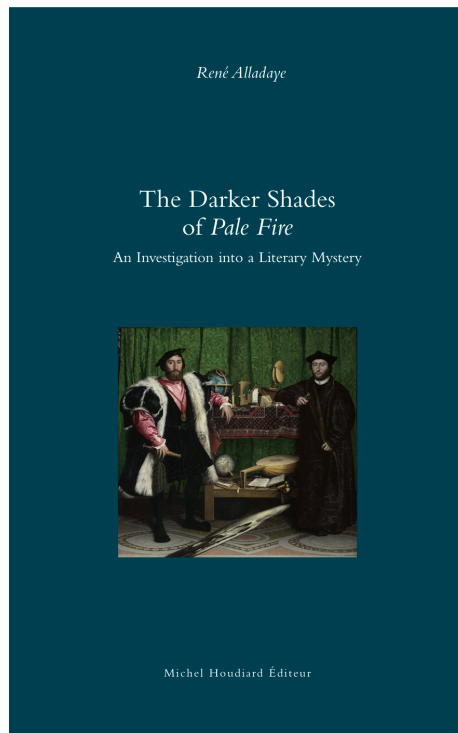


***The Darker Shades of Pale Fire: An Investigation into a Literary Mystery*, by René Alladaye.** Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2013; ISBN 9782356920935. Bibliography. Index. 198 pp.



René Alladaye's *The Darker Shades of Pale Fire: An Investigation into a Literary Mystery* succeeds as a history and overview of *Pale Fire*'s boldest critical interpreters. Alladaye contextualizes the long arc that began with Mary McCarthy and moved through Andrew Field, Donald Barton Johnson, and Brian Boyd, all of whom have provided elegant arguments for radical re-readings of Nabokov's most radical work. Combined, these critics (and those who have responded, refuted, or otherwise complicated their claims) suggest that *Pale Fire*'s overt narrative structure – a novel composed of a long poem composed by John Shade, sandwiched by fictional preface and annotations by a delusional Charles Kinbote – hides an even more elaborate nesting series of narrators. Writ large, two competing camps suggest that Shade or Kinbote are the sole “actual” authors of *Pale Fire*. Boyd's theory

refines the two-author proposition, with Shade's ghost influencing Kinbote's commentary. As an overview of the critical interpretative summersaults around these narratorial candidates, *Darker Shades* is a triumph: seldom has there been such a succinct and clear account of this long, interesting, and highly productive conversation. What the overview provides is vital, and how Alladaye arrives at his own contribution is laudable. A reader need not be convinced by the central claim of *Darker Shades* to find it necessary, well written, humorous, and careful about the contours that the investigation provides, and these qualifications (and qualifiers) are necessary for readers who have a hard time believing in these alternate authorial theories.

As a sceptic myself, I appreciate the way in which Alladaye presents Kinboteans, Shadeans, and others, and particularly grateful for how the merits and virtues of each is presented and then disputed. Chapter 6 crystallizes much of what is tantalizing about the limits inherent in each possible alternate reading,¹ but not before providing chapters where the history of the novel's composition is juxtaposed to its form, and where modes of reading the novel are approached, all of which give a series of answers to a simple question: Why have critics refused to leave well enough alone? That is, given leaps necessary in making each of these theories work, why do critics continue to find these readings so alluring? What Alladaye makes available is the rationale and the context for these variant readings, since so much of what has led to these interpretations is the wealth of problems presented by Nabokov himself: the promise of secret coded meanings to be found in stories like "The Vane Sisters," or the metaphysical concerns that lurked at the edges of so much of Nabokov's work, has yielded so much in the past twenty years. There is often the implicit assumption, on the part of each of these proponents, that Nabokov has carefully hidden something, and that a series of clues has been arranged so that the meaning will become clear when they are properly brought to notice. It is a perfectly reasonable assumption, given the degree to which this approach has yielded substantive new insights into Nabokov's work.² Nabokov's work teems with information, with linkages to rich, seemingly bottomless portals into the historical, into the personal, and into the

¹ See in particular the subsections titled "To the Dedicated Shadeans: Why Kinbote Could Be the Author of the Poem" and "To the Dedicated Kinboteans: Why Shade Could Be the Author of the Commentary," where the mutually incompatible propositions are sequentially dismantled.

² Andrea Pitzer's *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov* is the best recent example. The book provides strong and convincing evidence that coded references to Soviet and German concentration camps can be found in *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and elsewhere.

modes through which we interpret and misinterpret the world. Alladaye himself provides a beautiful term for this sort of skewed reading: anamorphosis.

Because Alladaye goes to great lengths to obscure certain parts of his analysis until the later chapters, it may be unfair to present it here without the considerable amount of foregrounded material in the book, but it feels necessary to do so, and it feels just as necessary to point out why it fails to convince. Readers who would rather preserve Alladaye's element of surprise may want to skip this paragraph. Alladaye claims that in *Pale Fire* Nabokov has hidden references to Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. To support this claim, he notes the way in which the novel repeated the ambassador motif, and that Shade's poem makes explicit, if distorted, descriptions of the painting. Much of the proof comes from a description of the room belonging to Shade's aunt Maud, but the interpretative leaps necessary to make it fit Holbein are problematic. Alladaye writes that "the 'paperweight of convex glass enclosing a lagoon' is evocative of the terrestrial globe" in Holbein's painting, and that "the 'verse book open at the Index (Moon, Moonrise, Moral)' seemingly alludes to both the Lutheran hymnal (the word 'verse' evokes the Bible, hence the religious context of the painting) and the celestial globe ('Moon, Moonrise')" (135). It is a daring reading, and it is not fully groundless, but it does not fully convince. Given that the objects described are arguably still-life commonplaces, and since Shade is arranging Maud's room as though it were a still life, one could find analogues other than *The Ambassadors*. One could just as easily argue that the painting described has no need for a real-life referent, or that Nabokov would have described the room in such a way that it could only belong to Holbein. Here, going by Alladaye's logic, one could stretch the textual evidence to fit any number of other works. Take, for example, Pieter Clesz's 1628 *Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill*, which contains a tumbled glass over a (hymn?) book and which one could argue is serving as more of a paperweight than Holbein's globe. I'm more taken by Alladaye's insistence that the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting, whose distorted perspective can only be appreciated when examined from a particular (and highly skewed) angle, provides a useful framework for thinking about the novel, though perhaps not in the directions advocated by Alladaye.³

Additional contortions are required, but it is to Alladaye's great credit that he sees this reading not as definitive but simply as one of the ways in which Nabokov's novel rewards

³ Holbein leads him to the suggestion that Hazel and Sybil have a hand in the internal authorship of the novel.

reinterpretation and re-reading. This is a terrific insight. The novel, arguably more than any other, “lends itself to reconstructions which are not mutually exclusive” (176). Alladaye’s reconstruction is perhaps more daring than most, but it never fails to fascinate even if it suggests other possible approaches.

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