

The book cover features a complex collage. The background is a dark, textured blue-grey. Overlaid on this is a large, semi-transparent image of a man's face, likely Vladimir Nabokov, looking slightly to the left. In the lower-left foreground, there is a detailed illustration of a small bird, possibly a sparrow or finch, with brown, orange, and white plumage, perched on a branch. The text is arranged in a formal, academic style.

BRIAN BOYD

NABOKOV'S
Pale Fire

The Magic of Artistic Discovery

NABOKOV'S
Pale Fire

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To BRONWEN

*We are discoverers: and discovery
is a creative art.*

(KARL POPPER, *Conjectures and Refutations*)

Contents

xi	Acknowledgments
3	<i>Introduction</i>
15	PART ONE · THESIS: READING STORY AS DISCOVERY
17	1. <i>Foreword</i>
25	2. <i>Poem</i>
37	3. <i>Commentary</i>
63	4. <i>Index</i>
67	5. <i>Pale Fire</i>
75	PART TWO · ANTITHESIS: REREADING IN SEARCH OF THE STORY BEHIND
77	6. <i>Intrusions of the Real: Shade</i>
89	7. <i>Excursions from the Real: Kinbote</i>
107	8. <i>Problems: Shade and Kinbote</i>
127	PART THREE · SYNTHESIS: RE-REREADING DISCOVERY AS STORY
129	9. <i>Transformation</i>

149	10. <i>From Appalachia to Zembla: A Woman Spurned</i>
173	11. <i>"Pale Fire": Origins and Ends</i>
188	12. <i>"A Poem in Four Cantos": Sign and Design</i>
207	13. <i>From Zembla to Appalachia: The Contrapuntal Theme</i>
233	14. <i>"Pale Fire," Pale Fire, pale fire: The Spiral Unwinds</i>
247	<i>Conclusion</i>
263	<i>Notes</i>
291	<i>Bibliography</i>
299	<i>Index</i>

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NABOKOV'S
Pale Fire

Introduction

VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *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. Witness the breathlessness of Mary McCarthy's renowned, much-reprinted review: "*Pale Fire* is a Jack-in-the-box, a Fabergé gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself kit. . . . This centaur-work of Nabokov's, half-poem, half-prose, this merman of the deep, is a creature of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth."¹ Because it invites us to discovery, *Pale Fire* 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.²

That seems to suit our muddled times, when "advanced" thinkers claim we must all accept as a universal truth that there is no such thing as truth, only local versions. The very notion of the difficult pursuit of the complex truth of things seems outdated to many a postmodernist—until he or she needs, say, the latest medical treatment arrived at through just such a struggle for truth.³ In an age that has become particularly skeptical of the possibility of *artistic* discovery, both *in* art and *about* works of art, I want to affirm 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.⁴

DISCOVERY

Nabokov himself was passionately committed to discovery all his life, as a scientist, a scholar, an artist, and a man. His scientific work on butterflies was small in scope—he had only a few years in the 1940s when he could snatch time from teaching and writing for laboratory work—and has only in the 1990s come to be fully appreciated by researchers in his field,⁵ but he knew nothing like the spell of the microscope, the challenge of unravelling nature's riddles—or so he

would say in the throes of discovery.⁶ But in the heat of other pursuits, he could think equally irresistible the excitement of the literary research he undertook in the 1950s for his edition of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, or the sustained sixty-year thrill of literary invention, or his lifelong quest to locate our position in "the universe embraced by consciousness."⁷

As he matured as a novelist, he found new ways to offer readers the same challenge of discovery, on the same range of levels, that he encountered in life. Nowhere does he succeed better than in *Pale Fire*, which detonates in the creative reader's mind a chain reaction of explosive discoveries that become still more explosive the more we reread.

Reveling in the find after find that she had made—or thought she had made—in *Pale Fire*, Mary McCarthy ended her review by hailing it "one of the very great works of art of this century." Most keen readers of Nabokov concur, happily singling out *Pale Fire* as his highest achievement. But it proves a good deal harder for them to interpret than to evaluate the novel. Whereas *Lolita* sparks moral debate especially among those who have never read it, *Pale Fire* has ignited a critical controversy among those who have read and reread it that burns more fiercely every year.

Rereaders of the novel incline to one of four major positions, three of which have been around almost since *Pale Fire* was published in 1962, and the fourth, arguing that we must move beyond the first, but only to find the second and third readings locked in intentionally irresolvable competition, has circulated for at least two decades.⁸ Indeed it is primarily because of the continuing debate among these positions that, in John Burt Foster, Jr.'s words, *Pale Fire* is "often viewed as a masterpiece of emerging postmodernism in fiction. Thus Matei Calinescu contends that it furthered the process by which the term 'postmodern' shifted from its original narrowly American application to the broad international meaning it holds today."⁹

The debate among these four positions recently re-erupted onto the Internet,¹⁰ and as the staunchest proponent of one of them, I ejected a little lava of my own. I restated my case, citing old evidence that had already persuaded many and adducing new evidence that was inclining still others to waver, and was asked to present a complete statement of the case in print. But as I reread *Pale Fire*, a few niggles in the novel itself and in the critical debate around it forced me to reconsider my position and drove me to a radical new reading that no one had yet

glimpsed. This new interpretation contradicts all the others—and confutes the claim that the novel is quintessentially “postmodern”—yet explains their appeal and their partial truth.

Nabokov's “Pale Fire” leads toward this interpretation through the series of discoveries Nabokov invites the first-time reader to make, then the more elusive discoveries he offers the rereader,¹¹ and the even more resistant and astonishing discoveries he prepares for those ready to make a still further imaginative effort.

As a researcher into one particularly complex family of butterflies, the Blues, Nabokov had found dizzying degrees of difficulty in understanding their relationships and their evolution. In an interview two months after the publication of *Pale Fire*, he reflected that experience when he declared: “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.”¹² One of his greatest achievements as a writer was to invent a way to entice his readers to discover little by little the increasing complexity of the world of one of his novels, to lure them, as he felt lured by the mystery of the world around him, into trying to advance along that infinite succession of steps. By focusing intently on the psychology of discovery, he learned to write fiction that was immediately accessible but that almost immediately encouraged us to begin exploring deeper—fiction that would be found to be endlessly complex yet would neither overburden the reader from the first, like Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or even parts of *Ulysses*, nor introduce intricacy for its own sake or at the expense of character and life, like Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*.

Frank Kermode called *Pale Fire* “one of the most complex novels ever written.”¹³ True, but John Barth's comment seems closer to the experience of the novel: “*Pale Fire* is a joy.” It is a joy that intensifies with time and effort, as we inch toward its recessed surprises and the possibility that the surprises it intimates may lie in wait in the world around us. The reading of *Pale Fire* I propose suggests a way of reading all of Nabokov that runs counter to the still widespread notion that he was an ironist who skewers with the elegant épée of his prose all he dislikes in life, an artist who flaunts his artifice, a supreme stylist with nothing to say. Nabokov is an ironist, but his ultimate irony is that people fail to see the bewildering bounty of life. He is an artist who does indeed flaunt some of his artifice, but only to leave much more

concealed, as he thinks life itself hides most of its unending surprises. He works with unusual care at the surface of his style, but he does so to open up unusual depths of feeling and thought. Unlike a Mann or a Musil, he quickly becomes impatient with ideas, but he may one day be seen as one of the most philosophical of all novelists.

The subtitle of this book, *The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, reflects several of its directions: the excitement of discovery awaiting us in *Pale Fire*; the artistic discoveries Nabokov had to make in order to allow *us* to discover so much; the process of critical discovery surrounding the novel; and the explanation of the nature of discovery advanced by Karl Popper from the time of his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934) and until his death.¹⁴

As Bryan Magee has recently observed, Popper's argument, "despite appearances, . . . is radical—revolutionary in a historic sense, and epic in its implications."¹⁵ Magee sums up Popper's claims:

... that ... all philosophy and all science involving the pursuit of certainty must be abandoned, a pursuit which had dominated Western thinking from Descartes to Russell; that because we do not, and never can in the traditional sense of the word "know," know the truth of any of our science, all our scientific knowledge is, and always will remain, fallible and corrigible; that it does not grow, as for hundreds of years people believed that it did, by the perpetual addition of new certainties to the body of existing ones, but by the repeated overthrow of existing theories by better theories, which is to say chiefly theories that explain more or yield more accurate predictions; that we must expect these better theories in their turn to be replaced one day by better theories still, and that process will have no end; so that what we call our knowledge can only ever be theories; that our theories are the products of our minds; that we are free to invent any theories whatsoever, but before any such theory can be accepted as knowledge it has to be shown to be preferable to whatever theory or theories it would replace if we accepted it; that such a preference can be established only by stringent testing; that although tests cannot establish the truth of a theory they can establish its falsity—or show up flaws in it—and therefore, although we can never have grounds for believing in the truth of a theory, we can have decisive grounds for preferring one theory to another; that therefore the rational way to behave is to base our choices and decisions on "the best of our knowledge" while at the same time seeking its replacement by something better; so if we want to make progress we should not fight to the

death for existing theories but welcome criticism of them and let our theories die in our stead.¹⁶

Much recent thinking aims to reject foundationalism, the assumption that we can have a secure foundation or authority for what we think we know. In advancing what he calls his “non-authoritarian theory of knowledge,”¹⁷ Popper shows that we must reject all claims to be able to reach truth through some sure method—tradition, intuition, reason, observation, experiment, or whatever—and that we can nevertheless still explain the explosive growth of provisional human knowledge.¹⁸ Unlike a Derrida or a Rorty, he removes foundations without removing the search for truth.¹⁹

Like Nabokov, Popper stresses that there is always more to discover, and no right road to discovery. We sense a problem, to which we freely invent solutions that we then need to test against alternatives, by comparing their consistency, their consequences, their explanatory power. In *Pale Fire* Nabokov poses a whole series of problems, problems within problems and problems overlapping problems, and the history of *Pale Fire* criticism shows exactly the fitful advance toward attempts to engage with deeper problems that Popper or Nabokov would expect in tackling a complex world or work.

On the strength of his philosophy of science and the political philosophy that he develops from it,²⁰ claims Magee, Popper is “the outstanding philosopher of the twentieth century.” Yet he also points out that Popper overlooks major areas that matter: “the things that are most important of all to us, which Kant (and for that matter the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*) saw as rooted in the world of the unknowable—the meaning of life as a whole, the meaning of death; morality; values; the significance of art—are things that Popper has not written about, or at any rate not much.”²¹ But these things are exactly what interests Nabokov most of all. A scientist himself, impatient with the old answers, the old approximate descriptions and explanations, Nabokov knows that modern science has discovered worlds within unexpected worlds, what his John Shade calls

A system of cells interlinked within
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked
Within one stem.

But he thinks that behind the endless complexity of things we can discover in science lurks “something else, something else, something else”—“and I must not be overexplicit.”²² In his poem “Pale Fire,”

Shade arrives at the conclusion “not text, but texture”: that he cannot express the truth he sees behind things directly, but only through the interrelationships between things. In the same way, Nabokov allows his readers to find through the interrelationships between the parts of *Pale Fire* what he must not make overexplicit, 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.

READING

Introducing his course “Masterpieces of European Fiction” at Cornell, Nabokov would tell his students: “Curiously enough, one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader.”²³ Presumably he wanted his own readers to be active and creative rereaders. What exactly *did* he think and expect of us? In a chapter of *Speak, Memory* written just months before he first gave that Cornell lecture, he discusses the chess problems he often composed in his years of European exile. That he wants chess to cast light on his writing he lets us see in one famous sentence:

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.²⁴

To an interviewer who quoted part of the parenthesis back at him, Nabokov replied “I believe I said ‘between the author and the reader,’ not ‘the world,’”²⁵ which is plainly what he had originally intended.

To some, the comparison of the relationship between author and reader to that between problem-composer and problem-solver epitomizes just what disturbs them in reading Nabokov: that he seems to see the reader as an antagonist whom he wants to outwit and convince of his own superiority. But although a chess *game* involves an attempt by one player to outdo another, a chess *problem* is quite different—and

Nabokov was always much more interested in the composition and art of chess problems than in the competition of chess games. Despite the resistance a good problem must have to easy solution, others must be able to solve it, or it is a failure. *Because* of the resistance, successful solvers can enjoy knowing they have exercised the imagination and intelligence to discard false solutions and persevere to find the true one. The relationship between composer and solver is fundamentally a generous one: the composer invites the solver as close to creative equality as the difference in their roles allows.

Nabokov thinks it a key to his world that the world itself invites us to share in the creativity we find in it, and he makes that in turn a key to his work. In an article on fictional audiences that begins and ends with *Pale Fire*, Peter Rabinowitz writes: "Nabokov appears to derive an almost sadistic satisfaction from knowing that his authorial audience [the hypothetical audience an author writes for] is intellectually well above his actual readers—although it is possible that Nabokov in fact writes for an authorial audience quite close to his actual readers but writes in order to make that audience feel intellectually inadequate."²⁶ This seems to me exactly the reverse of the truth. Nabokov thinks that the world itself is "intellectually well above" us all. As a scientist exhilarated by the discoveries he makes in the natural world, he is also aware that each new discovery reveals more that now suddenly needs explanation. Science, he insists, does nothing to dispel the mystery of the world and in fact has turned each of us into "a trillion of mysteries."²⁷ Yet he thinks that there is something fantastically generous, curiously playful, even, in the fact that the world is far more complex, dense, and deceptive than it seems, in its providing such inexhaustible scope for inquiry.

Once, shortly after his years in the laboratory at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, Nabokov was ready to write an ambitious book on the subject of animal mimicry,²⁸ which he thought often manifested an artistic perfection and wit in excess of any possible advantage it could have in the struggle for survival, and "seemed to have been invented by some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man" to discover.²⁹ He suspects that in general nature buries so much precisely so that we will always have more to unearth. Echoing the first modern philosopher of science, Sir Francis Bacon, who echoes Proverbs, he writes in *Bend Sinister* that "the glory of God is to hide a thing, and the glory of man is to find it."³⁰ Nabokov feels that the

inexhaustibility of the world is nowhere more munificent than in offering endless opportunities for the delights of discovery. He tries to provide equivalents in his fiction as he invites us to discover more and more about our world, or the world of literature, or the world of the particular work, to become, as nearly as possible, the co-creators of one of his miniature worlds, as we solve the artistic problems it poses.

Always passionately concerned with freedom, Nabokov sought it in a metaphysical even more than in a political sense, in the possibility that somehow human freedom might escape what he saw as the amazingly spacious but still unbreachable prison of time, personality, mortality. At the beginning of the chapter of his autobiography that ends with the chess problem, he writes:

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 of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call "thetic" the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; "antithetic" the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and "synthetic" the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on.³¹

This spiral runs through all of Nabokov's metaphysics and his art. He sketches its metaphysical implications in the next and final chapter of *Speak, Memory*: "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 turn, 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."³² He dwells on the esthetic implications of the spiral at more length, in the chess problem ending the previous chapter:

I remember one particular problem I had been trying to compose for months. There came a night when I managed at last to express that particular theme. It was meant for the delectation of the very expert solver. The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and

discover its fairly simple, "thetic" solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme (exposing White's King to checks), which the composer had taken the greatest pains to "plant" (with only one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having passed through this "antithetic" inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. The pleasant experience of the round-about route (strange landscapes, gongs, tigers, exotic customs, the thrice-repeated circuit of a newly married couple around the sacred fire of an earthen brazier) would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit, and after that, his arrival at the simple key move would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight.

The problem is not just an elaborate metaphor but a genuine chess problem: on the next page, Nabokov provides both the position of the pieces on the board and the key, and the problem has more than once been analyzed purely in chess terms.³³ But in view of the comparison he makes on the previous page between chess and fiction, Nabokov plainly intends us to take this particularly successful problem as an analogy to the aims of his most successful fiction.³⁴ In his fiction he offers all readers a straightforward, accessible reading, which nevertheless itself requires *some* imaginative problem-solving to arrive at the "fairly simple, 'thetic' solution," just as life itself offers its own kind of problems and rewards to the unintellectual. He then places greater demands on his more sophisticated readers, subjects them even to the "pleasurable torments" of the "antithetic inferno," an unexpected tour of the world of the work or the problem that is its own "ampl[e] reward," before they can reach the ultimate solution in "a synthesis of poignant artistic delight," just as life itself sets before the inquiring mind the additional challenge of attempting to wrest out its secrets and sense and the additional reward of the thrill of discovery.

As Martin Amis observes, Nabokov, whatever else he may do, "spins a jolly good yarn, with believable characters, a strong story-line, and vivid, humorous prose. . . . He does all the usual things better than anybody else."³⁵ Unlike many modernists, Nabokov treats us to the pleasures of striking characters and storylines involving love and death, those staples of life and literature, in unusually dramatic and

colorful forms. Even at this level, of course, he invites us to be active and imaginative: to guess at the reality and the identity of Humbert's pursuer and his intended victim; to intuit the link between Kinbote and Charles II; to notice the true family relationship between Van and Ada. By incorporating even into his plots problems that we can all solve in the course of a single reading, he invites us to sample the delights of discovery, while by leaving still more that remains elusive, he encourages us to return for more. Just as he slowly turns the "would-be solver" of his chess problem into "the by now ultrasophisticated solver," so he develops us into the ultrasophisticated readers he knows we can become.

In this, his procedure could not be more different from Joyce's. For Joyce the subject and the style appropriate to the subject were everything, and the reader be damned. Joyce's radical pursuit of appropriate form opened up extraordinary new possibilities in fiction, in his unrivalled and varied handling of interior monologue, in the amplitude and precision of his realism, in the exuberance of his artifice, in styles ranging from the headlines and rhetoric of the "Aeolus" chapter of *Ulysses* to the lyrical pseudoscientism of "Ithaca" to the dream-palimpsests of *Finnegans Wake*, but for most readers it also meant a sense of overload, even in *Ulysses* ("Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes . . ."), let alone in the nightslur and oneirobabble of *Finnegans Wake*. Writing for the professors he wanted to keep busy for a thousand years, or for the ideal reader with the ideal insomnia, 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.

Nabokov, by contrast, writes with an acute awareness of the range and capacity of his readers, whom he thinks—*pace* Rabinowitz—"the most varied and gifted in the world."³⁶ He handles 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. Even his vocabulary operates this way. He cannot attain a Joycean luxuriance in his English, but he studs his text with curios—"versipel," "kinbote," "lemniscate," "lansquenet," "stillicide," "luciola" are a few that might stump us in *Pale Fire*—that send us to our fattest dictionary to locate the explosive surprise waiting in each word. He spaces and grades his challenges, so that we can handle enough of them to continue at speed, so that we can solve enough to want to look

out for more, but so that we do not even suspect the deeper problems until we are well on the way to becoming expert solvers.

None of Nabokov's other novels seems closer to the chess problem model than *Pale Fire*.³⁷ A first reading of the book introduces us as it were to its thetic phase, where Nabokov as part of the "good yarn" he spins sets us all problems to solve as we read, though each of us may solve them in different ways and at different rates.³⁸ By the time we reread the novel and have a knowledge of the whole at our disposal, we have entered the antithetic phase, where new problems appear as we try to trace an echo, or account for the role a particular part plays in the whole. While some problems solve themselves almost as soon as we glimpse them, others resist us. Some seem isolated, but many appear to relate to each other in elusive patterns we want to identify and explain, and even to add up to the promise of some major new meaning. We make discoveries rapidly, but with each new find we sense there is still more to discover, or our apparent discoveries start to unravel or to suggest something still more important beyond. Suddenly, we hit on one key move, we enter the synthetic phase, we find the solution that transforms the whole novel and its world, and discovery cascades down upon discovery. And even there the magic and the mystery have not reached their end.

A word about method. I quote at length from *Pale Fire*, often returning to the same quotations a number of times. This should not be taken as an insult to the reader's intelligence but as a tribute to Nabokov's. Any passage in the novel works on a first reading, and in its local context; but many also conceal unanticipated discoveries for the rereader or re-rereader. Partly to establish such passages' immediate self-sufficiency, partly to show that they are not being distorted by selective quotation, partly to point up ironic reversals of implication from reading to rereading or re-rereading, and above all to have all necessary clues at hand, and to stress the surprises lurking behind natural-seeming surfaces, I return to particular quotations, as readers keep returning to them in successive readings of *Pale Fire*, with a new sense of the novel's problems and possibilities each time.

Part One

THESIS: READING

Story as Discovery

its fairly simple, “thetic” solution

I.

Foreword

IF YOU HAVE NOT read *Pale Fire*, read it before reading on. You will not be able to unlock all its surprises, but you should not risk having sprung for you here what you could have had the pleasure of finding for yourself.

Pale Fire consists of four parts—a Foreword, signed Charles Kinbote; the long poem “Pale Fire,” by John Shade; Kinbote’s line-by-line Commentary to the poem; and his Index.¹ One of the many jokes of this very funny novel is that when we reach the end of the Foreword, we do not know which way to continue. But let us begin at the beginning, at the start of a first reading, to see how Nabokov primes us for discovery. Kinbote starts off with a sober description of the poem he is presenting to the public for the first time in this annotated edition: “*Pale Fire*, a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines, divided into four cantos, was composed by John Francis Shade (born July 5, 1898, died July 21, 1959) during the last twenty days of his life, at his residence in New Wye, Appalachia, U.S.A.” Nothing could be less like “*Lolita*, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul . . .” than this dry academic self-effacement.

All the same, the jokes have already begun, even before the playful transformation of a town in upstate New York into “New Wye, Appalachia.” Once when teaching *Pale Fire* I had in my graduate class, as well as bright young students, the recently retired former head of our English Department. I began to describe the book as consisting first of “a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines” when his white head jerked back, perplexed. Unlike the students, he had not missed the absurdity of the opening line—as if I had said that a family has nine children, all twins.

The second paragraph continues in the same apparently bloodless critical vein but its pulse soon starts to twitch erratically: "The short (166 lines) Canto One, with all those amusing birds and parhelia, occupies thirteen cards.* Canto Two, your favorite, and that shocking tour de force, Canto Three, are identical in length (334 lines). . . ." "Your favorite"? When we have only just opened the book? When it is always absurd to prejudge another's taste? When this familiarity instantly violates the impersonal decorum? What sort of a person *is* this commentator?

The third paragraph resumes the orderly exposition: "A methodical man, John Shade usually copied out his daily quota of completed lines at midnight but even if he recopied them again later, as I suspect he sometimes did, he marked his card or cards not with the date of his final adjustments, but with that of his Corrected Draft or first Fair Copy. I mean, he preserved the date of actual creation rather than that of second or third thoughts. There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings." By now academic calm has been shattered completely, as Kinbote's "I mean" discloses a first sign of distractedness before he erupts in the impatient petulance of his complaint about the noise, doubly comic for the way it chimes so oddly with the previous sentence: here, if anywhere, is the moment of actual creation preserved, with no sign of second or third thoughts exerting any control.

The sentence that follows returns to discreet scholarly distance ("We possess in result a complete calendar of his work"), but we are on guard for the next sign of instability, the next quirk of chaos. Before we reach it, Kinbote raises the stakes of our curiosity in another way:

It contains not one gappy line, not one doubtful reading. This fact would be sufficient to show that the imputations made (on July 24, 1959) in a newspaper interview with one of our professed Shadeans—who affirmed *without having seen the manuscript of the poem* that it "consists of disjointed drafts none of which yields a definite text"—is a malicious invention on the part of those who would wish not so much to deplore the state in which a great poet's work was interrupted by death as to

* Parhelia? A parhelion, Nabokov's favorite dictionary, Webster's Second, explains as "a mock sun, any one of several bright spots, often tinged with color, on the parhelic circle. Several parhelia, symmetrically distributed, are often seen at once. They are due to the same cause as halos, of which they may be regarded as intensified parts." Our first invitation to discover, and our first "pale fire."

aspersion of the competence, and perhaps honesty, of its present editor and commentator. (14)

We have heard him already explode into expostulation. *Can* he prove a competent commentator?

The intrigue swirling around the manuscript intensifies as Kinbote names "Prof. Hurley and his clique" as his antagonists, and insists on the poem's completeness. For Shade

the third canto was the penultimate one, and thus I myself have heard him speak of it, in the course of a sunset ramble, when, as if thinking aloud, he reviewed the day's work and gesticulated in pardonable self-approbation while his discreet companion kept trying in vain to adapt the swing of a long-limbed gait to the disheveled old poet's jerky shuffle. Nay, I shall even assert (as our shadows still walk without us) that there remained to be written only *one* line of the poem (namely verse 1000) which would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure, with its two identical central parts, solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings of five hundred verses each, and damn that music. (14–15)

So Kinbote is not just an academic editor, but a close personal associate of the poet. What exactly is the relationship between this poet, given, it seems, to "pardonable self-approbation," and the commentator who calls himself a "discreet companion" but can again burst out with "and damn that music"? And *is* the poem complete, in the way Kinbote suggests?

Concluding his case, Kinbote adds: "And if all this were not enough—and it is, it is enough—I have had the dramatic occasion of hearing my poor friend's own voice proclaim on the evening of July 21 the end, or almost the end, of his labors. (See my note to line 991.)" Why that urgency, that desperation, in his "it is, it is enough"? And why does he urge us to see his note to line 991? He presumably has his reasons, but we can already suspect he is a man easily engulfed in his own immediate predicament. Yet behind his outbursts, his "amusement park," his "and damn that music," we can sense Nabokov's irony and control. Does Nabokov too want us to skip forward to the note to line 991?

If we imagine he does, and we flip forward to the note, we find ourselves indeed on the evening of July 21, and we find something very odd in the relationship of poet and commentator. They are neighbors,