James Ramey

PALE FIRE'S BLACK CROWN[1]

P*ale Fire* is a novel about authorship, literary criticism and literary detective work. Critics have had intense disagreements about the final "solution" Nabokov encoded into this novel, a solution he refers to mysteriously in letters going back to the time of the novel's composition in the late fifties. It is my belief that Nabokov deployed a series of intentional mistakes in the 1962 publication of *Pale Fire*, and that he figured these illusionistic mistakes as a parallel in literature to the kind of defensive mimicry or camouflage that he admired in the natural world, a biological phenomenon he thought often "seemed to have been invented by some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man" (*The Gift* 110). The central clue that Nabokov could have used intentional mistakes in the novel comes at the dramatic epiphany-moment of John Shade's poem, in which the poet declares that his long, obsessive search for immortality may depend on something as bathetic as a misprint he discovers in a newspaper article.

> There's one misprint — not that it matters much:
> *Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch."

Life Everlasting — based on a misprint!

I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,

And stop investigating my abyss?

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,

810   Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.

(*PF* 62-63)

Brian Boyd and others have tended to consider this passage the Poem's climax, but the possible role of misprints in the novel has been neglected, and later editions of *Pale Fire* have corrected many of them. However, in preparation for the publication of *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel, Jr., asked Nabokov about an apparent mistake in *Pale Fire* in which the title of *Finnegans Wake* appears with an "i" for the "e" in "*Finnegans*," and also with a possessive apostrophe, thus apparently correcting Joyce's obviously intentional error while throwing in a new one for good measure.[2] But Nabokov would have been familiar with Stephen's quip in *Ulysses*: "A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery" (243). So his response to Appel is tantalizing: "You say you don't understand the mistakes of tricksters but they would not be tricksters if they did not profit by their own tricky mistakes."[3] Nabokov thus seems to be suggesting that just as the title of *Finnegans Wake* functions to "trick" readers into catching a mistake that really isn't one (a subject brilliantly explored by Tim Conley in his book *Joyces Mistakes*), the author of *Pale Fire* may intend to profit from apparent "mistakes" or

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[2] This passage appears in the note to line 12 in the Commentary: "Of course, it would have been unseemly for a monarch to appear in the robes of learning at a university lectern and present to rosy youths *Finnigan's Wake* as a monstrous extension of Angus Mac-Diarmid's "incoherent transactions" and of Southey's Lingo-Grande ("Dear Stumparumper," etc.)" (*PF* 76) Since this intentional error is only the second note in the Commentary, it may be that Nabokov chose to place a major thematic clue here, as he often does, precisely because of its high visibility.

[3] The letter from Nabokov to Appel is filed at the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, dated April 3, 1967. In spite of Nabokov's cryptic "trickiness" response, Appel refers to the misspelling of *Finnegans Wake* in *Pale Fire* in a note in *The Annotated Lolita*, but does not note that Nabokov may have meant anything special by it. Instead, he just flags the irregularity in his quotation of *Pale Fire* so it won't look like his own mistake: "…present to rosy youths *Finnigan's* [*sic*— A.A.] *Wake*…" (413).

misprints in the text that are "tricky"—and perhaps even to transform those "volitional errors" into his own "portals of discovery."

I have argued in a previous article[4] that Shade's strange line, "Just this: not text but texture," suggests that the misprints which grant "Life Everlasting" in *Pale Fire* are misprints *not* of the text—that is, words, grammar, punctuation, or spelling—but instead misprints of the visual texture of what is printed, which can be understood in typographical terms to involve fonts or, more specifically, italics: "not text, but texture." If so, then Shade's realization would be brilliantly double-coded when he writes, "all at once it dawned on me that *this* / was the real point, the contrapuntal theme," in which the italicization of the word "*this*" would thus itself be *"the real point,"* leading to a decoding of a major contrapuntal theme, or pattern, having to do with italics in the novel.

A logical place to start looking for a counterpoint pattern involving the conventions of italicization would be Kinbote's notes to this very passage in the Commentary. In the note to line 810, "Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense," Kinbote mentions that the owner of the motor-lodge where he is writing the Commentary offers to let him read some "dog-eared paperback mystery stories" that "did not rate more than a sigh and a smile" (*PF* 261). We have seen low-grade mystery stories involving italics before: in *Lolita*, Humbert says "a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues. In my youth I once read a French detective tale where the clues were actually in italics" (*AL* 211). A few pages later, Humbert remarks on the italicized French term, "*Qu'il t'y*—What a tongue-twister!" (*AL* 223). Thus, with a clue that is "actually in italics," he coyly reveals to the careful reader the solution to the central "mystery story" of that novel: that "Quilty," perfectly spelled out in "*Qu'il t'y,*" is the one who abducts Lolita. With this intertext in mind, we continue reading the note to line 810:

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[4] The article is titled "Parasitism and *Pale Fire*'s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh".

Image 1

Kinbote is presented with "a battered clothbound treasure. 'A great book by a great guy,' the Letters of Franklin Lane." Though extremely well camouflaged, the title of this book is a misprint. It should be in italics, like the titles of other books mentioned in *Pale Fire*, but is not. If Nabokov placed this misprint intentionally, this would mean that, by convention, the words of the title are being emphasized by virtue of their not being in italics, something I call "double-italicization" in the spirit of the mirroring and doubling theme of the novel. This "straightening" of something that should be "crooked," or italicized, is suggestively echoed by the quotation from Franklin Lane's deathbed letter, in which he imagines meeting Aristotle in the afterlife: "What satisfaction to see him take [. . .] the long ribbon of man's life and trace it through the mystifying maze of all the wonderful adventure . . . The crooked made straight. The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above" (*PF* 261).

In the Index we find the following entry: "*Lane, Franklin Knight*, American lawyer and statesman [. . .], author of a remarkable fragment, 810" (*PF* 310). The numerical line references throughout the Index are, as a rule, italicized—but "810" is not.
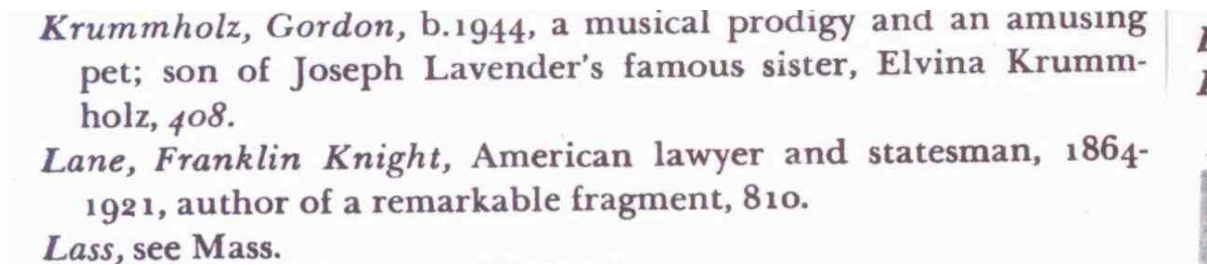
> *Krummholz, Gordon,* b.1944, a musical prodigy and an amusing
>   pet; son of Joseph Lavender's famous sister, Elvina Krumm-
>   holz, *408.*
> *Lane, Franklin Knight,* American lawyer and statesman, 1864-
>   1921, author of a remarkable fragment, 810.
> *Lass,* see Mass.

Image 2

It, too, is double-italicized, something that is "crooked made straight." Could *Pale Fire* then, like *Lolita*, be a "detective tale where the clues [are] actually in italics"? And might this freak correlation of misprinted italics be the beginning of a "long ribbon" that will help us find our way through a "mystifying maze"? And where might such a maze be leading us? For a possible answer, we need only scan the entry headings of the Index before we find another item that should be in italics, but is not: "Hiding place" (*PF* 307).
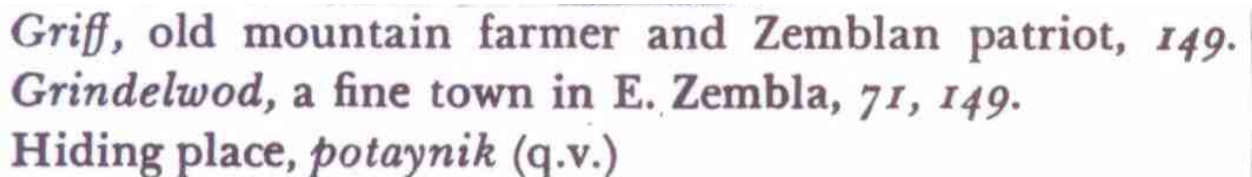

> *Griff,* old mountain farmer and Zemblan patriot, *149.*
> *Grindelwod,* a fine town in E. Zembla, *71, 149.*
> Hiding place, *potaynik* (q.v.)

Image 3

Pale Fire's most obvious and most playful "mystery story" is undoubtedly the riddle of the crown jewels. Throughout the Commentary, Kinbote teasingly mentions the crown jewels, including his "diamond-studded crown" (*PF* 276), so that even on a first reading, few readers would fail to be curious as to their whereabouts. Although Nabokov said in a 1966 interview that the crown jewels are located, "In the ruins [. . .] of some old barracks near Kobaltana," a place in Zembla that is mentioned only in the Index, I have argued elsewhere that there is a distinct possibility Nabokov was offering only costume jewelry in that interview. In the *same* interview, Nabokov is asked "to describe something of the writer's relationship to this world," in answer to which he refers the reader to Chapter 14 of *Speak, Memory*, where we find:

> Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the
> grotesque, were my notions of strategy . . . It should be understood that

competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world) . . . One particular problem I had been trying to compose for months... was meant for the delectation of the very expert solver. The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and discover its fairly simple, "thetic" solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. . . . The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on a fashionable avant-garde theme... which the composer had taken the greatest pains to "plant".... Having passed through this "antithetic" inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move . . . The pleasant experience of the roundabout route . . . would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit, and after that, his arrival at the simple key move would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight. (*SM* 289-92)

If we suppose that the location of the crown jewels in *Pale Fire* follows the pattern in this passage from *Speak, Memory*, then Kobaltana would seem to correspond to the "thetic" solution for an unsophisticated solver, designed to keep treasure-hunting critics away from the real Hiding Place for as long as possible. If so, then we need to identify an antithetic Hiding Place, and then a synthetic one.

The "Hiding place" entry itself takes us on a wild goose chase of (*q.v.*)'s through the Index that finally circles back on itself, through the entries for "*Potaynik,*" "*Taynik,*" and "*Crown Jewels,*" leaving us empty-handed. Although this runaround doesn't lead us directly to any plausible Hiding Place, it does demonstrate the chess-like possibilities of jumping around in the Index by means of the (*q.v.*) device, which moves us from one entry to another as chess pieces move from square to square around the board. And indeed, the "q.v." in the Hiding Place entry is itself double italicized.

Griff, old mountain farmer and Zemblan patriot, *149.*
Grindelwod, a fine to   in E. Zembla, *71, 149.*
Hiding place, *potaynik* (q.v.)

It is itself another item in "the web of sense" of double-italicized clues suggesting perhaps that if we want to find the real "Hiding Place," we should keep our eyes on the functioning of the *q.v.*'s in the Index.

The possibility that a chess-like game is being set up in the Index recalls the author Franklin Lane's middle name, which appears in the Index . . . "Knight." Nabokov often describes the chess knight in metaphoric terms, describing in *Pale Fire* "the fanning out of additional squares which a chess knight (that skip-space piece), standing on a marginal file, 'feels' in phantom extensions beyond the board." If we combine the two double-italicized clues that allow us to skip between the Commentary and the Index, that is, the terms "Letters" and "810," we get the composite notion of "810 Letters." If we then take the trouble to count 810 alphabetical letters beyond the "810" in the Franklin Lane entry, we start with the "L" in "Lass" and arrive at the "w" in the word "worthy" in the Odevalla entry: "worthy Zule ('chessrook') Bretwit, granduncle of Oswin Bretwit (*q.v.*, *q.v.*, as the crows say)."

> *Lane, Franklin Knight,* American lawyer and statesman, 1864-1921, author of a remarkable fragment, 810.
> *Lass,* see Mass.
> *Lavender, Joseph S.,* see O'Donnell, Sylvia.
> *Male,* see Word Golf.
> *Mandevil, Baron Mirador,* cousin of Radomir Mandevil (*q.v.*), experimentalist, madman and traitor, *171.*
> *Mandevil, Baron Radomir,* b.1925, man of fashion and Zemblan patriot; in 1936, K's throne page, *130;* in 1958, disguised, *149.*
> *Marcel,* the fussy, unpleasant, and not always plausible central character, pampered by everybody in Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, 181, 691.*
> *Marrowsky, a,* a rudimentary spoonerism, from the name of a Russian diplomat of the early 19th century, Count Komarovski, famous at foreign courts for mispronouncing his own name—Makarovski, Macaronski, Skomorovski, etc.
> *Mass, Mars, Mare,* see Male.
> *Multraberg,* see Bera.
> *Niagarin and Andronnikov,* two Soviet "experts" still in quest of a buried treasure, *130, 681, 741;* see Crown Jewels.
> *Nitra and Indra,* twin islands off Blawick, *149.*
> *Nodo,* Odon's half-brother, b. 1916, son of Leopold O'Donnell and of a Zemblan boy impersonator; a cardsharp and despicable traitor, *171.*
> *Odevalla,* a fine town north of Onhava in E. Zembla, once the mayorship of the worthy Zule ("chessrook") Bretwit, granduncle of Oswin Bretwit (*q.v.*, *q.v.*, as the crows say), *149, 286.*
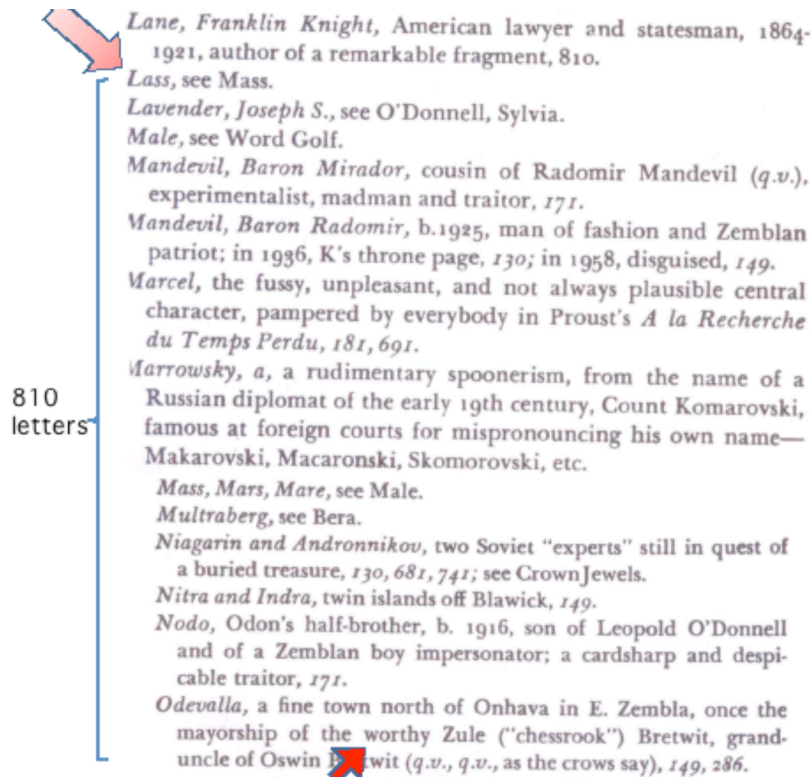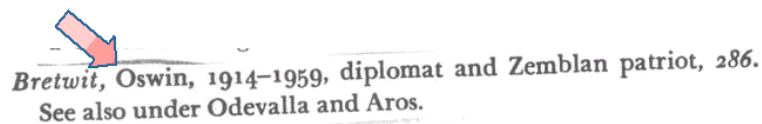
810 letters

Thus our chess knight in the Franklin Lane entry would appear to lead us through a phantom extension of letters in the Index directly to a "chessrook," and also to a rather intriguing double "*q.v.*" in the Index, the only one of its kind. If we follow the emphatic instructions to refer to Oswin's entry, "(*q.v., q.v.*, as the crows say)," we discover that his first name, which should be italicized like the other first names in the Index, is in fact yet another instance of double-italicization—another instance of "The crooked made straight" in the "mystifying maze" we are encountering in the Index.

Bretwit, Oswin, 1914–1959, diplomat and Zemblan patriot, 286.
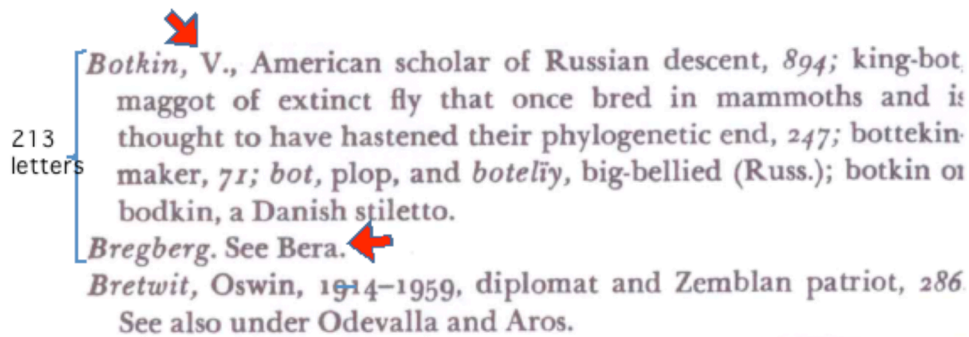See also under Odevalla and Aros.

Image 6

In the Commentary, we have been informed that in the language of Zembla, the surname Bretwit means "Chess Intelligence" (*PF* 180). Since we have arrived at Oswin Bretwit's entry by way of the chessrook in the Odevalla entry, an intelligent next move might be to follow the instruction of the Bretwit entry to "see also under . . . Aros." And, tantalizingly, under the Aros entry we find "the worthy Ferz ("chessqueen") Bretwit, a cousin of the granduncle of Oswin Bretwit (*q.v.*)" (*PF* 305). This move, however, turns out to be a maddeningly dead end, since the "q.v." here merely remits us directly back to the Oswin Bretwit entry from whence we came. Our other options exhausted, our last best hope for a viable clue in the Bretwit entry would be to follow its sole numerical line reference and "skip space" once again back into the Commentary for line 286. In this note, we are told the story of Gradus's interview with Oswin, who knows where the king is located. Gradus gives Oswin a package to which is prefixed a brief note from his uncle: "Here are some precious papers belonging to your family. [. . .] Verba volant, scripta manent" (*PF* 175-6), the Latin tag meaning, "Spoken words are fleeting, written words endure." The Commentary goes on to say, "The *scripta* in question were two hundred and thirteen long letters which had passed some seventy years ago between Zule Bretwit, Oswin's grand-uncle, Mayor of Odevalla, and a cousin of his, Ferz Bretwit, Mayor of Aros" (*PF* 176). It is worth mentioning that line 213 of Shade's Poem begins the italicized couplet: "A syllogism: *other men die; but I / Am not another; therefore I'll not die*" (*PF* 40). This fits nicely into the pattern of

"Life Everlasting—based on a misprint," since here we have life everlasting based on another kind of volitional error—not of typography, but of logic in the form of a droll syllogism.

The fact that there are "two hundred and thirteen long letters" between Zule and Ferz Bretwit would seem to suggest that we should now count 213 alphabetical letters backwards from the "Bretwit, Oswin" entry. Why backwards? It must be backwards because the Commentary specifies that the letters passed between Zule, the "chessrook" on the seventh page of the Index, and Ferz, the "chessqueen" on the first page of the Index. We can understand this configuration in chess terms to be the equivalent of two pieces guarding a single square on the board—Oswin Bretwit's entry. As we count backward from the Bretwit entry, we begin to ascend letter by letter through the Index's crucial Botkin entry, which many critics believe reveals Kinbote's actual identity as an insane Russian scholar named Vseslav Botkin. We notice along the way that the italicized page references in the Botkin entry, unlike any of the other Index entries, appear to contain another mistake—they are in reversed order (894, 247, 71), making it so that our backward sojourn among them is actually in the proper order (71, 247, 894). This may suggest that Nabokov knew a traveler would eventually climb through the Bregberg pass and painstakingly count 213 long letters backward through the backward Botkin entry to arrive at a single-letter misprint even subtler than the misprint of mountain for fountain: in the entry that begins, "*Botkin*, V., American scholar of Russian descent," the "V" is double-italicized, and is also the 213th long letter counting backwards from Oswin Bretwit's double italicized entry heading.

Botkin, V., American scholar of Russian descent, *894*; king-bot, maggot of extinct fly that once bred in mammoths and is thought to have hastened their phylogenetic end, *247*; bottekin-maker, *71*; *bot*, plop, and *boteli̇̆y*, big-bellied (Russ.); botkin or bodkin, a Danish stiletto.

Bregberg. See Bera.

Bretwit, Oswin, 1914–1959, diplomat and Zemblan patriot, *286*. See also under Odevalla and Aros.

Image 7

For seven years I believed that this "V" in the Botkin entry was the endpoint of the treasure map, primarily because Kinbote tells us that the jewels are cached in a "totally different—and quite unexpected—corner of Zembla" (*PF* 244), and since the letter V consists of two converging lines that can be understood iconically to form a corner. Furthermore, I was convinced of the key importance of the fact that if we trudge one step beyond this "V", we find the letter "n" at the end of Botkin's name, giving us the initials by which the true king of *Pale Fire* consistently referred to himself: VN, an "American scholar of Russian descent." In this reading, Nabokov's double-italicized "V" functions simultaneously as the X that marks the spot on our treasure map for the crown jewels and the secret location of the Nabokovian author-deity of *Pale Fire*. I now believe, however, that this was a crowning blunder—that this solution was merely the "antithetic inferno" that had been promised in *Speak, Memory*.

Not long ago, I was doing research at the Berg collection in New York. After several visits I stumbled on some galleys for *Pale Fire* that had been misfiled for many years, and were marked "hand-corrected by the author". When I opened the first set of these galleys, marked

"OK, VN, Feb. 8, 1962," I arrived at a synthesis that instantly ended my seven-year misery of deceit.

PALE FIRE

A NOVEL BY

Vladimir Nabokov

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

Image 8

On the title page, just below his own name and just above the coat-of-arms logo for the G. P. Putnam's Sons publishing house, there has been drawn a little shining crown, next to which is written "18 pt. chess 420-807 (to come)", which appears to be technical font information for the printer.[5]

Image 9

In the second set of galleys, dated March 5, in place of this sketch there has been added an 18-point black crown with five spires and three diamond-shaped jewels. This is the crown of the black queen in the Hastings typeset, a font commonly used for printing chess problems in newspapers. This crown is camouflaged as part of the Putnam heraldic design, but is actually a diabolical addition to it.

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[5] I have not been able to determine what the numbers "420-807" in the first galleys refer to, and would be grateful for guidance or guesses.

PALE FIRE

A NOVEL BY

Vladimir Nabokov

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
New York

Image 10

So all those years I was convinced that the final solution was not Kobaltana, but rather the reversed initials of the author in the "*Botkin*, V." entry of the Index, arrived at by a series of chess moves culminating in 213 letters counted backwards from the Oswin Bretwit entry. I now realize that these moves, and all the playing with double-italicization I had traced, were merely the "'antithetic' inferno" Nabokov had laid for his solver. It should have occurred to me long ago that the hidden initials of the author in the Index were telling us to turn to the one instance in the novel's text of the author's full name, on the title page—the one paratext in the book Nabokov had apparently *not* exploited for its artistic possibilities. The title page is *Pale Fire*'s outer textual surface . . . its windowpane fatal to the waxwing. And there, in that first hardback edition, sits the wry composer's black queen: a black chess crown mimicking a minor element in a stuffy old coat of arms, its jewels glittering in devilishly plain sight.

But why a black queen? Why not the Hastings font of the black king's crown, which in chess problems represents the composer's *sine qua non*? Closer inspection of the other chess

pieces we have seen in the Index reveals multilingual chess wordplay: Zule Bretwit's first name is a heraldic term for the chess rook, and Ferz Bretwit's first name is the Russian word for "pawn." I would be delighted if other scholars can detect an actual chess problem in these piquant encodings, but whatever the case, it seems very likely that they culminate in the black queen on the title page, that she is the final "move" in the series. If so, it would be my hunch that this is an elegant little joke letting the solver know that until reaching this page, having passed through the "mystifying maze" of all the foregoing chess moves, he/she has been Black's pawn all along. For only here, at the first rank of White's end of the board, can the solver be promoted from pawn to queen, defending in perpetuity the only true king of *Pale Fire*, whose name is printed in bold-face just above his queened pawn's crown.

To conclude I wish to point out that this visual flourish recalls the description of another character in *Pale Fire*, a Zemblan portrait painter named "Eystein" who

> showed himself to be a prodigious master of the trompe l'oeil [. . .]
> But in some of those 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 [. . .] 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 "reality" perceived by the
> communal eye. (*PF* 130)

Nabokov is fond of saying that "reality" is one of the few words that should always appear with scare-quotes around it, in order to emphasize the radical perspectivalism he thinks the word should register. The Eystein passage expresses a similar idea—that there is no single reality, but rather a multitude of realities conjured and colored by our distinctive minds, and also sometimes created *for* us by "tricksters," such as painters or novelists, or even "the insect that mimics a leaf," what Shade calls "natural shams" in which "The reed becomes a bird, the knobby twig / An inchworm, and the cobra head, a big / Wickedly folded moth" (*PF* 59). It seems possible that

Eystein's "weird form of trickery," in which he would insert something into one of his trompe l'oeils "which was really made of the material elsewhere imitated by paint," is meant to put the reader on the lookout for something that seems like one of the ordinary varieties of trickery (such as those required for painterly and novelistic *imitatio*), but turns out really to *be* what it appears to be. In other words, the object of our pursuit, described by Kinbote as his "diamond-studded crown," turns out to be as deviously ignoble as Edgar Allen Poe's purloined letter, sitting in the most obvious possible place, awaiting "a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus."

Image 11

Fragment of the illustration above

Pale Fire is an inexhaustible work of art, and I wish to emphasize that this article's preliminary discussion of these findings should not be mistaken for a belief on my part that the novel has been, or ever could be, truly "solved," but rather as a point of departure for new discoveries and new readings, as an axis of new relationships between the novel and those who match themselves against it in pursuit of new syntheses of poignant artistic delight.

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