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PALE FIRE AND OLD NORSE LITERATURE

Oh there were many such instances. In a skit performed by a group of drama students I was pictured as a pompous woman hater with a German accent, constantly quoting Housman and nibbling at raw carrots; and a week before Shade's death, a certain ferocious lady at whose club I had refused to speak on the subject of "The Hally Vally" (as she put it, confusing Odin's Hall with the title of the Finnish epic), said to me in a middle of a grocery store, "You are a remarkably disagreeable person, I fail to see how John and Sybil can stand you," and exasperated by my polite smile, she added: "What's more, you are insane."¹

Kinbote, the principal narrator of *Pale Fire*, states that he teaches Zemblan literature at Wordsmith College, New Wye, Appalachia.² The veracity of this claim depends, of course, on Zembla existing in the 'real world' of *Pale Fire*. Kinbote certainly makes clear that he neither belongs to John Shade's English³ nor Pnin's Russian department.⁴ On the other hand the club-lady's request that Kinbote lecture on Norse mythology suggests either the departments of Germanic or Nordic studies as his academic home,⁵ an impression that is fortified by his frequenting the Icelandic section of the college

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire. With and Introductory Essay by Mary McCarthy* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, line 627.

³ Kinbote reports that members of the English Department considered him unfit to edit *Pale Fire* because, among other things, he belonged to another department. *Ibid.*, lines, 376-377.

⁴ "Speaking of the Head of the bloated Russian Department, Prof. Pnin, a regular martinet in regard to his underlings (happily, Prof. Botkin, who taught in another department, was not subordinated to that grotesque 'perfectionist')... ." *Ibid.*, line, p. 172. I assume here that Botkin is Kinbote's real identity.

⁵ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire. The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 90-93.

library.⁶ One possibility is that in his state of advanced mania, Kinbote has conflated his every-day university duties with the fantasy that shall be referred to as the ‘Zemblan narrative’.

The Zembla narrative, which covers nearly half the prose-part of *Pale Fire*, presents scenes from the life of Crown Prince Charles before his coronation in 1936 as king of Zembla, and after the revolution of 1958 which leads to his overthrow and imprisonment. Charles escapes through a secret tunnel and treks over the mountainous Zemblan peninsula, and boards a motorboat to make his get-away from the northern kingdom. After a short stay in Europe, Charles is parachuted into the United States where he assumes a lectureship at Wordsmith College under the alias of Kinbote. The last part of the Zembla narrative relates the story of Gradus, an assassin sent by the revolutionary regime to kill the exiled king.

Pale Fire concludes with the last entry in the Index: ‘Zembla, a distant northern land’, an entry that Kinbote seemingly leaves unfinished. The kingdom is located somewhere in the vicinity of Scandinavia, with a nod towards the Baltic region, and its dominant language is the West-Germanic (but Russian influenced) Zemblan.⁷ The country is a curious blend of the familiar and the odd, a kind of Ruritanian looking-glass land. As Kinbote explains, ‘the name Zembla is not a corruption of the Russian *zemlya* but of Semberland a land of reflection of ‘resemblers’⁸. This Zembla narrative is essentially parasitic in nature, drawing as it does on Kinbote’s (or Botkin’s) everyday experience in New Wye, and his broad knowledge of Western (and especially English) literature.

Considerable attention has been paid to the covert and direct allusions and references in the Zembla narrative to the works of (to name but few) of Walter Scott, Goethe, Lewis Carroll, and, most significantly, Shakespeare.⁹ Old Norse references and allusions have, however, received less rigorous examination than they deserve.¹⁰ This essay studies the use

⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, line 949, p. 221. It is worth remembering that Cornell University Library, where Nabokov worked on both his literary and scholarly works, hosts the largest Old Norse and Icelandic collection in the Western Hemisphere (the Fiske Icelandic Collection).

⁷ John R. Krueger, “Nabokov’s Zemblan: A Constructed Language of Fiction,” *Linguistics* 31:5 (1967), pp. 44-49. Ronald E. Peterson, “Zemblan: Nabokov’s Phony Scandinavian Language,” *Vladimir Nabokov Research News* 12 (1984), 29-37.

⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, line 894, p. 208.

⁹ See, for instance, Gerard de Vries, “Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and the Romantic Movement (with special reference to Brocken, Scott and Goethe),” *Zembla* 2/12/8. For Shakespeare in *Pale Fire* see Samuel Schuman, *Nabokov’s Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury: London, 2014), pp. 85-105.

¹⁰ One study that attempts to address this topic is Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘Pale Fire’* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). Unfortunately, her study is marred by a tendency to postulate far-fetched connections with Old Norse literature while largely ignoring more obvious associations. Further, the study treats the Old Norse in a distinctly cavalier manner and it is not always clear she has actually read the works she refers to. For instance, the statements regarding the nature of *Sólarljóð*, ‘The Song of the Sun’, (ibid. p.46) and *Konungs skuggsjá*, are simply misleading (ibid., p. 50). See also: Sara

of Old Norse texts that are explicitly mentioned in *Pale Fire*, namely the so-called *Poetic Edda* and *Konungs skuggsjá* (The ‘Royal Mirror’ or, more accurately, ‘The King’s Mirror’). The intention is neither to contribute to the famously, even notoriously, vexed question of *Pale Fire*’s internal authorship nor to shed light on the work’s underlying metaphysics. Rather, my concern is to highlight how the Old Norse material serves as an active agent in the work’s thematic development rather than merely as a decorative feature.¹¹ My objective, therefore, is to contextualize the Old Norse elements within *Pale Fire* and explore how they link and interact with other apparently unrelated elements, and so add to our understanding of some of the novel’s most important subtexts.¹²

Nabokov refers to Old Norse elements in two earlier works, the short story *Solus Rex* and in *Lolita*. Though not as prominent as the use in *Pale Fire*, in both instances they reveal subtexts that either have not been recognized (*Solus Rex*) or further advance our understanding of ones already identified (*Lolita*). As such they help us to contextualize the Nabokov’s Old Norse material in *Pale Fire* and, accordingly, I have chosen to include an analysis of both in an appendix to this essay.

I

The most overt application of Old Norse Literature in *Pale Fire* feature in Kinbote’s commentary to line 79 (more specifically to the word ‘preterist’):

Written against this in the margins of the draft are two lines of which only the first can be deciphered. It reads:

The evening is the time to praise the day.

I feel sure that my friend was trying to incorporate here something he and Mrs Shade had heard me quote in my lighter-hearted moments, namely a charming quatrain from our Zemblan counterpart of the Elder Edda, in an anonymous English translation (Kirby’s?):

Pankenier Weld, “Nabokov’s Northern Kingdoms: Pseudo-Scandinavian Traces and the Transnational Translation of the Self,” *Scando-Slavica*. 59: 2 (Winter 2013), pp. 185-206.

¹¹ For musical counterpoint as a model for aspects of Nabokov’s style, see Gerard de Vries, “Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, its Structure and the Last Works of J.S. Bach,” *Cynos* 24:1 (2006).

¹² Here I apply the term ‘sub-text’ as discussed and defined in Pekka Tammi, *Russian Subtexts in Nabokov’s Fiction* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1999).

The wise at nightfall praise the day
The wife when she has passed away,
The ice when it is crossed, the bride
When tumbled, and the horse when tried.¹³

Kinbote's comments to line 79 include a modified version of stanza 81 of *Hávamál*, 'The Saying of the High-One', a collection of wisdom poetry attributed to the god Óðinn. *Hávamál* is one of the longer and better known poems in the so-called *Poetic Edda*, a late thirteenth-century compilation of verses on legendary and mythological matters that had been preserved and developed in oral traditions in the West-Norse region for centuries.¹⁴ Kinbote, it should be stressed, states that the stanza does not derive directly from the *Poetic Edda* but rather from a comparable Zemblan work.

In the Index, however, Kinbote explicitly associates the Zemblan stanza with the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*.¹⁵ The following are the principal English translations available to Nabokov at the time of his researching and writing *Pale Fire*:

For these things give thanks at nightfall:
The day gone, a guttered torch,
A sword tested, the troth of a maid,
Ice crossed, ale drunk.¹⁶

Praise day at even, a wife when dead,
a weapon when tried, a maid when married,
ice when 'tis crossed, and ale when 'tis drunk.¹⁷

Give praise to the day at evening, to a woman on her pyre,
To a weapon which is tried, to a maid at wed lock,
To ice when it is crossed, to ale that is drunk.¹⁸

At the eve the day is to be praised,
a woman after she is burnt, a sword after it is proved,
a maid after she is married,

¹³ *Pale Fire*, line 79, p. 90.

¹⁴ For a good introduction and modern translation of the *Poetic Edda* see *The Elder Edda. A Book of Viking Lore*, transl. and edited by Andy Orchard (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), pp. xiv-xxxv.

¹⁵ *Pale Fire*, p. 245.

¹⁶ *The Poetic Edda. Translated with and Introduction and Explanatory Notes* by Lee M. Hollander (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas, 1928), p. 40.

¹⁷ *The Elder or Poetic Edda: Commonly Known as Sæmund's Edda*, translated by Olive Bray (London: Printed for the Viking Club, 1908), p. 83.

¹⁸ *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Henry Adams Bellows (New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1923), p. 45.

ice after it has been passed away, beer after it is drunk.¹⁹

Comparing these with Kinbote's Zemblan stanza, it becomes apparent that Nabokov has excised the reference to the sword and the ale, but added the riding of the horse and somewhat vulgarized the reference to the praising of the maiden.

Kinbote introduces the stanza in a notably nonchalant manner. He claims to have recited the lines to the Shades in a 'light-hearted moment' and he asserts they are 'charming' rather than substantial. This by itself calls for heightened vigilance on the reader's part and, on closer inspection, the stanza does indeed appear to chime with some of *Pale Fire's* principal themes.

The first line – 'The wise at nightfall praise the day' – echoes a section near the conclusion of *Pale Fire*, the poem. In the evening John Shade ruminates in his home-office on the day's work, in the course of which he had almost completed the poem:

I feel I understand / Existence, or at least a minute part / of my existence, only through my art / In terms of combinational delight, / And if my private universe scans right / So does the verse of galaxies divine / which I suspect is an iambic line. / I am reasonably sure that we survive / and that my darling somewhere is alive / As I am reasonably sure that I / shall wake at six tomorrow on July / the twenty-second, nineteen fifty-nine / and that the day will be fine / So this alarm clock let me set myself / Yawn, and put back Shades 'Poems' on the shelf.²⁰

Shade praises the day in which he nearly completes *Pale Fire* in a harmonious state of inspiration, but he also praises the following day when he is killed.

What may have prompted Kinbote to feature a Zemblan version of the *Poetic Edda* in his commentary? Kinbote's statement that he quoted the whole stanza because of Shade's marginalia is false for in this instance, as in the case of other variants, he has manifestly added his own made-up comment which he then presents as the poet's work. In the Index Kinbote owns up to his fakery where he lists the variants that are 'K's contribution' including 'Edda, one line, Kinbote's contribution'.²¹

That he claims there were originally two lines of marginalia 'of which only the first can be deciphered', should draw our attention to the quatrain's opening. Its significance becomes apparent when it is recognised as a secondary allusion, namely to Coleridge's translation of Schiller's play *Wallensteins Tod* which, for a good reason, has been identified

¹⁹ *The Elder Eddas of Saemund Sigfusson* [trans. by Benjamin Thorpe] and *the Younger Eddas of Snorre Sturleson* [transl. I.A. Blackwell] (London/Stockholm/Copenhagen/New York: Norroena Society, 1906), p. 38.

²⁰ *Pale Fire*, lines 971-984, p. 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

as the closest parallel in the world literary canon to the utterance in *Hávamál* stanza 81.²² In the fourth act *Wallenstein*, a general in the Imperial army during the Thirty Years War, has seen his plan (to switch sides and join the Protestant forces) falter, and consequently his position has become precarious. *Wallenstein* nonetheless envisages a change in his fortune that will bring back his days of glory. At this point, his second in command utters the following warning:

And yet remember I the good old proverb,
“Let the night come before we praise the day.”
I would be slow from long-continued fortune
To gather hope: for hope is the companion
Given to the unfortunate by pitying heaven.²³

Before the day’s end *Wallenstein* is assassinated by his own officers. Nabokov’s familiarity with Schiller’s work is evident from his work on *Eugene Onegin*, indeed it has been postulated that Kinbote’s commentary includes an allusion to Coleridge’s translation of *Wallensteins Todt*.²⁴ The secondary association with this source certainly shifts the tone of Kinbote’s Eddic stanza from the carefree to the ominous as it echoes John Shade’s looming murder. Kinbote, it seems, chooses the stanza from *Hávamál* in order to elevate his own role in prompting Shade’s conclusion to the poem, that is by praising the passing day as well as the following day.

Further, by opting for this particular stanza from the *Poetic Edda* (albeit in a modified form) Kinbote echoes Hazel’s death as related in John Shade’s poem or, alternatively, Shade has unconsciously assimilated his friend’s Eddaic material into his account of her demise. The third line of the *Zemblan* quatrain advises that one should only praise the ice ‘when the ice is crossed’, words which recall Hazel’s death-scene at the end of Canto 2. Note, in particular, the repetition of the word ‘cross’:

People have thought she tried to cross the lake
At Lochan Neck where zesty skaters crossed

²² Archer Taylor, “In the Evening Praise the Day,” *Modern Language Notes* 36:2 (1921), pp. 115-118.

²³ *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Poetical Works III. Plays: Part I*, ed. by J.C.C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 895.

²⁴ See the comments by Matthew Roth on Nabokv-L Archives (2 May, 2007) on the correspondence between lines 433-434 in Kinbote’s commentary with the lines in Coleridge’s translation.

From Exe to Wye on days of special frost.
Others supposed she might have lost her way
By turning left from Bridgeroad; and some say
She took her poor young life. I know. You know.
It was a night of thaw, a night of blow...²⁵

The correspondence between the Eddic source and Shade's poem appears even more pronounced when we consider that *Hávamál* stanza 83 advises that ice should be traversed on skates, and that stanza 86 warns against the perils of newly frosted ice.

In Canto two, Shade strongly implies that Hazel committed suicide. He depicts Hazel as a figure of pity who, due to her appearance, was destined to forgo the possibility of romantic love. Shade's poem suggests that, returning home on a night of thaw from a humiliating rejection on a blind date, she threw herself into a half-frozen lake. Kinbote also believes Hazel committed suicide, which is hardly surprising considering his own suicidal thoughts (which he apparently acts upon before completing the entry to Zembla in the Index).²⁶ Not many commentators have questioned Shade's version of events.²⁷ But as in the case of Hamlet's Ophelia, which Shade explicitly associates with his daughter,²⁸ no firm conclusion can be reached. Kinbote's choice of stanza from *Hávamál* and indeed his reference to two wintry accidents in the Index seem to indicate his unconscious doubt on this subject.²⁹

Thus there is thematic correspondence between the first and second line in the stanza from the 'Zemblan Edda' as both allude to fatal incidents, those that befell Hazel and her

²⁵ *Pale Fire*, lines 493-496, p. 43.

²⁶ Most notably in his commentary to lines 47-48, pp. 70-78.

²⁷ See, however, Eric S. Petrie, "Moonrise Over the Moor: Hazel's Death in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Online Journal* 7 (2013), pp. 1-24.

²⁸ *Pale Fire*, line 488. Kinbote himself, perhaps inadvertently, leaves open the possibility that Hazel's death was accidental for in his long rumination on the most convenient way to commit suicide, he notes that some claim 'ladies should either swallow a lethal doze or drown with clumsy Ophelia'. *Pale Fire*, p. 175. Ophelia either committed suicide or she was clumsy and fell into the river as the willow-tree branch broke under her weight; it is difficult to envisage both possibilities being simultaneously true. It is worth noting that whereas John Shade indicates (but never explicitly so) Hazel's death as suicide, Gertrude presents Ophelia's drowning as an accident.

²⁹ In the third last entry of the index reads 'Yaruga, Queen, reigned 1799-1800, sister of Uran, drowned in an ice-hole with her Russian lover during traditional New Year festivities'. *Ibid.*, p. 246. Pekka Tammi notes the correspondence between this accident and Haze's drowning. Pekka Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Approach*. Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, ser .B, vol. 23, (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1985), p. 212. The second is the reference to Oleg, King Charles's childhood friend, who dies in an otherwise unexplained toboggan accident. *Ibid.*, p. 106, p. 243.

father. The day should be praised when we have negotiated its dangers, while the ice should be praised when it has been crossed.

The concluding line and a half in the Zemblan stanza: ‘the wife when tumbled and the horse when tried’, echoes a central theme in the Zemblan narrative that centers on the king’s rejection of women. Charles II is gay, and, in Zembla homosexual activity is normal among upper-class males. The conundrum is that the king is expected to fulfill his royal duty and produce an heir which, of course, he is both unwilling and unable to do. The king in fact rejects not one but three women: the peasant girl Garh, Countess Fleur de Fyler and, most importantly, his wife Queen Disa whose life becomes a misery as she is denied a normal relationship with her husband whom she loves deeply. These rejections constitute what has been termed the ‘Women spurned theme’.³⁰

Kinbote’s quotation of a seemingly light-hearted line about only praising a wife when she has been tumbled thus touches on a central thematic strand in the Zemblan narrative. Moreover, the absence of marital tumbling resonates with the second half of the line: ‘and the horse when tried’. The last time the king excuses himself from the conjugal bed by referring to ‘an old riding accident’,³¹ while his unfaithfulness is established ‘beyond any doubt’ by the queen’s discovery of a riding boot in his bed.³² That this correspondence is not coincidental is suggested by the equine reference representing one of Kinbote’s two substantive modifications to 81 *Hávamál* stanza. In this case he has substituted the praising of the ale with the praising of the tried horse.³³ The latter then transmutes into King Charles’s excuse to Disa as he deflects her advances.

One further aspect of Kinbote’s quotation from the Zemblan *Edda* is worth highlighting, namely the reference to ‘Kirby’ as the poem’s possible English translator. The Kirby in question is clearly W.F. Kirby, the well-known lepidopterist and literary scholar. Kirby did not, though, translate the *Poetic Edda*.³⁴ Rather, what prompts Kinbote’s comment is Kirby’s pioneering translation of the Finnish Epic *Kalevala*. Again, we encounter the subtle manner in which Kinbote refracts his real life into the Zemblan narrative. Here, Kinbote transposes the confused request of the club-lady for him to speak on the ‘Hally Vally’, conflating Odin’s hall (Valhalla) with a Finnish epic, into another merging of Norse

³⁰ Brian Boyd, *The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, pp. 149-172.

³¹ *Pale Fire*, lines 433-434, p. 167.

³² *Pale Fire*, lines 433-434, p. 165.

³³ But does, interestingly, echo references to horses in *Hávamál*’s subsequent stanzas.

³⁴ Although one may note in passing that he chose to speak on *The Seeress’ Prophecy* from the *Poetic Edda* for his presidential lecture to the Viking Society for Northern Research (published in 1912). W.F. Kirby, *The Völuspá: The Sibyl’s Lay in the Edda of Sæmund’*, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 8 (1913-14), pp. 44-52.

mythology and *Kalevala*. In Kinbote's mind the translator of the latter in real life metamorphoses into the translator of the former while, similarly, Valhalla/Odin and *Kalevala* again combine in the Zemblan narrative to form Odevalla, 'a fine town north of Onhava'.³⁵

II

The second *Poetic Edda* example in the Zemblan narrative differs from the first in that Kinbote does not explicitly refer to its Old Norse origin, though still the correspondence between his reworking and the original is fairly close. The scene appears at the exiled king's last meeting with Disa, his estranged Queen, at her residence on the Cote d'Azur (in 1958 according to the novel's internal chronology). Charles and Disa, we are told...

talked for a while about nice trivial things, such as the motion picture, based on a Zemblan legend, that Odon hoped to make in Paris or Rome. How would he represent, they wondered, the *narstran*, a hellish hall where the souls of murderers were tortured under a constant drizzle of drake venom coming down from the foggy vault?³⁶

The first element to note here is Kinbote's casual reference to this legend which recalls his low-key introduction to the stanza from the 'Zemblan Edda'. In this passage, however, Kinbote manifestly alludes to stanzas 38-39 of *Völuspá*, *The Seeress' Prophecy*, in which the seeress depicts a nightmarish vision of the world's end:

She saw a hall standing, far from the sun, in Náströnd; its doors are northward turned, venom-drops fall in through its apertures: entwined is that hall with serpents' backs.

She there saw wading the sluggish streams bloodthirsty men and perjurers, and him who the ear beguiles another's wife. There Nidhögg sucks the corpses of the dead; the wolf tears men. Understand ye yet, or what?³⁷

This Old Norse reference is topical in *Pale Fire* on (at least) three levels. First, the punishment allotted to the murderers in *narstran* may prefigure Gradus's punishment for his killing (in his mind) of John Shade, which, in turn, reflects Kinbote's hatred and contempt towards this particular character of his own imagination. Second, the reference aligns with

³⁵ The Odin-Kalevala correspondence with Odevalla is pointed out in Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Approach*, p. 208.

³⁶ *Pale Fire*, line 433-434, p. 169.

³⁷ *The Elder Eddas*, p. 6.

Kinbote's tormented state of mind during his tenancy in Judge Goldsmith's house: 'Solitude is the playfield of Satan. I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress',³⁸ which leads to his insomnia, an 'orgy of spying'³⁹ on the Shades and obsessive thoughts of suicide. This interpretation is especially apposite considering Judge Goldsmith's house: 'an old, dismal, white-and-black, half-timbered house, of the type termed *wodnaggen* in my country, with carved gables, drafty bow windows and a so-called "semi-noble" porch, surmounted by a hideous veranda'.⁴⁰ In *Völuspá* the tortures allotted to murderers take place in the hall located in *Náströnd* (literally: 'corpse-shore') which is 'woven out of serpents' spines'. This reminds one of Judge Goldsmith's abode with its 'carved gables' (the dragons of Norse stave-churches spring to mind here). The name for a house of this kind, '*wodnaggen*', evokes associations of extreme discomfort and madness.⁴¹ Further, the poison dripping down on *narstran's* souls reflects both Kinbote's despair and paranoia about his perceived enemies in New Wye: 'The thick venom of envy began squirting at me as soon as academic suburbia realized that John Shade valued my society above all other people'.⁴² On another occasion he refers to 'journalistic callousness and the venom of vipers'.⁴³ Here, like elsewhere, Kinbote transmutes his every-day life in New Wye into the commentary on Shade's *Pale Fire*.

But the inclusion of this second reference to *Völuspá* can be viewed from another perspective. Earlier, we observed how Kinbote's adding the equine reference to 81 *Hávamál* chimes with the 'Woman spurned' theme. Similarly, the Zemblan version of *Völuspá*, which Disa and Charles attempt to envisage as a scene from Odon's film, subtly differs from its Old Norse exemplar. In *Völuspá* the punishment is allotted to murderers, oath-breakers, and adulterers whereas in the Zemblan legend only murderers are mentioned. Further, the legend has been invested with a Christian tinge in the Zemblan narrative as it depicts *souls* undergoing the torturous ordeal. Here the focus is on the soul's punishment in the afterlife for the sin of murder/suicide.

Shade and Kinbote are both preoccupied with the afterlife. But whereas the former finds glimpses of the hereafter in the combinatory nature of his art the latter is desperate to believe in Divine Providence. Kinbote can almost convince himself that a better place awaits him after death: God, he muses, 'is not despair. He is not terror'.⁴⁴ His suicidal thoughts

³⁸ *Ibid.*, line 62, p. 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 47-48, p. 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 47-48, p. 68.

⁴¹ Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden*, p. 86.

⁴² *Pale Fire*, p. 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, line 1000, p. 223.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

revolve around hastening the advent of this new state of existence although, and here is the crux of the matter, this will entail the cardinal sin of suicide. But behind his façade of certainty Kinbote dreads that the afterlife will bring even greater terrors than the ones he already endures. His faith in Divine Providence clashes with a visceral fear of divine retribution for his earthly sins: “For a Christian, no Beyond is acceptable or imaginable without the participation of God in our eternal destiny, and this in turn implies a condign punishment for every sin, great or small.”⁴⁵ Kinbote’s anguish stems in large measure from his inability to reconcile these essentially contrary thoughts.

Such is the context for Odon’s cinematic rendering of the horrors of *narstran*. The scene, set in Disa’s residence, Villa Disa, which not coincidentally had previously borne the name ‘Villa Paradiso’, is as far from representing ‘nice and pleasant things’ as is possible to imagine in its depiction of never-ending tortures inflicted on murderers. The soul of Kinbote the self-murderer is surely the object of the torments in Odon’s imaginary film, just as in the concluding paragraph to his commentary Kinbote declares “he may join forces with Odon in a new motion picture: Escape from Zembla (ball in the palace, bomb in the palace square).”⁴⁶ Kinbote desperately envisages an immortality of a kind through escaping into, and thus somehow continuing, his Zemblan fantasy under the direction of Odon. But even here Gradus, his eventual assassin and indeed the embodiment of his suicide, will eventually track him down.

Thus Odon – the actor, the producer, the king’s bodyguard – and his projects echo each other within Kinbote’s commentary. Thus we are directed to the third instance in which Odon, appears in the context of a thespian production. This happens at a seminal juncture in the Zemblan narrative, namely as King Charles emerges from the secret tunnel that connects the palace to a green room in Onhava’s theatre. There ‘The Merman’, ‘an old melodrama’, is being staged, and the king’s appearance coincides with the play’s interval. At this point he catches sight of Odon:

He was wearing a velvet jacket with brass buttons, knickerbockers and striped stockings, the Sunday attire of Gutnish fishermen, and his fist still clutched the cardboard knife with which he has just dispatched his sweetheart. ‘Good God,’ he said on seeing the King.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

This, we learn, is the first staging of ‘The Merman’ in Onhava for three decades. The play’s last production had in fact synchronized with Charles’s discovery and exploration of the tunnel in his youth. Then the prince, in the company of Oleg, his friend and early lover, eavesdrops on actors in the green room rehearsing the same scene which, three decades later, Odon has just performed on stage:

Two terrible voices, a man’s and a woman’s, now rising to a passionate pitch, now sinking to raucous undertones, were exchanging insults in Gutnish as spoken by the fisherfolk of Western Zembla. An abominable threat made the woman shriek out in fright. Sudden silence ensued, presently broken by the man’s murmuring some brief phrase of casual approval (‘Perfect, my dear,’ or ‘Couldn’t be better’) that was more eerie than anything that had come before.⁴⁸

From this one concludes that the ‘The Merman’ is a play set among the Gutnish community of West Zembla whose eponymous hero, in his human manifestation, knives his sweetheart to death. From early in Kinbote’s commentary the figure of the merman is closely identified with King Charles:

Incidentally, it is curious to note that a crested bird called in Zemblan *sampel* (‘silktail’), closely resembling a waxwing in shape and shade, is the model of one of the three heraldic creatures (the other two being respectively a reindeer proper and a merman azure, crined on) in the armorial bearings of the Zemblan King, Charles the Beloved <...>.⁴⁹

There is manifestly a thematic thread between the three scenes in which Odon either produces or plays a role. One is his hypothetical cinematic rendering of *Völuspá* stanza 38-39, which expresses Kinbote’s anxiety about his fate in the afterlife. The second, placed at the end of the Commentary, foresees his participation in a future Odon’s movie production that transforms the Zemblan narrative into celluloid art, thus further delaying Kinbote’s seemingly certain fate of suicide. The third, a scene from ‘The Merman’, in which Odon plays the leading role, neither entails posthumous punishment nor an escape from an intolerable present, but rather crystalizes two kindred and ubiquitous themes in *Pale Fire*: metamorphoses and murder/suicide. The concluding part of this section will explore the intricate interweaving of patterns associated with these themes and how they relate to another Old Norse reference.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ *Pale Fire*, lines 1-4, pp. 61-62.

In Old-Norse skaldic poetry a fairly common *kenning* for ‘sword’ is something along the line of ‘icicle of battle’ (*‘jökull böðvar’*), which plays on the similarity between the shape of the weapon and the pointy outline of an icicle. John Shade applies a comparable metaphor in *Pale Fire* as he ruminates on his heightened visual sense:

Whatever in my field of vision dwelt –
An indoor scene, hickory leaves, the svelte
Stiletto of a frozen stillicide –
Was printed on my eyelids’ nether side.⁵⁰

The progression here is fairly straightforward. First, stillicides freeze to form icicles which are likened to stilettos, a word Webster’s defines as “a slender dagger with a blade thick in proportion to its breadth.” Kinbote helpfully (for once) glosses that the archaic word ‘stillicide’ appears in Thomas Hardy’s poem, “Friends Beyond”: “They’ve a way of whispering to me–fellow-wight /who yet abide / in the muted measured note / of a ripple under archways or a lone cave’s stillicide.”

Kinbote cannot resist the temptation of associating Shade’s ‘Stiletto of frozen stillicide’ with the Zemblan narrative: ‘We should also note the cloak-and-dagger hint-glint in the ‘svelte stilettos’ and the shadow of regicide in the rhyme’.⁵¹ This is a quintessential Kinbotian imaginative leap, which neither relates to Shade’s poem nor seemingly his fantastic story. Interestingly, though, if read literally, the ‘cloak and dagger’ reference echoes the scene in which Charles emerges from the secret tunnel and is greeted by Odon who, in the garb of the merman, is ‘clutching a knife’ and then ‘plucks’ two cloaks, one of which he gives to the king (and which he then loses on his mountain-trek).⁵²

This correspondence is likely coincidental, but the metaphoric progression is manifestly intentional, as it expands from Thomas Hardy’s poem, in which the afterlife is linked with icicles. Kinbote then associates John Shade’s likening of icicles to daggers with the act of regicide. The third literary text relevant to this thematic set appears in the Index where the name Botkin (or Bodkin), who, as noted, is likely Kinbote’s real identity in New Wye, is glossed as a ‘Danish stiletto.’ This refers to Hamlet’s soliloquy where the prince ruminates about committing suicide with a ‘bare bodkin,’ which Kinbote also considers for

⁵⁰ *Pale Fire* lines, 33-36, p. 28.

⁵¹ *Pale Fire*, p. 68.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

the same use.⁵³ As mentioned, Kinbote's dread that death (Hamlet's 'undiscovered country' with its many dangers) may even entail greater suffering than he already experiences in his living life, delays his suicide.

The thematic sequence identified here is thus explicitly associated with both murder and suicide: stillicide turns into icicles which transform into daggers and, as such, are the potential instruments that might (in Kinbote's mind) aid the journey into either blissful paradise or hellish *narstran*-like beyond. Botkin/Kinbote of New Wye is identified with daggers/knives and suicide, whereas Charles II of Zembla is associated with the figure of the Merman. The Merman in the Zemblan play is in turn linked with both a knife and a murder.

Where, however, do icicles slot into this thematic complex? The association of icicles with the beyond famously features in one of Nabokov's short story, *The Vane Sisters* written in 1951 (published 1958), where they convey signs from the recently deceased to the main protagonist. More broadly, generally relates to the association of water with the otherworld in Nabokov's fiction.⁵⁴ In *Pale Fire* the qualities that bring icicles to the fore are their very impermanence or, to put it differently, the way this natural feature is in a continuous state of change, of metamorphosis.

A strong indication that Nabokov thought along these lines can be found in a somewhat cryptic comment in his published lecture on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*. Nabokov observes that the name 'Jekyll' derives from the Danish word for icicle, *jokulle*. Leaving aside Nabokov's somewhat suspect etymology, *jokulle* does mean icicle in the 'Danish tongue', though only if the term is understood as the common medieval designation for the Old Norse language rather than modern Danish. Nabokov, however, leaves unexplained why this etymological origin should reveal anything about the main character – or rather one half of the main character – in Stevenson's novella. This mystery is resolved if one consider a principal argument in the lecture, namely that Jekyll is not a purely benign person who stands in complete opposite to his evil counterpart, but rather that he exists in a state of metamorphosis.⁵⁵ This likely explains why Nabokov considered a name evoking an 'icicle' to be appropriate for the character in question. This interpretation receives

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵⁴ See, for example, David S. Rutledge, *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery: The Expression of Metaphysics in His Work* (Jefferson, D.C./London: McFarland & Co, 2011), pp. 90-96.

⁵⁵ 'It follows that Jekyll's transformation implies a concentration of evil that already inhabited him rather than a complete metamorphosis. Jekyll is not pure good, and Hyde (Jekyll's statement to the contrary) is not pure evil, for just as parts of unacceptable Hyde dwell within acceptable Jekyll, so over Hyde hovers a halo of Jekyll, horrified at his worsen half's iniquity. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, introduction by John Updike (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 184.

support elsewhere in the lecture where Nabokov compares Jekyll's state of mind to that of water.⁵⁶ Thus the *Jekyll and Hyde* lecture reveals that Nabokov, some years before the publication of *Pale Fire*, associated 'icicle' with Danish/Old Norse and, further, that he recognized the transformative potential of these elements as forming a larger constellation of interlinking motives.

A crystallization of this thematic complex occurs when King Charles emerges from the secret-tunnel into the green room where he encounters Odon in the role of the merman. The play, as mentioned, is set in a Gutnish-speaking fishing community and features the merman, in a human form, mortally knifing his girlfriend. These elements suffice to establish that the plot of 'The Merman' essentially represents an inversion or reversal of H.C. Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, a story which clearly held a particular fascination for Nabokov considering that it features, in one form or another, in *Speak Memory*, *Lolita* and *Ada*.⁵⁷ In Andersen's story the mermaid, smitten by a handsome prince, seeks out a witch who transforms her into human form. The downside, however, is that the mermaid's legs will feel as though they were knives and, additionally, she is rendered voice-less. The mermaid, mutely enduring her suffering, soon discovers that the prince is intent on marrying an earthly princess while treating her merely as a sisterly associate. The mermaid's sisters offer her a return to her aquatic form with the caveat that in order to regain her former life she must follow the witches' bidding and plunge a knife into the prince's heart. As she stands over the sleeping prince with a knife the mermaid is confronted with two options: murder or suicide. The mermaid chooses the latter option and, as a reward for her selflessness, receives the hope of eternal salvation.

In the Zemblan/Gutnish 'old melodrama' the merman *does* kill his loved one with a knife and, presumably, is punished in the afterlife. Other reversals between the two accounts should be noted. Thus there is an exchanging of genders while the scene in 'The Merman' takes place among the fishermen rather than royalty. Further, the loud exchanges between the two characters prior to the murder, which scare Charles and his friend from exiting the secret

⁵⁶ 'No, he is a composite being, a mixture of good and bad, a preparation consisting of ninety-nine percent solution of Jekyllite and one percent of Hyde (hydatid from the Greek 'water' which in zoology is a tiny pouch within the body of man and other animal...'). *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Emily Collins, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid'," *Nabokov Studies* 9 (2005), pp. 77-100. Lucette in *Ada*, like the Little Mermaid, is spurned by the man she loves and commits suicide, like the mermaid, by throwing herself off a ship. Ada, Van Veen, notes 'is now a mermaid in the groves of Atlantis.' *Nabokov, Ada or, Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 599. See also Elena Sommers, "Nabokov's Mermaid: 'Spring in Fialta'," *Nabokov Studies* 12 (2009/2011), pp. 31-48.

tunnel, contrast with the still serenity of the mermaid's final scene with the prince, for she is, after all, mute.

The *Little Mermaid* includes nearly all of the elements of the thematic complex identified above: a knife, a metamorphosis from a human to aquatic creature, decisions on suicide and murder, in addition to damnation and salvation. These are associated with King Charles's escape from Zembla that heralds the unraveling of Kinbote's/Botkin's Zemblan fantasy which, at least temporarily keeps thoughts of taking his own life at bay, and the seemingly inevitable punishment thereafter. The fading of the Zemblan narrative not only suggests Kinbote's own suicide but the demise of all the characters who inhabit his private, imaginary, universe. Suicide and murder are intrinsically conjoined in Kinbote's mind.⁵⁸ There are the combinations of Icicle-Knife / King Charles-The Merman / Kinbote (Botkin)-Knife) / Merman-Knife, while the over these hover acts of murder and suicide as well as the alternatives of salvation and damnation. There is, however, one combination, namely the direct association of the *merman with icicle*, which is notably absent from this interrelated assembly of motifs.

Apart from the *Poetic Edda*, *Pale Fire* only mentions one other Old Norse text by name. This is *Konungs skuggsjá* ('The King's Mirror'), composed in the West-Norse region around the middle of the thirteenth century. King Charles refers to the work in the context of his incognito lecturing on literature at Onhava University:

Of course, it would have been unseemly for a monarch to appear in the robes of learning at a university lectern and present to rosy youths Finnegans Wake as a monstrous extension of Angus MacDiarmid's 'incoherent transactions' and of Southey's Lingo Grande ('Dear Stumparumper,' etc) or discuss the Zemblan variants, collected by Hodinski, of the Kongsskugg-sio (The Royal Mirror), an anonymous masterpiece of the twelfth century.⁵⁹

We know that Nabokov noted down the existence of *Konungs skuggsjá* in early October of 1957, more specifically three days before he recorded the custom of the inebriated Cedar Waxwing to smash into windowpanes – arguably *Pale Fire*'s central metaphor.⁶⁰ Nabokov may have come across title of this Old Norse work in Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the*

⁵⁸ It worth observing that a picture of the actress Iris Acht (d. 1888) (whose affair King Thurgus the Third explains the existence of the tunnel) hangs over the closet through which Charles enters the tunnel. Similarly, the terminus of the tunnel, the green room in Onhava's theater, had once been Iris' changing room in Onhava's theater where, in a clear echo of the murder in 'The Merman', she was strangled 'by a fellow actor, a jealous young Gothlander...'. However, 'she died officially by her own hand'. *Pale Fire*, p. 237.

⁵⁹ *Pale Fire*, p. 65.

⁶⁰ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 315.

Scottish Border from which, in fact, he also derived other elements for his description of King Charles's escape.⁶¹ Thus it was almost certainly in Walter Scott's work that he encountered Thormodus Torfaeus (Þormóður Torfason), a seventeenth-century Icelandic saga scholar and antiquarian, who in the Zemblan narrative has been transposed into (seemingly) a venerable historian of the kingdom whose spirit King Charles's mother converses with in séance meetings.⁶²

Although Nabokov is unlikely to have read 'The King's Mirror' in its entirety, there are reasons to believe he perused a brief section that tells of the natural and miraculous wonders of Ireland and the North Atlantic.⁶³ This would correspond with Nabokov's other reading into the supernatural in his research for *Pale Fire*, such as 'Elf and Fairy' sections in Scott's *Minstrelsy* (which is the very section that includes the reference to *Konungs skuggsjá*). That Nabokov had sampled the Old Norse work is suggested by the similarity of a named lake mentioned in its only English translation and Lochan Neck in which Hazel Shade drowns. The former, in a footnote, is referred to as Loch n-Echach or Lough Neagh, a lake in Ireland which magically transforms material that is lowered into it.⁶⁴ In isolation, this could be considered coincidental, were it not for Hazel debarking the bus on the fateful night at a place called Lochan Head, which chimes with Lochearnhead in Angus MacDiarmid's *A Description of the Beauties of Edinample and Lochearnhead* (1826). Thus the two place-names most intimately connected with Hazel's suicide (or fatal accident) feature in two works mentioned in connection with King Charles's university teaching. This is possibly a coincidence, but, if so, it is a most extraordinary one.

Nabokov likely followed up the reference from the *Minstrelsy* and read the 'wonder' section of 'King's Mirror' precisely because of the reason Walter Scott refers to it in the Old Norse work in the first place. This he does as he comments on John Leyden's, *The Mermaid*, a poem which John Shade clearly alludes to in *Pale Fire*.⁶⁵ Scott briefly discusses *Konungs skuggsjá* because it incorporates a description, arguably the first since classical times, of mermen who are believed to have lived in the seas off Greenland. Walter Scott is particularly concerned with the shape of these creatures or, more specifically, the shape of their non-

⁶¹ *The Works of Walter Scott, Esq. Vol. III: Containing the Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (London/Edinburgh: Longman [et al.], 1906), p. 336. The references to 'The King's Mirror' in Scott's *Minstrelsy* have been pointed out by Gerard de Vries, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Romantic Movement (with special reference to Brocken, Scott and Goethe)," *Zembla* 2008.

⁶² *Pale Fire*, p. 91. De Vries, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Romantic Movement."

⁶³ *The King's Mirror (Speculum Regale – Konungs skuggsjá)*, translated by Laurence Marcellus Larson (New York: Ulan Press, 1917), pp. 105-144.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶⁵ Gerard de Vries, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Romantic Movement."

human part. He observes that the mermen ‘are said to have the upper parts resembling the human race; but the author, with becoming diffidence, declines to state, positively, whether they are equipped with a dolphin’s tail’.⁶⁶

Although mute on the merman’s dolphinesque features, the ‘King’s Mirror’ does in fact depict the shape of this creature in a vivid manner: ‘[The Merman] appears to have shoulders, neck and head, eyes and mouth, and nose and chin like those of a human being; but above the eyes and eyebrows it looks more like a man with a peaked helmet on his head’.⁶⁷ As to the merman’s lower-half, he explains that less is known apart from the fact that its ‘body apparently grows narrower from the shoulders down, so that the lower down it has been observed, the more slender it has seemed to be’. In order to convey the creature’s shape he author opts for a striking simile: ‘The form of this prodigy has, therefore, looked much like an icicle [Old Norse *jökulle*]’.⁶⁸ Nabokov has already indicated that Kinbote knew *Konungs skuggsjá* well enough to teach the work (or rather its Zemblan variants) and hence, as seen in the case of the *Poetic Edda*, elements of this work are only expected to leave an imprint on the Zemblan narrative. Nabokov, it is documented, was also familiar with the Old Norse word *jökulle*, ‘icicle’, which he associated with metamorphosis and, further, that this natural phenomenon was for him closely affiliated with the afterlife, as evidenced in the *Vane Sisters* and the reference to Hardy’s *Friends Beyond*.

III

The third use of the *Poetic Edda* in *Pale Fire* differs from the previous two examples in which the source has either been explicitly mentioned (81 *Hávamál*) or followed so closely that the origins are fairly transparent (38-39 *Völuspá*). The third example, however, is so skillfully imbedded within interwoven into the Zemblan narrative that it has hitherto escaped scholarly notice. Further this example, unlike the two earlier ones, not only engages with an important theme already identified, ‘The Woman spurned’ theme, but, I shall argue, also plays an important *structural role* in the shaping of the Zemblan material.

During Charles’ trek over the mountainous Zemblan peninsula he receives hospitality from a farmer and his wife:

⁶⁶*The Works of Walter Scott, Esq.* Vol. III, p. 332.

⁶⁷*The King’s Mirror*, p. 135.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 136.

The gnarled farmer and his plump wife who, like personage in an old tedious tale offered the drenched fugitive a welcome shelter, mistook him for an eccentric camper who had got detached from his group. He was allowed to dry himself in a warm kitchen where he was given a fairy-tale meal of bread and cheese, and a bowl of mountain mead.

The exhausted the king falls asleep by the hearth and in the morning the farmer orders his daughter, Garh, to direct the visitor to his escape path. Having reached their destination, Garh offers herself to Charles but he abruptly declines and ‘without turning once, with a springy step, the King started to walk up the turf incline’.⁶⁹

Michael Wood comments on the whole mountain-farm episode that we “have been here before, but not outside literature. Is Kinbote sentimentalizing some sort of reality or is he making the whole thing up?”⁷⁰ Whilst the episode may originate in literature, the question regarding the precise identity of this literature is left unanswered. Kinbote is keen to stress the generic nature of the mountain-farm episode. He presents it as a nondescript fairytale and, in the process, he lulls the reader into a complacent sense of familiarity. But such sleight of hand is a common feature of Nabokov’s style; we have already encountered something comparable in Kinbote’s casual reference to the stanzas from the ‘Zemblan Edda’. Consequently there is reason to suspect that a specific text may underlie Kinbote’s fairytale-like scene of King Charles’s encounter with the farmer and his family.

The text appears to be another poem from the *Poetic Edda* (as it is usually published) entitled *Rígsþula*, ‘The Lay of Rígr,’ which relates the mythic genesis of mankind’s classes: slaves, freemen and rulers.⁷¹ *Rígsþula*, as preserved, divides into three parts and in each one Rígr visits a farmstead and receives hospitality from a couple, a man and his wife, of descending age (commencing with the oldest). While staying at each abode for three nights he leaves behind an offspring from which are formed the three classes. Although in the prose introduction to the poem Rígr is identified as Heimdallr, a god in Norse mythology, his name is rooted in the Irish word for ‘king’ and, as is noted in Lee Hollander’s translation which Nabokov may have consulted, it cognates with the Latin *rex*.⁷² Hollander, whose translation I suspect Nabokov consulted, renders the opening stanzas in the following manner:

⁶⁹ *Pale Fire*, pp. 114-116 (the episode in its entirety).

⁷⁰ Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts. Nabokov and the Risk of Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 179.

⁷¹ Strictly speaking *Rígsþula* does not form a part of the *Poetic Edda* as it does not feature in the so-called *Codex Regius*. However, the poem is always included in scholarly editions and translations of the *Poetic Edda*.

⁷² *The Poetic Edda*. Translated with an Introduction and Explanatory Notes by Lee M. Hollander, pp. 106-107.

1. In old times, say they, on earth-paths green
there wended his way a wise god ancient,
rugged and mighty – Rig was he hight.

2. Walked unwearied (in middle ways);
to a dwelling he came, was the door bolted.
In gan he go, on the ground was a fire,
at the hearth, hoary, sate husband and wife –
Ai and Edda, in old headgear.

3. Well knew Rig wisely to counsel;
on middle seat he sate him down,
betwixt the twain of the toft benched him.

4. Then took Edda a thick loaf heavy
of bread hard-baked and full of bran;
a bowl then bore on the board Edda,
filled with the broth of boiled calf-meat.

5. Well knew Rig wisely to counsel;
he rose up thence, ready for sleep;
on middle bedstead his berth he made,
betwixt the twain of the toft laid him.

There are manifestly general similarities between Rígr's encounter with the Edda and Ái and the king's visit to the Zemblan mountain-farm. In both a royal figure, or a god who is closely identified with kingship, travels incognito and is shown hospitality by an elderly peasant couple who offer rustic fare with fire burning in the hearth. In both accounts the traveler is offered sexual favours, the matron of the farmstead in *Rígsþula* and the daughter in

the Zemblan narrative. Hollander explains how in olden times it was customary to offer either the wife or the daughter to an honoured guest.⁷³

But the most telling signal that *Rígsþula* is being reflected or refracted here through Kinbote's mind is the curious reference to the old farmer busying himself with 'unlocking and unbolting two or three doors'. Little notice has been taken of the farmer's strange activity as the fugitive king takes leave of the farmstead. In *Rígsþula*, however, bolted and unbolted doors are of symbolic significance, as they differentiate between the dwellings of the three pairs of husband and wife visited by Rígr:

to a dwelling he came, was the door bolted [first visit].

to a dwelling he came, was the door ajar [second visit].

the door, raised on high, with a ring in the doorpost [third visit].

Thus, the three-fold repetition of the door theme in *Rígsþula*, and in particular the unbolted door of the couple on the lowest social rung, is transposed into the farmer bolting 'two or three doors'. Notable also is that in *Rígsþula* this motif features when Rígr enters the farmstead, whereas in Kinbote's narrative it occurs when the king leaves the dwelling which, as we shall see, is merely one instance of the mirroring effect to the use that permeates the mountain-farm scene.

Otherwise Kinbote applies the theme of three-fold repetition as well as the theme of three nights on a number of occasions in his commentary. While Rígr dwells three days and three nights with the couple who host him, Fleur de Fyler lays siege to Charles's chamber for three nights before his coronation.⁷⁴ Further, Kinbote connects the theme of three nights with the fairytale pattern in the so-called 'Haunted barn' episode in which, for three nights, Hazel Shade stakes out a barn where paranormal activities had been reported. Kinbote comments that 'there are always 'three nights' in fairy tales, and in this sad fairy tale there was a third one too'.⁷⁵

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 107. There are also audible echoes between the *Pale Fire* passage and Hollander's translation. The gnarled hands of the offspring tallies with the gnarled hand and knuckles of the Zemblan farmer. The girl companion of thrall is referred to as a wench, while King Charles twice refers to Garh as a wench. Even Garh's name is reminiscent of the young woman Thir, while the Garhr's unkempt appearance corresponds to the unflattering descriptions of the daughters Thir sires with Thrall. Lastly, the Old Norse poem notes the 'bent down' nose of Thir while Garh, her mirror image in *Pale Fire*, is referred to as 'snub-nosed'.

⁷⁴ *Pale Fire*, line 80, pp. 92-93.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

The triadic structure of the Old Norse poem reflects a central theme in the Zemblan narrative, namely King Charles rejecting the advances of Garh, Fleur de Fyler and Disa. One observes the schematic and, some might even consider, the un-Nabokovian manner which underlines both the physical appearance of the three women and their social class.⁷⁶ Garh is at the bottom of this hierarchy, a blonde ill-kept peasant girl, who is driven by ‘mechanical lust’. Then there is Fleur de Fyler who, although she becomes a countess, occupies a rung between Garh and Disa on the social ladder. Kinbote, in fact, comments that some at court considered Fleur unsuitable for queenship because her grand-father was a fiddler.⁷⁷ Fleur’s seduction attempts are distinguished by orientalized eroticism in stark contrast to the brief and embarrassing episode involving Garh. Finally there is Charles’s queen, Disa, the dark-haired Grand Duchess of Pain and Moan, whose relationship with the king, in spite of its failure in the physical sphere, attains a spiritual depth which the exiled king can only experience in dreams rather than in waking reality.

Alice comments that in the world she has just entered through the looking glass, books ‘are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way’. Similarly, Zembla is a land of resemblances and Zemblan is the ‘language of a mirror’. In *Pale Fire* it is as though *Rígsþula* has been held up to the looking glass like, as mentioned earlier, H.C. Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*. Thus Rígr’s lack of weariness as he enters the first farmstead contrasts with King Charles’s exhaustive state as he seeks safety in the mountain-farm. Similarly, in *Rígsþula* swarthinness characterizes the lowest class, the slaves, whereas blond hair is the hallmark of the nobility, the earls and kings. In the Zemblan narrative, however, Kinbote links Garh’s flaxen hair with her humble origins. He comments that most young women in Zembla are freckled blondes and these he compares unfavourably with Disa who has ‘coal-black hair’ which, he implies, signifies her exalted status and quality of character.⁷⁸ So, Kinbote reverses the colour-scheme which is an obvious thematic pattern in *Rígsþula*.⁷⁹ But viewed from a broader perspective, the easygoing heterosexuality of the Old Norse poem, in which Rígr sires three offsprings, sharply contrasts with King Charles’s failure to perform his

⁷⁶ But see the female triad in *Bend Sinister*. There the three sisters, ‘Mariette, Linda Bachofen, and Doktor Amalia von Wytwyl, embody three different versions of love – one pseudo-seductive, another pseudo-genteel, the third pseudo-compassionate’. Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 99. Each of the three women in *Pale Fire* also expresses a particular quality of love.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁷⁹ In *Laughter in the Dark* (*Kamera Obscura*, 1933) the story of the cruel love triangle between Albinus, Margot and Axel Rex essentially represents an inversion of the love triangle between Othello, Desdemona and Yago. Further, Nabokov inverts the colour scheme for where as ‘Shakespeare’s hero is a black man, Nabokov’s has a name [Albinus] which suggest a kind of insipid whiteness’. Samuel Schuman, *Nabokov’s Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 33.

royal duty with his queen, and with his barren and troubled relations with the other two women.

King Charles can be seen in yet another sense to reflect his image in *Rígsþula*. On his second visit Rígr sires a boy who is called Karl, while his grandson from the third is named ‘konr’ which Hollander explains in his notes, is cognate with *konungr*, or ‘king’. Thus the native rendering of Charles – Karl – can be read from *Rígsþula* and specifically in connection with the quality he lacks, namely heterosexual fecundity. Just after the most direct allusion to *Rígsþula* – the farmer unlocking and unbolting two or three doors – the king observes a picture of the royal couple that clearly evokes his spurning of Disa’s sexual attention. Here, uniquely in the Zemblan narrative, the king is directly referred to by the Germanic or rustic form of his name, ‘Karl’, which in turn is associated with the absence of heterosexual prowess: the picture shows Disa as an ‘angry young virgin with coal-black hair and ice-blue eyes’.

In spite of the somewhat artificial order of the three females in ‘Women spurned’ theme, Kinbote still struggles to keep their identity apart. It is as though they blend with each other and even with characters outside the Zemblan fantasy.⁸⁰ In this sense, I suggest, the ‘Lay of Rígr’ is not only mirrored in the mountain-farm scene, but also serves as a kind narrative triptych which aids Kinbote to individualize the females in his story.

The question remains how Kinbote, and by implication Nabokov, conceived the idea of entwining *Rígsþula* with central themes from the Zemblan narrative. As seen, Nabokov was familiar with the best-known poems of the *Poetic Edda*, *Hávamál*, ‘The Saying of the High-One’, and *Völuspá*, ‘The Seeress’ Prophecy’, for he has Kinbote quote the former and retell an episode from the latter. Still, one wonders how the less familiar *Rígsþula* came to Nabokov’s attention. Now, Kinbote shows a particular interest in personal names; indeed his sole mentioned scholarly publication is a monograph on surnames. But, as has been shown, Kinbote’s knowledge of this subject is heavily reliant on Sabine Baring-Gould’s impressive but frequently unintentionally funny (in a Kinbotian kind of way) *Family Names and Their Stories*.⁸¹ Indeed Kinbote pedantically explains the provenance of Zemblan personal names by consulting Baring-Gould’s text, although he never directly divulges his source. So Kinbote

⁸⁰ ‘But she [Disa] moved, and he saw it was not she at all but only poor Fleur de Fyler collecting the documents left among the tea things. See note to line 80.0’. *Ibid.*, p. 170. ‘Garh, a farmer’s daughter, 149, 433. Also a rosy-cheeked goose-boy found in a country lane, north of Troth, in 1935, only now distinctly recalled by the writer’. *Ibid.*, p. 239. See also the scene of Fleur de Fyler in front of Sudarg of Bokay’s fantastic cheval glass ‘a triptych of bottomless light’ in which she merges into an infinite progression of girls some of whom break ‘into individual nymphs’. *Ibid.*, p. 93

⁸¹ Sabine Baring-Gould, *Family Names and Their Story* (London: Seeley & Co., 1910).

pilfers from this work names for his characters in the Zemblan narrative. One is a certain Harfar Schalksbore, a particularly raucous friend of the king, whose family name is purloined from Baring-Gould's claim that 'Shakespeare' derives from the Old Norse 'Schalksbær' ('knaves-farm'). The Christian name, however, appears in a footnote on the very same page which features a reference to the 'Old-Norse saga of King Harald Harfar of Norway'.⁸² From 'Schalksbær', one also observes, Nabokov derives *boer*, the Zemblan word for 'mountain-farm', the type of dwelling inhabited by the old couple and their daughter.

Seeking what Baring-Gould has to say about the history of 'Charles', as Kinbote (and indeed Nabokov) would certainly have done, brings us to page fifty four which lists the derivate forms of this name. The second entry directs us to page one hundred and seventeen which relates its origins, and here *Rígsþula* is offered as the primary example:

The constellation of the Great Bear is commonly called Charles's Wain, and in this instance Charles stands for Ceorl. In the Edda of Sæmund the churl is represented by no means as a villain or thrall, but as a freeman. In Anglo-Saxon the ceorl is almost, if not quite, indistinguishable from the serf. In the Edda the curl is represented, indeed, as the offspring of different parents from the noble and from the thrall, but he occupies the position of free bonder. *Carl* signified a man generally. Charles is rarely found as a Christian name in England before the time of Charles I.⁸³

Sabine Baring-Gould marshals *Rígsþula* in support of the name Charles having both a common and a royal derivation. Indeed for a regal connection he highlights King Charles I, the father of Charles II whose escape to Boscobel in 1651 echoes his namesake's flight from Zembla.⁸⁴ Further, in a footnote to this passage Baring-Gould refers again to *Rígsþula* and presents a brief re-cap of its contents. All things considered, it is easy to envisage how this poem from the *Poetic Edda* could have caught Nabokov's intention and was from there sifted, through Kinbote's peculiar mind, into the Zemblan narrative.

* * *

There is precious little that is unique about Nabokov's use of Old Norse material in *Pale Fire* compared with his application of other literary references and allusion. What catches the eye, however, is the variety in which he identifies and integrates the material into a broader thematic mosaic. In *Pale Fire* passages from the *Poetic Edda* are integrated into

⁸² Matthew Roth, "A Source of Character Names in *Pale Fire*," *The Nabokovian* 59 (2007), pp. 5-9.

⁸³ Baring-Gould, *Family-Names and Their Story*, p. 117.

⁸⁴ Meyer, *Find What the Sailor has Hidden*, pp. 99-108.

major themes, such as Kinbote's thoughts of suicide and posthumous fate, his dealings with women, as well as the deaths of Shade and his daughter. I have also argued that the Eddic *Rígsþula*, 'The Lay of Rígr', with its heavily stylized three-fold design, plays a notable role in shaping the Zemblan narrative. As such, this use foreshadows Nabokov's use in *Ada* of another, more celebrated, triptych medieval work as a structural inspiration: Hieronymus Bosch's 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' with its depiction of Paradise, earthly life, and Hell.⁸⁵

Appendix:

TWO OLD NORSE REFERENCES IN NABOKOV'S WORKS PRIOR TO *PALE FIRE*

Solus Rex

The first text to consider is fact generally recognized as a precursor to this novel. In 1939-1940 Nabokov composed two chapters, or fragments, which he intended for a novel entitled *Solus Rex*. Although this project was soon abandoned, the chapters were published in a Russian literary journal and, in the 1970s, these were translated into English under Nabokov's supervision as self-contained short stories entitled *Ultima Thule* and *Solus Rex*.⁸⁶

Both stories feature Nordic or Scandinavian elements. In *Ultima Thule* Sineusov, an artist-engraver, buries his grief following his wife's death in childbirth by illustrating an historical epic which is written by a "strange Swede or Dane – or an Icelander, for all I know." Not being able to read the epic in the original language Sineusov...

managed to understand only that his hero was some Northern king, unhappy and unsociable; that his kingdom, amid the sea mists, on a melancholy and remote island, was plagued by political intrigues of some kind, assassinations, insurrections, and that a white horse which had lost its rider was flying along the misty heath.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Liana Ashenden, "Ada and Bosch," in *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson with an essay by Liana Ashenden (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 145-166. Brian Boyd, "Ada, the Bod and the Garden: or Straw, Fluff, and Peat: Sources and Places in *Ada*," *Nabokov Studies* 9 (2004), pp. 107-113.

⁸⁶ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), pp. 500-545.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

Solus Rex, originally intended as the second chapter in the aborted novel, shows the reader into Sineusov's imaginings of Thule.⁸⁸ The narrative perspective is that of a king (designated as 'K.') who reminisces about his role as a young man in a plot against Thule's crown-prince, Arnulf. The 'K.' of his youth is presented as a somewhat dull and impressionable character who is appalled by the vulgar, debauched and irresponsible prince, and especially by the prospect of his ascension to the throne. 'K.' is recruited into a conspiratorial ring of prominent Thulean citizens which, it can be deduced, ultimately assassinates the crown-prince (though *Solus Rex* breaks off before this is related).

Solus Rex includes Nordic elements reminiscent of *Pale Fire*. There is the synthetic language of Scandinavian-Anglo-Saxon-Slavic origin as well as personal names which recall Germanic rulers of the early Middle Ages (King Adulf, Eadric and Rogfrid).⁸⁹ The dual Germanic-Slavic nature of Thule is prefigured in Sineusov's own name which chimes with that one of the three semi-legendary Norse founders and rulers of Rus', Sineus.⁹⁰ Still, the azure-skied and glittering textures of Zembla starkly contrast with the drab and rain-soaked Thule (where it rains 306 day a year) with its stale air of neglect.

The opening scene in *Solus Rex* is set in royal chambers where, one morning, the king ruminates on his role in the conspiracy against the crown-prince.⁹¹ The Old Norse reference appears as K's. 'konwacher', 'king-waker', enters the room. His name is Frey, the appellation of the Norse god of fertility, who, according to Snorri Sturluson, the thirteenth century Icelandic historian and mythographer, is 'the most glorious of Aesir. He is the ruler of rain and sunshine and thus of the produce of the earth, and it is good to pray for him for prosperity and peace'.⁹² To associate the master of the bed-chamber with the god of fertility may seem highly apposite, though this Freyr scarcely lives up to his name: 'That decrepit, asthmatic *konwacher* invariably emitted in a motion a queer supplementary sound, as if he were in a great hurry, although haste was apparently not in his line, seeing he had not yet got around to dying'.⁹³ The presence of this frail Freyr underlines the peculiarity of the king awakening alone in his chamber. Nabokov explains this anomaly in a brief foreward to the English translation: K's. queen, Belinda, was to be killed in the following chapter 'by a bomb meant

⁸⁸ D. Barton Johnson, "Vladimir Nabokov's *Solus Rex* and the 'Ultima Thule' Theme," in *The Slavic Review* 40:4 (1981), pp. 543-556.

⁸⁹ Though one must agree that in '1939 no character in a novel just happens to be called Adulf'. Michael Maar, *Speak, Nabokov*. Translated by Ross Benjamin (London/New York: Verso, 2009), p. 29.

⁹⁰ Brian Boyd, *The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 519.

⁹¹ It is clear thought that K. remembers this morning at a later date.

⁹² *Snorri Sturluson Edda*. Translated and edited by Anthony Faulkes (London: The Everyman Library, 1995), p. 24.

⁹³ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 525.

for her husband, on the new bridge across the Egel, a few minutes after returning from the Riviera'.⁹⁴ The king's morning rumination thus foreshadows a day of tragedy.

The Old Norse reference chimes with an earlier, what at first may seem as merely a 'mood-setting', passage that enumerates the assorted items found beneath the king's bedroom: 'chicken feathers, broken earthenware, and large, red-cheeked tin cans that had contained 'Pomona', a national brand of preserved fruit.'⁹⁵ Pomona is a Roman sylvan goddess of 'fruits and fruit trees'⁹⁶, and so represents one of Freyr's minor Latinate counterparts.⁹⁷ Thus the opening scene features a less than virile old man who bears the name of the Old Norse god of fertility, presumably a shell of his old former self, and an empty tin named after a Roman goddess of fruitful plenty. Interestingly, some forty years later Nabokov applied a comparable contrasting effect in *The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)* in which the heroin Flora, sharing a name with a Roman fertility goddess, is depicted (in Brian Boyd's words) as a 'sterility goddess'.⁹⁸ In *Solus Rex* the life-sapping, infertile, mood of the opening scene is further amplified by details such as the 'barely blooming honeysuckle' which combine with the king's listless and melancholy mood.

'K.' now recalls his meeting as a student with Prince Adulf who, in the presence of the old king, delivers an impromptu lecture on Thule's history from earliest times.⁹⁹ The thrust of Adulf's argument is that in Thule 'the root of power has always been construed amongst us as having originated in magic'. The prince presupposes a mysterious link between power and the island's dominant vegetation – Thule is mostly covered in heather. In the ancient past, he relates, authority was invested in a priestly caste, the mos-mons, 'the bog people (moss-men)', who worshipped 'luminescent peat, that sort of things'.¹⁰⁰ But the magical quality of Thulean kingship, 'la magie innee et naturelle of our fatherland', did not terminate with the arrival of the 'crazy Roman creed' brought by friars in a skiff that was

⁹⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, translated by Dmitri Nabokov and Simon Karlinsky in collaboration with the author (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), p. 147.

⁹⁵ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 523.

⁹⁶ *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*. An American Dictionary of the English Language, revised by C.A. Goodrich and N. Porter (Albany, NY: Webster, 1911). For other cultural references and allusions contained in personal and place-names (and associated sub—texts) in *Ultima Thule* and *Solus Rex*, see John M. Koppper, "Nabokov's Art of Translation in *Solus Rex*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 33:2 (1989), 255-274.

⁹⁷ It is important to stress that Frey and Pomona both feature in the Russian original.

⁹⁸ Brian Boyd, "A Book Burner Recants. *The Original of Laura*," in Brian Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 394.

⁹⁹ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, pp. 529-530.

¹⁰⁰ The real celebrated 'bog-people', found mummified in peat bogs throughout Northern Europe (especially Denmark), are widely believed to have been ritualistically killed. Thus Nabokov turns these victims into masters who build their power on the very material in which their more unfortunate real life counterparts have been preserved.

‘equipped with a cross instead of a sail’. Rather it was reinvigorated in the times of Rogfrid I, the *Stammvater* of the reigning royal dynasty. During the reign of Rogfrid’s grandson the Danes attempted to place their own candidate on the throne by fomenting a rebellion against the king. But when the Danish army landed in Thule the insurrection was quashed...

because, you see, ‘the ling’" – that is, the heather of the plain across which the turncoat army was to pass to join with the foreign forces – "‘had entwined the stirrups and shins of treachery, thus preventing further advance...’¹⁰¹

The prince sums up his historical sermon by noting that ‘the life of our country, like some amphibian, keeps its head up amid simple Nordic reality, while submerging its belly in fable, in rich, vivifying sorcery’. Arnulf delivers his lesson as his father, the king devours ‘quickly and nimbly’ [...] ‘tiny olive-black plums’. This is another vegetative reference and so is ‘Fig’, the crown-prince’s appellation among the Thuleans (a politer term for his vulgar nickname which evokes the fruit’s shape). The scene thus presents a continuation of the theme of fertility and vegetation which, as observed, suffuses the chapter’s opening episode.

Arnulf’s interpretation of Thule’s past owes an obvious, although to my knowledge yet unobserved, debt to James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* which was published in installments between 1890 and 1915.¹⁰² The evolutionary trajectory of Thulean history follows Frazer’s sectioning of human history into the ‘Age of Magic’, dominated by priest-kings, and the ‘Age of Religion’, which was jointly presided over by Church and Crown and, lastly, the ‘Age of Science’ of enlightened modernity. Frazer postulates that in the earliest phase priest-rulers assumed the role of magicians whose power stemmed from their seeming influence over the fundamentals of human survival, namely the soil’s fecundity. The most enterprising of these priest-magicians monopolized power in the role of kings, one which they then consolidated with organized religion rather than natural magic. Still, the origins of kingship in magical priesthood survived in different guises.

Arnulf simply dresses Thulean history in a *Golden Bough* garb, but with the important caveat that the crown-prince claims royal magic exists, whereas Frazer considered it a deep-rooted deception which the ‘Age of Science’ would eventually eradicate. But Arnulf is not committed in the least to the ideas he expounds. Rather, as ‘K.’ later realizes, his oration is the product of ‘an almost unconscious cunning on the part of the promulgator, who

¹⁰¹ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 530.

¹⁰² For a succinct overview of Frazer’s ideas see Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School. J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York and London: Routledge), pp. 45-66.

undeniably had a special kind of instinct that allowed him to guess the most effective bait for any fresh listener'. At a later meeting 'K.'s' disinterest in his own theory is manifest:

“I've been thinking how much truth there is in what you were saying. Books say nothing about it at all.”

“About what?” asked the prince, laboriously trying to reconstruct which stray theory he had been expounding lately in front of his cousin.

“Oh, you remember! The magical origin of power and the fact –”¹⁰³

'K's.' claim that 'Books say nothing about it at all' raises suspicion that the theory does originate in a book and that Arnulf has frivolously applied it to Thule's history to draw in and dazzle his impressionable relative. As seen, however, Frazerian echoes in *Solus Rex* are not confined to Arnulf's history lecture. Seen from this perspective some of the chapter's more peculiar elements shift into focus. The killing of Arnulf echoes the sacrifice of the king, or rather the sacrifice of the 'king's son', to secure Thule's prosperity. The familiar Frazerian ideas regarding the 'substitute king' and the 'scapegoat' are embedded in the plotter's somewhat farcical attempt to discredit the crown-prince in the eyes of the Thuleans. For this purpose, they recruit a respectable academic who volunteers to shoulder the blame for such debauched crimes as Arnulf is known, or is rumoured, to have committed. The collapse of this conspiracy seemingly leads to the assassination of the crown-prince. Frazerian ideas also imbue the curiously detailed description near the beginning of the chapter on the transformation of Thule's heathered landscape by hydraulic power. As noted, according to Arnulf the heather encapsulates the magical properties of the island that is thus accosted by man's rationality. Along with the king's distaste for the recently built Egel bridge, on which his queen's life will terminate, he expresses his contempt for the 'Age Science' and his instinctive attachment to older manifestations of power and authority.

Nabokov showed, as far as I am aware, no special interest in *The Golden Bough*. But Frazer's work, it hardly needs noting, exerted a profound influence on Western literature in the first half of the twentieth century, and it became especially associated with the modernist camp.¹⁰⁴ Thus T.S. Eliot acknowledged his debt to *The Golden Bough* in his notes on the *The*

¹⁰³ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 532.

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance, John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), especially pp. 233-279 and pp. 381-407.

Waste Land, a poem in which the theme of sterility/fertility plays a significant role.¹⁰⁵ Nabokov's views on Frazer's theories are, however, of scant significance, for the reader is shown the psyche of Sineusov, who creates the world of Thule from his own imagination and learning. In this kingdom the themes of fertility, death and renewal emerge as a reflex to the death of his wife in childbirth; the desolate, infertile, mood of the *Solus Rex* contrasts with its opening line in which Sineusov addresses his dead wife: 'Do you remember the day you and I were lunching (partaking of nourishment) a couple of years before your death?' Nabokov, one should note, later stated that Sineusov had resurrected his wife in Thule through the character of Belinda.¹⁰⁶ The cycle of death and renewal, so central to the overarching concept *The Golden Bough*, is imprinted into the fabric of Nabokov's abortive novel. Thus the allusion to Freyr not only attests to Nabokov's awareness of Old Norse mythology but also serves as a portal, albeit by no means the sole one, to the Frazerian sub-text of *Solus Rex*.

Lolita

Lolita, like *Solus Rex*, includes a single reference to Old Norse matters, indeed also to a figure in Norse mythology. Humbert Humbert, attempting to assuage his loneliness without Lolita, takes to the road with Rita, a woman in her late twenties. Humbert is torn by his desire to find Quilty, and his guilt-ridden memories of Lolita, which his frantic itinerary does little to alleviate. Waking up 'one afternoon' in a hotel, they discover with them in bed a stranger, 'a blond, almost albino, young fellow with white eyelashes and large transparent ears'. On awakening the intruder, whom they discover had emptied five glasses (of medicine, presumably), he proves to be completely amnesiac. Humbert and Rita leave him at a hospital, where, half a year later, he was 'still isolated from his personal past'. Humbert claims that this episode 'started a chain of ideas that resulted in a publication in the *Cantrip Review* of an essay entitled 'Mimir and Memory',¹⁰⁷ which from his precise shows to be a somewhat Bergsonian treatise on the nature of time. Mimir is the giant of Old Norse mythology who

¹⁰⁵ A poem which Nabokov obliquely satirizes in *Pale Fire* by parodying Eliot's pastiche of the opening scene of Pope's *Rape of the Lock* Boyd, *The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, pp. 193-206. On *Pale Fire* and Eliot in general see John Burt Foster, Jr., 'Not T.S. Eliot, But Proust: Revisionary Modernism in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*', *Comparative Literature Studies* 28:1 (1991), pp. 51-67. *Idem*, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 219-232. There is an echo, I would suggest, between the beginning of *Solus Rex* and the opening of Pope's poem. In the latter the Sylphs (lead by Ariel), the classical deities, attend on Belinda and warn her of the impending 'disaster' the day will bring for her, which corresponds to Queen Belinda's death on the day the king wakes in *his* chamber.

¹⁰⁶ *A Russian Beauty*, p. 658

¹⁰⁷ [Vladimir Nabokov] *The Annotated Lolita, edited with a preface, introduction and Notes by Alfred Appel, Jr.* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 270.

guards *Mimisbrunnr*, ‘Mimir’s fountain (or well)’, which, according to the *Prose Edda*, bestows wisdom and knowledge on those who drink from it. Inversely, of course, for the transparently-eared interloper the drinking denotes his complete loss of memory and knowledge.

In recognition of the academic excellence of ‘Mimir and Memory’ Humbert is accorded a guest-scholarship in Cantrip College, located some four hundred miles from New York. The strangely unbalanced title of the article appears to be an in-joke on Nabokov’s intended title for *Speak, Memory*, published in 1951, namely *Speak, Mnemosyne*, which his publisher advised him to change “as little old ladies would not want to ask for a book whose title they could not pronounce.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed just prior to Humbert noting the title of the article he comments on the intruder’s amnesia by exclaiming ‘Oh Mnemosyne, sweetest and most mischievous of muses’. Thus Humbert’s paper should properly be called ‘Mimir and Mnemosyne’, referring to the gods of knowledge and memory/time in Norse and Greek mythology respectively. Mnemosyne, like Mimir, is associated with a river or spring, albeit in her case memory and oblivion rather than knowledge.

In *Solus Rex* we have encountered a pairing of comparable mythological figures from different traditions, with Freyr and Pomona representing fertility and fruitfulness respectively. Such doubling also appears elsewhere in *Lolita* in the names of the two dogs owned by Jean, Charlotte’s and Humbert’s neighbor: Cavall and Melampus. These derive from two different literary fields – Arthurian legend and Roman mythology. More pointedly still, both share the same nature of representing the first hound ‘to chase or turn a stag’.¹⁰⁹ Cavall, it should be stressed, is only one of several Arthurian allusions and references in *Lolita*. In fact Humbert’s journey to and from Cantrip College is distinguished by an interweaving of this legendary world and the sole reference to Norse mythology. The thematic pattern which commences with the night intruder continues almost immediately thereafter as Humbert and Rita set out from New York to Cantrip College:

I was called from New York, where Rita and I were living in little flat with a view of gleaming children taking shower baths far below in a fountainous arbor of Central Park, to Cantrip, four hundred miles away, for one year.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited by Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Brian Boyd, “*Lolita*: What We Know and What We Don’t,” *Cycnos* 24:1 (2008).

¹¹⁰ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 260.

The appearance of a fountain under an arbour so soon right after the appearance of the novel's sole Old Norse reference evokes Mímir's well (or fountain), which is located under the roots of the 'World Tree'. There is likely a pun intended in the somewhat surprising choice of Central Park as Humbert's temporary abode, given that the 'World Tree' is located at the centre of *Miðgarðr* which in, turn, literally means 'central enclosure' or 'central park': this is simple word-play consistent with the exuberant play on place-names in *Lolita*.¹¹¹ The elements in this brief and seemingly throwaway evocation of his New York neighbourhood are children at play, trees and water which, in turn, are associated with memory or knowledge. The notion of enchantment in this section is amplified by the name of the college town to which Humbert has been invited, namely 'Cantrip', a word of Scottish origin denoting magic spell or enchantment which also provides the name for the journal, 'Cantrip Review', in which 'Mimir and Memory' is published. Humbert is under a spell of his memories of Lolita and the knowledge of his crimes. At the same time he is obsessed with hunting down Clare Quilty under whose spell he himself has fallen.

Humbert's brief vision of Central Park is echoed near the end of the novel in celebrated 'epiphany scene' as he stands on a cliff edge above a mining town and hears children at play down below.¹¹² The scene is sufficed with a watery image: '[he] could make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and gray roofs, and the green puffs of trees, and serpentine stream'. Strikingly, he compares the sound of children to 'vapor' three times: their 'melodious unity of sounds rising like 'vapor' while he refers to 'that vapory vibration of sound' and, finally, 'What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air within this vapor of blended voices...'. The episode manifests Humbert's principal idea in 'Mimir and Memory' where knowledge and memory fuse in an epiphany of a kind. But the moral sense of Humbert's 'epiphany' is fatally undermined by the episode's kinship with Humbert's initial view of The Enchanted Hunters, the hotel in which he first rapes Lolita, in which the elements of mist/, vapour/, water/trees are also clearly present: "the travelers became aware of a diamond glow through the mist, then a gleam of lakewater appeared – and there it was, marvelously and inexorably, under spectral trees, at the top of a graveled drive – the pale palace of The Enchanted Hunters."¹¹³

¹¹¹ See, for instance, Monica Manolescu-Oancea, "Inventing and Naming America: Place and Place Names in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*," *European Journal of American Studies* 4: 1 (2009).

¹¹² *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 307.

¹¹³ For the fairytale allusion in this scene, see Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty*," in *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: A Casebook*, ed. by Ellen Pifer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 128-129.

Here the “gleam of lakewater” and the “diamond glow” alliterate on both the linguistic and thematic plane with the “gleaming children” he observed playing in the “fountainous arbor” of Central Park.

In between the two references to Humbert observing or hearing children below in Central Park and the un-named mining town, the fountain-arbour-water-enchancement pattern weaves its way through Humbert’s triangular relations with Lolita and Quilty. On the return journey from Cantrip College, despairing of ever finding his mysterious nemesis, Humbert is impelled to relive his memories with Lolita by staying for a night in The Enchanted Hunters. The hotel is located in Briceland, which, as has been observed, derives its name from Brocéliande, the forest in which Vivian, the “Lady of the Fountain” or the “Lady of the Lake,” entrapped Merlin with her magical spell.

The Arthurian story pattern in question could originate from a number of medieval and modern sources, but Wace, a Norman poet, was first to describe the forest of Brocéliande and its magical fountain in his *Roman de Rou* of ca. 1160 (although he neither mentions Merlin nor Vivian). Wace was also the first to translate Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Merlin material into French. Nabokov pays homage to Wace by naming after him the town in which Humbert and Lolita see *The Enchanted Hunters*, a play written by Quilty and Vivian, his partner. In the town of Wace Lolita “passionately desired to see the Ceremonial Dances marking the seasonal opening of the Magical Cave,”¹¹⁴ but this spectacle has already been performed when they arrive which leads them to attend *The Enchanted Hunters*.

The play’s plot turns out to be a reworking of Vivien’s enchantment of Merlin in the forest of Brocéliande with Lolita performing the central role of “a farmer’s daughter who imagines herself to be a woodland witch, or Diana” who, with the help of a book on hypnotism, plunges a number of lost hunters into various entertaining trances before falling in her turn under the spell of a vagabond poet (Mona Dahl). Although it is uncertain whether Nabokov had any specific medieval Arthurian literature in mind here, the closest parallel appears in the thirteenth-century *Vulgate Merlin* (or the *Prose Merlin*). There Merlin (in disguise) travels to the forest of Diana where he meets a twelve year old Vivien (which is Lolita’s age when Humbert first beholds her) by a fountain (or spring) and proceeds to teach her all his magic. Later, as mentioned, Vivien traps Merlin by casting over him an unbreakable spell in the Forest of Brocéliande.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 210.

¹¹⁵ See, for instance, Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur’s Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 101-102. One may also note here Humbert’s quatrain about the

Lolita's Arthurian subtext is not the subject of this essay, but it is still worth highlighting the way in which the single Old Norse reference, like the one in *Solus Rex*, combines with these and other elements to form motific constellations associated with specific themes.



Enchanted Hunters hotel he composes for Rita: 'Query: / What Indian dyes, Diana, did they dell / endorse to make of Picture Lake a very / blood bath of trees before the blue hotel?'