s comments concerning Eystein’s methods of composition also serve as a very relevant remark about Nabokov’s own compositions: “the basic fact that ‘reality’ is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye” (Ibid). Once again, the implication for Nabokov’s novels centers on the potentially massive difference between what is perceived and what truly exists beneath the facade. Any resemblance between the novel’s world and reality should be approached with a healthy suspicion. After all, as Kinbote says, “the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian *zemlya*, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections, or ‘resemblers’” (Ibid, 265).

In a further extension of the lesson the scene offers, Nabokov also raises the issue of the crown jewels to a metafictional level by giving them an entry in Kinbote’s index, a particularly active segment of the novel in which Nabokov is offered ample space to make the necessary bridges and connections between more remote games located throughout the text of the forward, poem and commentary. As the reader becomes aware of the index and its relevance to the tale Kinbote weaves, it becomes more and more tempting to refer to index in order to see what has and has not made it into Kinbote’s quixotic list of worthy entries. The case of the missing crown jewels offers a prime example of the way that Nabokov’s novels manage to rise above the level of the

narrative, incorporating the reader, while inverting back upon themselves in spiraling reflections. The entry for “*Crown Jewels*” offers their location by page number within the text, but also suggests that the reader “see Hiding Place” (Ibid, 306). The entry for *Hiding place* offer “potaynik (q.v.),” but does not suggest any further notations. However, considering the fact that the primary subject of the game is the secret location of the crown jewels, the index would no doubt continue to adhere to this impulse to obscure the exact whereabouts of the treasure. If the reader is still curious, a search for “*Potaynik*” yields an unreferenced entry in the index, despite its obvious relevance to the game in question (Ibid, 312). Under the entry is merely a reduction of the word to “*taynik* (q.v.)”. If readers have managed to maintain their suspicion, this final entry offers a sweet, sequestered reward, but one quite unlike the gold and diamonds for which the Russians are searching so avidly. The final link in the game, the entry “*Taynik*,” offers this: “*Taynik*, Russ., secret place; see Crown Jewels” (Ibid, 314).

In creating this particular textual puzzle, Nabokov manages to achieve several aims at once. On the one hand, he subjects the reader to a goose chase just as frivolous as the one the Russians undertake, highlighting the fact that the novel is in fact a kind of duel taking place on Nabokov’s own turf and terms. Yet, as Boyd has suggested, “the Index plays everywhere with the impulse to discovery that runs throughout *Pale Fire*, thwarted in the case of Niagrín and Andronnikov, so often richly rewarded for the reader. It prompts our curiosity...challenges our attention but repays us with surprising cadences or details...” (Boyd, 1999, 65). Kinbote himself unwittingly tunes into the ludic nature of the scene later in the commentary while confidently boasting about the safe and secure nature of the hiding spot. In attempting to play the condescending apologist for Russians’ failures he waxes prosaically: “All this is the rule of a supernal game, all this is the immutable fable of fate, and should not be construed as reflecting on the efficiency of the two Soviet experts” (Nabokov, 1962, 244).

In Eichelberger’s discussions of ludic practices in *Pale Fire*, he notes that, “[o]f the many games contained between the covers of *Pale Fire*, none has generated as much critical discussion as the anagrammatic Word Golf” (Eichelberger, 182). As another example of Nabokov’s penchant for achieving purpose through word play, this particular duel is recounted by Kinbote as a game he and Shade play in which each member takes

turns transforming one word into another coherent word by changing only one letter at a time. In the note to line 819, the note in reference to Shade's line "Playing a game of worlds," Kinbote discusses the nature of this game of words:

My illustrious friend showed a childish predilection for all sorts of word games and especially for so-called word golf. He would interrupt the flow of prismatic conversation to indulge in this particular pastime, and naturally it would have been boorish of me to refuse playing with him. Some of my records are: hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five... (Nabokov, 1962, 262)

The passage is significant for many reasons. As far as the actual narrative instance goes, Kinbote could just as easily be describing Nabokov himself as John Shade. The passage almost operates as a good-humored response from Nabokov to those who have criticized him for his "childish predilection for all sorts of word games," or the fact that such indulgences tend to "interrupt the flow" of narrative and plot in his novels. By choosing to file this particular word game under the note to "Playing a game of worlds," Nabokov also manages to effectively illustrate and literalize the connection between his penchant for word play, puns and puzzles and greater significance these lexical games have within the context of fiction writing.

Yet, more importantly, the presence of the game resonates throughout the novel, from poem to index, linking many of the images and tropes so far discussed. The passage that Kinbote has chosen to reference is particularly telling. At no point in this part of the poem is there a mention of world golf, games, or Kinbote's evenings spent on Shade's front porch. Kinbote has chosen to discuss this specific game in lieu of the following couplet in Shade's opus:

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
820 To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns. (Ibid, 63)

Once again, Nabokov's chess metaphors come into play as Kinbote discusses this random memory from his time spent with Shade. Furthermore, the tone of this section of

Canto Three is primarily concerned with discerning meaning behind the madness of the world, addressing the would-be gods in a tone of irreverence as they are described as no more than indifferent men playing games with living, breathing pieces of our world. The previous section in Shade's poem, lines 808 through 815, concerns itself with the themes of pattern and discovery as it discusses "not text, but texture; not the dream / But topsyturvical coincidence, / Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense," as well as discussing the "correlated pattern in the game" (Ibid, 63). By choosing to set Kinbote's discussion of word golf in juxtaposition to this potent passage from Shade, Nabokov grants the reader a vital hint about texture of the text and the degree of involvement required in order to even approach the novel's solutions.

The now attuned reader realizes that such entries have their potential reflections in both the poem and the index. By referring back to the poem, Nabokov has effectively reiterated the themes at work within the novel, such as the search for meaning and patterns in the madness of the world. By literalizing this search for meaning, Nabokov clues the reader in on the ways in which textual artistry can come to reflect greater ontological concerns through example. For Eichelberger, "the lexical transformations required by Word Golf become analogous to the textual levels which must be traversed by the reader and the Word Golf becomes what André Gide called a *mise en abyme*...for the clash between author and world" (Eichelberger, 182)⁴. "While Word Golf is of course another of Nabokov's mirror games" according to Eichelberger, it is also "an extended metaphor for linguistic and semantic shifts occurring over time and altering shared perceptions of that elusive entity, "reality," which is defined by language" (Ibid, 183). This notion of the *mise en abyme*, or what is also referred to as the "illusion of infinity," will become even more relevant as it offers both a fitting metaphor for the mirroring framing devices Nabokov uses throughout the novel and helps to illustrate some of the more complex, spiraling mysteries that surround Kinbote's situation as well as the ontological conundrums they entail.

However, Nabokov doesn't stop here with word golf's textual potential. As has been illustrated with the issue of the crown jewels, certain subjects within Kinbote's

⁴ Eichelberger cites Gide's definition of the terms literary significance in his *Journal* from 1893: "In a work of art I rather like to find transposed, on the scale of the characters, the very subject of the work. Nothing

commentary seem to strongly suggest that the reader check for reverberations elsewhere in the text, but above all, in the index. Just as the presence of the crown jewels leads to a literalization and inversion of the Russians' endeavors to discover King Charles's treasure, a search for word golf becomes another mirroring, spiraling display of metafictional gaming. Within the index, the entry contains: "*Word golf*, S's predilection for it, 819; see Lass," offering the note already mentioned from Kinbote and a further reference within the index (Nabokov, 1962, 315). The mere existence of the entry "Lass" serves to illustrate just how comically undependable Kinbote's index truly is, considering the word has no relevance within any sector of the "*apparatus criticus*" or Shade's poem. However, the actual entry bears fuller fruit. This floating entry sparks a chain of further index references that becomes a literal display of word golf in action. "*Lass*, see *Mass*" leads to yet another isolated entry of "*Mass*, *Mars*, *Mare*, see *Male*" (Ibid, 310; 311). The final chain in series is "*Male*, see *Word Golf*" and, much like the search for the crown jewels, reveals the inherent circularity of the novel, the prison house of mirrors in which the even the reader is at times trapped by the texture of the text (Ibid, 310).

Eichelberger makes a strong distinction between the way word golf's manifestations come to reflect the nature of the characters engaged. "As a Shadean pastime, Word Golf take on a rule-governed, end-oriented, logical set of qualities" as regards John Shade (Eichelberger, 182). However, in regards to Kinbote's acquisition of the game and his choice to indulge in its shifting rules, both on the narrative and on the textual level, Eichelberger sees a different set of forces at work, for "Kinbote's verbal play manifests itself primarily in circular and reflexive, or agonistic and oscillatory patterns" (Ibid, 178). Eichelberger goes on to once again reference Huizinga's analysis of literature as a ludic phenomenon, noting the fact that he "persuasively argues that circularity is intertwined with the notion of a magician circumscribing and defining a space within which a sacred ritual is to take place" (Ibid, 178). Yet, he also does well to point out the fact that for Huizinga "there is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for the purposes of sheer play" (Huizinga, 20).

However, if the crown jewel game operates as a textual manifestation of the

throws a clearer light upon it or more surely establishes the proportions of the whole" (182).

actual search for the Zemblan jewels, word golf manages to go a step further by highlighting specific aspects of Kinbote's personality since he is, in fact, the one constructing the web of the index. Eichelberger notes that "in Kinbote's index, Word Golf becomes an eternally recursive process" and that "instead of revealing significant information about Shade," his choice to embrace the game comes to frame his own character "through the *mise en abyme*" (Eichelberger, 183). "In other words, Kinbote's homosexual proclivities are revealed in this apparatus which magically transforms all lasses and mares into males, and instead of revealing Shade, Kinbote reveals himself" (Ibid, 183). Eichelberger points out the fact that the term "inversion" is both Freud's term for the subconscious processes of male homosexuality as well as being the literary term for the "reflexive novel's propensity to turn back on itself" (Ibid, 183). The implication of the device in this particular gaming instance is that by "literalizing this trope, Nabokov reinforces a level of meaning which recalls Kinbote's inability to break out of what Nabokov calls in *Speak, Memory* 'the vicious circle of time'" (Ibid, 183). While Kinbote may profess himself to be the master of the majority of the text, the signification at work in these types of word games, even ones that he prompts and propagates, undermines the agency he actually has over not only his scholarly project, but his own life as well. Even Kinbote's own wit and wisdom betrays him as the text becomes an extension of Nabokov's puppet strings.

In his evocation of the *mise en abyme* as a fitting image for the framing of *Pale Fire*'s narrative levels and the infinite recursion of its textual games, Eichelberger unintentionally stumbles upon the contents of yet another such puzzle, and one that seems to suggest that Nabokov also found some merit in the term's applicability. In discussing Gide's use of the term, Eichelberger goes on to clarify the origins of the French phrase, stating that, "*mise en abyme* is a term from heraldry and signifies the inclusion of a smaller coat of arms inside a full sized coat of arms" (Ibid, 182). While the term's relevance to literature is by no means new, with such notable examples as the scene of the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*, its use by Nabokov in *Pale Fire* comes to bear upon the novel's subtle metaphysical intimations. "Heraldry" becomes the name of the game within the pages of Kinbote's commentary as a yet another of Nabokov's accumulative puzzles. In fact, it plays a role in the very first pages of the commentary.

In first entry of the commentary discussing Shade's opening lines about the waxwing slain by the illusion of continuous space, Kinbote almost immediately begins to stray from the path as he begins to make the first connections between Shade's poem and Zembla. After a short discussion of the poem's opening couplets, Kinbote states: "Incidentally, it is curious to note that a crested bird called a *Zemblan sampel* ("silktail"), closely resembling a waxwing in shape and shade, is the model of one of three heraldic creatures (the other two being respectively a reindeer proper and a merman azure, crined or) in the armorial bearings of the Zemblan King" (Nabokov, 1962, 73-4). The inclusion of the waxwing, or at least its counterpart in Zembla, the "land of reflections, or 'resemblers'," seems to stress the role of illusion, delusion, and reflection in Kinbote's tale of the exiled king from a mythical land (Ibid, 265). And as I will show with regard to the recounting of king's famous escape from the besieged palace, the merman too marks a notable choice on Nabokov's part as it comes to signify the trope of the play-within-a-play, fittingly represented by yet another mythical entity.

The relevance of the term as a unique signifier is once again brought up in Kinbote's notes in relation to a section of Shade's poem that concerns itself with the elusive borders of reality and the sense of being metaphysically trapped, this time as both a cumulative association and as a lexical puzzle. And once again, shades of color seem to act as associative markers between the two, such as the "false azure" of the waxwing passage. In this particular section, lines 109 through 114 of Shade's poem, it is the word "iridule" that prompts Kinbote's passage:

The iridule – when, beautiful and strange,
110 In a bright sky above a mountain range
One opal cloudlet in an oval form
Reflects the rainbow of a thunderstorm
Which in a distant valley has been staged –
For we are most artistically caged. (Ibid, 36-7)

Now, the epistemological concerns in this passage by Shade, as well as those of the famous opening lines, are quite clear: Shade is of the distinct opinion that "reality" as we know it operates as some encoded illusion, beyond which there must be something more. The metaphor is, of course, again that of man as the misguided bird. The heraldry

connection is, however, quite a bit more complex at this stage, as Nabokov expects his reader to be up to the task of solving an associative puzzle in the commentary. In Kinbote's notes, he suggests that the "term 'iridule' is, I believe, Shade's own invention" and cites the unreferenced Fair Copy of the poem in which Shade has written "peacock-herl" next to the draft of the passage (Ibid, 116). Kinbote then goes on to explain that the "peacock-herl is the body of a certain sort of artificial fly also called 'alder.' So the owner of this motor court, an ardent fisherman, tells me" (Ibid). Aside from the fact that both sources of knowledge, Shade's handwriting on the draft and the entomological information on the fly, are highly suspect and extremely unreliable, the explanation seems to be, like many Nabokovian passages, loaded with ludic potential. In the hope that the reader will discover the riddles solution, Nabokov offers the key immediately in the succeeding entry of the commentary. In the note to "*Line 119: Dr. Sutton,*" Kinbote offers this quirky clue concerning the random name: "This is a recombination of letters taken from two names, one beginning in 'Sut,' the other ending in 'ton'" (Ibid, 117). The key seems to suggest that name games are operating throughout the text, particularly in three-letter combinations. The existence of exactly three heraldic animals on the Zemblan coat of arms seems also to mark the number as meaningful, along with an array of other notable three's throughout the text. With this in mind, a look back at the preceding section offers two names in quotes, the seemingly intentionally hyphenated "peacock-herl" and "alder." By dropping "peacock" from the equation and applying the three letter rule, the game offers, perhaps coincidentally, this new word: her + ald , or "herald." While the more skeptical might shrug the solution off as a combination of chance within the text and conviction on the part of the (or this) reader, it is perhaps worthwhile to reiterate the Nabokov quote from *Ada* in the epigraph to this chapter: "Some law of logic should fix the number of coincidences in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of a new truth" (Nabokov, 1969, 361).

In the event that this particular game's solution still reeks of scholarly projection, there is yet another passage that effectively solidifies the facets of the heraldry patterns, linking them back to this image of the *mise en abyme* posited by Eichelberger, that heady concept of infinite recursion in both fiction and reality. The final passage, Kinbote's

“Line 270: My dark Vanessa,” thoroughly consolidates all the elements so far discussed in the chain of associations: the combinational name game, the coat of arms, and heraldry as an expression of infinity. The name's use within Shade's poem appears primarily as a term of endearment and a romantic simile, as he discusses the first years of his relationship with his wife, calling her "My Admirable butterfly" (Nabokov, 1962, 43). In response this highly intimate section of Shade's poem concerning his wife, Sybil, Kinbote remarks: "It is so like the heart of a scholar in search of a fond name to pile a butterfly genus upon an Orphic divinity on top of the inevitable allusion to *Vanhomrigh, Esther*" (Ibid, 172). If any doubt has remained about the combinational nature of Nabokov's name games, this opening display does well to quell such fears. The actual name "Vanessa" is shown, through the use of italics, to be exactly that: a portmanteau formed by Swift from the first syllables of his lover's name, acting as a reminder of the seemingly superfluous passage concerning of the origins Dr. Sutton's name.

While the chain of connections remains thin if made solely via the combinational name games, Nabokov manages to bring it full circle, tying the loose ends back to the obscure beginnings by allowing Kinbote to reveal the following: "The Red Admirable, later degraded to The Red Admiral. It is one of the few butterflies I happen to be familiar with. Zemblans call it *harvalda* (the heraldic one) possibly because a recognizable figure of it is borne in the escutcheon of the Dukes of Payn" (Ibid, 172). In one single passage, Kinbote manages to connect the trail of associations so far noted by directly citing another example of the combinational names in the use of Vanessa, then proceeding to use both "heraldic" and "escutcheon," which is, of course, just another word for a coat of arms and the source of Eichelberger's applied term *mise en abyme*. Such symmetry nearly nullifies the necessity to mention that the "alder" is also commonly cited as a major food source for many species of Lepidoptera. Aside from acting as a literal manifestation of the text's circularity, this particular puzzle also seems to place a degree of emphasis on the Vanessa butterfly itself. A brief taxonomical search for the "Red Admiral," as delineated by Kinbote here, reveals an exhilarating, though perhaps no longer surprising, permutation between the realms of reality and metafiction: the "Red Admiral" of the genus *Vanessa* and the species *atalanta* is also part of the family of Lepidoptera known

as the *Nymphalidae*.⁵ The intertextual connection to *Lolita* is only further supported by the fact the next undulating appearance of the "heraldic butterfly" in the note to "Line 408: A male hand" is immediately followed by the note to "Line 413: a nymph came pirouetting" (Ibid, 197; 202). Should any doubt still remain, Kinbote cites the draft once again in which the line is rendered using Nabokov's infamously coined term as: "A nymphet pirouetted" (Ibid, 202). Such a "coincidence" seems to be an indication that the "male hand" mentioned is none other than Nabokov's own.

When considering the fact that all the previous commentary entries addressing heraldry are prompted by passages from the poem in which Shade addresses either mortality and the illusory nature of reality, it is fitting that the culmination of this particularly complex, the Vanessa butterfly, is also harbinger of death for Shade himself. For as Kinbote recalls, "One minute before his death, as we were crossing from his demesne to mine...a Red Admirable (see note to line 270 [My dark Vanessa]) came dizzily whirling around us like a colored flame" (Ibid, 290). Much like the pirouetting nymphet, the Vanessa's "frightening imitation of conscious play" at this last hour of Shade's life operates as bold indication of the puzzling power Nabokov holds over the both characters and text and strong, though by no means declarative, hint at the possible metaphysical ideas implicated in the novel's recursive framing (Ibid). As one level within the infinity of the *mise en abyme*, the scene offers both a solution to the game and, perhaps, a mere whisper from Nabokov himself concerning the bonds between fiction and reality.

Games in general have a reoccurring place within Kinbote's discussions of the life of Charles Xavier, his own personal relationship with Shade, character names, tropes and images, serving as reminders from Nabokov that the current text is itself a game or duel between the author and whomever sits on the receiving end. Upon a second or third reading of *Pale Fire*, the prevalence of gaming metaphors and puns begins to stand out, particularly in reference to chess. When Kinbote discusses the Goldsworth's home, a house he has rented from the vacationing judge for whom Shade will later be ironically and tragically mistaken, he describes the place as "an old, dismal, white-and-black, half-

⁵ [BugGuide](http://bugguide.net/node/view/448/tree). Iowa State University. 20 June 2008
<<http://bugguide.net/node/view/448/tree>>.

timbered house," evoking the two-tone image of a chessboard (Ibid, 82). The house itself seems under the spell of some strange ordering principle as Kinbote mentions the names and ages of the Goldsworth children, "Alphina (9), Betty (10), Candida (12), and Dee (14)," names that have been alphabetized in a reverse chronological sequence, working their way backward to A (Ibid, 83). The same goes for Mrs. Goldsworth's "intellectual interests" which Kinbote describes as "going as they did from Amber to Zen," bookends that also implicate Kinbote's two global locations, Appalachia and Zembla. (Ibid). The repeated presence of such alphabetical and numerical sequences in the novel seem to suggest that certain places, scenes, or conversations act as individual squares on the board, with letters corresponding to the files A-H and numbers to the ranks 1-8 of algebraic chess notation. Kinbote even mentions a strict note left by a member of the Goldsworth family regarding the damage the sun might cause on the antique furniture if left exposed in which it's suggested that he "might prefer to shift and reshift out of sun range the more precious pieces," to which Kinbote can only say, "I was supposed to castle the long way before going to bed and the short way first thing in the morning" (Ibid, 85).

As Kinbote's commentary progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to suppress what he believes to be the big secret of both Shade's poem and his "scholarly" narrative, that is, that he is in fact the exiled King of Zembla. The steadily growing impression begins to reveal a schism within the narrative, and a particularly Nabokovian one at that. While Kinbote is, for better or worse, the novel's main character and narrator, the abundant information suggesting his madness begins to compromise the truth of his narrative as well as the degree of power he exerts over the tale. While the more complex nature of this particular puzzle will garner more in depth attention later, its foundations are first established for the reader using the same gaming hints. When discussing his attempts to retrieve a detailed map of the Onhava Palace back from Sybil after John's death, Kinbote declares, "the plan is mine and is clearly signed with a black chess-king crown after 'Kinbote'" (Ibid, 107). At this particular point in his story, Kinbote still attempts to maintain the illusion (or delusion) that his deep secret is has yet to be realized by his readership, speaking of "The Prince" and "King Charles Xavier" in the third-person as he proceeds to overindulge his egoistic drive to tell this tale. However, within a

mere eleven pages from his comments regarding the symbol of the black chess-king placed beside his signature, Kinbote describes the King's situation during the first sparks of the rebellion using a similar metaphor: "He had the amusing feeling of his being the only black piece in what a composer of chess problems might term a king-in-the-corner waiter of the *solus rex* type" (Ibid, 118-9). If Kinbote's supposed identity hasn't already dawned on the reader by this point, the close proximity of the two images effectively underscores the connection while at the same time revealing an important aspect of Kinbote's own being. Having identified himself as the black king piece, his description of the board's setup seems to suggest that he in particular is no more than a piece, and a lone piece at that, in some greater, cosmic game of which he is only vaguely aware.

This section in particular, which chronicles the king's famous tunnel escape from the palace, marks an important development in Nabokov's ludic proceedings and a literal application of the castling move of a king piece in chess. This segment, Kinbote's note to Line 130, is the longest of the commentary and the most intricate in terms of Nabokov's use of games as a means to directing literary discovery and structuring the progress of the text. As Boyd mentions, Kinbote "recounts the tunnel episode in the longest note of all, a note tense with the excitement of discovery and the exultation of escape...the entire tunnel note in fact seems to be constructed as a kind of chess problem for us as well as for the king" (Boyd, 1999, 52). In choosing to begin the section with this now repeated chess metaphor, Nabokov manages to plant a seed within the first few paragraphs that will, hopefully, spark the processes of word and image association. As the section proceeds, gaming rhetoric and images begin to play a central role in the story's structure and elements.

Kinbote begins the scene with King imprisoned in his room by the revolutionary forces bent on prizing the Zembla kingdom from royal hands. His "black blazer and white trousers" have just been taken away and outside his room "two soldiers on a stone bench" sit "playing lansquenet," a card game derived, ironically, from the German word for soldier, a literal example of ludic inversion and mirrored meaning (Nabokov, 1962, 122). As the "illuminated card players" sit in waiting, Kinbote takes the opportunity to flashback to a childhood moment in which the Prince and his young friend Oleg discover (along with their sexuality) a tunnel at the back of his closet, obscured by a black velvet

curtain. Before discovering the door, the young Prince finds an assortment of knickknacks on the closet shelves, among them “a gilt key,” a Zemblan translation of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, “and a square board with a design of interlaced figures for some long-forgotten game” (Ibid, 125). When Oleg arrives, the two boys decide to sneak off to investigate as “soon as Monsieur Beauchamp had sat down for a game of chess at the bedside of Mr. Campbell,” effectively synchronizing their adventure with that famous game of symmetry played by two men with bilingual names that literally mirror each as they sit on opposite sides of the board (Ibid, 126). Upon their return from the cryptic passage, they arrive just in time to discover “Beauchamp and Campbell ending their game in a draw” (Ibid, 127).

A striking symmetry exists between the tunnel episodes recounted in the passage, both the one of discovery taken by the young curious prince and one of escape taken by the desperate, trapped king. As the boys remove the cloth and descend into the tunnel, Kinbote describes the “silent, green-carpeted steps” of an inexplicable underground tunnel that passes under “Academy Boulevard, Coriolanus Lane and Timon Alley” as its “cryptic course” adapts “itself to the various structures which it followed” (Ibid, 126). As the boys move down the tunnel rife with “magic apertures and penetrations,” they measure the distance using a pedometer that finally stops at exactly 1,888 yards as they reach tunnels end, discovering that the “magic key of the lumber room closet slipped with gratifying ease into the keyhole of a green door confronting them” (Ibid, 126-7). Just as they are about to turn the “magic key” and discover what lies behind the mysterious door, they hear two voices “exchanging insults in Gutnish as spoken by the fisher-folk of Western Zembla,” prompting the boys to retreat in terror to the safety of the palace. Before Kinbote has even had a chance to continue with the second phase of the tale, the king’s castling escape, a degree of pregnant meaning already seems to surround several aspects of the episode, such as the reoccurring green tones, the fortuitous match of the key and the door, the mention of Timon Alley and the presence of the Zemblan translation of *Timon of Athens* in the closet alongside the key, the roundness of the tunnel’s distance at 1,888. If the importance has yet to sink in for the reader, Nabokov makes sure to bookend the boys’ journey with the end of the game of chess initiated as they entered the tunnel as a subtle reminder that a greater, ludic structuring is at place

below the surface of the scene.

Kinbote then jumps back to recounting the dilemma of the king as he sits trapped with the revolutionary landsknecht, or mercenaries, playing lansquenet outside his door. As the chess game images inaugurated the first tunnel journey, Nabokov aims to set the same tone before moving on to the second expedition. The king requests that he be allowed to play the piano before bed in order to communicate his newly hatched plans to Odon, the actor and loyalist who operates undercover as a revolutionary in the palace. Upon revealing the location of the secret tunnel, Odon states his ignorance of the tunnel's existence "with the annoyance of a chess player who is shown how he might have saved the game he has lost" (Ibid, 129). Through the accumulation of the gaming metaphors and actions, Nabokov immediately draws the necessary parallels between the suggestive elements of the last journey and the one that the king is about to undertake. In order to stress the time constraints placed on the escape, the conversation is then followed by the episode of crown jewels discussed previously, in which illusion, *trompe l'oeil* and artistic notions of "reality" are discussed in relation to the Russian attempts to excavate the castle walls. The board has, hopefully, been organized properly in the mind of the reader so as to expect some riddling symmetry to play a part in the tale's proceedings.

As the king sneaks behind the facade of the closet wall, he hears the thud of the *Timon Afinsken*, the Zemblan translation, as it falls from the shelf, taking it, a set of gym clothes, and a flashlight with him into the gloom. When he turns on the light, he's shocked to find himself "hideously garbed in bright red," a stark contrast to the abundantly green tunnel and door (Ibid, 133). As the king finally emerges from the tunnel through the green door, he finds himself in "the dimly lit, dimly cluttered *lumbarkamer* which had once been Iris Acht's dressing room in the Royal Theater"(Ibid, 134). Iris Acht, whose name of course means "eight" in German, becomes the lynchpin in the connection. Only a few pages prior to this revelation, the king's description of his prison-like room prompts a detailed family history in which "his grandfather, Thurgus the Third" is mentioned as being the previous occupant of the room and that since that time the room has showcased a picture framed in black velvet of "the forgotten actress Iris Acht, said to have been for several years, ending in her sudden death in 1888, the mistress of Thurgus" (Ibid, 121-2). The mystery of the tunnel itself is solved as it is

revealed that “the mile-long corridor provided an extravagant means for his trysts with Iris” (Ibid, 134). However, as mentioned before, there is a difference between the minor puzzles solved on the first pass of a Nabokov scene and the grand, chess-like games played out at the higher levels of the text. The parallels are further stressed as the king leaves the dressing room only to run into Odon, who was “due to act that night in *The Merman*, a fine old melodrama” in the Royal Theater, dressed in “the Sunday attire of a Gutnish fisherman,” a synchronization that reveals the frightening voices heard by the young prince so many years ago to be no more than the lines of the very play being performed on the eve of his escape (Ibid, 129; 134). And, as mentioned earlier as regards heraldry and the *mise en abyme*, it marks a moment of fiction-within-fiction, artifice-within-artifice, as the “merman azure” is cited as one of the three animals of Zemblan heraldry, alongside Shade’s waxwing, another victim of illusion (Ibid, 74).

The strong symmetry of the two scenes is nearly overwhelming in its suggestion of latent, ludic potential. But what, if anything, is Nabokov trying to do? The parallels abound in the reflections of the color green, the lovers on each end of the tunnel, the drama performed then and now, the associations of Acht, 1888 and 1,888, the redundancy of *Timon of Athens*, the chess game of Beauchamp and Campbell and the two-tone, chessboard patterning of red and green. As Boyd has posited, they “all accumulate to charge the atmosphere in a way that even the first-time reader can register. But charge with what? A sense of the fates deciding between someone’s death or his imminent escape to freedom? A sense that all depend on Charles II making some right move?” (Boyd, 1999, 55). Perhaps, if Nabokov’s comments regarding symbolism are kept in mind, they add up to nothing in and of themselves, in the sense that the colors, numbers or references directly signal anything specific and concrete. L.L. Lee has discussed the fact that “there maybe a logical pattern in Nabokov’s use of colors,” but not “one that makes divisions,” that he “uses the numbers in the same way – they are not magic numbers, symbolic numbers, but connections, liking this to that” (Lee, 80).

Scenes such as this act as perfect locales for observing the minor and major games operating within the text, serving as further examples of the way that Nabokov’s texts act as a *mise en abyme* as smaller puzzles are eventually revealed as being framed by larger puzzles and so on. It is "because the human mind's capacity to represent, or

metarepresent, is central to its power, and because he is always preoccupied with the relationship between the inner (the individual consciousness) and the outer (the world outside the individual consciousness)," that Boyd feels "Nabokov also incorporates in his stories an extraordinary number and variety of metarepresentations of the story, the parts that reflect the whole" (Boyd, 2005, 34). As the reader becomes more acquainted with the logic operating behind such minor puzzles on the first pass, a second pass of the novel begins to reward the dedicated and persistent reader with the much-needed red thread, offering duplicates, mirror images, repetitions and structural symmetries throughout. The realization that this scene, among others, is constructed as a game, that the characters themselves are all pieces and pawns in that game, marks the second tier of discovery on the way toward understanding one of the largest games in the text, the mysterious identity crisis that surrounds Kinbote's turbulent text, the grand puzzle at the heart of his person and a subsumed secret that has gotten the better of many Nabokovian scholars and readers.

3. The Kinbote Question: The Artifice of Double Deception

The discussions in this chapter have been primarily concerned with the local challenges that Nabokov establishes within specific scenes using a combination of wordplay, numerical and alphabetical orderings, and the repetition of key imagery as means of marking the face of the text, of adding texture that equates such scenes with the *trompe l'oeil* paintings of Eystein. As the display and discussion of these puzzles has shown, such gaming raises the reading of the text to a secondary level, to a level where the reader communicates more directly with the author himself through a first-hand experience of the novel's ordering systems and means of signification. However, a novel such as *Pale Fire* has, like the *mise en abyme*, higher levels of framing beyond even these localized, highly intricate riddles and hints. Perhaps the most encompassing of these ludic levels, one that operates from cover to cover and incorporates all the minor puzzles in between, is the one surrounding the madness of Charles Kinbote. The question itself becomes a perfect illustration of Boyd's observation about the way in which *Pale Fire's* construction produces radically different solutions among readers and critics, including

the polar division of many scholars into two camps that have proposed not only different theories regarding Kinbote's situation, but inherently conflicting ones. "To claim that the author is dead and that the text is up for grabs, as Roland Barthes did in his celebrated essay, does not help much," according to Maurice Couturier, especially in regards to "such a tightly constructed text, which burdens every critic with the same question: where do I stand as regards Shade, Kinbote and eventually the author?" (Couturier, 2).

The dilemma in question is more than just a matter of reliability on the part of Kinbote as narrator, particularly in light of the fact that his madness becomes a central theme in the pages of the commentary and a key element to both the novel's puzzles and its overall humor. Couturier observes that as "early as 1966-67, a number of critics began to raise with same insistence the question of who invented whom," outlining the initial rift in critical opinion as Page Stegner proposed that Kinbote, the delusional genius, was author of every aspect of the text including the poem, while Andrew Field endeavored to prove the opposite, that Shade himself was behind the fictitious forward, commentary and index (Couturier, 1). The critical drive toward solving this problem is, for Boyd, based on the fact that "as our knowledge of Kinbote grows and we probe the chasm between his world and Shade's, we also begin to sense an eerie congruity between poem and commentary that invites us to look deeper still" (Boyd, 1991, 436). And although this "congruity" and its implied solution are clearly further cases of Nabokov's presence within the work, of his invitation to discovery, since there is in fact a mystery to be solved, the seemingly absolutist nature of the critical debate, the insistence on declarations of "right" versus "wrong" or "true" versus "false," merely manages to transform the riddle itself into a kind of practical joke laid out by Nabokov for the determined scholar. In looking into these opposing opinions, it is, perhaps, handy to keep Nabokov's comments concerning truth in mind, both for the sake of the text itself and as a means to understanding the epistemological opinions he held, for as he has stated: "You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (Nabokov, 1973, 11).

The impetus for the divide on critical opinion in some cases harkens back to earlier discussions regarding responses to purpose within Nabokov's art. In such cases, as

Couturier mentions, "[m]any critics, like [George] Cloyne, felt that Nabokov had overdone it this time and had merely performed an unsurpassed narrative stunt but one that was devoid of aesthetic and/or philosophical value" (Couturier, 1). The mistake made in assessing Nabokov's narrative play then boils down to a clear confusion of motivations between author and narrator, prompting an overall application of the sentiment to the novel as a whole. In doing so, critics such as Stegner and Cloyne found it much more convenient "to claim that Kinbote, a mad megalomaniac, had authored not only the commentary but the poem as well" (Ibid). Stegner's comments in particular capture the essence of critical opinions that failed to see any merit in Nabokov's ludic methods, casting his works into a realm of artistic and human irrelevance:

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. (Stegner, 131-2)

Once again, notions of "moral truth" and human interest seem to be bound up within critical receptions of the novel, not to mention the fact that Stegner's final line sounds similar to the allegations of aesthetic cruelty discussed by de la Durantaye in its declaration that technique remains primary and superior to human sympathy. A Kinbotean theory becomes quite convenient then on account of the fact Kinbote's madness, solipsism and megalomania help to justify a reading of the text that views the novel as being void of any greater truth, consideration or relevance for humankind, a text as self-involved as its narrator. However, once again, such an opinion concerning Nabokov as a writer does not facilitate a de facto application of the position to a fictional character within an individual work, especially one as acutely crafted as *Pale Fire*. If anything, it has all the hallmarks of a textual trap laid for those unwilling to play the game.

As a representative of the opposing argument, Andrew Field, while perhaps more

laudatory, seems to also miss the mark in a similar fashion, once again placing emphasis on the roles and limits of insanity in determining the fictional authorship. For Field, “there are many compelling logical reason to place John Shade before Charles Kinbote. 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” (Field, 317). In Field’s opinion, the prospect of Shade inventing both Kinbote and the commentary is a testament to the fact that “Nabokov has given us the best and truest allegorical portrait of the ‘literary process’ that we have or are likely ever to get,” viewing the creation of Kinbote by Shade as a recreation of Nabokov’s own endeavors in creating the whole novel (Ibid, 316-7). Although his idea hits upon the matryoshka-like recursion of the *mise en abyme* of the novel, Field’s assumptions about the “logical” operations of real world distinctions such as “sane” and “insane,” along with their inherent capabilities and limitations, completely misses the fact that such a conclusion fails to account for Nabokov’s “game of worlds.” By no means should we as readers assume that the fictional characters inhabiting Nabokov’s realms operate according to our own consensual notions of “reality.” Such approaches are, in Couturier’s words, similar to a “Cheshire Cat line of reasoning” (Couturier, 2).

Although Boyd would later rework his theory of authorship completely, initially he too was among the main proponents of the solely Shadean theory of authorship. In Boyd’s take on the idea, the sections of the novel that constitute Kinbote’s adventures are extrapolations upon the themes of the poem itself, such as mortality, suicide and loss, however, with a more metaphysical motive. As Couturier critically describes them, Boyd’s theories concerning Shade’s authorship reduce Kinbote’s tale to a “bloated metaphor of his daughter’s pathetic misery and helpless attempts to gain access to an intangible reality” (Ibid, 2). Couturier goes on to say that, “considering the megalomaniacal digressions of the commentary, its obsession with homosexuality and its grim humor, would not this interpretation amount to saying that Shade has been so ravaged by his daughter’s suicide that he has foundered into sheer madness?” (Ibid). Couturier’s assessment of Boyd’s Shadean theory, though concerned with the appropriate miscalculations, seems to strike more at logical fallacies surrounding the same subject of sanity and its inherent limits and motivations, much like his contradictory critique of

Field's Kinbotean theory. The crux of Boyd's approach seems to best summed up when he notes that "[i]n creating Kinbote, Shade can also *mimic the role of the gods*, wielding over an imagined world the sort of control he supposes some higher force may exercise over his own life" (Boyd, 1991, 451). While Boyd's reduction of authorial agency does seem to miss the complex nature of Nabokov's narrative strategies and metaphysical propositions, effectively neutralizing the role Kinbote has to play as fellow player and pawn, his comments concerning authorial power in an "imagined world" do become quite relevant when discussing the true man behind the mask, Nabokov, as well as his endeavors in writing such a novel. As Boyd would later say himself, his early approaches constitute only half of the puzzle's solution.

Although Boyd's revamped theories wouldn't be available until the publication of *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* in 1999, his comments eight years earlier within the second of his two-part biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, bear the signs of a more expansive approach to the riddle of authorship when discussing the functions of Shade and Kinbote as characters. In speaking of the two men as balanced parts of a kind of dialectic of character, Boyd strikes more at the heart of what, perhaps, Nabokov hoped to establish in the textual spaces between the two men. As Boyd observes:

Kinbote is not so much a case study or even a critique of Freud as a zanily unforgettable character composite – critic, neighbor, lunatic, king – whose madness allows Nabokov to set him in sharp opposition to John Shade...Nabokov contrasts Shade's self-control and Kinbote's emotional riot, Shade's love for Sybil and Kinbote's desperate loneliness, Shade's luminous fulfillment and Kinbote's consuming despair, Shade's kindness and sensitivity and Kinbote's crazy selfishness. Shade embodies the imagination at its best, able to break free of the narrow confines of self; Kinbote's deranged mind represents the imagination not as escape but as jailer, herding everything he sees into the dungeon of his own crazy ego. (Boyd, 1991, 435)

In this assessment, Boyd not only strikes the right note in regards to Nabokov's character constructions, but also offers the first hints concerning the potential philosophical ideas working within Nabokov's supposedly empty aesthetics. His opinions of Kinbote in particular make a fitting transition toward discussing the game of identity that lies

subsumed beneath the surface of the text, obfuscated by the smoke screen of the very tale itself.

The near hysterical and obsessive drive that Kinbote displays in his efforts to make some meaning out of his life through acquiring Shade's poem reveals a massive amount of instability within his portions of the text as he tries desperately to make his case. In doing so, Kinbote often loses control of his own words, allowing slips, inconsistencies and permutations to pepper the facade of his tale. A first reading of the novel may leave one with the lingering sense that Kinbote's claims of royalty are no more the product of desperation and self-delusion, that he is merely a homosexual professor in the Russian department of an American university and, perhaps, a paranoid schizophrenic. Even within the first impression of the *Forward*, Kinbote allows the subject of his sanity to enter the text when discussing a grocery store encounter with a "ferocious lady," an acquaintance of the Shades, who declares, "You are a remarkably disagreeable person. I fail to see how John and Sybil can stand you....What's more, you are insane" (Nabokov, 1962, 25). Should any doubt remain about the credibility of the opinion, Kinbote reveals as much in the closing pages of the *Forward*. While discussing the appropriate conditions for reading the text at hand, Kinbote abruptly breaks from the tone when stating that one should read the work "on a comfortable table – not like the shaky little affair on which my typewriter is precariously enthroned now, in this wretched motor lodge, with that carousel inside and outside my head, miles away from New Wye" (Ibid, 28). The sensitive reader is primed to view Kinbote as a clearly insane character, however, the clearest solution is not necessarily the correct one, or at least not entirely.

The answer to Kinbote's riddle is, like many of the games so far recounted, a matter of tuning in on the repetition of key clues, essential wordplay and revealing conversations, particularly between Shade and Kinbote. As the hints begin to build up, several important remarks by Shade serve to contextualize the errata of Kinbote's commentary, offering the necessary hints for ordering these clues and understanding their potential. In one of the many scenes in which Shade is shown to be truly the only sympathetic soul in Kinbote's life, he makes a particularly important remark while defending Kinbote during a party against the onslaught of Wordsmith criticism. Kinbote manages to interrupt a conversation of which he is the topic, hearing only Shade's

response to a remark made by a Mrs. H's (which the attentive reader can only deduce to be a charge of insanity). In response, Shade states, "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's merely turning a new leaf with the left hand" (238).

While the subject of the discussion could easily be understood to be Kinbote's invention of the King Charles facet of his life and its accompanying tale, such an easy solution would overlook the fact that, for the most part, Kinbote has attempted to keep such a fact under wraps out of fear from the assassin Jakob Gradus. The tale itself has, for the most part, been confined to the pages of the commentary, with only John Shade being regularly bombarded with tales of the Zemblan king.

Instead, it is worth noting another remark made by Shade, this time in one of the few calm, congenial scenes between Shade and Kinbote, a scene that recounts a metaphysical discussion between the two that fortuitously begins, like the tunnel scene, "after a game of chess, a draw" on Kinbote's terrace (Ibid, 223). As they discuss the role of god and chance in the "preposterous game of nature," Shade remarks, "There are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance" (Ibid, 226). If the reader adheres to Shade's suggestion to search for dual solutions within the game of the text, they are richly rewarded within the next few pages. In the very next note, the note to "*Line 550*: debris," Kinbote admits to falsifying lines earlier attributed to Shade, in this case the note to "*Line 12*: that crystal land," in which Kinbote claims to have found among Shade's deletions the couplet "Ah, I must not forget to say something / That my friend told me of a certain king" (Ibid, 226; 74). The falsified note is only the second in the commentary, just following the opening note, and offers the first of many supposed deletions that appear to bare more relevance to Kinbote's tale than any in the actual poem that Shade constructs. Although Kinbote adamantly claims, "It is the *only* time in the course the writing of these difficult comments, that I have tarried, in my distress and disappointment, on the brink of falsification," the text is already compromised (Ibid, 228). His case isn't made any better when he admits, "I could strike them out before publication but that would mean reworking the entire note, or at least a considerable part of it, and I have no time for such stupidities" (Ibid). With this one, short passage, Kinbote's entire commentary comes under extreme suspicion as he reveals his desperate

drive to make the poem correspond to his personal vision. Furthermore, the corresponding line that prompts the falsification, "that crystal land," seems suggest that that other land, Zembla, may too be pure fiction. If this is the case, then what could the possible "dual solution" be to Kinbote's situation?

Boyd sees the same destabilizing effects in the ramification of the last note, the note to "*Line 1000*: [= *Line 1*: I was the shadow of the waxwing slain], an invented note to an invented line. In the final passage which recounts the murder of Shade by Jack Grey, the escapee of an asylum in search of Judge Goldsworth, for whom he mistakes Shade, Kinbote's lengthy tale of the assassin Gradus suddenly unravels as he claims unconvincingly to having obtained "an interview, perhaps even two interviews, with the prisoner" (Ibid, 299). Kinbote basically admits that, "By making him believe I could help him at his trial I forced him to confess his heinous crime – his deceiving the police and the nation by posing as Jack Grey, escapee from an asylum, who mistook Shade for the man who sent him there" (Ibid). In light of the now obviously desperate connections Kinbote tries to force upon the commentary, lying openly and unconvincingly about the revolutionary assassin, Boyd observes that the "elaborately orchestrated account of Gradus's approach, which fills almost as much space in the commentary as the story of the king's escape, disintegrates into fabrication or fantasy" (Boyd, 1991, 59). Furthermore, if "that circumstantial story, following a trail that begins in Zembla, is entirely unreal, then so too in all probability is Kinbote's claim to be Charles II, and perhaps even the very existence of the country Zembla" (Ibid).

Who then is Kinbote if not the King of Zembla or even an average Zemblan who believes himself to be a king? For the determined and conscious reader who has managed to follow Nabokov's gamesmanship, both the solution and the rules to this particular puzzle are provided throughout the text. In fact, the very facets of the game surrounding Kinbote are but an combination and extension of the games already discussed so far. The goose chase of the jewels, the self-referential word golf game in the index, and the combinational name game all contribute to determining who exactly Kinbote is and why the truth of his identity has been so clouded. The first clue comes from Kinbote in an early discussion of Shade's mother's maiden name, Lukin, as an example of names as derivatives of professions. His explanation of how "Lukin comes from Luke, as also do

Locock and Luxon and Lukashovich" acts as a manifestation of what he refers to in the index as a "*Marrowsky*," "a rudimentary spoonerism, from the name of a Russian diplomat of the early 19th century, Count Koramaroskit, famous at foreign courts for mispronouncing his own name – Makarovski, Macaronski, Skomorovski" (Nabokov, 1962, 100; 310). The "marrowsky" then acts as a combination of the name game and word golf in a sense, as it shifts names according to what appears to be an almost natural linguistic shifting through time or under the influence of human change. Kinbote then offers further examples of how "names derive from professions such as Rymer, Scrivener, Limner (one who illuminates parchments), Botkin (one who makes fancy footwear) and thousands of others" (Ibid, 100). The first three names are all in some way related to the writing process, be it rhyming, writing, or "illuminating" parchments. Aside from acting as a game of which-of-the-following-does-not-belong, the final name bears an uncanny resemblance to Kinbote and acts another example of the "Sut-ton" combinational game of three letters (especially when considering the "e" to be silent in Kinbote).

The name has been marked and the cautious reader made aware of its potential value. The name appears again later on in a strange aside from Kinbote as he discusses the Wordsmith staff. In criticizing the "Head of the bloated Russian Department, Prof. Pnin," Kinbote remarks, "happily, Prof. Botkin, who taught in another department, was not subordinated to that grotesque 'perfectionist'" (Ibid, 155). Happily for whom? And who is this personality, this name, now mentioned twice? For the devoted Nabokovian, this scene in particular serves as another puncture in the text by Nabokov, a clue from beyond the veil of words, as Prof. Pnin marks a metafictional crossover from another of Nabokov's worlds, none other than Timofey Pnin of the eponymous novel *Pnin*. On a first read, the name may still not factor into the ludic patterns Nabokov sets out, however, the "infinitely generous" nature that Boyd has attributed to the writer shows itself through two more increasingly clear clues.

The next mention of the now red-flagged word appears in a more disturbing and revealing section of Kinbote's commentary, a section in which, prompted by a passage about Hazel, he discusses the merits and methods of suicide. As Kinbote begins, first objectively and then increasingly more subjectively, to describe suicidal scenarios, he

claims,” I am choosing these images rather casually. There are purists who maintain that a gentleman should use a brace of pistols, one for each temple, or a bare botkin, (note the correct spelling), and that ladies should either swallow a lethal dose or drown with clumsy Ophelia” (Ibid, 220). The parenthetical marks one of the largest permutations present within the pages of the novel. Kinbote’s directive to “note the correct spelling” marks one of the most direct examples of Nabokov’s intrusion into the text, this time in the form of a helpful hint that borders on breaking the rules of his own game as the problem-designer assists the problem-solver. In noting the spelling, Kinbote achieves two arguably unintentional things: first, a check in any dictionary will show that a *bodkin*, not a botkin, is the Old English remnant word for a dagger, to which it is assumed Kinbote refers in regards to suicide. Furthermore, the mention of Ophelia and the use of the phrase “bare botkin” is a direct reference to yet another Shakespearean play, *Hamlet*, in which the Danish Prince also mulls over the value of suicide in Act 3, Scene 1:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? (Act 3, Scene 1)

In light of the parallels, the reference is disturbing, particularly so as the passage goes on. Kinbote goes on to say, “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 woody death...the universal unknown engulfing the miniscule unknown that had been the only real part of one’s temporary personality” (Nabokov, 1962, 221). In lieu of the final reference, Kinbote’s remarks here mark a significant progress toward understanding the riddle’s function.

The final occurrence of Botkin in the commentary is the most blatant and direct hint that one is likely to ever receive from Nabokov, though in order to profit from it, one must have necessarily followed his cues thus far. The note to “*Line 894: a king,*” a scene that takes place in the Wordsmith Faculty Club as Kinbote answers questions regarding

the missing King of Zembla, marks one of the most meaningful sections of dialogue in the entire novel. As Kinbote recounts the scene, he claims that several members of the Wordsmith faculty discuss how closely he resembles the exiled king, citing articles and newspaper photos of the missing monarch. As Kinbote proudly denies the link, Shade too steps in to refute the claim, saying, "this is no resemblance at all. I have seen the King in newsreels, and there is no resemblance. Resemblances are the shadows of differences. Different people see different similarities and similar differences" (Ibid, 265). The comment both ties the discussion to the "Semberland, land of reflections, or 'resemblers'," as the word "resemblance" is denied repeatedly, and also seems to flag the scene as another situation in which perspective will be key in viewing the *trompe l'oeil* of the text. The lynchpin clue of the scene comes as a casual remark from a Professor Pardon and, upon a first reading, might be even be overlooked as too simple a suggestion were it not for the weight of the hints thus far. As the discussion of resemblances progresses, Pardon suddenly interrupts to ask Kinbote, "I was under the impression that you were born in Russia, and that your name was a kind of anagram of Botkin or Botkine?" (Ibid, 267). The outrageous remark prompts the following dialogue:

Kinbote: "You are confusing me with some refugee from Nova Zembla" [sarcastically stressing the "Nova"].

"Didn't you tell me, Charles, that *kinbote* means regicide in you language?" asked my dear Shade.

"Yes, a king's destroyer," I said (longing to explain that a king who sinks his identity in the mirror of exile is in a sense just that). (Ibid, 267)

Furthermore, as the scene continues, Professor Pardon asks, "You do know Russian, though?...I think I heard you, the other day, talking to – what's his name – oh, my goodness," to which Professor Hurley responds, "Think of the French word for 'tire': *punoo*" (Ibid, 268). Shade humorously responds by saying, "Why, sir, I am afraid you have only punctured the difficulty" (Ibid). The French word, of course, is *pneu* and marks yet another metafictional reference, literally another Nabokov "puncture" in the text, to Professor Pnin within a discussion of the word or name Botkin. The above scene is once again red-flagged by Nabokov as potentially meaningful, particularly in regards to anagrams, homophones, puns, punctures and other such ludic operations. And as previous

games such as word golf or the hunt for the crown jewels have shown, when in doubt, the Index offers a wealth of self-referential clues for solving such cumulative mysteries.

An Index check for the name Kinbote predictably yields a two-and-a-half page plethora of carefully catalogued references within the commentary, testifying to his self-involvement in writing every aspect of the scholarly supplements. But if the reader has finally become attuned to the importance of Botkin within the pages of the commentary, a search within the Index offers a final piece to the puzzle of identity, yielding this entry:

Botkin, V., American scholar of Russian descent, 894; king-bot, maggot of extinct fly that once bred in mammoths and is thought to have hastened their phylogenic end, 247; bottekin-maker, 71; *bot*, plop, and *boteliy*, big bellied (Russ); botkin or bodkin, a Danish stiletto. (Ibid, 306)

The entry chronicles the word's appearances within the text, both as the name of an individual and as an item, such as the dagger that Kinbote evokes when discussing his own preferred methods of suicide. However, the tight control that Kinbote attempts to maintain over the index also becomes part of his own downfall. In attempting to neutralize the entry for Botkin by providing these seemingly simple references, Kinbote also manages to reveal the entry's importance. The more opinionated and personal appearances of the name Botkin are purposefully left out of the entry, as if they constituted some threat to the integrity of the tale. Thus, the first mention of the individual, Prof. Botkin, and his fortuitous escape from the Russian department of Prof. Pnin is not referenced. For some reason or other, Kinbote does not want his readership to register that name and its potential connection to the scene discussing Kinbote as an anagrammatic shift, or "marrowksy," of Botkin.

Yet, one entry does stand out among the rest as a glaring riddle that will come to solidify the growing suspicions of the reader who has followed this mirror man, this strange doppelganger who, like a canary in a coal mine, serves to signal the dangerous slips and cracks in Kinbote's imperfect facade. While the majority of the references cite the commentary note numbers of relevant locations of the word, as name, item or specific individual, the second one, "king-bot," does not reference such an appearance. Instead, it seems that Kinbote's wounded ego has allowed one final, fatal permutation

that will effectively dissolve his carefully crafted mask, making sense of the cryptic comments and connections surrounding the two names. This entry, which cites the note to *Line 247: Sybil*, recounts the tense relationship between Kinbote and Shade's wife, who expresses a notable antipathy toward the doting critic. Despite his professed kindness toward Sybil, Kinbote states, "I was to learn later that when alluding to me in public she used to call me 'an elephantine tick, a king-sized botfly, a macaco worm; the monstrous parasite of a genius.' I pardon her – her and everybody" (Ibid, 172). Although she calls him a number of names, the only epithet to make it into the entry is "a king-sized botfly," which is then shortened to "king-bot" in the Index, but as an entry under Botkin, V. instead of Kinbote, Charles. In his haste to detail Sybil's hatred, Kinbote has mistakenly made the connection between the two names. And although he attempts to recode Sybil's assessment of the "monstrous parasite of a genius" as a faux fact about an extinct species of parasitic fly that feed on mammoths and "hastened their phylogenic end," the damage is already done.

The reference ties the two together in several ways. First, the sheer fact that both men share this rather absurd insult becomes an obvious clue. However, Nabokov takes it a step further by shortening the title, removing "-sized" and "fly." The remaining "king-bot" becomes a blatant wordplay hint, as the mere addition and omission of a single letter (removal of the "g" and the addition of an "e") allows for a straight spelling of "Kinbote," whereas a three-letter recombination, of course, yields "Botkin." While Sybil's comments can no doubt be taken at face value as a criticism of the obsessive and lingering neighbor who seems to stalk her husband, it can also be read as a remark about the role that Kinbote's entire persona performs for the actual mad genius (for his layers of creative self-delusion are nothing if not ingenious), that is, the repeatedly suppressed, but eternally present, V. Botkin. The ever-increasing connections between the two suddenly become clear but, furthermore, the mystery of Kinbote's madness, like many of the games, rises to yet another level as the solution of his dilemma becomes clear. As Boyd explains, beyond the first level realization that Kinbote is in fact not King Charles Xavier, "lies another, more unsettling still: Kinbote and the whole Zemblan past appear to be nothing but the demented fantasy of Vseslav Botkin, a refugee scholar in the Russian department at Wordsmith. His anguish in exile has led him to construct the compensatory

refuge of Zembla, a homophile homeland where he is king..." (Boyd, 1991, 433).

The riddle then does in fact have "dual solutions" as Shade suggests and it's answer lies at the tertiary level of the King Charles / Kinbote / Botkin identity. Even if the reader has discovered that Kinbote is in fact a delusional madman and not the king of the commentary, Nabokov stands as victor in the duel of dual solutions, stumping the would-be problem-solver with one of the most vast and complicated red herrings imaginable: the actual commentary itself, the story of King Charles Xavier, exiled ruler of the Zembla. The reality is in fact much simpler and much more ingenious. Vseslav Botkin, whomever he may be, was never a man so mad as to be capable of imagining himself as the present ruler of a tangible kingdom capable of erasing the painful memories of some untold tale of exile from Russia. Such a delusion would offer the relief of complete and absolute madness, sheer hallucination offering what life could not. Instead, Botkin, "the American scholar of Russian descent," has crafted a tale capable of coloring his current reality with a rosier shade of literary lacquer. Instead of being no more than the hated homosexual professor of Russian resigned to the mundane confines of a quiet American college town, an exile plagued by memories apparently too painful to confront, he reshapes his past or, as Shade has said in his defense, "deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention" (Nabokov, 1962, 238). As Michael Wood notes, "Botkin is the static in Kinbote's story, the buzz and the hum of repression, the self that Kinbote has buried...Botkin's role in the novel is...to remind us eerily, that Kinbote's self is invented, precarious; that it has a past" (Wood, 178).

Kinbote's parenthetical remark following the translation of his surname as "a king's destroyer" reveals much more about his dilemma and hints even further at the reality below the multiple layers of masks and veils. Kinbote almost involuntarily adds: "(longing to explain that a king who sinks his identity in the mirror of exile is in a sense just that)" (Nabokov, 1962, 267). Such a remark once again harkens back to the "land of reflections, or 'resemblers'," to the copious references to reflections, symmetries and mirrors throughout the novel. Kaplan observes that, "another reading of this note--nearly the reflected reading--is that it refers to an exile sinking his identity in that of a king, which speaks to Botkin and Nabokov's presence" (Kaplan, 2). Thus, Nabokov's continual hints about reflection prompts a reversed reading of that statement, reducing it from a

profound statement about the clandestine operations of a threatened king to a confession by a poor exile concerning the madness and fictional delusion to which he has succumbed in order to save himself from despair and suicide.

The riddle of the novel, the mounting accumulation of ludic levels, and manipulation of language come to reveal a man, a character, caught in puppet strings of his own creator as he desperately seeks to escape the house of mirrors made specifically for his detention. The novel itself proves to be cyclical prison of prose and poetry, a manifestation of the infinite implications of the *mise en abyme* as it spirals on through space and time, always receding into yet another encompassing level. Even "Kinbote's verbal play manifests itself primarily in circular and reflexive, or agonistic and oscillatory patterns," according to Eichelberger, harkening back to the central place of the circularity in the forward as Kinbote reveals his first clue, the first sign of madness in "that carousel inside and outside my head" (Eichelberger, 178; Nabokov, 1962, 18). Yet, his torment and entrapment within the board of the text is more than just a case of cruel playfulness on the part of Nabokov, more than just a the literary equivalent of a child burning ants with magic of a magnifying glass. For although Nabokov is clearly seated at the highest level of the novel, his choice to embrace the infinite spiraling of the *mise en abyme*, the recursive reflection of the themes of artistic creation and epistemological control, implicates the both himself and we as readers in a metaphysical commentary that points to our own potential status as pawns in some great, cosmic (or is it comic?) game. As Toker has observed, "the relationship between earthly life and the transcendent realm in Nabokov's worlds if most often imagined on the basis of gnostical dualism: the material world is a product of a sinister swerve in the spiritual realm, upon which human spirit has been entrapped in a spurious universe 'hastily assembled' by a 'demiurge'" (Toker, 238).

The meaning then as regards Kinbote is that, as Wood says, "When previous characters in Nabokov discover they are characters in a novel, they think of themselves as authored, their lives scripted, written from elsewhere. Kinbote sees himself not only as a character in a novel but as the potential author of other works of fiction" (Wood, 203). Thus, in bestowing this dilemma upon the poor, exiled Russian Vseslav Botkin, Nabokov has in some sense crafted a golem capable of mimicking and sharing the very existential problems that "Nabokov often seems to have thought of himself," that is, that he too

might be "the fictional creation of someone who might in turn be fictional" (Wood 204). The dilemma of authorship then becomes, like the *mise en abyme*, inherently infinite, overwhelmingly encompassing and abundantly powerful. Beyond the aesthetic brilliance of the novel, there exists the metaphysical implication that "by its nature, authoring a work brings with it the fear that you, too, could be authored. It demands a complete reevaluation of our own world. The very act of creation is self-referential; by creating we risk bringing the whole thing down around our ears, discovering that we live in Zembla or New Wye; that we are Botkin" (Kaplan, 5).

Conclusion

Not Text, but Texture

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

- John Shade

How could the world not fall under the sway of Tlön, how could it not yield to the vast and minutely detailed evidence of an ordered planet? It would be futile to reply that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but orderly in accordance with divine laws (read: "inhuman laws") that we can never quite manage to penetrate. Tlön may well be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth forged by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men...it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels.

- Jorge Luis Borges

As the elements so far discussed have illustrated, the levels of operation encountered during a reading of *Pale Fire* act as a literalization of Nabokov's comments concerning the ever-elusive quality of truth and reality. With each new discovery, be it broad or local, there always seems to be yet another level of meaning, another structuring frame that recontextualizes and reshapes the previous discovery. In fact, it is this particular quality, this indeterminacy in Nabokov's work, that, upon finishing one of his novels, leaves one with the distinct feeling that more gems lie in waiting; and it is this inconclusiveness that makes it so hard to speak with confidence about the intentions of the man behind the mask of words. As was discussed in the first chapter, these roadblocks against critical interpretation have often lead many to dismiss Nabokov's methods as self-involved, onanistic and intentionally obscure. And while aesthetics do

clearly play a central role in the way Nabokov ascribes meaning and worth to both his artistic endeavors and his own life, their deployment within his fiction also seem to outline through their application the shadows of a much more meaningful commentary on the character of human consciousness. "Yet, even if Nabokov's concern with aesthetics dominates his ideology, it is not exclusive," according to Toker and, furthermore, "[i]ts link with his ethical concepts and metaphysical preferences emerges from" a closer examination of his treatment of themes, as well as in his comments on art (Toker, 232). And although Nabokov has been notably dismissive in some of his comments concerning the overall importance of his works for mankind, such comments are usually situated within a more direct response to "the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash" (Nabokov, 1970, 315). Nabokov's discussion of purpose in the afterward "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" shines more light on the way he viewed art as a means to a higher state of human consciousness. As Nabokov states, "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" (Ibid, 314-5).

For Toker, Nabokov's layering of imagery and thematic elements, the mirroring quality of his texts, "points to the possibility...that the interpenetrating states of consciousness might be *intersubjective*. Different people may step into the same state of perception-oriented consciousness," making a reading of his novels an act of complicity, of intercommunication not through the transmission of creeds or concepts, but through an active participation in cognition (Toker, 242). Nabokov's gaming and "enchantment [do] not amount to arrested motion: separate images are imprinted in the reader's memory in retrospect, but in the process of reading they are part of the flux of consciousness, *the lived time of imaginative cooperation with the text* (Ibid, 233). For Lee, this aspect of Nabokov's writing amounts to him "showing that the world, and the language one uses to create that world, are intricately, inextricably interwoven," that in the process of creating and experiencing art he aims not "to recapture just past action, nor even past meaning, but to capture, again and again, the order of the world in an artistic form. Or rather, [that] art shows the form of and gives form to the world" (Lee, 76). As Eichelberger puts it, "this 'game of worlds' begins in the 'lexical playfields' where notions of correspondence

between language and reality begin and end” (Eichelberger, 183).

Form and structure then become key in understanding a novel such as *Pale Fire*, where, in Eichelberger’s assessment, “each [narrative] level becomes an intermediary step in the understanding of *Pale Fire*, and the final level can never be reached due to these disruptions and the novel’s insistent reflexivism” (183). And “each level is quite as true as the next,” for Lee, meaning the “novel is an order within itself, an aesthetic order created by the author. What the events represent, on the deepest level, is the author’s vision of the world...As an artist, he is at the center of his spiral” (Lee, 78). The novel, as a microcosm of human epistemology, becomes an expression of our own subjective struggle with the boundaries of truth, reality and identity. Behind the elaborate weave of Kinbote’s fantastical tale lies the reality of Botkin, a very "real" and very painful case of an exile who struggles to make meaning and beauty out of loneliness and suffering through what is perhaps only a hyperbolic instance of the autobiographical fiction-making that all humans indulge in to some degree. What some have viewed as merely a narrative stunt on the part of an infinitely creative author, Eichelberger views as being “consistent with his definition of reality, however different Nabokov’s ‘realism’ is from the ‘realism’ associated with Balzac, Turgenev, or James” (Eichelberger, 183). And just as Botkin writes the tale of Kinbote, a.k.a Charles Xavier, using artistry in order to achieve some state of grace, so does Nabokov write the tale of Botkin, who creates Kinbote, who creates Charles Xavier...and so on. In this sense, perhaps the novel is in fact a fitting metaphor for the very process of creation, for the ways in which imagination and invention are capable of saving one’s life.

Lee’s evocation of the spiral in discussing Nabokov’s aesthetics and metaphysics offers a fitting image for both the experience of truth and the process of discovery in Nabokov’s works, as well as an image of which he would have approved. On the material, textual level, the spiral accounts for the way in which his texts progress cyclically through time, providing mirroring scenes, repetitious images, and an overall symmetry unparalleled in modern fiction. His remarks from *Speak, Memory* detail his perspective perfectly:

The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled,

unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this up when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel's triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time. Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis and the next series. (Nabokov, 1966, 275)

This very triadic approach has been taken up by Boyd and applied as the ordering principle through which Nabokov hoped his readers too might come to view first his novels then, hopefully, life itself. For Boyd, the very experience of reading Nabokov can be characterized by this move toward a synthetic realization that far surpasses the more cerebral pleasure of processing philosophical ideas or heady dialogue. In Boyd's application of the image, he sees Nabokov as first offering "all readers a straightforward, accessible reading," or basically the "thetic" solution, "the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally" (Boyd, 1999, 11; Nabokov, 1966, 275). "He then places greater demands on the his more sophisticated readers, subjects them even to the 'pleasurable torments' of the 'antithetic inferno'," what Nabokov would describe as the "larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it" (Ibid). The final reward is the "synthetic" solution of the two, "the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on" (Nabokov, 1966, 275). The imagery is by no means chosen by Nabokov, or embraced by Boyd, merely for the convenience it offers in sketching the structural operations of his fiction. The spiral, as an image of the infinite, much like the reoccurring *mise en abyme*, is distinctly tied to the way in which Nabokov saw time in his own life, as experiences, impressions, synchronicities, and memories came back around to bare an increasing relevance as he moved through life in search of whatever personal truths he might find:

Every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turns, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows – a special space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again. (Ibid, 301)

As Lee characterizes it, "the spiral is like the circle, but less exact, less rigid; it is time recurring and yet not quite; events that are repeated but only partially; mirror images

that are of necessity distorted because they exist at different moments” (Lee, 75). But more importantly, Nabokov’s choice to embrace this image moves beyond the his fiction, enveloping his own life and ours, as it “is timelessness that he is praising; the purpose, the structure, and the texture of his novels are searches for timelessness, not just for time past, but for all time now. Timelessness is unity” (Ibid, 77). The image marks one of the strongest threads between Nabokov’s art and his own ontological beliefs, possibly one of the strongest Nabokov would dare to offer, lest he be accused of preaching some spiritual absolute, therefore it’s worth noting, as Lee does, that “Nabokov’s belief in spirality is not, it must be emphasized, deterministic. There is freedom in that belief, just as there is order and yet freedom in art” (Ibid, 85). Art itself becomes, for Nabokov, that very medium within which he can approach the mysteries of mortality, mysteries he sees as operating as complexly and playfully as he does within his own creations. As Boyd sees it, Nabokov, like Shade, “wishes to express in terms of fiction what he cannot express directly in a sober account of his own life: a confidence that through the magic mirror of his art he can somehow resolve the mystery of death that must otherwise remain impenetrable in life” (Boyd, 1991, 455). In constructing characters that try “to understand death and the unknown forces beyond life by playing their own game,” characters that mimic the very actions of their creator, Nabokov manages to comment on our own realities between the dusty covers of birth and death (Ibid, 455). He performs his puppet show, circling around in an near uncomfortably familiar fashion, then “on the last twist before the expanding spiral disappears from sight, Nabokov implies the hope that his own work in its turn may be somehow close to the aims of whatever mysterious forces lurk further beyond” (Ibid).

Once understood this way, the allegations that Nabokov writes out of some cruel artistic spirit, a self-involved desire to craft unsolvable puzzles with no collective solution, seems to miss the mark not only on the textual level, as such critics no doubt failed to pass through Nabokov’s gauntlet, but also on the metaphysical level. “He has a reputation for teasing his readers for the sake of teasing, or for taunting them with the implication of his own superiority,” but for Boyd such assessments have failed to realize that “he teases us to test us, because he has so much confidence in the enterprise of good readers...and because to attentive and imaginative readers he is the most generous of

writers” (Ibid, 426).

As a man who approached his art, his scientific studies, and his own mortality with an infinite curiosity, despite the decades of exile across two continents, Nabokov “knows that there is not substitute for the excitement of a discovery we make ourselves,” that although the world more often than not fails to yield any clear and definite answers, it “can afford endless rewards to those how approach it in a spirit of inquiry and confidence” (Ibid). Once again, Nabokov’s comments about reality testify to this unwavering drive toward discerning the outlines of truth, even if those lines prove impossible to truly fill. His take on reality could, in fact, sound quite similar to a reader’s take on his novels when he says, “you can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable” (Nabokov, 1973, 11). A reading of *Pale Fire* becomes itself a *mise en abyme* as well as a lesson in the commitment and patience necessary to pursue truth of any kind. Comprehending the balance between its parts becomes, as Boyd says, an expression of “what he must not make overexplicit,” allowing his readers to “approach closer and closer to the ‘something else’ hidden behind the world of his work, a reflection of the ‘something else,’ the great surprise that he thinks hidden behind life and death by the mysterious generosity somehow hidden still further behind” (Boyd, 1999, 8).

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