

Lara Delage-Toriel, Université Marc Bloch (Strasbourg II)

Reflected Obsessions, Obsessive Reflections: Nabokov's Pale Fire

In an interview he gave in 1964, Nabokov made the following statement: "I take gleeful pleasure every morning in refuting the Viennese quack by recalling and explaining the details of my dreams without using one single reference to sexual symbols or mythical complexes. I urge my potential patients to do likewise" (Strong Opinions, 47). 'The Viennese quack' is just one amid the fantastic array of nicknames with which our author graced Freud, time and again, with relentless – might one dare say obsessive – regularity, in every one of his novels, as well as in his forewords, interviews, autobiography, letters and lectures. Warning signs against Freudians, energetically planted at the thresholds of his novels, are a commonplace ritual, almost a passage obligé, as one may gather from the following introduction to Bend Sinister: "All my books should be stamped Freudians, Keep Out" (xviii). This diktat notwithstanding, Freud himself keeps on popping in and out of his fictional worlds in a manner which the Viennese doctor, or 'witch doctor,' would have deemed rather symptomatic.

My purpose here is not to attempt a post-mortem analysis of the writer, nor even to reflect upon the relationship between Nabokov and Freud, but rather to show how certain concepts rooted out by Freud -- in this case 'obsession' -- not only blossom in but also shape the very structure of Nabokov's fiction, of which Pale Fire is a particularly brilliant emblem. If Freud is such a constant butt of attack, it is most likely because Nabokov considered him his most worthy rival, both men hunting over the same grounds, that is, the vastly complex workings of the psyche. This turf war reaches beyond Nabokov's fictional realms, for their plots not only involve the tortuous minds of his characters, but also those of his readers. It is no small wonder, then, that he addresses his readers as 'potential patients'.

Since its publication in 1962, Pale Fire has brought to light a most impressive number of readerly pathologies, among which, most persistently, an obsessive compulsion to track down the true story behind the surface story and pinpoint the identity of the narrative authority. Although Nabokov often features unreliable narrators, Pale Fire takes the narrative problem a step further by offering us a hybrid, outwardly bicephalous structure: on one side, a poem called 'Pale Fire', apparently written by John Shade, on the other, a critical framework featuring a foreword, a series of annotations under the title of 'Commentary' and an index, all apparently written by Charles Kinbote. As Gérard Genette points out in Paratexts, everything that surrounds the actual text and serves to present it to the reader – such as forewords and afterwords, titles, epigraphs, etc. holds an ambiguous, straddling position, the "double antithetical prefix [para] signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest on host, slave to master". Moreover, a paratextual object "is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside." (1n2). In Pale Fire, Nabokov dramatizes this permeability between the inside – Shade's poem – and the outside – Kinbote's surrounding text.

This is quite visible from the very first pages of the novel, in the 'Foreword' written by Charles Kinbote. From the outset, it appears that Kinbote occupies a double position: he is John Shade's neighbour and friend, but he is also the person who has survived Shade's accidental death and has managed to salvage from greedy hands the manuscript of the poem he has proceeded to annotate. Yet Kinbote isn't any old kind of annotator, as can be guessed

from the way he discusses his relationship to the poem: “one’s attachment to a masterpiece may be utterly overwhelming, especially when it is the underside of the weave that entrances the beholder and only begetter, whose own past intercoils there with the fate of the innocent author” (Pale Fire, 16; henceforth referred to as PF). To the first-time reader, Kinbote’s convoluted prose remains rather cryptic: what is obvious is the strong – “overwhelming” -- emotional or psychological involvement of the annotator vis-à-vis a text to which he feels biographically connected. If one observes the syntax a little more closely, one notices there is a grammatical indetermination in Kinbote’s phrasing: “it is the underside of the weave that entrances the beholder and only begetter”. To which grammatical subject is the relative pronoun “that” related? In other words, is it the underside or the weave that entrances the beholder and only begetter? Is Kinbote positioning himself as the begetter of the underside, that is the masterpiece, which amounts to claiming he is the true author of the poem, or is he rather the begetter of the weave, which can be retrospectively identified as Kinbote’s own story, which relates the life of Charles the Beloved, king of Zembla; a story which the reader later learns Kinbote has “been pressing upon [the poet] with a hypnotist’s patience and a lover’s urge” (PF 233) and which is the dominant theme of his annotations? This aporia is substantiated by the verb “intercoils” which seems to indicate that in the same way as the underside and the weave are intertwined, then the very lives of the poet and his commentator seem inextricably linked. At this early stage of the novel, the commentator is already overstepping his role, and the etymology of the verb ‘to behold’ reminds us that the spectator is also the one who holds, so that Kinbote would not only be a spectator, but equally an owner of the masterpiece. And here we hold our main theme: possession. Kinbote is ‘possessed’ – “entranced” – by a poetic discourse, but he also claims to possess it. Here is sketched the leading tension of the novel, the struggle for authorial possession. A struggle, which, if you will remember, also informs Nabokov’s relationship to Freud: in both cases, what is at stake is an obsessive tuft war against someone else’s largely recognized discourse. Even before he starts unwinding his own fantastic story (the story of Zembla), Kinbote is already setting the stage for a coup which will establish his authorial mastership. His professed “attachment” to the poem barely conceals his obsessive engrossment in his own story – the true “weave” of the creative text, for which the poem acts as mere underside. In fact, Kinbote’s statement may just as well be turned inside out in such a way that it is his own story that appears as the true masterpiece. Here, Nabokov not only indicates the permeability of the membrane between text and paratext, he also suggests that the traditional relationship between text and paratext is subverted in such a way that the paratext dominates the text. This is made quite explicit at the end of the Foreword, when Kinbote declares: “for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word” (PF 25). In this particular fictional context, obsession may therefore be considered in agonistic terms: it expresses a fascination, but one that is empowering rather than debilitating, for Kinbote’s only aim, throughout his commentary, is to impose upon the reader the pre-eminence of his own zany discourse. And although the reader soon realises the commentary is totally delirious, he cannot escape a similar fascination for the dazzling story-telling gifts Nabokov has endowed him with. All the more so since Kinbote’s commentary spreads over 236 pages (in my own edition), whereas Shade’s poem only takes up 29 pages.

By creating a commentator which such overweening vanity, Nabokov gave his reader a whimsical reflection of his own obsession with Pushkin, which led him to translate and then annotate Eugene Onegin in 4 fat volumes. It is known that he had just finished this monstrous enterprise when he started writing Pale Fire. As early as 1937, in a lecture entitled “Pushkin ou le Vrai et le Vraisemblable,” Nabokov voiced the dangers of scholarly erudition, in particular what he calls ‘biographies romancées’: “j’y retrouve le même besoin qu’éprouve un esprit goulu, mais borné, de s’appropriier quelque grand homme savoureux, quelque doux génie sans défense” (50). In his creation of Kinbote, Nabokov not only reflects, in a somewhat

grotesquely fashion, his own obsessions, he also anticipates, perhaps indeed seduces his critics into becoming almost mimetic reflections of his own character. This comic situation was underlined by Robert Alter in 1975:

I am afraid the novel has inspired its own Kinbotian commentators, among Nabokov's critics. Exegetes of the novel, it seems to me, have tended to complicate it in gratuitous ways by publishing elaborate diagrams of its structure (which is, after all, clear enough in its main outlines), by devoting learned pages to wondering who – Nabokov, Shade, or Kinbote – is responsible for the epigraph, by exerting their own ingenuity to demonstrate dubious theses, like the one in which both the poem and the poet are argued to be Kinbote's inventions. This novel is not a Jamesian experiment in reliability of narrative point-of-view, and there is no reason to doubt the existence of the basic fictional data – the Poem and its author, on the one hand, and the mad Commentary and its perpetrator on the other, inverted left hand. (185-86)

In fact the novel isn't as clear-cut as Robert Alter indicates; much of its tantalizing appeal comes from the fact that we are not really sure where to place the ultimate source of narrative authority. This situation is encapsulated by the very title of the novel and the poem, which Nabokov borrowed from Shakespeare's Timon of Athens.

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction,
 Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
 And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
 The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
 The moon into salt tears. (4.3. 435-40)

Read in this context, Kinbote's story, his blazing sun, appears at once as hypotext and hypertext, both source of light, or inspiration, and reflection from another source of light. The poem also has this dual status. Although everyone knows that the sun is our primary source of light, just as Nabokov is the primary source of the narrative, the pattern of circular reflection between sun, moon and sea suggests how difficult it is to locate the primary source of light within the novel itself. What is outlined is an endless regression towards an original point which remains a blindspot. This is also the reader's own predicament when he attempts to discover the authorial origin of the narrative as a whole. He is caught in an endless play of reflections between the poem and its commentary, for the novel is the exact prototype of an e-text, or hypertext, which, according to one of its inventors, Ted Nelson, is "a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper". The very layout of the novel does indeed confound its readers when they realise how ill-equipped they are to work out the order in which they are to read the book, in spite of Kinbote's advice to consult his notes first and then study the poem with their help, "rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture" (PF 25). Kinbote's sprawling self-agrandisement hardly solves the problem of non-linearity. So, should we read the whole of the poem first, then the annotations? Or should we rather move to and fro between the annotations and the poem? Both methods prove unsatisfactory: in the first case, we miss out on all the correlations – some straight, others wild – which enable us to stake out the perimeters of the poem. For example, the note to the first few lines of the poem furnishes the exact date when the poem was begun.

But if we start moving from poem to annotation, even by following Kinbote's advice and acquiring another copy of the novel, we end up swerving off the main course of the poem, since not only are the annotations often rambling, but they also frequently refer to some other line or note, inducing in the reader's mind a dizzying loss of bearings. In his note to the first line of the poem "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain," Kinbote first refers us to some

later passage in the poem, lines 181 and 182, where indeed the waxwing reappears, but in his overwhelming attachment to his own self, Kinbote cannot help adding a paragraph on his own ornithological knowledge, which brings him to mention a young New Wye gardener – New Wye being the fictional setting where both Shade and Kinbote live –, and refer us to his note to line 998, that is, the very end of the poem, which does indeed mention “some neighbor’s gardener”; in his note to line 998, Kinbote gives us an anecdote about how he met this young gardener and how this young gardener eventually saved his life, and how they were the “last people who saw John Shade alive”. The reader who reads to the end of note 998 cannot help noticing that the next note is to line 1000, which doesn’t actually exist, since the poem ends on line 999 (“trundling an empty barrow up the lane”); yet Kinbote equals line 1000 with the first line of the poem, an assumption that does make sense since line 999 and line 1 are coupled by the rhyme, ‘lane’/ ‘slain’, thereby fitting perfectly within the poem’s pattern of heroic couplets. Readers are thus confronted to a prismatic structure which creates a sense of depthless and deceptive perspective.

The very first lines of the poem already constitute a reflection upon this problem of perception:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
 By the false azure in the windowpane;
 I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I
 Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.
 And from the inside, too, I’d duplicate
 Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:
 Uncurtaining the night, I’d let dark glass
 Hang all the furniture above the grass,
 And how delightful when a fall of snow
 Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so
 As to make chair and bed exactly stand
 Upon that snow, out in that crystal land! (PF 29)

The mineral surface of the windowpane, like that of the paratext, induces a superimposition of two different realities, the inside and the outside. It is a mirror-like screen, onto which is projected the inside of the room with its various pieces of furniture, as well as the poem’s persona. Yet it is also a transparent membrane which gives the impression that the outside extends inside (hence the waxwing’s fall), at the same time as the inside is translated outside (the chair and bed stand upon the snow).

In the commentary devoted to this passage, these elements of superimposition are already at work; Kinbote indeed notes that “a crested bird called in Zemblan sampel (‘silktail’), closely resembling a waxwing in shape and shade, is the model of one of the three heraldic signatures [...] in the armorial bearings of the Zemblan King, Charles the Beloved [...] whose glorious misfortunes I discussed so often with my friend” (PF 61-62). This allusion takes on particular significance in retrospect, since we later learn that Kinbote is said to resemble the King (PF 208) and that “the name Zembla is a corruption [...] of Semblerland, a land of reflections, or ‘resemblers’” (PF 208). But is Zembla any less true than New Wye? And isn’t there a pattern, an overarching logic to be reconstructed from this web of reflections? In his autobiography, Nabokov compares his craft to that of composing mind-boggling chess problems and in one of his interviews he declares his fondness for “composing riddles with elegant solutions” (Strong Opinions, 16). The cryptic nature of Pale Fire certainly invites its readers to launch into a detective investigation, with the natural assumption that their pains will be rewarded with an elegant solution.

The poem's first explicit riddle comes right after the passage which we've just studied. Looking through the windowpane at the landscape shrouded in snow, the persona, let's say Shade, wonders:

Whose spurred feet have crossed
 From left to right the blank page of the road?
 Reading from left to right in winter's code:
 A dot, an arrow pointing back; repeat:
 Dot, arrow pointing back . . . A pheasant's feet!

The poet then muses, just two lines down:

Was he in *Sherlock Holmes*, the fellow whose
 Tracks pointed back when he reversed his shoes? (PF 29)

As the gazer attempts to decipher the code, he is constantly impelled to follow the arrow and trace back what may appear like a simple linear progression. Yet by this very act, he is no more reading from left to right, but reverting back from right to left. In other words, the reader/gazer can only progress through a movement of regression of which the key motif is 'repeat'. Our proclivity to seek rational explanations in unidirectional linearity is thus defeated by the existence of perfectly coherent otherworlds in reverse. One may read this early riddle as a warning to the reader and an invitation to follow the text's coded progression by the following in the wake of Sherlock Holmes' ambidextrous ploy. The reference to this ploy reminds us that beyond the snow-white surface of evidence, we are stepping into the realm of make-believe.

It is no small wonder, then, that so many readers have as it were fallen into the author's trap by launching into an obsessive tracking down of the novel's every potential trick. This very particular disease, to which Nabokovian scholars are particularly vulnerable, turned into something of an epidemic at the end of 1997, some 40 years after the novel's publication, when a major flurry spread over Nabokovian scholarship, flooding its Internet Forum with a solid downpour of vivid exchanges which lasted 4 whole months, with after-shocks until the summer of 2006 – which may be kindled anew at any time. I have resisted the temptation to produce samples of these discussions, which generally sprawl over a number of pages, with numerous cross-references which sometimes appear to act on the novel as Kinbote's commentary does on the poem, except that they are polyphonic. Let me therefore simply read you one comment by a fellow member of the Forum, George Shimanovich:

To answer question of authorship of *Pale Fire* one is forced to answer questions that in real life are unanswerable. So may be there is more to find in the texture than in text, after all? I like invitation to the mirror world of Zembla: 'Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.' One should keep his/her mirrors clean in Zembla or risk being analyzed.

“One should keep his/her mirrors clean in Zembla or risk being analyzed”: the warning is strangely reminiscent of that remark of Nabokov's with which I opened this paper. Are we doomed, as critical readers, to become his 'patients'? Wouldn't Nabokovian critics be falling in the trap of intentional fallacy by seeing reflections where there are none, unwittingly mimicking Kinbote's “attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints” (PF 233)? Can we avoid crashing against the surface of the text, deluded by the “false azure” of its mirror games? Or, worse still, interpreting the text according to our need for self-validation and explanatory coherence, as Kinbote does? This seems to be the main criticism aimed at Brian Boyd, arguably Nabokov's most eminent

scholar. In 1999, Boyd published an extremely erudite and astute book-length study of Pale Fire in which he claimed to have at last found the solution to the riddle which would satisfy all would-be solvers. Basing himself on a minute survey of the text, but also on his knowledge of Nabokov's aesthetic and metaphysical creed, he asserted that the novel's narrative authority is not single, but a collective entity. The strange coincidences that link poem and commentary are thus explained by the fact that Kinbote's commentary is written under the influence of a flock of ghosts – Shade, Shade's daughter and even Shade's parents. Among Boyd's most virulent detractors, we find France's leading Nabokov scholar, Maurice Couturier, who writes, in his latest book, Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir:

[a]yant écrit la meilleur biographie de Nabokov à ce jour, il s'arroge une autorité absolue sur ses textes et prétend avoir découvert la vérité ultime de ce roman, endossant sans s'en rendre compte l'habit de Kinbote [...]. Il masque, derrière une glose sans cesse plus sophistiquée, son désir de pouvoir sur la communauté des Nabokoviens tout entière, prétendant être non seulement l'exégète le plus averti de Nabokov mais presque son interprète. (320)

Clearly, these passionate debates within the realm of Nabokovian scholarship have ended up reflecting and/or being reflected by the novel's own extravagant dramatisation of obsession. Critical devotion may sometimes bring to the surface the deepest forms of one's lust for power, but it would be a mistake to fear that Boyd's most 'authoritative' analysis might impose an authoritarian end to this crazy hermeneutic quest: as 'interprète,' he does indeed claim to 'translate' most faithfully Nabokov's own creative intentions, but by so doing, he has also provoked new reactions, new reflections, so that, although the commentator may often seem to have the last word, the work of fiction remains alive, constantly calling for new interpretations to complete it. At the same time, the critic may also be an 'interprète' in a musical sense, playing a part that has already been composed, yet infusing his performance with a particular sensitivity that brings him in close intimacy with creation itself, affording him "something of the same pleasure in it as those who played it found" (PF 53). As Umberto Eco wrote in L'Oeuvre ouverte, "[j]ouir d'une œuvre d'art revient à en donner une interprétation, une exécution, à la faire revivre dans une perspective originale" (17).

Obsession may be a pleasurable, indeed a healthy, affliction when it expands our consciousness and curiosity beyond the limited sphere of one's existence. Thanks to the wonders of internet, in one same day, the minutest point of interpretation may thus elicit a range of responses spanning fields as different as astronomy, botany, literature, history, metaphysics or epistemology. The very latest game which Nabokovians have embarked upon so far (end of 2005), "The Great NABOKV-L 1000th Line CONTEST for "Pale Fire"," is just one among many tokens of the Nabokovian's eagerness to play with the text and vie with its "plexed artistry" (PF 53). Yet to seek the last (?) missing (?) line to the poem does in no way signal an attempt to complete the poem and have the last word. It goes to prove, on the contrary, that although it would be very convenient to deem, like Kinbote, that line 1000 is line 1, readers have come to terms with the fact that the poem ultimately evades any gesture that would encompass it, for there is nothing circular about it that could be rounded. Such absence of circularity ultimately warrants the freedom of each particular reader. Nabokov observed in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, that "[t]he spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free" (211). Likewise, obsessive reflections, when stripped of their solipsistic bent, do not turn round in circles, but rather ripple out in ever-widening spirals.

Works/Sources Cited

- Alter, Robert. Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre. London: University of California Press, 1975.
- Couturier, Maurice. Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir. Seyssel : Champ Vallon, 2004.
- Eco, Umberto. L'Oeuvre ouverte. Paris: Seuil, 1965.
- Genette, Gérard. Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation. Trans. J. E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997
- Nabokov, Vladimir. Bend Sinister. 1947; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
- _____. Pale Fire. 1962 ; reprint, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1991.
- _____. "Pushkin ou le vrai et le vraisemblable" La Nouvelle Revue Française : 1937 ; reprint, Magazine Littéraire 233 (1986) : 49-54.
- _____. Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited. 1967; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- _____. Strong Opinions. 1973 ; reprint, New York : Vintage International, 1990.
- Shimanovich, George. Re: reply to Thomas N re Pale Fire. NABOKV-L listserv. listserv@listserv.ucsb.edu (05 Nov. 2002).
- "hypertext". OneLook Dictionary. <<http://www.onelook.com/?w=hypertext&ls=a>>