

# RHYMING WITH REDEEMER



A Commentary on  
Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*



# Rhyming with Redeemer

*A Commentary on Vladimir  
Nabokov's Pale Fire*



*To Our Family*



*We are always taking leave—of a person, an emotion, a landscape, a way of life. Music and dance, the arts I have loved the most: what are they if not an enhanced enactment of continuous leave-taking, the passing note or the daring leap vanishing before one's eyes but living on in the heart?*

—PAUL RUSSELL

*The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*

*Suddenly Innokentiy grasped a wonderful fact: nothing is lost, nothing whatever; memory accumulates treasures, stored-up secrets grow in darkness and dust ...*

—VLADIMIR NABOKOV

“The Circle”



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## Preface

This book is a commentary on the 1962 novel *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov. The phrase “Rhyming with Redeemer” comes from Nabokov’s attempt, after he emigrated from Russia to the northeastern United States, to help non-Russian speakers pronounce his name. Nabokov joked:

Frenchmen of course say Nabokoff, with the accent on the last syllable. Englishmen say Nabokov, accent on the first, and Italians say Nabokov, accent in the middle, as Russians also do. Na-bo-kov. A heavy open “o” as in “Knickerbocker”. My New England ear is not offended by the long elegant middle “o” of Nabokov as delivered in American academies. The awful “Na-bah-kov” is a despicable gutterism. Well, you can make your own choice now. Incidentally, the first name is pronounced Vladeemer—rhyming with “redeemer.” (SO, 51-52)

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Our suspicion is that the phrase “rhyming with redeemer,” which Nabokov was fond enough of to repeat, is not just some quippy mnemonic device but also a revealing glimpse into how he viewed his artistic mission.<sup>1</sup>

Our interest in redemption—and Nabokov’s exploration of it—arises from a specific concern we’ll call “the Permanence of the Past.” When one is grieving, one is often aware of platitudes such as “You can’t change the past,” “Let bygones be bygones,” and “What’s done is done.” These phrases suggest the past is fixed, that there is something misguided or immature about not accepting the finality of what has happened. While those who employ such phrases might not deny that events of the past may have lingering negative effects, they often suggest the best course of action is simply to try to “move on.”

We believe, by contrast, that trying to “move on” from personal loss may often be inadequate. The thesis of this book is that Nabokov—and *Pale Fire* in particular—gives a compelling account of how creativity can be enlisted to overcome the Permanence of the Past.

We began writing this book together in 2021, but its ideas are ones we have been discussing since we first met

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in 2016. This throughline only occurred to us recently when we were reading back through some of our early correspondence. In an email from late 2016, I (speaking in J's voice now) was reflecting to M about a park near the Minneapolis apartment I had lived in earlier that year. It had been a tough season for me, as my grandpa had passed away, I had just left my job, and I was navigating the onset of mental illness. For some reason, thinking about that particular place—the sloped grassy hills and oak trees—after I'd moved away was comforting in a way the park hadn't been while I was physically there. I wrote to M that it was strange “how some of the places we are saddest become some of the fondest in memories.” Then I asked her, “Do we need to remember in order to redeem?” M answered, “Yes, I think you’re onto something. Maybe memories shift around like cards in a deck and can be restitched as time gives us more thread.”

When we both began reading Nabokov more intently, we were surprised and grateful to find in him an author who gave voice to these sentiments and provided a trail for us to explore them further. Essentially, this book is a continuation of our 2016 conversation. If J's being drawn to returning to certain sorrowful places reflects our interest in “redemption,”

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M’s response about shuffling around and restitching memories points to what “rhyming” might have to do with it.

Rhyming is the act of creating a *near* resemblance, not identical, but similar enough to sound nearly the same. As a result, a rhyme provides a sort of harmony rather than a total resolution. There are plenty of things art cannot do when addressing loss: it cannot bring back the dead, allow one to repeat the past, or substitute for counseling or the support of a community. While acknowledging such limitations, we believe art can act with a moving, alive quality that has the ability to speak to loss *as a rhyme*, resonant with the original presence that is no longer with us. It stitches together without erasing the seam. While we do not think that humans can always make past brokenness *whole*, we are persuaded living people can take creative actions that *harmonize* with what has come before. Furthermore, the idea of “rhyming” with a redeemer, without claiming to be a redeemer oneself, allows one to insist on human agency while leaving the door open for other, higher forms of redemption, should that accord with one’s personal beliefs.

We have found Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* an excellent starting place to explore the redemptive potential of art

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for three reasons. First, Nabokov's life was not light on loss, and *Pale Fire* can be seen as an artistic response to the significant hardships he faced. Nabokov was forced to flee his home in Russia during the Russian Revolution, and, after he resettled in Germany, the rise of Nazism forced him and his Jewish wife and son to become refugees once more.<sup>2</sup> His father, a liberal politician, barely avoided being executed in Russia for being an "enemy of the people" before being assassinated by an extremist in Berlin.<sup>3</sup> His brother Sergey died in a Nazi concentration camp after he was persecuted for being gay and for speaking out against the totalitarian regime.<sup>4</sup> The Nazis also killed many others of his relatives, friends, and acquaintances who had been living in Germany and France.<sup>5</sup> One can find echoes of his lived experience, which one can learn from even if one's life has not been marked by the same set of trials, in *Pale Fire*. The book's story is driven by the two protagonists, Charles Kinbote and John Shade, who turn to art in the face of the loss of homeland and loved ones. Both rest their hopes on John's poem entitled "Pale Fire," which gives its name to the book as a whole and which promises to honor and keep alive what was taken from them.

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Second, the very form of the book suggests a way of responding to the Permanence of the Past. *Pale Fire* is famously split into two main parts: John Shade's 999-line poem entitled "Pale Fire" is surrounded by a commentary on the poem written by Charles Kinbote. Kinbote ends his Foreword with the declaration: "For better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word." (29) We think Kinbote's idea—that the meaning of a text is not determined solely by the author and fixed the moment they put down their pen, but also relies on the actions of readers who come later—can inform more broadly how living people conceptualize their relationship to past actions and events that may appear set in stone.

Finally, for Charles Kinbote and John Shade, redemption is not simply a matter of waving some kind of magic wand over the past. At the climax of his Poem, John asserts that it is through the analogy of ensuring a line of poetry "scans right"—that is, has all of its stresses on the correct syllables—that he arrives at the insight that his "darling" daughter Hazel Shade lives on after her death. In what we consider perhaps the most important lines of the book, he writes:

I feel I understand

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Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight;  
And if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine  
Which I suspect is in iambic line.  
I'm reasonably sure that we survive  
And that my darling somewhere is alive. (68-69)

This passage is a strong endorsement of the promise for art to help lessen, however imperfectly, the burden of loss. At the same time, it depicts redemption as *work*—the universe won’t “scan right” on its own!—in which salvation is in the details. We believe attentiveness to the details artists call on to create interactions between different elements of a work of art—such as allusions, foreshadowing, rhythm, and rhyming—might help attune one to how one’s present actions can help recast the past in a different light, allowing one a chance to get closer to an abiding sense of harmony and connection amidst the shadow of tragedy.

We believe this hopeful message emerges from *Pale Fire* most compellingly if one pays careful attention to its details. *Pale Fire* is a puzzle that demands close reading. It is, in the words of the book’s first major reviewer, Mary McCarthy, “a chess problem ... a cat-

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and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself novel.”<sup>6</sup> To flesh out the theory of redemption we believe Nabokov leads one to, one must attempt to solve the puzzle he has devised. We have found this endeavor of close reading produces many moments of what Nabokov called “aesthetic bliss,” but it also leads to moments of heartbreak as one tries to trace the roots of Kinbote’s madness, John’s grief, and Hazel’s despair. (*L*, 314) For it would be hollow to look for redemption before first trying to become fully mindful of what it is that needs redeeming.

This book is structured around alternating chapters. The odd chapters (1, 3, and 5) attempt to articulate Nabokov’s theory of redemption on a thematic level, reading him in tandem with kindred philosophers such as Judith Shklar and Walter Benjamin. The longer, even chapters (2 and 4) consist of a close reading of *Pale Fire*, a nose-to-the-ground hunt for solutions to the mysteries of the book’s characters and plot. The odd chapters are written in J’s “voice” and the even chapters are in M’s, though we have each worked on both. The thought behind structuring this book in alternating chapters is that this more closely mimics a conversation between us rather than two separate monologues. We also hope this structure makes it clear for readers more interested in the textual analysis,

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or conversely more curious about the book’s themes, where they can locate that material. (Although, of course, we hope readers will at some point be interested in both “halves” of this book!)

Chapter 1 attempts to answer the question of why one should engage with Nabokov’s work at all given some of the potential “baggage” it carries. We canvas questions relating to his status as a canonical author, his being a Russian author amidst the country’s war with Ukraine, and the fact that his fame rests on the controversial novel *Lolita*. We attempt to show how one can engage with his books while being mindful of these issues and in accordance with Judith Shklar’s dictum to “put cruelty first.” But just because we think one *can* engage with Nabokov’s work ethically, why would it be worth the risks? The second half of the chapter puts forward two qualities we think make Nabokov’s work unique and enduring: his distinctive focus on reading as a form of “verbal adventure” and his insistence on the value of art in a broken world.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the mind of the main narrator of *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote. In Chapter 2, we propose three theories about his life that we think explain some of the novel’s central mysteries: that Kinbote, King Charles, and Jakob Gradus are three

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aspects of the same person; that Kinbote—not Jack Grey—killed John Shade; and that Kinbote is a refugee from the real Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The subsequent chapter considers what the living can do to affect the redemption of deceased people like Kinbote who are both perpetrators and victims of serious harm.

The next pair of chapters centers on John Shade’s daughter, Hazel Shade. In Chapter 4, we propose her life and death can be illuminated by comparing it to Ophelia’s from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. We subsequently argue that Hazel is one of many serial selves who comprise the real poet of “Pale Fire,” that recognizing Ophelia in *Pale Fire* reveals Charles Kinbote’s sexual relationship and pregnancy with the poet, and that the poet’s true identity and fate can be revealed by tracing themes of a car accident on a fatal March night. In Chapter 5, we analyze how artists’ use of “stitching” fictional characters together, as Nabokov does with Hazel and Ophelia, can be redemptive for both characters being connected—and for readers who may find themselves in similar tragic situations.

Finally, the book’s conclusion addresses a serious challenge to our argument: if Vladimir Nabokov is some great author of redemptive work, why did he seem to suggest in his autobiography *Speak Memory* that the

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loss of his brother Sergey Nabokov, who was killed by the Nazis, was irredeemable?

Now some commentators have claimed Nabokov's books "practically assume an academic reader."<sup>7</sup> We don't think that is true. Rather, we believe anyone who thinks literature has a purpose and who likes to be rewarded by books that require close attention may find significant value in them. This accords with Nabokov's belief that all it took for one to be a "good reader" was imagination, memory, some artistic sense, and a dictionary. (*LL*, 3)

Similarly, Nabokov does not hold that one needs to officially be some kind of artist as one's vocation to use creativity to participate in redemption. He suggests that strings to the "web of the world" are in everyone's hands, not just artists. What's important, he seems to think, is to recognize *that* one holds strings and to reflect on what one can do with them. Redemptive work could be producing some grand piece of art, but it could also be other, more subtle or everyday actions—how one responds to the art of others, how one simply relates to others, what one chooses to pay attention to, whose memories one is motivated by—that generate and shape meaningfulness.

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Charles Kinbote ends his introduction by saying, “For better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word.” (29) Though we are satisfied with our interpretations presented in this book, ours is not an attempt to have the last word. We know—we hope!—that somewhere, someone is working on their own theories that will highlight different themes and details, and present new and even conflicting evidence and theories. Future readers of *Pale Fire* will inevitably cast our proposed solutions in a new light, just as we hope our ideas make you think differently about what has come before us. In the world of literature, it’s accepted that the future alters the present which alters the past. We hope our book will help persuade you this happens in the “real world” as well.

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# Chapter 1: Nabokov's Redemption Dilemma

When Nabokov was asked in a 1964 interview to imagine his literary legacy, he replied:

Well, in this matter of accomplishment, of course, I don't have a 35-year plan or program, but I have a fair inkling of my literary afterlife. I have sensed certain hints, I have felt the breeze of certain promises. No doubt there will be ups and downs, long periods of slump. With the Devil's connivance, I open a newspaper of 2063 and in some article on the books page I find: "Nobody reads Nabokov or Fulmerford today." Awful question: Who is this unfortunate Fulmerford? (*SO*, 34)

We don't know who Fulmerford is either and have no inkling of how Nabokov will be received in 2063, but we do know that in the 2020s, over halfway to 2063, he is still going strong. Dozens of articles about his work

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still appear each year, and his cache endures not just amongst scholarly types but also in the wider culture. Perhaps the most famous Nabokovian is Colin Jost, co-host of Saturday Night Live’s “Weekend Update” alongside Michael Che, who wrote his college senior thesis on Nabokov. Anya Taylor-Joy, star of the Netflix series *The Queen’s Gambit*, is also a Nabokov fan and expressed interest in featuring in an adaptation of Nabokov’s 1932 novel *Laughter in the Dark*.<sup>1</sup> Benedict Cumberbatch, known for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes, listed Nabokov first among his most revered authors.<sup>2</sup>

*Pale Fire* specifically also continues to inspire: in 2023 Tom Will published a 999-line poem entitled *Pale Townie* that was a riff off of John Shade’s poem in *Pale Fire*.<sup>3</sup> In 2024 Weidenfeld & Nicolson published a new edition of *Pale Fire* featuring an introduction by novelist Mary Gaitskill that began, “*Pale Fire* is one of the greatest books I’ve ever read. It is so great it is terrifying to write about.”<sup>4</sup> Also in 2024 Tavi Gevinson released a 75-page magazine called “Fan Fiction” that was described as “a gender-swapped pastiche of *Pale Fire*, about one writer’s obsession with arguably the most popular poet in America.”<sup>5</sup> That “most popular poet in America,” of course, being Taylor Swift. The

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same year, Nabokov was compared with the chart-topping pop star by both the *New Statesman* (“The Nabokovian Genius of Taylor Swift”) and the *Daily Californian* (“Taylor Swift was Vladimir Nabokov in a Past Life”).<sup>6</sup>

Amidst this, however, Nabokov’s books have perhaps never been entangled in as many ethical questions. This is saying something for an author whose work, upon publication, was the subject of denouncements and book bans. If the overarching goal of our book is to read Nabokov’s work for guidance about the concept of redemption, we immediately encounter a dilemma: is Nabokov redeemable enough *himself* to warrant reading his work to learn about redemption? In this chapter, we examine three of the ethical questions his work raises. Ultimately, we conclude that none of these questions rule out engaging with his work, and following that exploration, we offer two reasons we are still greatly drawn to it.

Before discussing these questions, let us briefly introduce his life: Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born in 1899, a significant year to him because it was the centennial of the birth of one of his heroes, the legendary Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. Nabokov was born on April 10, but after this date was shifted to

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the newly adopted Gregorian calendar, his birthday became celebrated on April 23, the same day, he'll have you note, as that of William Shakespeare. (*SM*, 13-14; *LDQ*, 8) Nabokov's life, which lasted 78 years, can be divided into four roughly equal quarters:

For the first quarter of his life, he had an idyllic childhood in a wealthy Russian family who lived on a country estate south of St. Petersburg. However, his family was forced to flee Russia in 1917 amidst the Russian Revolution, traveling via Crimea and Greece to Western Europe. Nabokov spent the second quarter of his life in Western Europe, first going to school in Cambridge in the United Kingdom, then making a name for himself in the Russian émigré community in Berlin and Paris under the pen name “Vladimir Sirin.” He married Vera Slonim in 1925, and their only child, a son named Dmitri, was born in 1934. Vladimir’s father, a prominent liberal politician, was assassinated in Berlin in 1922. During the Nazi advance into France, Vladimir managed to flee with his family to the United States, where he spent the next quarter of his life, about 20 years, teaching, primarily at Wellesley College and Cornell University. Notably, one of his Cornell students was future Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. He became famous and rich upon the

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publication of *Lolita* in 1955. *Pale Fire* appeared in 1962, a year after he left the United States permanently to live out the final quarter of his life in a hotel in the Swiss Riviera. He died there in 1977.

### The Canon Question

The first question we will consider is how we should view Nabokov's status as a "canonical" author at a time when the idea of a literary canon has come under scrutiny. Likely the first encounter I had with Nabokov was in high school Quiz Bowl, an academic trivia club. To improve in the "Literature" category, I was told to memorize the Modern Library's list of 100 "Best" novels of the 20th century. On that list, Nabokov's *Lolita* clocked in at #4, and *Pale Fire* made the list at #53.<sup>7</sup> (*Speak Memory*, Nabokov's artful autobiography, was judged #8 among non-fiction works). In hindsight, this list reflected much more about those who compiled it than about the merits of the works themselves. Over 90% of the books on the list were written by white authors, over 90% were written by men, and 100% were written in English. Such aspects of Nabokov's identity have undoubtedly given him a significant leg up in

making it into the canon, to the exclusion of many other artists who may be just as or more talented.

We don't think one should read Nabokov simply because he has in the past been considered canonical, and Nabokov didn't view the idea of a canon highly himself. While he was forced to teach "great books" courses as a professor, he often did so ironically and irreverently. He stated in interviews that he disliked the notion of "great books" or "great literature" and refused "to be guided by a communion of established views and academic traditions."<sup>8</sup> (*SO*, 57, 102, 266) He also remarked, "I've been perplexed and amused by fabricated notions about so-called 'great books' ... what journalists term 'great books,' is to me the same sort of absurd delusion as when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair."<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, Nabokov venerated and was in dialogue with a number of writers who are often considered part of a "canon." However, scholar Alexander Dolinin writes that Nabokov "believed that a modern Russian writer should incessantly question and test the canon, debunking stale notions and developing potentialities that have been overlooked or untried."<sup>10</sup> For example, despite being influenced by Dostoevsky's work, Nabokov liked to use the existentialist as a punching

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bag, commenting that he was a “mediocre” writer whose books were filled with “wastelands of literary platitudes.”<sup>11</sup>

The “tradition” Nabokov was a part of was by no means limited to Russian, or even the French or English he studied in college. Scholar Priscilla Meyer has argued magnificently that *Pale Fire* has echoes of Irish, Finnish, and Viking literature from far before the formation of the modern English, Russian, or Western canons. Nabokov believed that the web of literary influence is hardly limited to a language, country, or series of pre-ordained texts. Perhaps most of all, Nabokov is part of the literature of migration and translation. As scholar Marijeta Bozovic writes, Nabokov sought to place his works as part of the “complex web of intermingled transnational culture,”<sup>12</sup> an aspiration that has inspired “writers who feel distant from the traditional centers of cultural capital” such as Azar Nafisi, Orhan Pamuk, J.M. Coetzee, and W.G. Sebald.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to crowding out equally or more worthy works, or prompting unthinking acceptance, canonizing a book can ensure it is read as a chore. I’ll always remember a classmate of mine in a college Shakespeare course describing Shakespeare as a kind of large whale carcass that is feasted upon by numerous

tiny fish. It may be more difficult to encounter the works of canonical authors in a “fresh” manner, not weighed down by all the accumulated discourse surrounding them. We believe Nabokov’s books are best enjoyed on their own terms and should not be foisted upon you based on his supposed stature or his ranking on some list.

## **The Russia Question**

As a college Russian major, I was captivated by something called the “Cursed Questions.” These were a set of questions said to “baffle the mind and torment the heart,” which members of the Russian intelligentsia have from time immemorial debated to no end.<sup>14</sup> Picture a group of people huddled around a dimly lit table covered with mostly empty glasses arguing until four in the morning. You couldn’t solve the Cursed Questions, but you couldn’t ignore them either. Examples of the Cursed Questions are: *Is there a God or not?*, *What is to be done?*, and *Who is guilty?*

The question *Who is guilty?* has become an especially important and contentious question not just in Russia but around the world. The scholar Ashraf

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Rushdy has defined the period since the end of World War II as the “Guilted Age,” referring to society’s evolving understanding and debate about how individuals are implicated in wrongdoing.<sup>15</sup> Our previous section considered the worry that establishing a canon was necessarily going to exclude great works from cultures or authors who weren’t socially advantaged. But a concern of the Guilted Age is whether works of the canon are guilty of wrongs in ways that those who established the canon have not fully reckoned with. Furthermore, canonized works face additional scrutiny when they are part of a larger social context that is fraught. In this section, we will focus on one specific angle of this concern, namely how Russian literature is implicated in Russia’s expansionist ideology.

For my birthday in 2021, my parents gave me a copy of *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* by George Saunders. The book is a series of Russian short stories by “classic” authors such as Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy printed alongside commentaries by Saunders. The book is billed as a kind of “master class” in close reading. I was gripped by the way Saunders’s commentary drew out the subtle gems of meaning from the stories’ seemingly simple details, and it transported me back to an excellent

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class I took my senior year of college on Russian short stories. For the first time since college, I thought seriously about studying the Russian language again so I could read more of these stories in the original.

However, about a week after I finished the book, Russia invaded Ukraine. The ongoing war has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people and led to large-scale destruction of homes and disruption of life. Amidst this, Russia's war has provoked a backlash against Russian culture worldwide. Russian departments across the U.S. have adapted to de-emphasize aspects of the curriculum they had previously organized their instruction around. My college's Russian department canceled the biannual Moscow trip I went on and now holds study abroad in Kazakhstan instead. Russian cultural performances have been boycotted. Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, pulled a forthcoming book set in Siberia because of negative responses from her Ukrainian readers.<sup>16</sup> The Museum of Russian Art in Minneapolis, where M and I went on our first date, has rebranded itself to the acronym "TMORA" to remove the word "Russian" from the title.

Still processing these conversations, I decided not to pick up my study of Russian again, at least for the time

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being. However, I have continued to work on this Nabokov book. As we have worked on it, some people have asked us if it is strange to be working on a book about a Russian writer amidst the war. At first, we didn't think it was an issue with Nabokov because he emigrated from Russia and rejected writing in the Russian language. He was also fiercely critical of the country and never returned. Over time, though, we have come to see the issue as more complex.

When it comes to Nabokov, there are a number of areas in which readers have found him guilty of problematic attitudes or of being a “product of his time.” For example, though each of these points has been disputed,<sup>17</sup> it has been argued that his books are sexist and even misogynistic,<sup>18</sup> that he displays homophobia,<sup>19</sup> that he can be fatphobic,<sup>20</sup> and that he evades discussion of racial inequality and bigotry.<sup>21</sup> And it is not just Nabokov that is implicated in these shortcomings, but Nabokov scholars who downplay, try to explain away, or perpetuate these elements in their own work.

Most recently, Nabokov's views regarding Russia and Ukraine have come under scrutiny. In the article “The Russian War on Ukraine Has Always Been a War on Its Language,” Askold Melnyczuk begins with a

quote from Nabokov about Nikolai Gogol, who has become a center of discussion during the current war over whether he “belongs” to Ukraine, where he was born, or to Russia, which has claimed him as one of its canonical authors because he published his works in Russian. Nabokov wrote in a 1959 study dedicated to Gogol’s work: “We must thank fate (and the author’s thirst for universal fame) for his not having turned to the Ukrainian dialect as a medium of expression, because then all would have been lost,” continuing, “when I want a good nightmare, I imagine Gogol penning in Little Russian dialect volume after volume ....”<sup>22</sup> Melnyczuk writes that “What [Nabokov] calls the ‘Little Russian dialect’ is none other than the Ukrainian language, which is about as close to Russian as Spanish is to Italian.” Melnyczuk argues:

Nabokov’s dismissal of the Ukrainian language reflects a position taken by countless Russian writers and intellectuals over the last century. Such attitudes have consequences. It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that this prejudice has contributed to the slaughter of millions of people and is a significant factor in the war currently being waged by Russia against Ukraine. Putin has expressly stated that he has attacked Ukraine in

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order to protect the large Russian-speaking population of the easternmost region of the country, known as the Donbas.

It may seem extreme to accuse Nabokov of “contributing to the slaughter of millions of people,” however we think it is a charge that should not simply be invalidated. Rather, it reflects what author Elif Batuman calls a form of “trauma response” by Ukrainians to the ongoing conflict.<sup>23</sup> Batuman is a writer for the New Yorker who has written three books treating themes drawn from Russian literature, all of which we are quite fond of. She has also become one of the leading public intellectuals in the United States today grappling with how to engage with Russian culture, including in the 2023 New Yorker piece “Rereading Russian Classics in the Shadow of the Ukraine War.”

Batuman details that in March 2022, Ukrainian literary groups published a petition arguing that “Russian propaganda is woven into many books which indeed turns them into weapons and pretexts for the war.”<sup>24</sup> In April 2022, the *Pushkinopad* (“Pushkin fall”) movement led to the toppling in Ukraine of a number of statues of Russia’s national poet, Alexander

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Pushkin.<sup>25</sup> There has been pushback to this movement, however. Germany PEN, an organization that advocates for free expression, pleaded to the international community not to lump Russian authors in with their current politicians, using the slogan “The enemy is Putin, not Pushkin.”<sup>26</sup>

Batuman was originally sympathetic to the German PEN position: “What was next, mining James Fenimore Cooper for insights into Donald Rumsfeld?”<sup>27</sup> However, Batuman began to think differently about how Russian novels could be entangled with expansionist ideology by reflecting on the influence of literature on her views of sexuality:

I came across Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” In it, Rich identifies a tendency in Western literature to suggest “that women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically, drawn to men; that even when that attraction is suicidal ... it is still an organic imperative.” ... It made me think: if the books I loved so objectively were actually vehicles of patriarchal ideology, why wouldn’t the ideology of expansionism be in [Russian classics], too?<sup>28</sup>

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We imagine everyone can identify some misguided belief they have held that was at least partially adopted due to consuming certain books or other sorts of media.

In a podcast reflecting on her *New Yorker* article, Batuman raised a slightly different yet also important idea: that a member of the Russian literary canon may be implicated in something problematic *even if they held no problematic views on Ukrainian culture itself*—even if there was no support, even implicit, for Russian expansionism at all. Her point is that actions that may be perfectly normal on their own can prove to be harmful as a result of the individual's larger place in society. For example, about *War and Peace* author Leo Tolstoy, who was a pacifist, Batuman reflects, “The way that I look at it more now is that it's kind of a structural issue—writing within a certain historical structure at a certain historical time is more salient than what your personal view was.”<sup>29</sup>

How could this be? As Charlotte Higgins writes about Pushkin, “For many Ukrainians the problem with Pushkin is not only, and not even mainly, the poetry itself. It is to do with his sheer ubiquity—and the way he has been instrumentalized as the ultimate symbol of Russian culture and influence.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, part of Russia's self-understanding is the

mystique of its culture. Russians are proud of their tradition of “serious” books, of their “universality” (to use Nabokov’s word about Gogol). There is perhaps no other country that has so many public places named after artists or dotted with statues of them. Russian political and cultural leaders have deliberately cultivated the cache of its culture, and it has served, both implicitly and explicitly, as justification for the country’s sense of superiority it has over countries with less publicly “celebrated” cultures. This contributes to its more general sense of superiority.

And it’s not just the Russians who have recognized and weaponized the country’s cultural cache. During the Cold War, the U.S. tried to turn this cache against Russia after many artists like Nabokov emigrated to the States by arguing that only in “free” America can the “great Russian literary tradition” survive.<sup>31</sup> Nabokov was drawn into this culture war, whether he knew it or not, because one of his publishers was funded generously by the CIA.<sup>32</sup> Even if an individual author isn’t consciously advocating for a particular political position, political leaders can still instrumentalize their work to support a broader agenda promoting a specific understanding of national identity.

## Nabokov's Redemption Dilemma

I was surprised to find myself reacting quite viscerally to the argument that the social cache of Russian literature has been weaponized, and that engaging with it can be problematic, even if one doesn't have sinister intentions. I was a Russian major in college for a number of reasons, but one was because my family emigrated from Russia to the United States a little over a century ago. I viewed the language as a way of connecting with my heritage. However, after embarking on my studies, I learned that my family was specifically from Kherson, near Odesa. While Kherson was part of the Russian Empire when my ancestors lived there, Kherson is now a Ukrainian port city that was invaded by Russia during the recent war.

Batuman's podcast made me rethink a number of assumptions I had about my study of Russian. In identifying my heritage with the Russian language, had I made a mistake? Did my ancestors *choose* to speak Russian, or was it forced upon them? Did they identify more with Russia, or Ukraine? Or did they identify with neither, since they were Jewish and fled Kherson due to the threat of persecution? Did I take all those Russian classes and read all of those "classic" Russian works based on misguided assumptions? Is the choice to work on this Nabokov book also a mistake? Am I

unknowingly playing into a larger social narrative that is destructive?

Batuman argues that being a modern reader entails trying to increase one's awareness of the factors that influence the choices one makes, such as what language to study or what to read and write about, as these factors are often bigger than any individual. She does not, however, argue we need to throw out all aspects of past Russian literature. Rather, her "purity test" is: "Does the writer from that time invite us now to see things that the writer was not able to see at the time ... did they give us the means to have a richer view than they had personally?"<sup>33</sup> In other words, do the books contain within them a sort of antidote to the cultural forces they are participating in, and that may be contributing to great harm? For our purposes: can Nabokov's work be read in a way that counteracts the negative entanglements it might have regarding Russia's war in Ukraine? We believe the answer is yes.

In the mid-20th century, philosopher Judith Shklar made famous the mantra "put cruelty first."<sup>34</sup> Shklar, who like Nabokov was a political refugee, meant by this phrase that whatever one does, one must start with the path that allows no excuse for cruelty. Cruelty might be defined as inflicting pain on another person, usually one

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in less of a position of power than you, in order to cause anguish and fear. Putting cruelty first means that one should not attempt to justify cruelty by pointing to the gain of some other value, such as beauty, greatness, humor, or efficiency. Applying this to literature, if a book's only “positive” value is that it is amusing, beautiful, or “great,” this is not a good enough reason to continue reading it if it perpetuates cruelty. Only if, as Batuman argues, a book can be read to counteract in some way the very cruelty it perpetuates should it be judged to have continuing value.

Like Shklar,<sup>35</sup> Nabokov was firm about his opposition to cruelty throughout his life. “I’m a mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty,” Nabokov stated in *Strong Opinions*. (SO, 19) In his *Lectures on Don Quixote*, he told students that “freedom from pain” was “one of the few things that may save our world.” (LDQ, 75) In his book *Pnin*, the title character Pnin plans to teach a course on tyranny, declaring, “The history of man is the history of pain.” (P, 168) (Pnin’s name is one letter off from “pain.”) Nabokov’s son Dmitri attested that his father selected “contempt for cruelty” as his main theme.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, many passages in Nabokov’s books contain elements that can be very painful or

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frustrating to read, especially if one has characteristics that are being denigrated. Some of these remarks might seem relatively minor, but as political theorist Alasia Nuti has persuasively argued, “radical” forms of injustice such as physical violence usually go hand-in-hand with, and have been prepared for, by “banal” injustices such as negative stereotypes or dehumanizing language. Part of trying to address “radical” acts of violence is to attend to “banal” forms as well.

So how do we square Nabokov’s staunch opposition to cruelty with his own implication in it? We believe *Pale Fire* meets Batuman’s “purity test” and Shklar’s dictum to “put cruelty first”—but only if one foregrounds certain themes. We believe the theory of redemption laid out in *Pale Fire* counteracts cruelty by insisting that help is always possible for those who have suffered.

The idea that a work may contain an antidote to the very harm it inflicts is something we think applies specifically to Nabokov’s views on Ukraine and his participation in Russian culture. In his lifetime, Nabokov railed against the Soviet Union’s corruption of authentic Russian arts and letters.<sup>37</sup> He wholly supported trying to detach Russia’s cultural history and clout from its political regime. And, more

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straightforwardly, he sympathized with peoples resisting Russian expansion. We will attempt to argue in Chapter 2 that Zembla in *Pale Fire* is modeled on Hungarian resistance to Soviet control. We think his analysis of Russian aggression in *Pale Fire*, as well as in other books such as *Bend Sinister*, can be read in a way that counteracts some of his problematic views of Russian and Ukrainian identity, giving readers the threads to weave a richer view than he held in his own lifetime.

### **The Lolita Question**

Finally, to write at length about Nabokov necessitates some discussion of his most controversial book, *Lolita*. Written shortly before *Pale Fire*, *Lolita* established Nabokov's fame and gave him the financial stability to sustain the rest of his career.<sup>38</sup> After *Lolita*, he stopped teaching and finished *Pale Fire* as he devoted himself full-time to writing, so it is not a stretch to say that without *Lolita*, there would be no *Pale Fire*.

Nabokov surely knew *Lolita* would be controversial even before it appeared. In recognition of this, Nabokov initially expressed interest in publishing it under a pen name. It was rejected by five different publishers in the

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United States before being printed by a quasi-pornographic publishing house in France in 1955, appearing in the United States three years later.<sup>39</sup> It would have likely been banned in the United States if not for the 1957 Supreme Court ruling in *Roth v. United States*, which loosened obscenity laws for works judged to have “redeeming social importance.”<sup>40</sup> Since then, *Lolita* has been frequently banned and denounced, even as it has been lauded.<sup>41</sup> Most criticism centers on the fact that the novel describes the sexual violence by a man named Humbert Humbert against a 12-year-old girl named Dolores Haze, whom Humbert calls “Lolita.” Today many find extremely troubling the fact that Nabokov’s writing style in the book seems to encourage the reader to identify with Humbert, arguably preparing them to condone and even revel in the serial rape of the young girl.

Questions about *Lolita* have intensified in light of the Me Too movement. “Can *Lolita* be read as anything but a story of predation, depravity, exploitation—and specifically, rape—no matter how stunning Nabokov’s prose might be?” E. Ce Miller asks in an article entitled “I Read *Lolita* in the Age of Me Too—And I’m No Longer Standing For Its Overt Misogyny.”<sup>42</sup> The

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conclusion reached by Miller, and many readers, is that *Lolita* is “a novel whose time is up.”

Nabokov’s work has undoubtedly contributed to what has been called the “*Lolita* myth,” which glamorizes improper relationships with minors.<sup>43</sup> Numerous pop songs reference *Lolita* in the context of uncritically describing relationships with underage people, including ones by the Police, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Billy Joel, and Lana del Rey.<sup>44</sup> Media gave the moniker “*Lolita Express*” to the private plane used by Jeffrey Epstein to engage in sex trafficking.<sup>45</sup> The first child to play *Lolita* in the 1962 film *Lolita*, Sue Lyon, observed as an adult in 1996, “My destruction as a person dates from that movie. *Lolita* exposed me to temptations no girl of that age should undergo. I defy any pretty girl who is rocketed to stardom at 14 in a sex nymphet role to stay on a level path thereafter.”<sup>46</sup>

The difficulties with *Lolita* are especially pronounced when teaching it in a classroom setting. Scholar Marilyn Edelstein writes, “If we do choose to teach *Lolita*, we now do so with awareness that there’s a high probability that some of the women in our classes (and possibly some of the men) have been or will become victims/survivors of sexual assault, including child sexual abuse.”<sup>47</sup> Edelstein is a contributor to the

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2021 volume *Teaching Nabokov’s Lolita in the #MeToo Era*, which calls for a “reassessment” of the novel in light of the ongoing conversation about the pervasiveness of sexual violence. Many of the contributors to the book *do* believe *Lolita* should still be read—indeed it seems that students are reading and reflecting on the book with a “greater sense of urgency in the #MeToo era than they ever have before,” according to one contributor<sup>48</sup>—but they raise a number of important considerations when deciding how to present and engage with it.

For some, the task of readers is to “recover” *Lolita* from Humbert’s oppressive narration and from the gaze of men who have historically been the book’s main audience. Francesca McDonnell Capossela examines closely how *Lolita* fights against being silenced and how the reader can observe and validate the story of her agency.<sup>49</sup>

Some contemporary readers echo an argument about empowerment made most famous by Azar Nafisi in the 2003 memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi’s work centers around a group of young women in the capital of Iran who turn to literature as a form of resistance against the country’s repressive regime. Nafisi, who leads the women in a reading circle, writes,

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“I suppose that if I were to ... choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it would not be *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or even *1984* but perhaps Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* or better yet, *Lolita*.<sup>50</sup> Nafisi writes that women in Iran, like Lolita, had “become the figment of someone else’s dreams” but that “no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom.”<sup>51</sup>

Others have argued the novel’s enduring relevance can be found in its “nuanced perspective on the predator’s mind.”<sup>52</sup> Eléna Rakhimova-Sommers discusses how Humbert’s status as a “redemption-seeking child molester” asks questions of the reader about the redemptive-worthiness of real-life perpetrators of severely harmful acts.<sup>53</sup> Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya compares Humbert’s account of his actions to the increasingly common genre of public “apology” participated in by disgraced public figures such as Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey.<sup>54</sup>

Still another argument for the novel’s value is in training readers to interrogate their own entanglements with Humbert’s predatory behavior, learning to resist

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his narration and fight against identifying with or becoming enmeshed in Humbert's viewpoint.<sup>55</sup> In doing so, they may be able to better scrutinize their own capacities to objectify and oppress.

Many of the contributors to the aforementioned volume state their intent to continue teaching *Lolita* but explain their significantly revised approaches to doing so. For example, it is now common to pair *Lolita* with other works about sexual abuse that more clearly center a victim's or survivor's perspective. Examples include *The Bean Trees*, *How I Learned to Drive*, and *The Bluest Eye*.<sup>56</sup> Many also assign feminist commentaries on *Lolita*; books such as *Lo's Diary* and *Journal de L.*, which both retell *Lolita* from the perspective of Dolores Haze;<sup>57</sup> or even Nabokov's own *Invitation to a Beheading*, which Rakhimova-Sommers says gives Nabokov "street cred" in the eyes of students because its protagonist is someone who has been unjustly imprisoned.<sup>58</sup>

Our attitude toward *Lolita* has evolved as we re-read the book in conjunction with our exploration of *Pale Fire*. We had planned to recommend that someone interested in Nabokov should leave *Lolita* aside and be much more rewarded instead by *Pale Fire*, which contains the familiar Nabokovian themes, style, puzzles,

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and devices but without what many consider the fraught subject matter. However, upon further rereading, we believe there is a way to interpret *Lolita* that significantly changes in our minds how one should appraise it and would make it a different kind of book altogether. The interpretation we have arrived at does not ignore or dismiss the violence at the heart of the book, but locates it in a different place. Nabokov once commented, “Most of the stories I am contemplating ... will be composed ... according to [the] system wherein a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent one.”<sup>59</sup> Because there has (understandably) been so much writing about the ethics of reading *Lolita* at all, we wonder if the “second (main) story,” which may be placed behind more familiar parts of the novel, has yet to be fully excavated. We hope to further explore this possibility and perhaps present it in some future work. In the meantime though, we agree with many of the main points of *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita in the #MeToo Era* and would recommend it to anyone interested in recent reflections on the novel.

## Why Read Nabokov

We have tried to work through some—but by no means all—of the main challenges involved in approaching Nabokov’s work. In what remains of this chapter, we want to give voice to two main reasons we find positive value in Nabokov and *Pale Fire* specifically.

### Verbal Adventures

Nabokov famously stated that “one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader.” (*LL*, 3) He also characterized his books as “verbal adventures” and “riddles with elegant solutions.” (*GF*, 139; *SO*, 16) If you enjoy rereading books; if you delight in puzzles, riddles, or literary hunts; if you like frantically flipping pages back and forth to confirm your hunches, you will likely appreciate Nabokov. The puzzle-like quality of his books is something we greatly enjoy and also explains the vast commentary surrounding his work, as well as the numerous attempts by readers to “crack” his stories.

There are several different types of puzzles in Nabokov’s work that have captured readers’

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imaginaries. One type is the literary puzzle, where readers track down references made to other literary works. For example, on *Pale Fire*'s Wikipedia page, over 50 different “Allusions and references” are listed, and dozens more have been identified elsewhere. A second type of puzzle is the autobiographical puzzle, where readers trace parts of Nabokov’s life encoded in his fiction, and a third is the thematic puzzle, where certain philosophical positions are extracted from his books. Finally, there is the plot puzzle, where readers try to piece together what *actually* happens in his stories by carefully paying attention to what Nabokov refers to as the “divine details.” (LL, xxiii) In our minds, the literary, autobiographical, and philosophical puzzles are most interesting only after one tries to crack the plot—the puzzle of what happened in the story itself.

The idea that Nabokov’s books are puzzles is not universally accepted. Given this is our focus, we must address the beguiling question of whether *Pale Fire* even contains a solvable puzzle. Some readers and commentators, including the Nabokovians Brian Boyd and Ilya Osovskiy, have claimed to have found an overarching “solution” to the book.<sup>60</sup> Others, such as Mary Ross, have argued that there are multiple solutions.<sup>61</sup> Some, like Volker Strunk, say there are

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*infinite* possibilities in the novel.<sup>62</sup> Finally, some have argued that Nabokov is trying to *make fun of* all attempts to find solutions within his books. In this vein, David Roach speaks for many when he argues that *Pale Fire* is “a labyrinth with nothing but dead ends” and that “there is no one correct interpretation that conclusively connects the various levels of *Pale Fire*. In fact, on close examination, the text reveals a conscious effort to block attempts at discovering a meaning.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, at a certain point *most* readers are likely to be exasperated and driven to wonder if the whole book is nonsense. This isn’t helped by the fact that some of the “proposed” solutions commentators have devised seem fanciful and are dramatically contradictory to one another. The contradictory nature of existing solutions might lead one to conclude that a commentary is just one person’s interpretation and should not be thought of as definitive.

All that said, we don’t believe there are infinite solutions to *Pale Fire*. If one can take the book in any direction one likes, why read the novel as opposed to, say, stare at a toaster? We have a hard time believing Nabokov, who compared his work to puzzles with “solutions” so often, and who was so into puzzles in other domains of his life—he was a composer of chess

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problems, after all—would suddenly reject puzzles when it came to his books.<sup>64</sup> This is the person who wrote that “the unraveling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind,” and he emphasizes again and again that there is a payoff for those who work at it.<sup>65</sup> For example, Nabokov states that “a good reader is bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author, but those efforts can be most rewarding after the bright dust has settled.” (SO, 183) Taking Nabokov’s comments into account, we believe *Pale Fire* can be “solved,” and that it becomes more enjoyable when one believes in a solution. Certainly, many 20th-century authors write ironically and seem to spit in the face of readers, but we don’t believe Nabokov is one of them.

Though we believe a single solution to *Pale Fire* exists, Nabokov doesn’t make it easy. He writes, “I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work in his turn—so much the better. Art is difficult. Easy art is what you see at modern exhibitions of things and doodles.” (SO, 115) As Carol T. Williams notes, Nabokov *does* put many red herrings into his work.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Nabokov writes in his autobiography that a “great part of a problem’s value is due to the number of

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‘tries’—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.” (*SM*, 290) In this vein, we believe there are several red herrings within what we will call the “Standard Solution” to *Pale Fire*, such as the identities of Jack Grey and Vladimir Botkin. Although we don’t deny there are obvious discrepancies in the book, instead of throwing up one’s hands, we believe one should take these moments as a challenge to come up with a reason for the seeming contradictions.

Finally, in case one is worried about drawing solutions from Nabokov’s books that the author never intended, we appreciate Ann Komaromi’s point that Nabokov “acknowledged that there were many keys and combinations readers found in his works which had not occurred to him, but some of which he nevertheless found entirely plausible.”<sup>67</sup> In this way, Nabokov shows respect for his readers’ own creative qualities as well.

## **The Other World of Art**

The second broad reason we find Nabokov worth reading is that he insisted on the value of art in a broken world. His view runs counter to two prominent beliefs.

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The first belief minimizes art as somehow a luxury, a distraction, just for play, or merely the “frosting” on life when everything else is going well. The second belief is that art is essential but only for advancing some political purpose.

Nabokov, when he became a professor after immigrating to the United States, was aware he could not remain untouched by the outside world. The violence he and his family experienced in Europe returned to him throughout his life in the form of nightmares and insomnia.<sup>68</sup> He wrote, “As much as I may want sometimes to hide in my little ivory tower, there are things that wound too deeply—like the German atrocities, the burning of children in crematorium ovens, children as delightful and precious as yours and mine. I retreat into myself but there I find such hatred for the Germans, for concentration camps, for the tyranny of all kinds that as an escape *ce n'est pas grand' chose* [it's not much].”<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, Nabokov consistently discussed his aversion to what he labeled in *Bend Sinister* “the literature of social comment.” (BS, xii) Nabokov continues, “Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of ‘thaw’ in society, Russia, the future of

mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent.” (*BS*, xii) In the Foreword to the dystopian *Invitation to a Beheading*, he wrote that whether the Nazi regime was an influence on the events of his book “should concern the good reader as little as it does me.” (*IB*, 5)

This insistence on art’s separateness from politics was influenced no doubt by his acquaintance with Soviet Russia, where many artists put their work in service of the regime. He saw firsthand the misuse of art for totalitarian purposes and wished no part in it. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, it is stated about the titular character that “Newspaper headlines, political theories, fashionable ideas meant to him no more than the loquacious printed notice (in three languages, with mistakes in at least two) on the wrapper of some soap or toothpaste.” (*RLSK*, 65)

But perhaps the main reason he could have this attitude of defiance was his faith that the present world—the world of politics, economics, and atomic bombs—is not the only world there is.<sup>70</sup> His spouse Vera called the concept of the “other world” (*potustoronnost*) the “watermark” of Nabokov’s works.<sup>71</sup> In *Invitation to a Beheading*, the protagonist reflects that “part of my thoughts is always crowding around the invisible umbilical cord that joins this world to

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something—to what I shall not say yet.” (*IB*, 53) In *Bend Sinister*, he describes “a rent in [the] world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty.” (*BS*, xv) Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, states that in Nabokov’s work “there was always the shadow of another world, one that was only attainable through fiction. It is this world that prevents his heroes and heroines from utter despair, that becomes their refuge in a life that is consistently brutal.”<sup>72</sup>

Nabokov suggests art as an “other world” could offer at least three important things: refuge, power, and salvation. The world of fiction is a refuge from strife because it calls into question the reality of the “real” world. In *Glory*, Nabokov wrote of “finding in art—not an ‘escape’ (which is only a clean cell on a quieter floor), but relief from the itch of being!” (*Gl*, xiii) In *Ada*, art is characterized as protecting humans from being “creatures of chance in an absolute void.” (*A*, 426)

Art is also a source of power: Nabokov believed, according to Olga Voronina, that “Laughter ... is the artist’s most effective weapon against oppression.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, he also believed that art can punish more than physical violence: “The twinkle in the author’s eye as he notes the imbecile drooping of a murderer’s underlip, or watches the stumpy forefinger of a professional tyrant

exploring a profitable nostril in the solitude of his sumptuous bedroom, this twinkle is what punishes your man more surely than the pistol of a tiptoeing conspirator.”<sup>74</sup>

Finally, art for Nabokov is a source of salvation: when Cincinnatus C., the protagonist of *Invitation to a Beheading*, reaches a “dead end of this life,” he concludes, “I should not have sought salvation within its confines.” (*IB*, 205) Instead, he finds salvation in “imagination,” and by the end of the book, Cincinnatus discovers that it is the authors and readers of the book who set him free. (*IB*, 114) Similarly, Nabokov writes that it is the “good reader” who “has saved the artist again and again from being destroyed by emperors, dictators, priests, puritans, philistines, political moralists, policemen, postmasters, and prigs.” (*LL*, 10-11)

Art is not the only sphere that can protect, empower, and save. One can find this in relationships, love, religion, social movements, and more. We do not believe that these spheres are necessarily in tension with one another as they also contain within them elements of creativity. Poet Wallace Stevens writes, “The aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them.”<sup>75</sup> As with such other spheres,

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Nabokov suggests creativity can be a way of challenging the status quo, of imagining the world otherwise than it currently is. Imagination is not the same thing as wishful thinking, having your head in the clouds, or not being able to face “reality.” Rather, it is one part of human experience that allows one to look directly at catastrophic life circumstances and find hope.

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With these preparatory comments made, and if you’re now “on board” with believing an exploration of Nabokov to be worthwhile, it’s time to turn to *Pale Fire* itself.



# Chapter 2: The Kinbote Complex

It has been said by scholars that *Pale Fire* is “immediately accessible” and “a joy.”<sup>1</sup> Upon my first reading of the novel, I could not have disagreed more. The story is a tangle of narratives, and the best way I can describe it is by comparing it to the time I hiked Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire.

This analogy feels appropriate because Nabokov himself compared the writing and reading process of a book to climbing a mountain. If successful, the writer and reader meet at the top where Nabokov says, “they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever.” (LL, 2) Needless to say, no one was happily or spontaneously embracing in my hiking or first-time reading experience, but in what follows I hope

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to use those moments to offer a brief synopsis of *Pale Fire*. The novel is broken into four parts: Foreword, Poem, Commentary, and Index, so this synopsis will be too. For people who have never read the novel, I hope this synopsis will be helpful. For those who have already hiked through its pages with glee, trepidation, or exasperation, I hope this synopsis will at least be painless.

The Foreword is the beginning of the hike. The sun is shining. It's a cold October morning in New England. A man named Charles Kinbote introduces himself as the commentator of a poem titled "Pale Fire." The author of the poem is Kinbote's neighbor, John Shade, but John is dead now. Kinbote offers numeric information about the poem and stresses the closeness of his friendship with John. Though a bit sprawling, I can follow the Foreword like a path in the woods. There are little white flowers and birch trees. Maybe this won't be the easiest excursion, but I'm capable!

The Poem is the foothills. Trees grow dense and the sun disappears behind a canopy of green leaves. John Shade is writing now, and he's telling about his life. In the first half of the poem, his parents die, his Aunt Maud raises him, and he meets and marries his wife, Sybil. Together, John and Sybil have a daughter named

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Hazel, but tragically, Hazel dies by suicide or accidental drowning in early adulthood. In the second half of “Pale Fire,” a grieving John contemplates the nature of death, art, and the afterlife. Though initially convinced Hazel is lost forever, by the end John sounds more hopeful. He writes:

And if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine  
Which I suspect is an iambic line.  
I’m reasonably sure that we survive  
And that my darling somewhere is alive, (69)

At this point in the hike, the path has become stony. Big trees grow up around me and there’s a pleasant ache in my legs. The sun speckles through the leaves and a brown rabbit scampers by. This is the sort of nature I came for! I want to stay in the cool darkness forever, but soon the shade ends.

The Commentary is the mountain of the hike—the main event. The forest falls away and I am confronted by a face of gray stone. Now the path is narrow and dusty, and I have to carefully place my feet as I navigate upwards. This is the longest part of the novel, and as the name suggests, it involves Charles Kinbote commenting on his neighbor’s poem. Kinbote plucks out his favorite

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of the 999 lines and responds to them, but confusingly, his responses rarely focus on the Poem at all. Instead, he takes the opportunity to convey three different storylines.

The first story involves the personal history of Charles Kinbote and John Shade. The men are neighbors, and both teach at Wordsmith College, a fictional school in New England. In this storyline, Kinbote is infatuated with John. He watches his neighbor through windows, trails after him on walks, and presses upon him tales of Zembla, a fictional country. Zembla is Kinbote's homeland, and our commentator desperately wants John to immortalize the country by incorporating it into his poem. The second story involves a man named King Charles of Zembla. In this storyline, Zembla has recently experienced a revolution, and King Charles is fleeing from anti-royalists who wish him dead. The third story involves a man named Jakob Gradus. Gradus is an anti-royalist from Zembla who is tasked with killing King Charles. In this storyline, Gradus pursues the king from Zembla all the way to New Wye, the sleepy, fictional college town where Kinbote and John reside.

These storylines are not told in order, and Charles Kinbote rarely gives warning before switching from one

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narrative to another. Also, there are multiple characters in each story, and many of the characters have multiple names, undisclosed motives, flashbacks to their youths, and odd, dream-like sequences. Finally, Kinbote intersperses these storylines with his own outbursts and meltdowns, some of which include suicidal ideation, obscure literary references, and invented languages.

After a few hundred pages of climbing the mountain path of the Commentary, I find myself high in the sky, clinging to a face of rock and wondering how on earth I got here in the first place. This isn't fun! I muster the energy to hoist myself up onto a slanted, gray lookout. Technically, I'm approaching the peak of the mountain, but I certainly can't see it. I sit down on a boulder as Charles Kinbote's stories converge in a disorienting clash: John Shade is shot dead, Kinbote spirits away the poem, and King Charles and Jakob Gradus melt and mold into the background as I chew a handful of Peanut M&Ms and wonder what just happened.

The Index is the descent of the hike, a catalog of the thing I've just spent hours trying to navigate. Some trail markers look familiar, but I'm tired. At this point I'm thinking only of a shower and a soft bed. The last entry listed is "*Zembla, a distant northern land.*" (315) Then

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the trail ends and the cars appear. The sun sets as the book closes. I'm finished.

Sometimes after a difficult experience such as hiking Mount Monadnock or reading *Pale Fire*, it's easy to say things like, "I'm never doing that again" or "that book was a joke." But then days go by, maybe years, and sometimes the difficult thing comes back. There's a new invitation to hike the mountain you didn't peak, or your eyes snag on the book you couldn't understand. The words of the invitation hang in the air, and your hand hovers over the bookshelf. A hard kernel grows inside you, some old competitive dredg. You smile and say yes to the mountain invite. You pluck the book off the shelf and stare down at the long-dead author. He once called *Pale Fire* a riddle, and maybe this time you'll solve it. (SO, 16)

In Chapter 2 and 4 of this book, we will propose several new solutions to the riddle of *Pale Fire*. Because Nabokov enjoyed the "detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures," these solutions will be conveyed in the form of a first-person hunt rather than a series of formal arguments. (LL, 3) By emphasizing the hunt, we hope to imbue these chapters with a bit of the excitement we felt along the way.

### A Shared Past

In the years following my mountain adventure, I reread *Pale Fire* many times, bolstered by Nabokov's 1948 declaration that a "good reader" (and presumably a reader who would understand *his* work) needs only "imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense." (LL, 3) During these readings, I began to notice odd coincidences between three of the leading men.

One series of coincidences occurs between Charles Kinbote and King Charles, whose lives intermingle with increasing strangeness as the book progresses. For example, at one point Kinbote notes, "I who have not shaved now for a year, resemble my disguised king," and he later slips into first person when describing King Charles's arrival to New Wye. (76, 247) Meanwhile, under "Charles II, Charles Xavier Vselav, last King of Zembla" in the Index, our commentator bluntly writes, "See also Kinbote." (306) Based on these moments, we (like many readers) have concluded the two Charles are one.

A second series of coincidences occurs between Charles Kinbote and Jakob Gradus, who share multiple

physical overlaps. For example, Kinbote can intimately describe the pain of trying “to dislodge the red-hot torture point of a raspberry seed from between false and dead gum,” while Gradus wears dentures. (230, 273) Gradus endures violent food poisoning after consuming an old “softish, near-ham sandwich,” while Kinbote amusingly rejects pork at a faculty luncheon. (280, 273, 20) Finally, Gradus is hit over the head with a gardener’s spade following John Shade’s death, and Kinbote endures headaches while composing the Commentary. (294, 107, 157, 194) I began to wonder: could Kinbote, King Charles, *and* Gradus be the same person?

This question was the starting place for many months of inspecting the book for overlaps, tugging at timelines, and following loose threads to their improbable ends. Eventually, I concluded Charles Kinbote, King Charles, and Jakob Gradus are three personalities who reside within one body. I believe this theory is supported by the corresponding life events of the three men, as well as by Nabokov’s predilection for what he called “evolving serial selves” in his writing. (SO, 24)

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### Life Events

Nabokov once remarked during an interview, “People tend to underestimate the power of my imagination and my capacity of evolving serial selves in my writings.” (SO, 24) In this book, we will interpret “serial selves” as characters who sneakily inhabit more than one identity. Such a character might have multiple names, birthdates, likenesses, personalities, and even lovers, but in the end, these attributes can be traced into one body via small, seemingly insignificant details. In *Pale Fire*, we believe one instance of serial selves occurs between Charles Kinbote, King Charles, and Jakob Gradus, whose lives share a similarity in shape that is too marked to be coincidental.

First, all three men endure difficult childhoods. King Charles and Jakob Gradus lose their fathers by 1920 and their mothers by 1936. (101, 77, 104) Gradus’s father is a Protestant minister, and correspondingly, King Charles’s father gives speeches as part of his profession. (77, 102) Little to no information is shared about Charles Kinbote’s parents, though he confirms his boyhood was “tender and terrible.” (88)

Second, all three men marry women and have unsuccessful marriages. King Charles marries a woman

named Disa, but their relationship is unhappy due to the king's repeated affairs. Eventually, Disa leaves him. (208-209) Correspondingly, Jakob Gradus marries a woman who also leaves him. (77, 253) Little information is given about Charles Kinbote during this stage of life, however, he acknowledges he had a wife at one point, and he also confides in his neighbor, "Wives, Mr. Shade, are forgetful." (86, 22)

Third, all three men live in Zembla, a fictional country where a revolution takes place in 1958. (74-77, 205) Before and after the revolution, all three men spend time in Nice, France. (204-206, 232-233, 170) King Charles and Jakob Gradus also visit Paris, and though Charles Kinbote's past isn't extensively spoken of, he possesses a book printed in 1954 in Paris, possibly indicating he too spent time in France's capital before arriving in the United States. (213, 174, 162)

Fourth, during the Zemblan Revolution, all three men appear to experience an execution by firing squad, albeit from different perspectives. The execution takes place after a person is caught broadcasting "underground radio speeches deriding the government" in Zembla. (153) Jakob Gradus condemns this person to death, Disa worries that King Charles might be sentenced to death, and later, Charles Kinbote has

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nightmares that “at any moment, a company of jittery revolutionists might enter and hustle me off to a moonlit wall.” (153, 206, 96) Notably, the person whom Gradus condemns to death survives his execution. (153) If the three men reside within the same body, I think these scenes could indicate our commentator gave a radio speech, was condemned to death, and survived an execution, all while cycling through his respective identities.

Fifth, following the Zemblan Revolution, all three men are linked to Sylvia O’Donnell, a woman with connections to both Wordsmith College and France through her marriages. (311) When King Charles arrives in New Wye, he switches into first person as Charles Kinbote and confirms Sylvia housed him and organized his lodgings and work. (246-250) Meanwhile, when Jakob Gradus visits a villa in Europe, the home belongs to Joseph Lavendar, a cousin of Sylvia’s soon-to-be ex-husband. (200, 310-311) This overlap of Sylvia’s hospitality and homes could indicate she is helping the same person when Kinbote, King Charles, and Gradus appear at her door.

Sixth, as stated in the introduction to this chapter, Charles Kinbote and Jakob Gradus share physical overlaps, including details of dentures, an aversion to

pork, and head pain. (230, 273, 20, 273, 280, 294, 107, 157, 194) Notably, physical overlaps occur between Gradus and King Charles as well. For example, when the king flees Zembla, he carries a flashlight described as having “a hopeless eye,” and a pair of pajamas that “might easily pass for a fancy shirt.” (133, 144) Similarly, Gradus leaves Zembla with “a glass eye” and a pair of “striped pajamas—the kind that Zemblans call *rusker sirsusker* (‘Russian seersucker suit’).” (276, 273)

Finally, all three men are associated with one secondary character who resembles them, and who appears to function as an additional identity. For example, Charles Kinbote turns up in the Index as Botkin, V., an “American scholar of Russian descent.” (306) Meanwhile, King Charles is mirrored by Julius Steinmann, a “tennis champion” who gives radio speeches during the Zemblan Revolution and mimics “to perfection” the voice of the king. (153) That King Charles teaches university students under an “assumed name” beginning around 1955, and that Kinbote plays “table tennis” in New Wye, could further support this Steinmann theory. (76, 314, 23) Lastly, Jakob Gradus gives the name Jack Grey to the police following John Shade’s death, creating a new version of himself as well. (295)

### Authorship

Due to the vast thematic overlaps of the Poem and Commentary within *Pale Fire*, many readers have entertained the possibility of serial selves between Charles Kinbote and John Shade.<sup>2</sup> In both segments of the novel, butterflies flap, someone is faced with execution by firing squad, wives are lost, a gardener toils, mountains rise up, Shakespeare is called upon, and Zembla endures. (35, 142, 55, 153, 55, 253, 69, 291, 36, 119, 68, 92, 67, 74) Aside from these authorial similarities, Kinbote claims that he and John are close friends who even share the same birthday of July 5. (161) The idea that Kinbote and John could be one person offers a single-author solution to the sprawling, head-scratching novel: either Kinbote is scribbling alone in the dark, ascribing the Poem to an invented artist, or John is scribbling alone in the dark, ascribing the Commentary to an invented academic.

Though compelling arguments have emerged from these theories (along with two camps of readers referred to as “Shadeans” and “Kinboteans”), we don’t like the effect they have on the book. If large swaths of the novel

are invented, what is the point of wading through Nabokov's relentless details? Moreover, why do we care about John Shade's loss of Hazel Shade, or Charles Kinbote's loss of Zembla? If one of these two authors is fake, either Hazel or Zembla essentially becomes an analogy for the other, and all of those heart-wrenching little moments—Oleg holding a single tulip, Disa smiling through her pain, Hazel stepping on thin ice, Sybil Shade slamming closed a window—slip away into the outlines of the author's grief. (125, 211, 51, 90) To reconcile the overlaps of the Poem and Commentary, we've come to believe that there are two separate authors, but that Charles Kinbote has manipulated or overwritten disjointed drafts of John Shade's poetry. We believe this theory is correct for three key reasons.

First, in the Foreword, an unnamed scholar who is labeled a “professed Shadean” is quoted as saying John Shade's poem “consists of disjointed drafts, none of which yields a definite text.” (14) Although Charles Kinbote contradicts this statement, we think the unnamed scholar should be trusted over our unreliable narrator.

Second, Charles Kinbote describes in great detail how he once watched John Shade “burning a whole stack” of poetry drafts in the “pale fire” of a backyard

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incinerator, possibly hinting that our commentator could have smuggled these drafts out of the fire. (15)

Finally, although Charles Kinbote calls himself “a miserable rhymester,” he appears to have manipulated variants of the Poem. (289) He writes, “I now think that the two lines given in that note [to line 12] are distorted and tainted by wistful thinking. It is the *only* time in the course of the writing of these difficult comments, that I have tarried, in my distress and disappointment, on the brink of falsification.” (227-228) Here, we think Kinbote’s defensive “*only* time” should raise some eyebrows. If he “distorted and tainted” existing lines of poetry, we believe Kinbote *is* capable of molding John Shade’s work into a story that suits himself.

If Charles Kinbote wrote the Commentary and *overwrote* disjointed drafts of the Poem, this means two authors still exist within the novel. As noted, this theory explains the echoes between the Poem and Commentary, and it also means the Poem could provide clues into our commentator’s manipulation—nothing is completely safe from Kinbote’s fingerprints, which will be important as we attempt to trace the true events of the novel.

## The Riddle of Note to Line 1000

John Shade's death is challenged and transformed by viewing Charles Kinbote as the same person as the murderer, Jakob Gradus. This idea of Kinbote as the true murderer has been briefly entertained by a few scholars. For example, Martine Hennard lists possible solutions for the book, including the idea that Kinbote's "monomaniac passion for Shade's poem may have driven him to murder the poet in order to appropriate his manuscript."<sup>3</sup> With equal brevity, Edmund White considers, "perhaps the killer is Kinbote himself and the victim, Shade, who tells 'Kinbote's story' only according to the demented man's scholarly annotations."<sup>4</sup> Finally, the scholar Ilya Osovskiy theorizes that Kinbote has killed John out of "jealousy and hatred toward most of his colleagues" at Wordsmith, and that "by killing Shade, he can secure a kind of metaphorical revenge against all of his rivals at once."<sup>5</sup>

Although we admire these scholars' work, we think if Charles Kinbote killed John Shade, there should be ample evidence of his guilt—the nuts and bolts of the murder should be highly visible in the text, not just his emotional volatility. We should be able to find his fingerprints on the gun, so to speak. (In fact, he *does* put

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his fingers on a gun on page 96.) In the following section, we will illuminate John's death by tracing Gradus into the depths of Kinbote's mind. We will also consider Kinbote's fate, which we believe is confirmed in the very last line of the novel.

### **The Death of John Shade**

In the last few passages of the Commentary, which culminate in his note to Line 1000, Charles Kinbote describes the evening of John Shade's death. The poet sits on his front porch, Kinbote invites him over for dinner, and the pair walk toward Kinbote's neighboring home, which is rented from Judge Goldsworth. Our commentator relieves John of the poem, a butterfly lands on the poet's sleeve, and Kinbote spots Jakob Gradus standing on his front porch. Gradus fires his gun, and Kinbote believes the shooter is aiming for *him*—persecuted King Charles. However, John is shot in the chest, the gardener hits the gunman over the head with a shovel, and when the police arrive, Gradus gives his name as Jack Grey. (293-295)

Charles Kinbote tells us Jack Grey is a whole character on his own, a man who escaped from an

“asylum,” hitched a ride with a truck driver, and set out to kill the official who imprisoned him, Judge Goldsworth. (299, 284) Based on these details, some readers conclude that Grey is a real person, and that Kinbote invented Jakob Gradus and King Charles as a fictional overlays.<sup>6</sup> In this interpretation, which we will call the Standard Solution, Kinbote’s notes on Gradus are largely disregarded, Grey is assumed to be genuine, and readers conclude that Grey shot John believing the old poet to be Judge Goldsworth. Additionally, Kinbote is revealed to be Vladimir Botkin, a Russian professor in the Index whose last name is an anagram of “Kinbote.”

Although the Standard Solution for *Pale Fire* is widely accepted in both scholarly works and featured on Wikipedia, we find it largely unsatisfying. It is one thing for Nabokov to send us on a journey with the mentally ill narrator, Charles Kinbote. It’s another thing for him to ask us to believe a *second* mentally ill man, Jack Grey, shows up at the right time, in the right place, to perform the murder that shapes the entire novel. By instead applying the concept of serial selves to this passage, new possibilities emerge, such as the idea that Kinbote killed John Shade during an episode as Jakob Gradus. We believe this theory is true for multiple reasons.

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First, Jakob Gradus's presence in Charles Kinbote's mind is loudly hinted at throughout the novel. For example, Gradus is an assassin, and Kinbote confirms self-destruction may be his only hope to cheat "the relentlessly advancing assassins who were in me, in my eardrums, in my pulse, in my skull." (97) He also observes, "We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought, as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia." (78) And finally: "Although Gradus availed himself of all varieties of locomotion ... somehow the eye of the mind sees him, and the muscles of the mind feel him." (135-136)

Second, Charles Kinbote's mental state deteriorates as the book progresses, possibly hinting that he is descending into the identity of Jakob Gradus. A woman at the grocery store calls him "insane," he considers whether he is experiencing hallucinations, and he admits to suffering from relentless night terrors throughout the spring of 1959. (25, 97-98, 96)

Third, Charles Kinbote copes with his night terrors by arming himself with Judge Goldsworth's shotgun and watching the windows of the Shades' house, hoping for "a gleam of comfort." (96) Notably in this passage, Kinbote has a gun! There is a literary principle known as Chekhov's Gun, which we believe applies to this

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scene. Anton Chekhov, a Russian writer whom Nabokov loved “dearly,” writes, “If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don’t put it there.”<sup>7</sup> (SO, 286) Based on this principle, the shotgun in Kinbote’s hands should be fired before the conclusion of the novel.

Fourth, images from John Shade’s death can be traced into the pools of Charles Kinbote’s memories, possibly hinting that our commentator has reverse-engineered his note to Line 1000. For example, when a butterfly lands on John’s sleeve, Kinbote observes, “Once or twice before we had already noticed the same individual [butterfly], at that same time, on that same spot, where the low sun finding an aperture in the foliage splashed the brown sand with a last radiance while the evening’s shade covered the rest of the path.” (290) Similarly, Jack Grey’s face and name can be traced into Judge Goldsworth’s sinister album, which displays the names and images of people the judge put behind bars. Early in the novel, Kinbote rifles through this album and admits that one man resembles “Jacques d’Argus,” also known as “Jakob Gradus,” “Jack Degree,” or “Jacques de Grey.” (83-84, 77) This innocuous detail means Kinbote may have a name,

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image, and likeness at his disposal when conveying the poet's death.

Fifth, as previously noted, the gunman endures "a tremendous blow on the pate" thanks to the heroic gardener, and weirdly, Charles Kinbote complains of headaches throughout the Commentary. (294, 107, 157, 194) If Kinbote killed John Shade, this blow would provide one reason for his relentless head pain.

Sixth, no one in New Wye corroborates Charles Kinbote's version of events, possibly hinting that he has lied about John Shade's death in an effort to evade guilt. About an article written by Professor Hurley, Kinbote declares, "The circumstances of this death are completely distorted by the professor, ... who—perhaps for political reasons—had falsified the culprit's motives and intentions without awaiting his trial—which unfortunately was not to take place in this world." (101) In an obituary written by professional reporters and John's friends, Kinbote again refutes the description of the poet's death: "[M]y intention is not to complain of the vulgar and cruel nonsense that professional reporters and John's 'friends' in the obituaries they concocted allowed themselves to spout when misdescribing the circumstances of Shade's death." (297) Even the gardener, whom he seems to have an

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affectionate relationship with, is out of step with Kinbote's version of events: "My good gardener, when enthusiastically relating to everybody what he had seen, certainly erred in several respects." (298) Lastly, Kinbote goes so far as to deny evidence that has not yet been given: "The desk girl at the Library will not recall (will have been told not to recall) anybody asking for Dr. Kinbote on the day of the murder. And I'm sure Mr. Emerald will ... deny with the vigor of roused virility that he ever gave anybody a lift to my house that evening." (297-298)

Finally, *four* men are thought to participate in the poet's death scene: Charles Kinbote, John Shade, Jakob Gradus, and the gardener. (292-295) If Gradus is a figment inside Kinbote's skull, this passage should have only three men: Kinbote (with Gradus in control), John, and the gardener. In fact, Kinbote tells the gardener, "You and I were the last people who saw John Shade alive," possibly confirming there *were* only three people at the poet's death: him, the gardener, John—and no Gradus. (292) Additionally, if Gradus were in control during John's death, Kinbote would likely feel bad and confused upon realizing he accidentally murdered his beloved neighbor. Indeed, Kinbote describes the week following the poet's death not just as

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“a time of sadness” but also one of “mental confusion.”  
(240)

### **The Death of Charles Kinbote**

Following the death of John Shade, Jakob Gradus is placed in prison, and Charles Kinbote somehow obtains “an interview, perhaps even two interviews” with the assassin. (299) Our commentator confirms Gradus posed as Jack Grey following the poet’s death, and a few days later, Gradus dies “by slitting his throat with a safety razor blade salvaged from an unwatched garbage container.” (299) Meanwhile, Kinbote moves to a cabin in the fictional town and state of “Cedarn, Utana,” where he proceeds to write the Foreword and Commentary. (29) If Kinbote killed John during an episode as Gradus, this peaceful retreat seems unlikely. How should one reconcile Gradus’s and Kinbote’s respective fates?

By applying the concept of serial selves to Jakob Gradus’s death, I think his demise could be interpreted as Charles Kinbote reclaiming consciousness or even planning his own death. In a note on suicide, Kinbote underscores a violent shaving theme when he observes,

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“[M]inor poets have even tried such fancy releases as vein tapping in the quadruped tub of a drafty boardinghouse bathroom.” (220) Additionally, razor blades are prominent throughout the novel. For example, when Gradus arrives in New Wye, he carries “a safety razor” in his suitcase, and when Kinbote describes his rental home, he finds “the slit for discarded safety blades was too full for use.” (276, 84) Kinbote also confirms he has “not shaved now for a year.” (76) If Gradus and Kinbote reside in the same body, these details could indicate that our commentator still possesses an unused safety razor blade. If true, this blade could function as a second instance of Chekhov’s Gun in *Pale Fire* and could foreshadow the means of Kinbote’s death.

If Jakob Gradus’s imprisonment and death can be explained as Charles Kinbote enduring suicidal ideation, what really happens to our commentator? Because Kinbote references and speaks directly to doctors in the Commentary, I believe he resides in an institution of confinement. For example, when describing Gradus, Kinbote writes, “We can now go further and describe, to a doctor or to anyone else willing to listen to us, the condition of this primate’s soul.” (278) He continues, “[W]e may concede, doctor,

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that our half-man was also half mad.” (279) In case readers missed this odd gesture, Kinbote again calls on the doctor later in the same note: “My own opinion, which I would like the doctor to confirm, is that the French sandwich was engaged in an intestinal internecine war with the ‘French’ fries.” (280) Together, I believe these excerpts confirm there are doctors attending to Kinbote as he writes the Commentary, indicating that he is being held under supervision because he has been judged to be suffering from severe mental illness.

One argument against the theory that Charles Kinbote is being held in an institution of confinement is that he provides a detailed description of his Cedarn cabin. He writes, “This describes rather well the ‘chance inn,’ a log cabin, with a tiled bathroom, where I am trying to coordinate these notes.” (235) However, Kinbote receives photos of the rental after he books it, writing, “[the cabin] looked in the snapshots they sent me like a cross between a mujik’s izba and Refuge Z, but it had a tiled bathroom and cost dearer than my Appalachian castle.” (182-183) In the same way Kinbote may have reverse-engineered Jack Grey from images in an album, I think our commentator could

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have used the cabin photos to create the setting in which he wrote the Commentary.

If Charles Kinbote resides in an institution of confinement, what happens next? By applying the concept of serial selves to the final line of the book, I believe Kinbote's fate is revealed. In this line, our commentator writes, "But whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere, will quietly set out—somebody has already set out, somebody still rather far away is buying a ticket, is boarding a bus, a ship, a plane, has landed, is walking toward a million photographers, and presently he will ring at my door—a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus." (301)

The words "respectable" and "competent" at first give this final sentence the ring of triumph and resolution. Upon originally reading this, I pictured Jakob Gradus ascending as someone who might redeem rather than kill. However, after examining Gradus more closely, one earlier passage stuck out: "The huddled fates engage in a great conspiracy against Gradus. One notes with pardonable glee that his likes are never granted the ultimate thrill of dispatching their victim themselves." (153) This excerpt highlights that Gradus's main incompetence is his inability to kill his victims. A

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later passage taken from John Shade's death echoes this sentiment. Charles Kinbote writes: "It is evil piffle to assert that he aimed not at me (whom he had just seen in the library—let us be consistent, gentlemen, ours is a rational world after all), but at the gray-locked gentleman behind me. Oh, he was aiming at me all right but missing me every time, the incorrigible bungler." (294)

If an incompetent Jakob Gradus is someone who fails to kill his victims, specifically King Charles, then a competent Gradus would be someone who successfully disposes of his targets. If Gradus and King Charles are figments who reside within the same body as Charles Kinbote, then I think Gradus successfully killing the king would translate as a death by suicide. Notably, in the final line of the novel, Kinbote is not *contemplating* the possibility of Gradus returning to him, he is certain of it. The sentence begins: "But whatever happens," and concludes "[H]e will ring at my door—a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus." (301)

In a 1966 interview, Nabokov stated that Charles Kinbote "certainly" dies by suicide "after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem." (SO, 74) Some scholars admonish this statement as "authorial trespassing," while others point to Kinbote's

preoccupation with death to defend the late author's claim.<sup>8</sup> I don't think Nabokov was trespassing or asking us to support his statement with a slew of internal references. Rather, I think he was confirming that if Jakob Gradus and King Charles are correctly read as figments and not as men, Kinbote's death by suicide is firmly in the text, in fact in the very last line of the novel.

## The Zemblan Revolution and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956

Zembla is a fictional country ruled by King Charles. Although some readers believe Zembla has "little basis in the real world,"<sup>9</sup> Nabokov objected to the idea that Zembla is "non-existent."<sup>10</sup> By applying our theory of serial selves to Zembla, we believe King Charles's country is revealed to be Hungary, and the Zemblan Revolution to be the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

Other readers have attempted to trace the "real" location of Zembla. For example, noting references to the Soviet Union, some scholars have focused on Novaya Zemlya, also referred to as Nova Zembla, the closely named Russian island chain in the Arctic Ocean,

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as the true location of Zembla.<sup>11</sup> (77, 131, 243-244) This theory is supported by the fact that in the Index, Charles Kinbote provides the entry “*Embla*, a small old town with a wooden church surrounded by sphagnum bogs at the saddest, loneliest, northmost point of the misty peninsula.” (306) Correspondingly, Nova Zembla is home to one of Russia’s northernmost orthodox churches, the wooden church St. Nicholas, which is located on the northern side of the peninsula, Belushya.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, by observing the language, landscape, and countries surrounding King Charles, other scholars have speculated that Zembla could hover somewhere Nordic. The scholar Brian Boyd writes, “Judging by geographical and linguistic indications, Kinbote’s Zembla is sometimes very close to Novaya Zemlya but shifts at times toward Scandinavia, perhaps toward Finland, where until November 1917 the Russian language had something like the presence it has in the Zembla of Kinbote’s youth, or perhaps toward Norway or Sweden, whose languages combine with Slavic traces to produce Zemblan.”<sup>13</sup>

Some scholars instead focus on the events of the Zemblan Revolution. For example, the scholar Desmond Turner links the novel’s events to the 1959

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invasion of Tibet by communist China.<sup>14</sup> In this theory, the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet wearing layman's robes convincingly resembles King Charles's disguised escape from Onhava. Meanwhile, Priscilla Meyer instead reaches for the English Revolution, arguing that "The English King Charles II is Nabokov's looking glass, reflecting Nabokov's experience by the identification of the Russian Revolution with the English one."<sup>15</sup>

Though all of the theories so far listed find specific, supporting details within *Pale Fire*, I think they are limited in the amount of resolution they provide the novel. After wading through Charles Kinbote's breathless accounts of the Zemblan Revolution, I want to know: Where did the revolution take place? Is King Charles actually royal, or is he being hunted for a different reason? No such political revolution is traceable in Nova Zembla or Scandinavia, and if we go so far as to locate Zembla in Asia or even England, large pieces of the *Pale Fire* puzzle become superfluous.

Due to my frustration with existing interpretations, I reread *Pale Fire* with my eyes on the Zemblan passages, hoping Charles Kinbote would blink. The first detail I registered as suspicious occurs when Kinbote introduces King Charles into the Commentary. He

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writes, “At forty, not long before the collapse of his throne.” (76) King Charles is forty in 1955, and his reign extends into 1958. (306) Could “not long” refer to a three-year stretch? Maybe, but this line made me wonder if the Zemblan Revolution could have occurred before 1958, and perhaps closer to 1955 instead.

A second suspicious detail occurs when King Charles is imprisoned in his castle in Onhava following the Zemblan Revolution. He gazes out his window and observes “the English ambassador” playing tennis. (119) Later, in New Wye, a visiting professor from Oxford claims to recognize Charles Kinbote as King Charles from a sports festival in Onhava, Zembla in 1956. (265) Due to the overlapping details of Onhava, a man from England, and sports, I think the Oxford professor could be the same man King Charles watches from his window in Onhava. If true, the May 1, 1958 start date of the Zemblan Revolution given by Kinbote conflicts with the 1956 date given by the Oxford professor. (205, 265) Though not conclusive, this moment also made me wonder if the Zemblan Revolution could have occurred before 1958, and possibly in 1956 instead.

With a new potential year in mind for the Zemblan Revolution, I did a basic internet search for revolutions involving the Soviet Union in 1956, just in case

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anything seemed likely. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 popped up right away, so I tentatively followed the thread. Over the next several months, numerous parallels emerged, and I also noticed Nabokov himself had a few connections to Hungary. He once gave an impromptu lecture to an audience memorably including the Hungarian National Soccer Team and James Joyce,<sup>16</sup> and he wrote to his friend Edmund Wilson in 1949 discussing the torture and show trial of Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty, primate of the Catholic Church in Hungary. (*DBDV*, 249)

Vladimir Nabokov's cousin and friend Nicolas Nabokov was also connected to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. (*LV*, 187, 190) When the revolution broke out, Nicolas was the Secretary General for the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), an anti-communist propaganda group backed by the CIA in the United States. In this role, Nicolas signed an open letter to TIME magazine regarding the revolution. The letter closes: “The Hungarian students, workers and writers have given the world a lesson in simple courage that shames all inaction. We hailed their first triumph; we must act to halt the shedding of their blood.”<sup>17</sup> The Hungarian scholar Orsolya Németh writes that “the repression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 by the

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Soviet troops was an event that mobilised the CCF's forces to an extent never to be repeated in its history. It made appeals to world opinion, gave financial aid to intellectuals who fled Hungary and to those who stayed, drew up white papers, founded the symphonic orchestra Philharmonia Hungarica with refugee musicians, [and] organised actions of solidarity and sympathy on the national committee level.”<sup>18</sup> Nicolas was particularly involved in organizing the Philharmonia Hungarica in Austria, an orchestra made up of musicians who fled Hungary following the revolution.<sup>19</sup> His work sustaining this orchestra stretched from 1957 through 1959. “Putting nearly all other projects aside, he invested himself in this new mission,” Nicolas’s biographer Vincent Giroud writes.<sup>20</sup>

Based on Nabokov’s awareness of rumblings in Hungary leading up to the revolution in 1956, his cousin’s overt involvement right before he began drafting *Pale Fire* in earnest, and his consistent disdain for the Soviet Union, not to mention the United States’ position as a receiver of Hungarian refugees—over 40,000 following the revolution<sup>21</sup>—we think it’s possible the author could have been inspired to incorporate the real Hungarian Revolution of 1956 into *Pale Fire* as the Zemblan Revolution.

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If the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 is the Zemblan Revolution, this would provide a map for what really happened in the odd, dream-like scenes involving King Charles and Jakob Gradus, and would also render Charles Kinbote as a real survivor of a traumatic historical event. Subsequently, Kinbote's status as a survivor would transform his Commentary into a painstaking account of his difficult experiences, not "a delusional story in which an exiled academic imagines himself to be the deposed king of a fictitious country."<sup>22</sup> This interpretation could also be read as a subtle political statement by Nabokov, who condemned the "brutal and imbecile" administration of the Soviet Union throughout his life. (SO, 58)

In what follows, we will highlight key events of both revolutions in order to assert that the Zemblan Revolution is the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. We will also argue that recognizing Zembla as Hungary unlocks one of the central puzzles in *Pale Fire*: the mystery of the crown jewels.

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### **Key Events of the Hungarian Revolution**

Key events of the Zemblan Revolution mirror those of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. For those (like me) who are unfamiliar with the history of Hungary in the 20th century, the main information to note for this section is that the Soviet Union controlled and violently enforced communism in Hungary between 1945 and 1989.<sup>23</sup> In what follows, I will lean heavily on work by the Hungarian news photographer Andor Heller, who provided a first-person account of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in his 1957 book, *No More Comrades*.

First, the capital cities of Onhava, Zembla, and Budapest, Hungary, resemble each other in their structures and underground tunnels. Structures mentioned in Onhava include a castle, university, cathedral, theater, and glass factory. (121, 76, 174, 134, 120) Similar structures can be found clustered quite closely together in downtown Budapest, including Buda Castle, the University of Budapest, St. Stephen's Basilica, the Budapest Operetta Theatre, and The Glass House, a historical glass factory and shelter for Jews during World War II.<sup>24</sup> A tunnel beneath the castle is also described in Onhava, and King Charles uses this

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passageway during his escape. (132-135) Correspondingly, an ancient network of tunnels, caves, and cellar systems spans for miles beneath Budapest, and in particular below Buda Castle.<sup>25</sup>

Second, inflammatory radio speeches occur in both the Zemblan and Hungarian Revolutions. During the Zemblan Revolution, a man named Julius Steinmann is arrested after giving underground radio speeches that deride the government. (153) As was theorized earlier in this chapter, I think Steinmann could be an alias given by King Charles, who taught university students under an “assumed name” beginning in 1955. (76) If I’m correct that King Charles is Steinmann, this radio and university connection heightens the overlap between the two revolutions. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was sparked when university students in Budapest staged a demonstration, which included attempted radio speeches against the communist government.<sup>26</sup> The students had a list of demands, some of which included the immediate evacuation of Soviet troops, a new government, and freedom of expression, press, and radio.<sup>27</sup> During the protest, news spread of a shooting at a radio building in Budapest. Heller writes:

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When we get to the Communist-controlled Radio building in Alexander Brody Street, we find out what has happened. A youth delegation tried to get in the door, in order to have their '14 demands' broadcast over the radio. Without warning, the security police guarding the building opened up on them with tear-gas bombs.

Suddenly shooting breaks out from all sides. The security police —the A.V.H.—are firing into the crowds. In minutes, the streets are strewn with the dying and wounded.<sup>28</sup>

Third, executions occur in both the Zemblan and Hungarian Revolutions. Following his radio speeches during the Zemblan Revolution, Julius Steinmann is tried by a court and sentenced to death-by-firing-squad. (153) Similarly, following the student protest and attempted radio speeches in Hungary, those who participated were subject to death sentences by special courts. Heller writes: "A decree has set up special courts that can pass death sentences against persons found guilty of 'rebellion, or possession of arms.'"<sup>29</sup>

Fourth, misdirection involving caps occurs in both the Zemblan and Hungarian Revolutions. As King Charles makes his escape, his supporters don red caps in order to confuse the police. Charles Kinbote writes,

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“They rigged themselves out to look like him in red sweaters and red caps, and popped up here and there, completely bewildering the revolutionary police.” (99) This red cap ploy may be an inversion of a real event that occurred during the Hungarian Revolution, when soldiers tore the red Soviet stars off of their caps and joined the protesters instead. Heller observes:

The radio continues to broadcast government threats of the death penalty on those who continue fighting or who even keep arms. But the authority of the government is vanishing. Today I have seen many Hungarian soldiers tear the Communist badges off their caps and join the demonstrations that are becoming a revolution.<sup>30</sup>

Fifth, the invasion by a police state occurs in both the Zemblan and Hungarian Revolutions. Charles Kinbote notes, “[T]he Modems (Moderate Democrats), might have still prevented the state from turning into a commonplace modern tyranny, had they been able to cope with the tainted gold and robot troops that a powerful police state ... was pouring into the Zemblan Revolution. Despite the hopelessness of the situation, the King refused to abdicate.” (119) The hopelessness King Charles witnesses in the face of the

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troops from “a powerful police state” may find a parallel in the army of the Soviet Union, which violently repressed the revolution in Hungary in early November of 1956.<sup>31</sup> Heller confirms, “[A] direct military struggle of the ten million Hungarians against the Soviet Russian giant could not last for long.”<sup>32</sup>

Sixth, the escape routes between the Zemblan Revolution and Hungarian Revolution of 1956 overlap geographically. Within *Pale Fire*, two escape routes are mentioned. First, following the revolution, King Charles escapes Zembla by car and then on foot “westward into the mountains.” (138-139) However, King Charles is also depicted on a train, possibly in some southern region: “Who can forget the good-natured faces, glossy with sweat, of copper-chested railway workers leaning upon their spades and following with their eyes the windows of the great express cautiously gliding by?” (147) In the Index, Kinbote confirms this passage references the Orient Express, a European train line that from 1945 to 1962 connected Budapest through various cities to Paris in the West, as well as Athens in the South.<sup>33</sup> (308) Both of these escape routes—the westward sweep over the mountains, as well as the potential journey southward—make sense within the context of Hungary in 1956. Following the

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revolution, roughly 180,000 Hungarians fled west over the border and into Austria, while around 20,000 fled south into Yugoslavia instead.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, one of the last radio speeches by a Hungarian protester documented as Soviet troops violently took back control of the country ends with the following lines:

Our ship is sinking. Light is failing, the shadows grow darker every hour over the soil of Hungary. Listen to the cry, civilized peoples of the world, and act; extend to us your fraternal hand.

S-O-S! S-O-S!—May God be with you.<sup>35</sup>

Though likely a serendipitous connection, I think it's interesting that "the shadows grow darker every hour over the soil of Hungary" in this speech, and that in *Pale Fire*, the Zemblan extremist group is simply referred to as "the Shadows." (150)

In conclusion, I believe the overlapping events of the Zemblan Revolution and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 are too marked to be coincidental. However, after tracing these parallels, I still felt a bit doubtful. Nabokov's connections to Hungary are interesting but not conclusive, and *Pale Fire* is teaming with references—readers cobble together convincing

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but unprovable theories all the time! For example, J and I were intrigued to notice the line, “killing a Balkan king;” in the Poem, because Hungary was at times in the 20th century considered by Western Europeans to be a Balkan state.<sup>36</sup> (63) But guess what? So were at least 11 other countries!<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the Hungarian language is mentioned on page 235, but it’s contained in a list of 13 other languages. (235) Was there anything in the novel that pointed *directly* to Hungary, that could corroborate my connection between these two revolutions?

Upon reexamining *Pale Fire*, I paused over the passage shortly before John Shade’s death scene. Charles Kinbote invites the poet over to his house, suggesting, “I have at my place half a gallon of Tokay. I’m ready to share my favorite wine with my favorite poet.” (288) Here, I got caught on the word “Tokay.” What was it? Some type of Appalachian alcohol? Clearly, it was Kinbote’s “favorite,” so it had to be somewhat important. (288) After some research, I discovered (with a silent celebration that startled J in the local library) that the wine Tokay, also known as Tokaji, is a white wine from the region of Tokaj, Hungary.<sup>38</sup> In combination with every other parallel discussed in this section, the detail of Kinbote’s “favorite wine” felt like

the direct link to Hungary I was searching for, and encouraged me to continue my exploration with more confidence. (288)

### **The Crown Jewels**

The mystery of the Zemblan crown jewels is perhaps the most vexing puzzle within *Pale Fire*. Charles Kinbote mentions the jewels frequently throughout the Commentary, and in the Index he provides a wild-goose-chase (and no answers) by sending readers from “Crown Jewels” to “Hiding Place,” “Potaynik,” “Taynik,” and then back to “Crown Jewels.” (306, 307, 312, 314) These mentions prompt the questions: do the crown jewels exist, and if so, where are they?

Since *Pale Fire*’s publication, readers have attempted to crack this crown jewel puzzle. For example, the scholar Priscilla Meyer theorizes the jewels “are to be found, as we have seen, in Shade’s poem and, in widening spirals, in Nabokov’s art.”<sup>39</sup> In a similar abstraction, the scholar Andrea Pitzer theorizes the jewels are the lost members of a liberal Russian society: “The real crown jewels of Zembla—of Russia—lay forgotten in the ruins of barracks in not just the distant,

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mysterious north, but in countless places across the Soviet Union: the dead exiles, the executed prisoners, a beautiful culture, annihilated.”<sup>40</sup> As a different approach, the scholar James Ramey argues that a chess problem within the book ultimately leads one to locate the crown jewels in the title page, where Nabokov added “an 18-point black crown with five spires and three diamond-shaped jewels. This is the crown of the black queen in the Hastings typeset, a font commonly used for printing chess problems in newspapers.”<sup>41</sup>

Though these crown jewel theories are compelling, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the jewels should be *real*. After tying the Zemblan Revolution to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, I wondered if Hungary could provide any answers for this puzzle. Eventually, I concluded that the story of the Hungarian crown jewels convincingly unlocks the mystery of the Zemblan crown jewels. In what follows, I will highlight parallels between the two stories and will sketch out our commentator’s potential hand in the matter.

The Hungarian crown jewels consist of a gold crown (the Holy Crown of Hungary), a scepter, an orb, a mantle, and a coronation robe.<sup>42</sup> These objects were last worn by the final King of Hungary, Charles I (also known as Charles IV or Karl I), who reigned from 1916

to 1918 and was exiled amidst World War I.<sup>43</sup> During World War II, the crown “was transferred from the palace’s armoury to a booth in the governor’s shelter 60 meters deep, where it was guarded 24 hours a day by 2 crown guards.”<sup>44</sup> In 1945, a “Hungarian honour guard”<sup>45</sup> smuggled the jewels out of Hungary and into the West “to protect it from the Germans and the Soviets.”<sup>46</sup> The jewels were hidden in “a large black satchel” and were “spirited” out of the country by the guard, who carried them into Austria.<sup>47</sup> The jewels were recovered by the U.S. 86th Infantry Division in Austria and subsequently stored at the Fort Knox military base in Kentucky. In 1978, the crown jewels were returned to Hungary.<sup>48</sup>

In this history, the “black satchel” stuck out to me because Jakob Gradus is seen repeatedly throughout the novel with a “battered black,” “shabby and shapeless briefcase” with a “ridiculous strap.”<sup>49</sup> (276, 293) Additionally, Charles Kinbote’s briefcase and “black valise,” are mentioned several times as well. (17, 21, 300) If Gradus and Kinbote reside in the same body, I think they could be referencing the same shapeless, black shoulder bag in these scenes. This black shoulder bag made me wonder: could Gradus have been the one to

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smuggle the crown jewels out of Hungary in 1945? I think this theory could be true for several reasons.

First, King Charles is in a “regiment” as of 1932, and a photo of the guardsman “Karl the Beloved” is dated by the king as having been taken around 1938. (104, 141-142) Based on the military references in these two passages, I think King Charles could have participated in the military into at least the late 1930s. Following his mother’s death in 1936, the king largely vanishes from the narrative until 1949. (104, 112) In the meantime, we are told Jakob Gradus arrives in Zembla in the 1940s. (77) If King Charles and Gradus reside in the same body, and if Zembla is Hungary, I think this could mean Gradus took over consciousness around 1940 and continued the king’s military service, possibly into 1945.

Second, the idea that Jakob Gradus served in the military may be hinted at during a game of cards, when he is selected as the man for a specific job, possibly because his “[F]oreign origin secretly prompted a nomination that would not cause any son of Zembla to incur the dishonor of actual regicide.” (150-151) Charles Kinbote tells us Gradus has been selected to kill King Charles, but I think it’s possible Gradus may have been selected for a different task, namely, spiriting away

the crown jewels. That Gradus was a “messenger boy” as a child, and that he had “experience on costume jewelry” as an adult, could corroborate this theory. (151, 275)

Third, there is a scene in *Pale Fire* where “two Soviet professionals” take the Zemblan castle apart, searching for the crown jewels. (129) King Charles worries as they come “closer and closer,” and soon after he escapes Zembla on foot over a range of mountains. (131, 129, 137-145) Similarly, due to the approach of German and Soviet soldiers in 1945, the Hungarian guards chose to smuggle the crown jewels out of Hungary and into Austria.<sup>50</sup> Historical accounts simply note that the Hungarians “spirited”<sup>51</sup> the jewels over the border, but due to the close proximity of Austria, I think it’s possible the guardsmen traveled at least partially on foot. If true, King Charles’s journey “westward into the mountains” could reference this route.

Fourth, if our commentator escapes “westward into the mountains” with the crown jewels, I think his journey south via the Orient Express could have occurred later, following the Zemblan Revolution instead. (139) One passage that may corroborate this

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later, southward movement occurs on page 235, when Charles Kinbote rattles off a list of 13 pairs of languages:

English and Zemblan, English and Russian, English and Lettish, English and Estonian, English and Lithuanian, English and Russian, English and Ukrainian, English and Polish, English and Czech, English and Russian, English and Hungarian, English and Rumanian, English and Albanian, English and Bulgarian, English and Serbo-Croatian, English and Russian, American and European. (235)

Some scholars have diagnosed this paragraph as simply a list of countries in the Soviet bloc,<sup>52</sup> but I think it could also function as a map of our commentator's route through Europe, especially if Kinbote, King Charles, and Jakob Gradus reside within one body. This list sensibly begins with "English and Zemblan," which could denote Kinbote's original homeland (maybe even Russia's Novaya Zemlya), and ends with "American and European," which could represent his final immigration from Europe to the United States. (235) The middle of the list includes the early entry "English and Lettish," which corresponds with Jakob Gradus's time in Riga as a child, and the oft-repeated "English

and Russian” could mark time spent in Russia or Russian-speaking émigré communities, such as Paris, France. (77, 213, 174) In the first half of the list, the pairings “English and Ukrainian,” “English and Polish,” and “English and Czech” create a westward sweep across central European countries, while in the latter half, “English and Hungarian,” “English and Rumanian,” “English and Albanian,” “English and Bulgarian,” and “English and Serbo-Croatian,” create a southward sweep. (235) If we embrace the idea that some of the four “English and Russian” entries could reference Russian-speaking émigré communities, not Russia, it becomes possible to theorize that our commentator spent time in Hungary as a Russian émigré, carried the crown jewels to safety as a man of “foreign origin,” spent time in France and England, returned to Hungary under an “assumed name” in time for the Revolution of 1956, and eventually fled south, possibly via the Orient Express. (235, 150, 76) That Gradus possesses “a French passport” as he boards “a Russian commercial plane” bound for Copenhagen, (and then travels briefly to Paris, Geneva, Nice, Paris, New York, and finally, New Wye) could indicate that he has already spent significant time abroad before returning to Zembla. (157, 307) Additionally, that such

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a southward journey mirrors Nabokov's own flight from Russia into Greece is worth noting, especially since Nabokov conceded, "Flaubert speaks in one of his letters, in relation to a certain scene in *Madame Bovary*, about the difficulty of painting *couleur sur couleur*. This in a way is what I tried to do in retwisting my own experience when inventing Kinbote." (SM, 253; SO, 77)

Finally, if Jakob Gradus, Charles Kinbote, and King Charles reside within the same body, Gradus's potential history with smuggling crown jewels could provide one reason for Kinbote's pride of country, paranoia, preoccupation with royalty, and suspiciously knowledgeable asides about the secret location of the crown jewels. There are several more minor clues we've explored within this theory, but that we don't have the space to fully consider here, including Nabokov's nudge toward a place called Kobaltana, Gradus's "V-for-Victory sign," Oswin Bretwit's association with treasure, and Kinbote's possible mention of the Warsaw Pact emblem. (SO, 92; 180, 178, 176) Ultimately, though, we think the details already highlighted in this section are enough to theorize that Gradus could have been the guard who "spirited" the Hungarian Crown Jewels into safety in 1945.<sup>53</sup>

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In conclusion, by recognizing the intertwined history of Charles Kinbote, King Charles and Jakob Gradus, a window into our commentator's life is blown open. Of the *Pale Fire* theories we've read, Kinbote has been described as "pathetic,"<sup>54</sup> "a freak,"<sup>55</sup> and "always vindictive,"<sup>56</sup> but by witnessing the details of his difficult past, a certain amount of empathy might be born for our commentator, an empathy that could be important in the next chapter, as we explore his quest for redemption.

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## Chapter 3: The Redemption of Charles Kinbote

No rule in art can't be broken, however, one of the rules that most artists seem to abide by is the Principle of Unity. The Principle of Unity, often ascribed to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, holds that each element of a work must contribute to the work as a whole. If an element such as a phrase, scene, or character doesn't play a part in adding to the meaning of the work, then it should simply be removed. Scholar William Woodin Rowe praises Nabokov for his adherence to this principle, writing, "The more one reads Nabokov, the more each individual word seems a purposeful participant in the total, uniquely calculated world of his works."<sup>1</sup>

The first time I read *Pale Fire*, however, I thought the novel did a terrible job of following the Principle of Unity. Like many readers, I found the depiction of John

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Shade compelling. Like Charles Kinbote, I “experienced a grand sense of wonder whenever I looked at [John]” and found his poem moving and insightful. (27) John reminded me of some of my college professors whom I had revered. However, much in Kinbote’s commentary I hardly paid much attention to, and I probably skipped altogether many of his fanciful digressions about Zembla. I found Kinbote himself egotistical and annoying, and all I cared about were the glimpses he provided of John’s life. If I found parts of the Commentary amusing, it was because I was laughing at—not with—Kinbote. My favorite of Nabokov’s jokes at Kinbote’s expense was when, John, describing his unathletic childhood, writes, “I never bounced a ball or swung a bat” and Kinbote comments, “Frankly I too never excelled in soccer or cricket,” mistaking John’s references to the American sports of basketball and baseball with mention of European pastimes. (37, 117)

And why should I take Charles Kinbote seriously? According to the Standard Solution, which I initially was persuaded by, Kinbote—aka Vladimir Botkin—has simply invented the stories of Zembla and both. King Charles and Jakob Gradus to make himself seem important. I believed the stories were, in the words of scholar Page Stegner, “sheer fantasy.”<sup>2</sup> They have

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nothing to do with John Shade or his poem. Indeed, the Poem could be wholly detached from the Commentary, as Ginko Press did when it printed an edition of *Pale Fire* containing just John's verses, promising that "Now readers can see the text for themselves, fresh from Shade's hands, before Kinbote commandeered it so shamelessly."<sup>3</sup>

John Shade's death especially violates the Principle of Unity if one believes it was committed by Jack Grey, someone we know almost nothing about, as he is wholly unrelated to the main plot. While John's death-by-mistaken-identity mirrors the death of Nabokov's father, who was killed by an assassin who was attempting to take the life of a different politician, it fails to leave the reader with any sense of pathos you might expect of a child writing about their deceased parent. It also de-politicizes his father's murder, stripping the elder Nabokov's death of any sense of heroism by turning it into some random mix-up.

If the reading we have laid out in the previous chapter is correct, however, then Charles Kinbote's Commentary and backstory suddenly take on much more relevance to John Shade's life and his death. The serial selves theory with Kinbote, King Charles, and Jakob Gradus unites the different parts of the narrative

and forces the Poem and John's death at the hands of this character into interrelation with the Zembla material. One is pressed to see how Kinbote's desire to immortalize Zembla in poetry slips into madness as Gradus, and it gives a better understanding of the roots of that madness. This act of reclaiming the unity of the book is important to one's enjoyment because it saves a large swath of the novel from being easily skipped over!

However, we believe this reading does more than just put *Pale Fire* into alignment with the Principle of Unity or otherwise enhance the aesthetic qualities of the novel. We believe it also brings into greater focus the book's "moral core," which will be the subject of this chapter.

## Kinbote's Quest

In his poem, John Shade tries to make sense of his daughter Hazel Shade's death and comes to the realization that she may somehow live on. In a key passage, which we'll refer to as John's Thesis, he writes:

I feel I understand

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Existence, or at least a minute part  
Of my existence, only through my art,  
In terms of combinational delight;  
And if my private universe scans right,  
So does the verse of galaxies divine  
Which I suspect is in iambic line.  
I'm reasonably sure that we survive  
And that my darling somewhere is alive. (68-69)

On the surface, Charles Kinbote shares a similar goal, although with respect not just to a single person but to all of Zembla and its people he has lost. Because he is not a poet himself, Kinbote hopes John will encase Zembla in art for him based on their conversations together. Echoing John's Thesis, Kinbote enthusiastically states that "as soon as the glory of Zembla merges with the glory of your verse" and thus Zembla is "transmuted by [John] into poetry," then "the people [of Zembla] *will* come alive." (214-215)

Charles Kinbote does seem to believe he has achieved something of John's Thesis by the end of the book, when he wears the poem on his person, feeling "armored with rhymes" and "bullet-proof at long last." (300) Under the Standard Solution, Kinbote wants Zembla to appear in John Shade's poem simply because he is an egomaniac and wants to seem important by

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claiming to be a king, when in reality he's just a bitter, minor faculty member. However, by applying our theory of serial selves, this is only part of the story. The history of Kinbote's real exile from his home country due to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 adds context to this fanciful desire. He has lost a world, and it brings up complex and deep emotions about the loved ones like Oleg and Disa he has lost. Perhaps having Zembla ensconced in art might help validate what he has gone through and provide protection from future loss.

One important difference between John Shade's goal of redeeming the loss of Hazel Shade and Charles Kinbote's quest to preserve Zembla is that John is concerned with what may be termed "natural evil"—suffering that results from accidents such as diseases or natural disasters. In this category, we would include pain inflicted and suffered because of mental illnesses. Such suffering is tragic, but it is not the result of human cruelty. The losses John experiences—a heart attack, an accidental death or death by suicide of his daughter, and his own death by mistaken identity—do not provoke blame to individuals. (If Hazel or Gradus intend to kill, it is only because they are mentally ill). When in the poem John does purport to "speak of evil as none has/Spoken before," his list of supposed evils includes

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jazz, primitivist paintings, swimming pools, Freud, and Marx. (67) He “speaks of evil” almost as if he’s a university professor who can imagine no worse thing about someone than that they have bad taste in art.

Charles Kinbote’s quest, however, is related to *human evil*: acts of wrong committed by persons. The Zemblan Revolution that set into motion his exile was committed by revolutionaries and the Soviet regime. Yet he is preoccupied not just with the wrongs that have been inflicted upon him but also with the wrongs *he* has committed. This preoccupation borders on an obsession. According to the Standard Solution, Kinbote would have little reason to be racked with guilt because he has done nothing transgressive besides being an egomaniac and stealing John’s poem, hardly grave sins. If our theory in Chapter 2 is correct and he has actually killed someone, it makes a lot of sense that Kinbote would have such ruminations about transgression and how one should respond to it.

Viewing Charles Kinbote’s quest for atonement for his sins at the center of *Pale Fire* suddenly makes a number of seemingly minor comments take on much larger significance. That Kinbote has wrongdoing at the forefront of his mind comes up almost immediately (albeit humorously) during a faculty meeting when a

colleague asks him if it's true that he has two ping-pong tables in his basement. (21-22) Kinbote responds by asking "Was it a crime?" to own a ping-pong table. When the colleague responds "no ... but why two," Kinbote says "Is *that* a crime?" in rejoinder.

The most serious treatment of the theme of transgression appears in Charles Kinbote and John Shade's dialogue on "sin and faith," in which they debate the existence of sin. John says there are only two sins: "murder, and the deliberate infliction of pain." (225) Kinbote himself muses on the difference between "sin" and "crime" and reflects on whether "Poor Kinbote's ghost, poor Shade's shade, may have blundered, may have taken the wrong turn somewhere." (224, 226)

Alongside dwelling on his "blunders" and "wrong turns," Charles Kinbote concerns himself with whether there is something that can be done in order to address them. He is terrified by the possibility that there won't be a way to counteract mistakes he has made when he mentions the "unspeakably dreadful notion of Chance reaching into eternity" in which after one has erred "there is no appeal, no advice, no support, no protection, nothing." (225-226) Kinbote's quest for deliverance takes him to two churches in order to

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address “the frozen mud and horror” in his heart.” (258) These visits provide him some relief, as he feels “in my bones that there is a chance yet of my not being excluded from Heaven, and that salvation may be granted to me.” (258)

However, based on his theological beliefs, Charles Kinbote also insists that there be not just salvation but some form of accountability for his crimes, even if committed while he is mentally ill. He mentions that Zemblan theologians hold that “even the most demented mind still contains within its diseased mass a sane basic particle,” says the existence of God implies “a condign [this means “appropriate”] punishment for every sin, great and small,” and speaks of the Zemblan mythological place called *narstran*, a “hellish hall where the souls of murderers were tortured.” (237, 223, 213)

Ultimately, though, Charles Kinbote does seem to believe in grace and mercy. He sees a young minister in a chapel “making contact with God” whose “guilty disgust contorted his thin lips,” as “his clenched hands seemed to be gripping invisible prison bars.” (88) Kinbote concludes, “There is no bound to the measure of grace which man may be able to receive,” and the minister’s look suddenly changes to one of “rapture and reverence.” (88) A scene of someone desperately looking

for grace is more impactful when we believe Kinbote himself is pursuing grace in response to his own transgressions.

It is important to note that Charles Kinbote is concerned not just with salvation and punishment from religion but also with the interpersonal components of crime and atonement. Kinbote contemplates the possibility of forgiveness himself when he states, after a romantic interest named Bob has left him, that “I can forgive everything save treason.” (27) Later, after describing Sybil Shade’s supposed dislike and distrust of him, Kinbote writes “I pardon her—her and everybody.” (172) Meanwhile, he reports that Sybil “pardon[s]” her husband for his friendship with him. (24) Most crucially, after hearing Kinbote’s account of John’s killing, Sybil states: “There are things for which no recompense in this world or another is great enough.” (298) This could be taken to mean she is thanking him for a profound act of help, but if reading this in light of the theory that Kinbote has killed John, then it can be seen as a way of saying some actions cannot be atoned for. This remark by Sybil then seems to go in direct contradiction to John’s Thesis.

Charles Kinbote’s meditations on wrongdoing and forgiveness come to a head when he claims to have

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found a “variant” to a couplet in John Shade’s poem that reads, “Should the dead murderer try to embrace/His outraged victim whom he now must face?” (231) Kinbote draws special attention to this passage, stating “I hope the reader will feel something of the chill that ran down my long and supple spine when I discovered this variant.” (231) He further underlines this passage when, in the Index entry on the variant, Kinbote says it shows “a remarkable case of foreknowledge.” (315) If one believes Kinbote has killed someone, these lines take on a huge significance, and it makes sense that he would be provoked by them. Considering his suicidal ideation, it also makes sense that Kinbote is concerned about atoning actions a murderer can take *after* their death.

Overall, these passages show Charles Kinbote is not just some self-absorbed egoist but a person who is deeply concerned with transgression and reconciliation. When Kinbote’s mental illness, real exile, and perpetration of murder come to the fore, they test John’s Thesis that “If my own private universe scans right, ... I’m reasonably sure that ... my darling somewhere is alive” in a much more radical form, raising the question of whether art can be used to address not just natural evil but human evil as well. (69)

## What is Redemption?

No one likes the pedantic person who makes a fuss over definitions, however, a large portion of disagreement that people have when it comes to “redemption” can be attributed to the fact that people mean different things by the same word. The Oxford English Dictionary lists numerous different meanings for the verb “to redeem,” including “to deliver from sin or damnation,” “to make amends,” “to make good,” “to rescue,” “to restore to a former condition,” “to elevate,” and more. Some reserve it for something lofty, for example, in religion when people speak of “Christ the Redeemer” or God “redeeming” the Israelites from bondage. Yet it is also commonly used in more mundane settings, such as “redeeming” a coupon, or a sports team “redeeming” itself by winning a championship it had lost the previous year.

The variety of meanings of “redemption” makes it important to be clear about what exactly one has in mind when using the word. For example, if one has in mind the definition “to restore to a former condition,”

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many will dismiss efforts to redeem the dead with the reply that there are some evils one can suffer that cannot be returned to wholeness. As we saw, this may be the meaning in *Pale Fire* of Sybil Shade's comment that "there are things for which no recompense in this world or another is great enough." (298) However, if one's view of redemption is something less demanding, perhaps simply "to elevate," then one might judge that redemption *is* possible. Priscilla Meyer notes that in Old Icelandic, the word "*bot*"—as in "*Kinbote*"—means a "bettering."<sup>4</sup> In what follows, we will be considering such a less demanding definition of redemption, such as "to elevate" or "to better."

I think one's ability to believe betterment for a loss is possible is usually derived from some kind of core experience. Most people are familiar with an experience in their lives that continues to have aftereffects going forward. A vivid and painful example of this is trauma, like the flashbacks Charles Kinbote experiences of nearly being executed, though this dynamic exists in less extreme gradients as well. The existence of trauma and similar phenomena demonstrates that there is a link between the past and present, whereby the past can continually affect the present. However, it is also possible, although perhaps less readily acknowledged,

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that things that happen in the present can also affect the meaning of the past. For example, consider the concept of “healing your inner child.” What I take this to mean is that there is a past version of yourself that needs attention and care and that one’s present actions can pay respects to this past self. One way one can attend to one’s inner child is to fulfill a dream or continue a practice that one previously had. Many people have also had the experience of someone else helping to heal a past version of themselves. To give a personal example, my brother has helped me work on this by engaging in activities together that we used to do when we were younger. This experience gives me hope that one can help bring about a betterment of someone else’s past self as well.

If one believes that one can attend to one’s past self, and that people can attend to others’ past selves as well, then it isn’t much of a further step to believe that one can try to attend to the past selves of those who have passed away. Now, interacting with the dead might perhaps strike modern readers as the stuff of fantasy or science fiction. However, there are many respects in which people act in ways to suggest that the dead are not fully “gone.” Examples of ways in which living people do things that give evidence of a connection with the

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dead include fulfilling long-ago promises, creating memorials, refusing to slander the dead, and issuing posthumous pardons.

The idea that the dead remain a presence in the lives of the living can be felt on a societal level as well. The concept of “generational trauma” refers to iniquities that have reverberations not just within one individual’s experience but from one generation to the next. Can the causal arrow go in the other direction as well? Perhaps the most famous philosopher who believes it can is Walter Benjamin, who lived in Berlin and Paris during the same era as Nabokov and who tragically died in 1940 while escaping the Nazi invasion of France. Walter Benjamin wrote that during the rise of Hitler, “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.”<sup>5</sup> By this, he meant that the victims of an unjust regime are not only living people but past individuals as well, whose memory or legacy is erased. In the United States, this idea is perhaps most famously expressed by Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address. Speaking of those who died fighting for the Union, Abraham Lincoln stated:

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here

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have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Lincoln's speech conveys that living people have some measure of control over the meaning of a past death. If the U.S. does allow the Confederacy to prevail, it will mean that the dead have “died in vain.” In Benjamin’s terms, it means that those who died enslaved and who died trying to bring about the abolition of slavery will not be safe if the Confederacy and its supporters prevail.

Believing that the dead can be harmed by the living shows that the connection between past and present is not just one-way but two-way. Just as the past can continue to harm the present, the present can endanger and harm the past. If one believes this, then one should grant that living people have the power to bring about a betterment of the past, at a minimum by trying to safeguard the deceased from future harm.

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In one of the most famous passages by Benjamin, who has been compared to Nabokov with respect to his views on redemption,<sup>6</sup> he writes:

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, and power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply.<sup>7</sup>

Weak messianic power is perhaps the key idea of our theory of redemption. This “weak messianic power,” Benjamin explains just after, prevents the finality of suffering because “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”<sup>8</sup> And he labels it a “retroactive force” that can “call into question” events that seem fixed, such as the triumph of injustice.<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin’s concept of “weak messianic power” is compatible with a variety of religious views. Far from being a kind of savior complex, it acknowledges that one’s power over the past is weak, leaving open the idea that there will be higher forms of redemptive power, which humanity’s power may be imitative of or

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cooperative with but not equivalent to. All this concept rejects is the idea that redemption is *exclusively* the realm of the divine. It also rejects a fatalist view that human beings are creatures with no power to effect change in the world.

While Benjamin's view is rather open on the question of religion, it is decidedly incompatible with some of the prevalent political ideologies of his time. He lays out his worldview in a famous passage by referencing a painting by Swiss-German artist Paul Klee:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him

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grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>10</sup>

The image in this passage depicts forces constantly hurdling humanity into the future, whether driven by left-wing movements that promise to deliver some future where inequities will be mitigated or in a reactionary mode where the future will see the restoration of some former glory. What the Angel of History is trying to do is say “Stop”: we can’t begin any future project until we acknowledge and attend to the “pile of debris” that this forward propulsion has already left in its wake.

## Past Perpetrators and Weak Messianic Power

To me, Walter Benjamin’s idea of weak messianic power finds a perfect encapsulation in John’s Thesis. The Thesis doesn’t say that we can “make whole what has been smashed.” Instead, it expresses hope that, through detailed work, humans can achieve some kind of betterment for losses that have come before us. John

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Shade's "darling" is not alive in this world, but she is alive "somewhere." John's Thesis applies to the death of his daughter, who is a victim of a corrosive social order and failing mental health—like Benjamin, John is primarily concerned with those who have suffered. In this section, however, we will turn to what Charles Kinbote seems to be obsessed with, and whether this same logic can be applied to perpetrators as well, specifically to perpetrators who are deceased.

There are many reasons why one would be reluctant to try to employ weak messianic power when it comes to deceased perpetrators. For one, many have trouble extending this power to cover all *victims*. Many wish for some measure of redemption for victims that one aligns with, but may not wish this for those one resents. For example, some Marxists who follow Benjamin seek redemption for victims of the working classes who have been oppressed but do not seek redemption for aristocratic victims, such as those killed during the French Revolution.

To consider extending one's concern further, to cover the redemption of perpetrators, might be even more challenging. Why should one focus one's attention on perpetrators when there is so much that still needs to be done for humanity's victims? However,

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I believe there are at least three reasons one might think it is worthwhile to investigate the fate of dead perpetrators.

First, it is almost certain that the number of those who have carried out injustice in some form in human history is far larger than the total of those who are only victims. One might even argue that nearly *every* person who has walked the earth has done or believed something that many would now consider objectionable (which is not to say equally objectionable). Indeed, John Shade states that “In due time history will have denounced everybody.” (266) This leads him in the Poem to wonder if “all escape” from the despair of death. (40) This in itself may be a reason to wonder what should befall past perpetrators in addition to victims.

Second, building off of this, given the number of people in history who we now judge to have perpetrated significant evil, it is also understandable to ask: how are we to know that we *ourselves* are not any better? We should be interested in knowing how we may be treated by someone in the future, so it makes sense for us to consider how we relate to deceased perpetrators.

Third, and again relatedly, many people commit evils that they genuinely believe are—or at least have

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convinced themselves are—morally correct. We might not be able to anticipate what we are doing now that future people will find abjectly immoral, but we do have a sense for things past figures have done that we find now immoral. If we can attend to past transgressions, we may hope that people in the future will attend to the things we do in good faith, but that turn out to be severely misguided.

To be sure, none of these arguments about the value of thinking about redemption for perpetrators should be taken as an invitation to do so at the *expense* of attention to victims. Indeed, Nabokov highlights in his fiction perpetrators trying to “play the victim” themselves when they should be focused on those they wronged. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus C., who is unjustly condemned to death, is told to consider the pain of the prison director: “do not forget he is no longer young, and has many troubles of his own.” (IB, 162) Similarly, the supporters of totalitarianism in *Bend Sinister* try to gain sympathy for their destructive regime by reminding the protagonist Krug that the regime’s dictator was bullied as a child and that the guards who commit abuse shouldn’t be judged too harshly because “even these men of steel have their domestic troubles.” (BS, 71, 220) Still, Nabokov puts

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forth the idea that there is something more lacking about a perpetrator than a victim. Charles Kinbote writes in *Pale Fire* that “The one who kills is *always* his victim’s inferior.” (234) A victim has not been morally compromised in the way a perpetrator has.

One might also note that the line between victims and perpetrators is not clear-cut. There is clearly a relationship between Charles Kinbote’s loss of homeland and loved ones and the crimes he commits. Nabokov scholar Andrea Pitzer writes that Nabokov rejected Dostoevsky’s idea that “suffering and humiliation [was] the path to moral transcendence.” Rather, “[s]uffering and humiliation, [Nabokov] knew, were just as likely to do irreversible damage.”<sup>11</sup> One might consider seeing wrongdoing not quantitatively—adding up the “wounds suffered” and “wounds inflicted” in two separate columns—but qualitatively, aware of the trauma Kinbote experienced in Zembla, and aware of its interconnection with the kind of paranoia and intense emotions that resulted in his deadly fixation on John Shade and his poem.

Ultimately, we don’t think the interests of victims and perpetrators conflict. One can avoid helping a victim in a way that is punitive with respect to the perpetrator because attending to a victim is something

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the perpetrator *themself* might want. In Charles Kinbote's case, he is clearly interested in his own salvation, but still sees his salvation as deeply connected to the betterment of his victim. This is why we think Kinbote places such an emphasis on the variant "Should the dead murderer try to embrace/His outraged victim whom he now must face?" (231) He is consumed by considering how to make right his actions.

To be sure, it is not easy to know what to do to make up for the wrongs one has committed. This is the dilemma Charles Kinbote faces when contemplating the variant about the question of the dead murderer's embrace. And Kinbote is evidently not in a state to perform redemptive work in his own lifetime as he is suffering from severe mental illness and suicidal ideation. Even if one has a desire to make amends, one has the potential to do more harm than good. Atonement is wrapped up in many complex human emotions such as guilt, ego, and resentment. It's not hard to see that Kinbote fails at his attempt to atone. But once he has passed away, that doesn't mean his chance for redemption is over. Living people can perhaps aid in this reconciliation in the way that someone in the grips of what Kinbote is dealing with may be hindered from. And as mentioned, one might be motivated to engage

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with this work because one might want future people to help attend to the harms one may have caused which, for all variety of reasons, one might not be in a position to adequately address in one's own lifetime.

## Poetic Justice

We have given a sense of why the living might do something to help deceased perpetrators work to atone for their errors. This is based in part on a mutual understanding that we, too, will err and should want our own mistakes attended to. In this last section of the chapter, we will consider what role art and creativity can play in allowing living people to exercise weak messianic power on behalf of perpetrators of past injustice, and in a way that attends to their victims.

One of the central recurring images in *Pale Fire* is the web. Charles Kinbote states that the only manner in which he considers himself a “true artist” is that he can see “the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web,” and in his Poem, John Shade has the epiphany that life is filled not with “flimsy nonsense” but with “a web of sense.” (289, 63) A web is an

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illustration of the interconnection of parts with a whole, where pulling the string in one part of the web has repercussions throughout it. In physics, this is epitomized in the Butterfly Effect, where a butterfly merely flapping its wings in one part of the world can set in motion atmospheric changes that can contribute to a hurricane in another part of the world. Nabokov seems to suggest that this kind of web or interconnection extends not only between all living things but also between the past, present, and future. “I would say that imagination is a form of memory,” he writes. (SO, 78) “An image depends on the power of association, and association is pulled and prompted by memory.” And whereas the present can’t physically affect the past the way a butterfly’s wings can, it can nevertheless cause significant changes to the past’s *meaning* by harnessing the power of association.

Artists are often precise when affecting meaning—anyone who has felt deeply in the face of a book, song, painting, dance, or film (to name a few) can attest to this power. Artists often understand the relationship between the parts and the whole, and have a sense of how affecting one part can change the meaning of the whole through devices such as motifs, rhymes, foreshadowing, allusions, narrative arcs, and more. The

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ability to create and shape meaning can give to the past a sense of “poetic justice” in a world where political or social justice may be severely lacking.

One does not need to be an official artist to develop this sense of interconnection. Ordinary people are capable of performing symbolically powerful actions. Even everyday actions such as acknowledging part of history, retelling a story, and acting “in the name of” someone in the past can meaningfully and tangibly make alterations to the web of the world, thus contributing to the quotient of poetic justice.

Some people may think that the only reason one would be motivated to engage in redemptive work is if one feels a sense of duty, responsibility, or guilt for what has transpired. Regardless of whether that is the case, what Benjamin stresses is not an awareness of our implication with the past but simply our power over it. If one understands that one is capable of doing redemptive work, and that one holds power, this understanding is often enough to be motivated to wield such power. This idea is especially true if one believes Benjamin’s argument that such power is “messianic,” that is, tied up in the central drama of the universe, even in the purpose of human existence itself. If one excuses

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oneself from this work, one could be missing out on something that is spiritually fundamental.

Returning to *Pale Fire*, what can a reader actually do on behalf of Charles Kinbote to attend to his transgressions? Simply acknowledging the harms he has committed and why he has committed them reshapes one's understanding of the web he inhabits. This means trying to understand the causes of his mental illness, as well as appreciating the impact of his actions. One can also help him "embrace" his victim by trying to continue John Shade's mission, which was left unfinished by his death. If one of John's central aims is to help his daughter Hazel Shade live on "somewhere," then we can honor him on Kinbote's behalf by picking up the threads of Hazel's story. That will be our goal in the next chapter, though opening Hazel's story leads not to a tidy, redemptive room but to a yawning labyrinth—the central puzzle of *Pale Fire*.

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## Chapter 4: Hazel’s “Mad Hope”

Though integral to understanding Charles Kinbote, the idea of redemption in *Pale Fire* is perhaps most directly raised with Hazel Shade, John and Sybil Shade’s daughter. Hazel enjoys wordplay like her father, participates in a school play as a child, travels to France, interacts with ghosts, and has at least two friends in young adulthood. (45, 44, 164-166, 186-190, 45) Despite this range of qualities and experiences, John despairs constantly about Hazel’s apparent unattractiveness. (43-45)

When in young adulthood Hazel Shade is invited on a date, John Shade wistfully terms her hope that the date go well a “mad hope.” (46) Calling his daughter mad for thinking a man might like her is fairly harsh and even hypocritical: Hazel inherited her looks from her father, and John ended up married to the beautiful and affable Sybil. (42-43) Things seem to have turned out well for

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John, so why shouldn't they for Hazel? Here one may conclude that because Hazel is a woman, her supposedly poor looks definitively ruin her chances with men, a social failing no amount of her other interests, including language, friendship, or the beyond, can redeem. In the end, the date mentioned above does go poorly, and Hazel dies, either by accidental or suicidal drowning, that night. (47-51)

Some readers accept that Hazel Shade dies by suicide due to her failure to attain romance with a man.<sup>1</sup> However, regardless of whether such a fate is likely in the reader's world, one must ask: within the world of *Pale Fire*, do women who fail to attain romance with men necessarily experience anguished lives that end in tragic death? By examining characters such as Aunt Maud and Sylvia O'Donnell, I believe the answer is a resounding "No."

Aunt Maud is John Shade's aunt, and she raises him after his parents died. (35-36) She is an artist and poet who never marries, is pointedly described as "far from spinsterish," and before her death enjoys pasting advertisements from LIFE magazine into a scrapbook as a way of mocking masculine ideals of the time. (36, 113, 114-115) Though a relatively minor character, Aunt Maud loudly embodies what Hazel Shade's life might

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have been had she survived young adulthood: she never takes a husband, thrives as an artist and poet, and dies without suffering any consequences for her choices.

Sylvia O'Donnell is the mother of King Charles's friend, and she helps the king get settled upon his arrival in New Wye. (311, 246-249) In many ways, Sylvia inhabits the other end of the marital spectrum. She marries and divorces multiple times, and in one of her primary scenes is found in her home, again alone, and recovering from a vaccine which will allow her to travel to Africa. (311, 247-248) Charles Kinbote also tells us she is the first known woman in the world to shoot wolves from an airplane. (139) Though Sylvia is also a relatively minor character, she too flouts the traditions of marriage without suffering major consequences.

By including women in his novel who appear to live freely outside the societal expectations of the time, we believe Nabokov nudges readers toward interrogating John Shade's narrow depiction of his daughter, and toward demanding more of the text when it comes to Hazel Shade's life and death.

As I proceeded to trace Hazel Shade through the novel, I passed through seemingly endless rounds of puzzles, including possible women serial selves, marked overlaps with *Hamlet*, and a hidden car accident.

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Eventually, I began to feel distrustful. Hadn’t I already solved the primary conflict within the novel by pinning John Shade’s death on Charles Kinbote? Shouldn’t Hazel Shade’s story now fall neatly into place? While feeling dismayed, I encountered an oft-cited quote by Nabokov, which provides rare insight into his construction of puzzles, and which further chastened my belief that I’d reached the final solution to *Pale Fire*. In this quote, Nabokov describes a chess problem, but it’s easy to see how his words could apply to his literary works as well. Many of the places he lists (New York, Canada, Eurasia,) are ribboned through *Pale Fire*. Additionally, “the Azores,” could reference the “azure” in the book’s Poem, while “the sacred fire” could reference the novel’s title:

I remember one particular problem I had been trying to compose for months ... 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...which the composer had taken the greatest

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pains to 'plant'... Having passed through this 'antithetic' inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move...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 roundabout 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 would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight. (*SM*, 291)

In this passage, Nabokov describes the ideal "roundabout route" in solving a problem, which involves "pleasurable torments" followed by "the simple key move." He also acknowledges this route involves "the misery of deceit" but promises "a synthesis of poignant artistic delight" in the end. This quote bolstered my confidence that *Pale Fire* was solvable and also made me realize John's death at the hands of Kinbote could be only the beginning of the journey.

With more "pleasurable torments" ahead of me, I waded through the many riddles of Hazel Shade. Though I certainly haven't cracked all her mysteries, I believe I've gotten far enough to recognize *Pale Fire*'s

outline of “poignant artistic delight.” In the following chapter, I will first theorize that recognizing serial identities between the women of *Pale Fire* reveals John Shade as a mask. Next, I will trace *Hamlet* throughout Charles Kinbote’s Commentary and will argue that his incorporation of the famous tragedy reveals a sexual relationship and pregnancy with the poet. Finally, I will attempt to reveal the poet’s true identity and will interrogate themes of a car accident in order to sketch out what *really* happened on that fatal March night.

## Serial Selves Amongst *Pale Fire*’s Women

Two of John Shade’s primary concerns about his daughter are that she is unattractive, and that she dies by suicide. Some scholars embrace and even extrapolate these views. Though in the novel Hazel Shade is “plump,” “not ... a beauty,” and perhaps a little socially awkward, in scholarly books and articles she is termed “overweight,”<sup>22</sup> “fat,”<sup>23</sup> “obese,”<sup>24</sup> “deranged,”<sup>25</sup> “a freak,”<sup>26</sup> “fatally unattractive,”<sup>27</sup> “insufferably wretched because of her physical unattractiveness,”<sup>28</sup> and “monumentally

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ugly.”<sup>9</sup> (43-45) Likewise, though Hazel’s death is ambiguous—she drowns by accident *or* by suicide—many scholars simply embrace John’s conclusion that Hazel dies by suicide.<sup>10</sup> (50-51)

If John Shade’s beliefs are questioned, two new narrative possibilities emerge. First, by questioning the depths of Hazel Shade’s apparent unattractiveness, it becomes possible to consider *someone* might have found her attractive, even for a brief time. Second, by rejecting the idea that Hazel certainly dies by suicide, it becomes possible to consider alternative reasons for her death.

While scouring *Pale Fire* for more information about Hazel Shade, I began to notice odd parallels between some of the women characters. For example, Hazel is described in the Poem as “a mess,” having “eyes expressionless,” and only smiling as “a sign of pain.” (44-45) Correspondingly, a mountain woman named Garh is described as “disheveled,” having a “sullen expression,” and smiling “for the first time” after King Charles bids her a dismissive farewell. (141-142) In an equally strange overlap, King Charles’s wife Disa has no relatives in New Wye, yet she bears a “singular resemblance” to young Sybil Shade in the Poem. (207) Together, moments like these led me to consider the

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possibility of serial selves amongst the women of *Pale Fire*.

The idea of serial selves amongst the women of *Pale Fire* hasn't really been explored before, and certainly not to the extent that it has with the men, so I was excited to try my hand at cracking the puzzle. However, just as I was happily settling into this new theory, a second gust of details blew by and disrupted everything.

First, while hunting for overlaps, I paused over a description of John Shade's "deformed pelvis," and "pregnant envelope." (292, 288) Though John is an older man, these descriptions felt weirdly like hints toward a woman's pregnancy. Bemused, the second detail that stuck out to me occurs when Hazel Shade communicates with a ghost and runs through the alphabet "eighty times." (189) Likewise, John's poem comprises "eighty medium-sized index cards." (15) Why this overlap in number? Finally, in the Foreword of the novel, Charles Kinbote helps John find "his galoshes" after a party. (24) The only other time this footwear is mentioned is at the end of the book, when Kinbote hides John's manuscript under "a heap of girls' galoshes." (295)

In combination, these details made me feel as though John Shade was edging in on my theory of

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woman serial selves! Dubiously, I included him on my list of women, and by following various threads, I came to a conclusion I had not anticipated: John is a mask, not a man. Unlike aforementioned Kinbotean theories, which propose John is a disguise used to conceal Charles Kinbote as the sole author of "Pale Fire," I now believe John is a mask for Kinbote's secret relationship with the true poet of New Wye.

### **The Mask of John Shade**

The idea of John Shade as a mask, not a man, may find some initial support in the fact that Nabokov has a long history of creating characters who are not real. In his very first novel, *Mary*, the title character never actually appears, and by the final page, her very existence is made murky, as the protagonist says that other than an image of Mary in his memories, "No Mary existed, nor could exist." (*M*, 114) In Nabokov's later novel *King, Queen, Knave*, Enricht, the neighbor of the main character Franz, creates uncertainty when it is said that the neighbor "knew perfectly well that there was no Franz behind the door, that he had created Franz with a few deft dabs of his facile fancy." (*KQK*, 281) Franz then

discovers that “there was no old woman at all” where he had believed the neighbor’s wife to be, instead there was just a gray wig stuck on a stick. Then, the neighbor declares “You no longer exist, Franz.” (*KQK*, 284) And of course, one of the most enduring questions about Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is whether Sebastian Knight is real at all, or whether the title is protesting too much.

In addition to his apparent predilection for creating characters who aren’t real, Nabokov has the habit of hiding the truth in plain sight, camouflaged as artistic prose. For example, when I first suspected the assassin Jakob Gradus could reside in Charles Kinbote’s mind, I was baffled to see Kinbote acknowledge “the assassins who were in me, in my eardrums, in my pulse, in my skull.” (97) Likewise, I felt encouraged when Kinbote literally describes John Shade as a mask in the Foreword: “His whole being constituted a mask. John Shade’s physical appearance was so little in keeping with the harmonies living in the man, that one felt inclined to dismiss it as a coarse disguise or passing fashion.” (25-26) If John *is* a mask, there should be ample evidence of our commentator’s deceit. In what follows, I will argue that John is a mask by tracing major aspects of his

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character into the pools of Kinbote's memory and imagination.

First, Charles Kinbote names several people who could have inspired John Shade's general image, including the English writer Samuel Johnson, a lunch lady, a museum character, and a judge. (267) He also connects John to the owner of his present motor court, a "blear-eyed, seventy-year-old man whose twisted limp reminds me of Shade." (261) Additionally, there are times when the poet's specific image is traceable. For example, at John's birthday party, he is described as having "a white flower in his buttonhole." (161) Similarly, Kinbote describes a magician from his youth as wearing a "magical flower in his buttonhole where it had passed through a succession of different colors and become fixed as a white carnation." (27-28)

Second, John Shade moves through *Pale Fire* less like a human, and more like an imagined insect, hinting that Charles Kinbote may have pounced "upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation" to inspire the poet's appearance. (289) For example, a caterpillar seems to crawl through the page when John is said to have "a hoary forelock," "wrinkles beaming," and "a slight limp, and a certain curious contortion in his method of progress." (21, 22) Later, the creation of a chrysalis

comes to mind when Kinbote watches John through the “black bendlet of a branch” as the poet writes, his foot “gently rocking” and “moving up and down to the secret rhythm of mental absorption.” (23) Finally, the image of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly is rendered when Kinbote watches “John Shade 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.” (27) That the Poem itself resembles a butterfly in symmetry, with “two identical central parts, solid and ample, forming together with the shorter flanks twin wings” may underscore this device. (15)

Third, aspects of John Shade’s personal life are traceable to alternative sources within the text, such as his wife, Sybil Shade. One of the few details we receive about Sybil following her husband’s death is that she “is dwelling now with relatives in Quebec.” (18) Weirdly, one of the only other mentions of Canada occurs in the Poem, when we are told the maid in the Shade home is Canadian. (35) This, in combination with Sybil’s gardening, driving, phone-answering, and general hospitality, made me wonder if she could be John’s maid, not his wife. (86, 23, 259, 159, 24, 91) If true, this

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would mean John and Sybil's marriage, which features heavily throughout the Poem and Commentary, was created by Charles Kinbote.

Though the idea of Sybil Shade as a maid makes some sense—her behavior around John Shade is brisk, capable, and rarely affectionate—she is depicted in the Poem as a clear object of romance. John describes Sybil as a “Vanessa” butterfly in her looks. (42) He also highlights a moment from their youth when they sat on a “damp grass” and “uncouth, hysterical John Shade” blubbered against Sybil’s “face, and ear, and shoulder blade.” (42-43) If Charles Kinbote overwrote or invented this passage, there should be a visible, original source of inspiration within the book. Sure enough, King Charles and Disa also appear on a grassy lawn, and the king longs to “sob away the monstrous past” onto Disa’s lap. (210)

Finally, aspects of John Shade’s death scene could be constructed by Charles Kinbote’s earlier memories, such as spying on the poet through trees, watching “the same” butterfly, and rifling through an old album. (87, 290, 83) However, even the violent culmination of John’s death, where the poet is “prone on the ground, with a red spot on his shirt,” could be lifted from Kinbote’s past. (295) For example, if he endured a

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violent political revolution, or survived being hustled off “to a moonlit wall” for execution, I think Kinbote could have witnessed a death, or even many deaths, by shooting. (96) If true, such experiences would supply the necessary imagery to construct John bleeding on the ground.

One argument against this theory of reverse-engineering is that Charles Kinbote could have simply molded certain moments in the Commentary to resemble John Shade’s life, not the other way around. For example, he could have manipulated the magician from his youth to look like John, or adjusted Disa to resemble Sybil Shade. Though such manipulations are possible, the puzzle of *Pale Fire* comes to a dead end using this line of thinking. Kinbote is rendered unreliable, manipulative, and obsessed with John’s poem, conclusions easily reached without noticing any of the details highlighted above. Because Nabokov cared deeply for the “divine details” of literature, I think he would make such tiny observations integral, not superfluous, to cracking his story.<sup>11</sup>

A second argument against the theory of John Shade as a mask is that such a device is unsatisfying or even cruel on Nabokov’s part. If John is a mask, what is the point of identifying his murderer as Charles

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Kinbote or engaging with the Poem’s authorship puzzle? Isn’t it sort of deflating to realize that John, his family, and his dramatic death scene could all be an elaborate lie? Though it’s easy to despair in such moments, the trail of *Pale Fire* continues if one notes John’s mask, shoots Nabokov a dirty look, and then pulls oneself together to remember the mask likely conceals *someone*. There could still be a flesh and blood poet, still some strange, collaborative relationship occurring between Kinbote and this person. But who are they?

### **A Secret Poet**

Due to John Shade’s strange and inexplicable connections to the women of *Pale Fire*, I originally theorized that he could be a mask for a woman poet. For example, not only is John associated with themes of pregnancy and the number 80, the latter of which links back to Hazel Shade, he is also parentless like Disa, a poet like Aunt Maud, and even carries around Aunt Maud’s old cane. (288, 45, 15, 189, 35, 208, 13, 36, 26)

Right away, the idea that Charles Kinbote’s obsessive adoration could be directed toward a woman

poet feels unlikely, mainly because Kinbote is usually interpreted as gay. If Kinbote is also King Charles, more information about his sexuality emerges. For example, the king has a heartrending childhood romance with a boy named Oleg. (124-128)

Despite Charles Kinbote's attraction to men, he and his potential figments encounter numerous characters throughout the Commentary who blur the lines between men and women, possibly suggesting a more complex understanding of gender and sexuality. For example, Kinbote observes a photo of the Goldsworths "with sexes reversed, Mrs. G. resembling Malenkov, and Mr. G. a medusa-locked hag." (83) He also watches a patroness of the arts arrive at John Shade's birthday with her "boy-handsome tousle-haired girl friend." (160) King Charles attends balls of "boy-girls and girl-boys," and when he first meets Disa at a masked ball, she arrives "in male dress, as a Tirolese boy, a little knock-kneed but brave and lovely." (104, 173) Upon meeting Garh, whose name "is strictly speaking, a masculine one," King Charles is sure she will be "a bare-kneed mountain lad" before she emerges wearing "a man's shirt." (141) Also in Zembla, two characters are described as "prickly-chinned Phrynia, pretty Timandra with that boom under her apron." (210) Noting such descriptions, it's

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important to acknowledge that writing about the gender and sexuality of figures in different historical eras requires nuance, especially when the figures are literary creations, as one risks imposing anachronistic or inflexible terminology and understandings onto the past.<sup>12</sup> Given this, it is perhaps sufficient to say that there is significant gender fluidity depicted in *Pale Fire*, which suggests the person behind John's mask may have lived outside the restrictive social norms of 1950s America.

The image of a person who lives outside the restrictive social norms of 1950s America may find roots in several of *Pale Fire*'s characters. For example, a certain sexual freedom appears in Sylvia O'Donnell's multiple marriages, Aunt Maud's "far from spinsterish" life, Fleur de Fyler's three-day seduction of King Charles, and Garh's bid for sexual connection in the mountains. (311, 113, 109-112, 142) Likewise, many of these characters possess a marked boldness of spirit. Sylvia shoots wolves out of an airplane, Disa attends a ball dressed as "a Tirolese boy," Hazel Shade dispassionately pursues books and ghosts over men, and Charles Kinbote notes that the "extravagant and sardonic turn of [Aunt Maud's] mind must have shocked sometimes the genteel dames of New Wye."

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(139, 173, 45, 113) Though I won’t attempt to render the person behind John Shade’s mask yet, I believe the pieces to do so exist within *Pale Fire*’s pages. It’s possible to see how Kinbote might have held the bulb of some secret, unconventional relationship, smashed it into pieces, and smuggled the shards into various characters of the novel.

Finally, if a person who lives outside the norms of 1950s America stands behind John Shade’s mask, certain New Wye scenes may make more sense. For example, at one point a faculty member named Gerald Emerald says, “I guess Mr. Shade has already left with the Great Beaver.” (24) Charles Kinbote hurriedly swoops in to claim this insult as being about his “brown beard,” but the derogatory phrase is typically used to describe a vulva covered in pubic hair.<sup>13</sup> (24) If Kinbote were conducting a secret relationship with the poet, his quick desire to clarify that “the silly cognomen evidently applied to me” and was “not worth noticing” makes more sense—he could be shielding the poet from an insulting comment. (24) A second scene occurs when Kinbote wishes to compliment John’s work but hesitates due to being surrounded by “grinning old males” of the “inbreeding academic type.” (21) The idea that Kinbote would be heckled for complimenting

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John, an old man, within a group of old men, may also make more sense if the poet's identity lies outside this group.

### *Hamlet as a Map*

In the previous section, I argued that John Shade is a mask for a secret poet. After landing on this theory, I wondered—why would the poet's identity be so heavily disguised? Surely a friendship or relationship between two consenting adults couldn't have inspired much controversy in 1950s New Wye, even if one or both lived outside social norms of the time. For example, in one New Wye scene a “patroness of the arts” and “her boy-handsome tousle-haired girl friend” arrive at John’s birthday party without a whisper of drama. (160) While puzzling over what could have justified concealing the poet’s true identity, I stopped again at the description of John’s “deformed pelvis” and “huge pregnant envelope.” (292, 288) These words made me wonder: could the poet have been pregnant?

Notably, the concept of pregnancy is traceable through several of *Pale Fire*’s characters. Not only does

John Shade possess a “huge pregnant envelope” and “deformed pelvis,” but of Disa we learn, “an odious, undeserved, humiliating disaster had befallen her” and “only obligations of etiquette and her staunch kindness to a guiltless third party gave her the force to smile.” (288, 292, 211) Here, Disa’s “guiltless third party” is said to be an unwanted houseguest, but I think this language could also hint at an unplanned pregnancy. (211) Likewise, Hazel Shade returns from her trip to France with “new defeats, new miseries,” but also with “swollen feet,” a common symptom of pregnancy.<sup>14</sup> (45) In the same passage, Hazel murmurs “dreadful words” as she sits on her “tumbled bed.” (45) Here, “tumbled” caught my attention as the precise word Ophelia uses to hint that she’s slept with Hamlet in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.<sup>15</sup> In case we missed this oddly sexual word, Charles Kinbote uses it in a similar fashion while quoting a Zemblan poem:

The wise at nightfall praise the day,  
The wife when she has passed away,  
The ice when it is crossed, the bride  
When tumbled, and the horse when tried. (107)

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Though Shakespeare's use of the word "tumbled" doesn't necessarily mean Ophelia is pregnant, in many interpretations of the play, she appears with a great orb under her garments.<sup>16</sup> For example, when J and I saw *Hamlet* at The Guthrie in 2023, Ophelia clutched her obviously swollen stomach as she sang,

*Young men will do't, if they come to 't;  
By Cock, they are to blame.  
Quoth she "Before you tumbled me,  
You promised me to wed.<sup>17</sup>*

Together, these details made me feel as though the poet could have been pregnant, and they also encouraged me to further explore *Hamlet* for answers.

This impulse to use *Hamlet* for answers is not necessarily a wise one. Nabokov's novel is full of literary references, so it's easy to skitter down a rabbit hole of comparison without any real payoff. However, the plot references I noticed seemed to go deeper than Charles Kinbote simply name-dropping plays or waving around his miniature copy of *Timon of Athens*. (240, 285) For example, Hazel Shade resembles Ophelia in her romantic rejection and ambiguous drowning, and Kinbote is traceable in Hamlet's loss of father, kingdom,

and sanity, but John Shade also emerges as a convincing Polonius, who loses a daughter and is murdered in a case of mistaken identity. Additionally, King Alfin finds a parallel in King Hamlet, who speaks Danish and suffers an early death, while Odon is recognizable as Horatio, King Charles's friend, who gently guides the unstable king out of Zembla. Even "two baffled tourists from Denmark" appear to surface as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the former of whom are killed with the help of Jakob Gradus after being mistaken as "non-union incendiaries." (112) Finally, the words "pale fire" not only appear in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, which Kinbote thrusts boldly into the reader's face, but also more subtly in *Hamlet*, when King Hamlet's ghost bids his son farewell:

The glowworm shows the matin to be near  
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.  
Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the extensive plot overlaps, I noticed a possible, partial anagram between "Hamlet" and "Zembla." The word "Zembla" shares all but two letters with the word "Hamlet," so if rearranged, the "T" in Hamlet would need to become "Z" in Zembla (6 letters

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away in the English alphabet) and in a reflection of distance, the "H" in Hamlet would need to become the "B" in Zembla (also 6 letters away, but in the opposite direction). This can be visualized as follows:

A **B** C D E F G **H** I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y **Z**

At first I thought this pattern was a funny coincidence, but probably not rooted in textual evidence. However, I believe *Hamlet* is referenced when Wordsmith faculty discuss Charles Kinbote's name as an anagram for "Botkin," a word previously used in note that references both "a bare botkin" and Ophelia. (220) In this Wordsmith scene, Gerald Emerald employs an encyclopedia to make a point about Zembla's king:

In the meantime, at the other end of the room, young Emerald had been communing with the bookshelves. At this point he returned with the T-Z volume of an illustrated encyclopedia. "Well," he said, "here he is, that king. (268)

In this passage, the mention of "T-Z," along with the line "here he is, that king," both on the heels of an anagram and possible *Hamlet* reference, could hint at the pattern I've outlined above. Though such an

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anagram would be extremely farfetched for most authors to smuggle into their work, Nabokov was known to enjoy such games. The scholar D. Barton Johnson confirms, “Anagrams are one of Nabokov’s favorite devices.”<sup>19</sup>

Together, the extensive plot overlaps between *Hamlet* and *Pale Fire*, as well as the partial anagram between *Hamlet* and Zembla, led me to believe that Charles Kinbote may have incorporated Shakespeare’s famous tragedy into the novel. For example, he may have used *Hamlet* to inspire aspects of Zembla, John Shade’s Polonius-like death, or Hazel Shade’s Ophelia-like drowning. At the same time, I believe our commentator may have used *Hamlet* to emphasize real losses he endured, such as those of a romantic partner, homeland, and father. In what follows, I will first trace hints of Ophelia through the text in order to argue that Kinbote had a sexual relationship and pregnancy with the poet. Next, I will examine a puzzle, which speaks to our commentator’s loss of homeland and father, in order to further corroborate the relationship timeline between Kinbote and the poet.

### **Ophelia and the Secret Poet**

Hazel Shade and *Hamlet*'s Ophelia resemble each other in numerous ways. Both women are associated with nuns, give nicknames to animals, appear to lose touch with reality, are romantically rejected shortly before their deaths, and die by accidental or suicidal drowning.<sup>20</sup> (45, 164-167, 47-51) Indeed, in his note about Hazel's death, Charles Kinbote loudly comments on suicide: "There are purists who maintain a gentleman should use ... a bare botkin ... and that ladies should either swallow a lethal dose or drown with clumsy Ophelia." (220) Because Hazel may be one of many serial selves who comprise the poet, I think her passages should be closely studied for signs of a hidden relationship.

One of Hazel Shade's passages that stuck out to me occurs in the Commentary, when Charles Kinbote describes her brief relationship with a poltergeist. (164-167) While rendering the movements of the poltergeist, which lasted for "nearly a month," Kinbote employs incredibly sexual words and phrases, including "impregnate," "perform," "intact," "whizz by," "spill its humble contents," and "scene of action." (165) He concludes by comparing the poltergeist's departure to

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“that bitter blast, that colossus of cold air that blows on our eastern shores throughout March, and then one morning you hear the birds, and the flags hang flaccid, and the outlines of the world are again in place.” (166-167)

Although this passage is supposedly about Hazel Shade and a poltergeist, I think the highly sexual descriptions could hint at a brief, intimate relationship between two people. Likewise, the conclusion, which Charles Kinbote personalizes by drawing on Zembla, could indicate that the relationship is unlikely or even goes against the nature of one or both of the participants. Because Kinbote is evidently attracted to men, this made me wonder if the passage could hint at an unlikely, nearly month-long relationship between our commentator and the poet. His reference to March as the month where “the outlines of the world are again in place” also made me theorize that the relationship could have ended in March and thus started in February. (166-167) Notably, Kinbote first meets the poet on February 16, possibly tying the outline of this relationship to his coauthor. (20)

With one highly sexual passage tied to Hazel Shade, I next swiveled my attention to Garh, the mountain woman who resembles Hazel, whose dismissal by King

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Charles resembles Ophelia's rejection by Hamlet, and whose name is reminiscent of the "garlands" and "garments" woven through Ophelia's death in *Hamlet*.<sup>21</sup> Notably, the words "garlands" and "garments" feature heavily throughout *Pale Fire*, and Ophelia's drowning is one of only three *Hamlet* passages translated by Nabokov into Russian.<sup>22</sup> (34, 89, 111, 196, 206) Additionally, in her only scene, Garh leads King Charles toward a lake which borders Mount Kronberg, a possible reference to Andrey Kroneberg, the person who translated *Hamlet* into Russian in 1844.<sup>23</sup> (142-143, 310) Because Garh, like Hazel, may be one of many serial selves who comprise the poet, I think her lone scene should be closely studied in case further details of a relationship emerge.

In Garh's only scene, she leads King Charles toward a mountain pass, removes her sweater in a bid for sexual connection, and is rejected. The king leaves her in the grass as he proceeds toward a mountain lake. (142-143) Despite Garh's rejection, the images surrounding this passage are distinctly sexual. For example, shortly before meeting Garh, the concept of virginity is used to describe King Charles's escape from Zembla: "[H]e sensed those thick fingers of fate only seldom during his flight; he sensed them feeling for him (as those of a grim

old shepherd checking a daughter's virginity) when he was slipping, that night, on the damp ferny flank of Mt. Mandevil." (233) Likewise, after leaving Garh, the king uses sexual imagery to describe the surrounding mountains. He writes, "At a high point upon an adjacent ridge a *steinmann* (a heap of stones erected as a memento of an ascent) had donned a cap of red wool in his honor." (143) In case readers missed this sexual language, Charles Kinbote later uses similar imagery to describe the same mountains: "The Bera Range, an erection of veined stone and shaggy firs, rose before me in all its power and pride." (259) The image of mountains as sex organs is a vivid choice, but what does it have to do with the poet?

If John Shade's poem, "MOUNTAIN VIEW" is examined, I think the image of mountains as sex organs makes more sense. (115) This short poem was reprinted in a newspaper following the poet's death, so the text is likely untouched by our meddling commentator:

MOUNTAIN VIEW  
Between the mountain and the eye  
The spirit of the distance draws  
A veil of blue amorous gauze,  
The very texture of the sky.  
A breeze reaches the pines, and I

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Join in the general applause.

But we all know it cannot last,  
The mountain is too weak to wait—  
Even if reproduced and glassed  
In me as in a paperweight. (115)

In this poem, the phrase “A veil of amorous gauze” may introduce a sexual theme. Additionally, “the mountain” that “is too weak to wait” may reference a person. Because both Charles Kinbote and King Charles employ mountains to allude to erect male sex organs, I think “the mountain” in question could refer to our commentator. Furthermore, “the mountain” is “reproduced and glassed” in the poet “as in a paperweight.” To me, the idea of one person reproducing inside another person, as well as the glass, orb-like image of a paperweight, brings to mind the image of a person’s pregnancy. In combination, I believe this poem, along with the sexual language and imagery surrounding Hazel Shade and Garh, could confirm a fraught, Ophelia-like relationship and pregnancy between Kinbote and the poet.

Finally, the idea of a pregnant poet may be most loudly hinted at in the Foreword, when Charles Kinbote observes John Shade at a party:

He is looking from the terrace (of Prof. C.'s house on that March evening) at the distant lake. I am looking at him, I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade 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. (27)

Although I think this passage may allude to the lifecycle of a butterfly, the image of the poet experiencing “a unique physiological phenomenon” which involves transformation, recombination, and eventually, “at some unspecified date an organic miracle,” could also refer to a person’s pregnancy. (27) Additionally, if I’m correct that a relationship between Kinbote and the poet began in February and concluded in March, the idea that the poet could be pregnant on a “March evening” makes sense.

### **Ghostly Riddles**

If Charles Kinbote *did* have a sexual relationship and pregnancy with the poet, when would such a relationship have occurred? In the Commentary, Kinbote arrives in New Wye in October of 1958 and meets John Shade in February of 1959. (246, 20) However, I've connected the poet to several other characters, especially Hazel Shade, who dies in 1957. (312) How should such disparate dates be reconciled? To locate Kinbote's true relationship timeline with the poet, certain dates given within the Commentary must be questioned.

One such date occurs when Charles Kinbote leaves Zembla. He flees his homeland for New Wye in 1958, but if Kinbote survived the Hungarian Revolution in October of 1956, I think he may have fled to the United States shortly after this revolution instead. (205, 246) If the journeys of Kinbote's potential figments are examined for clues, two very different arrival stories emerge: Jakob Gradus enters the United States with violent food poisoning, while King Charles floats down by parachute into "a field of hay-feverish, rank-flowering weeds." (280, 246) Notably in the latter passage, King Charles switches into first-person, and so

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Kinbote observes, “I looked around me with enchantment and physical wellbeing despite the congestion in my nose.” (247) To me, the need for our commentator to mention his “physical wellbeing” contrasts suspiciously with Gradus’s extreme sickness, and made me feel as though Gradus’s arrival story was more likely the true one.

Now there are two conflicting moments on the table. First, there’s the hunch that Charles Kinbote could have arrived in New Wye in October of 1956 due to the Hungarian Revolution, and second, there’s the feeling that Jakob Gradus’s food poisoning arrival scene, which occurs in July of 1959, is true. (273) If Gradus’s wretched arrival story is closely examined, more information surfaces. For example, after finding his way to the Wordsmith College library, Gradus relieves himself of “another portion of the liquid hell inside him,” then accepts a ride from Gerald Emerald to Dulwich Road. (282-283) However, Emerald *literally* drops Gradus on the side of the road and points to a house “up there” before speeding off to “some tryst in the valley.” (283-284) Gradus is left alone, then, simultaneously wanting to kill Emerald and “rid himself of the inexhaustible lava in his bowels.” (283) If Gradus

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is left alone, sick and angry on the side of Dulwich Road, what happens next?

If the scene where Jakob Gradus proceeds to kill John Shade in that awkward, Polonius-like death is rejected, new possibilities emerge. For example, noting that Gradus stands on Dulwich Road, one might reexamine the descriptions of the land surrounding our assassin. In the Commentary, Charles Kinbote and John walk "up the wood path to Dulwich," "skirting Dulwich Forest," before approaching "a square plot invaded with willow herb, milkweed and ironweed, and teeming with butterflies." (185-186) Not only could this square plot reference King Charles's parachuting scene, where he lands in "a field of hay-feverish, rank-flowering weeds" and observes "that vortex of yellow and maroon butterflies," but the spot previously supported a barn: "That barn had stood on the weedy spot Shade was poking at with Aunt Maud's favorite cane." (246-247, 186) Here, "That barn" is described in Kinbote's note to "*Line 347*: old barn," where he writes, "This barn, or rather shed, where 'certain phenomena' occurred in October 1956 (a few months prior to Hazel Shade's death) had belonged to one Paul Hentzner." (185) Suddenly, the fact that a violently ill Gradus is left on the side of Dulwich Road, and the idea that our

commentator could have arrived in New Wye in October 1956, converge on Hazel's barn experience "in October 1956." (185)

If Hazel Shade's barn scene is studied, more clues emerge. For example, Hazel visits the barn alone, at night, and communicates with a ghost that appears as "a luminous circlet." (187-189) Weirdly, this ghostly communication echoes a scene from King Charles's youth, when he is sick with pneumonia and "In his delirium he would strive one moment to follow a luminous disk probing an endless tunnel and try the next to clasp the melting haunches of his fair ingle." (128) The luminous orb appears again during King Charles's escape scene, when he uses "a steel flashlight" to navigate an underground tunnel. (131, 132-135) He observes, "The dim light he discharged at last was now his dearest companion, Oleg's ghost, the phantom of freedom." (132) Not only does this scene merge the orb of light with the idea of a ghost, but it confirms King Charles used a flashlight during his escape. Upon exiting the tunnel, "the weak light of his torch rolled its hopeless eye and went out," and the king drops the flashlight into "muffled nothingness." (133) However, Jakob Gradus arrives in New Wye with "a glass eye" in his suitcase, possibly hinting that the flashlight was

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recovered and made the trip to the United States after all. (276)

Taking King Charles's various ghost and flashlight scenes into consideration, I began to wonder if Hazel Shade's ghostly night in the barn could really belong to our commentator, with a violently ill Jakob Gradus in control, and with a flashlight in his hand. Is there any proof that this could be the case?

By interrogating Charles Kinbote's description of Hazel Shade's barn scene, a few suspicious details emerge. For example, after rendering Hazel's night, Kinbote defensively notes, "I have no idea what the average temperature of an October night in New Wye may be." (190) Additionally, after reading Hazel's report, Kinbote notes that a flashlight was *not* referenced in her pages. He writes: "Not one hint did I find. Neither old Hentzner's specter, nor an ambushed scamp's toy flashlight, nor her own imaginative hysteria." (189) Together, these instances of Kinbote's over-defensiveness could hint that he was the one in the barn, with a flashlight, on that October night in 1956.

All that said, proof beyond Charles Kinbote's defensiveness is required to conclude that the barn scene belongs to him. If the ghostly message Hazel Shade supposedly receives is placed on the table, the real fun

begins. While in the barn, Hazel runs through the alphabet eighty times and writes down a letter when the luminous orb reacts. (189) By communicating in this fashion, she documents the following message: “pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told.” (188)

Phonetically, readers have decoded this message as a warning from Hazel’s deceased Aunt Maud, who had a stroke-induced speech impediment before her death. This interpretation is well-summarized by the scholar Brian Boyd as: “a message to Hazel to tell her father (*pada*: pa, da, padre) not to go across the lane to old Goldsworth’s, as an *atalanta* butterfly dances by, after he finishes ‘Pale Fire’ (*tale feur*), at the invitation of someone from a foreign land who has told and even ranted his tall tale to him.”<sup>24</sup>

Although this interpretation makes some sense, it doesn’t add much to the story—John Shade’s death has already been revealed by the time the ghostly message surfaces. However, if the barn scene belongs to Charles Kinbote instead of Hazel Shade, new questions arise. For example, whose ghost would come back to communicate with a sick and struggling Kinbote? By reaching again for *Hamlet*, a specific answer emerges.

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Early in this chapter, I connected Charles Kinbote and his potential figments, King Charles and Jakob Gradus, to the title character, Hamlet. Notably, in one of the very first scenes in *Hamlet*, King Hamlet returns as a ghost to instruct his living son.<sup>25</sup> This ghostly encounter sets into motion the core events of the tragedy, and it made me wonder if King Charles's deceased father, King Alfin, may have returned as a ghost to communicate with his son as well.

In the Commentary, King Alfin is described as "a wretched linguist having at his disposal only a few phrases of French and Danish, but every time he had to make a speech to his subjects ... some uncontrollable switch went into action in his mind, and he reverted to those phrases, flavoring them for topical sense with a little Latin." (102) Based on this quote, it appears King Alfin gave disjointed speeches in some combination of Danish, French, and a little Latin, and notably, Nabokov enjoyed devising multilingual puzzles. For example, in *King, Queen, Knave*, he writes "a telegram that had been read over the telephone and transcribed thus by the multilingual desk: WISCH TU CLYNCH DEEL MUSS HAVE THAT DRUNK STOP HUNDRED OKEY RITTER. It made no sense, but who cared." (*KQK*, 332) Because Nabokov entertained

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multilingual puzzles in the past, I decided to explore the possibility of a Danish, French, and Latin translation within *Pale Fire*'s ghostly message: "pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told," keeping in mind that the translation would likely be clunky due to King Alfin's lack of fluency in these languages. (188, 102)

Because I studied Norwegian in college, and because Danish and Norwegian sound quite similar, certain words became recognizable when I read the ghostly message aloud. For example, "a lane" sounded like "alene," the Norwegian word for "alone." Likewise, "feur far" sounded like "for far," which means "for father" in Norwegian. After much fiddling with online dictionaries to make the small jump from Norwegian to Danish, and to account for the French and Latin possibilities, I landed on the following phonetic translation:

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Original	Language	Changes	Translation
pa	French	pas	No
da at alane	Danish	da at alene	since that alone
pad no	French	pas ne	don't
to	Latin	tu	you
go	Danish	gå	walk
old wart alan	Danish	alt var talen	The speech was everything
ther	Latin	ter	Thrice
tale feur farr	Danish	tæl for far	count for father
ant lant	Danish	andet land	another country
tal	French	t'al	you
told	Danish	tåld	endured

If paraphrased, this message roughly reads, "No, since you don't walk alone. The speech was everything. Thrice, count for father, another country you endured." If even just the core, Danish words are

plucked from this message, including “alone,” “speech,” “father,” “country,” and “endured,” I think a message of instruction and encouragement from King Alfin to his struggling, suicidal son becomes plausible. Additionally, the three countries “endured” could reference our Russian commentator’s moves to three new countries—Latvia, Hungary, and France—before eventually fleeing to the United States, while the phrase “the speech was everything” could confirm he bravely gave radio speeches during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

Here, I think it’s worth observing that although some scholars believe Nabokov “transforms his own father’s killing into the shambolic farce of Shade’s death,”<sup>26</sup> King Alfin’s coded message could also function as a deeply buried tribute to the author’s father. Like our commentator, Nabokov was born in Russia and endured three new countries—England, Germany, and France—before fleeing to the United States, and as a college student he gave a speech of his father’s, “Soviet Rule and Russia’s Future,” at a debate in Cambridge. (*SM*, 179) In his memoir, Nabokov refers to himself as a “ridiculous cacologist” who “inherited nothing” of his father’s public speaking skills, and indeed, during the Cambridge debate he recalls

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“drying up utterly after reciting what I had memorized, and that was my first and last political speech.” (*SM*, 178-179) Based on these details, I think King Alfin’s posthumous, trilingual message could function as a more meaningful and hopeful tribute to Nabokov’s father than John Shade’s awkward death scene.

If I’m correct that the October 1956 barn scene belongs to Charles Kinbote, not Hazel Shade, this yanks Kinbote’s timeline back two years. Suddenly, Kinbote could have arrived in New Wye in October of 1956 and met the poet in February of 1957, not 1959. If Hazel is one of many serial selves who comprise the poet, the fact that the last few months of her life, along with her death in March of 1957, overlap with Kinbote’s time in New Wye could be incredibly telling. Ultimately, these converging timelines led me to theorize that our commentator had a relationship with the poet that spanned from February to March of 1957.

Briefly, one argument against this 1957 theory is that in the Commentary, Jakob Gradus reads a newspaper from July 21, 1959, and in the Foreword, Charles Kinbote signs off on October 19, 1959, indicating that his story *does* extend into 1959. (273-274, 29) How should those two years be accounted for?

By examining other two-year stretches in the Commentary, some answers may emerge.

First, after first meeting Disa on July 5, King Charles “procrastinated for almost two years but was set upon by inhumanly eloquent advisers, and finally gave in [to marriage.]” (173-174) Here, the July 5 date is also John Shade’s birthday, and the image of the king dealing with advisers echoes the Foreword, when Charles Kinbote insolently rejects an adviser’s help from “the Shade committee.” (13, 17) Together, the odd overlap of dates and advisers made me wonder if the “almost two years” of procrastination could hint at Kinbote dragging his feet and refusing help while composing the Commentary. (173)

Second, the idea of an extended two-year writing period may be underlined in a scene involving King Charles’s uncle Conmal, who, like our commentator, knows a lot about Shakespeare. Conmal is described as “A large, sluggish man with no passions save poetry, he seldom moved from his warm castle and its fifty thousand crested books, and had been known to spend two years in bed reading and writing.” (286) The image of a man laying in bed, reading and writing for two years, may further outline how Charles Kinbote really spent 1958 and 1959.

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Third, one of the few details revealed about the New Wye gardener is that "He had worked for two years as a male nurse in a hospital for Negroes in Maryland." (291) Here, the association of "two years" with a hospital could ultimately hint at Charles Kinbote's confinement, which is where we believe he composed the *Commentary*. That King Charles lands by parachute "near Baltimore" upon his arrival to the United States could underscore this point. (246)

Together, these various "two year" references, which highlight themes of procrastination and advisers, reading and writing in bed, and a hospital in Maryland, could account for the gap between Kinbote's relationship with the poet in 1957 and his conclusion of the *Commentary* in 1959.

## Headlights in the Fog

So far in this chapter, I've argued that a secret poet stands behind the "mask" of John Shade, and that the poet is composed of various characters in the novel. I've also used *Hamlet* as a map to trace a brief sexual relationship and pregnancy between Charles Kinbote

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and the poet and to theorize that their relationship occurred in February and March of 1957, not 1959. Based on these theories, two pressing questions remain: “Who is the poet?” and “How did it end?” While searching for answers to these questions, I noticed a theme of car accidents throughout the Poem and Commentary and decided to follow the thread.

First, themes of headlights, a March night, and a crash are emphasized in the Poem:

A host narrator took us through the fog  
Of a March night, where headlights from afar  
Approached and grew like a dilating star, (48)

Although this passage isn’t directly about Hazel, Charles Kinbote observes, “Note how delicately at this point the television theme happens to merge with the girl’s theme.” (204) Later, Hazel rides a bus and sees “*More headlights in the fog.*” (49) Additionally, in Canto Three a mother and child meet in the afterlife after experiencing a “head-on crash.” (54-55)

Does that small solemn boy  
Know of the head-on crash which on a wild  
March night killed both the mother and the child?  
(54-55)

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Here, I think the "head-on crash" could reference a car accident, and the month of March notably overlaps with "a March night" in Canto Two. (54, 48)

Second, themes of cars, car accidents, and death are woven through Charles Kinbote's Commentary. As the scholar Michael Wood observes, Kinbote's car, a "powerful Kramler," is "underlined more than it needs to be,"<sup>27</sup> and while trying to sleep in the springtime, our commentator writes: "The sound of a rapid car or a groaning truck would come as a strange mixture of friendly life's relief and death's fearful shadow." (96) Kinbote concludes this passage by observing "that constant highway looping up over me and around my heart as I dozed off." (97) Later, while discussing sin with John Shade, Kinbote notes, "[W]e still have to reckon with the individual mishap, the thousand and second highway accident of those scheduled for Independence Day in Hades." (226)

Third, in the Commentary, Charles Kinbote attends a party which resembles Hazel Shade's fateful night out. For example, on the night of Hazel's drowning, she goes out to "a Hawaiian bar" that's "a score of miles" away from New Wye. (47) "Sleet glazed the roads," and she is on a date with a man named Pete

Dean. (47) Similarly, Kinbote describes a night where he drives a young boy “to his parent’s estate, a little matter of two hundred miles.” (158) Then, “in the course of an all-night party,” he encounters “young people, old people ... barbecue smoke, ... and auroral swimming.” (158) Kinbote loses “all contact with the silly boy,” and in the morning locates his car “off the road, in a pine grove,” with brakes that have “aged overnight.” (158) I think the overlap of a long drive, Hawaiian or barbecue atmosphere, and swimming are notable, and the fact that Kinbote’s car’s brakes have “aged overnight” may indicate that he was in some sort of accident. (158)

Together, the overlapping themes of a car accident, March, death, and a wild night made me wonder if the poet and our commentator could have experienced a car accident in March of 1957. Are there any details that corroborate such an event? By examining the Commentary, two clues emerge.

One clue occurs when Charles Kinbote observes of the Shade home: “[O]n those March nights their house was as black as a coffin.” (96) Here, the “coffin” imagery could hint that Kinbote witnessed a tragedy within the Shade home in March. (96) A second clue occurs at John Shade’s birthday party, when Kinbote watches from afar as a black car pulls up to the Shade house: “[A]

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long black limousine, officially glossy and rather funereal, glided into the aura of the drive.” (161) Here, I think using the word “funereal” to describe a “long black” car could reference a hearse rather than a limousine. This language made me wonder if Kinbote could have witnessed the poet’s funeral, not birthday party.

In what follows, I will first attempt to reveal the identity of the poet behind Charles Kinbote’s elaborate disguise. Next, I will bring together threads from the Foreword, Poem, Commentary, and Index to illuminate what really happened on that March night.

### **Word Golf**

As outlined earlier in this chapter, I believe multiple characters comprise the poet. For this reason, a labyrinth of serial selves must be navigated to reveal the poet’s true identity. Because there are *so* many potential places to begin the hunt, I think it’s helpful to focus on the loudest clues first.

In what follows, I will trace two loud clues in a process somewhat resembling Word Golf—a game of John Shade’s which involves adjusting single letters in a

word until, through a string of words, the player arrives at a new one. (262) One example of this game occurs in the Index, when Charles Kinbote highlights the word “Lass,” then puts to “Mass,” “Mars,” “Mare,” and finally “Male,” a satisfying and perhaps telling transformation. (310-311) Notably, this game involves following a slow transformation of *words*, but while hunting for the poet’s identity, I will follow a slow transformation of *images*.

One of the first loud clues I noticed between the characters in *Pale Fire* is Hazel Shade’s precise resemblance to the Zemblan mountain woman, Garh. As noted previously, both women are disheveled, have sullen expressions, and smile as a sign of pain. (44-45, 141-142) By noting this resemblance, I’ve stepped from Hazel to Garh. Next, Garh is described as having “yellow hair,” which reminded me of Charles Kinbote’s observation that most Zemblan women are “freckled blondes.” (141, 206) Noticing these details, I’ve stepped from Garh, to “yellow hair,” to “freckled blondes.” With this typically Nordic appearance in mind, I perked up when later, King Charles’s Zemblan wife, Disa, turns up in Sweden. (208) Having stepped from Hazel to Garh, “yellow hair,” “freckled blondes,” and finally to Disa in Sweden, I was feeling fairly disoriented.

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However, on a whim, I ran the name Disa through a Swedish online dictionary, just in case anything popped up. As it turns out, the name Disa stems from the Norse word "dís," and "dis" means "haze" in Swedish.<sup>28</sup> This translation is confirmed by the scholar Priscilla Meyer, who notes, "In modern Swedish, *dis* means 'haze.'"<sup>29</sup>

With the translation of "dis=haze" on the table, I felt as though I'd arrived back at Hazel Shade! What did this odd path mean? If the route I've laid out is visualized, the images move from Hazel in New Wye to Disa in Zembla, culminating in the translation of dis=haze. Together, I think these details could support the idea that aspects of Hazel's character reside in Zembla, possibly as the Zemblan wife Kinbote has left behind.

In the same way Hazel Shade arches from New Wye to Zembla, aspects of Disa are pulled from Zembla into New Wye. In a second loud clue, Disa is said to bear a "singular resemblance" to young Sybil Shade, and Charles Kinbote scolds, "I trust the reader appreciates the strangeness of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all." (207) Noting this resemblance, I've stepped from Disa to Sybil. Next, Disa, and apparently a young Sybil, are said to look "like a compass rose of ivory with four

parts of ebony.” (206) Here, a “compass rose” could reference wayfinding, and the “ivory” and “ebony” stand out as materials traditionally used to construct piano keys. (206) With these images in mind, I’ve stepped from Disa to Sybil, then to an ivory and ebony compass, and finally, to piano keys. The image of piano keys seems fairly random until a young piano prodigy, Gordon, is observed in the text. (199-200) After stepping from piano keys to Gordon, I again felt disoriented until I noticed the Wordsmith College music professor, Misha Gordon, in the Commentary. (216, 229) Now my path has woven from Disa to Sybil, an ivory and ebony compass, piano keys, a piano prodigy named Gordon, and finally, to the music professor, Misha Gordon. What is the relevance of Misha in *Pale Fire*? One of the few details granted about this professor is that Misha is a person with red hair, and weirdly, the “combing and reek” from a “fiery haired” person are found in Charles Kinbote’s bathrooms around March 30. (26-27, 259) Kinbote blames this hair debris on a roommate’s tryst, but I think this detail could also tie back to Misha, one of the only red-haired characters in the book. (26, 216)

Together, these details of Disa, Sybil Shade, an ebony and ivory compass, piano keys, Gordon,

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Professor Misha Gordon, red hair, and red combings found in Charles Kinbote's rooms may trace aspects of Disa all the way from Zembla into Kinbote's home. By following this subtle path of clues, I believe Kinbote is revealed to have a close and possibly secret relationship with Misha. If true, this could point to the idea that Misha is the true poet of New Wye.

The idea of Misha Gordon as the poet makes sense for multiple reasons. First, Misha is a professor at Wordsmith College, so could plausibly stand behind John Shade's various campus scenes. Second, Misha is a music professor, which could bring new meaning to Charles Kinbote being haunted by "rotating, malicious music," why several of the characters play instruments (Fleur de Fyler's viola and flute, Gordon and Odon's piano, Aunt Maud's guitar) or why Kinbote views the poet's possible pregnancy with himself as "a fusion of image and music, a line of verse." (19, 15, 110, 199-200, 128, 36, 27) Third, Misha is a name with Hebrew origins,<sup>30</sup> possibly indicating that this professor is Jewish. The idea that Misha is Jewish may be further hinted at when an antisemitic remark is made at Wordsmith College by a "not very engaging" man, and Misha roundly replies, "of course, God might choose His people but man should choose his expressions."

(216) Furthermore, the poet’s “laconic suggestion” that Kinbote “try the pork” in the Foreword may be read as a subtle or wry acknowledgement of religion, since Jews traditionally do not consume pork. (20) Fourth, Misha is a gender-neutral but typically male name, serving as a nickname for the Hebrew name Michael.<sup>31</sup> (Coincidentally or not, Misha Gordon is also the name of a boy in the novel *Doctor Zhivago* by the Russian author Boris Pasternak, a contemporary of Nabokov’s.)<sup>32</sup> If Misha is the poet, this gender-neutral name may also echo the frequently blurred depictions of gender throughout *Pale Fire*.

Despite the feeling that the details were adding up, I still wanted a clear “tell” to confirm Misha Gordon as the pregnant poet I’d sketched behind John Shade’s mask. While scrounging for clues, I stopped at a March 14th dinner party in the Commentary, where both Misha and Charles Kinbote are in attendance. (229) In this passage, Kinbote observes “three or four interchangeable women (of whom one—Mrs. Gordon, I think) was *enceinte*.” (229) Here, J thought “three or four interchangeable” guests could nod to the concept of serial selves, and I clocked the word “*enceinte*,” as “*enchanté*,” the French word for “delighted.”<sup>33</sup> (229) However, when I ran “*enceinte*” through an online

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French dictionary, I was stunned when the English translation came back as "pregnant."<sup>34</sup> Suddenly, it appeared Kinbote was quietly acknowledging that Misha was pregnant at that dinner party on March 14th! If true, this detail would align well with my theory that Kinbote and the poet, Misha, experienced a sexual relationship between February and March, and were pregnant together sometime in the latter month.

In conclusion, I believe these two games of World Golf trace two key relationships in Charles Kinbote's life: a wife in Zembla, and a poet in New Wye. By continuing to untangle serial selves within the novel, my hunch is that most overlapping details could be traced into one of these two characters. For example, Fleur de Fyler and Garh's sexual rejection by King Charles could belong within the identity of the Zemblan wife, while John Shade, Hazel Shade, and Disa's associations with pregnancy could belong within the identity of the New Wye poet. This idea of inversion could also account for why Hazel resembles Garh, or why Sybil Shade bears a striking resemblance to Disa—our commentator has thoroughly crisscrossed details across the Atlantic in an effort to bury true events of the novel. But, as has already been asked several times, what is Kinbote trying

so desperately to hide? What happened on that fateful March night?

### **A March Night**

In this chapter so far, I've theorized that Charles Kinbote has invented masks, employed *Hamlet*, and inverted characters, all in the name of deeply burying his relationship with the true poet of New Wye, Misha Gordon. I've also speculated that Kinbote's secrecy could be due to a brief sexual relationship and unexpected pregnancy with Misha. However, a secret relationship and pregnancy do not account for the relentless details of cars, car accidents, and death haunting the month of March. By tracing these details, I believe the outline of what happened that night comes slowly into focus.

To begin, specific dates and scenes from Charles Kinbote's March should be closely examined. For example, on "Saturday, March the 14" Kinbote attends a dinner party with Wordsmith professors, including Misha Gordon. (229) Kinbote also visits the poet while the latter is in the bathtub "one March morning," and the poet memorably shouts, "Let him in, Sybil, he won't

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rape me!" (264) In the Foreword, Kinbote and the poet attend a party "at Prof. C.'s house on that March evening." (27) Finally, on March 30, Kinbote cries so hard he is left "gasping for breath" due to his roommate Bob's departure. (259) Because I suspect the poet's death and funeral could have occurred in March, not July, I think Kinbote's despair at Bob's leaving should be closely studied.

In the Foreword, Charles Kinbote kicks Bob out due to the latter's entertaining "a fiery-haired whore" in Kinbote's rental home. (26-27) This action seems to highlight Kinbote's attraction and jealousy for the student Bob, who has betrayed Kinbote with someone else. However, the fact that the "fiery-haired" person is referred to as a "whore" strikes me as particularly hateful, possibly indicating that Kinbote is angry with the red-haired person, not Bob. (26) If true, this could mean the red-haired person, who I believe is Misha Gordon, betrayed Kinbote's trust instead. Is there any proof of such betrayal within the novel?

After some searching, I slowly connected Gerald Emerald to Charles Kinbote's potential betrayal. The first clue I noticed occurs when Jakob Gradus observes "a man in a bottle-green jacket, sitting in the company of an obvious whore." (251) Here, the repetition of the

word “whore” could connect to the red-haired person in the Foreword, and the description of “a man in a bottle-green jacket” could link to a young professor referred to as Emerald, who is pictured wearing “a green jacket,” and whom our commentator loathes. (26, 251, 268) Kinbote’s loathing for Emerald is highlighted several times throughout the novel. For example, when Emerald allegedly calls Kinbote a “Great Beaver,” our commentator retaliates by “pulling Gerald Emerald’s bow-tie loose with a deft jerk of my fingers as I passed by him.” (24) Kinbote’s disdain for Emerald, along with the repetition of a “green jacket” and “whore,” made me wonder if Emerald could have conducted an affair with Misha, during, after, or near the end of the latter’s relationship with Kinbote. (26, 251, 268)

One clue that points toward a love triangle between Charles Kinbote, Misha Gordon, and Gerald Emerald occurs in the Index, when Kinbote describes several generations of Zemblan Royalty. Within one 19th-century generation, he highlights Thurgus the Third, who in many ways resembles himself. For example, Thurgus carries a flambeau or “flaming torch” when meeting his mistress “every night, during a short period.” (314) Likewise, I believe Kinbote has a flashlight in New Wye and conducts a brief affair with

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Misha. Thurgus is also said to have a “nose like a congested plum,” and in the Commentary, Kinbote randomly notes “the congestion in my nose.” (314, 247) Additionally, Thurgus conducts an affair with Iris Acht, a woman who in many ways resembles Misha. (314) For example, Iris is described as “passionate and powerful,” is said to be a “favorite of Thurgus the Third,” and dies “officially by her own hand; unofficially, strangled in her dressing room by a fellow actor.” (305) These descriptions of a strong person and ambiguous death could be callbacks to characters such as Aunt Maud, Disa, and Hazel Shade, all of whom I believe comprise aspects of the poet, Misha. Finally, the person who murders Iris is “jealous young Gothlander.” (305) Notably, if “Gothlander” is unscrambled, it becomes “thon Gerald,” or, if the 19th-century gender-neutral pronoun is updated, “that one, Gerald.”<sup>35</sup> Together, these clues could corroborate a love triangle between Kinbote, Misha, and Emerald, and could even hint that Kinbote blames Emerald for Misha’s death.

The idea that Gerald Emerald could have been involved in that fatal March night drew me back to themes of cars and a possible car accident. Notably, Emerald owns a car which Charles Kinbote self-consciously compares to his own, writing “[Emerald’s]

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drive took only a few minutes (it took me, at the wheel of my powerful Kramler, four and a half)." (283) Additionally, themes of Emerald and a car accident may be alluded to in the Poem, when the author writes:

Espied on a pine's bark,  
As we were walking home the day she died,  
An empty emerald case, squat and frog-eyed,  
Hugging the trunk; and its companion piece,  
A gum-logged ant. (41)

Here, the image of “an empty emerald case” hugging the trunk of a pine tree on the day of Hazel Shade’s death could link back to Kinbote, who, after attending an all night party that resembles Hazel’s date night, finds his car “in a pine grove” with “brakes [that] had aged overnight.” (41, 158)

By closely inspecting Charles Kinbote’s night out, more details emerge. For example, he describes the night by first noting: “That jinxy streak had started on the eve when I had been kind enough to offer a young friend—a candidate for my third ping-pong table who after a sensational series of traffic violations had been deprived of his driving license—to take him, in my powerful Kramler, all the way to his parents’ estate, a little matter of two hundred miles.” (158) Here, Kinbote’s “young

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friend" could reference Gerald Emerald, who is referred to as "young Emerald" twice in the Commentary, and possibly "young Gothlander" in the Index. (158, 267, 268, 305) Additionally, that this person appears to be a reckless driver could be meaningful later, when Kinbote "loses all contact with the silly boy," and then finds his car off the road. (158)

Gerald Emerald's potentially reckless driving may provide one reason for a car accident, but there could be a second, more subtle reason for a crash as well. In the previous section, I argued that Charles Kinbote crisscrossed the details of various characters across the Atlantic Ocean, but I think he may have muddled certain *places* as well. For example, Kinbote describes, "A small skyscraper of ultramarine glass" in Zembla, while similarly, "Professor C.'s ultramodern villa" is observed in New Wye. (75, 92) Additionally, after Jakob Gradus visits a villa in Europe, he looks over a lake and "from far below" hears "the clink and tinkle of distant masonry work." (202) Similarly, from the "ultramodern villa" in New Wye, "one can glimpse to the south the larger and sadder of the three conjoined lakes," and weirdly, Kinbote hears "tantalizing tingles and jingles," as well as the "clink-clank" of horseshoes near his home, which he says radiate from "across the

road on the lower slopes of our woody hill." (92, 287, 288-289) Together, these images and sounds made me wonder if a lakeside structure of blue, reflective glass was being built in New Wye and could have been crashed into on that fatal March night. That in Zembla, King Alfin's death occurs when he flies his "bird of doom" airplane "smack into the scaffolding of a huge hotel which was being constructed in the middle of a coastal heath" could emphasize such an event. (103) Finally, in what are perhaps Nabokov's most famous lines, the Poem reads, "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain,/By the false azure in the windowpane." (33) Here, a bird fails to see a reflective, blue, glass surface and fatally crashes into the window. Likewise, if a glass structure *is* being built in New Wye, I think such a reflective or mirrored surface could contribute to a fatal car accident, especially if glimpsed at night by a reckless driver. (75)

If Gerald Emerald *did* crash Charles Kinbote's car, possibly with Misha Gordon as a passenger, where was Kinbote in all this? Here, I think it's interesting to examine the recurring imagery of a person being passed out in a ditch throughout the novel, which may hint at Kinbote's location following a car accident. One such instance occurs when King Charles is escaping Zembla:

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All at once a pinhead light gleamed ahead and presently he found himself staggering up a slippery, recently mown meadow. A dog barked. A stone rolled underfoot. He realized he was near a mountainside *bore* (farmhouse). He also realized that he had toppled into a deep muddy ditch. (140)

In this passage, the combination of a "pinhead light" and a "deep muddy ditch" feels like it could be drawn from the experience of watching car lights approach at night, then waking in a ditch. (140) That later, Kinbote notes "the frozen mud and horror" in his heart may underscore this passage. (258) Additionally, Jakob Gradus experiences a similar scene as a child, when he falls "asleep in a ditch" while waiting to ambush a boy. (151) As a result, Gradus misses the action and wakes up only after the fight occurs. Finally, on the night of his mother's death, King Charles witnesses a drunk man singing a song called "Karlie-Garlie" before falling into a "demilune ditch." (106) Though not conclusive, I think it's worth noticing this ditch pattern in case it helps point to true, concealed events within the Commentary.

The image of a fateful car accident involving Gerald Emerald, Charles Kinbote, and Misha Gordon may be

compelling, but if such an accident occurred, why isn't the aftermath of this night more visible in the novel? By tracing details within the Commentary, I think some evidence emerges. First, following his date with Hazel Shade, Pete Dean is found "selling automobiles in Detroit." (196) In this passage, Kinbote is weirdly defensive of Pete, calling him "innocent" and defending his decision to pursue "a glorious young athlete" instead of Hazel. (195-196) This made me wonder if Pete's decision to sell cars in Michigan could hint that Kinbote, following a confusing and possibly fatal accident, sold his car. Even if Emerald was the one driving, Kinbote may have felt implicated in the accident since it was *his* car. This could also provide a reason for why he emphasizes his "powerful red Kramler" throughout the novel—perhaps he changed the make and color of his car following the accident, but wants to convince the reader that it is, and was always, a red Kramler. (19, 20, 22, 158, 283)

The idea that Charles Kinbote could be perceived as guilty following an accident may also be hinted at in the novel. For example, at one point he medicates himself before seeing a doctor, "to prevent an accelerated pulse from misleading credulous science." (181) To me, this sounds like someone medicating before a lie detector

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test. Kinbote also experiences "a maddening and embarrassing experience at the college indoor swimming pool," and earlier complains, "the plunging of a real person, no matter how sportive or willing, into an invented milieu where he is made to perform in accordance with the invention, strikes one as a singularly tasteless device." (291, 236) In some ways, this sounds like a swim test, which could be relevant if the fatal March night involved a drowning similar to Hazel Shade's.

If Charles Kinbote is perceived as guilty following a car accident, what happens to Gerald Emerald? Because of Emerald's fast and possibly reckless driving, I think it's likely he was the one behind the wheel of the car that night. However, if the car belonged to Kinbote, it's easy to see how Emerald could have fibbed and been let off the hook. Such lying could provide further reason for Kinbote's energetic loathing of Emerald, and also brings to mind Jakob Gradus's murderous rage at the end of the book, when Emerald drops him off on the side of Dulwich Road. Kinbote writes, "One finds it hard to decide what Gradus alias Grey wanted more at that minute: discharge his gun or rid himself of the inexhaustible lava in his bowels." (283) At this point, I think it's important to recall that Kinbote has access to

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a shotgun. Though I believe John Shade’s death was largely invented, I think our commentator should still shoot at *someone* before the end of the novel, especially with the principle of Chekhov’s Gun in mind. Suddenly, Gradus’s car scene made me wonder if Emerald could be the victim of our commentator’s attack. Is there any textual evidence that could hint at such an event?

A passage that could hint at our commentator shooting at Gerald Emerald occurs in Zembla, when Jakob Gradus attempts to shoot and kill a “young man” who is “recuperating from his wounds at a provincial hospital.” (153) Gradus is angry that the man has seemingly dodged punishment, and he fires twice before “the gun was wrested from him by a hefty male nurse.” (153) The passage concludes, “Such things rankle—but what can Gradus do? The huddled fates engage in a great conspiracy against Gradus.” (153) Oddly, this scene mirrors John Shade’s death scene, where a male nurse again saves the day by hitting the shooter over the head with a shovel and retrieving the gun. (291, 294) Together, these passages made me wonder if Charles Kinbote may have tried to kill Emerald following the March accident, especially if the accident resulted in the death of his beloved poet, Misha Gordon. If true, this

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would bring new meaning to Sybil Shade's words following the New Wye shooting, when she strokes Kinbote's hand and says, "There are things for which no recompense in this world or another is great enough." (298) Kinbote claims she is praising him for his attempt to save the poet, but I think Sybil's words could also be interpreted as urging our commentator to accept that even killing the man who caused the poet's death is not enough to redeem the loss.

Now that I've outlined what *could have* happened following such a car accident, I'd like to revisit our commentator, whom I left lying in a muddy ditch. I've determined Gerald Emerald may have been injured in the crash, but if Charles Kinbote were knocked unconscious in a ditch, I think Misha Gordon might have tried to cross the lake to find help. This movement may be hinted at in the Poem, when the author entertains how Hazel Shade ended up in the water. "People have thought she tried to cross the lake ... Others supposed she might have lost her way." (50) Oddly, this image of a person drowning in a wintery lake is repeated in the Index, when Queen Yaruga, Zemblan royalty from the 18th century, drowns "in an ice-hole with her Russian lover during traditional New Year's festivities." (315) Queen Yaruga's Russian lover is an

“adventurer” named Hodinski, who is “a poet of genius” and is “said to have forged in his spare time a famous old Russian *chanson de geste* generally attributed to an anonymous bard of the twelfth century.” (246) To me, Hodinski sounds an awful lot like Kinbote, and the fact that Hodinski’s affair with Queen Yaruga resulted in her “only child” could drive home the outline of a pregnant Misha and Kinbote in this royal depiction. (246) If true, this 18th-century scene could hint that Kinbote ended up in the lake with Misha.

If Hazel Shade’s death in the Poem is examined, more clues about Charles Kinbote’s potential involvement in the lake scene emerge. For example, “Father Time” is the person who finds Hazel in the lake, and earlier in the Poem, Hazel is referred to as “Mother Time.” (50, 44) This weirdly parental depiction is underlined in Kinbote’s note to line 475, when he writes:

*Line 475: A watchman, Father Time*

The reader should notice the nice response to line 312. (218)

Predictably, “line 312” is the line in the Poem where Hazel is referred to as “Mother Time.” (44) To me, this

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language appears to emphasize that the two people involved in this drowning are lovers and even parents together. If Kinbote is pictured as "Father Time," waking in the ditch, struggling up the hill, and finding his pregnant lover Misha Gordon in the icy water, what happens next? (50) Does he go in after the poet?

Though Charles Kinbote has his faults, I think of him as someone who tries hard to do the right thing and often tragically comes up short. There are two excerpts which I think hint that Kinbote goes into the water after Misha Gordon. The first occurs in the Foreword, when he talks about the Poem and writes, "Actually, it turns out to be beautifully accurate when you once make the plunge and compel yourself to open your eyes in the limpid depths under its confused surface." (14) To me, this is a vivid image of someone submerging themselves in water and then opening their eyes as if to search for something or someone. The second excerpt occurs when the poet speaks to Kinbote about finishing the Poem: "He had finished his Third, penultimate, Canto, and had started on Canto Four, his last (see Foreword, see Foreword at once), and would I mind very much if we started to go home ... so that he could plunge back into his chaos and drag out of it, with all its wet stars, his cosmos?" (260) Here, the words "plunge" and "chaos"

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could be callbacks to the “limpid depths” and “confused surface” in the Foreword, especially with Kinbote’s odd insistence that we revisit the Foreword “at once.” Also, the “wet stars” similarly appear on the night of Hazel Shade’s drowning:

Black spring  
Stood just around the corner, shivering  
In the wet starlight and on the wet ground.  
The lake lay in the mist, its ice half drowned.  
(50-51)

Together, I think these passages could point to the idea that Kinbote went into the frozen lake after Misha and dragged the poet out of the water.

This moment—Charles Kinbote plunging into the water after Misha Gordon—would be a desperate, frantic scene, one that should be visible in the text of *Pale Fire*, even if heavily disguised. After some searching, I paused over the passage where King Charles says his final goodbye to Disa. If this emotionally poignant scene has been manipulated by Kinbote and really belongs to Misha, the details could be highly illuminating. King Charles begins by describing a dream he has of Disa, writing,

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The gist, rather than the actual plot of the dream, was a constant refutation of his not loving her. His dream-love for her exceeded in emotional tone, in spiritual passion and depth, anything he had experienced in his surface existence. This love was like an endless wringing of hands, like a blundering of the soul through an infinite maze of hopelessness and remorse. They were, in a sense, amorous dreams, for they were permeated with tenderness, with a longing to sink his head onto her lap and sob away the monstrous past. They brimmed with the awful awareness of her being so young and so helpless. They were purer than his life. (210)

The king continues by referring to his dreams of Disa as "sunken treasure," weirdly tying her to an underwater theme. (210) Later, in person, he compliments her "silver spangled jacket," and on the very next page, Jakob Gradus observes "the lake had developed a scaling of silver." (214, 215) Together, I believe these descriptions connect Disa to the lake, and if this scene belongs to Misha, could indicate that the poet is covered in water, or worse, ice.

Despite the grim clues emerging, King Charles and Disa conclude this passage in an embrace: "I must be on my way," he whispered with a smile and got up. 'Kiss me,' she said, and was like a limp, shivering ragdoll in his

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arms for a moment.” (214) Here, if the poet has been pulled out of the water and is a “limp, shivering ragdoll” in Kinbote’s arms, I think this could mean Misha is frozen, unresponsive, or even dead. (214) By returning to Father Time in the Poem, the last heartbreak detail clicks into place:

*Out of his lakeside shack  
A watchman, Father Time, all gray and bent,  
Emerged with his uneasy dog and went  
Along the reedy bank. He came too late. (50)*

This final image then—Charles Kinbote struggling up the hill, plunging into the “limpid depths” of the lake, pulling a pregnant figure out of the water, holding Misha limp and shivering in his arms, but arriving “too late” to save his poet, could be the simple, tragic loss behind “the frozen mud and horror” in our commentator’s heart, the “endless wringing of hands” that would become his *Pale Fire*. (14, 50, 258, 210)

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## Chapter 5: The Redemption of Hazel Shade

In Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, an account of the narrator's quest to unravel the mystery of his half-brother, a famous novelist named Sebastian Knight, the narrator muses, "I sometimes feel when I turn the pages of Sebastian's masterpiece that the 'absolute solution' is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage I have read too hastily, or that it is entwined with other words whose familiar guise deceived me." (180) When in a hospital the narrator finally encounters who he thinks is Sebastian Knight, he states that "the belief in some momentous truth [Sebastian] would impart to me ... now seemed vague, abstract, as if it had been drowned in some warm flow of simpler, more human emotion." (202) We don't suppose our reading of *Pale Fire* has achieved a solution of absolute clarity. Still, we hope you have found in it

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elements of a “simpler, more human emotion,” especially as compared to the Standard Solution.

At the center of our interpretation of Misha Gordon’s character is the web of repeated references to the Shakespeare play *Hamlet*, a web accessed through the doorway of the character Hazel Shade. While searching for an understanding of why this play was so central to the work, we paused over Charles Kinbote’s Foreword, where he summarizes each Canto of the Poem and notes, “Canto Two, your favorite.” (13) Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is perhaps most visible in the character of Hazel in Canto Two of the Poem, as Hazel’s story neatly follows the outline of Ophelia’s—she sits on her “tumbled bed,” is rejected by a man, and dies by accidental or suicidal drowning. (45, 47, 51) With his comment about “your favorite,” we think Kinbote addresses the poet, his fellow collaborator. This line could be read as him paying tribute to the poet, who would presumably appreciate the glimmers of Shakespeare due to an appreciation for poetry and theater. As part of this attempted homage, we believe Kinbote has highlighted aspects of *Hamlet* that mirror Misha’s life while at the same time bending or inventing parts of the story to align it with the play. The poem “Pale Fire,” describing the night of Hazel’s death, speaks

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of “coordinating these/ Events and objects with remote events/ and vanished objects. Making ornaments/ Of accidents and possibilities.” (63) We think transforming the poet’s death into an Ophelia-like demise is Kinbote’s attempt to make an “ornament” of Misha’s life while simultaneously preserving the poet’s privacy and providing a form of recompense for a loss that he himself feels implicated in.

That *Hamlet* could have a central role in *Pale Fire* is made more convincing when the preeminent status the tragedy had for Nabokov and Russian culture more broadly is recognized. In this chapter, we will lay out Nabokov’s connection to *Hamlet* before showing that Nabokov’s use of the Ophelia trope fits into a long and rich history of Russian authors reworking the Ophelia story. Then, we will argue that the decision to link the fate of Misha Gordon to this literary tradition is a redemptive act both for the poet and for past incarnations of the Ophelia figure. Whereas in Chapter 3, we argued for the redemptive power of art for *perpetrators* of past wrongdoing, in this chapter we will highlight one way art can be put in the service of *victims* of injustice and tragedy.

## *Hamlet*: A Window on Russia

In one of Nabokov's earliest poems, entitled simply "Shakespeare," he declared, "You are among us, you're alive."<sup>1</sup> Nabokov was a lifelong Shakespearean, boasting about sharing a birthday with him, weaving Shakespeare motifs into many of his novels, and claiming that "the verbal poetical texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has known."<sup>2</sup> (*SM*, 13-14; *LDQ*, 8; *BS*, 29)

Nabokov regarded *Hamlet* as "probably the greatest miracle in all literature,"<sup>3</sup> and at one point intended to translate the whole work.<sup>4</sup> He was especially interested in the character of Ophelia. Ophelia's death scene was one of three translations of Shakespeare Nabokov finished early in life,<sup>5</sup> and he deployed the Ophelia theme—which Brian Boyd calls "a recurrent feature of Nabokov's responses to *Hamlet*"—in several of his books, including *Pnin*, *Ada*, and *Pale Fire*.<sup>6</sup> (*P*, 79)

Nabokov's repeated references to *Hamlet* tie him to a long literary tradition in Russia. It has been claimed that Russia surpasses Shakespeare's native England as the place where the Bard's plays are most passionately received, and no play more so than *Hamlet*. (Or "*Gamlet*," as it is called in Russia, because Russian has no "H," so it uses a "G" instead.) This section will

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briefly trace the main ways *Hamlet* has left its mark on different generations of Russian readers, while the next section will do the same specifically for the character Ophelia. (Or “Ofeliia,” as it is spelled in Russian). Then, we will consider what it means for *Pale Fire* to be in conversation with this history.

Since *Hamlet* was first translated by Aleksandr Sumarokov in 1748, Russians have always seen parallels between Prince Hamlet’s fate and their own. “Hamlet is you, me, everyone of us,” the Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky stated.<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Rowe calls *Hamlet* a “Window on Russia” because the way each generation of Russians has interpreted the play serves as a kind of shortcut to understanding the ethos of each particular generation.<sup>8</sup> In 1888, William Morris declared that “Hamlet should have been a Russian, not a Dane.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in 1916, Oscar M. Kartoschinsky wrote, “It was Hamlet that won the deepest sympathy of the Russians. His passivity, his constant reflection, his everlasting pensiveness—are these not typically Russian traits? We can almost say that in Russia alone Hamlet is sincerely loved and understood.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps one reason the tragedy caught on so quickly was due to its political dimension, with the theme of usurpation all too familiar to Russia at the time. The

play was first put on in 1750, but 12 years later, in 1762, it disappeared from the Russian stage.<sup>11</sup> Many speculate that this was because in 1762, Tsar Peter III was murdered by Catherine the Great, and the regicide in the play was seen as too closely paralleling the real one.<sup>12</sup> The future Tsar Paul, the son of Peter and Catherine, became known in European circles as the “Russian Hamlet.” In 1810, shortly after Tsar Paul himself was assassinated, a new Russian translation of *Hamlet* appeared. It was not known at the time whether or not Tsar Paul’s son and successor Alexander had been involved in the plot, but, as Fuad Abdul Muttalib writes, when the translation appeared, “Hamlet’s mourning for his father, was seen to suggest that Tsar Alexander, Paul’s son, was guiltless in his own father’s assassination.”<sup>13</sup>

From the beginning, Russians have not merely copied the play into their own language but instead taken great liberties with Shakespeare’s text to suit the contemporary moment. Sumarokov’s first “translation” preserved only the monologue in Act III and the scene in which Claudius prays on his knees.<sup>14</sup> In it, contrary to Shakespeare’s text, Gertrude becomes a nun, Polonius dies by suicide, and Hamlet becomes happily engaged to Ophelia—and regains the Danish throne.<sup>15</sup> So much did

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Sumarokov deviate from Shakespeare's original text that he didn't even include Shakespeare's name on his publication!<sup>16</sup>

In the early 19th century, the Age of Pushkin, Russia's national poet and preeminent Shakespeareophile,<sup>17</sup> Hamlet was seen less as a political actor than a free spirit oppressed by the obligations of society. Soon, Hamlet was cast in the role of a "superfluous man"—a Russian character type that denoted someone gifted yet unable to fit into the strictures of society.<sup>18</sup> Later in the century, in 1860, Ivan Turgenev, author of *Fathers and Sons*, proclaimed that the "two fundamental directions of the human spirit" are best expressed by the characters of Hamlet and Don Quixote, with the former representing the analytical egoist and the latter representing the ethical idealist.<sup>19</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Shakespeare suffered the same treatment as many other Western writers; he was considered too aristocratic and reactionary or too much of a bourgeois writer who left the revolutionary ideas in his work veiled.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, however, he was made into an official cult figure in Soviet ideology. *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and many other of his plays filled the best Moscow theaters.<sup>21</sup> Except for *Hamlet*. Although some

notable scholarly work related to *Hamlet* was produced, for more than twenty years, *Hamlet* was not performed in Moscow—supposedly because Stalin himself hated Hamlet.<sup>22</sup> The theme of usurpation of power might have also been too close to Stalin’s mind as some have suggested that Stalin killed Lenin himself via poisoning.

During the Soviet era, there was a proposed all-star collaboration directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold that was to have Pablo Picasso design the set, Dmitry Shostakovich compose the music, and Boris Pasternak make a new translation of *Hamlet*.<sup>23</sup> However, this project never happened as Meyerhold’s theater was closed, and he was tragically arrested and killed by the Soviet regime.

In the contemporary era, the era of Putin, *Hamlet* continues to have deep relevance. For example, the writer Mikhail Lansman’s reinterpretation in 2012 featured the characters Vladimir Vladimirovich Claudius and Dmitri Anatolevich Hamlet who clearly reference Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and his second-in-command Dmitry Anatolyevich Medvedev. Modern productions also treat cultural and sociological structures, especially those that have been changed by the arrival in the country of Western-style capitalism.

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One of the most notable contemporary Hamletists is Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, a leading figure in Russian letters and author of the excellently named work *There Once Lived a Mother Who Loved Her Children Until They Moved Back In*. In 2002, Petrushevskaya released *Hamlet. Act 0*, a bleak absurdist prequel to Shakespeare's play, which depicts Hamlet's ghost as a ruse put together by henchmen of the Norwegian King Fortinbras so he can more easily conquer Denmark.

The suggestion that Hamlet's realm could be compromised by deception from a foreign power has eerie resonances in today's Russia, where *Hamlet* has acquired a new layer of meaning in the hands of Putin's one-time chief ideologist, Vladislav Surkov. Once an aspiring theater director, Surkov has been called by the Atlantic "the hidden author of Putinism."<sup>24</sup> In October 2016, a hack of his emails revealed his role in trying to flood Ukraine with propaganda to make that country more easily ripe to be subordinated to Moscow's influence. And Surkov is obsessed with *Hamlet*—so much so that he's penned his own novel drenched in references to the play. Journalist Peter Pomerantsev recalls a conversation with Surkov:

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“Who’s the central figure in Hamlet?” [Surkov] asked. “Who’s the demiurge manipulating the whole situation?”

I said I didn’t know.

“It’s Fortinbras, the crown prince of Norway, who takes over Denmark at the end. Horatio and the visiting players are in his employ: their mission is to tip Hamlet over the edge and foment conflict in Elsinore. Look at the play again. Hamlet’s father killed Fortinbras’s father, he has every motive for revenge. We know Hamlet’s father was a bad king, we’re told both Horatio and the players have been away for years: essentially they left to get away from Hamlet the father. Could they have been with Fortinbras in Norway? At the end of the play Horatio talks to Fortinbras like a spy delivering his end-of-mission report. Knowing young Hamlet’s unstable nature they hired the players to provoke him into a series of actions that will bring down Elsinore’s rulers. This is why everyone can see the ghost at the start. Then when only Hamlet sees him later he is hallucinating. To Muscovites it’s obvious. We’re so much closer to Shakespeare’s world here. On the map of civilisation, Moscow—with its cloak and dagger politics—is somewhere near Elsinore.”

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Both Petrushevskaya and Surkov have hit upon a reading of the play that Nabokov himself had actually highlighted. A character named Professor Hamm in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* writes a work called "The Real Plot of *Hamlet*" with the thesis that "The real hero is of course Fortinbras." (BS, 108)

Additional significance emerges when Nabokov's use of *Hamlet* themes is understood against the backdrop of centuries of Russians' engagement with the play. For *Pale Fire*, this meaning becomes most clear when we consider where Ophelia figures in this history.

## Ophelia in the Russian Soul

Ivan Turgenev, perhaps the third most famous Russian novelist of the second half of the 19th century after Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, presented an essay that declared that all Russians are either "Hamlets" or "Don Quixotes." In it, he claims that "All [Hamlet's] relations with Ophelia are for him only a form of being engrossed in himself."<sup>25</sup> In a similar way, much of the commentary on the history of *Hamlet* in Russia is focused primarily on Hamlet in a way that reflects absorption in the prince

and renders Ophelia “superfluous.” However, several scholars have recently shown that tracing the history of Ophelia through Russian letters yields an understanding that is no less rich—and relevant to *Pale Fire*.

Daria Chernysheva, a scholar of the history of literary translation in Russia, examined the two earliest translations of *Hamlet* into Russian by Aleksandr Sumarokov (1748) and Stepan Viskovatov (1810) and argues that they both deviate significantly from Shakespeare’s original text in a way that puts “a heavy emphasis on the feminine, particularly on the character of Ophelia.”<sup>26</sup> Chernysheva continues: “These *Gamlets* welcome an examination of authority and power from the perspective of the female character, who, in becoming a focal point of dramatic self-expression, proposes a new connection between tragic women and national politics.”<sup>27</sup> This emphasis can be seen in the way that the “translations” deviate significantly from Shakespeare’s text in their depiction of Ophelia’s role. In Sumarokov’s version, the primary antagonist is not Hamlet’s stepfather Claudius but rather Ophelia’s father Polonius, who orders the execution of his own daughter. Ophelia resists Polonius, who eventually dies

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by suicide.<sup>28</sup> In Viskovatov's *Hamlet*, Ophelia appears as Claudius's daughter, not Polonius's.<sup>29</sup>

Chernysheva writes that in the early Russian adaptations of the play, "Ofeliia is a vocal agent, capable of public argumentation and private introspection. She does not hesitate to give her opinion on proper behavior and matters of state. Even when she does speak of love, other considerations color her words—those of moral conviction, civic duty, and personal ambition."<sup>30</sup> Kaara L. Peterson notes that the drowning scene is the central focus of Shakespeare's Ophelia, but that is not the case with the early Russian Ophelias.<sup>31</sup> However, Chernysheva cautions against seeing these Ophelias as "proto-feminists."<sup>32</sup> Chernysheva writes that the Russian version of Ophelia found resonance with the changing role of women at the time: "In eighteenth-century Russian society, the gradual integration of women into public life was performed with the goal not of bettering the position of women but rather of helping to refine men, who were seen as being able to benefit from women's innately good behavior and 'civilizing function.'"<sup>33</sup> However, these depictions "echo the experiences of real-life eighteenth- and nineteenth-century educated women who may have

similarly reacted against social tyranny or defaulted to external sources of authority.”<sup>34</sup>

As Russian contact with the West increased, depictions began to revert back ones that saw Ophelia’s madness as “the outcome of her melancholy, erotomania, or hysteria, all of which at the time were considered to be typical biological and emotional weaknesses of the female sex.”<sup>35</sup> One notable work that subverted this trope, however, is Anton Chekhov, often considered Russia’s most celebrated playwright. In his most famous play, *The Seagull*, written in 1895, a character named Nina seemingly confirms at the play’s opening that she is the Ophelia to the main character Konstantin’s Hamlet. To highlight this, she dresses in white and stands by a body of water.<sup>36</sup> However, Chekhov does not have Nina’s path run parallel to Ophelia’s. Instead, Peter Holland writes that “close though she is to madness, tempting though it is for her to commit suicide, Nina refuses the role, refuses to follow through her implication into the destiny of being Ophelia. The model is conjured up only to be altered.”<sup>37</sup> Instead, it is Konstantin (Hamlet) who dies by suicide.

During the Soviet era, male scholars were “intensely critical” toward Ophelia, writes Natalia Khomenko, an expert on “Soviet Shakespeare.”<sup>38</sup> She also states that for

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some literary critics, Ophelia “is perceived as a deeply ambiguous figure whose lovely surface might hide dark and threatening entrails.”<sup>39</sup> This was part of the Soviet turn in attitude toward Shakespeare. He was heralded as “a proto-revolutionary writer” and his works were “appropriat[ed] ... as evidence that the October Revolution was historically inevitable,” yet Soviets also considered him “an inherently suspect figure” due to his “foreign birth” and “uncertain class origins.”<sup>40</sup>

Ophelia often came to be the locus for these Soviet misgivings about Shakespeare: “Ophelia is the obvious choice for such a displacement of cultural anxiety, since her relationship with Hamlet presents a whole range of problems that cannot be resolved satisfactorily onstage or in academic writing without throwing a shadow of doubt on the character of Hamlet and thus on the heavily idealized playwright,” writes Khomenko.<sup>41</sup> Soviet men identified first and foremost with Hamlet and so overlooked his cruelty toward Ophelia. “When Hamlet is understood to be a proto-socialist hero, neither recognition of his harshness nor subsequent sympathy for Ophelia is a desirable reader response,” Khomenko continues.<sup>42</sup> Because of the Soviet attack on Ophelia, she became a symbol for anti-Soviets. For example, the anti-Stalinist Grigori Kozintsev’s film

depicted Ophelia as a doll in order to highlight, according to Shakespeare scholar Courtney Lehmann, the “fatal diminution of the subject under the shadow of the Stalinist patriarch.”<sup>43</sup>

Khomenko notes that the depiction of Ophelia during the Soviet Union was differentiated based on gender. “If anything, Soviet ideology, while claiming gender equality, privileged masculine homosocial relationships, which women could truly enter only as a good, all-forgiving mother or an androgynous colleague in party pursuits. Not surprisingly, Soviet male writers are acutely uncomfortable with any feminine presence near their proto-revolutionary hero [Hamlet].”<sup>44</sup>

Soviet women creators often attempted to “reclaim” Ophelia. Khomenko writes:

Marina Tsvetaeva in “Ophelia—to Hamlet” and its companion piece “Ophelia—in Defence of the Queen” (1923) adopts the persona of Ophelia to speak back to the Danish prince, pointing out the flaws in his worldview and conduct. Similarly, in her novel *The Leopard from the Peak of Kilimanjaro ...* (1965), the Soviet science fiction writer Olga Larionova stages a performance of the play, and subsequently re-writes Ophelia’s death, only to show to what extent this heroine is

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misinterpreted by the male narrator, who is an ideological heir to both Hamlet and, as the title suggests, Ernest Hemingway.<sup>45</sup>

Recent Russian works continue to make use of Ophelia imagery. For example, Khomenko points to Olga Nechaeva, who published the poem "Ophelia, float and sing ..." in which the heroine is told "Everybody died—but you are alive,/ everybody left—you are still here."<sup>46</sup> Khomenko comments: "Having broken free, as Nechaeva urges, from the constraints of the Shakespeare ideology ... the figure of Ophelia can be used in speaking against the centralizing impulse [of Soviet ideology], so strong even in today's Russian Federation, with its growing emphasis on traditional gender and family roles."<sup>47</sup>

Khomenko concludes:

Because of her history as an ideological scapegoat, for Russian women writers Ophelia can act as a role model who has not been directly implicated in the construction of statehood and can thus be used to evade the centralizing impulse. As an unmarried girl caught in the turmoil of political unrest and mistreated by her beloved, Ophelia enables a frank examination of women's position in a highly

ideological context. While in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, Shakespeare and his *Hamlet* are frequently appropriated as the unchallengeable center of the national ideology, the story of Ophelia is the story of subversive potential open to women seeking to declare themselves as active, speaking, and desiring subjects, staking out their place in the state narrative.<sup>48</sup>

## **Stitching Hazel to Ophelia**

We have argued that Charles Kinbote's decision to link Misha Gordon to Ophelia is a tribute to the poet's interest in *Hamlet*, and that he is motivated to make this tribute as a way to offer a recompense for the poet's death, which he himself feels implicated in. However, there is an additional layer to the move of connecting, on the surface level, Misha to Ophelia: what are Nabokov's intentions? In this section, we will argue that stitching Misha to Ophelia via Hazel Shade informs how the reader views the poet in three important ways.

First, the Ophelia comparison helps one understand why the fate of Hazel Shade has been left largely uninterrogated in many interpretations of the novel.

## The Redemption of Hazel Shade

That readers unquestioningly view Hazel’s predicament as a case of suicide after romantic and social rejection is understandable because it has been reinforced by centuries of the same story. Indeed, if one becomes aware that John Shade’s character is playing into a trope—for example, by noting the misogyny of Soviet commentators who disparaged Ophelia during the same time period—one is given reason to believe his rendering of Hazel could be inaccurate. Likewise, when one sees alternative possibilities for Ophelia across history, such as the examples highlighted by Khomenko and Chernysheva in the previous section, it gives one grounds to believe the reading of Ophelia as a “woman spurned” says more about the reader than about the character herself. The emergence of alternative possibilities extends also to characters who follow in Ophelia’s narrative footsteps, such as Hazel, or indeed, Misha.

Second, having Ophelia in the back of one’s mind when recognizing that the dominant view of Hazel Shade is a misperception heightens one’s sense of injustice. Things one can excuse or write off as isolated incidents become much worse when they are connected to a pattern. This is one reason that slogans like “never again” or “no more” have power: the repetition of an

injustice often compounds the injustice. Recognizing that the idea that Hazel would die by suicide after the rejection by a male love interest would seem natural also shows how little the trope has evolved. That Ophelia's fate is just as possible in the 1950s United States as it was in English society 300 years ago makes it even more frustrating. And it implicates not just the character of John Shade or certain readers of *Pale Fire* but those who have perpetuated this trope generation after generation.

Third, the recognition of a trope not only brings understanding to a situation and heightens the injustice, it also gives one a better footing to challenge it. Once one has identified the dominant view of Hazel Shade as a common trope, one may feel emboldened to deviate from this interpretation. Additionally, one may be inspired by periods when authors and actors boldly challenged accepted interpretations, such as the alternative views of Ophelia described by Khomenko and Chernysheva. When one's attention is drawn to a certain trope, one is more easily able to question, avoid, or overcome the trope in “real” life.

One recent novel that embodies this process of recognition, heightened injustice, and overcoming is Elif Batuman's 2022 novel *Either/Or*, which is of special interest to us because the main character, Selin, subverts

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the Ophelia trope while referencing both *Pale Fire* and *Hamlet*. In *Either/Or*, Selin is a college sophomore who turns to literature as a way to wrestle with the tumult in her life. She becomes engrossed in *Nadja*, a book by André Breton, and takes furious notes: “I started keeping a running record in my notebook of everything in *Nadja* that seemed related to any of my problems. Soon, all I wanted to be doing was to be working on this list.”<sup>49</sup> While making her list, she says she begins to feel kinship with Charles Kinbote from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*:

The rows of page numbers and quotes looked a little bit like *Pale Fire*: a novel where the first half was a poem, and the second half was an autobiographical commentary by the poet’s mentally ill next-door neighbor. I wished I could write a book like that about *Nadja*, where I could explain each line and how it applied in such a specific way to things that had happened in my life. I knew that nobody would want to read such a book; people would die of boredom.<sup>50</sup>

As the novel progresses, Selin increasingly recognizes herself in the lives of fictional women. She compares her relationship with a man named Ivan, a

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senior whom Selin met during her first year of college, with Søren Kierkegaard's novella "The Seducer's Diary." She states: "The more I read, the more parallels I found to my own experience. The emails Ivan and I had exchanged, which had felt like something new we had invented, now seemed to have been following some kind of playbook."<sup>51</sup> In the same way Nabokov links Hazel Shade to Ophelia, here it seems Batuman has tethered Selin to Kierkegaard's heroine, Cordelia. Finally, although she doesn't compare herself to Ophelia explicitly, Selin muses about reading *Hamlet* in high school and contemplates dying by suicide as a response to being romantically spurned. (*Hamlet* comes up later in the book as well when one of her friends goes to Wellesley to watch a woman play Polonius in the play).<sup>52</sup>

If we lay *Hamlet*, "The Seducer's Diary," *Pale Fire*, and *Either/Or* on the table, along with their publication dates of 1603, 1843, 1962, and 2022, we see four separate heroines seem to embark on painfully similar romantic paths across place and time: They slip from certain narrow ideals of their day—Ophelia and Cordelia are too easily seduced, while Hazel and Selin fail to provide the allure necessary to retain men—are subsequently rejected by men, and experience despair,

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madness, and even suicidal ideation or death. During Ivan's lengthy, confusing rejection of Selin, he writes to her,

Man, you really screwed it up with me big time. Never tell a guy you love him until he tells you seven times first. Otherwise, you are playing a losing game. Even if he was thinking about saying he loves you, he can't now, you have destroyed the mystery.<sup>53</sup>

In the course of grieving this relationship, Selin remains on the well-trodden path of despair and even suicidal ideation:

I thought longingly about jumping out a window—not our bedroom window, which was blocked by the bed and was only on the third floor and overlooked the turtle-shaped kiddie pool of a childcare center—but some other, higher window. For some reason, the image that came to my mind was of Peter explaining to someone in a quiet, serious voice that Selin's problems had been more serious than anyone had realized. No way, I thought. I was going to stick around and bury those people.<sup>54</sup>

Thankfully, the image of a classmate earnestly explaining her demise jolts Selin away from her contemplation of suicide. With the aid of medication, she experiences some relief from her depression. Though Selin slips away from the fate of suicide, she does not entirely outrun the idea that romance with a man will bring her life meaning. For much of the remainder of the book, she pursues other sexual and romantic encounters with men compulsively, sometimes overriding her own discomfort and pain. By the very end of the novel, however, Selin decides to leave for Russia and stop allowing men to dictate her life's moves. She concludes, "I had a powerful sense of having escaped something: of having finally stepped outside the script."<sup>55</sup>

Selin has gone through the process of identifying that she is following a trope or "playbook." Her growing awareness of this trope causes her to be defiant in the face of it and ultimately leads her to step "outside the script." Just as stitching Hazel Shade to Ophelia helps one interpret Hazel differently, stitching *Either/Or*'s Selin to Ophelia helps one contextualize how powerful it is when Selin subverts the tragic pattern altogether, opening the door wide for readers to perhaps do the same, both in literature and in life.

## Stitching Ophelia to Hazel

Throughout this book, we have emphasized how the connection between the present and the past is a two-way street. Just as viewing Hazel Shade's situation in light of the tradition of Ophelia can help free our understanding of Hazel and open the door for her and future people to be redeemed from the burdensome trope, so too does how we view Hazel and those in the same situation today have reverberations for those in the past who were constrained by this trope.

In his fiction, Nabokov puts forward the idea that it is just as valid to be concerned with the suffering of long-deceased people as it is for those living today. The titular character of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* "could not understand why these [] people did not feel exactly the same spasm of rebellious grief when thinking of some similar calamity that had happened as many years ago as there were miles to China. Time and space were to him measures of the same eternity." (RLSK, 66)

If the idea of time as a web is embraced, then it is not just Ophelia who changes the way one sees Hazel Shade,

but the other way as well. What happens to Hazel and how we act in response to her character also affects how we view Ophelia, and indeed the Ophelias that have come before. “By stepping outside of the script,” one redeems past people who were in the same position of suffering in two ways. First, by stepping outside the script, one acknowledges that the past judgment about people in the same position was incorrect. Consider the example of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. The mob in the book may condemn Prynne, but the mob has no way of compelling the reader to accept their judgment of her, and the reader’s judgment can triumph over the mob’s to restore to Prynne “poetic justice.”<sup>56</sup>

Second, by stepping outside the script, one can dedicate oneself to breaking a cycle “in the name of” those who came before. As we saw with the idea of “dying in vain” that was expressed in Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, the living have some control over the meaning of a past death. If living people fail to observe, call out, and break the cycle that trapped so many individuals in Ophelia’s situation, then these Ophelias’ deaths will, in a meaningful way, be denigrated. Just as we argued about the retroactive power of action to address past wrongdoing, so too can

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action in the present change the way a past ill is viewed. In the Ophelia and Gettysburg examples, the stakes are life and death, but less extreme forms of suffering can also be rendered diminished or, on the contrary, affirmed.

In this chapter, we have focused primarily on the Ophelia-Hazel Shade connection, but let us also note briefly that there is a lesson for the Hamlet-Charles Kinbote linkage as well that runs in both directions. On the one hand, viewing Kinbote as a kind of Hamlet gives him nobility in our estimation. One may be less likely to view him as a *pathetic* egomaniac. At the same time, there exists a tendency to see characters with mental illness in literature as heroic, like Hamlet, while more often, such illness tends to manifest as it does in Kinbote. Understanding the destructiveness Kinbote exhibits might draw attention to the destructiveness of Hamlet's life. Both also highlight the trope of untreated mental illness. We look at Kinbote differently when we see *Pale Fire* as a manifesto written by someone with mental illness and a gun, and this should cause us to wonder how *Hamlet* would have gone differently as well if the Danish prince lived in a time with adequate treatment for mental illness.

“Stitching” together characters and people is not just some formulaic performance. The difference between a moving connection and something that is “cringe” cannot be prescribed in advance, but rather requires intuition and an understanding of the “web of the world.” There are many ways to “get it wrong” when it comes to connecting present situations to those of the past. This raises an issue of the dangers of attempts to redeem. For just as one has the power to affect the past positively, so too does one in a negative way. Recall that Walter Benjamin stated that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.”<sup>57</sup> It is also true that the dead are not safe from efforts on their behalf. For example, failures in one’s interpretations of Hazel Shade also have the power to harm past Ophelias. This means redemption has a dangerous potential, which is all the more reason to study it carefully so that one doesn’t end up doing more harm than good. Indeed, it is arguable that this is what Charles Kinbote has done. And for all we know, he is linking Misha Gordon to *Hamlet* without any true understanding of what the poet has gone through. As the book progresses, Kinbote patently displays this dangerous potential for redemption: He appears to shoot someone. He writes a strange book.

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His desire to redeem is heavily interfered with by emotions such as guilt, fear, egoism, and more.

Still, there are shimmers of redemption in *Pale Fire*, even if it's very far from perfect. This leaves readers in the position of trying to understand and redeem Charles Kinbote's attempt at redemption. One of the notable things about *Pale Fire* is that almost every single major character ends up dead, yet it is far from a hopeless book, likely because the story continues in the hands of the readers. In this respect, *Pale Fire* is similar to *Hamlet*, where Prince Hamlet uses his dying breaths to tell Horatio:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile  
And in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story.<sup>58</sup>

The act of telling a story holds the potential of achieving a measure of “poetic justice” in a harsh world, and it affords the living the possibility of linking the redemption of their world with a web that extends into the past and future.



## Conclusion: Sergey

This book has been an attempt to respond to the idea of the Permanence of the Past through a close examination of *Pale Fire*. Whereas one who believes that the past is fixed would counsel there's no going back, and that one should instead invest oneself in the future, we have tried to show how the world of *Pale Fire* manifests the impulse to oppose the past's permanence, primarily by turning to art. We support Nabokov's idea that humans exist within webs of meaning, and that these webs extend into the past. These webs mean past events are never really past, because one can still touch the strings of such events in the present.

However, there is one unaddressed subject that casts a shadow over any discussion of Vladimir Nabokov and redemption. So far, we have discussed how redemption factors into his fictional characters. However, as we mentioned in the Preface, Vladimir's life was not light

on loss. One might wonder how he related to redemption in his own life, to the loved ones he lost in the mass violence of the early 20th century. We have suggested he does this in *Pale Fire* with respect to his father (and homeland), but this question becomes especially complex when it comes to the death of his brother Sergey.

In 1966, Vladimir Nabokov released the “final version” of his literary memoir *Speak Memory* fifteen years after the first edition appeared. (14) Among several changes to the work, he added two pages about his younger brother Sergey, a subject he admitted he had “balked in” writing about in the first version of the memoir. (SM, 257) After discussing his youngest brother Kirill, Vladimir turned to Sergey: “For various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother. He is a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections,” he wrote. (SM, 257) One of those “various reasons” was that his brother Sergey was gay, although Vladimir is unwilling to say this directly in his memoir: During his school years, Vladimir says “a page from his diary that I found on his desk and read, and in stupid wonder showed to my tutor, who promptly showed it to my father,

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abruptly provided a retroactive clarification of certain oddities of behavior on his part.” (*SM*, 258)

While the brothers eventually achieved “quite amiable terms” during their time as exiles in Paris, when Vladimir left Europe, Sergey stayed in Berlin, where he was persecuted for his sexuality. (*SM*, 258) He was imprisoned by the Nazis, and after his release was arrested again for speaking out against the Nazi government. He died in a concentration camp in Hamburg, Germany, where he had been sent after being arrested for allegedly being a “British spy.” (*SM*, 258)

Vladimir concludes his discussion of his brother Sergey by saying, “It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem.” (*SM*, 258) When we first read those lines, we were perplexed. After having read *Pale Fire* and some of his other works, we had thought that redemption was central to Vladimir’s view of art. However, now we thought he was saying that his brother’s life is one that could not be replaced or redeemed. If redemption wasn’t possible for the loss of one’s immediate family, then what purpose did it really have?

## *Rhyming with Redeemer*

The details of Vladimir's life, which we sketched in Chapter 1, have been the subject of countless articles and books, including his own *Speak Memory*. Sergey's life, on the other hand, has been pieced together from a few existing letters and the recollections and diaries of friends and family members.<sup>1</sup> Two of the most comprehensive accounts are a 2000 article in *Salon* by Lev Grossman and the 2011 book *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* by Paul Russell, which we will discuss in more detail below.

Sergey and Vladimir's lives bear some outward resemblance. Sergey was born in St. Petersburg on March 12, 1900, just 11 months after Vladimir. They both were raised in a Russian aristocratic family. Both were exiled upon the onset of the Russian Revolution. Both took identical degrees at Cambridge in Russian and French and played tennis together there. (*SM*, 258) After graduation, both brothers worked at a bank in Berlin, which both quit almost immediately.<sup>2</sup> Sergey then moved to Paris and taught English and Russian. (*SM*, 258)

When it came to demeanor, however, "No two brothers could have been less alike," wrote Lucie Lion Nohl:<sup>3</sup>

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Vladimir was the young *homme du monde*—handsome, romantic in looks, something of a snob and a gay charmer—Serge was the dandy, an aesthete and balletomane ... [He] was tall and very thin. He was very blond and his tow-colored hair usually fell in a lock over his left eye. He suffered from a serious speech impediment, a terrible stutter. Help would only confuse him, so one had to wait until he could say what was on his mind, and it was usually worth hearing ... He attended all the Diaghilev premieres wearing a flowing black theater cape and carrying a pommeled cane.<sup>4</sup>

In Paris, Sergey became involved in some of the city's most famous cultural circles. He fell in love with an Austrian man named Hermann Thieme. Sergey also converted to Catholicism. In 1941, despite attempts to hide his relationship with Thieme, which included them seeing each other only rarely, he was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned for four months. After he was released, Sergey began speaking out against the Nazi regime. He was arrested again in 1943 for making "subversive" statements and likely also for trying to help a former Cambridge friend who was a prisoner of war.<sup>5</sup> He was sent to a concentration camp near Hamburg. Grossman writes that Sergey's conduct in the camp left

a lasting impression on survivors: “Nicolas Nabokov’s son Ivan says that after the war, survivors from Neuengamme would telephone his family out of the blue—they were the only Nabokovs in the book—just to talk about Sergei.”<sup>6</sup> He continues, “They said he was extraordinary. He gave away lots of packages he was getting, of clothes and food, to people who were really suffering.”<sup>7</sup> Sergey died in the concentration camp on January 9, 1945, four months before it was liberated.<sup>8</sup>

If *Pale Fire* is about someone trying to redeem a dead loved one, why didn’t Vladimir attempt to do this for his brother? Several possibilities might be proposed. The first reason may be that Vladimir judged him for being gay. At least by the end of the 1990s, readers and critics of Vladimir’s work began discussing in depth his views on sexual orientation. As Grossman notes, referring to Sergey’s marriage to Thieme, “Not once did Nabokov, the master observer, describe an instance of mature love between adults of the same sex—even though a glowing example of that love was right before his eyes.”<sup>9</sup> He subscribed to the belief that being gay was genetic, and his son said that Vladimir would have been “less than happy” had his son been so.<sup>10</sup> Grossman writes that “At no point did Nabokov, who in ‘Lolita’ would wring pathos from the sufferings of a child

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molester, ever have the courage to publicly state that his brother was gay.”<sup>11</sup>

It would be simple enough to write Vladimir’s views off as simply being a product of his time, but there were many examples in his family of members being accepting. Vladimir had other gay relatives besides Sergey, including his uncles Konstantin Nabokov and Vasily “Uncle Ruka” Rukavishnikov, and other people in his family were welcoming of Sergey, including La Generalsha and Uncle Kostya.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Vladimir notes in *Speak Memory* that an essay by his father, whom he revered deeply, “reveals a very liberal and ‘modern’ approach” to sexual orientation. (*SM*, 179)

Some have suggested that Vladimir did try to write about his brother, albeit subtly. Grossman says Sergey is “a crucially important figure in his brother’s work,”<sup>13</sup> and he has been identified as present in the pages of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the story “Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster,” and *Ada*.<sup>14</sup> *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* might be the clearest example, which is about a brother writing about their dead brother. However, the brother being written about resembles Vladimir far more than Sergey, and Vladimir in his autobiography admitted that his attempt to write about Sergey in that book was not sufficient. (*SM*, 257)

Regarding *Pale Fire*, in which Charles Kinbote is perhaps Vladimir's most visible gay character, Edmund White writes that "at the time of the novel's publication, many gay men were vexed by the satirical portrait [of Kinbote]."<sup>15</sup> He notes that recently, however, the portrayal "seems perfectly acceptable." Readers have increasingly begun to read Nabokov as criticizing his contemporaries' views about sexuality. Steven Belletto writes that in *Pale Fire* "Nabokov is criticizing the sociopolitical implications of a pop-Freudian understanding of homosexuality."<sup>16</sup> Walton writes that in Zembla, the "homoerotic element is explicitly acknowledged, sanctioned, and celebrated"<sup>17</sup> and that "Kinbote is not seen as sick or needing a cure."<sup>18</sup> Walton notes that Nabokov's use of this trope with both Kinbote and Hazel Shade shows he is aware of it as more than just an isolated incident.<sup>19</sup> In an article on Kinbote's "transparent closet," Jean Walton writes:

Though it was too late, after Sergey's death, to 'make amends,' I would suggest that Nabokov's fictional construction, however ambivalent, of a specifically gay protagonist in *Pale Fire* was the means by which the author could explore his own partial complicity with the cultural imperatives that marginalized and eventually annihilated people like

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his brother. Whether it was his intention or not, Nabokov, in his perceptive delineation of the structure of the transparent closet, made visible the extent to which the heterosexual imperative of the post-war United States was in many ways consistent with the fascism of Nazi Germany.”<sup>20</sup>

Walton concludes by saying that while “it would be fanciful to characterize Kinbote as some kind of pre-Stonewall gay activist, ... his delineation of the erotics of male-male desire make it possible to read *Pale Fire* as the site of a sexual dissidence that begins to challenge [in Kinbote’s phrase] ‘our cynical age of frenzied heterosexualism.’”<sup>21</sup>

When reading more carefully Vladimir’s statement about Sergey—“It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem”—we find that Vladimir wasn’t actually saying redemption was *impossible* for his brother. (*SM*, 258) Rather, the passage is saying that the “*mere recognition of such a want*” is insufficient. Thus, rather than denying redemption, we read this as saying it is not just enough to *want* redemption or recognize the need for it—one must go beyond that. This leads us to conclude

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that Vladimir is saying redemption requires work, which is what John's Thesis also acknowledges. And it is work that can fail, just as Vladimir believes his early work about Sergey has done.

To believe redemption is possible leads to many further questions: Am I someone who is capable of doing redemptive work? If redemption is *work*, what if I am not good at it? If there is nothing I can do, I can't be blamed for doing nothing. But if redemption is possible and I do it poorly, then I am blameworthy. I am letting people down. In the face of such questions, we think it is important to recall Walter Benjamin's statement that redemptive power is *weak*. Furthermore, redemptive power is possessed not by each person but by each *generation*, so we are not the only ones tasked with such work. If one does not feel capable of certain redemptive work, there may be others who can help do it in one's place.

In regard to Sergey, just because Vladimir didn't feel he succeeded in redeeming his brother's life doesn't mean others couldn't pick up the threads. For example, Paul Russell ends his book *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* with Vladimir's line about Sergey's life being unredeemed,<sup>22</sup> and in some sense, Russell's book is an answer to this statement. *The Unreal Life of Sergey*

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*Nabokov* centers Sergey and does him justice. Russell's writing is uncannily like Vladimir's and ultimately leaves one with a much fuller image of Sergey's life than the one rendered by his brother.

In *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, Paul Russell weaves a narrative together that flits between the present, where Sergey struggles in bombed-out Berlin, and the past, where he journeys through life with the hope and melancholy of one who lives unwillingly on the outskirts. He is a child with a stutter that never leaves him, a boy who falls in love with other boys, and a man who reaches for opium and religion alternately. The theme of redemption is considered directly. A line put into Sergey's father's mouth is "There are sentiments so deplorable that no beautiful words can redeem them."<sup>23</sup> His relationship with his older brother, Vladimir, is challenging. Despite both fleeing Russia and later attending Cambridge together, the brothers are not terribly close, and Russell indicates that Sergey's sexual orientation and Vladimir's potential sexual abuse as a child may contribute to the distance between them. After Vladimir immigrates to America, Sergey's life continues in Europe where he has fallen in love with Thieme and is eventually murdered by the Nazis.

Notably, Sergey believes in redemption. After the death of his friend Davide Gornotsvetov his character reflects, “grief had faded into a belief that the dead do not vanish entirely but remain with us, watching over us.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, he states, “we only, any of us, live in art. No matter whether it is in books, painting, music, or dance, it is there we flourish, there we survive.”<sup>25</sup>

Throughout *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, one never knows what parts are from Russell’s research and what parts are fiction. For example, in the scene where Vladimir reads Sergey’s diary, he encounters the line, “I AM FIERCELY IN LOVE WITH OLEG’S SOUL.”<sup>26</sup> Here, Oleg is also the name of Charles Kinbote’s childhood love, so it’s hard to tell if Oleg is a real person, or if Russell has simply aligned this scene with *Pale Fire*. However, to scrutinize such details too closely might miss the point. What “really happened” may not always be helpful. In many cases of lives cloaked in injustice, the nature of any existing records may be biased, and any official records may only contain a portion of what really happened. In regard to Sergey, to rely solely on available records would be to offer a skewed view, one that may not accurately touch his inner life or what mattered most to him. As Russell

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writes, “a tricky thing, this parsing of reality and invention.”<sup>27</sup>

Also throughout *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, Paul Russell depicts Sergey as sharing the real-life Vladimir’s distrust with realism. For example, Vladimir writes in the Afterword of *Lolita* that “reality” is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes.” (L, 312) When attempting redemptive work, this sentiment does not mean that reality does not exist or that one should simply make things up to support one’s agenda. In cases like Russell’s, we believe it is still one’s job as a historical writer to do one’s best research. However, there are cases where one *can* use fiction to make the reader aware that historical records do not provide the full image of what happened. Indeed, just because a life was not well documented does not mean it didn’t matter. Finally, when rendering the history of something that doesn’t have many sources, the scholar Saidiya Hartman recommends that sometimes, one should “honor silence.”<sup>28</sup> Put simply, there are some details one shouldn’t try to fill in with fiction, because to do so would be inherently insufficient. For example, though Russell provides a moving, robust image of Sergey’s life, he does not attempt to give the reader an inside look into the concentration camps. The story

fades into silence when Sergey crosses that particular, sinister threshold.

If Paul Russell's *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* is redemptive for Sergey, then this redemption may also extend to others who were victims of the Nazi's persecution due to their sexuality and gender identity. Tens of thousands of LGBTQ+ people were imprisoned by the Nazis, and over 10,000 were deported to concentration camps, where the majority were killed.<sup>29</sup> After the war, the Allies refused to revoke the law that had led to this persecution and refused to recognize LGBTQ+ people as victims of the Nazis, leaving their families unable to receive redress for their losses that had been afforded to other groups. Many who were persecuted remained imprisoned.<sup>30</sup> It took decades before this history became officially acknowledged, and even today it is often omitted from education about the Third Reich.<sup>31</sup> Stories can be a form of redress or redemption, and in some cases may be the only kind that is possible or achievable.

The fact that others can do redemptive work on one's behalf doesn't let one off the hook. Rather, it should cause one to reflect, "what strings do I hold myself, what stories do I have the power to affect?" And even if such work is not possible in the present, that

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doesn't mean it will be impossible in the future. The nature of the web means this process is always cooperative.

To conclude, we would like to highlight a concept in Russian literature called *unfinalizability*. This concept was coined by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in a commentary on the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, author of *Crime and Punishment*. While it usually applies to the inner life of characters, Bakhtin also applies the idea more generally. For example, he asserts that when we say the world is “unfinalized,” this means “Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.”<sup>32</sup> Another way Bakhtin phrases this idea is that “all endings are merely new beginnings.”<sup>33</sup> Based on this concept, one cannot accept that the final word on an event has been spoken—there is always a chance that something in the future can cast it in a different light.

Perhaps the most famous example of “unfinalizability” in Russian literature is in Mikhail Bulgakov’s book *Master and Margarita*. At the beginning of the novel, a character named Berlioz expresses supreme confidence that he will go to a party

that evening. Instead, his head is chopped off by a tram after he slips and falls on spilled oil. The character John Shade has a similar moment in *Pale Fire* when he writes that he's "reasonably sure" he'll wake tomorrow and that "the day will be fine," but instead ends up shot dead. (69) This uncertainty, this inability to plan, this failure to have closure, can be unsettling because it means nothing is secure. However, the flipside of this concept is that there is always the possibility for change.

The most famous line in *Master and Margarita* is "Manuscripts don't burn." This means that even if the physical vessel of a truth, such as a manuscript, is destroyed, it still exists within a realm that cannot be touched, and the experience that gave rise to the truth can never be fully obliterated. The novel *Master and Margarita* was written in Russia during the violently oppressive Stalin era, and so the line "manuscripts don't burn" has become a slogan of faith for those making art in the worst of circumstances. Even if one is persecuted, even if one's creations are censored and never see the light of day, they are still important, and somehow, they survive.

*Master and Margarita* was published in the late 1960s, well after the author's 1940 death, so it's highly unlikely Nabokov would have heard about this novel

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while drafting *Pale Fire*. However, the image of a burning book saved from oblivion is something central to *Pale Fire* as well, the idea that some version of the past lingers—there is something that can't be obliterated. In this way, perhaps the past is permanent after all—not because it can't be changed, but because it doesn't go away to begin with.

In this book, we have theorized that redemptive work is not just wishful thinking, nor naivety, nor a savior complex. It is ordinary, everyday, and labor-intensive. It is work that can go wrong or backfire, and it is mixed with thousands of other human emotions. Humanity's redemptive power is weak: it will always be insufficient, and there will always be more to do. But we have tried to argue through our reading of *Pale Fire* that redemptive work is an integral part of the human experience, one that prevents defeat from being final, gives hope that it is never too late, and promises that we never go it alone.



## Abbreviations

All page numbers for *Pale Fire* come from Nabokov, Vladimir, *Pale Fire*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1962; edition date 1989). The references to the rest of his works come with the following abbreviations from the following editions:

*A* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Ada, Or Ardor*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1969; edition published 1990).

*BS* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Bend Sinister*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1947; edition published 1990).

*DBDV* Nabokov, Vladimir, and Edmund Wilson, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

## Abbreviations

*Gf* Nabokov, Vladimir, *The Gift*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1963; edition published 1991).

*Gl* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Glory*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1971; edition published 1991).

*IB* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Invitation to a Beheading*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1959; edition published 1989).

*KQK* Nabokov, Vladimir, (New York: Penguin Classics, copyright 1968, edition published 2012).

*LDQ* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lectures on Don Quixote*, (San Diego: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1983).

*LL* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lectures on Literature*, (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1980).

*L* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lolita*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1955; edition published 1997).

*LV* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Letters to Véra*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

*M* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Mary*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1970; edition published 1989).

## Abbreviations

*P* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Pnin*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1953; edition published 1989).

*RLSK* Nabokov, Vladimir, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, (New York: New Directions, copyright 1941; edition published 2008).

*SM* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Speak Memory*, (New York: Vintage International, copyright 1967; edition published 1989).

*SO* Nabokov, Vladimir, *Strong Opinions*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, copyright 1973).



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## Conclusion: Sergey

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