

Annalisa Volpone

**‘SEE THE WEB OF THE WORLD’:
THE (HYPER)TEXTUAL PLAGIARISM IN
JOYCE’S *FINNEGANS WAKE* AND NABOKOV’S *PALE FIRE***

But I hope
the master of this house may come home soon,
so I can grasp his welcome hand in mine.
As for all the rest, I'm saying nothing.
A great ox stands on my tongue. But this house,
if it could speak, might tell some stories.
I speak to those who know about these things.
For those who don't, there's nothing I remember.
(Aeschilus, *Agamennon*, I, 43-50)

The notion of *nostos* in its original meaning refers to the return of heroes from war. In the extensive body of ancient Greek literature, *nostos* was associated with “nostalgia,”¹ and described the heroes’ painful longing for home. Contemporary literature has reworked this concept in a more articulated way, *nostalgia* pervading the very nature of literary discourse. As a matter of fact, the thick web of relationships² that constitutes the textual fabric of a work is based on the common assumption that literature is already “always a return,” a repetition with a variation of archetypal literary topics, of fixed and codified models of composition.³ Sometimes the writer accepts and conforms to such an inescapable passage; sometimes he opposes it by using stylistic devices such as parody or *pastiche*.⁴ In a remarkably provocative way, postmodern writers have

¹ “Homesickness:” *nostos* meaning “a return home” and *algos* meaning “pain” (OED).

² Gérard Genette (*Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) perfectly depicts these different kinds of textual transactions. In particular, the interaction between what Genette calls hypotexts and hypertexts will be explored below.

³ John Barth. “The Literature of Exhaustion.” *The Atlantic* 220.2 (August 1967): 23-94.

⁴ See Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

made a wide use of plagiarism as a paradoxical demystification of the heavy weight of literary tradition.⁵

The works of James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov represent a peculiar example of such an ambivalent attitude towards the past. Indeed, *Finnegans Wake* (*FW*) and *Pale Fire* (*PF*), the two novels examined in our present investigation, originate from such an uncertainty. Interestingly, they seem to anticipate some of the most prominent features of postmodernism.⁶ The aforementioned plagiarism becomes constitutive in *FW*, where literary tradition “reamalgame[s]” (49.36)⁷ bits and pieces in its “meandertale” (18.22).⁸ Following the logic of the “seim anew” (215.23),⁹ which combines the Vichian *corsi* and *ricorsi* (in the course and recourse of history) with the necessity of deconstructing literature at the root,¹⁰ Joyce eagerly depredates the western canon. In so doing, he bases his textual repertoire upon displaced expressions, scattered allusions, misquoted lines, and all the literary scraps he can avail himself of

⁵ See Daniela Carpi. “Hermes: God of Thieves. Plagiarism in Twentieth Century Literature.” *Law and Critique* 14.12 (May 2003): 213-223.

⁶ See for example Kevin J. H. Dettmar. “The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism. Reading against the Grain.” *Studies in the Novel* 32.3 (2000):390-94; Maurice Couturier. “Nabokov in Postmodernist Land.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 34.4 (1993):247-60.

⁷ James Joyce. *Finnegans Wake*. New York: Viking Press, 1939. References are to page and line numbers, references being the same in all editions. “Reamalgame” is a particularly dense compound word, which describes the cyclical combination (“amalgam”) and repetition (“re-emerge”) of the foundations of knowledge through the history of mankind. See Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Rev. transl. of the third ed. of 1744. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948.

⁸ The compound word epitomizes the very essence of the *Wake* alluding to its narrative meanderings. It also describes the reader’s sense of disorientation and confusion in his various attempts to decipher such an evasive and protean text. There are a number of studies on the concept of intertextuality/plagiarism in *FW*, for brevity’s sake I shall only mention the most interesting: Jennifer Schiffer Levine. “Originality and Repetition in *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*.” *PMLA* 94.1 (January, 1979):106-20; M.K. Booker. *Joyce, Bakhtin and the Literary Tradition*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995; and undoubtedly the most influential one: Jacques Derrida. “Two Words for Joyce.” D. Attridge and D. Ferrer (eds.). *Post-Structuralist Joyce. Essays from the French*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 145-159.

⁹ Analogously to “reamalgame,” the expression refers to the idea of repetition with variation of some specific cultural patterns through ages. “Seim” in particular alludes to both the pronoun “same” and the Russian river Seim. A river that keeps on flowing and yet remains the “Seim” undoubtedly suggests Heraclitus’ notion of *panta rhei* (everything is in a state of flux) and his famous observation: “we both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and we are not.” Susan Shaw Sailer (*On the Void of to Be. Incoherence and Trope in Finnegan’s Wake*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993) has examined Joyce’s notion of the “seim anew” by comparing it with Julia Kristeva’s negativity and Jacques Derrida’s *différance*. The repetition of motifs, fragments, literary topics, and the consequent meta-reflection on such a repetition entangle the reader in a writing in which each word and notion are carried “to an interminable chain of relatedness, resulting in the enfolding of the subject in a destiny and direction shared with all other subjects.” (4).

¹⁰ It is not by chance that *FW* starts with the fall of Tim Finn as a modern reinterpretation of Humpty Dumpty’s story. The anthropomorphic egg falls off a wall and breaks into pieces. Obviously, Humpty Dumpty is a powerful bearer of meaning. It brings in itself one of the most ancient symbols of mankind: that of the egg as a paradigm of a new life, fertility and origin. Its disruption prophetically anticipates that of literature. Indeed, in the novel, literature is subject to the same fall and consequential fragmentation, which irremediably compromises its very meaning and origin.

to recount HCE's story. In other words, like Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleur*,¹¹ Joyce works with the knowledge/culture at his disposal to plunge it into a different narrative flux and make it useful for other forms of utterance. Moreover, showing a peculiar predictive quality, *FW* embodies its readers' future interpretations. Long before the novel was published as a whole, its critical readers were already absorbed into the portal venous system of its open textuality, hence the discourse *about the text* is turned into a discourse *in the text*.¹² As a consequence, this kind of articulated textual *corpus* becomes a "begotten and not created" organism, a kind of "literary monster" in the manner of *Frankenstein's* composite corpse.¹³

Plagiarism and thievery are two of the most luring traits of *PF* as well; undeniably, they affect the text both on the linguistic and thematic level, which seriously compromises any attempt to apply a totalizing hermeneutics. Starting with its very title — two words borrowed from a line of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, in which Timon significantly reflects upon thievery¹⁴ — *PF* is a masterpiece that is surreptitiously built on the practice of purloining.¹⁵ Take Kinbote's puzzling position in the novel: his Commentary and his hidden, or probably stolen identity, are all examples

¹¹ See Claude Lévi-Strauss. *La pensée sauvage* (1962). Paris: PUF, 2004; see also Margot Norris. "The Consequence of Deconstruction: A Technical Perspective of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*." *ELH* 41.1 (Spring 1974):130-148.

¹² I refer here to the well-known case of the collection of essays by Samuel Beckett et. al., *Our Examination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1929. Joyce perversely incorporates the text into the novel, translating and remodeling its language into the peculiar Finneganesse idiolect. Thus the collection's title becomes: "Your exagmination round his factification for incamination of a warping process." (497). For further considerations on the interplay between author and critical reading in *FW*, see Annalisa Volpone. "Speak to us of Emailia." *Per una lettura ipertestuale di Finnegans Wake*. Napoli: ESI, 2003. 131-164. I shall come back to this issue later in the essay.

¹³ See Edward Said. "The Poet as Oedipus." *The New York Times* (13 April 1975). <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/01/specials/bloom-misreading.html>> (accessed December 8, 2007). Here Said, commenting on Harold Bloom's *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), argues that "The ground of literature is the text, just as its father [...] is the author. This is the very citadel of literary orthodoxy. Only a great writer will challenge that fortress of certainty. He will see that a father is himself a son; he will also see that his own work must be protected not only from writers who will come after it, but also from the powerful authors that precede him, who remind him of their strength of their prior authority and his filial secondariness." Following Said's observations, one might suggest that *FW's* primary nucleus is the expression of such a double bind between "prior authority" and "filial secondariness;" analogously, in *PF*, Kinbote's metaleptic psychoses embody the very essence of the author/tradition dilemma.

¹⁴ "I'll example you with thievery [...] The moon's an arrant thief, / And her *pale fire* she snatches from the sun." (IV.iii. 426-429, Italics mine).

¹⁵ For the concept of purloining as a displacement of meaning and language in its symbolic order see Edgar Allan Poe. "The Purloined Letter" (1845). <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/POE/purloine.html>> (accessed November 1, 2008). See also John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds.). *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. For its treatment in *PF*, see Brian Boyd. *Nabokov's Pale Fire. The Magic of Artistic Discovery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999 and "Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*." *Nabokov Studies* 4 (1997). <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/boydpf1.htm>> (accessed December 7, 2007).

of a narrative that evokes, quotes and misquotes other narratives, even to the point of mimicry. In this regard, Pekka Tammi observes:

In a quite literal sense of the term, [...] [Kinbote's] act of editing the text exemplifies "thievery", for he has confiscated the dead poet's manuscript [...]. Moreover, it is evident that in composing his discourse K[inbote] borrows several elements directly from S[hade].¹⁶

Consequently, Nabokov goes beyond Joyce's provoking incorporation of criticism into *FW*. Structuring *PF* as a poem with an exceptionally sophisticated paratextual apparatus, not only does he turn criticism (or better, Kinbote's criticism) into fiction, but he also manages to shift the attention from the poem "Pale Fire" to the Commentary, which also implies a change in the text's *genre* from poetry to prose.¹⁷ Here, literary criticism becomes fictional in every respect. The novel's layout, as well as its structure, is devised with the purpose of confusing and deceiving the reader. It follows that the boundaries between text and off-text, center and margin are irremediably blurred. Hence the novel *PF* comes into existence with Charles Kinbote's notes and comic contributions. His peripheral editing and critical reading of John Shade's lines becomes the center of a multilayered elusive and resistant narrative that entices the reader to discover the increasing complexity of Nabokov's texture (see Boyd 1999).

In this regard, *nostalgia* represents the key to *FW* and *PF*'s challenging structure. It discloses a textual grid of potential literary discourses that have already taken place. In spite of many readers' resistance to *FW* and to its teratological intricacy, there is no doubt that the novel embodies an inescapable *locus memoriae* for contemporary literature, a cultural memory storage with which any writer and reader has to negotiate.¹⁸ On the other hand, through Kinbote's eerie speculations and overt manipulation of John Shade's poem, the reader is led to a web of literary and cultural connections to be decoded, interpreted and matched against the novel's context.

¹⁶ Pekka Tammi. *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics. A Narratological Analysis*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1985. 206.

¹⁷ According to Bakhtin, "the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. [...] The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities." ("Epic and Novel." Holoquist Michael (ed.). *Mikhail Bakhtin. The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982. 3-40, 3). In an interview for BBC-2 (3 September, 1968), Nabokov observes that "One of the functions of all my novels is to prove that the novel in general does not exist" (*Strong Opinions* (1973). New York: Vintage, 1990. 115.) I shall hereafter refer to this text as *SO*.

¹⁸ In this regard, Nabokov observes that "one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader." (*Lectures on Literature*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980. 3.) I shall hereafter refer to this text as *LL*.

In consideration of such a crucial role played by *nostalgia* in *FW* and *PF*, I would like to suggest a comparison between the texts in terms of a dialogue, which according to Bakhtin, is incipient in the genre of the novel itself.¹⁹ However, both *FW* and *PF* express a seductive polyphonic quality that, by means of a parodic exaggeration, transcends the Russian critic's theoretical framework. The result is an "echo effect" that reverberates through their narration and contributes to engender new patterns of meaning.

HYPertextUALITIES

James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov met a few times while Joyce was living in Paris. Nabokov was fascinated by Joyce's sagaciousness and strong personality.²⁰ On his part, the Irish writer empathized with this young Russian artist to the point of helping him in a difficult moment in his career.²¹ Nabokov's admiration for *Ulysses* is widely documented²² as well as his rejection of *FW*, which he considered "one of the greatest failures in literature" (*LL* 349). In *SO*, he refers to Joyce's last novel as "a formless and dull mass of phony folklore, a cold pudding of a book, a persistent snore in the next room, most aggravating to the insomniac I am" (71). Hence, it will not come as a surprise that in response to Alfred Appel's question about a textual convergence between *FW* and *PF*,²³ Nabokov answered quite peremptorily: "It [*FW*] has no inner connection with *Pale Fire*" (*SO* 74).

Such a firm judgment might discourage one from speculating about a dialogic tension between *FW* and *PF*. Yet, I do not think that this issue can be so easily dismissed. After all,

¹⁹ For Mikhail Bakhtin, "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" ("Discourse in the Novel" 279).

²⁰ Richard Ellmann recounts a conversation that occurred between the two at a dinner in Paul Leon's flat, about the use of mythology in modern literature (1937). On that occasion, Joyce dismissed his reference to Homer in *Ulysses* as a "whim." Regarding the collaboration with Stuart Gilbert for his critical work *James Joyce's Ulysses: A Study*. London: Faber & Faber, 1930 (in which a chapter is devoted to the influence of the *Odyssey* on the novel), he did not hesitate to observe that it was a "terrible mistake, an advertisement for the book" and that he "regret[ted] it very much." (*James Joyce* (1959). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. 619).

²¹ In this regard, Ellmann notes, "On hearing that Vladimir Nabokov was to lecture on Pushkin, and would probably confront an empty hall, Joyce made a point of attending so as to save his young friend from undue embarrassment" (699). In an interview conducted by Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov recalls the same episode observing that "A source of unforgettable consolation was the sight of Joyce sitting, arms folded and glasses glinting, in the midst of the Hungarian football team" (*SO* 86).

²² See *LL* and Nabokov's observations on Joyce's novel collected in *SO*.

²³ In particular, Appel asked about the analogies between the *Wake*'s fifth chapter, devoted to Anna Livia's *mamafesta*, and *PF*, since for Appel, this chapter of the *Wake* is very close in spirit to Nabokov's novel.

Nabokov truly believed Joyce to be a genius,²⁴ for him the Irish writer's works were both a challenge and a significant source of inspiration.

In my opinion, the two novels share what we could call the same "literary database system." One might say that *FW* belongs to a particular kind of software that Derrida has called *Joyceware*²⁵ and *PF* belongs to another kind of software that I shall call *Nabokovware*. In other words, these novels can be regarded as "literary machines," whose exponential capacity of meaning production, once primed by the reader, is destined to a virtually inexhaustible updating.

The two novels' unique narrative structure can be compared with the contemporary notion of hypertext, as it has been introduced in different contexts by Theodor Holm Nelson on the one hand, and Gérard Genette on the other.²⁶ For this reason, "hypertextual narratives" seems to me to be the most fitting expression to describe Joyce and Nabokov's textualities. Certainly, the way these authors weave their stories and establish intra/inter-textual relationships with their and others' texts is very close to hypertextuality or to what Italo Calvino defines as "hyper-novels," as they are built on a cumulative, modular and combinatory structure.²⁷ Indeed, both Joyce and Nabokov employ very peculiar methods of composition. They do not write their novels consecutively, chapter after chapter, page after page. Rather, they juxtapose episodes and crucial narrative events following a personal mental pattern, which highly affects their unconventional prose.

In Joyce, such a conceptual assemblage/dissemblage first begins on a linguistic level. It is the word and its basic components that must be disarticulated in a dismembering process through which meaning endlessly defers itself. Ellmann states:

²⁴ This is what he declared in an interview with James Mossman at the BBC (4 October, 1969).

²⁵ Jacques Derrida describes *FW* as a hypermnestic machine "capable of integrating all the variables, all the quantitative or the qualitative factors. [...] this machine would only be the double or the simulation of the event 'Joyce', the name of Joyce, the signed work, the Joyce software today, joyceware" (148).

²⁶ Theodor Holm Nelson coined the term "hypertext" in 1963 when he defined it as "non-sequential writing" and "a software environment for collaborative work, communication and knowledge acquisition." See Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin, Robin Parmer. "Hypertext." *The Electronic Labyrinth*. <<http://elab.eserver.org/hfl0037.html>> (accessed January 8, 2008). Over the years, he improved the well-known "Xanadu Project" intended to incorporate western literature into a single database. For further details, see W. Boyd Rayward. "Visions of Xanadu: Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and Hypertext." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* Vol.45 (1994):235-250. Developing his conception of transtextuality, Gérard Genette uses "hypertext," in opposition to the term of his coinage "hypotext," to define the hypertextual relationship between a text B (the hypertext) and a prior text A (the hypotext), B being grafted on A in a way that is different from that of the commentary.

²⁷ See Italo Calvino. "Multiplicity." *Six Memos For The Next Millenium*. Trans. Patrick Creagh. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1988; see also Calvino's most audacious novel on the act of telling/constructing stories, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973). Trans. William Weaver. San Diego, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976.

To imitate the sophistication of word- and image- formation in the unconscious mind (for Joyce discarded the notion that the mind's basic movements were primitive) he took settled words and images, then dismembered and constituted them (716).

Analogously, Nabokov's novels materialize in his mind as fragmentary images and spots of color.²⁸ The author himself describes this process as follows:

I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no I pick out a bit here and bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete (*SO* 32).

Reconfiguring the features that inscribe the novel onto its genre,²⁹ Nabokov and Joyce extraordinarily anticipate some of the issues raised by hypertextual writing, such as originality, transparency, autonomy, linearity, finality, textual partogenesis and closure. Yet, at the same time, *FW* and *PF* overtly reveal the structural conditioning to which such proto-hypertextuality is subjected, completely breaking the illusion of a fluid textuality that allows the reader to intervene in the narrative.³⁰ Equally important is the fact that both Nabokov and Joyce challenge the very nature of the book as a privileged medium for writing, prefiguring in some way the postmodern notion of literature: a proliferation of textual data, a *con*-fusion of texts that can be read, manipulated, parasitized and endlessly reproduced³¹ in a flexible unit-oriented writing space.³²

Even the reader, endowed with brand-new paraphernalia, recalls the *wreader* of hypertexts. He is asked to take part in the sacred act of writing. In *FW*, the four old men "Mamalujo," during

²⁸ "I don't think in any language. I think in images," Nabokov used to say (*SO* 14).

²⁹ In an article on Nabokov's death ("Vladimir Nabokov, Author of 'Lolita' and 'Ada,' Is Dead"), remembering some of the writer's major declarations, Alden Whitman quotes the following: "How can I talk about the novel when I don't know what a novel is? There are no novels, no writers, only individual books." *New York Times* (July 5, 1977). <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/02/lifetimes/nab-v-obit.html>> (accessed October 21, 2008). On the other hand, Joyce, when talking with August Suter about *FW*, confessed: "it is like a mountain that I tunnel into from every direction, but I don't know what I will find" (Ellmann 543).

³⁰ On the role of the reader in hypertextual narratives see Jay David Bolter. "The Rhetoric of Interactive Fiction." Philip Cohen (ed.). *Texts and Textuality: Textual Instability, Theory, and Interpretation*. New York: Garland, 1997. 269-290.

³¹ In this regard it is worth mentioning the on-line discussions of these novels on "JJF" (The James Joyce Foundation) and all its related links (HJS-Hypermedia Joyce Studies, James Joyce Center, James Joyce Portal, etc.) and "Zembla," a website devoted to Nabokov. Also, many readers subscribe to Internet Forums and Reading Groups to confront their interpretations and raise questions, giving life to that choral, multivocal (polyglot) reading of the novels, foreseen by Joyce and longed for by Nabokov, or better, by Kinbote.

³² See Scott Bukatman, "Virtual Textuality" (1995). <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/~jmu2m/bukatman.html>> (accessed February 2, 2008).

their inquisition, warn Yawn about his answer as if he were given the chance to personally intervene in the narration:

Upjack! I shudder for your thought! Think! Put from your mind that and take on trust this. The next word depends on your answer (487. 4-6).

It appears that Yawn's answer may seriously influence the entire narrative flux. This character, in Joyce's complex allegorical conception of HCE's family, on a macro-level embodies the rational/logical side of consciousness.³³ Whereas Shem, or in this case Jim,³⁴ his twin brother, is associated with writing, creativity and inspiration, Yawn/Shawn is associated with orality, material success and pragmatism. Therefore, he does not write the letter-*mamafesta*, he "only" reads it. However, on some occasions, Yawn attributes the letter's authorship to himself and plagiarizes it at will. In a certain sense, he may be taken as the reader's fictional projection in the novel. Seen from this point of view, the previous passage becomes paradigmatic of the author/reader dualism. It elicits the breakdown of barriers between texts, between codes and registers, between reading and writing.³⁵

Thus the reader is entrusted with the task of producing/organizing narrative discourse. On a meta-textual level, the four judges are indirectly asking the fatal question dreaded by every author, i.e. "And now what comes next?" to which they reply by metaphorically abdicating their role to Yawn-the-reader: "the next word depends on your answer." Thus, the displacement/obliteration of textual authority begins.

Conversely, one may observe that such considerations could still be a part of a conscious fictional device.³⁶ Although this may be true, the *Wake* seems to involve the reader on a more challenging and ambitious ground. Doubtless, part of the novel's system is built upon the possibility

³³ For a fuller account of Shem and Shaun's functions and roles, see David Hayman. *The 'Wake' in Transit*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990.

³⁴ Adeline Glasheen proposes a pattern of correspondences according to which when Shaun manifests himself as "Yawn," Shem becomes "Jim" (*Third Census of Finnegans Wake*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

³⁵ For further observations about Joyce and his reader/writer's narrativity, see Patrick A. McCarthy. "Attempts at Narration in *Finnegans Wake*." *Genetic Joyce Studies* Issue 5 (Spring 2005). <<http://www.antwerpjamesjoycecenter.com/GJS/GJS5/GJS5McCarthy.htm>> (accessed February 5, 2008).

³⁶ See for example, Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, in which the reader is constantly asked to "take part" in a narration, that in my opinion remains grounded on traditional narrative principles. In this regard, Jeffrey Williams argues that in *Tristram Shandy* (as in the other novels he examines) narrative technique is never beyond or outside the plot. (*Theory and Novel. Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

of a creative response on the reader's side.³⁷ In other words, Joyce gives life to a textual mechanism, an engine that only the reader can set in motion.³⁸ Nevertheless, the latter is by no means an updated version of Eco's "model reader," since Joyce demands the reader's intervention *before* interpretation. He asks for the reader's collaboration from the novel's very begetting, at that particular moment when a story becomes word.

The author-as-a-character's abdication of his role in favor of Shaun-the-reader inevitably influences the flesh-and-blood reader's attitude towards the novel. Here, the subversion of the reader/writer's functions is brought to its extremes: through a vertiginous superimposition and consequential disruption of their traditional operating areas, reading becomes writing and writing becomes reading. In the Babelic Finneganesque idiom, each word implies an endless negotiation of meaning, a choice among the infinite semantic possibilities of the text.

The aforementioned passage makes us confront one of the *Wake*'s biggest dilemmas (a crucial issue for the theorists of hypertextual writing as well): how to cope with a text that on the one hand seems to be built after a medieval cathedral building plan,³⁹ and on the other, seems to confer the reader an unlimited power to change and *signify* narrative.⁴⁰ As a result, the novel's writing space is irremediably disrupted by a double bind that resists any final and definitive *Aufhebung*.

In *PF*, the deconstruction of the text passes through the deconstruction of its medium: the book. Before approaching John Shade's poem ("Pale Fire"), Kinbote suggests to us that what we are about to read cannot be enjoyed linearly, according to an ineluctable page-turning chain:

To this poem we must turn. My Foreword has been, I trust, not too skimpy. Other notes, arranged in a running commentary, will certainly satisfy the most voracious reader. Although those notes in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the problem, consulting them for a third time so as to complete the picture. I find it wise in such cases to eliminate the bother of back-and-forth leafings by either cutting out and clipping together the pages with the text of the thing, or, even more simply, purchasing two copies of the same work which can then be placed in adjacent position on a comfortable table [...].⁴¹

³⁷ See James M. Cahalan. "'Dear Reader' and 'Dread Writer': Joyce's Direct Addresses to His Readers in 'Finnegans Wake.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol.41.3 (Fall 1995): 306-13.

³⁸ See Jacques Aubert. "riverrun." 69-77.

³⁹ See Umberto Eco. *The Aesthetic of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*. Trans. Ellen Esrock. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989.

⁴⁰ Such an impasse is analogous to that between an "exploratory hypertext" (where the reader can choose which path to follow among a limited, and already established number of possible links) and a "creative hypertext" (where the reader becomes the author and writes his own links and paths).

⁴¹ Vladimir Nabokov. *Pale Fire* (1962). New York: Vintage International, 1989. 28. All parenthetical numbers refer to pages and lines in this edition.

Kinbote decries the inadequacy of the book to second his demands. He calls for a change on the writing/reading level that strikingly prefigures a hypertextual virtual environment where

“Hypertext” designates texts that utilize non-linear (or multi-linear) structures through their composition and display on computer terminals. On screen, the text is separated from its physical existence on a hard disk, and becomes a malleable “virtual” text. A unit of text might be “linked,” through a click of the mouse or touch of a key, to another unit or text: a glossary or annotation, or another work by that author, or from that period, or one influenced by the first. Further, these additional texts, or units, can incorporate illustration, video, sound, as well as music or movie samples (Bukatman 1995).

The subversion of any hierarchy of textual authority claimed by Kinbote (“the reader is advised to consult [the notes] first”) anticipates the “non-linear (or multi-linear) structures” of hypertexts; in addition, the “cutting out and clipping together the pages,” apart from recalling the “cut” and “paste” commands of an electronic word processor, can be compared with the malleability of a text in a virtual writing space (“a unit of text might be “linked,” through a click of the mouse or touch of a key, to another unit or text”).

When Kinbote recommends the reader to “purchas[e] two copies of the same work which can then be placed in adjacent position on a comfortable table,” he is not just trying to suggest the most suitable way to read the book, rather, he seems to have in mind something else. More precisely, Kinbote’s idea can be considered a literary translation of Vannevar Bush’s reading device, known as “memory extender” (“memex”), presented in 1945:

Consider a future device for individual use, which is a sort of mechanized private file and library. It needs a name, and to coin one at random, “memex” will do. A memex is a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory. It consists of a desk, and while it can presumably be operated from a distance, it is primarily the piece of furniture at which he works. On the top are slanting translucent screens, on which material can be projected for convenient reading. There is a keyboard, and sets of buttons and levers. Otherwise it looks like an ordinary desk.⁴²

As a supplement to memory, a memex can provide an immediate data access. In some respects, *PF* performs a more sophisticated function. Indeed, although its memory storage keeps on updating and growing bigger and bigger — as the reader occasionally revisits the text⁴³ — Kinbote’s “eccentric

⁴² “As We May Think.” *The Atlantic Monthly* (1945). <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/194507/bush>> (accessed October 23, 2008).

⁴³ Priscilla Meyer argues that “Nabokov deliberately designed his total *oeuvre* as a spiral that finds ever-widening patterns in the weave of the universe” (“Igor, Ossian, and Kinbote: Nabokov’s Notification as Reference Library.” *Slavic Review* Vol. 47.1 (Spring 1988): 68-75, 68).

scholarship is conspicuously inaccurate” (Meyer 74) and prevents him from offering the reader a serious intertextual framework. First, this is because he manipulates references for his own convenience, as he admits in the delirious note to line 550:

It is the *only* time in the course of the writing of these difficult comments, that I have tarried, in my distress and disappointment, on the brink of falsification. I must ask the reader to ignore those two lines (which, I am afraid, do not even scan properly). I could strike them out before publication but that would mean reworking the entire note, or at least a considerable part of it, and I have no time for such stupidities (228).

Secondly, from the place where Kinbote is hiding (a “bookless mountain cave” 194) to escape Shadean scholars who would like to have the poet’s manuscript in their hands, he cannot cross-check his drafts. Therefore, on reading his Commentary, we easily run into these kinds of considerations:

Anybody having access to a good library could, no doubt, easily trace that story to its source and find the name of the lady; but such humdrum potterings are beneath true scholarship (256).

If the reader wants to enjoy the novel according to a conventional narrative structure,⁴⁴ he is compelled to re-establish formal hierarchies. The subversive textual disarrangement urged by Kinbote⁴⁵ must give way to a complete reconfiguration of text and paratext. Paradoxically in so doing, the novel disappears among the ruins of Kinbote’s verbose speculations, since the “real” *PF* text is a poem.

In his apparently flawless plan, Kinbote has developed a formidable self-destructive textual machine that resists any external interference. Consequently, as the reader’s possible intervention becomes more concrete, Kinbote’s Forward, Commentary and Index disarticulate themselves from their original context, turning the novel into scattered, scarcely intelligible non-sequential writing.

From these observations it appears quite clear that such engaging and intentionally deceiving narratives invite a further reflection on authorship. We can hardly define the author’s role both in *FW* and *PF*, since it must be negotiated and reconfigured page after page. Thus, the author disrupts and deconstructs his work while he unequivocally defends and manifests his presence. In

⁴⁴ I.e. as a long narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end.

⁴⁵ On various occasions, Kinbote vehemently refers the reader to notes or parts of his Commentary that completely divert narration, as when he observes: “see, frequently see, note to line 181” (169) or “see, see now, my note to lines 993-995” (172) or again “see Forward, see Foreword at once” (260).

other words, he needs his reader to *admire* the wonder of his intellectual creation as a mark of his genius.

Nonetheless, Joyce and Nabokov's self-esteem and ambition do not prevent them from silencing the "author" when it is necessary. Rather than being killed by their self-love, *a lá* Ovid's Narcissus, they oedipally murder the author, though only in a fictional sense, for the reader's benefit. As we shall see further on, towards the end of *FW*'s final chapter, the reader is given the sad news: "The Author in fact was mardred" (517.11); in *PF*, the poet John Shade (the author of the poem "Pale Fire") dies (he is killed by Gradus); even Charles Kinbote, his mysterious schizophrenic alter ego, will inflict on himself the same destiny.⁴⁶

KINBOTE'S LIBRARY: FINNIGAN'S WAKE

The whole body of annotations in Kinbote's Commentary functions as a Shelleyan "fading coal," which describes the mind in creation; it is but a feeble distant echo of an "amnesic knowledge," whose gaps must be filled by way of imagination. Kinbote's approach to "Pale Fire" recalls John Keats' notion of the "silent working," as he defined the unconscious mechanics of imagination. The poet, who is often quoted in his Commentary, considered imagination to be a "cohesive relation to remembered experiences, recurrent images dominant patterns of feelings and thoughts."⁴⁷ Tellingly, in his last note Kinbote declares:

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 (297).

Rather than being a formal critical apparatus,⁴⁸ Kinbote's Commentary is a formidable work of imagination which parasitically draws life from the dissected main text, whose broken sentences and words are recycled for a different narrative. Even the title is reversed and anatomized in Kinbote's coercive appropriation of "Pale Fire," reappearing above the textual surface as "wavelets of fire" and "*pale* and phosphorescent hints." Thus, Kinbote's contribution turns into a whirlpool of

⁴⁶ In an interview conducted by Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov reveals that Kinbote "certainly [committed suicide] after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem" (*SO* 74).

⁴⁷ See Leon Waldoff. *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985. xii.

⁴⁸ Kinbote dismisses these kinds of studies by defining them as "nonsense" (14) or as something "aside from the veritable clarion of internal evidence" (14) and the like.

“contrapuntal” translations of images and echoes, partly belonging to his own existential experience and partly to Shade’s.

It is remarkable that, precisely during this activity of sorting out the threads of his rhizomatic web of (non)sense, Kinbote should recall to his mind Joyce’s last novel:

Of course it would be unseemingly for a monarch to appear in the robes of learning at a university lectern and present to rosy youths *Finnigan’s Wake* [sic!] as a monstrous extension of Angus MacDiarmid’s “incoherent transactions” and of Southey’s LingoGrande (“Dear Stumparumper,” etc.) (76).

The passage refers to King Charles’ passion for literature. Disguised in his physical appearance and under false identity (according to Kinbote, it would be inconvenient for a King to work at a university), he becomes an esteemed professor who lectures on *FW*.⁴⁹ Here, Joyce’s novel is related to Angus MacDiarmid, a champion of Scottish folklore and culture, author of *A Description of the Beauties of Edinample and Lochearnhead* (1815) written in a somewhat broken and clumsy English, and to the romantic poet Robert Southey, in this case mentioned more for his love of riddles, puns and nursery rhymes than for his poems. Unequivocally, Nabokov aims to emphasize the extreme linguistic experimentation and parody offered by these authors. In a single annotation, he conflates Joyce, MacDiarmid and Southey as the ultimate paradigm of linguistic nonsense and distortion.

As for Angus MacDiarmid, Nabokov seems to refer to the Scottish antiquary and journalist Robert Scott Fittis who, in *Sports and Pastimes of Scotland Historically Illustrated*, describes him as follows:

He appears to have acquired just sufficient knowledge of the English language to enable him to use an English dictionary, from the study of which his untutored mind formed an extraordinary style of composition. The *Description*

⁴⁹ In the current Vintage International Edition of the book, *FW* is spelled “Finnigan’s Wake.” Other editions of the novel carry the same misspelling, while in the Penguin Classics (and in more recent American editions) the novel’s title is correctly spelled. Ironically, such a mistake has been inherited by the translations of *PF* as well. In particular, Richard Zahnhausen has noticed that in the “Afterward” to the German translation, Andrew Field has ascribed the misprint to Kinbote, as another proof of his mediocre literary culture. The question has been discussed in the on-line Nabokov forum, where some of the most prominent scholars have reached the conclusion that most likely it is a misprint; yet this explanation has not convinced the Nabokovian community and the debate is still ongoing. Curiously, the “correct edition” issue is another element of confrontation between Joyce and Nabokov. Charles Rossman has argued that the first edition of *Ulysses* was rushed to press to be printed in time for Joyce’s 40th birthday and typeset by French-speaking printers to avoid the wrath of English censors, it contained so many mistakes that its publisher, Shakespeare and Company, sold it with an insert apologizing “for typographical errors unavoidable in the exceptional circumstances.” (“Introduction to Special Issue on Editing *Ulysses*.” *Studies in the Novel* 22.2:113-119, 113). Hence, whether Nabokov miswrote the title on purpose or not, such a slip undoubtedly seems very Joycean. For a complete account of the discussion see <NABOKOV-L@UCSBVM.UCSN.edu> (accessed 24 November, 2006).

was reprinted at Aberfeldy in 1841, and again in 1876, and is altogether unique as the production of an untaught Highlander striving to express his thoughts in literary English. A copy of the first edition apparently fell into the hands of Robert Southey, who quoted and laughed over one of its queer phrases "men of incoherent transactions."⁵⁰

As a humorous and witty intellectual, Robert Southey was amused by MacDiarmid's "queer language" which evoked his word-games and jokes. In particular, Kinbote's allusion to the "Lingo Grande" refers to a sort of linguistic game played between Robert and his sister-in-law, Sarah Fricker, the wife of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Sarah had invented a language, "Lingo Grande," as her family called it, which she spoke with her friends and children. According to Molly Lefebure, "the fullest surviving account which we have of this language occurs in a letter from Southey to [his friend] Grosvenor Bedford dated 14 September 1821."⁵¹ The letter begins with "Dear Stumparumper," which is how Mrs. Coleridge addressed Bedford in her language.

Moreover, from 1814, Southey "began working on a book which he at first was tentatively calling 'Dr Dove' and ultimately was to publish as *The Doctor*, a tome of seven volumes, comprising collections of mottoes, anecdotes, fairy tales, nursery tales, social history, gossip, folklore and ballads, punning and play with words, attempts at serious etymology and essays on every subject under the sun [...]" (Lefebure 80). Southey's work can be inscribed onto the literary tradition (inaugurated by Lawrence Sterne⁵² and later developed by Lewis Carroll) devoted to systematically undermining narration in its deepest structure and seriously putting into question the effectiveness of linguistic communication.

In other words, Nabokov associates *FW* with two main literary traditions: "nonsense" and "regional literature." In this regard, both MacDiarmid and Southey's stylistic devices might be considered to be excellent precursors of those employed by Joyce in the novel. Hence, it will not come as a surprise that Kinbote describes the *Wake* as a "monstrous extension" of MacDiarmid and Southey's works. Nabokov is mocking what he believed was the total nonsense of Joyce's language as well as the audacity of his style in *FW*. As for MacDiarmid, in his genuine ignorance of the English language, he rendered his thoughts in an approximate prose form, including semantic slips, misquotations and decontextualized translations from Scottish. Such a peculiar use of language can be compared with Joyce's provocative attempts to show the unpredictable mechanisms of linguistic

⁵⁰ London: Alexander Gardner, 1891. 47.

⁵¹ Molly Lefebure. "The Imagination of Mrs Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Unknown Inspiration of An Unknown Tongue." Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn & Nicholas Roe (eds.). *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 79-87, 82.

⁵² Southey considered himself the rightful heir of Lawrence Sterne, indeed he turned the tale *The Doctor* into a book with "much of Tristram Shandy about it." See Lefebure.

communication. Analogously, Southey's intentional deconstruction of language and grandiose project of *The Doctor* seem to anticipate the *Wake*. In his intention of producing an omnicomprehensive text that ranges from serious to humorous and encompasses all literary genres, Southey is creating a precedent for Joyce's novel. However, whereas the romantic poet needs six volumes to realize his project, Joyce encapsulates the wor(l)d in 628 pages.

Priscilla Meyer considers the reference to MacDiarmid a parody of the Scottish poet, James MacPherson. MacDiarmid was trying to establish a cultural and national tradition for Scotland just as Macpherson, in his eighteenth century forgery, was trying to affirm a specific literary and epic inheritance through the mysterious discovery of the ancient bard, Ossian.

Here Nabokov's description of the *Wake* as "a dull mass of phony folklore" (SO 71) or as "regional literature full of quaint old-timers and imitated pronunciation" (SO 71) might be useful. Similarly to MacPherson, Joyce is (re)creating a national epic, intentionally forging a tradition that does not exist. From this perspective, the *Wake* becomes for Kinbote the highest example of literary deceit, a model reference to make Zembla more tangible. Indeed, to turn his imaginary land into a real place, Kinbote needs to endow it with a national history, a culture and, of course, a language. Consequently, the very essence of his library is its Zemblan translations of the major achievements of western culture, *FW* included.

It is as if the books in the library were a draft copy of the original, a plagiarized and manipulated collection of the ideas that have contributed to the advancement of human knowledge. In this infinite catalogue, the *Wake*, with its overt plagiaristic nature, embodies the ultimate parody of this calculated forgery. The annotations and comments of Prof. Jones to the *Tiberiast Duplex* as a comic counterpart of the *Book of Kells* (from which the letter-*mamafesta* seems to derive), are a further extension of MacPherson's cooked up annotations to Ossian's *Son of Fingal*, echoed by Joyce in the very title of his novel.

Finally, the context in which Kinbote mentions *FW* deserves some attention. He lingers on a long digression in the note to "crystal land" in line 12. In his reading, this expression might be an allusion to his "beloved Zembla." His painful exiled condition often leads him to misinterpret Shade's words as encrypted signs of his country. Thus, he argues that in the passage he is commenting on, the main subjects are exile and *nostalgia*. Recalling Joyce in this context is more than appropriate. Like Kinbote and, of course, like Nabokov, he chose to leave his motherland and never return. Despite this drastic decision, we know that Joyce wrote only about Ireland and Dublin.

As a matter of fact, Kinbote's pathological contextomy⁵³ and distorted interpretation turn Zembla into the center of Shade's poetical discourse.⁵⁴

One cannot help but compare King Charles/Kinbote's lectures with Nabokov's. During his stay in America, Nabokov taught at Stanford University, Wellesley College, Harvard and Cornell. Posthumously his lecture notes on European and Russian literature were published under the titles *Lectures on Literature* (1980) and *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981). In his famous course on the Masterpieces of European Fiction (Literature 311-312 delivered in 1954 at Cornell University), a prominent place was given to *Ulysses*, which Nabokov considered one of the greatest achievements of the twentieth century. It is quite ironic that Nabokov's fictional counterpart, King Charles/Kinbote, does not teach *Ulysses* but instead, teaches *FW*, as if the latter were more appropriate to a professor who manifests signs of mental disorder.

Undoubtedly, the compelling linguistic experimentations of HCE's Finneganesse prefigure both Kinbote's dense Zemblan "heteroglossia and multi-linguagedness" (Bakhtin 274) with its polysemic blending of Russian, English and other languages and Hazel's peculiar use of "mirror words" or "twisted words," as Shade would have it. For instance, in his comment to line 109 of "Pale Fire," Kinbote states that Shade's word "iridule" means "an iridescent cloudlet, Zemblan *muderperlwelk*." Kinbote's Zemblan analogue is a compound word in which there are allusions to English, Russian and German (just to mention the most apparent languages). Indeed, "*muderperlwelk*" echoes the English expression, "mother of pearl welk" ("welk" being a particular kind of mollusk or shell), the Russian "perlmutr," and the German "perlmutter." Moreover, "welk" in German brings to mind both "welken," which means "withered" and "wolke," which means "cloud." Each of these references contributes both to the articulation of meaning and to the emergence of a *différance* between Shade's line and Kinbote's Zemblan version. The effect of the endless deferral of meaning, in the passage from one language to another, is even more dramatically intensified by Kinbote's attitude towards Shade's text. Like a virus, he creeps into the wounds of translation and the clefts of language to deconstruct Shade's poetic *imaginaire* and substitute it with

⁵³ This expression refers to "the practice of 'quoting out of context' [...] in which a passage is removed from its surrounding matter in such a way to distort its intended meaning." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallacy_of_quoting_out_of_context> (accessed February 5, 2008). See also Matthew McGlone. "Contextomy: the Art of Quoting Out of Context." *Media, Culture & Society* 27:511-522.

⁵⁴ There are a number of episodes in the novel in which Kinbote argues that his Zembla is the subject-matter of the poem.

his own. The result is the kind of undecidable tension and infinite play of allusions that characterize the language of *FW*.

The analysis of the compound word “muttheringpot” (20.7) can serve both as an example of such a practice and as a meta-reflection on the use of languages in the *Wake*. Joyce employs this expression in the context devoted to cooking and communication. In this case, the very act of speaking/writing is analogous to the preparation of a dish. “Mutther” refers to German “Mutter,” which means both “type mould” and “mother.” It is women, and in particular mothers, who are traditionally associated with food and cooking, as it is to a feminine sphere that the notion of “native language” is metonymically referred in the expressions, “mother language” or “mother tongue.” Furthermore, “muttheringpot” echoes the English “melting pot,” “muttering” and “murmuring” as if communication were a long, continuous indistinct sound of blending languages, like the bubbling of a pot on the fire, a hidden message which becomes meaningful only if properly “cooked.” It is a perspective that polyglot Nabokov seems to put into practice quite literally.

As for Hazel’s private idiolect, again *FW* is a point of reference. Wordplays like “top” for “pot” or “redips” for “spider” could be easily added to the Wakean linguistic repertoire. Certainly Joyce’s novel presents an abundant use of mirror words and metathesis.⁵⁵ The acronyms/sigla by which the author refers to his characters, ALP (Anna Livia Plurabelle) and HCE (Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker), are often written in reverse.⁵⁶ For example the first three letters of the term “echoland” (13.5) correspond to the initials HCE in reverse order, thus, “echo-land” can be also read as “HCE’s land,” i.e. Ireland. As Louis Armand has observed, sometimes Joyce uses palindromes (which are a particular kind of mirror words) as in the following question: “And shall not Babel be with Lebab?” (258.11-12). Indeed not only is “Lebab” the reverse of “Babel” but it is also “a palindrome incorporating the Hebrew word for ‘heart’ (*lebhabh*), as well as a derivative of the Irish word *leabhar*, meaning ‘book.’”⁵⁷ It follows that for Joyce, mirror words represent a formidable instrument for increasing the novel’s semantic density. In Nabokov, they are a repetition on a smaller scale of the novel’s main pattern which consists of an infinite play of reflections,

⁵⁵ It is a linguistic process of transposition of sounds or syllables within a word or of words within a sentence (for example, “comfterble” for “comfortable”). See “Wikipedia-Linguistics”. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metathesis_\(linguistics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metathesis_(linguistics))> (accessed October 30, 2008).

⁵⁶ For the use of acronyms in *FW* see Roland McHugh. *The Sigla of Finnegans Wake*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976.

⁵⁷ Louis Armand. “The Art of War: Declarations of the Other.” <http://www.geocities.com/louis_armand/ijht_declarations.html> (accessed October 20, 2008).

reverse images and (a)symmetrical juxtapositions. After all, "Pale Fire" opens with the image of "a waxwing slain/by the false azure in the windowpane" (33).

To conclude, in such a complex hypersemiotic reference system, meaning is turned into the most visible effect of an "ongoing dynamism." Through the evocativeness of certain semantic nodes, as in the case of the passages on which I have just commented, the reader is brought to develop his own reference pattern according to his knowledge, competence and experience. Echoicity is what makes the reader move from node to node (from note to note), if he decides to follow not the linear arrangement of the text, but Kinbote's stream of (un)consciousness. Philosophical concepts, folk-stories, historical events, geographical areas, trivialities and TV programs reverberate first into Kinbote's mind and then into his notes⁵⁸ that the reader is asked to decode. *PF* presents a *modus legendi* very close to that concocted by Joyce for *FW*. Its protean structure is based on the idea that it is the reader who decides what it is important and what is not, what should be at the center and what should be at the margin, which narrative thread should be followed and which one should be abandoned.

READERS AND RAIDERS

Close to the very end of his Commentary, Kinbote, digressing as usual from the subject of his criticism, meditates on the very essence of art and on the peculiarities of the artist. Although he does not consider himself a poet or a real artist ("I am a miserable rhymester" 289),⁵⁹ Kinbote confesses that there is something he shares with the artist, in fact he "can do what only a true artist can do," that is:

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 (289 Italics mine).

According to his considerations on art, Kinbote's "true artist" should be able to romantically elevate himself above the triviality of everyday life ("the habit of things"), because he is endowed with an

⁵⁸ Besides, *PF*, at its most, is an echo of Nabokov's annotated English translation of *Eugene Onegin*, Alexander Pushkin's romantic novel in verse form, that Nabokov had just finished working on when he started writing the novel.

⁵⁹ According to Kinbote's romantic vision of art, the real artist is the poet (this would explain his great admiration for John Shade), who, more than a prose writer, is endowed with true creative essence.

inward eye (“pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation”) that allows him to see the “architecture of the world,” and its logical, meaningful and ideal pattern.

In this respect, a poem – as the poet’s highest expression – should be a repetition on a lower scale of such a carefully organized structure. This concept has been expressed by Kinbote from the start, when in the Forward, in order to justify the existence of a *mysterious* “missing line” in John Shade’s unfinished poem, he feels the need to “complete the symmetry of the structure” (15). Kinbote obstinately insists that Shade’s poem is the result of a “harmonic balance” (15), of a “beautifully accurate” (14) work. He overtly criticizes those “professed Shadeans” (14) who affirm that the poem “consists of disjointed drafts none of which yields a definite text” (14), unable to see “the limpid depths under its confused surface” (14).

It is quite meaningful that Kinbote eventually admits some confusion in Shade’s poem, attributing to the reader (and so in a certain sense, to himself, the most accredited reader, in his role of commentator) the gift of “seeing through” such a blurred surface, and of discovering the signified through the signifier. Thus the artist might be endowed with a special sight that makes him *see* the hidden connections among things (“the web of the world”), but it is the reader who significantly arranges these connections. It is the reader who gives meaning to the author’s signs and symbols, producing a text.

Nabokov removes the differences between producer and consumer, the body of the text and its marginalia. More than just complementary figures, author and reader establish an interplay that sets the machine “Pale Fire” in motion.

Such a transformation implies also a reconfiguration of the text which, in Barthes’ terms, from readerly becomes writerly.⁶⁰ The writerly text refuses the narrative logic of the readerly text and presents the reader with a proliferation of meanings, which cannot be interrupted. It therefore forces the reader into an active, ongoing production of meaning. Moreover, the writerly text, in turning the reader into a writer, resists the commodification of literature:

Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text (Barthes 4).

⁶⁰ See Roland Barthes. *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

For its “integral ambiguity” (to use Umberto Eco’s expression in *The Open Work*), *FW* can certainly be considered an *oeuvre scriptible* at its extreme, where the reader’s operativeness is truly determining:

Qui quae quot at Quinnigan’s Quake! Stump! His producers are they not his consumers? Your exagmination round his factification for incamination of a warping process. Declaim! (496.36-497.03).

The above quotation refers to the already mentioned collection of critical essays on the *Wake* called *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. The crucial question, “His producers are they not his consumers?” perfectly exemplifies Barthes’ observation about the reader who is no longer a consumer, but rather, is a producer of the work.

In the “artful disorder” (*FW* 126.9) of the text, as we have seen in *PF*, the poet’s task becomes crucial for a complete understanding of the author and reader’s roles:

The prouts who will invent a writing there ultimately is the poeta, still more learned, who discovered the raiding there originally. That’s the point of eschatology our book of kills reaches for now in so and so many counterpoint words (482.31).

The poet (*poeta*) is presented here as the inventor of writing and the discoverer of “raiding.” However, the “harmonic correspondence” between writing and reading is compromised by the pun on “reading” which, in becoming “raiding,” phonetically incorporates the very act of writing as well. “Raiding” is something more than just “looking at and understanding the meaning of written or printed words and symbols” (OED), it is also a “raid,” “a violent entering a place to steal from it” (OED). Thus, Joyce seems to suggest that the act of reading implies a violence, an effraction. The reader must fight the writer’s resistance,⁶¹ even though his ultimate, desperate attempt to maintain his authority dramatically ends with a murder. It is not by chance that, in this context, *The Book of Kells* becomes *The Book of Kills*. Later in the chapter, when Yawn is urged by the four old men Mamalujo to recount the epic struggle of father and son, he confesses: “The author, in fact, was mardred.” *Mardred* refers to both “murder” and “mother” via the Italian “madre.” The combination murder/mother is quite remarkable: in a single compound word the author is deprived of his most fertile, creative and thus feminine qualities that can be compared to a woman’s ability to become a

⁶¹ In this regard, Stephen Heath speaks of an “ambiviolence” in the reader and writer relationship (“Ambiviolences: Notes for Reading Joyce.” 31-68).

mother. In other words, in order to signify the text, the reader has to metaphorically kill his father/author (or he is allowed by the author to commit this consensual murder/suicide), overcoming his literary Oedipus complex or, as Joyce would have it, his “writer complexus” (114.33).

Finally, even in this aspect of the author and reader relationship, Joyce seems to be evoked in *PF* in one of the most emblematic declarations, uttered by Kinbote, that closes the Forward and literally opens the novel:

To this statement my dear poet would probably have not subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word (29).

Like the Joycean consumers who turn into producers (i.e. authors), Kinbote’s ideal commentator, in having the last word, appropriates Shade’s prerogatives as a poet, and turns into an author. Eventually, as I have noticed, Shade dies a violent death and Kinbote commits suicide. It is we then, the ultimate commentators, who *do have* the “last” word; even on Kinbote, who, as the reader of “Pale Fire” and the author of its Commentary, wrongly believes that he can develop a totalizing hermeneutics of Shade’s poem (as the Zemblan theme may be), and transform it into his own text. His limited and egocentric perspective prevents him from considering that, as Joyce has taught us, writing is “a sequentiality of improbable possibles” where “the possible was the improbable and the improbable the inevitable” (110.11-12).

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