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Vladimir Nabokov’s Aerial Viaduct: 
*Pale Fire* and the Return to the Forbidden Past

Abstract

*Pale Fire* may be read as an elaborate parody of literary criticism, or even Nabokov’s self-parody. This paper reconsiders the puzzle of identities in the novel in this context, with the trio of the author, the critic/annotator and the mysterious third man tracking the progress of both with clearly insidious intent. This analysis aims to uncover the suppressed trauma of Kinbote’s past, hiding behind Kinbote’s narrative. A memory of traumatic past forces Kinbote into ecstatic fiction-making. He constructs the marvellous Semberland (the land of resemblers) as a bridge between his lonely life in the foreign culture and his obscure past in the culture that no longer exists. This mythologization also mirrors a much grander theme: the theme of death and – always mysterious, never graspable – afterlife, and an attempt to bridge the gap between the quotidian realm of one’s existence and the glorious and unexplainable *potustoronnost’,* the other side of the mirror, the other side of consciousness.

Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire* consists of a 999-line poem, glossed at great length by a mad scholar. In this bizarrely involuted text, a quiet though not uneventful domestic life of an American poet, John Shade, serves as a drab background for the brilliant fictions of his commentator, Charles Kinbote. The obvious irony of the text is the distance between the autobiographical poem that Shade writes and its dramatically unreliable critical apparatus (foreword, commentary, index), constructed by Kinbote. Instead of providing insightful explanations of the author’s literary inspirations, useful biographical data, historical trivia or even some possible interpretations of the work supported by the textual evidence, the critic brazenly appropriates the poem, using it to thrust forward his own agenda. It is just as well that by the time the critic gets his hands on the poem, its author is conveniently dead – Shade is shot, having been mistaken for someone else, an incident that once again proves that in Nabokov’s world fate is an ironist. Kinbote has a chance to steal the poem, and spirit it away, quite like the Elf king snatching
the child from the arms of the distraught father in Goethe’s poem.² It is curious that *Pale Fire* precedes Roland Barthes’ celebrated “The Death of the Author” by at least five years – it seems that Nabokov should be credited with the idea of the dead author (cf. Barthes 142–148).

It has been noted that Nabokov wrote *Pale Fire* immediately after completing his work on the translation of *Eugene Onegin*, which includes extensive notes on the text. It is therefore tempting to read *Pale Fire* as a conscious self-parody. In fact, some of Kinbote’s statements often closely echo Nabokov’s tone in his notes, which are meticulously researched and informative, yet nonetheless unmistakably Nabokovian. For instance, Kinbote famously proclaims that without his commentary the poem “simply has no human reality at all” (455). Nabokov, explaining his compulsive attention to details, states: “unless these are thoroughly understood and remembered, all ‘general ideas’ (so easily acquired, so profitably resold) must necessarily remain but worn passports allowing their bearers short cuts from one area of ignorance to another” (Pushkin 1990, 8).

Luckily for us, the madness of the commentator is endlessly entertaining. The world he constructs in his own fictions is the fabulous realm of Zembla, a distant northern land of inenubilable blue sky (an intentional oxymoron, the never-clearing blue of the sky subtly hinting at the nature of Kinbote’s kingdom), the marvellous Semberland – which in Zemblan means “the land of resemblers” (265) – in other words, the land of the mirror. And in this world, Kinbote is the king. As in every good fairy tale, there is a crisis – a revolution in the Kingdom of the mirror begins, appropriately, at the Glass Factory. Soon, the King is imprisoned. He finds a secret tunnel, escapes, passes through the mountains and flees further away, parachuting down to America, where he will pose from now on as a distinguished and eccentric scholar. The comedy of the campus life, with academic feuds and students, passing in silent enchantment from classroom to classroom like bleak phantoms blown by the moody air-conditioning, seamlessly merges with the shimmering images of the Zemblan court intrigues and glamorous amusements of Charles II Xavier the Beloved (Kinbote’s “real” name).

1. Who is Kinbote?

Can we somehow lift the panoply of fictitious selves to investigate who Kinbote really is? Here are some facts that we may gather by reading and rereading *Pale Fire*. First, on the level of the “reality” of the text, which constitutes the world of the New Wye, Appalachia, where both Shade and Kinbote reside in the neighbouring houses, Charles Kinbote is an émigré who teaches in the Wordsmith University some Scandinavian language, but also speaks fluent Russian. He is a homosexual, unable to even pretend to hide his sexual preferences, for which he becomes the object of the predictable social ostracism. He lives alone,
in a rented house, sometimes enticing male students to allay his loneliness, only to feel the pain of betrayal all the more keenly when his advances are rejected or, worse, ignored. He manages to strike an acquaintance with Shade to whom he immediately begins telling his fantastic stories of Zembla, hoping that the old poet would reproduce this crystal world in his poetry.

Of course, the name of the location in America is invented, which introduces interesting tensions into the text. If there is such a state as Appalachia in the world of *Pale Fire*, might there also be such a country as Zembla? According to Kinbote’s commentary, the subject he teaches at the university is Zemblan literature and culture. Other people seem to take for granted Zemblan affairs and even, at times, discuss Zemblan matters and dignitaries, causing some alarm on Kinbote’s part. Yet, all this appears only in his own commentary, which warps the American reality to make it almost as fantastic as Zembla itself.

In Shade’s poem, which supposedly reproduces the untainted reality of his world, New Wye is mentioned repeatedly, while Zembla appears only once. The poet fancifully describes the process of shaving in his bath: “and now I plough / Old Zembla’s fields where my gay stubble grows, / And slaves make hay between my mouth and nose” (936–938, 67). This, Kinbote obligingly explains (in a tone of defeat and sadness), is a reference to Alexander Pope’s “At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where” from *An Essay on Man* (Pope 287). Curiously, Zembla also features in Pope’s meditations on the nature of fame in *Paraphrases from Chaucer: The Temple of Fame* – in an extended metaphor of eternity the poet invokes the image of endless winter:

So Zembla’s rocks (the beauteous work of frost)
Rise white in air, and glitter o’er the coast;
Pale suns, unfelt, at distance roll away,
And on th’ impassive ice the lightnings play. (Pope 105)

The “work of frost” recalls Shade’s “diamonds of frost,” “pale suns” contain an intriguing echo of “pale fire,” and it is quite possible that Shade intended to refer to this passage as one of the inspirations for his title – and if so, Kinbote may have misidentified the source of Shade’s line. The more famous case of such misidentification is his failure to trace the poem’s title to Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* – even though this is the one book Kinbote actually has in his possession while writing his commentary.

There are certain rejected passages from Shade’s poem, which he apparently failed to destroy and which Kinbote obligingly cites. These fragments seem to refer to Kinbote’s story or his kingdom and may be counted as indirect evidence of Zembla’s existence. But the index identifies every single one of those variants as “K’s contribution” (314–315), therefore once more obliterating Zembla from the surface reality.
Kinbote may also not be the real name of our mad narrator. Delving into the sub-reality of the text, we find in the commentary a certain Botkin, who, like Kinbote, does not belong to the Russian department of the university. He is first mentioned in a subordinate clause, in parenthesis, in a sentence dealing with Professor Pnin, who is a very memorable character from Nabokov’s earlier novel. His name signals to the reader Nabokov’s authorial intrusion (referring the reader outside the novel to another work in Nabokov’s textual universe, and then, in the next step, to the deity that guarantees the stability of this world, i.e. the author). Botkin’s appearance in this fragment is mysterious: he is not a character participating in any of the events that Kinbote describes. Looking him up in the index, however, we learn that V. Botkin, is an “American scholar of Russian descent” (306). There is further enlightenment, if we still need any, in the question put to Kinbote by an ironically named Prof. Pardon: “I was under the impression that you were born in Russia, and that your name was a kind of anagram of Botkin or Botkine?” Kinbote’s reaction is particular: “You are confusing me with some refugee from Nova Zembla” (C. 894, 267). This is a very close copy of Lolita’s reaction to Humbert when he obtusely teases her about Quilty being her old flame: “You must be confusing me with some other fast little article” (Nabokov 1999, 222). Of course, the apparent denial is, in fact, a confirmation.

Botkin must be Kinbote’s real name, and he must be an émigré not from fabulous Zembla, but from Russia, where a very real revolution displaced many of his kind, expelling them into the fictions of the rest of the world. Donald Barton Johnson proposes a hypothesis that Botkin’s double delusion is recognized and tolerated by the people of New Wye, therefore they refer to him as Kinbote in conversations reported in the commentary. Johnson also suggests that while Kinbote (the fictional identity) may kill himself by the end of the story, Botkin might survive and continue to function as an author persona (Johnson 60–73). Zemblan chronology constructed by Kinbote is all wrong (revolution taking place in 1958 instead of 1917), but this must be merely one of the instances in which Kinbote’s inventiveness reveals itself.

There are many intriguing echoes in the commentator’s name which have been glossed at length by the many scholars attracted by the glowing lamp of *Pale Fire*. Let us mention just one resounding resonance: Botkin refers to a sharp stiletto mentioned by Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy which tantalizingly shadows many of Shade’s and Kinbote’s musings on death and suicide: “For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, / [...] When he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin?” (Shakespeare 158).

Interestingly, though, the letters that form both Kinbote and Botkin also may be used to form NIKTO, a word meaning nobody in Russian (Tammi 574). This may serve as another confirmation of Kinbote’s desire for self-deletion. We will return to the question of Kinbote’s end, but for now let us note that self-deletion appears to be a peculiar exercise that quite a few characters besides Kinbote
are keen to engage in. Shade imagines himself in the first lines of his poem as a waxwing flying into the blue reflection of the sky in the window and knocking itself out in the full flight. Shade’s assassin cuts his own throat in prison. Shade’s daughter Hazel drowns herself in a lake. Kinbote tells a story of Iris Acht, an actress and his grandfather’s mistress who might have died by her own hand. Self-cancellation becomes a disease that decimates the ranks of *Pale Fire* characters.

Botkin, who may or may not survive the ending of the story, reimagines himself as Kinbote, who believes that his true identity is that of the exiled King Charles Xavier the Beloved. One fiction is not enough, there must be a whole gallery of reflections to satisfy a mirror-addict. Zembla is a bridge between Kinbote’s lonely life in the foreign culture and his obscure past in the culture that no longer exists, the long lost pre-revolutionary Russia. In fashioning it out of bits and pieces of his memories, Botkin-Kinbote-Nikto practices the forbidden magic of passing incognito back into his past, quite like the speaker of Nabokov’s poem *Fame*:

I kept changing countries like counterfeit money,  
hurrying on and afraid to look back,  
like a phantom dividing in two, like a candle  
between mirrors sailing into the sun.  
It is far to the meadows where I sobbed in my childhood  
having missed an Apollo, and farther yet  
to the alley of firs where the midday sunlight  
glowed with fissures of fire between bands of jet.  
But my word, curved to form an aerial viaduct,  
spans the world, and across in a strobe-effect spin  
of spokes I keep endlessly passing incognito  
into the flame-licked night of my native land. (Nabokov 2012, 107)

Nabokov glosses the “strobe-effect spin” in a footnote to his poem thus: “the strobe effect causes wheels to look as if they revolved backward, and the cross over to America becomes an optical illusion of a return to Russia” (Nabokov 2012, 182). The “flame-licked night of my native land” seems to invoke an impression of personal loss – a sunset, an end of an era of cloudless childhood. At the same time, more grandly, it refers to what the poet sees as the night of history (bolshevism), the darkness that persists despite the flames of witch-hunts.

But we are dangerously near to blurring Nabokov’s personal past with Kinbote’s private heaven and hell of memory. And while it is true that Nabokov saturated *Pale Fire* with images borrowed from his own history (to give just one example: July 21st, the date of Shade’s assassination, is the birthday of Nabokov’s father), clearly Kinbote’s mysterious figure is quite distinct from that of his creator’s.
Kinbote’s fiction connects the two realities divided by a gap of history, yet it also obliterates the memory of the past, and the “aerial viaduct” threatens to turn into an elaborately decorated marble sarcophagus, burying the painful past in the graveyard of oblivion. Reinventing himself, reinventing his culture, Kinbote plays a game of mirrors, chasing himself further and further into the glass labyrinth where pale fire of the past can never be looked at directly, only glimpsed in a shadowy corner. As a devoted narcissist, Kinbote worships the mirror, but at the same time intuits something of its sinister nature, fearing the phantoms it might breed.

Kinbote’s paranoia is something that defines him and makes sense of his story: Shade’s murder by a would-be assassin of Zemblan king substantiates Kinbote’s identity, if not to the police investigating the case, then to the reader of his commentary. It seems, at times, to be his one authentic emotion, overriding every other sentiment, every other sensation:

The sound of a rapid car or a groaning truck would come as a strange mixture of friendly life’s relief and death’s fearful shadow: would that shadow pull up at my door? Were those phantom thugs coming for me? […] At times I thought that only by self-destruction could I hope to cheat the relentlessly advancing assassins who were in me, in my eardrums, in my pulse, in my skull, rather than on that constant highway looping up over me and around my heart […] (C.62, 96–97)

His state of mind strikingly resembles the very peculiar species of paranoia described by Nabokov in his poem “An Evening of Russian Poetry”:

My back is Argus-eyed. I live in danger.
False shadows turn to track me as I pass
and, wearing beards, disguised as secret agents,
creep in to blot the freshly written page
and read the blotter in the looking glass.
And in the dark, under my bedroom window,
until, with a chill whirr and shiver, day
presses its starter, warily they linger
or silently approach the door and ring
the bell of memory and run away. (2012, 136)

The final image – auditory as well as visual – of a bell ringing in memory without bringing up anything distinct, the nagging impression of having forgotten something important, even vital – is familiar to many readers: a haunting tinkling of some distant analogy, a ghost of a secret connection between this moment in time, the loveliness of the world on the page, its muted reflections somewhere in the spiral corridors of one’s brain and some other green room in the theatre of im-
agination. But here it is doubled with that nagging presentiment of time’s secret agents stealing the precious matter of the writer’s invention, inverting his words and worlds – quite like Kinbote does, when he steals Shade’s poem – first literally and then figuratively, through his invention-inversion of Zembla. There is more than a hint of megalomania: the writer appears as a possessor of some highly valuable, perhaps even forbidden knowledge, which some spies try at their own peril to purloin. But who are these spies supposed to be?

The obvious answer seems to be, the “false shadows” are the critics. The writer is quite distressed by the suspicion that – o horror! – the critic might be able to decode the secret cypher of the words on the page. And how may one escape this danger of being interpreted/decrypted? Prince Hamlet had a certain rather attractive idea about this: one may escape through madness, or, to be more precise, by feigning madness. Kinbote’s creative flights into the past are thus doubly coded: inversion (the cypher of the mirror-language) and warbling of the insanity, which may be real, or may be a deliberate ruse – just as in Hamlet.

It is rather surprising that an individual with so many mental problems constructs such artistically complete and coherent narrative. Even if we put it down as an example of the elaborate fictional worlds which some intelligent madmen are capable of creating, it is still surprising that Kinbote somehow manages to function in the real world. He does not have many friends, but he keeps a job, does his shopping, drives a car, etc. Or, may this be Nabokov’s joke that the only environment in which a madman as far gone as Kinbote can still function as a fully eligible member of society is academia?

But let us take a step back, and once more compare the situation of Professor Botkin with the stance of the paranoid writer in the poem. In Kinbote’s case the paranoia of the writer seems to be originating in remembering, rather than in forgetting. The shadowy noises fill him with fear not because there will be no one at the door for him (i.e., something he cannot remember despite all desperate attempts to chase the “bell ringers”), but, it appears, precisely because he dreads finding someone or something there.

What is it that haunts Kinbote? Why should he choose not to resurrect his past by remembering every stray detail of his childhood and youth, but instead turn it into a fairy tale? A hint at what might be happening with Kinbote is dropped in the conversation he overhears and reports without seeming to realize that he is its object. Shade responds to someone who has just called Kinbote mad in the following way: “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” (C.629, 238).

It seems that, unlike Nabokov’s, Kinbote’s past is not a bliss of earthly paradise, but “a drab and unhappy” stretch which culminates in the heartbreak of exile and turns him into a compulsive inventor. Let us take a closer look at the sinister
demons he tries to keep at bay by enchanting his memory into madness.

2. Inversions of trauma

Discussing Kinbote, Brian Boyd points out that he is not only a homosexual, but also a paedophile (94). And indeed, the text is full of suggestions to this effect: Kinbote continuously praises the beauty of young boys and time and again boasts of his conquests. Moreover, Boyd suggests that Kinbote had to escape to America from Sweden or some other Scandinavian country because of his paedophilia – again, a likely scenario.

However, this leaves some troubling questions unanswered. Firstly, the frankness with which Kinbote admits his sexual perversions is strange to say the least. If indeed, paedophilia was the reason that chased Kinbote away from his home, he would most definitively make sure to be more careful in his new country, and this theme would have been suppressed in his narrative. And even if this strange self-exposure is somehow explained (perhaps, by insisting that Kinbote is about to commit suicide and therefore sees no reason to suppress his criminal tendencies), there remains a mystery of Shade’s relationship with Kinbote. The poet did tolerate his insufferable neighbour taking long walks with him, listening to the very candid descriptions of “the King’s” adventures, which included exemplars of his particular sexual predilections. And Shade claimed to have guessed Kinbote’s identity. While we may agree with Boyd that by showing kindness to the egoistical, oppressively self-imposing, voyeuristic, mad Kinbote, Shade demonstrated the finest faculties of his nature – the ability to empathize with the most repulsive human being, this tolerance receives an entirely different tenor if Shade also realized his neighbour’s paedophilia. We would need to somehow account for this, and there seem to be only two possibilities. The first is that perhaps, Shade had some problems of his own. This possibility is tempting, as it would provide a completely different explanation for his daughter’s suicide. However, there is simply no textual evidence to support this hypothesis, and Shade seems to be as far removed from Humbert Humbert as he is from Kinbote. There remains the second possibility, namely, that Shade understood something peculiar about Kinbote which made him abstain from dispensing judgment.

It seems obvious that Kinbote persists in constantly transforming reality. Every story that he tells is an inversion of actual events and personalities into something that renders them harmless. The mirror-land of Zembla contains inverted reflections from Kinbote’s past, and stray echoes of his present. In this mirror nothing is simply a direct equivalent, but a reworked – often, out of all recognition – simulacrum. Let us analyze one of the key passages that allow critics establish Kinbote’s paedophilia:
Little Christopher’s family is about to migrate to a distant colony where his father has been assigned to a lifetime post. Little Christopher, a frail lad of nine or ten, relies completely (so completely, in fact, as to blot out the very awareness of this reliance) on his elders’ arranging all the details of departure, passage and arrival. He cannot imagine, nor does he try to imagine, the particular aspects of the new place awaiting him but he is dimly and comfortably convinced that it will be even better than his homestead, with the big oak, and the mountain, and his pony, and the park, and the stable, and Grimm, the old groom, who has a way of fondling him whenever nobody is around. (C.493, 219–220)

Kinbote’s extended metaphor with the disturbing figure of the fondling “Grim” suggests a dark secret patch in the life that otherwise would be quite perfect. And this troubling passage may indicate not Kinbote’s predilections for young male children, but his own childhood trauma, buried deep beneath the brilliant and flamboyant fictions of the royal palace and not-so-innocent games. If Kinbote is the victim who tries to transcend his trauma by projecting himself as the molester, because then the horrible memory might cease to torment him, it could explain his total disregard for his safety in constantly talking about the supposed past conquests. And if Shade managed to guess as much, it would explain his continued tolerant kindness to Kinbote (“and the password is-? Pity” C.549, 225).

Perhaps a confirmation for this theory may be found in the phrase Kinbote uses: “a personality consisting mainly of the shadows of its own prison bars” (C.549, 227). The phrase recalls immediately the newspaper article that according to Nabokov’s claim served as an inspiration for Lolita: “The first little throb of Lolita […] [was] somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (Nabokov 1991, 311). The trauma of his childhood may have become the defining feature of Kinbote’s personality. The whole story of Zembla reflects the predicament of Kinbote’s trauma, of which he cannot speak directly, but only through artful inversion. If so, Lolita represented the paedophile’s tale, and Pale Fire – the same story, but from the point of view of the damaged child who grew up with the “personality consisting mainly of the shadows of its prison bars.”

Russia still edges his tale, but merely as a mirage on the edge of the dream. Kinbote, describing Zemblan mountains, adds in a dreamy whisper: “and from one of them, the highest and hardest, Mt. Glitterntin, one can distinguish on clear days, far out to the east, beyond the Gulf of Surprise, a dim iridescence which some say is Russia” (C.149, 138). This “lovely, infinitely cautious sentence” (Wood 2007) combines nostalgia, wistfulness and quite perceptible relief caused by the relished remoteness of the image. Michael Wood offers two ways to decode this sentence: what lies behind the mountains is Soviet Union, still called by some by the antiquated name of Russia, or, “by a ghostly temporal trick of the kind
which fills the pages of *Pale Fire*, on some days, from Zembla, to your surprise, you can actually see an older, liberal Russia, the delayed light of a different political star” (Wood 2007). A distant, dim vision, which might be an illusion of a fairyland or an echo of a legend – this is the only representation of Russia that is safe for Kinbote – almost lovely, almost desirable. As Alexander Dolinin writes, Nabokov’s heroes “‘safely solipsize’ [reality], transforming it into ‘another, fanciful’ being” as a way to transcend “the pain of exile and isolation inflicted by history” (Dolinin 201).

3. (Re)covering the past

Kinbote’s falsification, fabrication and fabulation of history (a mirror version of the American Dream, a fresh page that is opened not in the future, but in the past – with the left hand) is in stark opposition with Shade’s insistence on faithfulness to the most evanescent, most trivial detail of the remembered past. Memory seems to constitute for him the meaning of existence, whether in this world, or the next:

I’m ready to become a floweret  
Or a fat fly, but never, to forget.  
And I’ll turn down eternity unless  
The melancholy and the tenderness  
Of mortal life; the passion and the pain;  
The claret taillight of that dwindling plane  
Off Hesperus; your gesture of dismay  
On running out of cigarettes; the way  
You smile at dogs; the trail of silver slime  
Snails leave on flagstones; this good ink, this rhyme,  
This index card, this slender rubber band  
Which always forms, when dropped, an ampersand,  
Are found in Heaven by the newly dead  
Stored in its strongholds through the years. (523–536, 52–53)

The passage rings with sadness because the poet seems to realize that Mnemosyne is a fickle mistress, even when decorated with insignia of eternity and exalted to the position of absolute dictator. Shade’s attempt to recover the past is just as precarious, just as uncertain in its success, as Kinbote’s ecstatic fabulation. Even when the past is not deliberately falsified, it just as invariably becomes a stylized image through mere reiteration:

I was an infant when my parents died.  
They both were ornithologists. I’ve tried  
So often to evoke them that today
I have a thousand parents. Sadly they
Dissolve in their own virtues and recede. (71–75, 35)

Devout and tender evocation of the past, the constant practice of the ability to recall the exact shape, smell and feel of things, somehow only succeed in making them still more distant. Shade continues this thought when he notes:

For we die every day; oblivion thrives
Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives,
And our best yesterdays are now foul piles
Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files. (519–522, 52)

This passage softly echoes Keats’ “Ode to Melancholy,” which is, perhaps, meant as response to the despondence of the poet’s realization that memory fails to conserve the past just as it is (with all the precious minutiae of detail), and recollection – however faithful, however fervent – does not allow one to relive the bygone experiences. Keatsian warning on not seeking the intensity of melancholy in the themes of sadness or oblivion in the first stanza proceeds through the enumeration of the poisonous plants, flowers, moths and birds traditionally associated with death, or, more precisely, with suicide, to culminate in: “For shade to shade will come too drowsily, / and drown the wakeful anguish of the soul” (Keats 197).

For Shade, the poet, remaining in the shade of his melancholy is not sufficient to sustain “the wakeful anguish of the soul.” The daily death of the past, which disappears into inanimate matter of the dusty “foxed files” as soon as it ceases to be the present, is poignant with the recognition of time’s cruel efficiency. The image of “blood-ripe lives” in his poem evokes the grape of joy bursting into poison of deep sadness in Keats’ ode (Keats 199), where one is permitted to taste and savour the fully saturated pain of remembrance only in the transient pleasure of the present.

4. Kinbote’s end

For Pale Fire characters, the past is poisoned. Shade dies when someone else’s past comes to demand its revenge – whether the killer is really Gradus, assassinating Charles the Beloved / Kinbote, or Jack Grey, looking for Judge Goldsworth. Traumatized Kinbote is clearly suffering from some complicated form of mental illness, which combines the paranoia, split-personality disorder and delusions of grandeur, culminating in suicidal hysteria that will very probably end his life immediately after the commentary is completed.

The most conclusive evidence for such an end to his life is found outside the text. In one of his interviews Nabokov not only insists on Kinbote’s demise, but specifies the date of his self-annihilation, 19th October 1959: “I think it is so
nice that the day on which Kinbote committed suicide (and he certainly did after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem) happens to be both the anniversary of Pushkin’s *Lyceum* and that of ‘poor old man Swift’s death” (Nabokov 1990, 74).

Let us follow this tentative clue. The date of 19th October marks the anniversary of the school in which Pushkin – one of the most important literary presences for Nabokov – was educated between 1811 and 1817. Pushkin was one of the first 30 students enrolled in Lyceum (founded by the czar Alexander I on 19 October 1811). Strong ties of friendship were formed between the class mates, and 19th October became the date for their annual reunions. Throughout his life, Pushkin wrote six poems dedicated to his Lyceum comrades, dated or entitled “19th October” (Kahn 32). The best known and most optimistic of these poems is “19th of October 1925” (written while the poet was in exile in Mikhailoskoye), a celebration of hope overshadowed by the theme of death. The last poem is dated 1936, and – like *Pale Fire* – remains unfinished. Pushkin recited it during the last celebration he would attend before his death, but became so overcome by emotions that he did not manage to finish the reading; he also failed to fulfil his promise to provide the complete text of the poem to his friends later (Pushkin 1935, 737–738). All this is pregnant with significance, yet, Nabokov seems to be referring to another text, a shorter poem written in 1927:

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God grant you, friends, a helping hand –
In cares of state and private plights,
In rowdy feasts of friendship’s band,
In passion’s sweet and secret rites!
God grant you, friends, a helping hand –
In daily woes and days of strife,
On vacant sea, in distant land
In every black abyss of life! (Pushkin 2009, 121)
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The exact translation of the last line of the poem would be: “And in the dark abysses of the earth.” It most likely refers to the fates of the Decembrists, some of whom were Pushkin’s Lyceum friends, Kukhel’beker and Pushchin, missing at the 1827 celebration of the Lyceum Day (Wachtel 66). The poem returns to the theme of death that would implant itself firmly as the key theme of the 19th October cycle. Without the precise biographical framework (and Kinbote is the inimitable master of inverting or obliterating context), the poem may be read as a farewell note of the lyric speaker addressed to his friends – or a suicide note. It does contain phrases that echo throughout *Pale Fire*. The “distant land” is particularly significant, prefiguring the legend of Zembla. Pushkin’s “black abyss” appears in Shade’s meditations on death and afterlife:
There was the day when I began to doubt
Man’s sanity: How could he live without
Knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom
 Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb?
And finally there was the sleepless night
When I decided to explore and fight
The foul, the inadmissible abyss,
Devoting all my twisted life to this
One task. (173–181, 39)

The image of the abyss – this time, softly, dreamily alluring, rather than “foul” – is also a persistent feature in Kinbote’s fantasy of a “perfect suicide”:

If you rent a cell in the luminous waffle, room 1915 or 1959, in a tall business center hotel browning the star dust, and pull up the window, and gently – not fall, not jump – but roll out as you should for air comfort [...] Another popular take-off is a mountaintop with a sheer drop of say 500 meters. [...] The ideal drop is from an aircraft, your muscles relaxed, your pilot puzzled, your packed parachute shuffled off cast off, shrugged off - farewell, shootka (little chute)! Down you go, but all the while you feel suspended and buoyed as you somersault in slow motion like a somnolent tumbler pigeon, and sprawl supine on the eiderdown of the air, or lazily turn to embrace your pillow, enjoying every last instant of soft, deep, death-padded life, with the earth’s green seesaw now above, now below, and the voluptuous crucifixion, as you stretch yourself in the growing rush, in the nearing swish, and then your loved body’s obliteration in the Lap of the Lord. (C.493, 220–221)

As Boyd explains, 1915 is the date of Kinbote’s birth, and 1959 – the year in which the Commentary is being written (104). Placing these dates as room numbers for most convenient suicide locations gives strong evidence to the case of Kinbote’s imminent end. The various scenarios for the self-destruction imagined by him all include that vision of a flight through the vacuous sea of air into the black “inviting abyss” of oblivion, as if inverting Pushkin’s image.

We may, of course, choose to ignore this instance of “authorial trespassing” (Wood 1994, 33). The evidence for Kinbote’s suicide within the novel (without Nabokov’s helpful nudge in the cited interview) is inconclusive. Yet, the nature of the text, with corrections inserted haphazardly, without deleting the previous variants, indicates lack of proofreading at the very least. This, in turn, suggests that by the time Pale Fire reached the printers, Kinbote was no longer in control of the text. Two explanations of such outcome suggest themselves. Either Kinbote was institutionalized in some kind of asylum, as he envisioned in the last lines of the commentary: “I may huddle and groan in a madhouse” (C.1000, 301), or his promise of self-annihilation was finally fulfilled.
The name “Kinbote” itself contains a direct suggestion of the commentator’s future. A curious conversation is recorded in the note to line 894: ‘“Didn’t you tell me, Charles, that kinbote means regicide in your 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” (C.894, 267). The metaphor is transparent: exile is merely the first step in the process of self-immolation.

Kinbote’s aerial bridge by which – with Nabokov’s trick of the strobe effect – he may imagine returning home from the alien world, can be of use to him, paradoxically, only if it does not lead back into the past. In his condition, cyclicity does not stand for redemptive return, it is a curse, a return to hell, to the past that has been charmed into slumber, but will most surely awake and reassert itself once the charmer crosses the forbidden border. Kinbote’s last note in the commentary, the most mysterious entry, glosses this terrifying in-escapability of eternal recurrence, in which some particulars may be changed, but the main events – including those most disturbing – will remain the same:

I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art (...). Oh, I may do many things! History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom, and with a great sob greet the gray coastline and the gleam of a roof in the rain. I may huddle and groan in a madhouse. But whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere, will quietly set out – somebody has already set out, somebody still rather far away is buying a ticket, is boarding a bus, a ship, a plane, has landed, is walking toward a million photographers, and presently he will ring at my door – a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus. (C.1000, 657–658)

This passage plays on various strings. It introduces the implication, unsettling in its correctness, that beyond Kinbote’s paranoia there lies a single irrefutable truth of the inevitable death. It hints at a possibility that both New Wye and Zembla are fictions of a madman locked in an asylum. It also introduces “glimpses of unexpected, inadmissible truths, not only that [Kinbote] is mad, but that he is invented” (Boyd 61). The projection of the “old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile” clearly invokes the image of the author. However, by this time (post-Lolita) Nabokov is not quite “sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art.” Thus, this projection is not just a metafictional joke – it may be Botkin’s most treasured, most secret dream: to be happily “normal” and quite invisible, with a secret of his art intact – and there is at the same time a definite awareness of the predestination that will short-circuit that dream. Even his musings about the bliss of death are not free from the same traumatic consciousness of eternal return: the passage about the little
Christopher discussed above provides evidence that even the next dimension – construed by Kinbote as Heaven – is likely to include that tormenting shadow, the fondling “Grimm.”

**Conclusion**

This, admittedly, is merely one of the possible interpretations of the novel. While Kinbote’s trauma seems undeniable, it may not entail his victimization by some paedophile. Yet, such reading explains the peculiar insistence on this theme running throughout the novel, as well as the disturbances in Kinbote’s perception of reality and Shade’s longsuffering forbearance of his neighbour.

*Pale Fire* in its elastic compatibility with various interpretations, has been compared to a chess game, which may be played out differently according to the choice of the players:

> How then is one to read the book? The only way, I suppose, is to make an arbitrary choice about which narrative audience one wants to join – or to read the novel several times, making a different choice each time. As in a game, we are free to make several opening moves; what follows will be dependent upon our initial decision. (Rabinowitz 140)

Decisions of the critics, perhaps quite as outrageous as Kinbote’s (mis)interpretative gestures, fulfil the expectations of the novel – as long as they “play by the book.” And if *Pale Fire* is a satire of a critical work, featuring an act of usurpation – the critic getting the upper hand over the dead author – and if it is a structure of mirroring frames, then what might Gradus – that inescapable Shadow who will inevitably track down Kinbote in the end – represent? Well, it must be the incarnation of the critic’s ultimate nightmare: another critic, another usurper, who will be quite free (since Kinbote is now also conveniently dead) to comment on the commentary.

**Notes**

1. All references to *Pale Fire* will indicate the line number of the poem and the corresponding page; when references are made to commentary on the line, “C” is prefixed to the line number.
2. Goethe’s “Der Erlkönig” is an important subtext in *Pale Fire*. It is echoed in Shade’s poem (653–664, 57) and mentioned in Kinbote’s commentary, with a bonus translation of the two opening lines into Zemblan (C.662, 239). According to Kinbote, these lines are chanted by the escaping king on his dan-
gerous night route through the mountains. The Zemblan translation, with its short, abrupt words, producing almost a marching rhythm, contrasts sharply with the sonorous Russian version that would be well familiar to Nabokov (the poem was translated by Vasili Zhukovski and quickly became one of the classic poems learned by every Russian child). Curiously, Goethe’s source was Johann Gottfried von Herder’s rendering of a Scandinavian (Danish) folk ballad. Thus, if Zembla is indeed a Scandinavian country, it would be the real home to the legend, and therefore, Kinbote’s Zemblan version would be another example of inept retranslation (see discussion of the sources for the title of Shade’s poem and Pope’s references to Zembla). See also Meyer 162–163 on the connections between Zhukovsky’s and Kinbote’s versions of Goethe.

3 See also another amusing example of the paper chase not unlike the hunt for the crown jewels in *Pale Fire* in Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin* explicated in Barnstead 2007.

4 An interesting hypothesis regarding the sources of Kinbote’s madness is proposed by Wiśniewski, who suggests that Gerald Emerald is in reality Kinbote’s mysterious roomer, “Bob.” There is a possibility that the disappointed passion for “Bob” triggers Kinbote’s descent into insanity.

5 For a finely nuanced discussion of Pope’s poetry as an intertext to *PF*, see Zunshine 161–182.

6 Cf. explication of the tunnel and the green room imagery in Boyd 159.

7 *Pale Fire* was completed in December 1961, and *Lolita* in 1955. In fact, despite being poorly suited for the tastes of general public, *Pale Fire* did make it to the bestseller lists – probably, in the afterglow of *Lolita* fame.

References


