



## *The Strangeness of Allegory*

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### Chapter 6. Fishes and Fowls

This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave Mr. Langton, of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. “Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats.” And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favorite cat, and said, “But Hodge shan’t be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot.”

James Boswell, the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, quoted by Vladimir Nabokov as the epigraph to *Pale Fire*

A discussion of reverie is not easy even in the language in which the reverie took form. It is inseparable from the personal past of memories and images which belongs only to the dreamer, and each word he uses is colored by this past. And since a reverie, as Bachelard suggests, is inseparable as well from the language in which it was dreamed, a translation is especially difficult. The very nature of the dreamer’s language has shaped the reverie.

Daniel Russell, from the *Translator’s Preface* to Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*

Yes, words really do dream.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*

To risk both prosopopoeia and redundancy at once (probably not for the first and certainly not for the last time in this work), allegories create themselves in a condition of literariness. They exist first and foremost as literature, as words written – and, moreover, written in a tradition or, even more often, in many traditions. They consciously or even self-consciously mediate themselves. This is not as trivial an observation, nor as self-evident or self-explanatory a truth, as it may at first glance seem. There are works that “know” they are written and works that do not: allegories are usually “hyperconscious” of their status as literature.

Self-conscious mediation means that, in contrast to a naive realism which tries to persuade readers of the literal truth of what it says (“I was there, I saw this”), or more sophisticated realisms that seek to present the truth of memory or perception (“This is the way I recall it, this is the way it appeared”), allegories raise questions from the outset about the nature, reliability, and consistency of their own verisimilitude (i.e., their level of reality) and their formal status (history? fiction? fable? romance? report? exemplum? confession?). Non-allegorical works more often than not seek to present themselves to the reader in univocal disguise, as if they were not primarily literature<sup>1</sup> but something, some single thing, else: letters, confession, police

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<sup>1</sup> I realize that the distinction between literature and other forms/modes/kinds of writing is in very bad odor these days, particularly among the faction of New Historians who profess to be unable to make the distinction (a claim I am inclined to believe), but the distinction remains a valid one for distinguishing at least three different kinds of writing, perhaps four: works written without any conscious artistic intention (anything from office memos to diaries

report, history, slice of life. They seek to stake a claim to a “realism” of content – the essence of what they recount is true – by means of a form (letter, report, etc.) whose primary or normal function and contents are factual. Allegories on the other hand problematize both their formal status and their relation to “reality” to such a degree that the effect, in allegory, of those two aspects of a work is the polar reverse of their effect in non-allegorical kinds of writing: instead of providing assurance, framework, orientation toward the words and their meanings, they totally destabilize the text, rendering a univocal readerly relation to it impossible. These twin areas of dubiety and ambiguity in turn force readers to confront, in a special way, a single huge and multifaceted question: what, in any sense, am I reading?

This, of course, is the fundamental question of all reading, and – as I suggested at the very outset of this study – allegory acts as a synecdoche for all reading, all problems of interpretation, insofar as it poses the question to us, or forces us to pose it to the text, in peculiarly pointed and potentially rich ways. Texts other than allegories facilitate the answer – indeed, to some extent prompt facile answers – to that basic question by framing the reader and the work univocally: “You are reading a novel in the guise of an autobiography”; “You are reading a fable of life under fascism”; “You are reading a historical fiction written only to be made into a movie starring Danny De Vito and Cher.” To confine ourselves for the moment only to these formal (what kind of book is this?) and verisimilar (what relation to the world as I know it do these words bear?) aspects of that basic question, allegories go a very different and much more complex way than the vast majority of non-allegorical texts. Allegory breaks all the frames and opens all possible horizons by providing either no answer at all to the formal question or many competing, perhaps-in-strict-logic incompatible, answers to it. Similarly, allegory adopts a very uncertain, essentially indeterminable stance vis-a-vis “reality” or its stepchild, literary realism.

These strategies have consequences both within the text and without: they not only problematize the “identity” and the “truth” of the allegorical text, but they also problematize the status of all literary genres and the status of what we are pleased to call “the real world.” Allegory does this simply by denying, ignoring, or complicating any fictive claim of immediacy and invoking instead multiple, equivocal media to rupture the relation of text and reader. By multiplying the artificial frames surrounding the text, allegory removes the real borders that separate subject and object, readers and meanings. By layering and laminating and complicating its narrative voices, allegory breaks through the medium of the narrator into the space where “words really do dream.”

### Mediation

In drama, as to some extent we have already seen in *The Tempest*, mediation is provided, automatically as it were, by the fact of the stage. No matter how much breached or opened by

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to real police reports, for instance); works written with artistic intent, of whatever level of simplicity or sophistication, that ape those forms/modes/kinds for the purpose of establishing (naive, I would call it) verisimilitude; works written with highly conscious artistic intent that exploit those forms/modes/kinds for purposes that may include but do not end with verisimilitude; and allegories, which certainly exploit the forms for purposes beyond verisimilitude but also beyond what we normally think of as the function or range of formal distinctions. It is the last two sorts of writing that I wish especially to designate here as literature.

dramaturgy, the stage always forms a middle ground between the reality of quotidian life outside the theater's or tent's or ring's doors or flaps or circles and the un-, ir-, super-, supra-, hyper-, or para-reality of the author's and the audience's internal fantasies and dreams. The physical space of drama *is*: it exists, its actors exist, the words they say and the actions they perform and the ideas and images they conjure exist, physically and externally, even though in a way far different from the externality of words on a page that we read internally. They are "real" even though we the audience know they are not "real" in the same senses or sorts of senses that either the contents of the day's news or the very different facts of our personal victories or defeats are real for us. Nevertheless, the drama's qualified reality itself becomes, in hands like Shakespeare's and plays like *The Tempest*, a perfect image of mediation, an enactment of mediation, a tautological presentation of theater itself in its self-generating and self-consuming redundancy: pleonasm as plentitude, want become desire, dearth made dear.

Prospero's fielding percentage is a lot better than the Ancient Mariner's: the latter "stoppeth one of three," while Prospero catches a whole boatload. The tempest that miscarries Shakespeare's internalized audience of wedding guests and sailors figures the stage illusion that transports its audience and translates its author's reveries and dreams into their local habitations and names. In that precise sense and that sense of precision, all art is translation. This is both not news, and also the exact reason *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* isn't an allegory: it does nothing to problematize, to enrich or impoverish, to undermine or verify, its status as fable and its parabolic relation to a conventionally defined reality. But the tempest that Shakespeare uses to figure his stage illusion does so by confessing its illusionary nature and thereby exposing and repudiating its own illusionality. By revealing the fact that it is illusion, *The Tempest* specifically calls attention to its medial reality and mediatory function. *The Tempest* strips bare the artifice of the stage and makes its audience look the mediator square in the face: it makes its audience confront exactly what is "real" and "unreal" about what it is and does. It transports and translates, all right, but to different ends and different destinations from those its passengers assumed. In that precise sense, all allegory is translation, a transport from a known language to an unknown tongue.

Allegory's "symbol" in *The Tempest*, if it has one at all, is neither the play's titular storm nor the poor, bare island of the stage, but the battered, unremarked-upon vehicles that transport the mage and his audience to the island in the first place and bear them from it at the end: Prospero's "rotten carcass of a boat" (I.ii.146) and the "brave vessel" (I.ii.6) that Miranda saw sink beneath the waves. In a thoroughly allegorical fashion, those images – that image? that mage? – both request and resist translation: in addition to being "real" boats, one of which we "actually" see in the play's first scene and the other that Prospero makes us and Miranda imaginatively see in its second scene, they both both "are" and "aren't," for instance, both the body and the state, and no locution that lacked either connotation would translate or even read either of them aright. They remain, as so much allegory so often does, language dreaming: startlingly clear, concrete, and specific vehicles of remarkably uncertain, imprecise, and various tenors, like Lord Jim's Veiled Bride, or Charles Kinbote's romantic Zembla, or even Joseph Andrews's modest, inarticulate, illiterate Fanny.

### Remediate

*Pale Fire* confronts readers with problems of its formal status and relation to reality right from the start.<sup>2</sup> For openers, there are two texts sharing the same name, one a poem in rhymed couplets by one John Shade (this text here to be distinguished as “Pale Fire”) and the other the total text (here to be designated *Pale Fire*), which is apparently a novel (since, outside the text, we know *its* author, Vladimir Nabokov, primarily as a novelist) and which comprises a Foreword, Shade’s poem, a Commentary thereon, and an Index. The “author” of Foreword, Commentary, and Index, Charles Kinbote, may well be mad, and his comments seem – at first blush, at least – to have very little to do with Shade’s poem. Why that should even concern us – this is *all* a fiction, after all – is an interesting matter of readerly psychology, and seems to indicate that we are subconsciously according Shade’s poem some kind of extra-textual reality, a higher level of reality than we allow Kinbote’s commentary. This is further complicated by other, extra-textual data: the poet Shade bears some unsettling resemblances to Robert Frost, and the possibly mad Kinbote has affinities with Nabokov himself (exile, e.g., or attitudes toward Freud and toward the Soviets).

Is this a *roman à clef*? Perish the thought – but the thought won’t perish, no more than will any of the other possibilities for explaining (away) the book’s uneasy relation to familiar genres or familiar life. From one point of view, *Pale Fire* exists as a text on/in/of translation, a shared reverie conducted in simultaneous translation by two people with no language in common. Viewed from this angle, *Pale Fire* comes as close as any text I know to language dreaming itself, to the pure, random play of words creating out of themselves chance skeins of meaning which in turn generate other threads of sense to finally weave together a tissue of semi-coherent narrative. From another point of view, *Pale Fire* is – also and simultaneously – no such thing, but a novel rigorously worked out to its last logical jot and tittle, as artfully plotted and bound together as any Victorian triple-decker, and just as scrupulously delineative of the characters and motivations of its protagonists.

*Pale Fire* manages to be and to do such contradictory things while at the same time playing formal games of impressive complexity and magnitude: first and most obviously in its parodic reproduction of the form and contents of a scholarly edition of a major poem by a major poet; second in its appropriation of one of the English language’s most artificial forms, the heroic couplet, for some of its most humdrum (not to say pedestrian) subject matter; next in its juxtaposition of that body of quotidian contents with the elaborate romance and fairy tale hokum of Kinbote’s commentary (the true stuff of the deepest-dyed melodrama: a dashing, beloved prince driven into exile by plots and cabals, persecuted by evil conspirators, masking his nobility in the guise of a commonplace teacher); and finally the marvelous reversal of roles, implicit and explicit, in the admirer/commentator’s reading his own life into the poet-of-his-admiration’s autobiographical opus – as if Johnson had written his own life, while Boswell paid

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<sup>2</sup> The works to which I am most indebted for guidance in thinking about *Pale Fire* are the following: Robert Alter, *Partial Magic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov’s English Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Carl Eichelberger, “Gaming in the Lexical Playfields of Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Phyllis A. Roth (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 176 - 85; Lucy Maddox, *Nabokov’s Novels in English* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1983); David Walden, “The Viewer and the View: Chance and Choice in *Pale Fire*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 4 (1976), 203 - 221. The text of *Pale Fire* that will be quoted throughout is the Vintage International Edition (Random House: New York, NY, 1989).

no attention to that but insisted instead that the poet write his erstwhile biographer's life. As the editor whose commentary theoretically transports Shade's "abstruse/ Unfinished poem" into clear prose, Kinbote shows himself a translator of the school of the often-cited Conmal, whose Zemblan apparently produces or renders a Shakespeare English readers never knew. Even that idiosyncratic Shakespeare is pressed into dual, ambiguous service: Kinbote's talismanic Zemblan edition of *Timon of Athens* persistently reminds us both of his own comic, personal translation of Timon's flipflopping philanthropy/misanthropy into consistent misogyny and pedophilia and of both *Pale Fire's* and *Timon's* formal problems of authorship, since *Timon* is a play widely believed to be what *Pale Fire* poses as, the work of two hands; and the nature and extent of Shakespeare's part in it is a vexed scholarly question indeed.

Beyond that, of course, *Pale Fire* right from the start complicates and problematizes its level of reality in dizzying ways. The *Foreword's* first paragraph establishes quite nicely the fictive reality of plodding scholarly reporting and authority, stating only facts or seemingly verifiable descriptions. The second paragraph continues in that same vein, with only two appositional words raising any eyebrows or questions: "Canto Two, your favorite" (13). Who is you? and how did he or she get in here? Is it the reader, i.e., me? Can't be: I haven't read the poem yet, and so don't have any favorite canto. No one else has read it yet either (Shade, Sybil, and Kinbote, perhaps an editor or two: those are the only exceptions we will learn of), so even though the grammatical form of the second person is unquestionably used here, the remark cannot apply to an audience or readership outside the text. That leaves only the editor and commentator Kinbote, who has not yet introduced himself – and if it is he who is meant by his own use of "your," that is a strange and disturbing mode of referring to oneself. Whoever is meant – and I don't know that we can ever be certain – that simple little apposition constitutes a major roadblock and disruption in the text. It makes the first of many fissures in the scholarly frame and simultaneously begins the process of estranging the reader from any relationship of simple trust or naive credulity vis-a-vis both text and narrator.<sup>3</sup>

The third paragraph gives us more to chew on. The totally third-personal first paragraph yielded briefly to a startlingly disruptive second person in the second paragraph: the third paragraph begins again with that calm, factual-sounding, authoritative third person, only to quickly collapse into a distressingly vivid and present first person.

A methodical man, John Shade usually copied out his daily quota of completed lines at midnight but even if he recopied them again later, as I suspect he sometimes did, he marked his card or cards not with the date of his final adjustments, but with that of his Corrected Draft or first Fair Copy. I mean, he preserved the date of actual creation rather than that of second or third thoughts. There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings.

That second, periphrastic, explanatory, and implicitly apologetic second sentence gives the

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<sup>3</sup> It also begins an important process of sensitizing readers to grammatical person and number, which will in turn provide a kind of *commedia d'arte* as we watch the multiple slips of the tongue by which Kinbote's mask slips and the Charles the Beloved identity or delusion emerges: see, for example, the significant "my father," referring to King Alfin (102; my italics).

reader a little tremor of dubiety. Why not say it clearly in the first place? Didn't the editor take the trouble to rewrite and polish his text? Or did he intend, perhaps, to unbend a little here, to shed some of the formalities of academic discourse? A small thing, as I say, but it nevertheless creates a set of nuances to which readers have already been sensitized by the previous paragraph's violations of tone and/or grammatical relation and/or formal status.

In any event, anything we may think about that second sentence is rapidly swallowed up in wonder at the third. That "very loud amusement park" cannot distract the editor any more than his telling us about it flabbergasts us. The modulation of first persons so far – "I suspect" leading to "I mean" – has done nothing to prepare us for this sudden manifestation, this incarnation almost, of a "real" person, distressed, distracted, perhaps on the verge of losing control. So powerful is its effect, so much does Nabokov accomplish with so few words, that it cannot be described unequivocally: it's comic, it's confusing, it brings readers up short. It disorients us: why is he – whoever he is – telling us this? It doesn't belong in here: it's the kind of detail that belongs in a novel, or a report, or a letter, but not in a scholarly preface.

At the same time that all those effects of the sentence are making us suspicious/dubious/worried about the *bona fides* or qualifications of our editor, the simplicity and directness of what and how the sentence says and what its saying implies tend to make us, for the first time, perceive our editor as a "real" human being rather than a mere scholarly function: it excites a compassion to answer its implicit suffering. Of course that mention of amusement park is hopelessly, ludicrously, comically inappropriate to a *Foreword* to somebody else's poem: still, it suddenly confronts us with the "fact" that we are reading a "real" human being rather than a safe, univocal, unchanging (and therefore unsurprising, unthreatening, unimplicating) narrative voice. The violation of the established voice and format (impersonal scholar, factual edition) by the intrusion of a radically different voice and its implied form (a distracted? annoyed? helpless? angry? nervous? neurotic? indefinable but inescapably personal voice from the precincts of fiction or confession) has the paradoxical effect of making this second voice, this new aspect of the persona, more rather than less real to us, more persuasive and welcome than our unthinking (unthinking because we automatically accept each text on its own premises, at least initially) assent to or acceptance of the original, dry-as-dust scholarly voice.

Our third or fourth thought, if not our first, is, of course, that the man may be mad or on the way to it – after all, why wasn't this too edited out? – but it's too late to worry about that: we've already gratefully accepted the relief from John Shade's meticulous and boring index cards (Shade's use of and way with index cards, by the way, mirrors exactly Nabokov's own practice in writing). Just as Kinbote – to give him the name he will assign himself – is going to translate Shade's mock-Frostian epic of the uneventful life into the dashing, melodramatic biography of Charles the Beloved, we have been transported from the safe precincts of a scholarly edition to the wilds of psychobiography (whether "fictive" or "factual" at this point we can't tell). What Kinbote is going to do to Shade's poem, from this point on, parallels or embodies what Nabokov is going to do to us and his book (a small instance of fractal self-similarity across scale and dimension – but of this, more later).

Instead of being able to uninvolvedly read the poem and the book as artifacts – as objective data, as things external to ourselves, as museum pieces – we are going to have to come to

terms with them as lived, as live, as living. Nabokov makes them over into texts enacting and demanding a strenuous, involved, implicated readership, texts coextensive with the lives of their two narrators (Shade and Kinbote) and by implication coequal to the imaginative lives of their readers. That Kinbote's readerly acts are, in conventional terms, bad criticism, overt wrestings of Shade's orthodox text to his own heterodox purposes, only adds to Nabokov's comedy: they parallel quite exactly the kinds of interpretations that Shade makes, within his poem, of the equally recalcitrant data of "reality." Both Shade and Kinbote are what Harold Bloom would approvingly call "strong readers" or "strong misreaders," and the convergence of their seemingly divergent or opposed discoveries of pattern and meaning in the heteroclit materials they are each confronted with is one of the most important of *Pale Fire's* many iterated doublings (all of them, too, richly understandable as fractals). Shade's vaporings about an afterlife and pattern in the universe, about a "fantastically planned,/ Richly rhymed life" (969-70) and "the verse of galaxies divine,/ Which I suspect is an iambic line" (975-76), are based upon his perceptions of coincidence and pattern in what he originally took to be random and chaotic:

But all at once it dawned on me that *this*  
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;  
 Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream  
 But topsy-turvical coincidence,  
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.  
 Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find  
 Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind  
 Of correlated pattern in the game,  
 Plexed artistry, and something of the same  
 Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (806-15)

Insofar as we readers take these lucubrations at all seriously – even with the provisional seriousness of fiction – we are thus entrapped by our own logic or lack of it to extend the same respect, the same seriousness, to Kinbote's discovery, within the warp and woof of Shade's poem, of the covert subtext of Zemblan melodrama. On one hand we as readers are being encouraged to strike out boldly on our own interpretive paths, seeking our own "*consonne/ D'appui*" (967-68); on the other, the apparent sadness of Kinbote's seeming paranoid fantasy should warn us away from any such attempts – a classic allegorical trap for the unsuspecting reader. Thus do we of wisdom and of reach by indirections find directions out. Kinbote reads literature "rightly" (you may well ask, sez who?) by his active immersion in it, by his intense involvement with it. "In the destructive element immerse" is good advice, and Kinbote's imagination and the life he constructs out of it appear to have been shaped by much the same sort of romance that shaped Lord Jim's imagination and life. Kinbote reads literature "wrongly" by trying to dominate it, by trying to make it over into his kingdom and his image.<sup>4</sup> If any readers think that *Pale Fire* depicts only an aberration of interpretation, a unique fictional

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect, of course, Kinbote locates himself firmly in a straight line of descent from Swift's demented Grub Street Hack and identifies himself a latter-day avatar of the classic mock-epic hero. On both these points, see my *Epic to Novel*.

instance that cannot really represent any possible relation of textuality to what we call reality or of reader to text, our contemporary criticism ought to thoroughly disabuse them. When Swift created the great-grandfather of *Pale Fire* in his *Tale of a Tub* volume, his satire was predictive of the shape of things to come, and Charles Kinbote is not the least of his progeny. At the end of *Pale Fire*, Kinbote doesn't merely vanish: he changes his name, goes to Yale, and writes *The Book of J*.<sup>5</sup> *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, eh?

Kinbote, in one respect, is merely a middle term in a long series of replications that starts, for the purposes of this novel, with Shade. What Shade does to the data of "reality" in his poem Kinbote does to the data of Shade's poem in his commentary, and Nabokov does in turn to the data of both in his creation of the book: Shade, Shade's poem, Kinbote, Charles the Beloved – all these are the raw "data" from which Nabokov constructs the richly patterned, interwoven fabric that is *Pale Fire*. Put it another way: Nabokov is and does outside the book what Shade is and does inside it – and we readers, by the same token, are and do outside the book what Kinbote is and does within it.

As in every allegory, we are implicated. We are one set of the many fractals that constitute the allegory, which entraps us, lures us, seduces us, cons us into doing what its characters do, perhaps what it does. We are incorporated into the allegory's self-similarity, thereby breaking all the bounds and frames of fiction and "art," erasing the borderlines between "art" and "reality." We do what Nabokov does, what Kinbote does, what Shade does, and – somewhere in all those self-similar doings – allegory occurs. *Pale Fire* both shows and performs all that and leads us to perform it too. In truth, *Pale Fire* is a book that – as much as allegory ever does – comes close to spelling it all out for us, by making us act it all out.

### Immediate

Despite or in addition to the prominence and importance of Shakespearean allusions throughout *Pale Fire*, the Eighteenth-Century ancestry of much of Nabokov's verbal play shows itself in many places throughout the novel, in everything from the couplet form itself, to the use of the Pope's and Swift's semi-mythical Zembla, to various other more-or-less recondite puns and place names: Wordsmith College, Judge Goldsworth, Mandevil Forest. The overall form of the novel, a poetic text with pseudo-learned commentary, derives directly from Scriblerian projects such as *The Dunciad Variorum*, and its rich verbal play shows clear affinities to Sterne's *Tristram*

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<sup>5</sup> Since academics notoriously lack all sense of humor, let me make clear here that while my language is facetious my point is real: Harold Bloom's tour-de-force in *The Book of J* is a thoroughly Kinbotean performance in taking J's text (and David Rosenberg's translation thereof) and creating out of them a *Romance of J*, wise female survivor of the court of Solomon, wry observer of Rehoboam's deficiencies, friend and rival of the unknown author of II Samuel (a court historian of Solomon's), a writer who shares to a remarkable degree Bloom's own taste for ironies, ambiguities, and verbal play, and inventor of a Jahweh Bloom can get along with even if orthodox Judaism can't. My point is not to debunk Harold Bloom – personally, I found *The Book of J* thoroughly delightful reading – but to stress yet again how persistently the basic western paradigm of interpretation works, how strongly the will to find what one seeks dominates all reading of all texts. In Bloom's case, of course, we encounter a rare – therefore very welcome – instance of this process rising to consciousness. As the leading exponent of what I cannot help but think of as the Macho School of Criticism, Bloom deliberately counters what he considers weak misreadings of J with his own "strong" reading or misreading. Right or wrong doesn't matter as long as it's strong: the honesty is refreshing, but the will to dominate is still misplaced.

*Shandy*. Even specific characters are linked in specific ways to specific Neoclassical texts: Gradus, for instance, is at one point described in language that patently echoes Hobbes's depiction not of the individual but of the collective, the commonwealth:

Mere springs and coils produced the inward movements of our clockwork man. He might be termed a Puritan.<sup>6</sup> (152)

So pervasive is the presence of Eighteenth-Century materials in *Pale Fire* that we are thoroughly justified in assuming that both specifics of particular works and the general formalisms of Eighteenth-Century and early Romantic literature serve as yet one more battery of the multiple literary frames that *Pale Fire* both exploits and violates.

In particular, Swift's *Tale of a Tub* volume (including the titular work, *The Battle of the Books*, and *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*) looms large as a frame and foil for much of Nabokov's work. Kinbote most certainly functions as a mad narrator in the tradition of *A Tale of a Tub's* Hack, who reinterprets the universe by the light and in the image of his own mind. The interplay of poem and commentary in Nabokov's work can legitimately be construed as affectionate parody or straightforward adaptation of the interplay of tale and digression in Swift's, particularly with regard to the way Swift's tale of the three brothers' dealings with their father's will and the Hack's commentary on it illuminate and/or obscure the practices of reading and interpretation. Of Swift's announced twofold targets in *A Tale of a Tub*, abuses in religion and abuses in learning, Shade's poem, preoccupied as it is with the question of an afterlife and the evidences of providential plan, tallies neatly with the ostensible religious concerns of *A Tale of a Tub's* narrative sections, while Kinbote's commentatorial lucubrations can easily be seen as discharging the other half of the Swiftian commission. Such matters are by no means straightforward in either author, however, and Shade's many reflections on his own art of poesy and Kinbote's frequent, spirited defenses of his own Zemblan brand of Orthodox Christianity certainly render the border between the two concerns highly porous – just as it is in Swift.

Nabokov shows an allegorist's reluctance to use even the complex materials that he draws from Swift in anything like a simple or straightforward manner: all is skewed and seemingly misapplied. For instance, Kinbote, as I have just said, seems often to function as a narrator in the mold and manner of the *Tale's* Hack, who, in Swift's work, identifies himself quite closely with the beliefs of the youngest brother, Jack, who is distinguished, as a kind of populist fanatic and extremist, from the aristocratic, Roman-Catholic practices of the oldest brother Peter and

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<sup>6</sup> The relevant – and famous – passage from Hobbes that Nabokov here draws on goes as follows: “Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. For seeing life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within, why may we not say that all automata (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the heart, but a spring; and the nerves, but so many strings; and the joints, but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the Artificer? Art goes yet further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of Nature, man. For by art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State (in Latin, Civitas), which is but an artificial man.” (*Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakshott (Oxford, nd), 5.)

the Protestant via-media-ish beliefs of middle brother Martin. Nabokov brings precisely those relationships explicitly to bear not on Kinbote, however, but on the Extremist Gradus – Jakob Gradus, alias Jack Degree, whose “father, Martin Gradus, had been a Protestant minister in Riga” and whose uncle’s name is Roman (77). At their simplest – and nothing about such allusions or appropriations is simple – such reverberations of Swift’s text within Nabokov’s or of Nabokov’s against Swift’s point to a subterranean linkage of Kinbote and his seeming antithesis Gradus, just as the seeming opposites Jack and Peter come to resemble each other in Swift’s *Tale*. But that is only a starting point for the many possible resonances of Swiftean materials in *Pale Fire*.

Nabokov in fact never merely borrows or simply alludes, any more than any other allegorist does. Everything taken is transformed, either in its adaptation or in its context. For instance: if Swift’s Hack is “the freshest of all the Moderns” and the spokesman for all that is new, Kinbote amounts to his utter opposite, explicitly in politics and religion and, given his taste for Housman and Tennyson, implicitly in art as well. We are allowed to get comfortable with that inverted relationship for most of the novel: during most of the book, Kinbote follows the Hack at a distance, sharing his mental instability but not its forms or predilections. Their silhouettes are alike, so to speak, though the particulars of their appearance differ radically. Then, three paragraphs from the end of the book (conspicuously in symmetry with the disturbing third opening paragraph), we encounter the actual voice of the Hack himself: “Yes, better stop. My notes and myself are petering out”<sup>7</sup> (300).

That is shock enough, to run head on into the very *persona* who first embodies – in English at least – the utterly book-generated being, a being who writes himself into and out of existence by means of his pen and his commonplace book. But immediately before him, in Nabokov’s text, we encountered a different, new persona, a sort of carnival barker and tent revivalist, who modulates – if that is the word – from his Zemblan nurse’s adage (“God makes hungry, the Devil thirsty”: whatever that may mean) to “Well folks, I guess many in this fine hall are as hungry and thirsty as me, and I’d better stop, folks, right here.” The reader may be pardoned for wondering who this guy is and where he came from and what “fine hall” he’s talking about, as well as what “folks” he’s addressing. Whoever he is, he ain’t Kinbote, who would never commit that “hungry and thirsty as me” solecism. The disorientations generated by this volley of schizophrenic non-sequiturs are then capped by the appearance, right after the voice of the Hack himself, of what seems to be the Hack’s mock-Drydenic voice, an eloquent if self-pitying writer who laments his sufferings, prays for his countrymen, and mourns his poet in relatively dignified, elegaic language:

Gentlemen, I have suffered very much, and more than any of you can imagine. I pray for the Lord’s benediction to rest on my wretched countrymen. My work is finished. My poet is dead. (300)

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<sup>7</sup> See “The Conclusion” of *A Tale of a Tub*, 132-35 *passim*. For instance: “But now, since by the Liberty and Encouragement of the Press, I am grown absolute Master of the Occasions and Opportunities, to expose the Talents I have acquired; I already discover, that the *Issues* of my *Observanda* begin to grow too large for the *Receipts*. Therefore, I shall here pause awhile, till I find, by feeling the World’s Pulse, and my own, that it will be of absolute Necessity for us both, to resume my Pen” (135).

This impersonation, this further distancing of the idea of fixed identity, in turn segues – by means of an artfully placed second person (“And you, what will *you* be doing with yourself, poor King, poor Kinbote?’ a gentle young voice may inquire” 300) – to a final, purely first-personal paragraph wherein schizophrenia triumphs as the artistic and personal freedom of self-creation:

God will help me, I trust, to rid myself of any desire to follow the example of two other characters in this work. I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art. I may join forces with Odon in a new motion picture: *Escape from Zembla* (ball in the palace, bomb in the palace square). I may pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments. Oh, I may do many things! History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom, and with a great sob greet the gray coastline and the gleam of a roof in the rain. I may huddle and groan in a madhouse. 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. (300-301)

The fusion of modes of existence and levels of reality here is dizzying, raising to a complex intellectual level – by means of multiplexly literalized puns – the simple case of “mistaken identity” on which the climax of the narrative turns. Kinbote is disguised king is perhaps a version of Nabokov, who may also be present – a piece of him, at any rate – in the poet/creator Shade, and who has already nebulously appeared on the fringes of the narrative by way of his own character from another novel, Professor Pnin. The whole of *Pale Fire* is now unabashedly “this work,” of which Kinbote acknowledges himself as much a part as the “two other characters” whose deaths offer him a potential model. Kinbote’s projected stage play sounds remarkably like the book and tale we have just read, even to its insistence on the intrusion of illusion/delusion into “reality’: its poet perishes “between the two figments.” All identity is mistaken identity: Nabokov has walked us through the looking glass, through the mirror of Zembla, “of Semblerland, a land of reflections, of ‘resemblers’” (265), into a non- or anti-Aristotelean world where the principle of non-contradiction no longer holds, a world where things and people can both be and not be in the same respect at the same time – can, in short, be both themselves and Other. Nabokov takes us into an allegorical world of infinite openness and infinite resonance, a space dominated by self-similarity across scale, across genres, across roles, rather than by self-identity.

Self-similarity frames *Pale Fire*, offering a border of no fixed location. The final paragraphs of the book reflect, without duplicating, its opening paragraphs. The antepenultimate paragraph confuses the speaking voice, identity, and role of the narrator just as the third paragraph from the opening does. The intrusive second person – here at the end that altogether alien voice

solicitously asking Kinbote his plans – serves the same pivotal purposes as the intrusive second person does in the work's opening paragraphs. It here leads to the novel's final paragraph, a wonderful piece of Nabokovian magic prose that in key respects is the mirror image – i.e., the reversed image – of the grammatically third-personal, psychologically impersonal first paragraph of the work. This last paragraph is dominated grammatically by the first person but ideologically by personality construed as a thing, identity understood as a garment to be donned and put off. In the various roles that "Kinbote" envisages as possibilities for himself – not roles, but identities, psychologies, personalities: persons in short – he and we see subjectivity objectively: we view the first person as and in the light of the third. This is why the paragraph and the book culminate, appropriately and beautifully, with *Pale Fire's* obsessive agent of the third person, of the Other understood as opposite and opposition, antithesis and contradiction: Gradus, the man of degrees, the evil gray man who destroys the good gray poet, the man of steps and procedures and method, who is nevertheless an Extremist, and lives and moves and has his being in Kinbote's and the novel's extremity.

But the poet too is a man of steps and procedures and method, and Gradus's approach, all through Kinbote's commentary, has been exquisitely meshed with, linked to, almost identified with, the forward progress of the poem and the poet's work of creation and composition – facts Kinbote remarks on more than once. And he remarks on them in more than the sense of noting the coincidences: Kinbote creates the coincidences. Whether Gradus the character is or is not Kinbote's creation, the Progress of Gradus is, and it is Kinbote's poem as much as "Pale Fire" is John Shade's.

His departure for Western Europe, with a sordid purpose in his heart and a loaded gun in his pocket, took place on the very day that an innocent poet in an innocent land was beginning Canto Two of *Pale Fire*. We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought, as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia, through the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm, riding past in a rhyme, skidding around the corner of a run-on, breathing with the caesura, swinging down to the foot of the page from line to line as from branch to branch, hiding between two words (see note to line 596), reappearing on the horizon of a new canto, steadily marching nearer in iambic motion, crossing streets, moving up with his valise on the escalator of the pentameter, stepping off, boarding a new train of thought, entering the hall of a hotel, putting out the bedlight, while Shade blots out a word, and falling asleep as the poet lays down his pen for the night. (78)

Marvellous prose, incantatory prose, that incarnates Gradus as a perfectly synchronous aspect of Shade's verse and – speaking of synchronicity – at the very same time makes the verse a perfectly transparent metaphor for Gradus's journey. The fusion becomes almost airtight, its expression verges on tautology, when Gradus – or Shade – boards "a new train of thought," a phrase that functions with total accuracy both as clichéd metaphor and as literal statement, and both in the sense of the poet's string of ideas and his commentator's provision of transportation.

Although Gradus availed himself of all varieties of locomotion – rented cars, local trains, escalators, airplanes – somehow the eye of the mind sees him, and the muscles of the

mind feel him, as always streaking across the sky with black traveling bag in one hand and loosely folded umbrella in the other, in a sustained glide high over sea and land. The force propelling him is the magic action of Shade's poem itself, the very mechanism and sweep of verse, the powerful iambic motor. Never before has the inexorable advance of fate received such a sensuous form (for other images of that transcendental tramp's approach see note to line 17). (135-36)

Not only is "that transcendental tramp's approach" itself a powerful example of the "iambic motor," but the twofold meaning of "tramp" therein – the steady rhythm of Shade's verse, Gradus the seedy sojourner – completely fuses the utterly alien (to Shade) and extra-poetic creature of Kinbote's mind and/or memory with Shade's most intimate, most personal and private, most intensely and peculiarly Shadean activity: with what Gerard Manley Hopkins would call his "selving."

This to say that in *Pale Fire* (the book, as opposed to "Pale Fire" the poem) it is certainly pointless and probably erroneous to talk about levels of reality. The progress of the poem and the approach of Gradus are interchangeable, equivalent: one of the connotations of his name, after all, is *Gradus ad Parnassum*,<sup>8</sup> which is itself at least ambiguous, at most an oxymoron – literally, the steps to Parnassus, the legendary peak of poetic inspiration, home of the Muses, and equally literally the name of a pedestrian handbook of poetic imagery, long the crib of schoolboys and the *vademecum* of hacks and poetasters. As readers, we cannot distinguish between the reality of Shade and the reality of Gradus (after all, we really only have Kinbote's word for either of their existences) or between the reality of Kinbote and that of Charles the Beloved, between the poet and his killer and the king and his killer ("kinbote means regicide" in Zembla: "a king's destroyer'... a king who sinks his identity in the mirror of exile is in a sense just that" [267]). So too, it is naive in the extreme to talk about *Pale Fire* in terms purely of creation, even in terms of self-creation: every self-creation not only mirrors the creator but also and synchronously calls forth its mirror image, its other and The Other, the destroyer who will shatter that image. Even Gradus will "meet, in his urgent and headlong flight, a reflection that will shatter him" (135). Kinbote's Zembla may be "that crystal land" ("Pale Fire," 17), "Semberland, a land of reflections" (265), but the revolution that tumbles Charles the Beloved begins in its "famous Glass Factory" (120) and Gradus himself had failed in the glass business (151-52). Note too that it is "the *false* [italics mine] azure in the windowpane" that initiates all the action of "Pale Fire," and consequently of *Pale Fire*, its magnified reflection.

Shade, devotee of doubleness that he is – not for nothing does he write couplets – "duplicate[s]" his self and room on the "crystal land" of fresh snow via the medium of "dark glass" ("Pale Fire," 5-2). St. Paul too knew something about that kind of seeing and its limitations, and the echoes of the Pauline "Now we see through a glass darkly"<sup>9</sup> ought to be enough to warn readers about the accuracy of Shade's visions. After all, however we take the

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<sup>8</sup> On this point, see Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, p. 34 and 31-56, *passim*).

<sup>9</sup> Kinbote himself quotes the phrase directly, but from a statement of "Professor Hurley" and not from St. Paul, on p. 14 of the "Foreword": "it is not improbable that what [Shade] left represents only a small fraction of the composition he saw in a glass, darkly."

name Shade – and the presence of wife Sybil certainly provides spectral connotations that run well beyond simple sun-shadow into the deeper darks of the classical underworld and those few heroes who have toured it and returned to tell – it bespeaks neither clarity nor brightness nor light nor substantiality. As the goal of Charles the Beloved’s and/or Kinbote’s quest, Shade remains a curiously ambiguous datum, a poet-seer – the Latin word *vates* says it best – of dubious insight, incommunicative to Kinbote in life and disappointing to him in the afterlife of his poem. Even narratively Shade is ambiguous: the pairing with Sybil makes him the object of a *descensus ad inferos*, the kind of descent to hell undertaken by Aeneas to obtain enlightenment and direction – neither of which this Shade provides.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, his status as poet and Kinbote’s admiration for his poetry make the approach to him – especially via the adulterated pastoralism of Appalachia and New Wye – a kind of personal *gradus ad Parnassum* for Kinbote, and one can conclude that, indeed, the commentator on “Pale Fire” did find a kind of poetic inspiration there – though he also finds The Other that dissolves his identity and ends his life at Wordsmith College.

Indeed, in that sense Shade’s poem finds its fulfillment in the concluding dissolution and opening of Kinbote’s personality to multiple possibilities. “Pale Fire” starts with and from a multiplication of selves: the “I” who speaks *is* – the poem uses the copulative verb – “the shadow of the waxwing slain,” it is “the smudge of ashen fluff,” yet it “Lived on, flew on” to “duplicate/ Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate” (1-6). If we can accept as profound – or at least as significant – statements like those in verse, what is so preposterous or so difficult about Kinbote’s valedictory schizophrenia in prose? Shade’s initiatory verses preserve firmly the separateness of the “I” which sees the death of the waxwing (*Bombycilla shadei*, as Kinbote “belatedly” realizes) and watches its reflection in “that crystal land.” Kinbote’s final words transcend that division by accepting the fluidity and transience, the malleability and multiplicity of the “I” that endures. Commenting on “Pale Fire” 131-32, Kinbote remarks,

Today, when the “feigned remoteness” has indeed performed its dreadful duty, and the poem we have is the only “shadow” that remains, we cannot help reading into these lines something more than mirrorplay and mirage shimmer. We feel doom, in the image of Gradus, eating away the miles and miles of “feigned remoteness” between him and poor Shade. He, too, is to meet, in his urgent and blind flight, a reflection that will shatter him. (135)

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<sup>10</sup> Nabokov plays quite comically with this aspect of Shade’s life: as in *The Aeneid*, Sybil controls access to the Shades, and she is not very friendly to Kinbote’s approaches. He lacks the necessary talisman, the golden bough: his Zemblan translation of *Timon of Athens* hardly does the trick. Aeneas and Sybil bring sops for Cerberus, to quiet the watchdog of Hell; Kinbote manages access to Shade with bribes of booze for the poet, otherwise strictly rationed by Sybil. Aeneas hunts for the Golden Bough in a forest and enters the Underworld with Sybil through a Grove of Death: Shade and Kinbote walk in a haunted wood (186) and pass a natural grotto (135) where an earlier companion of the poet’s customarily paused to ease his bladder. Is it going too far to see in Shade’s verse-covered index cards the loose leaves on which Virgil’s Sybil records her prophecies? I don’t think so, especially when – after Shade finally has become a shade – Kinbote seizes upon them as the treasure he has sought, the talisman that will protect him: “Thus with cautious steps, among deceived enemies, I circulated, plated with poetry, armored with rhymes, stout with another man’s song, stiff with cardboard, bullet-proof at last” (300). This last image is interesting from another point of view also: as he describes himself here, Kinbote is all but indistinguishable from *Pale Fire*, whether you think of *Pale Fire* as an intellectual substance or as a physical book.

The poem is a shadow – Shade’s shade – yet Gradus is a Shadow too, and the Shadows shadow Kinbote. The mirror image *is* false, the distance is feigned, and waxwing, Shade, and even Gradus are “shattered” – wonderful word – by the proximity of the images they cast, the reflections they create. The revolution that begins in the Glass Factory starts by breaking mirrors, and not the last of them is that “mirror of art,” that “glass of nature” wherein we see our own faces.

### Premeditate

*Pale Fire* weighs several other versions of art in its own particular scale and finds them wanting. Conventional allegorical theory gets as short – albeit comic – shrift from Nabokov as does conventional symbolism. Eystein’s portrait of Count Kernel, Keeper of the Treasure, offers the finest and the funniest instance of both of these:

Eystein showed himself to be a prodigious master of the trompe l’oeil in the depiction of various objects surrounding his dignified dead models and making them look even deader by contrast to the fallen petal or the polished panel that he rendered with such love and skill. But in some of these portraits Eystein had also resorted to a weird form of trickery: among his decorations of wood or wool, gold or velvet, he would insert one which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint. This device which was apparently meant to enhance the effect of his tactile and tonal values had, however, something ignoble about it and disclosed not only an essential flaw in Eystein’s talent, but the basic fact that “reality” is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average “reality” perceived by the communal eye.... At this spot hung a portrait representing a former Keeper of the Treasure, decrepit Count Kernel, who was painted with fingers resting lightly on an embossed and emblazoned box whose side facing the spectator consisted of an inset oblong made of real bronze, while upon the shaded top of the box, drawn in perspective, the artist had pictured a plate with beautifully executed, twin-lobed, brainlike, halved kernel of a walnut.

The two Soviet professionals could be excused for assuming they would find a real receptacle behind the real metal. At the present moment they were about to decide whether to pry out the plaque or take down the picture; but we can anticipate a little and assure the reader that the receptacle, an oblong hole in the wall, was there all right; it contained nothing, however, except the broken bits of a nutshell. (130-131)

We are, of course, back with our old friends the husk and the kernel again. This time the kernel is doubled – surely no surprise in this novel – in Count Kernel and literalized in his eponym, that wonderfully anatomical “twin-lobed, brainlike, halved kernel of a walnut.” The husk too is doubled, perhaps tripled, in the painting itself, in the real panel worked into the trompe l’oeil surface, and in the nutshell. And this time the kernels are outsides rather than insides, the surface of the picture rather than its deep content. That, in turn, is singularly literalized in the whilom outsides, the “broken bits of a nutshell,” hidden in the painting’s actual secret compartment, itself, in its turn, concealed by a real – not an artificial – panel. Anyone tempted to take Kinbote’s words about the relation of art to reality as a transcription of Nabokov’s own

beliefs or practices had better think long and hard about the complexities generated by this send-up of the conventional language of artistic semiosis – especially since, after all these relations are sorted out, the conscientious reader is still left with the problem of identifying that “essential flaw in Eystein’s talent” or Kinbote’s perceptions.

In fact, Nabokov doesn’t stop even with this. While this passage renders the conventional imagery of allegory and/or allegoresis utterly meaningless, it retroactively charges with significance the immediately preceding episode of the discovery of the hidden passage in the back of the closet. That closet and its hidden contents will, of course, reappear as Charles the Beloved’s avenue of escape immediately after this account of Eystein’s painting, so this whole excursus on art and reality, surfaces and subtexts, is framed by the discovery, exploration, and use of the treasure (there is literally one of those there too: see p. 125’s “sixty-five-carat blue diamond”) hidden among the detritus in the closet. That treasure is a subterranean passage that leads, by means of yet another sort of descent to hell (“The dim light...was now his dearest companion, Oleg’s ghost, the phantom of freedom.... The pool of opalescent ditch water had grown in length; along its edge walked a sick bat like a cripple with a broken umbrella.... And...there had somehow wandered down, to exile and disposal, a headless statue of Mercury, conductor of souls to the Lower World” [133]), out of the palace-prison and into the theatre – and there, tactfully, we ought to leave the matter.

We can’t, of course, because the action is too rich, too ambiguous, to go unremarked. The King goes into the closet – and the sexual implications of that should need no explaining – and Kinbote emerges. Palace/Prison/King here, Theatre/Freedom/ Kinbote there, and an underground passage connects them – a passage discovered in childhood and forgotten for years, repressed by change and loss until rediscovered in the pressure of greater loss – and the Jungian and even Freudian implications of that should need no explaining. Just don’t stop with the theatre only, which is merely a preoccupation of critics, and don’t think that all underground or underworld passages are necessarily good or liberating. Gradus is a member of the underground, and Kinbote’s mind is certainly the underground or underworld through which Shade’s poem passes to emerge as the stuff of the commentary. The same action appears on another scale, in a farcical dimension, in the subterranean passage of the “near ham” French sandwich and greasy French fries through Gradus’s intestines to emerge as the “liquid hell” (282) that almost aborts his mission. All of these and more conform to the fractal patterning of allegory: they constitute the literary equivalent of self-similarity across scale, and as such they amount to, in this particular form, some of the basic building blocks of this particular allegory, just as, as a generalized phenomenon, they are the basic building blocks of all allegories.

That means, of course, that no allegory has a predetermined or determinably finite form or shape: the scale is potentially endless, with each replication contributing at once a link of similarity and a measure of difference to a “whole” that is never entirely whole and never incomplete. *Pale Fire* offers no exception to this process. As we have already seen, the replications spill out of the literary “frame” to affect or infect us, and we renew and extend the pattern of similarity and difference each and every time we read the text. But *Pale Fire* does yet more than that. *Pale Fire* is not a book about the making of art, as one of the cliché gushes of twentieth-century criticism seems to pronounce any even semi-important work. The creation of

art is a critic's preoccupation, not an artist's and not art's. If the greatest works of literature and music and dance and sculpture and painting were only concerned with their own making, there would be precious little reason for the rest of us to pay any attention to them at all.

*Pale Fire* does involve artistic creation, but largely by the way: what it's about is what most serious thinking is about, what all allegory is always about – self-creation, and world-creation, and the nature of reality. That's why *Pale Fire* (and every other allegory) is open-ended rather than closed: not only because closure is in some senses impossible for it, but because closure is a betrayal of it, a denial of it. Allegories lead to freedom, to openness, to the bursting of forms and cocoons and the liberation of new life. That's why Shade's poem, written throughout in that form of perfect closure, the rhymed couplet, ends with an unrhymed line. That's why Kinbote's commentary ends with a welter of new possibilities limited only by the possibility of new and more potent opposition – always yin and yang, always the new possible seen as/by/through/in the new opposable.

That's why the novel ends not with Kinbote's vision of possibility for himself but with the Index, the last entry in which is the simple, wistful "Zembla, a distant northern land" (315) – a beginning, not an ending. Why an Index? Because it is the simplest contemporary mode of parataxis, a sequential order that neither implies nor demands form, order, valuation, or differentiation. It presents only an open field of equally important data: connect them how you will, why you will. The data of the Index are the raw material of universes, awaiting the different fiats that will arrange them, inflect them, decline them into languages and worlds. An Index is words, only words, and therefore all we need.

We will not begin fully to comprehend allegory until we are willing to posit not only that aspects of chaos theory are useful for illuminating its "internal" workings, but that the basic concepts of chaos theory – the emergence of order and disorder from the same causes, fractal dimensions, all the mathematical probabilities of flow and turbulence, the weirdly beautiful asymmetries of Mandelbrot sets, the pull of the strange attractors – are at work both in the writing and in the reading of allegories. To accept that is truly to let the genie out of the bottle.