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MUSICAL COUNTERPOINT
IN THEMATIC AND ANALYTICAL APPLICATION
IN NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE*

INTRODUCTION: READING PROCESSES AND "THE CONTRAPUNTAL THEME"

In this paper, I address the processes of reading in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, especially through Kinbote's directions. I will analyze the processes of reading and understanding in the text through the model of musical counterpoint. A strict structural transfer of musical counterpoint onto the processes of reading *Pale Fire* is problematic because of the differences inherent between a musical composition and a textual work — in musical polyphony, the contrapuntal melodies can be heard synchronously whereas in a textual work, the synchronous 'hearing' of the contrapuntal melodies must take place within one's own imagination, on in a nonsynchronous perception of different plot "melodies". Composition and realization of musical counterpoint in polyphony nevertheless offer a compelling and meaningful conceptualization of the purposefully complex nature of the references both inside the world of the text and references

to outside knowledge in the text.¹ Analyzing the processes of reading via musical counterpoint allows for ornamentation (leitmotifs, colors, themes, ‘symbols’) to be seen as part of the *texture* of a certain plot or grouping of information in the novel — rather than either ignoring recurring motifs and ‘symbols’ as non-symbolic red herrings or analyzing them completely as symbols.

My reasoning for using contrapuntal structure as a model for the analysis of the plots constructed through the reading processes of *Pale Fire* is based on structural similarities of the text with musical counterpoint, textual references to counterpoint and music, and Brian Boyd’s work on counterpoint and *Pale Fire*. The processes of reading enacted in *Pale Fire* via Kinbote’s instructions offer striking resemblance to polyphonic music: the *texture* of the re-ordering of plots taking place alongside the linear reading of Kinbote’s part of *Pale Fire* realizes an expansive polyphonic texture, where the different plot-“melodies” are intertwined but also progress independently of each other. The allowance of a non-linear process of reading via Kinbote’s instructions to turn to a different part of the text — sometimes in the middle of a sentence — builds a different set of contrapuntal, interacting, synchronous plot lines which, in turn, offer the reader an alternate — and sometimes more lucid — winding and unwinding of the plot ‘melodies’ alongside their linear realization. The textual references to counterpoint, texture, and music also offer reason for the analysis, both within the poem itself and in the ‘Commentary’, especially Gradus’s name. Brian Boyd argues in *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*,² that Gradus could refer to Johann Joseph Fux’ 1725 treatise on the composition of counterpoint: *Gradus ad Parnassum* — the steps to Parnassus, the abode of the muses.³ Boyd also offers precedence in the use of contrapuntal structure for the analysis of *Pale Fire*.⁴

I will rely on the definitions of counterpoint as presented in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music* and in *The Penguin Dictionary of Music* in order to convey the structural and thematic uses of counterpoint in *Pale Fire*. Both underline the quality of musical counterpoint as being able to simultaneously express two discrete melodies at once. The *Oxford Dictionary of Music* defines this as “[t]he ability, unique to mus[ic], to say 2 things at once comprehensibly.”⁵ This

¹ Simon Rowberry, “His and my Reader. Rereading *Pale Fire* Hypertextually,” *Nabokov Online Journal* 6 (2012): 1-19. Taking, for example, Rowberry’s analysis of *Pale Fire*’s structure via “a reader-response inflected version of hypertext theory[,]” (1) and his mapping of the interconnections of references between characters.

² Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire. The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 209.

³ Michael Kennedy, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 292.

⁴ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 207-232.

⁵ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

characterization suggests an application of the term outside of music, in the context of speech and writing, as this ability is described as ‘saying’ something. Further meaningful in this analysis is that contrapuntal melodies are “[...] each of significance in itself and the whole resulting in a coherent texture.”⁶ Each “melody” of the novel — the different plots enacted via Kinbote’s instructions — is on its own full of meaning and “of significance in itself”⁷ but in concert with the other “melodies” helps to form a “coherent texture.”⁸ John Shade’s poem *Pale Fire* offers an approximation of a *cantus firmus*⁹ to Kinbote’s ‘Commentary’, in the model of strict counterpoint: “[...] a short melody, set by the master, against which another melody is to be written by the student — or, it may be, several such melodies. It is usually set out with one note to a measure.”¹⁰ Here, however, the contrapuntal plot-“melodies” and reference points to Shade’s poem demonstrate a strict contrapuntal use of *cantus firmus* gone haywire. Instead, indeed, of ‘composing’ in kind, Kinbote reacts in prose,¹¹ which is visually structured off of the poem *Pale Fire*, but not often responding in an appropriate or related manner to the text of the poem, and recursively attempts to retroactively insert himself as the true source of the poem.¹² However, Shade’s poem — both the phases of its composition and its finished form — offer a temporal spine to Kinbote’s intertwining “melodies” of plot and characters.

The contrapuntal structures enacted via the processes of reading in the novel *Pale Fire* can be interpreted in three main systems within the novel. First, in the poem *Pale Fire* itself, there are two contrapuntal miniatures: once with a visual and thematic presentation of two separate “melodies” synchronously, and once in the representation of conversation. Second, the practice of strict musical counterpoint can help interpret Kinbote’s use of John Shade’s *Pale Fire* in the ‘Commentary’, where Kinbote’s *apparatus criticus*¹³ uses Shade’s *Pale Fire* as *cantus firmus*. Finally, the composition of the poem *Pale Fire* employs ‘*Punctus contra punctum*’¹⁴ to

⁶ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Further defined as “Fixed song. A melody, usually taken from plainsong, used by composers in 14th-17th cents. as the basis of a polyphonic comp. and against which other tunes are set in counterpoint” (Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 125).

¹⁰ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

¹¹ One should remember that Kinbote counts himself as a capable and able imitator, but as a “miserable rhymester” (Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin, 2011), 227).

¹² Which is, of course, complicated by Kinbote’s admission in the note to line 550, where he retroactively dismisses his interpretation of ‘crystal land’ as a reference to Zembla in the note to line 12, saying that “Conscience and scholarship have debated the question, and... the two lines given in that note are distorted and tainted by wishful thinking” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 180).

¹³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin, 2011), 73.

¹⁴ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

compose the Gradus storyline in a contrapuntal manner. Musical counterpoint allows the novel to be read and conceived of in its elaborate polyphonic whole as a “web of sense”.¹⁵ By analyzing the processes of reading *Pale Fire* via the “contrapuntal theme”,¹⁶ I do not imply that this structure is the underlying “solution”¹⁷ of the novel. Indeed, as the novel *Pale Fire* presents an overwhelming intricacy of interpretable themes, objects, and structures, I suggest that the process of reading becomes — much akin to trying to hear the individual melodies at the highpoint of such a monster of polyphony as Thomas Tallis’ *Spem in Alium*, where eight five-voice choirs sing forty parts¹⁸ — an exercise in trying to hold onto the threads of plot, theme, and meaning while at the same time containing multitude of simultaneous playful possibilities.

COUNTERPOINT IN STRUCTURAL MINIATURE IN THE POEM PALE FIRE

In John Shade’s poem *Pale Fire*, there are two instances of structural transfer of musical counterpoint that allow for an extrapolation of this structure of interpretation in the larger sense and process of the novel. First, there is a visual and thematic use of counterpoint in the scene of Hazel Shade’s death — two distinct and independent plot-“melodies” take place alongside each other in a polyphonic, simultaneous manner. Additionally, in a scene of the poem relating a conversation between instructors at the “I.P.H.”,¹⁹ musical language is employed to describe the scene of different voices coming together in a contrapuntal way.

The contrapuntal miniature in the poem illustrating the night of Hazel Shade’s death is introduced by Kinbote as a tired and unsuccessful imitation of a synchronization device: “The whole thing strikes me as too labored and long, especially since the synchronization device has already been worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce. Otherwise the pattern is exquisite.”²⁰ Kinbote’s dismissal of the device is reminiscent of what James Ramey calls “double italics,” where what seem to be typographical mistakes are actually highlights of clues.²¹ In the novel

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Compare Boyd’s compelling three-leveled reading for solutions, Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 5-13 (but also throughout); Cf. James Ramey, “*Pale Fire’s* Black Crown,” *Nabokov Online Journal* 6 (2012): 1-17: “*Pale Fire* is an inexhaustible work of art...” (Ramey, “*Pale Fire’s* Black Crown,” 16).

¹⁸ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 833.

¹⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 44.

²⁰ Ibid. 157.

²¹ Ramey, “*Pale Fire’s* Black Crown,” 3, 5.

Pale Fire, by virtue of Kinbote's dismissal, it is all the more necessary to investigate the phenomenon or reference. Because Kinbote has "[...] italicized the Hazel theme"²² in his edition of the poem *Pale Fire*, this passage illustrates a visual use of counterpoint, where the discrete melodies unfolding alongside one another also have a different typographical form.

Lines 389 to 488 of *Pale Fire* synchronously describe Hazel Shade's death and the evening spent at home by John and Sybil Shade using the aforementioned visual marker of italicized and non-italicized text to underline the presentation of two discrete plots.²³ The moment at which the reader is alerted to the synchronous double-narration in the poem occurs in brackets, suggesting the presence of a directorial hand within the poem: "[And here time forked.] I'll turn it on.' The screen / In its blank broth evolved a lifelike blur, / And music welled."²⁴ The following passage presents synchronously two unfolding, distinct plot-"melodies": separated by a blank line between italicized story and the Shades-at-home story. The "melody" that describes the evening of the Shades is richly described, with trills and ornaments via the different channels momentarily switched to by Sybil Shade. As the section unfolds, there is a description of Hazel's conception, offering a strange mirror to the unfolding events towards her death: "To the green, indigo and tawny sea / Which we had visited in thirty-three, / Nine months before her birth. [...]"²⁵ The progression of the Hazel-"melody" from the Hawaiian bar to Pete Dean's departure to her trip homewards towards New Wye is described much more starkly than the Shades' richly-worded evening at home. The starkness of the description of the moments leading up to Hazel's death is conspicuous in its plainness, even momentous, whereas the Shades' routine activities are described with a richness and attention to detail almost ironic in its fullness.

This contrast underlines the disparity of the two plot-"melodies" — one of comfort and light, with humorous, colloquial companionship — especially the presence of the television, and the other, dark, solitary, and ominous. As the two melodies are put visually closer together, the ominous direction of the Hazel-"melody" begins to affect the evening at home, as in line 443: "'Was that the phone?' You listened at the door. / Nothing. Picked up the program from the floor."²⁶ In Kinbote's 'Commentary', Hazel's actions are "already adumbrated."²⁷ Directly after

²² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 157.

²³ For the analysis of this scene, I am very grateful for Reader A's encouragement to reread the scene and perceive of its complex character.

²⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 40.

²⁵ Ibid, 41.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 157.

Hazel exits the bus early at Lochanhead, the TV in the “melody” of the Shades at home exclaims ““No, not that!”,”²⁸ reacting to this fateful moment. The descriptions of headlights in the home-“melody” in line 431, “headlights from afar / Approached and grew like a dilating star,”²⁹ are echoed directly in the Hazel-“melody”: “More headlights in the fog.”³⁰ Finally, as the TV after the so-called “Network roulette”³¹ reaches a frenzied highpoint and is switched off, the melodies come together poignantly: “And as life snapped we saw / A pinhead light dwindle and die in black / Infinity.”³² To represent these two storylines in counterpoint offers both a miniature enacting of the contrapuntal theme, made more visually striking via Kinbote’s italicization. The representation of the two storylines in this contrapuntal form underlines the capacity of counterpoint to “[...] say two things at once comprehensibly.”³³ Storylines take on the quality of distinct “melodies” and the complexity of multiple scenes unfolding simultaneously and synchronously is visually depicted by placing the “melodies” into as close a space as possible in the poem in order to mimic counterpoint.

An additional scene of counterpoint inside of the poem is a conversation at the so-called “I.P.H., a lay / Institute (I) of Preparation (P) / for the Hereafter (H), or If [...]”.³⁴ Although the conversation is not visually as clearly demarcated as the contrapuntal double storylines unfolding as described above, there is still a markedly musical choice of language in the passage and an intricate description of the multiple voices in the passage from lines 623- 637 of *Pale Fire*:

We heard cremationists guffaw and snort
 At Graberman’s denouncing the Retort
 As detrimental to the birth of wraiths.
 We all avoided criticizing faiths.
 The great Starover Blue reviewed the role
 Planets had played as landfalls of the soul.
 The fate of beasts was pondered. A Chinese
 Discanted on the etiquette at teas
 With ancestors, and how far up to go,

²⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 41.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 42.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

³⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 44.

I tore apart the fantasies of Poe,
And dealt with childhood memories of strange
Nacreous gleams beyond the adults' range.
Among our auditors were a young priest
And an old Communist. Iph could at least
Compete with churches and the party line.³⁵

The choice of onomatopoeic sounds “guffaw and snort”³⁶ and the multiplicity of contemplations and conversations represented through the passage allow for a cacophonous rendering of the interpersonal discourse at the Institute. The word choice of “[d]iscanted”³⁷ allows for an interpretation of this scene of multiple discourses to be taken in a musical, and thus, contrapuntal way.³⁸ Descant (alternate spelling “discant”), can be a high melody “sung or played” along with the main melody, as well as the composition or improvisation of counterpoint in general.³⁹ The discussion of tea with ancestors, touching on the presence of the theme of the afterlife in the novel *Pale Fire* and the poem “Pale Fire”⁴⁰ is seen as an almost ornamental melody alongside the other distinct voices forming the contrapuntal texture of voices at the Institute.

The poem and the text as a whole self-mark themselves as contrapuntal through recurrence of language that supports the contrapuntal theme and connects them to musical composition. Most obvious are the literal references to counterpoint and use of a musically-influenced language. These take place in the poem *Pale Fire* as well as in Kinbote’s ‘Foreword’, ‘Commentary’, and, occasionally, in the ‘Index’. In the ‘Commentary’, Kinbote mentions Shade’s “sense of harmonic balance”⁴¹ and describes the fourth Canto’s finality as shown through a “veritable *clarion* of internal evidence ringing throughout.”⁴² Additionally, the description of the parts of the poem as “cantos” (which, of course, has precedence as a

³⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 48.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Here I am grateful for Reader B’s comment pointing towards the additional meanings of “descant”/ “discant”: Webster’s also underlines it as a “discourse or comment on a theme” (Gove et al., *Webster’s Third*.), but the word also holds (especially in the context of “etiquette at teas” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 48) similarities to *decant*, the process by which impurities are removed from a liquid.

³⁹ Philip B. Gove et al., ed., *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1961).

⁴⁰ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 173-183.

⁴¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 13.

⁴² Ibid, 12, my emphasis.

description of poetical works⁴³), given the word's origins in Latin "song" or "chant" as well as its use as the description for a melody used in church or instrumental music connect it back to the musical, contrapuntal theme.⁴⁴ Furthermore in the 'Foreword', Kinbote describes watching the "unique physiological phenomenon"⁴⁵ of Shade's perceiving the world and making poetry out of it. The resulting "organic miracle"⁴⁶ of poetry is described as "a fusion of image and music, a line of verse."⁴⁷ Thus, Kinbote's 'Foreword' underlines the inherently musical aspect of his perception of Shade's verse. In the poem "Pale Fire", counterpoint is also referenced literally:

But all a 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.⁴⁸

In this passage texture stands in for the perception of the multiplicity of the perceptible and barely-perceptible aspects of the world, and highlights the role of coincidence in this structure. Counterpoint is not necessarily the *whole thing* but rather a tool towards perception of the "web of sense."⁴⁹ In Kinbote's 'Commentary', the "contrapuntal nature of Shade's art"⁵⁰ is described in relation to the "extraordinary coincidence"⁵¹ of Gradus's seeming appearance within the poem "Pale Fire", which further underlines the aspect of texture and counterpoint in the novel *Pale Fire*. In the 'Index', a small literal reference to music appears: in the entry under "*Kinbote, Charles, Dr*"⁵² "his appreciation of a quodlibet and his doubts anent its purported authorship, 727" is explained.⁵³ Referencing the Doctor's remark after Shade's collapse, Kinbote is using quodlibet in a freer sense, but upon looking it up, one finds that it is used in music as a term to

⁴³ Use of cantos called "Dantesque" in their use in Nabokov's *Onegin* translation (Anna Razumnaya, "Onegin in English: Against Nabokov," *Literary Imagination* 14:3 (2012): 277-291), here p. 285.

⁴⁴ Gove et al., *Webster's Third*.

⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 240.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 241.

describe the combination of several different melodies, often in counterpoint, and in a lighthearted and humorous manner.⁵⁴

KINBOTE'S APPARATUS CRITICUS AS COUNTERPOINT TO THE POEM PALE FIRE AS CANTUS FIRMUS

Within the fictional world of the text, Charles Kinbote's 'Commentary' — with its expansive notes, repeatedly only tangentially related to John Shade's poem *Pale Fire* — forms an *apparatus criticus* in response to Shade's poem which is less a "monstrous semblance of a novel"⁵⁵ and more an expanded semblance of composition according to strict counterpoint. According to Kennedy, strict counterpoint was a practice of early composers, in which "[...] a *Cantus firmus* (fixed song) is employed, i.e. a short melody, set by the master, against which another melody is to be written by the student — or, it may be, several such melodies. It is usually set out with one note to a measure."⁵⁶ In 'Commentary',⁵⁷ and indeed, already in the 'Foreword' and 'Index', Kinbote exerts, as Pekka Tammi puts it, control over the comprehensive text of the novel *Pale Fire*.⁵⁸ While Kinbote takes over the structure and progress of reading in the novel *Pale Fire*, it is still Shade's poem "Pale Fire" that provides the temporal spine and main orientation to Kinbote's notes. Even when the reader is overwhelmed by the length of Kinbote's note, and how far it is from a traditional or expected gloss on the text of the poem (although the reader has probably lost any hope of *actual* and reliable gloss at the 'Foreword' stage), the poem still supplies linear orientation within Kinbote's massive 'Commentary' and its lines are constantly referenced in the 'Index'. In the following section, I argue that the poem "Pale Fire" can be read as Kinbote's orienting *cantus firmus* for his *apparatus criticus*. Kinbote's status as a "miserable rhymester"⁵⁹ puts him in the position of a student of counterpoint and

⁵⁴ Gove et al., *Webster's Third*.

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 73: Additionally, the similarity between "semblance" and "Zembla" is noteworthy.

⁵⁶ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

⁵⁷ Which, strangely, exposes a 'hole' in the poem. By way of a strict reading via reference back to the poem and the 'Commentary', the line numbers labeling the poem *fall out of concordance* with the line number of the poem at line 479 — labeled as line 480. This could be a printing error, but seems to be an intentional mistake, as the line count concordances 'right themselves' again afterwards at poem line 510. This is a meaningful trick: especially because the hole happens before 'the big potato' moment, and right after Hazel's death (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 43-44).

⁵⁸ Pekka Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics. A Narratological Analysis* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1985), 205-206.

⁵⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 227.

composition to Shade's poem "Pale Fire," while, at the same time, he attempts to re-insert himself and Zembla retroactively into the poem. Despite Kinbote's reordering of the reading processes and his implied control over them, the poem "Pale Fire" forms the temporal and orientational 'spine' of the 'Commentary'.

Shade's poem functions as a *cantus firmus* to Kinbote's 'Commentary', and the description of strict counterpoint as a master-student exercise is especially interesting in relation to Kinbote's claim of being a "miserable rhymester": "Although I am capable, through long dabbling in blue magic, of imitating any prose in the world (but singularly enough not verse – I am a miserable rhymester), I do not consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do – pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web."⁶⁰ Much more is described in this quote than Kinbote's capacity with verse, but his claim allows Shade's "Pale Fire" to be seen as the masterful melody, the verse *cantus firmus* from which Kinbote composes his prose counterpoint. Furthermore, Kinbote claims to be able to use the "revelation" that the original author has perhaps forgotten (or neglected); to remain immune to getting stuck in habit; and to see the underlying structure and technique of creation—perhaps of creative process itself. The structural presence of the poem "Pale Fire" in the 'Commentary' is most straightforwardly demonstrated by the use of the lines of the poem as the structure to Kinbote's 'Commentary'. Here, for the most part instead of a thematic connection or elucidating gloss, Kinbote responds in his 'Commentary' with *his* stories—of Zembla, of King Charles, of Gradus, or of a (very possibly imagined) strong friendship with John Shade. Kinbote retroactively injects his stories as inspiration in the note to line 42, where he imagines how the stories that he 'presses' upon Shade with "[...] a drunkard's wild generosity [...]"⁶¹ will result in a 'recreation' of Zembla in Shade's verse. The use of *cantus firmus* in strict counterpoint in Kinbote's 'Commentary' is especially clear in the way Kinbote appropriates Shade's verse: he copies it here word for word, but takes the sense of the line in a very different direction. Here, however, there is also the presence of Kinbote's use of *Shade's* work as inspiration: he claims to see Shade's style of his critical essays "aped" in his 'Commentary.'⁶² The lines of the poem, although not often responded to in a way befitting the expectation of an enlightening

⁶⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 227.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶² *Ibid.*

commentary, form the linear structure of Kinbote's 'Commentary.' Except for two instances of non-linear progression,⁶³ and six instances of repetition,⁶⁴ the poem's lines offer a numeral, linear progression through the topsy-turvy 'Commentary' — although, if one reads as instructed by Kinbote, this linear structure is soon abandoned for a back and forth process of reading, in which certain notes are grouped together for repeated reading.

The model of *cantus firmus* describing Shade's poem and strict counterpoint describing the structuring of Kinbote's 'Commentary' and the unfolding of his different plot-'melodies' can be seen as parasitism, which is even touched upon in a note (to line 247) referring to Sybil Shade: "I was to learn later that when alluding to me in public she used to call me 'an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly; a macaco worm; the monstrous parasite of a genius'."⁶⁵ This is especially thought-provoking in the repetition here as elsewhere of "monstrous." Kinbote's *monstrous semblance*⁶⁶ may not even be a negative connotation of the word: what if "monstrous" refers here to its obsolete definition of something "unnaturally marvelous,"⁶⁷ rather than an "evil omen" or "an animal of strange and often terrifying shape"?⁶⁸ 'Monster', like Kinbote's strange and non-standard 'Foreword', 'Commentary', and 'Index' (on the surface a lampooning of the critical interaction with a work, and yet more than that⁶⁹), is an "animal or plant departing greatly in form or structure from the usual type of its species"⁷⁰ and also something that *overwhelms* the work. Indeed, reading the novel *Pale Fire* is to get so caught up in the references and multiplicities of Kinbote's part of the text as to forget its spine, so to speak, to forget the poem "Pale Fire," leading again to another use of monster: "a threatening force: an engulfing power," "a living thing unusually large for its kind," or "something huge and often of unmanageable proportions."⁷¹

⁶³ The reference to line 29, "gray" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 66.) and the reference to line 603 "Listen to distant cocks crow" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 185).

⁶⁴ Lines 86-90 "Aunt Maude"/ Lines 90-93 "Her room, etc." (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 94-95); Line 181 "Today" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 127-132) and Lines 181-182 "waxwings...cicadas" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 132); Line 347 "old barn" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 148-154) and Lines 347-348 "She twisted words" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 154); Line 376 "poem" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 155.), and Lines 376-377 "was said in English Lit to be" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 155-156); Line 502 "The grand potato" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 176), and Line 502 "I.P.H." (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 177); and Line 949 "And all the time" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 214), and Line 949 "and all the time" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 214-223).

⁶⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 138.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 73, my emphasis.

⁶⁷ Gove et al., *Webster's Third*.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Compare: Vgl. Rowberry, "Rereading *Pale Fire* Hypertextually," 11.

⁷⁰ Gove et al., *Webster's Third*.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Kinbote's first attempt to insert himself in the position of the 'begetter'⁷² of the poem occurs in the 'Foreword', in relation to his attachment to Shade's "masterpiece": "[...] especially when it is the underside of the weave that entrances the beholder and only begetter, whose own past intercoils there with the fate of the innocent author."⁷³ Kinbote's self-insertion can also be seen in his claim of having similarities with Hazel Shade: he insinuates himself into Shade's biographical time *before* he was present in New Wye. Elucidating Shade's description of Hazel Shade's 'twisting' of words,⁷⁴ Kinbote slyly intimates that it was *he* and not Hazel who made these "mirror words": "I am sure it was I who one day, when we were discussing 'mirror words,' observed (and I recall the poet's expression of stupefaction) that 'spider' in reverse is 'redips,' and 'T. S. Eliot,' 'toilest.' But then it is also true that Hazel Shade resembled *me* in certain respects."⁷⁵

This appropriation of the poem also takes place at the beginning of the 'Foreword' in Kinbote's description of the poem's length and division among the index cards: adding up the lines of what Kinbote has just described to be a 999-line poem (although he contends its finishing touch would be a 1000th line repeating the first), one comes to 1000 lines.⁷⁶ Thus, in the model described above of *cantus firmus*, one already has a transgression of roles: Kinbote inserts himself into the line count of Shade's poem, and, by sleight of hand, changes the parameters of the poem—"melody" itself. In a culmination of this transgression, Kinbote repeats line one as his assumption for line 1000 in his 'Commentary,'⁷⁷ adopts an authorial position and also literally steals Shade's line (which he has already done with the whole of the material poem in the note to line 991): "With an inward leap of exultation I relieved him of the large envelope that hampered his movements as he descended the steps of the porch, sideways, like a hesitating infant."⁷⁸

The poem as a *cantus firmus* is buffeted by Kinbote's persistence to insert himself and his stories as the origin, underside, or "main thread" of the poem. These recurring attempts are brought into focus by way of Kinbote's somatic appropriation of Shade's poem in form of index cards:

⁷² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 14.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 38.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 154, my emphasis.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 11: Kinbote assigns 166 lines to Canto One; Canto Two and Three are described as being the same length (334 lines each); and Canto Four "reverts to One in length" (11): Thus $166+334+334+166 = 1000$.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 229.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 226.

Some of my readers may laugh when they learn that I fussily removed it from my black valise to an empty steel box in my landlord's study and a few hours later took the manuscript out again, and for several days *wore* it, as it were, having distributed the ninety-two index cards about my person, twenty in the right-hand pocket of my coat, as many in the left-hand one, a batch of forty against my right nipple and the twelve most precious ones with variants in my innermost left-breast pocket. I blessed my royal stars for having taught myself wife work, for I now sewed up all four pockets. 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 long last.⁷⁹

Although this appropriation of the poem (locating the twelve variant index cards where Kinbote can still imagine he sees some of Zembla: with "[...] all Zembla [...]"⁸⁰ pressed to his heart) emphasizes the commentator's attempt to appropriate Shade's verse, it also underlines Shade as the actual begetter of the poem: "[...] stout with another man's song [...]"⁸¹, whereby the poem's role as *cantus firmus* for the 'Commentary' is underlined. The composition of the 'Commentary' is the prose attempt to see the inspiration, begetting of the poem as Kinbote's while structuring itself visually and linearly off of the *cantus firmus* of the poem. However, the counterpoint prose that Kinbote composes becomes a 'monstrous semblance' of a novel, overwhelming the poem, and even attempts to re-present itself as a secondary *cantus firmus*, shown by way of the 'Index', where the lines of the poem have lost their reference to the poem, and refer exclusively to the 'Commentary'.

The 'Index' represents a secondary reordering of the reading process of the 'Foreword' and 'Commentary', obscuring Shade's poem further. The 'Index' as an additional composition solely in response to Kinbote's texts⁸² structures further potentiations of meaning and reading processes instead of offering clarification to the poem. Furthermore, the 'Index', in addition to referring exclusively to Kinbote's 'Commentary'-elucidations on lines of the poem, is non-linear. In the 'Index', the line references are partially in numerical order, but offer multiple instances where the numbering stops, reverses, or jumps backwards to repeat in one single

⁷⁹ Ibid, 235.

⁸⁰ Ibid; Interestingly enough, it is in line 12 of the poem *Pale Fire* where Kinbote first attempts to read Zembla into Shade's "crystal land", a reading which he then reverses (p. 180) in the note to line 550.

⁸¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 235.

⁸² Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 63.

entry.⁸³ In the ‘Index’, though Kinbote does not reference or explicate the poem “Pale Fire,” he does reference the Shades. Thus, in the musical counterpoint model, the ‘Index’ functions as a reordering of the counterpoint voice to the *cantus firmus*.

‘PUNCTUS CONTRA PUNCTUM’ IN KINBOTE’S ‘COMMENTARY’: GRADUS

Kinbote’s ‘Commentary’ takes excerpts of the poem as ‘points’ from which to structure his narrative of Gradus’ progress. Kinbote composes to “coordinate” the points into a contrapuntal response, as in the note to lines 609-614, “Nor can one help, etc.”: “This describes rather well the ‘chance inn,’ a log cabin, with a tiled bathroom, where I am trying to *coordinate* these notes.”⁸⁴ Kinbote’s own difficulty in “coordinating”⁸⁵ the notes of his ‘Commentary’ has echoes of counterpoint, as “coordinating” associates coordinate points, which then must be aligned in some semblance of harmony and sense, but which are intentionally aligned in a way that overwhelms the reader in trying to connect the ‘coordinate points’ of Kinbote’s ‘Commentary’. Kinbote’s *coordinating* of the notes is to coordinate the points of plot and temporal progression of the characters and the poem, and, returning to Kennedy’s origin of the term counterpoint, the ‘point’ is further emphasized: “The term derives from the expression *punctus contra punctum*, i.e. “point against point” or “note against note.”⁸⁶ Gradus’s progress towards Kinbote/Shade is described in concordance with Shade’s writing of the poem “Pale Fire,” which suggests that Gradus’s ‘steps’ perform a structural function, imitating a melodic counterpoint in polyphony.⁸⁷ The lines of the poem, although only tangentially used, form the structural points of Kinbote’s ‘Commentary’: the poem is the reliable linear ordering of Kinbote’s ‘Commentary’, its timeline of composition form the temporal ‘spine’ of Kinbote’s plots.

If Kinbote’s plot of Gradus is contrapuntally arranged to ‘harmonize’ with the temporal spine of Shade’s poem (given that one at once follows Kinbote’s instructions for proceeding in

⁸³ For example, three times in the “Kinbote, Charles, Dr” entry (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 240-241); once in the “Shade, John Francis” entry (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 244); First backwards, then forwards in the “Translations, poetical” entry (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 245); once in the “Waxwings” entry (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 246).

⁸⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 185, my emphasis.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

⁸⁷ Gerard de Vries discusses the possibility of reading the character trajectories of Gradus, Kinbote, and Shade as a fugue in his article “Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, its structure and the last works of J.S. Bach.” *Cycnos* 24:1 (2008), URL: <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1052>.

the ‘Commentary’), then the Gradus plot becomes immediately visible. By following Kinbote’s instructions for reading, where a non-linear order of progression through the novel is enacted, the first glimpse one has of Gradus — via a variant read as an incredible, meaning-laden coincidence (but *not* coincidence, of course) in conjunction with Shade’s process of composition — Gradus at rest in Geneva, “Combinational fate rests on its laurels.”⁸⁸ Thus, Gradus’s name itself is read *into* the poem, and, as the Kinbote-process of reading progresses, the Gradus plot unfolds alongside, and in conjunction with the process of writing the poem. The moment Gradus is chosen as the regicide is also the moment of Shade’s beginning of the poem:

We can well imagine the scene: the ghastly neon lights of the laboratory, in an annex of the Glass Works, where the Shadows happened to hold their meeting that night; the ace of spades lying on the tiled floor; the vodka gulped down out of test tubes; the many hands clapping Gradus on his round back, and the dark exultation of the man as he received those rather treacherous congratulations. We place this fatidic moment at 0:05, July 2, 1959 — which happens to be also the date upon which an innocent poet penned the first lines of his last poem.⁸⁹

Underlining Gradus as a ‘voice’ in the contrapuntal whole is that, even before the Gradus plot has been fully shown — according to a Kinbotean structure of reading non-linearly — one knows that Gradus will make an exit (when one is directed to the note to “line 1000” — in his form as Jack Grey: “Enough of this. Exit Jack Grey.”⁹⁰

Gradus’s progress is further aligned with the lines of the poem, in the note to line 209: “Spacetime itself is decay; Gradus is flying west; he has reached gray-blue Copenhagen (see note to line 181). After tomorrow (July 7) he will proceed to Paris. He has sped through this verse and is gone—presently to darken our pages again.”⁹¹ Again citing July 7, Gradus’s progress is aligned with the progress of the poem’s composition, in the note to line 286: “Who could have guessed that on this very day (July 7) Shade penned this lambent line (the last one on his twenty-third card) Gradus, alias Degré, had flown from Copenhagen to Paris, thus completing the second lap of his sinister journey! Even in Arcady am I, says Death in the tombal scripture.”⁹²

⁸⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 183.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 140. Compare Abbasi, Pyeagam and Omid Amani, “Nabokov’s Postmodernism: The Matter of Discourse and Survival in *Pale Fire*,” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 4:2 (2013): 370-374, here p. 370; and cf. Rowberry, “Rereading *Pale Fire* Hypertextually,” 12. Gradus’s name can be connected to the steps of death.

Gradus's progress with the progress of the poem is again underlined in the following citation, in the note to line 408: "On July 10, the day John Shade wrote this, and perhaps at the very minute he started to use his thirty-third index card for lines 406-416, Gradus was driving in a hired car from Geneva to Lex, where Odon was known to be resting [...]." ⁹³ A further synchronization of Gradus's advancement and Shade's progress occurs when Gradus 'snoops' on a hillside above Lavender's villa: "From far below mounted the clink and tinkle of distant masonry work, and a sudden train passed between gardens, and a heraldic butterfly *Volant en arrière*, sable, a bend gules, traversed the stone parapet, and John Shade took a fresh card." ⁹⁴ Synchronization, which I see as a marker of the contrapuntal theme in the text, allows a way of imagining the storylines intermingling as harmonies in a counterpoint: multiple, saying two things at once. ⁹⁵ Gerard de Vries argues compellingly for reading the character trajectories of Gradus, Kinbote, and Shade as the voices of a fugue, ⁹⁶ which aptly connects thematically with the etymological meaning of fugue: flight, escape. ⁹⁷

Gradus's movement towards New Wye is physically aligned to the poetic elements:

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. ⁹⁸

The interlocking of Gradus's progress with the *cantus firmus* of the poem illustrates counterpoint: where the melody against which the counterpoint is composed is independent, yet

⁹³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 156.

⁹⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 161.

⁹⁵ Perhaps the re-writing of Jack Grey into Gradus underlines a re-writing of a senseless coincidence into *plot* and reason, to make coincidence into fate.

⁹⁶ de Vries, Gerard. "Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, its structure and the last works of J.S. Bach." *Cycnos* 24:1 (2008), URL: <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1052>.

⁹⁷ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 323.

⁹⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 67.

intertwining with the contrapuntal melody of Gradus, and also progressing in a reversal of A to Z — here Gradus progresses from ‘Z’ to ‘A’. They have no knowledge of one another; yet they exist in synchronous ‘playing’ with one another. Gradus’s “retrograde” progression from ‘Z’ to ‘A’ gives strong echoes of the *Canon Cancrizans* or *Retrograde Canon*, in which the voice imitating the melody plays or sings the melody from front to back.⁹⁹ The repeated mirrorings, reflections and “echoes”¹⁰⁰ in *Pale Fire* make this reversal all the more plausible. Thus the model of counterpoint is a tool of composition and synchronicity of plotlines, but also an effect of a reading process enacted by Kinbote’s instructions. In the illustration of the Kinbote plot — whether one reads linearly or by way of Kinbote’s suggestions for springing to other parts of the ‘Commentary’ or ‘Foreword’, *Pale Fire* becomes more clearly the one reliable timeline — the other plots and contrapuntal melodies are independent of it yet composed to its spine. The poem is the force which ‘propels’ Gradus: “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 sensuous form [...]”¹⁰¹

CONCLUSION

Musical counterpoint can be applied as a structural conceptualization of multiplicity in the text of the novel *Pale Fire*, both for the plots (“melodies”) at hand, as well as of the different reading processes. Contrapuntal structure allows for many voices at once, for a texture of melodies, mimicked and re-structured through a lens of composition. Boyd interprets Shade’s “not text but texture”¹⁰² as an opus of interrelationships: “that he cannot express the truth he sees behind things directly, but only through the interrelationships between things.”¹⁰³ Both the interrelations and the attempt to conceptualize the whole begins to approach what Boyd calls the ‘something else’ hidden behind the ‘world’ of Nabokov’s work: “[...] the great surprise that he thinks hidden

⁹⁹ Cf.: Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 147. Here I am very grateful for Reader B’s comments leading me towards further reflections and research on the *Canon Cancrizans*, especially in context of J.S. Bachs’ compositions. Gerard de Vries also discusses the *Canon Cancrizans* in his article (de Vries, Gerard. “Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” 10).

¹⁰⁰ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 202, 207.

¹⁰¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 111-112.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁰³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 7-8.

behind life and death by the mysterious generosity somehow hidden still further behind.”¹⁰⁴ Through musical counterpoint as well as an analysis of its thematic use in the novel *Pale Fire*, the ‘threads’ of the weave as well as its potentiation of meaning in the text become structurally visible.

Reading in the novel *Pale Fire* is a structure-giving exercise, in which choosing to follow Kinbote’s directions in reading structures a different unfolding of the plot of his *apparatus criticus*, and also allows for a potentiation of the seemingly sealed poem, in which the ‘Commentary’ and ‘Foreword’ actively exert a re-structuring of the reading process, and the ‘Index’ offers yet another approach to Kinbote’s ‘Foreword’ and ‘Commentary’ — perhaps even in an authorial coup to transform Kinbote’s prose into the *cantus firmus* of the ‘Index’. Thus, Shade’s “game of worlds”¹⁰⁵ has become a *game of words*, via Kinbote’s transformation of the line in his ‘Commentary’: by sleight of hand, Kinbote comments on Shade’s “childish predilection for all sorts of *word games* [...]”¹⁰⁶ This transformation underlines the world-making that has taken place: *worlds* are ‘read’ or scanned as *words*. In Kinbote’s ‘Commentary’, where the lines of Shade’s poem are used mostly as a transformation via texture rather than meaning, Kinbote uses Shade’s text as a springboard for his own production.

Kinbote’s ‘Index’ only references the contents of his ‘Commentary’ and leaves out Shade’s poem “Pale Fire,” even while ostensibly using the numbering of the poem’s lines. Kinbote’s ‘Index’ references his own ‘Commentary’ as *cantus firmus* instead of Shade’s “Pale Fire.”¹⁰⁷ The ‘Index’ orders and defines the characters of the poem and the novel in Kinbote’s context. It presents imitation, “[...] common to contrapuntal composition [...]”¹⁰⁸ by taking on the texture, but not the meaning. This echoes Kinbote’s repetition of lines from the poem “Pale Fire” in the ‘Commentary’ without reference to their context or meaning; he borrows the texture of the words without taking on their sense. Kinbote’s ‘Index’ functions as a potentiation of his ‘Commentary’: the ‘Index’ is the confirmation of his ‘monstrous semblance,’ a self-referential framework: out of the ordinary, larger than normal, an engulfing force.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 8.

¹⁰⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 54.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 219, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁷ Here I am grateful for the insights of Reader A of *NOJ* for his/her help with formulating this interpretation.

¹⁰⁸ Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 166.

Only six ‘Index’ entries are furnished with a reference to line 1000, Kinbote’s repetition of Shade’s line to complete the poem “Pale Fire”: *Charles II*¹⁰⁹; *Gradus, Jakob*¹¹⁰; *Kinbote, Charles Dr*¹¹¹; *Onhava*¹¹²; *Shade, John Francis*¹¹³; and *Waxwings*.¹¹⁴ This reference underlines my earlier claim that Kinbote’s ‘Index’ is an upset of the *cantus firmus* hierarchy. The counting trick of the ‘Foreword’ and the inconsistent numbering of the lines of the poem solidly integrate Kinbote’s crowning touch on Shade’s poem, intimating Kinbote’s reach into the structure of the *cantus firmus* of the poem itself. Suggestive of the movements of a crab, Shade is said to descend “the steps of the porch, sideways, like a hesitating infant”¹¹⁵ a moment after Kinbote takes the envelope containing the index cards of the poem. Although only a minor reference, this could imply that Kinbote, by holding the envelope, becomes a physical realization of the poem and *cantus firmus* while Shade himself begins to resemble the crab, the *Canon Cancrizans* to the main melody. By taking the poem into his possession, it becomes Zembla:

I do not consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do – pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web. Solemnly I weighed in my hand what I was carrying under my left armpit, and for a moment I found myself enriched with an indescribable amazement as if informed that fireflies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits, or that a bat was writing a legible tale of torture in the bruised and branded sky.

I was holding all of Zembla pressed to my heart.¹¹⁶

In the ‘Commentary’ to Kinbote’s added line 1000, Shade is shot by Gradus, and, later, in reading the poem (although Kinbote is first disappointed by a lack of references to his material) he begins to hear “dim distant music, [...] vestiges of color in the air”:¹¹⁷ “My commentary to this poem, now in the hands of my readers, represents an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of fire, and pale phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me.”¹¹⁸ The last words of the novel affirm Kinbote’s internal counterpoint via the ‘Index’: “*Zembla*, a distant

¹⁰⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 238.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 239.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 241.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 243.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 244.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 246.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 226.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 227.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 232.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 233.

northern land.”¹¹⁹ Musical counterpoint for the structural interpretation of *Pale Fire* functions as an illustration of the texture of the text but also allows to discern centers and crossings of plot “melodies,” characters, and *leitmotifs*.

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¹¹⁹ Ibid, 246.

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