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There is an obvious sense in which autobiography has no relevance to Nabokov's fiction, and he would have been the first to denounce any pursuit of links between an author's life and his work as the pendantry of minds too dull to respond to the intrinsic enchantment of fictional invention. Again and again in his interviews and obiter dicta, Nabokov insisted on the distance between himself and his protagonists, and on the status of all his novels as consciously wrought artifacts, constituting new worlds and not reflecting the conventionally presupposed one that he and his readers were said to inhabit. Purposeful, exquisite design, not "self-expression," is the watermark on every page he published. When the novelist Herbert Gold asked him in an interview whether his characters sometimes took on a recalcitrant life of their own, he responded in a combination of Johnsonian peremptoriness and Nabokovian punning, "My characters are galley slaves."[1] This is precisely what has irritated many readers. Nabokov certainly was, as David Bethea has put it in contemporary American idiom, "a control freak" — and this is the ultimate source of his detestation of Freud, who wanted to see an essential connection between unconscious mental processes and artistic creativity. But if novel-writing is actually performed as the exercise of perfect control over zestfully invented fictional constructs, can there be any purchase for biographical criticism? Nabokov's commentators have by and large focused on the elaboration of design in the fiction, as, most recently, Vladimir Alexandrov has done on metaphysical grounds in *Nabokov's Otherworld,* or as even Nabokov's authoritative biographer, Brian Boyd, has done in the critical sections of his admirable two-volume study, working on the assumption that if we patiently attend to the design we will come to appreciate the nuanced, luminous intelligence that informs the design.

Pale Fire represents the supreme deployment of design among Nabokov's novels, and precisely in this regard it has been a source of annoyance to unsympathetic readers and of continuing fascination to readers sympathetically disposed. Miles of printer-ribbon have been worn out in expounding the intricacies of relation among epigraph, foreword, poem, commentary, and index; the play of mirror-images and other kinds of mirrorings; the sundry alphabetic games and anagrammatic cryptograms; the recurrence and transmutation of motifs; the winding thread of allusions to Pope, Shakespeare, and the historical Charles II. I do not mean to suggest that any of this extravagant ingenuity on the part of the novelist is irrelevant to a reading of the novel. On the contrary, if you don't relish word-games and codes and teasingly concealed patterns and if you don't enjoy the exuberance of sheer fictional invention — a fictitious American state and university, and a far more fictitious European country with its language, foklore, and poetry — you are liable to toss away *Pale Fire* in disgust before you get halfway through. Optimally, this profusion of patterning leads a reader to ponder productively such topics as literature and its perilous dependence on interpretation, the varieties of mimesis, language and what we suppose to be reality, freedom and fatedness, coincidence and design, the relation between this world and any imagined world to come. In all this, Nabokov emerges as a seriously philosophic novelist — quite rightly, I think — consciously concerned with questions of aesthetics, epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics that have no obvious and direct connection with the particular circumstances of his own life.

It nevertheless seems to me that what finally makes *Pale Fire* more than the cleverest piece of fictional cryptography in the English language is that it bears so palpably the weight of its author's personal experience. Despite Nabokov's excessive admiration for Alain Robbe-

[1] *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 95.

Grillet's elegant experiments in fictional constructivism, he was not himself a post-modern writer, inclined to discard the representation of character and moral predicaments as unwanted baggage. And I would like to claim that a writer can spin the sinew and flesh of mimetically persuasive character only from the vital substance of his own life, however drastic the alchemical processes through which identity and sensibility and moral psychology are transmuted almost beyond recognition. The border, moreover, between control and spontaneous invention, between conscious thought and unconscious imagining, may often waver, even for a writer like Nabokov, and determining such boundaries is a futile exercise: what is crucial is that even in the midst of careful calculation, the life of the character draws from the quick of the writer's experience.

Let me begin with two autobiographical dates borrowed for events in *Pale fire,* one quite consciously and the other perhaps not. Brian Boyd, in the only paragraph of strictly biographical criticism, the penultimate one of the chapter, in his fine analysis of the novel, notes that July 21, the day John Shade is cut down by an assassin's bullet, is the birthday of V. D. Nabokov, the writer's father. As Boyd goes on to observe, V. D. Nabokov was killed in Berlin in 1922 precisely as Shade is killed at the end of the novel, when his body intercepted a bullet aimed by a political terrorist at another man. This private calendric allusion to the most traumatic event of Nabokov's life is gratuitous to the artistic design of the novel but suggests the extent to which the imagining of the death of John Shade — and perhaps, as Boyd has argued, his actual survival of his own fictional demise — was a way of mastering the horror of his father's death. Shade, of course, is in no way a father-figure for the author but more like an American alter ego. This is an identification to which we shall return.

Shade, the eminent poet and scholar of 18th-century literature, is Nabokov's coeval, born just a year later than his author (1900). Shade's unfortunate ugly-duckling daughter, Hazel, who commits suicide at the age of 23, is born in 1934, the same year as Dmitri Nabokov, the author's only child. In terms of the workings of the plot, it would have made no difference whatever if Hazel had been born in 1933, or 1936. The choice of 1934, though it may reflect less deliberate calculation than the assassination date of July 21, points to a complicated emotional investment of Vladimir Nabokov in the invented life of John Shade. Real Dmitri and fictional Hazel are in all respects, from gender to personal endowments, complete opposites: he, tall and good-looking, athletic and adventurous, a talented singer, a success with many women; she, overweight and odd, without vocation, a hopeless wallflower. But if, as Shade tells Kinbote, "Resemblances are the shadows of differences," there may be a way in the genesis of the novel in which differences are the shadows of resemblance. At the emotional heart of the poem "Pale Fire" is the death of the poet's daughter. The story of the two parents waiting by the television set on a windy, misty March night for the child who will never return is the most elaborately orchestrated piece of narrative in the poem, and it is above all that wrenching loss which drives Shade's musings on what may lie beyond the opaque veil of earthly existence. Genetically, Hazel's death is a photographic negative developed from the anxiously guarded image of Dmitri's life. Nabokov, shaken as a young man by the violent loss of his father, had long pondered the dark possibility of losing a child as well, a fear explicitly embodied in the ghastly murder of Adam Krug's only son in *Bend Sinister*. By 1961, when he was writing *Pale fire,* this understandable free-floating anxiety had been given a specific gravity by the 27-year-old Dmitri's two favorite leisure activities — mountain-climbing and racing sport cars. John Shade, the novelist's galley slave, lives out the anguish of a fate projected from the paternal fears of his master.

Nabokov has extrapolated, transmogrified, and redistributed bits and pieces of his inner life and personal circumstances, in the characters of both Shade and Kinbote, so the play of antitheses and complementarity between poet and commentator is not only a thematic and structural game but also a vividly disguised vehicle of autobiographical exploration. Shade is

the indegenous American counterpart to Nabokov the adoptive American writer, and a happily academic figure over against Nabokov's seventeen-year career as an amused, bemused, ambivalent though grateful transient in the groves of academe. Like Nabokov, he is a long-standing and contented monogamist, and a successful writer confident of his own powers. He shares with his author a long list of pet peeves and preferences. Though he is a fictional construct with an invented biography, his poetry is, to all intents and purposes, the English poetry of Vladimir Nabokov in all its distinctive features—constrained, I would say, to recurrent moments of awkwarness by the mixed marriage of Popean couplets and 20th-century colloquial English, but sometimes attaining a haunting eloquence compounded of witty verbal invention, precise observation of concrete particulars, and musical sound-play, that is unmistakably Nabokovian like this meditation on mortality and the possible afterworld:

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.
I'm ready to become a floweret
Or a flat fly, but never, to forget.
And I'll turn down eternity unless
The melancholy and the tenderness
Of moral 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 newlydead
Stored in its strongholds through the years.[2]

Though a fictitious poet may be a poetic persona at two removes, it takes little effort to see here in the shadows of differences the underlying resemblance to Vladimir Nabokov composing in ink on file cards and affectionately addresing his own wife. The image of the rubber band as ampersand is one of many witty transformations of objects into printed symbols in the novel, and, together with the "lemniscate" traced by bicycle wheels and the figure eight it virtually represents (as in Iris Acht, mistress to King Charles' grandfather), it is an ideogram of the novel's structure: poem flowing into commentary and vice versa. That connection, not as a matter of formal structure but as an interplay of sensibilities, is also adumbrated here, perhaps not deliberately, in the single florid flourish — "The melancholy and the tenderness /… the passion and the pain" — in which the usually restrained Shade indulges, thus making contact with the more flamboyant poetry of melodramatic Kinbote's prose.

There is one plangent moment in the poem when the rooted American poet projects a beam of empathy into the plight of a hopeless exile on the American landscape, thus replicating and refracting the process by which Nabokov, an exile happily rerooted in America for two decades, reconstitutes his own destiny in the novel in the opposed figures of the flourishing native poet and the hapless exiled king:

Nor can one help the exile, the old man
Dying in a motel, with the loud fan
Revolving in the torrid prairie night
And, from the outside, bits of colored light
Reaching his bed like dark hands from the past
Offering gems; and death is coming fast.

[2] *Pale Fire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), pp. 52-53.

> He suffocates and conjures in two tongues
> The nebulae dilating in his lungs. (pp. 55-56)

It is hardly surprising that the self-obsessed commentator, coming across this rare instance in which the details of the poem approximate the circumstances of his life, should read the passage as a literal prophecy of his last location in a motel in "Cedarn, Utana," writing his commentary. In Kinbote's case, the shadow of difference between him and the novelist is dramatically long: he is a compulsively promiscuous homosexual, an anguished isolate, a guilt-ridden sinner clinging to a Dostoevskian belief in divine forgiveness, a foreigner who never gets American right, an intransigeant vegetarian, and, of course, a deluded madman.

The one obvious link between Kinbote and Nabokov is figurative rather than psychological. Nabokov more than once likened his forced separation first from his native Russian cultural setting and then from the Russian language as a medium of artistic expression to the loss of throne and scepter. Although after the spectacular success of *Lolita,* he came to "reign" on a global scale as one of the most celebrated writers of his age, Nabokov sometimes still recurred to the image of the literary kingdom he had been compelled to renounce on the brink of manhood, and in *Pale Fire* he constructed out of that image the governing fantasy of Charles Kinbote, who imagines himself to be the deposed monarch of Zembla, thrusts that plot into the foreground of the novel, repeatedly bemoaning the loss of Zemblan sunsets, the glitter of life in his capital city of Onhava, the melodious magic of his native poetry.

On reflection (obviously the right activity for this novel), Kinbote, for all his extravagance and perversity, exhibits many points of contact with his creator. He shares Nabokov's views on art and reality: "…reality is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye" (p. 130). His judgment of violence and politics is identical with his author's: "The one who kills is *always* his victim's inferior" (p. 234). His wit is hard to distinguish from Nabokov's, as when he observes in a drawer of his rented house "an old but unused pocket diary optimistically maturing there until its calendric correspondencies came around again" (p. 84). Though Nabokov at times deliberately pushes Kinbote's language to flamboyant excesses in keeping with his extravagant character, as a stylist the mad commentator is often capable of truly Nabokovian lyricism, and even more frequently, of Nabokovian grotesque invention — "along [the underground ditch's] edge walked a sick bat like a cripple with a broken umbrella" (p. 133) — and of Nabokovian satiric humor, as in the index entry for Thurgus the Third — "stout and bald, his nose like a congested plum, his martial mustache bristling with obsolete passion" (p. 314). Kinbote the fantast, master of the novel's prose, really eclipses the neo-Popean Shade as poet (and it makes no difference if one infers that Shade has invented Kinbote), and his declaration near the end is patently Nabokov's poetic credo: "I can do what only a true artist can do — pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web" (p. 289).

How does a figure so spectacularly different from its author end up speaking — resonantly if intermittently — in its author's voice? Fictional invention is usually a playing out by the writer of alternate lives, which quite often means — manifestly, I think, in Nabokov's case — a bringing to the light of the buried underside of the writer's self. (This does not necessarily involve an expression of the unconscious, Freudian or otherwise.) Nabokov's fondness for twisted protagonists (Kinbote is part of a series that includes the nympholept Humbert Humbert and the incestuous egoist Van Veen) is, among other things, a way of camouflaging resemblance in obvious difference. As a writer so absolutely committed to the autonomy of the imagination, Nabokov was acutely conscious of the ways in which the imagination could distort the world, envelop a person in a solipsistic bubble, impair the capacity for authentic intimate connection with other people. The obverse face of that fierce independence which was the enabling condition of Nabokov's art was his living as a kind of hidden isolate, for all

the surface conviviality of his social behavior, sharing things deeply only with his wife. I don't mean to suggest that he felt this as the dark fate of a *poète maudit,* but he certainly used his novels to play out drastic possibilities of isolate imaginists exploiting humanity by using it as mere grist for their imaginative mills. Sexual desire, because it so powerfully fuels the imagination in its most distortive operations, is often the vehicle he chooses to create the isolate condition of his protagonists.

Kinbote's troubled homosexuality is an instructive case in point. Before one leaps to the conclusion of contemporary piety that the novel is "homophobic," one should note precisely what sort of homosexual Kinbote is. His sexual fate is, in the formal design of the novel, a neat antithesis to that of the happily heterosexual Shade, but it is its moral implications that deserve special attention. He is, as I have already noted, compulsively promiscuous, and he is also a pedophile. (Whether psychologically his being in love with John Shade is compatible with that proclivity is a question I am not competent to judge.) He cannot suppress the reflexive glimmer of lust for every pretty boy that enters his field of vision, even in the ultimate mountain motel-room where he writes his commentary and contemplates suicide. Since free-floating concupiscence, especially when its objects are adolescents, is a way of using people without the possibility of intimate connection except in the technical carnal sense, Kinbote is quite desperate in his isolation: "I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress" (p. 95). His assertion of a certain resemblance between himself and Hazel Shade (p. 193) is not as mad as it might first seem.

There are moral crimes perpetrated by a complete lack of imagination, and that is how Nabokov sees totalitarian terror. Its main representative in the novel is the assassin Jakob Gradus, the goon with the gun, but the artistic soul — see Gradus's anagrammatic reversed mirror-image, "Sudarg of Bokay, a mirror maker of genius" — is capable of perpetrating his own moral wrongs through excess of imagination. In Kinbote's fantasy life as Charles II of Zembla, the crucial focus of such moral failing is his wife, Queen Disa. He has more than enough imagination to realize her suffering in their unconsummated marriage, to recognize that, against all reasonable odds, she loves him, and even to love her in return, in a hypothetical way. But imagination becomes an instrument for reconciling himself to his unflagging neglect of her, even as he touches a certain tremulous chord of guilt, and she continues to languish in her abandonment, perhaps more akin to Hazel Shade than he.

> He dreamed of her more often, and with incomparably more poignancy, than his surface-life feelings for her warranted; these dreams occurred when he least thought of her, and worries in no way connected with her assumed her image in the subliminal world as a battle or a reform becomes a bird of wonder in a tale for children. These heartrending dreams transformed the drab prose of his feelings for her into strong and strange poetry, subsiding undulations of which would flash and disturb him throughout the day, bringing back the pang and the richness — and then only the pang, and then only its glancing reflection — but not affecting at all his attitude towards the real Disa. (p. 209)

At moments like this — and there are many of them in the novel — the narrator is not merely a grotesquely carved wooden king in a literary game of chess but speaks through his own peculiar predicament to a moral question over which his author surely brooded. Without imagination life can scarcely be thought of as human. But that very faculty, which provides us our keenest gratification in experiencing love, art, and the natural world, can be used to bend all things violently into its own shape (Humbert vis-à-vis Lolita, Kinbote vis-à-vis Shade and his poem); or alternately, it can offer the sweet substitute of its own seductive rhythms instead of engagement with the human other (Kinbote vis-à-vis Disa). In the representation here of Charles' sad dreams about Disa, Nabokov cunningly introduces the novel's recurrent motif of undulating reflections. Elsewhere, that motif is associated with the elusive enchantment worked by the power of art, but here the flashing reflections give us the image of an inner life turned into an endless hall of mirrors never leading to the outside.

As a fictional character, Kinbote represents a rare balancing-act. In some ways, of course, he is a figure of fun — inveterate bumbler, self-made misfit, shameless egotist, incorrigible pedant. But his suffering is finally no joke, even when Nabokov has him describe it in patently lurid terms. In fact, much of the language Nabokov fashions to express Kinbote's anguish is, without parody or camp, an evocative articulation of what it is like to be a splendid monster of the imagination, steeped in its flood of intensities but carried off from the sustaining connections of human commonality. Thus, Kinbote the tormented theist can at some moments speak in one voice with Nabokov the happy metaphysical non-theist, not only in an artistic credo but in a philosophic credo as well. Novelist and protagonist clearly converge in this ringing affirmation by Kinbote of what God is not:

> He is not despair, He is not terror, He is not the earth in one's rattling throat, not the black hum in one's ears fading to nothing in nothing. I know also that the world could not have occurred fortuitously and that somehow Mind is involved as a main factor in the making of the universe. (p. 227)

Kinbote and Shade and Nabokov come together in this declaration of faith. *Pale Fire* was composed not only out of its author's exuberant delight in his own architectonic and inventive skills but also out of his deepest troubled reflections on mortality, the threat of modern political violence and the sheer randomness of destruction, the dangers of living too much through the imagination. The oddly paired destinies he imagines in Kinbote and Shade, together with the intricate artifice through which they are represented, reach toward a serious visionary glimpse of order behind seeming chaos, pattern implicit even in what looks like random destruction, and a luminous prospect beyond the feared blackness of nothing fading into nothing.