Ferenc Takács

"SHADOW" AND "SUBSTANCE": PALE FIRE AND TIMON OF ATHENS *

he fictional shape of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* (1962) is based on a familiar professional activity, or rather on the familiar result of this professional activity: in its genre, form and textual layout, the book imitates the critical edition of a work of literature. As books of this nature are expected to do, it contains a literary text, in this case a carefully transcribed long narrative poem, its lines duly numbered. It is preceded by an editorial foreword and followed by a piece of technical scholarship — the editor's extensive and meticulously detailed commentary on the poem — followed by the usual index at the end. Each of these parts does its customary job according to expectations: the commentary clarifies the poem's textual problems, lists variants discarded by the author, emends the text where necessary, explores in full detail the literary, psychological and sociohistorical context of the work, and offers a comprehensive critical interpretation. There is conspicuous disproportion between the length of the relatively short literary text and the

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bulky critical commentary (something not wholly unprecedented in editing): while the former takes up twenty-nine printed pages, the latter runs to one hundred and sixty-two pages.¹

The literary work edited and interpreted here is *Pale Fire*, a 999-line narrative poem of four cantos by the American poet John Shade; its genre is the kind of longer reflexive poem familiar to readers of Alexander Pope, William Wordsworth or, in a more contemporary American context, Robert Frost. Shade taught literature at Wordsmith College in New Wye, Appalachia, and is the author of a critical monograph on Alexander Pope as well as of several collections of his own poetry. He completed *Pale Fire* virtually a few hours before his tragic and violent death on July 21, 1959, which prevented him from producing the closing line of his poem.

The manuscript of the poem, consisting of "eighty medium-sized index cards" (*PF* 7) scholars normally use for taking notes, ended up in the hands of Professor Charles Kinbote, Shade's university colleague and next-door neighbour. He happened to be carrying the envelope containing the index cards for Shade when the latter was shot dead, and he never relinquished it afterwards. In legal terms, Kinbote's acquisition of Shade's manuscript was, arguably, an act of theft. Still, he was granted — or claims to have been granted — permission to produce an annotated edition of the poem by Sybil Shade, the widow of the deceased poet.

As it gradually appears from his commentary on the poem, Kinbote joined the staff of Wordsmith College, or Wordsmith University as he prefers to call it, only recently. He is a relatively new arrival in the USA, an *émigré* from Zembla, "a distant northern land" (*PF* 224) which shares a common border with the Soviet Union. He has long been familiar with Shade's literary work: while still in Zembla, he translated some of his poetry into the Zemblan language. No wonder that upon arriving in New Wye, he was delighted to meet Shade and solicit his friendship. When he realised that Shade was about to write a longer narrative poem, Kinbote decided to provide him with a theme and regaled him with exciting fairytale-like stories of the life of Charles the Beloved, the last King of Zembla. The sovereign was dethroned and put under house arrest during the revolution in Zembla in 1958, though he managed to escape, in the most mysterious and improbably hazardous way, from

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¹ References in the text are to Vladimir Nabokov. *Pale Fire* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1962).

his palace (now his prison) and his country (now a republic), and eventually finds asylum in the United States. Kinbote has high hopes that Shade will weave this story into his work in progress, as his most fervent wish is that the poet, who he esteems very highly, will write a poem out of this story *instead of* him and, in a sense, *for* him.

As it appears later (that is, at some further point of the text of the novel) he has certain mysterious personal reasons for doing so. Processing a number of textual clues, the reader gradually discovers Kinbote's great secret: he and the exiled king of Zembla are the same person, and his exile would end if he found a new home. However, finding this ideal new framework for himself and for his personal history, the perfect equivalent of his life in Zembla — instead of a lowly, humdrum and contingent life — is possible only in the superior reality art can attain and offer, and this is Shade's poem as far as Kinbote is concerned. Ideally, this is, of course, something he would create for himself if he had the gift of literary creativity, which he does not; he describes himself as no "true artist," and only "a miserable rhymester" (*PF* 204).

By acquiring the poem, he made it, in a sense, his own, and once ready for appropriation by editing and interpretation, he is disappointed at first. The poem does not seem to have anything to do with him or with his life; apparently, there is nothing there to accommodate, or "house," Kinbote and his personal narrative. While he thought the title of the poem would be, aptly, *Solus Rex*, he is now dismayed to see its title is *Pale Fire*, a rather unenlightening phrase apparently borrowed from Shakespeare, the context of which he cannot even look up as, due to changing circumstances of his life, he no longer has access to a library. He also notes that the poem has nothing Zemblan about it from a literary point of view: *Pale Fire* is a characteristically American autobiographical and philosophical work about its author's life, self, and certain ultimate questions of the world – life and death as they touch on the personal life of its author. As far as Kinbote and his expectations are concerned, the poem is meaningless.

However, repeated rereading helps. Expressions, motifs, and images of the poem, innocent at first sight, gradually reveal their secret message as Kinbote discovers in them a coded and encrypted version of himself and his story. Far from being a "transparent thingum" as Shade self-reflexively describes the poem in line 961 (*PF* 48), Kinbote finds it a mirror rather than a window: it is truly "reflexive" as it reflects back whatever light it receives. So Kinbote, the exiled king, can recognize a reflection of himself as the poem acquires meaning,

or as Kinbote puts it, "human reality," through his commentary, which it does not possess otherwise (that is, without Kinbote's interpretative efforts) (*PF* 18-9). Similarly, Shade the poet acquires meaning for Kinbote as he can see him now as his "shade"; he is Kinbote's "shadow" or "reflection," the source of whose being is the light he receives from Kinbote, *solus rex*, a lone king but also king of Sol: Sun King. This, in the basic Shakespearean polarity of "shadow" versus "substance," amounts to saying that Shade the poet has no "substance," no independent being or essence; he is, or rather was, a form of appearance, shade, ghost, or Shakespearean "shadow," a mere reflection of the light of some *other* being.

Even the process of composing the poem seems, to Kinbote at least, to mirror another process: that of the journey from Zembla to New Wye of a certain Jakob Gradus, also known under various covers as Jack Degree, de Grey, d'Argus, or Vinogradus. Gradus was dispatched by the Shadows, the terrorist underground organization of Zemblan political extremists to find and kill the fugitive king. As Kinbote records in his commentary on *Pale Fire*, Gradus turned up at the house of Charles the Beloved (*alias* Kinbote) and killed Shade by mistake, who was walking to Kinbote's to discuss the now completed poem with his colleague (which, of course, bears out Kinbote's view of the matter: the assassin took Shade for Kinbote, mistook shade or semblance for the real thing, "shadow" for "substance.").

At this point the reader's increasing suspicion reaches a breaking point. Kinbote is, the reader must conclude, an unreliable narrator of the psychopathic variety who is relaying a whole system of madly paranoid fantasies, and consequently it is the reader's job to reduce all of this to its real value; that is, to interpret whatever the narrator communicates as a system of paranoid fantasies. Consequently, he needs some *terra firma*, some final incontestable "truth" or "fact" in Nabokov's fiction which, on the authority of the author, can be used as an indicator of "substance" relative to which everything else in the novel can be safely regarded as "shadow" and corrected — regarding its ontological status — accordingly in the process of interpretation.

To be sure, Nabokov does seem to offer some firm ground. Using a number of hints and clues, ambiguous and cryptic as they are, the reader is able to puzzle together that John Shade, Wordsmith College, and New Wye seem to be substantive (of course, only within the fictitious universe of the novel). On the other hand, Kinbote is insane and even his identity as Kinbote is a piece of pathological fantasy. He is the captive of a total and consistent system of paranoid delusions of his own making: his true name is Botkin, and he is a professor of

Russian extraction at Wordsmith College. Thus, Kinbote's name is Botkin's, as reflected in a mirror; Kinbote is a "shadow" of Botkin's "substance." On the other hand, Shade's assassin is what he says he is: Jack Grey, a criminal who escaped from the State Asylum for the Insane in order to find and murder the judge who had him committed. Judge Goldsworth is Shade's next-door neighbour, away on sabbatical leave, whose house Kinbote is renting. Turning up in front of the judge's house, Grey takes Shade for Goldsworth, to whom the poet bares some resemblance, and kills him; however lamentable, this is, under the circumstances, a highly probable and perfectly understandable mistake to make.

We thus find some ontologically certain and logically satisfactory ground for what we are supposed to assume to be (and, also, of what we are supposed to assume *not* to be) the case in Nabokov's novel. With these assumptions in mind, *Pale Fire* becomes a witty intellectual parable about texts and their readings, about Life and Literature and their interdependence, centralized by madness or paranoia as a lethally satirical metaphor for literary interpretation.

Upon further consideration, this firm ground becomes decidedly slippery: other hints and clues, equally ambiguous and cryptic, prompt the reader to identify alternative firm grounds, different "truths" and "facts" of the case; the more of these he finds in the book, the less confident he becomes as to which can be assumed to be authoritative. The reader is eventually forced to conclude that whatever he assumes to be a case of "substance" is revealed at some point to be "shadow." For instance, each object—previously assumed to be of transparent glass—turns out to be opaque: every window is a mirror through which a view of "substance" is impossible; instead, it is "shadow" mirroring "shadow" all around.

Therefore, it is only logical to assume the opposite position and entertain the interpretative possibility that, contrary to the above, while Shade and his *Pale Fire* are to be taken as "substance," Kinbote, together with his critical commentary, is the "shadow" of the former in a fully immaterial sense.

In his connection, we might want to take note of a somewhat cryptic couplet in Shade's poem:

Man's life as commentary to abstruse

Unfinished poem. Note for further use.

lines 939-40 (PF 48)

These lines of the poem *Pale Fire* give, in their literal sense, are an accurate self-reflexive description of the book entitled *Pale Fire* that contains them: the novel is about the life-indeed *the* life – of Kinbote, or Charles the Beloved, attached to an abstruse and unfinished poem in the form of a commentary. So *Pale Fire* (the novel) can be regarded, with equal justification, as this very "further use": after completing *Pale Fire* (the poem), Shade took up his literary project again and wrote a lengthy fictional supplement to the poem, for which he invented Kinbote and his commentary, with Zembla and his (Shade's) own death included. Accordingly, the ultimate "fact" of the fiction is that John Shade is the (fictitious) author of the *entire* book: in short, the "substance" of it all.

But, as accounts of the novel often point out, the logically opposite case can also be entertained with equal probability. Taking this view, Kinbote is the ultimate "truth" or "fact" in respect to the fiction of the book. He is an author blessed with a particularly inventive and devious imagination. First, he invents his real (fictional) self, then he invents his own fantastic semblance — or "other" — in Charles the Beloved by inventing the Zembla story. Finally, after inventing a surrogate author (a shadow or a ghost writer) in the imaginary person of John Shade, he writes the poem *Pale Fire* in his name (he "ghosts" it, if you will) to fit the rest of his invention.

The question of which of these interpretations is tenable or valid is something Nabokov leaves deliberately undecided: each has some relative or conditional validity while none can be confidently entertained to the exclusion of the others. One thing is certain: the first interpretation yields a *Pale Fire* decidedly too obvious, less interesting, simpler, and even trivial in comparison with the results of the two other readings. These, of course, have the added interest (or complexity) that in them the substantive "author" — whether Shade as in the first interpretation or Kinbote as in the second — is assumed to have produced the book in its entirety, and in this he bears close analogy to, indeed, he is an apt metaphor for the ultimate substantive author of the book, Vladimir Nabokov. It is, after all, Nabokov who has invented the whole work, including Shade inventing Kinbote, or Kinbote inventing Shade. Accordingly, Shade/Kinbote and Nabokov constitute another shadow/substance relationship, with Nabokov as the "substance" component. (Or, for that matter, as "shadow": in this post-Foucauldian universe, attaining substantive being seems to be possible only through

constructing and maintaining the possible reflections or "shadows" of our otherwise non-existent self or "substance.")²

On a different, perhaps more general level, *Pale Fire* itself enters into a shadow/substance relationship of an intertextual nature. Through quotation, allusion, and playful echo, the novel links itself to the "substance" of Western or European literature, primarily to English and Russian fiction and poetry (the former conspicuously represented by such authors as Pope, Goldsmith, Wordsworth, and Joyce — the latter ranging from *The Song of Igor's Campaign* to Pushkin, Dostoevsky and beyond). The true "substance," the *solus rex* of Western literature is, however, William Shakespeare, and it is in relation to him and his work that *Pale Fire* constitutes itself as a major "shadow" or "reflection."

Shakespeare first appears in the title of the novel, which is in turn identical with the title of Shade's poem. Shade himself records his search for a title for the "transparent thingum" he is in the process of writing and, also, the assistance he receives from the Shakespearean text in finding one. The self-reflexive moment of finding a title for his poem (and for Nabokov's novel) is encapsulated in the parenthetic lines

(But this transparent thingum does require Some moondroptitle. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*.)

lines 961-62 (PF 48)

Naturally, Kinbote tries to track down the Shakespearean reference. Since, unfortunately, at the time of writing the commentary he is a fugitive in flight from his real or supposed pursuers, he has no access to Shakespeare's works in the original. All he has is the text of *Timon of Athens*, and it is a Zemblan-language translation of the play. He gives it a try but he cannot find anything to equal the English phrase *pale fire* in the translated text. Earlier, however, he found it useful to quote the Zemblan version in his own "back-translation" into English, glossing one of the lines of Shade's poem to make the point that Shade's following text here echoes, without doubt, a similar passage in *Timon of Athens*:

Pale Fire: *The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

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² Critics discussing *Pale Fire* have advanced a number of conflicting interpretations as to which character is to be regarded as the fictional "substantive author" in, and of, the novel. A recent contribution to the controversy, wholly sceptical of the idea of Shade's authorship of Kinbote, Zembla and the rest, is Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's*

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea

And robs it. The moon is a thief:

He steals his silvery light from the sun.

The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon. (PF 58)

Bizarrely, Kinbote found the Shakespeare quote without realising he found it. Or, more accurately, he found it (and did not find it) *in translation*, that is, in the Zemblan "shadow" or "reflection" of Shakespeare's English. Apparently, shadows are sometimes false and deceptive as in the present case, despite the assertion of Conmal, the Zemblan translator of the play, according to whom Zemblan is especially well fitted for the art of literary translation as it is "the tongue of the mirror" (*PF* 172).

In the original, however, the phrase *pale fire* is very conspicuous:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief, And her *pale fire* she snatches from the sun; The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief, That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n From general excrement; each thing's a thief.

(*Timon of Athens* 4.3.439-445)³

Kinbote's "silvery light" is, then, the shadow of Shakespeare's "pale fire," which, in turn, is also a "shadow" – the Moon's cold and pale mirroring of the fire of the Sun.

Thus Nabokov's own novel is such a "shadow": without its own light or life, it reflects, coldly and palely, Shakespeare's fire. It does this in various refracted forms. Botkin (apparently, Kinbote's real name) echoes *bare bodkin*, an instrument of murder and suicide in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play replete with ghosts, shades and shadows, and their problematic

³ References in the text are to William Shakespeare. *Timon of Athens*. ed. H. J. Oliver (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1959/1969).

relationship to substantive realities; ⁴ inevitably, Shade and Kinbote discuss Shakespeare and the teaching of his plays. Some of the motifs of the novel are Shakespearean in a wider and perhaps more indirect sense. Zembla, the distant northern land by the sea, whose name echoes *zemlya*, the Russian word for "land" or "country," represents the country as only a "semblance" of a country (which still has some "resemblance" to real and substantive Russia), and the story of its last ruler, his overthrow, arrest, escape, and exile. This improbable fable of adventure, coincidence, magic, miracle, and fate recalls the vision of *Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale,* and *The Tempest.* It is, as Kinbote enthusiastically remarks in his commentary, is a "wild glorious romance" (*PF* 209), functioning in its paradoxical dual capacity as paranoid delusion *and* the triumph of the imagination, as madness *and* poetry, and, in Kinbote's own words, "magical madness" (*PF* 209) in the symbolic structure of Nabokov's novel. Or, in more sober technical terms, it is a *pastiche* ("semblance" and "resemblance") of Shakespearean romance.

The same symbolic relationship of light and its reflection controls some of the more basic dimensions of the novel as well. The *pale fire* passage quoted above condenses the overall moral vision of *Timon of Athens*: the world and the life of man in the world is governed by total interdependence that manifests itself in a kind of cosmic thievery or universal parasitism. The Sun, the Moon, the Sea, and the Earth all borrow their being from one another; each attains its appearance of "substance" by being the "shadow" of the other. Their interdependence is total and self-contained: their being has no ultimate origin in some independent substance as the "substance" of each turns out to be the "shadow" of the other and vice versa.⁵

The course Timon takes, his renunciation of the human world and his ultimate abdication of life altogether, is motivated by the realization that this is in fact the case, and

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⁴ "Botkin" also has an even stranger Russian echo. Apparently, the family physician of Emperor Nicholas II, the last Czar of Russia, was a certain Doctor Botkin. He was executed with the Czar and his family in Jekaterinburg in 1918. Cf. Essad Bey. *Egy ország tragédiája: II. Miklós cár.* (Budapest: Griff Könyvkiadó, 1943), 360 and Kun Miklós. "Kérdőjelek a cárgyilkosság körül: II. Miklós és családja kivégzése." *História* 20, no. 7 (1998/7), 20. This story, involving the shared fate of a monarch and an intellectual, has some dark symmetry with Kinbote's fantasy of himself sharing a life with Charles the Beloved, the last King of Zembla. In addition, it reinforces the notion that Zembla is a patently unreal "semblance" or "shadow" of historical Russia during the Revolution and after.

⁵ The idea of "natural thievery" in the Shakespearean passage and its link with "the mirror-theme" of the novel was first noted by Mary McCarthy, "A Bolt from the Blue," in *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 32.

fraught with grave moral consequences. His disappointment in — and total rejection of humanity originates in his insight into the universal and essential "false" nature of the human world (*Timon of Athens* 4.3.378). He is forced to realise that whatever he naively regarded as "substance" while in his fortunate state, including practically everything of value such as morals, friendship, love, art, and money, is in fact "shadow." That is to say, it is mere appearance maintained by extremely fragile bonds of human mutuality and reciprocity which, when these bonds are severed, vanishes into the thin air of insubstantiality. The conclusion Timon draws from all this is that human life (which is, of course, by definition corporate or social in character) has no substantive being whatsoever; that everything in the world of man is, in the ever-recurrent keywords of both the text of the play and of its protagonist, "shadow," "show," "imitation" and "counterfeit." For Timon this includes the quintessential component of human life: Art, our most effective and most "false" instrument (morally speaking) for creating the illusion of substantive being. The role of the Poet and the Painter in the play is akin to the "false" (illusory) magic of gold, that is, of money and riches; like all art, theirs is nothing but ineffectual trickery dealing in shadows, without substantive effect or truth. When they meet Timon in the wilderness, he hurls stones or dirt at them accompanied by his ironic exhortation that they carry out what, in substantive terms, is impossible: "You are an alchemist, make gold of that!" (Timon of Athens 5.1.113).

However, the radical moral lesson and the attendant plan of action Timon draws from his insight leads, similarly, to something equally impossible. He decides to make a total break with the "shadow" world of life in the community of humans in order to shed everything that is "false," and by doing so to attains the honesty of being purely and exclusively that which is his "substance." In act 4, scene 1 he leaves behind the human community represented by Athens in the play and, in a symbolically charged gesture, sheds his clothes, stripping himself naked. As clothing acts as an ancient symbol or archetype of all that is false, illusory, deceitful, and "shadowy" in human nature and human conduct, Timon's nakedness is symbolic of his desired identity with his pure substantive self. Therein lies his tragic mistake: the human essence or "substance" is, paradoxically, the artificial, "made," and in this sense "false" nature of man; his culture as the insubstantial "shadow" with which he supplements substantive Nature. According to this paradox, it is precisely man's "shadow" character that constitutes his "substance."

Thus, when Timon sheds his clothes, he sheds his humanity as well. He also sheds his life as, instead of the "substance" of his being that he hopes to find behind all these "shadows," there is only nothingness, and, if the logic of this quest for a non-existent substance is as consistently pursued as Timon certainly pursues it, personal annihilation. Accordingly, Timon's moral decision and the course he chooses in keeping with the imperatives of his decision is a form of tragic aberration or, if this word still has any use, madness.

Pale Fire presents a precise mirror image of this aberration and madness. As a mirror image it shows, of course, a reversed image. For Kinbote, the world is pure "shadow" without any "substance": everything is the reflection of something else; everything imitates, mirrors, signals, evokes, and explains some other thing. The world is its own multiple, or infinite series of Zemblas, or "semblances" and "resemblances," a hyper-textualised and infinitely complex piece of art, which has no other being except as its own simile or metaphor. This insight is a replica of Timon's aberration in reverse and leads Kinbote into the same kind of madness. Since for Kinbote the world of "substance" is, at best, a contingent irritation and illusory distraction, his quest is for pure "shadow" as the only valuable form of being there is. Unlike Timon's, his overwhelming ambition is to become fully part of the world of insubstantiality, to dwell among the shadows, even bodily, if possible. In other words: he himself wants to become a shadow or a shade. Or Shade, since this would mean his being fully "gathered into" (pace Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium") that supreme form of "shadow," the Work of Art or the Poem: into the "eternity of artifice" of the poem entitled Pale Fire.

In attempting to attain identity with his pure human "substance," Timon sheds his clothes. In the last page of the novel Kinbote does the opposite thing — he *dresses up* in order to shed even the appearance of his substantive being. The "clothing" he dons for the purpose is the manuscript of Shade's poem: he distributes the ninety-two index cards that contain the text over his body, putting twenty of them into the right pocket of his jacket, another twenty into the left one, and another forty "against my right nipple," while "the twelve most precious ones with the variants" he puts into his inner left-breast pocket – closest to his heart (*PF* 212). This is a grotesque symbol of the paranoid cult of art, and as such it is the ultimate symbolic reversal of Timon's case: "shadow" is now Kinbote's (totally illusory) "substance," the talismanic shield of pure artifice makes him a "semblance" of Timon's reverse, invulnerable to nature and substance as well as immune to sanity.

In a 1966 paper, Jacques Derrida said the following:

There are [...] two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology — in other words, through the history of all of his history — has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.⁶

If we attempt to translate the "shadow/substance" idea into the language of Derrida and, generally, of post-structuralism (and thereby to produce yet another "shadow"), in this translation Timon can be usefully regarded as the embodiment of an extreme form of "humanist" man. This man regards sign exclusively as the surrogate or "shadow" of some truth or origin and, therefore, sees sign as something without intrinsic value and even morally suspect, as it is something deceptively concealing while "standing for" the real thing — in favour of which it must be ultimately discarded. On the other hand, Kinbote seems to represent an equally extreme case of "post-humanist" man who is seen as fully dissolvable in the "shadow" world of signs, without even a residual substantive self. In this, two interpretations of world and self present their respective mirrors to each other, and in these mirrors humanism and post-humanism (and further and further reflections of humanism and post-humanism) reflect each other in a *mise-en-abîme* generated by the intertextual traffic between Timon of Athens and Pale Fire. Furthermore, the same intertextual traffic is responsible for the highly complex two-way effects of the shadow/substance relationship between the two texts: while, to be sure, the pale fire of Nabokov's novel is thief and parasite of the Sun's light in *Timon of Athens*, *Pale Fire* is also the Sun — in the light of which *Timon* of Athens appears now as it has never quite before.

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⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (1970) (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 264-65.

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