

“Playing a Game of Worlds”: Postmodern Time  
and the Search for Individual Autonomy  
in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*

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Much scholarly criticism of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* has revolved around the debate as to whether the apparent structure of the novel can be taken at face value. Do the central characters, John Shade and Charles Kinbote, constitute separate voices within the novel, as poet and commentator respectively, or, as Volker Strunk puts it, “Is Kinbote the annotator of his own poetic concoction—or is it Shade who has provided his own poem with a monstrous *apparatus criticus*?” (456). Like most critics, Strunk goes on to advocate the latter position, although a few have adopted the contrary view—that Shade is the illusionary creation of a deluded Kinbote.<sup>1</sup> Still others have argued that neither Shade nor Kinbote but a character mentioned only in passing, Professor V. Botkin, is really the controlling author of the text.<sup>2</sup> And most recently, Brian Boyd has postulated that although Shade and Kinbote are distinct characters, Shade in effect composed both the poem and the commentary by means of a ghostly posthumous influence upon his annotator, acting as an ironic muse to Kinbote’s Romantic artist.<sup>3</sup>

Such arguments reveal that many critics, despite the fact that *Pale Fire* is obviously not a conventional novel, tend to read it along traditional realist lines, trying to force it to conform to the standards of an authoritative central presence and a grounding

in a recognizable reality—in this case, the reality of the world of literary criticism. For this reason they are forced to choose between Shade and New Wye, or Kinbote and the Kingdom of Zembla, as the norm from which the other represents a fictional deviation. But such readings ignore the possibility that *Pale Fire* might be questioning the very constitution of the “reality” upon which such a paradigm rests. Elsewhere, Nabokov has declared that there is no such thing as recognizable or everyday reality in which to be grounded in the first place. Rather, reality is a “very subjective affair,” a “gradual accumulation of information” (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 10) that the individual mind must process and synthesize in order to create his or her own version of the world. The notion of an everyday reality is faulty because it “presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known” (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 10); in Nabokov’s conception, one must make creative and associative links between pieces of information in order to compile a picture of the world. The individual formulation of one’s reality will never correspond directly to anyone else’s; hence the belief in the existence of a common ground of experience to which everyone can refer is itself a fiction.

This breakdown of the distinction between fiction and reality is overtly operative in Nabokov’s fiction. Herbert Grabes has written that Nabokov’s characters do not merely concoct idiosyncratic visions of reality that occasionally and by accident reflect “real reality”; rather, their formulations emphasize the fact that reality is itself an artificial construct, a synthesis of ruling conventions that is precisely fictional (269). Accordingly, Nabokov’s characters deviate only from another fiction when they create their own worlds.<sup>4</sup> Yet many critics persist in reading *Pale Fire* as if the novel itself posits an illusionary “everyday reality,” from which Kinbote in his madness represents a deviation.

As I will demonstrate, this habit of reading arises from a set of faulty critical assumptions based upon Nabokov’s own conception of art’s purpose and function that entail a negation of at least some of the possible implications of his views. That negation is founded in part upon a fundamental anxiety about, and

possibly a misunderstanding of, certain post-structuralist suggestions about the instability of language. Thus is engendered a repetitive and fruitless debate that finally represents a blatant disregard of what Nabokov himself has explicitly stated about the nature of “reality.” The consequent attempt to force interpretations upon the novel that have their origin in a concept that directly contradicts Nabokov’s own formulation is to misread the novel altogether, and perhaps to substantiate Nabokov’s uncomfortable point about how we as critics tend to overtake and appropriate literary texts in order to serve the interests of our own interpretive frameworks.

Pekka Tammi has observed that a “more rewarding question” than “whether Kinbote has invented Shade or Shade Kinbote—or even the postmodern query whether both are inventing each other” can be asked about *Pale Fire* (576). Tammi argues that when we “look more closely into the characteristically Nabokovian problem of hidden *links* between the diverse parts of the text and consider their possible origin” (576; emphasis in original), we ultimately discover that despite Kinbote’s apparent madness, he succeeds in putting Shade’s own poetics into practice and thus in creating a “comprehensive narrative text as work of art” that renders Zembla as real as New Wye and obligates us to treat both locales with the same exegetical respect (583; emphasis removed).

I would concur with the first portion of Tammi’s analysis. The entire Shade/Kinbote debate is, finally, irrelevant, for each version of reality, each authorial figure within the universe of the novel, is equally fictional—or equally real, as the case might be—and the novel deserves that more significant lines of inquiry be opened. However, whereas Tammi preserves notions of “real” and “fictive” as greater and lesser states, and thus, in order to establish that it is misguided to argue for the primacy of one text over the other, feels obliged to insist that we understand Kinbote’s kingdom must itself be considered real, I would argue that Nabokov’s view of reality suggests simply that in a universe in which there is no standard or norm to deviate from in the first place, it is impossible, and unnecessary, to prove that New Wye is any more real than Zembla (or, conversely, that Zembla is no less so than New Wye), or even that Kinbote is any less sane than Shade.

Tammi approaches the question from such a direction because he believes that “any reader who refuses to take Kinbote’s invention in earnest . . . is also a menace to the status of art and imagination as purveyors of meaning in human life” (584). That is, if art is to have any purpose at all, and if Nabokov is a great artist, then the novel must not be reducible to, at best, an inept and farcical commentary that subsumes the serious poem it annotates or, at worst, a mere game, a textual play on (Shade’s, Nabokov’s own?) words, rendered by a madman (Kinbote, Nabokov himself?) and possessing no artistic integrity or significance.

I would like to suggest, however, that Tammi’s implicit rejection of the relevance to Nabokov of postmodern/post-structuralist perspectives on the meaning and purpose of art—a stance echoed by several other critics—is based on a too-narrow interpretation of the revelation that language is an unstable tool incapable of fulfilling its promise of signifying the signified.<sup>5</sup> Let us, instead, at least for the moment, agree to suspend our adherence to the conventional supposition that art must be understood to bring us closer to a *telos* or a transcendent Truth in order to have meaning. Let us, also, eliminate the consequent imperative of deciding whether sane Shade or mad Kinbote is in control, in order to have the liberty to explore the actual postmodern implications of Nabokov’s rejection of objective reality as they play out in *Pale Fire*. In doing so here, I will focus specifically upon the challenges presented to the individual subject by linguistic indeterminacy and the resulting absence of authoritative norms that allow one to claim a degree of control over the way things happen in the world. At the same time, I will examine what these implications might mean for the status of Nabokov’s art.

As many critics have noted, the novel apparently is structured around the respective texts of Shade and Kinbote, related to one another as precursor to successor, primary text to secondary. When we read further, however, we observe that the Commentary in fact has little to do with the poem itself; Kinbote apparently had hoped that Shade’s work would be the recreation “in a poem” of “the dazzling Zembla burning in [*his*] brain” (*Pale Fire* 80;

emphasis added), but he finds with disappointment that the poem is, "instead of the wild glorious romance" he had expected, "an autobiographical, eminently Appalachian, rather old-fashioned narrative in a neo-Popian prosodic style" (PF 296). Seemingly, then, the exiled king's response has been to create in the Commentary his own Zemblan narrative by rereading Shade's poem and finding in it what he had hoped would be there the first time. So even when we take Kinbote's own narrative as a separate and unrelated text, Shade's poem apparently still functions as the prior text, the primary source for the subsequent text that arises out of Kinbote's attempt to force Shade's poem to be what Kinbote had hoped for (even if in this second case the issue is one of literary influence rather than of author/critic parasitism).

However, a different picture of the relationship between the two texts gradually emerges if we look more closely at the ramifications of living in a universe in which reality is just a series of individual fictions or texts. If one of the results of the absence of objective reality is the concurrent release from the perceived constraints of linear time, then within this context it is possible to claim that Shade's text does not necessarily precede Kinbote's as the progenitor to which Kinbote's text owes its existence. To clarify: when creating a version of reality, one is not necessarily required to connect events in linear order. This phenomenon is perhaps most easily understood when thought of in terms of the creation of past reality, or memory (although present reality itself is, perhaps, only a more immediate memory of less remote events). The mind applies its imaginative powers of association and synthesis to the various recollections that it holds, and formulates a cohesive sense of the world as experienced. One's impressions of the past are discrete bits of information that the mind can combine in various ways, irrespective of the linear order in which they were originally perceived to have occurred. As Nabokov sees it, the memory "store[s] up this or that element which creative imagination may want to use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time" (*Strong Opinions* 78).

Kinbote and Shade have a textual strategy in common, in that they both engage in this process of fashioning their realities from the temporally disparate materials of their individual experiences. One of our first glimpses of Shade in the novel is of his:

Perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse. (PF 27)

Correspondingly, his text moves back and forth in time among points in the present, in his childhood, in the near past of his daughter's death, and in the future—he is “reasonably sure” that he will “wake at six tomorrow, on July/ The twenty-second, 1959,/ And that the day will probably be fine” (“Pale Fire” 69/979-82). Likewise, Kinbote's narrative of Zembla moves back and forth in time among his kingship, his present cloistering as he writes his Commentary, his life as an exile-cum-professor, his flight from his country, and his vision of the future, in which he “may assume other disguises,” he may “turn up yet” (PF 300).

This movement back and forth in linear time is possible because any act of creating reality is necessarily an act of textualization, and as Jacques Derrida long ago argued, any use of language necessarily removes us from the teleological Center or *logos* that marks linear time. Language entails the absence or “forgetfulness” (*Grammatology* 37) of the *logos* that results in the indeterminacy of meaning; thus it can only constitute an image of that of which it speaks, and “in this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring” (*Grammatology* 36). Language operates in the mode of blurring the distinction between origin and image, or predecessor and successor—or primary text and secondary text. Movement along the metonymic chain flows in both directions, for there are no absolute beginning and ending points, no fixed linear order, without teleological time.

If we apply this reasoning to the process of creating fictions, the notion of origins and descendants is hopelessly confused; it

follows, then, that it becomes impossible to fix texts in an historical order. Instead of one text's necessarily preceding and inspiring another, all fictions become essentially contemporary with one another. In a linguistic universe, *all* texts are secondary, and thus all fictions are equal; in a purely textual world, then, Shade's and Kinbote's respective texts can exist only on the same level. Each draws life from the other in an endless cycle, like the sun and the moon and the sea in the passage from Shakespeare that Kinbote cites: "The sun is a thief: she lures the sea and robs it. The moon is a thief: he steals his silvery light from the sun. The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon" (*PF* 80). Shade's and Kinbote's respective texts are locked in eternal reflection and imaging of one another; neither is able to assume the primary position of the source.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fundamental equality of all fictions, however, Shade and Kinbote each seems to want to assert the primacy of his own text over the other's, although each author holds his own view of what that textual mastery would entail, and each employs his own method of trying to achieve it. Both are bound to failure, however, for absolute dominance is impossible in a purely textual world devoid of the evaluative standards and hierarchical rankings that would allow one to claim a position of authority and hence a feeling of control over the way events happen.

The radical freedom into which the individual is plunged when teleological conceptions of time are removed can constitute a liberating source of creative power in terms of one's ability personally to construct reality. Nabokov maintains that the process of selection in which the mind engages is an "act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic recombination" (*Strong Opinions* 186). And he writes in his autobiography that the resulting creation is one of the ways for human beings to "fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence" (*Speak, Memory* 297). Similarly, Derrida has contended that one response to the implications of the instability of our primary epistemological tool might be "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a

world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (*Writing* 292). Some opponents of post-structuralism have charged that this perspective renders art, and the interpretative activity it entails, arbitrary and meaningless. Yet that perspective in fact reaffirms art's transcendent power: as always, art leads us in the effort "to pass beyond man," though in the postmodern world it guides us not toward the *telos*, but beyond "humanism, the name of the man being the name of that being . . . who has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play" (*Writing* 292). This self-conscious art does not perpetuate the belief that it can transport us beyond the signifier, but enables us to recognize linguistic limitation as the very source of our creativity, and of the sublimity of the human spirit, if you will, that is sustained by play. As Vladimir E. Alexandrov observes, "one of the constants of Nabokov's own beliefs" was the unattainability of the "otherworld" that nonetheless allows Shade "to glean a momentous meaning" from his pursuit of it (194-95). And, as Tammi notes, ultimately a great deal of *Pale Fire's* significance comes from its "indeterminacy," upon which "much of the joy of reading this novel hinges" (575).

At the other extreme, this same freedom from teleological thinking could be perceived as a source of deep anxiety, for it makes the governing force of the world not individual initiative, but blind chance. As Frederic Jameson has put it, speaking of the general loss of time in postmodern culture, "the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and the intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis" (73). One's experiences no longer seem to be causally connected to one another; things no longer happen according to a logical plan, with a comprehensible end. They merely occur randomly.

Jameson links the breakdown of causality to the poststructural rupture between the signifier and the signified: "when that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (72). While we might seem to have absolute

power because we can create order out of the rubble by recombining events at will, such constructs are radically unstable because they are composed of empty signifiers. The created realities have no power over the force of chance, and hence they will always, sooner or later, be displaced. The empty promise of the power to create reality makes us acutely aware of the absence of objective reality, and of the impossibility of fabricating a reliable underlying logic to the course of events. We have no choice, however, but to delude ourselves into believing that there is a means of asserting control; otherwise, the anxiety becomes overwhelming and we risk lapsing into despair at the recognition of our vulnerability.

Hence we persist in the effort to find a way at least to appear to be in control—a fictional device, indeed, but one perhaps necessary in a fictional world. As Derrida has observed, the individual is driven by a teleological desire to attain the elusive *logos* (in this case, control), and this desire prompts him or her to embark upon the endless journey along the metonymic chain of displacement, not in the spirit of play but under the infinite obligation to devise new tactics for achieving control as the old ones are inevitably displaced. When the journey ends it can do so only by chance, for fulfillment of the desire is impossible.

A version of Derrida's metaphysics of desire operates in *Pale Fire* in terms of the rivalry between fictions for control over the representation of reality. In constructing his universe, Shade clings to the notion of an extra-textual, objective reality, which his aesthetic universe embodies, orders, and explains. His textualization of reality is a very traditional, mock-epic, architectonically perfect poem that purports to reveal the true "meaning of life," in which Shade assumes the conventional role of the Romantic poet/interpreter:

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 . . . ("PF" 39.173-81)

Shade will speak for humankind as a whole, divining the nature of its collective consciousness and revealing what its ultimate fate will be.

Shade's arguably modernist stance leads him to conceive of mastery in terms of achieving closure within the text and rendering it fixed and immutable for posterity, and hence immune to displacement, despite his ability to take pleasure in the experience of "texture" even while he quests for "text." Some of his last words to Kinbote are to the effect that he has left "only a few trifles to settle and [suddenly striking the table with his fist] I've swung it, by God" (*PF* 288). Shade feels himself on the verge of assuming the elusive control; however, the possibility of his achieving closure in a textual world is adamantly negated when he fails, in fact to "swing it." Shade's confidence in his ability to produce a mythic or governing representation of the world is revealed as faulty; his desire is doomed to go unfulfilled, for he dies in a chance accident before he can complete his epic (which Kinbote claims the poet was within one line of doing).

Whereas Shade feels equipped to negate the power of chance in his effort to assert his control, Kinbote is perhaps hyper-sensitive to chance's dominance over him, and hence his anxiety is far more apparent than Shade's. Kinbote goes to great lengths to show that he is not totally dependent, that he can, somehow, direct the course of events in his own life—after all, he casts himself as a king in his own world. But his discourse belies his discomfort about the fact that he is, finally, powerless (he is a *deposed* king):

Throughout eternity our poor ghosts are exposed to nameless vicissitudes. There is no appeal, no advice, no support, no protection, nothing. Poor Kinbote's ghost, poor Shade's shade, may have blundered, may have taken the wrong turn somehow—oh, from sheer absent-mindedness, or simply through ignorance of a trivial rule in the preposterous game of nature—if there be any rules. (289)

When Kinbote engages chance, he is respectful of his vulnerability to it. His tactic is to take advantage of expedient opportunities that randomly arise. When Shade dies by the mistaken hand of Gradus—a physical “transcendence” he finally is afforded through the force of chance rather than through the power of his art—Kinbote suddenly finds himself in possession of the unpublished manuscript of Shade’s poem. This puts him in a position to repress the rival fiction before anyone else is aware of its content, and to try to subsume it into his own so as to assert his text of reality as the primary one.

Kinbote tries to do so by means of the same nonlinear process of forging associative links between temporally unrelated events that served him in creating his text of Zembla. He divorces the words of Shade’s text from their historical context as part of the poem and gives them another meaning by making them express aspects of his own narrative. For example, Kinbote’s gloss on the words “conclusive destination” (*PF* 250/697), which expressed for Shade part of his poetical musing about his own fate, in Kinbote’s text signify the approach of the assassin Gradus as he nears New Wye and his royal target. The word “address” in line 768 for Kinbote refers to a letter that he wrote to his wife, in which he foolishly included his address and from which Gradus was able to discover Kinbote’s whereabouts; but in Shade’s text, the word refers to the address of the woman with whom the poet thought he had shared an after-death experience.

In this way Kinbote meshes his text with Shade’s, working his characters and Shade’s together into the weave of the whole. Finally, by means of the way Kinbote orders his account of his text’s relationship to the poem “Pale Fire,” he makes it appear as if Shade really took *Kinbote’s* subject as his own; hence Kinbote’s text implicitly emerges as the progenitor of the poem. The Commentary thus becomes the primary text without which Shade’s poem would not exist, and Kinbote’s holds the position of dominance and authority. Just in case the reader fails to realize this, however, in his Foreword Kinbote directs the reader’s attention to the relative order and importance of poem and commentary:

Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture. . . . Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem . . . has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings . . . a reality that only my notes can provide. (*PF* 28-29)

In this configuration, Kinbote's fiction gives life to Shade's poem as its source and inspiration.<sup>7</sup>

Because this opportunity for Kinbote to assume the position of textual dominance arises by chance, however, he is equally subject to a chance downfall like Shade's. Someone else is equally capable of taking the opportunity to substitute his or her own world-fiction for the currently dominant one, just as Kinbote did. Because world-fictions are language constructs, they are infinitely unstable and subject to displacement, another part of the metonymic chain that is operated upon by desire.

Kinbote's response to this instability, interestingly, seems to be to play the odds with chance and try to avoid a permanent displacement for as long as he can: when he finds one of his fictions losing ground, he merely creates another version of reality that might prove more successful. Hence in his Commentary, when he feels himself losing his sense of dominance and control—everyone around him violently rejects his account of the relationship between poem and commentary, and no one accepts his claims that he is an exiled king and Gradus a revolutionary assassin—his tactic is to abandon his current narrative and declare, "Well, folks, I guess many in this fine hall are as hungry and thirsty as me, and I'd better stop, folks, right here" (300). He will move on to create another fiction, and another, and another as necessary, as they too are subsumed into other texts and supplanted by other fictions, until finally he himself meets up with his final displacement through the force of Gradus. He vows that he will:

. . . 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 anything but his art . . . Oh, I may do many things! . . . But whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere will quietly set out. . . and presently he will ring at my door—a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus. (*PF* 300-01)

Kinbote will delude himself as long as he can into believing there is a possibility for control, until he, too, is taken out of the game of chance unfulfilled.

*Pale Fire* thus portrays a postmodern world in which there are no rules—with the exception of chance—and any search for individual autonomy is revealed as an illusionary conquest. Although one is free to create one's own personal reality, one cannot claim a stable, essential identity that is not both anticipated and reflected somehow in that of another. Even the possibility of self-definition through difference is eliminated when the self is recognized as a text that endlessly reflects and is reflected by other texts. Only in terms of artificially positing one's own text, however unoriginal, as hierarchically superior to others' texts can one fabricate a sense of autonomy and control—an autonomy that is eventually negated by the hegemony of chance in a random world.

It is perhaps this sort of a response to a post-structuralist world that some critics of Nabokov, including Boyd, have seemingly embraced. They insist that Nabokov's belief in the "warp and weft and web" of the material world as the signifier of a transcendent realm beyond the human grasp necessarily entails a teleological world-view that presumes syzygy, as opposed to chaos, as a governing principle. For example, Boyd argues that, as a lepidopterist, Nabokov believed in a scientific method of discovery as a means of arriving at knowledge; by analogy, Boyd suggests, Nabokov perceived art and its interpretation similarly. Invoking philosopher of science Karl Popper's "non-authoritarian theory of knowledge," Boyd insists that Nabokov's fascination with "the endless complexity of things" leads not to a decentered sense of postmodern play, but to the impression that Truth is somehow still attainable, even if not "through some sure method" (7). Nabokov's adherence to a progress model, Boyd implies, assumes

that all exegesis must move us closer to Truth, rather than simply displacing or anticipating other interpretations in proximity to it and extending our pleasure in reading the text. The role of the reader is to recognize and decipher the import of the patterns set in place by the artist, just as the role of the artist is to do the same with patterns of the transcendent Creator; hence Nabokov deliberately constructs his novels so that we are always spurred on to “even more resistant and astonishing discoveries” (5) that ultimately we might make if we are sufficiently good readers. Otherwise, Boyd contends, like the chess problem so ill-constructed or complex that no one can solve it, Nabokov’s art would be “a failure” (9).

For Boyd, anything but this configuration would reduce our engagement with art to a solipsistic and purposeless exercise. Perhaps Nabokov’s most prominent critic, he himself has spent much of his scholarly career reading Nabokov closely, seeking the final key to the puzzle of *Pale Fire*. In his *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, he suggests that he finally has arrived at his long-sought answer when he argues that Nabokov constructs the text to reveal to only the most savvy reader that Shade ultimately controls the entire fictional universe, even from beyond the grave. Boyd claims that the novel finally “leads toward [his] interpretation” because it “explains more of the book than other interpretations directed at the same problem” (256), even while it “explains their appeal and partial truth” (5). Further, he declares, his reading settles the question of whether Nabokov is a postmodern author once and for all, because it “shows Nabokov to be nothing like the fashions of the age” (260). Yet one cannot help noticing that by denying the validity of other possible readings of the novel and fixing his own as the immutably correct formulation, Boyd’s criticism itself “closes off the play” (*Writing* 279) of interpretation and re-enacts that same teleological preoccupation Derrida posits as one typical response to the postmodern world.

Significantly, even while Boyd aims for closure he seemingly cannot ignore the active play that saturates both Nabokov’s art and letters. He quotes Nabokov’s remark that “reality is an infi-

nite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable” (qtd. in Boyd 5). However, he glosses the comment as an indication not of Nabokov’s doubt about the artist’s ability to achieve transcendence in the end, but as an expression of his experience with the “dizzying degrees of difficulty” he encountered in understanding the natural world, which prompted him to lay in place the equally complex pattern “of the world of one of his novels” (5). And Boyd concedes that *Pale Fire* “might merely reflect the depth of our desire, might merely help to define the limits of our imprisonment within a chaotic life that prompt us to dream up a freedom and order beyond” (261).

Indeed, Boyd himself engages in a kind of textual play. In a less exaggerated way that, nonetheless, recalls Kinbote’s gambits, he displaces even his own earlier interpretations of the novel when he points out that previously he was “the staunchest proponent” of the Shadean thesis, yet “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” (4). He concedes that his arrival at a “‘solution’ to some of the problems [Nabokov’s] novels can pose” does not mean “that everything is now settled and unproblematic” (257); conceivably, other interpretations will come along and displace even Boyd’s. Seemingly, then, Boyd’s vocal resistance to intimations of post-structuralism in Nabokov’s art only emphasizes *Pale Fire*’s postmodern flavor all the more: one might seek what one knows is unattainable, but it is all a part of “playing a game of worlds” (*PF* 63/819) in Nabokov’s universe.

### Notes

1 See also, for example, Andrew Field’s and Julia Bader’s Shadean arguments, and Page Stegner’s Kinbotean stance.

2 See, for example, D. Barton Johnson, and, though less emphatic in their assertions, Mary McCarthy and John Haeger.

3 See Boyd’s *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*.

4 Significantly, unlike the other critics I've mentioned, Grabes avoids the temptation to make a definitive statement concerning the authorship of *Pale Fire*. He settles instead for positing several possibilities for interpretation and concluding that "the more critical penetration one brings to bear on the book, the more difficult it is to determine what it is 'really' about" (276).

5 See, for example, Boyd and Alexandrov.

6 In this way, the critics who argue that one character creates the other are partially correct: when the originary distinction between Shade's text and Kinbote's breaks down and the texts instead endlessly reflect one another, there is a sense in which one character does create the other (presuming that one accepts the idea of the self as a text). However, this relationship is constantly in flux, so that it is impossible to claim that Shade is always Kinbote's creator, or that Kinbote is always Shade's. Both propositions are always true: Shade and Kinbote are each others' creators.

7 J.P. Shute also has recognized the competition between Shade's and Kinbote's texts, noting that they are more nearly "two rival, equipotent texts" than "parasite and host" (643); however, she writes of this competition as a manifestation of Nabokov's obsessive refusal of the authority of Freudian hermeneutics and of his setting of a "trap" for the reader/critic who would apply them.

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