Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire:* "The Method of Composition" as Hero

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The structure of *Pale Fire* provides its meaning and delight. While its critics have acknowledged that the novel's form is an important feature, most of them have used it as a way of unraveling the "plot"—what happens among the three principal characters, John Shade, Charles Kinbote, and Jakob Gradus—and, therefore, have approached the poem and commentary which comprise *Pale Fire* as separate entities to be studied as two units and then connected, usually by having either poet Shade or commentator Kinbote assigned the authorship of the whole.[1] I do not believe that Nabokov intended his unconventional novel to be read so conventionally. In an earlier Nabokov work, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Sebastian says of a novel that *he* has written: "But for enlightenment of those who felt baffled by its habits of metamorphosis, or merely disgusted at finding something incompatible with the 'idea of a nice book' in the discovery of a book's being an utterly new one, I should like to point out that *The Prismatic Bezel* can be thoroughly enjoyed once it is understood that the heroes of the book are what can be loosely called 'methods of composition'."[2] The heroes of *Pale Fire* are also "methods of composition."

The hero of the modern novel often embodies within himself the conflict which is the focus of the work. In *Pale Fire,* the form itself—a poem and a commentary on the poem—creates the tension of the whole and should be approached like a character: how are we meant to apprehend it? If Nabokov's method of composition is the hero, the reader's method of perusal determines how the hero will be perceived. Nabokov gives the reader no instructions as to the manner in which the work should be read, and Charles Kinbote's advice—to read his commentary before, during and, again, after the poem—reflects mania rather than useful procedure. Were one to treat *Pale Fire* like most novels, the reading sequence would be: Forward, Poem, and Commentary, probably skipping the "Index"; were one to take the work for the edited poem it purports to be, the conscientious scholar would place a marker in the notes and consult—or attempt to consult—them after each canto, stanza, or couplet, depending on whether his interest in the poem or need to be distracted from it were stronger. I think Nabokov intends the reader to participate in the fiction that the novel is Shade's opus subjected to Kinbote's research, and to go through it in dovetailed rather than chronological order. Attempting *Pale Fire* in this manner allows the hero its proper significance. Even so, a problem arises immediately: in his opening remarks on Shade's first four lines, Kinbote, a master of the cross reference, directs the reader to a later part of the poem and another part of the commentary, and he continues to do this throughout. Should one shuttle back and forth amongst *all* parts of the book as would the dutiful academician combing some tangled literary skein, or should one ignore

[1]See, for example, Andrew Field's interesting work, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).

[2]Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (London: Editions Poetry London, 1945), p. 83. Sebastian Knight and Vladimir Nabokov share a number of ideas on aesthetics—too many to quote here. I offer but one example: "Sebastian Knight used parody as a kind of spring-board for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion" p. 80.

Kinbote's officious, ever-present hand on one's elbow? Both. For the first reading, merely alternating between the poem and the commentary provides sufficient involvement in Nabokov's scheme while, at the same time, keeping the movement of both dimensions clear; on second reading, by following Kinbote's instructions—and one's own discoveries—one can start raveling the web.

The web is the controlling metaphor of *Pale Fire.* Sometimes conceived as a plex or grid, the visual pattern and the metaphysical formulation remain the same. Within Shade's poem, this conception is obvious. The climax of his work occurs on his way home from an abortive trip to see a woman who, like himself, had suffered a temporary heart failure and "crossed the border" into "The Land Beyond the Veil" where, according to a magazine article, she had seen a "white fountain." Shade, like Nabokov, rebelling against "the impersonal darkness on both sides of [his] life,"[3] also had had a vision of a fountain during his crisis. But the woman's "fountain" turns out to have been a "mountain": the story contained a misprint. Shade then reviews the fiasco:

> Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!
> I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
> And stop investigating my abyss?
> But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
> Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
> Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
> But topsy-turvical coincidence,
> Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
> Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
> Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
> Of correlated pattern in the game,
> Plexed artistry,[4] and something of the same
> Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (11.803-815)[5]

I think that Nabokov subscribes to these conclusions, although his gods are less likely to be extraterrestrial than Shade's. The poem asserts the "correlated pattern in the game"; the novel demonstrates it.

The dimensions that the axes on Nabokov's grid represent are time and space because events occur at the intersection of their relationships. In *Pale Fire,* the poem exists as the spatial dimension and the commentary as the temporal. Within the reality of each of these parts, naturally, time and space operate, but within the created structure of the whole novel, Shade and Kinbote each serve as a single dimension. Shade's poem is essentially self-contained and unalterable, a work of art outside of time, a thing like "The Thinker" or the "Mona Lisa." I speculate that Nabokov composed the poem in heroic couplets to emphasize its crafted quality and that he attempted to make it a very good poem. As has already been indicated, the commentary epitomizes the fluidity of time by maintaining coherence in any number of sequential orderings. Kinbote is intrusive because chronology is perceived as motion.

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[3]Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1966), p. 20.

[4]A plex is, of course, a network, deriving originally from a Latin verb meaning to braid or twine. A few stanzas further, Nabokov uses the curious phrase "a cancelled sunset." "Cancel" develops out of the Latin for lattice.

[5]Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1962), 11.803-15. Further references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

An example of how Nabokov goes about "coordinating . . . events and objects with remote events and vanished objects" (Shade: 11.826-28) will illustrate my rather abstract argument. Near the end of the First Canto, Shade writes:

> In sleeping dreams I played with other chaps
> But really envied nothing—save perhaps
> The miracle of a lemniscate left
> Upon wet sand by nonchalantly deft
> Bicycle tires. (11.135-139)

Kinbote, annotating for a change a term which the reader really needs help with, writes: "'A unicursal bicircular quartic' says my weary old dictionary. I cannot understand what this has to do with bicycling and suspect that Shade's phrase has no real meaning" (p. 136). No help; not even a diagram of a figure eight to show the pattern in the sand. Kinbote, unlike Nabokov, is not interested in etymology and the "lemniscate" will remain unsolved unless the reader consults his "weary old" dictionary; mine reads: "from lemniscus: a ribbon hanging down." Much later, Kinbote comes to annotate "web of sense," a crucial phrase in the stanza I have previously quoted. He begins one of his discursive non sequiturs, describing the motor court where he is staying, its owner, the owner's friendly proferring of reading materials, and Kinbote's winding up with *The Letters of Franklin Lane,* in which Lane wrote, on the eve of his death:[6] "And if I had passed into that other land, whom would I have sought? . . . Aristotle!—Ah, there would be a man to talk with! What satisfaction to see him take, like reins from between his fingers, the long ribbon of man's life and trace it through the mystifying maze of all the wonderful adventure. . . . The crooked made straight. The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above—smeared out as it were by the splotch of some master thumb that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line" (p. 261). The lemniscate, hanging suspended since Shade traced his boyhood memory, finds its coordinate coincidentally when the restless Kinbote is arrested by the long ribbon of a man's life which Aristotle, a fountain of wisdom from beyond the grave, may, Theseus-like, unwind through the labyrinthian grid of the universe, a moebius strip ribbon whose Shade side and Kinbote side are revealed as one.[7]

Throughout *Pale Fire,* Nabokov makes "ornaments of accidents and possibilities" (Shade: 11.828-29). This device is not merely decorative; it is the philosophic substance of the work. Long before Marshall McLuhan informed the world, Nabokov knew that the medium is the message. The major difference between Nabokov and other writers who conceive of life as governed by accident is that Nabokov does not espouse despair, apathy, or anarchy. Like a modern physicist, he is a pattern-hunter in a universe of chance.

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[6]*The Letters of Franklin K. Lane,* ed. Anne Wintermute Lane and Louise Herrick Wall (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), p. 464. When I first read Franklin Lane's "last words" in *Pale Fire,* I felt certain that he was a creature of Nabokov as surely as the character who was quoting him. Both the content of Lane's MS fragment and its style suited Nabokov's purposes so exactly that I was amazed to dixcover that Lane had indeed died on May 18, 1921, an American lawyer and political figure of some note. I like to think that Nabokov stumbled on Lane's letters under the same circumstances as Kinbote, so that the coincidence is real and not fictional.

[7]Time-space perspectives have intrigued an original artist in another medium, M. C. Escher, whose *Graphic Works,* published by Hawthorne Books, throws light on Nabokov's ideas. I think that a study of "Moebius Strip I," "Moebius Strip II," "Spirals," "Sphere Spirals," and "Cube with Magic Ribbons" are especially rewarding to students of *Pale Fire.*

Nor is this method of describing the world a new idea of Nabokov's. Discussing a vacation trip that the three principal characters of *King, Queen, Knave* (completed in 1928) plan to take, Nabokov's authorial voice says: "That little trip to Pomerania Bay was in fact proving to be quite a boon for everyone concerned, including the god of chance . . . once you imagined that god in the role of a novelist or a playwright."[8] In *The Eye,* written two years later, the hero-narrator Smurov asserts:

> Everything is fluid, everything depends on chance, and all in vain were the efforts of that crabbed bourgeois in Victorian checkered trousers, author of *Das Kapital,* the fruit of insomnia and migraine. There is titillating pleasure in looking back at the past and asking oneself, "What would have happened if . . ." and substituting one chance occurrence for another, observing how, from a gray, barren humdrum moment in one's life, there grows forth a marvelous rosy event that in reality had failed to flower. A mysterious thing, this branching structure of life: one senses in every past instant a parting of ways, a "thus" and an "otherwise," with innumerable dazzling zigzags bifurcating and trifurcating, against the dark background of the past.[9]

Van Veen, protagonist of *Ada,* extends the idea to future time when he says that the future "is an infinity of branching possibilities. A determinate scheme would abolish the very notion of time. . . . The unknown, the not yet experienced and the unexpected, all the glorious 'x' intersections, are the inherent parts of human life."[10] And Sebastian Knight, not surprisingly, wrote a novel, *Success,* on the theme:

> . . . Sebastian Knight devotes the three hundred pages of *Success* to one of the most complicated researches that has ever been attempted by a writer. We are informed that a certain commercial traveller Percival Q. at a certain stage of his life and in certain circumstances meets the girl, a conjuror's assistant, with whom he will be happy ever after. The meeting is or seems accidental: both happen to use the same car belonging to an amiable stranger on a day the buses went on strike. This is the formula; quite uninteresting if viewed as an actual happening, but becoming a source of remarkable mental enjoyment and excitement, when examined from a special angle. The author's task is to find out how this formula has been arrived at; and all the magic and force of his art are summoned in order to discover the exact way in which two lines of life were made to come into contact—the whole book indeed being but a glorious gamble on causalities or, if you prefer, the probing of the aetiological secret of aleatory occurrences. The odds seem unlimited. Several obvious lines of inquiry are followed with varying success. . . . Thus we are forced to assume that the outward circumstances of the meeting are not samples of fate's activity in regard to two subjects but a given entity, a fixed point, *of no causal import;* and so, with a clear conscience, we turn to the problem of why Q. and the girl Anne of all people were made to come and stand side by side for a minute on the kerb at that particular spot. So the girl's line of fate is traced

[8]Vladimir Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1969), p. 186.

[9]Vladimir Nabokov, *The Eye* (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), pp. 28-29.

[10]Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp. 560-61. In "The Texture of Time," Part Four, Veen holds that "Time is motionless." I do not think this formulation operates in *Pale Fire.*

back for a time, then the man's, notes are compared, and then again both lives are followed up in turn.'[11]

One means of determining what Nabokov is doing in *Pale Fire* is to consider it as a progeny of *Success* and to ask why John Shade, Charles Kinbote, and Jakob Gradus, alias Jack Degree, de Gray, etc., converge late in the afternoon of July 21, 1959. There are at least two answers proposed within the novel: Kinbote's explicit, elaborately plotted theory that Gradus has come from Zembla to kill him and has shot Shade through bungling, and the between-Kinbote's-lines explanation that the murderer is an escaped asylum patient who aimed at Shade, a look-alike of the judge who committed him. Nabokov has already reminded the reader, through Shade, that "dual solutions" in chess end-game problems are interdicted (p. 226) and he probably means this to hold true for the novel's end game as well. Granted the structure of *Pale Fire,* the best reason for rejecting Kinbote's conspiracy theory of the murder is not that Kinbote is insane—which he is in any event—while the implicit account is rational, but that Kinbote's picture is overly determined, causal with a vengeance, while the theory of an escaped lunatic who mistakes Shade for Judge Goldworth and, simultaneously, feeds Kinbote's own paranoia, precisely exemplifies Nabokov's notion of the "combinational delight" of coincidence (Shade: 1.974). Sebastian Knight discovered that "remodelled and recombined, the world yielded its sense to the soul as naturally as both breathed."[12]

Objects and events are plotted, using the axes of poem and commentary for the dimensions of space and time, to create a model of chance occurrence in the Universe. The novelist's dilemma is that he must persuade the reader that chance is operating in a deliberately contrived medium. Two factors work in behalf of his illusion: the reader's experiential acceptance of coincidence in the real world, and Nabokov's skill in choosing the absurdly ill-matched poem and commentary as vehicle.

Consider the title of the work. It is a beautiful case of Nabokov's controlling the material totally and, at the same time, impelling the belief that coincidence obtains in art as in life. Near the end of his poem, Shade writes: "(But *this* transparent thingum does require/ Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*"; 11.961-962). Kinbote's gloss of the lines reads: "Paraphrased, this evidently means: Let me look in Shakespeare for something I might use for a title. And the find is 'pale fire.' But in which of the Bard's works did our poet cull it? My readers must make their own research. All I have with me is a tiny vest pocket edition of *Timon of Athens*—in Zemblan! It certainly contains nothing that could be regarded as an equivalent of 'pale fire' (if it had, my luck would have been a statistical monster)" (p. 285). The reader, grown familiar by now with the terrain, and recalling that the species, statistical monster, is not uncommon in this landscape, reaches with a sure hand for *Timon of Athens.* Ah, here it is:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast Sea. The Moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire, she snatches from the Sun.
The Sea's a thief, whose liquid surge, resolves
The Moon into salt tears. (IV, iii)

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[11] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* pp. 84-85. Italics mine.

[12] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* p. 159.

But this is actually Kinbote's second allusion to *Timon of Athens*. In his notes to the third stanza of Canto 1—lines treating entirely different matters—he evokes the passage (IV, 3) "where the misanthrope talks to the three marauders." Kinbote has only Conmal's Zemblan translation which he reenglishes as follows:

> 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. (p. 80)

Except for a problem with gender, an Aristocratic Zemblan failing, and that *Timon* sounds like *Beowulf*, the rendering is not as bad as Kinbote's hint at the end of the note would indicate: "For a prudent appraisal of Conmal's translation of Shakespeare's works, see note to line 962." If one, having decided to pursue the cross-reference, then skips to the "Help me, Will!" gloss, the source of the title is within sight.

Yes, complains the disgruntled reader, the novel is clever enough, but learning how the web is spun by spinning it oneself is not enough; I want to know the meaning of the pattern: Nabokov never turns to the real provenance of the great artist—moral questions. It is true that Nabokov as novelist, as well as Lepidopterist, works descriptively. It is also true that pattern in fiction, like pattern in music, has no *intrinsic* value. But a particular pattern can emblemize a particular ethical conception of the universe. The chief feature of the grid, web, or plex is that no axis, no thread, no line is paramount in the entity. Significance is achieved through interconnection. The passage in *Timon of Athens* which Nabokov has chosen suggests the same view, although the figure differs: the sun, moon, and sea form a circular pattern of reciprocity, no one element dominating, which posits the harmony of the whole. (Although the embittered Timon sees the circularity as corrupt.) To perceive John Shade as a mere figment created by the mad imagination of Charles Kinbote, or Kinbote as a parasite feasting off of a healthy Shade is to impose on the least reductive of writers a fashionable interpretation based on pathology. The principal idea of *Pale Fire*, emerging from its structure, is not the ascendancy either of Shade or Kinbote; it is that the random interplay of their lives exemplifies non-deterministic interdependency in the universe.