

# Pale fire : the reader's first move

Autor(en): **Overmeer, Roelof**

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## PALE FIRE: THE READER'S FIRST MOVE

Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is like one of those sophisticated chess problems the young Sirin composed for émigré newspapers. It is constructed in such a way that in order to read it (or 'solve' it as far as Nabokov is concerned) one must discover the subtle 'moves' which the final work imply.

All Nabokov's readers are aware of his lifelong passion for certain games, especially chess. When a young Russian émigré in Berlin, he was an avid solver of chess problems and even composed some that were published in émigré newspapers.<sup>1</sup> In practically all of his novels, there is at least a game going on in the corner of the board, and in some a chess motif constitutes the very warp of the work. In *Zaschita Luzhina*, Englished as *The Defence*, Grandmaster Luzhin plays out his game against the world with a last ingenious move by jumping from a second story window onto the "dark and pale squares" below;<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Knight and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* jump away from capture (i.e. definition) like their chess counterpart; *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert wages a long struggle against his black vis-à-vis in order to win back his "queen" across the tessellated map of the U.S., to give but a few of the more obvious examples.

*Pale Fire* as well owes many of the strands of its weave to an analogy with chess. In Kinbote's commentary to the very first lines of Shade's poem, he mentions that it was begun "a few minutes after midnight July 1, while I played chess with a young Iranian enrolled in our summer school" (p. 74).<sup>3</sup> (The etymology of the word "chess" was undoubtedly in Nabokov's mind when he chose Kinbote's first partner). Other games of chess are played: between the then Prince Charles' French and English tutors in the wings while the main plot evolves on center stage, between Shade and his wife, and between Shade and Kinbote. Both "authors" use chess terms metaphorically in their respective "creations". For example, Shade compares the players of fiction to chess masters "... promoting pawns/ to ivory unicorns and ebon fauns" (p. 63); Kinbote tells us that the instructions of the owners of the house he is renting in New Wye to keep from the

sun's rays their "more precious pieces of furniture (two embroidered armchairs and a heavy 'royal console')..." comes down to "castl[ing] the long way before going to bed and the short way first thing in the morning" (p. 85). The outer structure of *Pale Fire* is like that of a chess game, Kinbote's comments being like the moves which respond to Shade's poem. And at the end, Kinbote, represented in the Index as "K", the chess annotational symbol for "King", has to flee the "Goldsworth château", in other words, he castles, and we are left with a king-in-the-corner situation of the *solus rex* type<sup>4</sup>, and *Solus Rex* was the title Kinbote had suggested for the heroic poem he thought Shade was writing inspired by his tale (as well as the working title of an unfinished work by Nabokov whose original idea grew into *Pale Fire*). Even just these few details and structural elements have multifarious reverberations in the book, but it is not my purpose to captate these, but rather to jump to the ultimate ring, where the work meets the reader.

The title *Pale Fire*, as all commentators after Kinbote have pointed out, is taken from a bitter misanthropic speech by Timon, no longer of Athens, to two thieves who have heard that the hermit has discovered a hoard of gold in his cave. Timon sarcastically praises them for at least being "thieves profess'd", for to his mind, all men are villains. He even accuses the heavenly bodies of thievery:

The sun's a thief, and with great attraction  
 Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief,  
 And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;<sup>5</sup>

As one might legitimately expect, since it is from there that Nabokov stole his title, that privileged depository of a work's intentions, certain themes in Timon's speech, that of reflection, of thievery, of contempt for mankind, are reflected in Nabokov's pale fire.

The epigraph of *Pale Fire* is a quotation from Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. The links between Johnson and his biographer on the one hand and Shade and his "biographer" on the other are many. Shade's initials are, of course, Johnson's reversed, and the 20th century poet is even said to look like the 18th century lexicographer.<sup>6</sup>

The shooting and the intimation of unreason will have their echo as well. That these links should exist between the epigraph

and the text proper is all perfectly expectable. What is less so is the fact that a passage in Boswell a few lines below that epigraphed by Nabokov also has its links with *Pale Fire*. Boswell, lamenting the lost opportunity of having his family history recorded by the “great Master” adds: “Family histories, like the *imagines majorum* of the Ancients excite to virtue; and I wish that they who really have blood, would be more careful to trace and ascertain its course”.<sup>7</sup> The advice was not lost on Kinbote, though I doubt that the family history of Igor II’s great-grandson “excite[s] to virtue”.

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!

John Shade’s poem begins with this, among other things, very apt metaphor for fiction. Fiction is like the “windowpane” which mirrors reality so well that it fools the “waxwing”. But the real bird cannot enter this other space, only its “shadow” may continue to fly on in the “reflected sky”. This other space can resemble reality easily enough (“... I’d duplicate/ Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:”), and then go beyond the limits which give reality its form (“... I’d let dark glass/ Hang all the furniture above the grass,”), for it is not subject to the same laws.

The poem begins with “I”, very appropriately since it is autobiographical, but this first “I” is grammatically identified with “the shadow of the waxwing”, and this superimposition of two identities on this key word, being the first, leads us to understand that “Pale Fire” is both the autobiography of a poet who is a fiction, and the autobiography of a fiction who is a poet, for Shade is of course “the *shadow* of the waxwing *slain*” (my italics) in the course of the events. And like the “waxwing”, in spite of having been slain, “he lives on... in the reflected sky”, in the work of fiction.

This “web of sense” can relatively easily be woven, but it takes a particularly attentive and combinative mind to associate these first lines with the laconic note in the Index referring to Kinbote’s “anti-Darwinian aphorism” (p. 234), “... on the slayer and the slain”, and make the link with (especially the beginning of) a poem by another New England poet:<sup>8</sup>

If the red slayer think he slays,  
 Or if the slain think he is slain,  
 They know not well the subtle ways  
 I keep, and pass, and turn again.  
 Far or forgot to me is near;  
 Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
 The vanished gods to me appear;  
 And one to me are shame and fame.  
 They reckon ill who leave me out;  
 When me they fly, I am the wings;  
 I am the doubter and the doubt,  
 And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.  
 The strong gods pine for my abode,  
 And pine in vain the sacred Seven  
 But thou, meek lover of the good!  
 Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

I don’t want to linger on the ways in which the words and images of Emerson’s “Brahma” take on Nabokovian meaning in the context of *Pale Fire* (“red slayer” for Gradus is a really wonderful find), except perhaps to underscore the lines “They know not well the subtle ways/ I keep, and pass, and turn again”, which in the universe into which they have been drawn serve as an auctorial warning to the reader, while at the same time the way they have been enrolled illustrates the validity of that warning.

I have taken three major moments of *Pale Fire*: the title, the epigraph, and the first lines of its central text. But in the way I use them, though they have more reverberations than less importantly positioned moments, they are typical, and a reading of them illustrates how the whole of *Pale Fire* demands to be read. For to even begin to see the associations which “pale fire” or the intimation of mental imbalance or the theme of mirror reflection suggest, it is not enough to read *Pale Fire*, *Pale Fire* demands to be *reread*. The plots of the stories, be it Shade’s or Kinbote’s or Charles the Beloved’s, are in themselves relatively banal. In fact, to undercut

any suspense as to the ultimate outcome, Nabokov, as he had done, though more explicitly, in the first paragraph of *Laughter in the Dark*, tells us in *Pale Fire*'s "Foreword" how the main characters will end. As Shade says, "not text, but texture" is the "real point" of *Pale Fire* (p. 63).

Some of the methods the reader might adopt to discover Nabokov's "subtle ways" are those suggested by Kinbote (p. 28) as well as by the form of the two separate but parallel texts. True, the connection between Kinbote's notes and Shade's poem range from tenuous to inexistant (which in itself is a joke of which commentators of literary works are the butt), but this insistence on forcing his version of the story on the reader helps to complete the picture we get of Kinbote. Similarly, though most of the indexed names, places, etc. refer straightforwardly to the actual moments in the text where they are mentioned, in addition, some references followed up, such as the wild goose chase which begins with "Crown Jewels", reveal some of the games Nabokov plays. In other words, though a first reading of *Pale Fire* might as well be linear as not, any rereading depends entirely on the clues the reader decides to follow up and his own intuition.

The next move by the reader of this article will undoubtedly be to say that *Dead Souls*, *St. Petersburg*, *Ulysses* or whatever title personal predilection dictates also demand to be reread, and that once one has read these works linearly, there is no particular order of reading that imposes itself, one may choose to reread this description, that dialogue, this scene or that section. Not only would Nabokov concede this point, but he would add that this is of course the point made by *Pale Fire*. By forcing his reader to pay particular attention to details and to adopt a non-linear reading, Nabokov is artistically expressing that which he had been saying for years: "A good reader . . . is a rereader"<sup>9</sup>, and the goal of a reader should be to uncover "the inner weave of a given masterpiece"<sup>10</sup>.

However, the fact that a speech by the disillusioned Timon of Athens and a passage in Boswell below the one used as epigraph and Emerson's poem "Brahma" have an important incidence on the texture of *Pale Fire* cannot be ascertained by the reader in his armchair, even the rereader. Nabokov also demands that his reader be like his dear Sherlock Holmes who will follow up all the clues, no matter in which direction they point.<sup>11</sup>

Reading *Pale Fire*, then, means accepting this role of the reader as detective, as the solver of a complicated chess problem. True,

in spite of what Nabokov says, there are different subsequent developments possible. Accepting to figure out the moves Nabokov's "problem" requires is but the first move of the reader of *Pale Fire*, but it is the *sine qua non* for further reflection.

Roelof OVERMEER.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some of these have been collected under the title *Poems and Problems* (New York, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> *The Defence* (London, 1969), p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> *Pale Fire* (London, 1962). Page references in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> cf. *Pale Fire*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>5</sup> *Timon of Athens*, IV, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Pale Fire*, p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (London, Oxford U. Press, 1953), p. 1217.

<sup>8</sup> I myself am indebted to Prof. James Schroeter for the association.

<sup>9</sup> *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (London, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> cf. *Pale Fire*, p. 34.