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**MUSING UPON THE KING'S WRECK:  
T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND*  
IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE***

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'There would be scarcely one masterpiece left untampered with and unchanged from beginning to end if we started to republish a dead author's works in the form we *think* he might have wished them to appear and endure.'

– Nabokov, on the temptation to insert 'draft' material into his translation of *Eugene Onegin*<sup>1</sup>

**A**s the 1980 publication of his *Lectures on Literature* revealed, Vladimir Nabokov was quick to share his admiration for some writers but equally scathing when referring to those he disliked either as artists or as people, and T. S. Eliot was certainly one of the latter group. In a 1978 essay Douglas Fowler remarked upon Nabokov's 'abhorrence' for Eliot's work, a form of disgust which "fascinates us with its venomous energy." (Fowler 44)<sup>2</sup> Referring to his own attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> From *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse by Aleksandr Pushkin. Translated from the Russian with a Commentary by Vladimir Nabokov, in 4 Volumes*, (1964). Volume 1:59.

<sup>2</sup> Fowler suggests two main reasons for Nabokov's loathing of Eliot's work: the taint of anti-Semitism in Eliot's early poetry and criticism, which Nabokov (who had fled pre-war Germany with a Jewish wife) could not abide; and secondly the nature of Eliot's vision of art as something that had to serve a spiritual or social purpose as something profoundly at odds with Nabokov's more playful aestheticism.

re-read Eliot's verse in 1947 Nabokov lamented its "pretentious vulgarity [and] tedious nonsense" (Boyd, *American* 188) and, writing to the *New York Times Book Review* in 1949 he referred to Eliot as a "big fake" (Nabokov, *Letters* 90) and offered to debunk his reputation in print at the first opportunity. A direct assault was not forthcoming, but some of Nabokov's disparagement arguably found expression in his reworking of a form that Eliot had made famous – the long poem with notes and 'commentary' – that came to be called *Pale Fire*, and was published in 1962.

*Pale Fire* the novel is, of course, 'Pale Fire' the poem; John Shade's last work, carefully annotated, explained, and presented by Charles Kinbote, a man who is either the exiled king of Zembla or a deluded visiting professor in the small American college town of New Wye who overstates both his 'friendship' with the deceased poet and his own presence in a poem whose meaning he either fails to recognise or wilfully ignores. The novel is a work obsessed with the search for meaning, built for the most part on a misreading, originating in madness and held together only by its own parody of order and sense. Indeed, whilst the thesis of a 'mad' Kinbote is widely held amongst readers and critics, it does not itself fully resolve the issue of the novel's 'ultimate' meaning, reminding us that the responsibility for any conclusions resides as much with the reader as with the problematic text.<sup>3</sup>

For a novel so preoccupied with unity of composition and meaning, though, it is interesting to note that *Pale Fire* was not itself written in one clean sweep. Like many

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<sup>3</sup> Nabokov's novels have always provided critics with rich veins of material, never more so than in the field of (post)structuralist thinking. See for example David Cowart's *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1993); Maurice Couturier's essay 'The Near-Tyranny of the Author' (published in Julian Connolly, ed. *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), and John Pier's essay 'Between Text and Paratext', in *Style*. 26.1 (Spring 1992) 12-32.

works of art it has its own group of attendant drafts and related fragments. Two of these, later to be entitled ‘Solus Rex’ and ‘Ultima Thule’, date from Nabokov’s life in Europe in 1939.<sup>4</sup> The idea of an exiled monarch’s story being told in a fragmented form is mentioned again in a letter of 24<sup>th</sup> March 1957, but Nabokov’s teaching commitments at Cornell, the controversy surrounding the publication of *Lolita*, and his mammoth new translation and critical edition of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* delayed work on the novel for several years.<sup>5</sup> Not until 1961 was the material worked into the form that we know today, when Nabokov contacted *Esquire* magazine with the following, slightly odd, suggestion:

I do have material for you, and since you are brave you might like to consider it.

It is a narrative poem [...] supposed to be written by an American poet and scholar, one of the characters in my new novel, where it will be reproduced and annotated by a madman (Nabokov, *Letters* 329).

Interestingly, this letter shows that Nabokov was happy for the poem ‘Pale Fire’ to appear independently, with the substance of the then-unfinished novel being glossed in a note appended to its text. *Esquire* declined the poem on the grounds that it did not publish poetry, and when ‘Pale Fire’ appeared before the world it did so as part of *Pale Fire*, a ‘novel’ in which Kinbote’s surreal commentary is inextricably fused with Shade’s

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<sup>4</sup> Nabokov told Alfred Appel in 1967 that both of these works (originally chapters in a Russian language novel started in 1939 and never finished) “belong to the same biological zone” as the fictional Zembla, adding that ‘Solus Rex’ “might have disappointed Kinbote less than Shade’s poem” (Dembo 43). Commenting on both works in 1973 he suggests that a “good reader [...] “will certainly distinguish garbled echoes of this Russian novel of mine in *Bend Sinister* and, especially, *Pale Fire*” (*Collected Stories* 658).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the relationship between *Pale Fire* and Nabokov’s text of *Eugene Onegin* see John O’Lyons’s ‘*Pale Fire* and the Fine Art of Annotation’ in L. S. Dembo (ed.) *Nabokov: The Man and his Work* (1967).

work.<sup>6</sup> In a celebrated early review, Mary McCarthy, likened the novel to "a chess problem, an infernal machine" (McCarthy 71), unravelled some of its complexities, and pronounced it "one of the very great works of art of this century, the modern novel that everyone thought was dead and that was only playing possum" (McCarthy 84).

With Nabokov's comments on Eliot's 'fake' credentials to guide them, scholars have also been happy to read *Pale Fire* (both the poem and the surrounding material) as something of a pastiche of Eliot's poetry, suggesting that in its formal qualities it echoes *Four Quartets* in structure and theme, and also that in the coming together of poem and notes there is an echo in part of *The Waste Land*, another work that has been challenging existing boundaries since its publication in 1922.

The complex history of *The Waste Land* was not clarified until the 1971 publication of the poem's manuscript revealed how Eliot's fragmentary group of poems coalesced, with Ezra Pound's editorial advice, into the work we know today.<sup>7</sup> Eliot told *Paris Review* in 1959 that he believed the original manuscript of the poem (sold to John Quinn in 1922) had been lost and, when pressed as to the nature of the now-absent material, alluded to "a long section about a shipwreck" (the much lengthier draft of 'Death by Water') and "another section which was an imitation *Rape of the Lock*", excised on Pound's advice (Cox & Hinchcliffe 25). Although Nabokov would have been unaware of *The Waste Land*'s genesis (had he even been interested), he may have known

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<sup>6</sup> Like other novels from his 'American' years, Nabokov had written *Pale Fire* on index cards, a method he preferred because it made it easier to insert new material into a novel that was being composed on a piecemeal basis. The manuscript, which was sent to the Library of Congress in December 1961 (divided into three separate packages) was "written in pencil on index cards of which there are about 1075", divided into Foreword, Poem, Commentary, and Index. In case a librarian was unsure as to how these sections fitted together, Nabokov added that "the commentary *is* the novel." (Nabokov, *Letters* 332)

<sup>7</sup> Recently, new light has been shed upon *The Waste Land*'s origins by Lawrence Rainey, in both his annotated text of the poem, complete with Eliot's contemporary prose (2005) and his investigation into the forensics of the poem's composition, *Revisiting The Waste Land*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005) Valerie Eliot's 1971 Facsimile of the Manuscript with Pound's annotations remains, of course, the definitive text.

that, when published in *The Criterion* in October 1922, the poem stood, as Nabokov had intended 'Pale Fire' to stand when he offered it to *Esquire*, wholly without commentary. Only with its publication in book form, by Boni & Liveright in the US later in 1922 and Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press in Britain in 1923, did it gain the associated notes that are now deemed integral to it. Like Nabokov's novel, the poem intrigued reviewers as much as it impressed them, with Edmund Wilson (later a keen correspondent with Nabokov) describing it with some frustration as "a puzzle rather than a poem," that "can possess no higher interest than a full-rigged ship built in a bottle" (Miller 400).

The saga of Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* divides opinion to this day as to whether or not, in purporting to clarify the poem's ambiguities, they complicate it further. Eliot himself told a lecture audience in 1956 that his notes may have "stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources," sending them "on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail" (Eliot, *Frontiers* 110). With the publication of the poem as a book in its own right Eliot felt that extra material was needed to bring the "inconveniently short" work up to an acceptable length.<sup>8</sup> By the time he delivered his lecture 'The Frontiers of Criticism,' however, he saw the Notes as little more than a "remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship" (Eliot, *Frontiers* 109), but whilst he admitted that he had "sometimes thought of getting rid" of them he had to concede that "they can never be unstuck," and were for better or worse integral to the poem.

A novel as ceaselessly inventive as *Pale Fire* can be made to fit almost any critical paradigm, but I believe that its relationship to *The Waste Land* is in fact closer,

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<sup>8</sup> See Pound's letter to Eliot of 24 December 1921, cited in Eliot *Letters* 497.

and considerably more complex, than previous studies have acknowledged.<sup>9</sup> Although it seems to have received nothing more than Nabokov's carefully-directed disdain, *The Waste Land* both provides *Pale Fire* with a model for the format that it so assiduously mocks, and also explores several of the problems that the novel later addresses.

On one level, both works are deeply concerned with the concept of self-consciousness, particularly in its capacity as a contributory factor to a breakdown in human relations that leaves people unable to understand each other. In both works, furthermore, voyeurism becomes an inadequate substitute for genuine engagement. On another level, both works are concerned with the search for a 'meaning' that will bind their material together in a sustaining myth or vision. Throughout *The Waste Land*, and in Shade's poem 'Pale Fire', traces of an absolute reality persist, faintly glimpsed occasionally and sought via the ordered vision of aesthetic creation. Kinbote's commentary on Shade's poem also attempts to locate a sustaining myth, except that in his case it is a far-fetched tale of exiled royalty, with Kinbote at its centre, and all other figures important only in the degree to which they impinge on his deluded consciousness.

Whilst the textual echoes of Eliot's poem within *Pale Fire* have been identified and analysed, it must be added that not all of them can simply be read as instances of parody on Nabokov's part. His use of Eliot's words reveals a degree of indebtedness that exceeds his conscious disavowals of any such relationship and reminds the reader that two very different authors, in texts that are both similar and distinct, may explore the

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<sup>9</sup> In her detailed study of the novel, *Find What the Sailor has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1988) Priscilla Meyer identifies the shared textual material found in both *The Waste Land* and *Pale Fire*, but insists upon a distinction between the 'mythical' and 'disembodied' world of Eliot's poem and the greater reality that Shade's meditation on life and death incorporates. Meyer does not, however, read both works as searches for meaning or aesthetic order, or explore the issues of self-consciousness that both works raise.

pitfalls of self-conscious delusion and suggest means by which fragmented understanding may yet be woven into a cohesive whole. Upon closer examination, then, the echoes of *The Waste Land* in *Pale Fire* make Nabokov's rather dismissive references to Eliot seem oddly out of place. In looking again at the connections between the two works we may see that Eliot's verse, which Nabokov was later to describe as "essentially platitudinous" (*Speak* 251), informs the work on a deeper level than simply that of a model set up to be undermined by the sharp Nabokovian wit.

*SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO WORKS:*

*ISOLATION AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS*

Both *The Waste Land* and *Pale Fire* are concerned with self-consciousness, manifested both in an individual's ability to construct his or her own reality and also to fail to see any correlation between that reality and the lives of those around them. Both works are also concerned with problems of 'connection,' with the failure of characters to ever overcome the bounds of self-consciousness for long enough to find release from their own anguish, enmeshed as they are in their own sense of self to the point at which the wider world becomes 'unreal.'

John Shade's poem 'Pale Fire' is a Wordsworthian meditation on life and a possible 'afterlife,' but in Canto II, his meditations are lent extra, tragic force by the suicide of his sensitive but physically plain daughter Hazel, who chose to drown herself one night after a blind date had come to nothing. Shade is also troubled that he knew so little of his daughter's thoughts or actions on that fateful night or, indeed, at any point in

her short, unhappy life. We learn that in her younger years he "sobbed in the men's room" (38) after seeing his daughter in the role of a bent charwoman in a school pageant while all around her were fairies, but this may be suggestive more of *his* sense of failure than an understanding of Hazel's torment, and it may be argued that it is only via his poem that he truly, retrospectively, understands her.

Similar questions of 'understanding' permeate *The Waste Land*, indebted as it is to Eliot's study of F. H. Bradley's philosophy, and particularly to the concept of the 'finite centre' as a means of understanding human consciousness. In a Bradleyan view, each individual feels his or her own thoughts and sensations acutely, but has no objective way of knowing whether or not these are shared with others, a metaphysics that raises the troubling possibility that what we consider to be our personal consciousness is rather an intricate form of imprisonment, foreclosing real understanding of those around us.

It is actually through Hazel that Eliot's verse enters 'Pale Fire' to a significant degree. Shade recalls one evening when, with each family member sitting in their own room, he overheard his daughter asking her mother for the definition of three words found in Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'Grimpen,' 'Chthonic' (her mis-spelling of Eliot's 'chthonic') and 'Sempiternal.' Shade dismisses the source of these words as "some phoney modern poem" (40) and we may feel that Nabokov is using him to get in a shot at Eliot here.<sup>10</sup> Eliot's importance in this passage, however, may reside not so much in the

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<sup>10</sup> Kinbote tells the reader that "I believe I can guess [...] what poet is meant" but refrains from naming Eliot directly here without concrete proof, adding that "I deplore my friend's vicious thrusts at the most distinguished poets of his day" (154). Given Kinbote's mental instability, however, his defence of Eliot can only possess the same degree of 'reality' as the rest of his comments, and so Nabokov may, paradoxically, be aiming a further thrust at Eliot by insinuating that his poetry should be appreciated by such a man. In a letter to Meyer Abrams from January 1958 Nabokov referred to Eliot as "a minor poet of yesterday" (Nabokov, *Letters* 240) and Hazel Shade's trick of reversing Eliot's initials to make 'toilest' (or toilets) originates in Nabokov's letter to Edmund Wilson of 21<sup>st</sup> November 1948 (Nabokov-Wilson Letters 213).



words as the situation within which they appear, where three people, each in their respective rooms, shout across to each other, seeking meanings for words that are hard to comprehend. Although in Shade's view it does not matter *what* poem was being read that night, and that the importance of the memory to him resides in its image of the three people connected together, he may be deceiving himself as to the nature of this connection, for whilst he supplies his daughter with the meaning of 'sempiternal', he does so via a 'roar' from behind the closed door of his study. This exchange, then, although structured around the vocabulary of the *Four Quartets*, is perhaps more suggestive of the closing section of *The Waste Land*, with 'each in his prison' trying to locate the key that would release both someone else and themselves:

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

(412-13)

Shade never really understood Hazel's loneliness and desperation, and it is only through his poem that he tries to retrospectively gain such an insight. Even in its opening lines, however, the account of her final evening tells us that such knowledge remains largely abstract to him, for after confiding his belief that Hazel may, even her desperation, have "nursed a small mad hope" (40) he completes the rhyming couplet by telling us that her death came around the time when his own book on *Pope* was completed, thus suggesting that, occupied as he was with his own affairs, he failed to fully appreciate Hazel's sadness, and can only mourn his "difficult" and "morose" darling (39) when she is gone.

Faced with such a loss, Shade's poem attempts to trace a purpose in what would otherwise be random so that, rather than look back on the past and blunder through "an infinite maze of hopelessness and remorse" (167), in Kinbote's phrase, he may find a "correlated pattern" that replaces the "flimsy nonsense" others inhabit with a "web of sense" for the discerning beholder (53). Whilst this draws our thoughts most naturally towards Eliot's *Four Quartets*, where the individual is freed from the pain of memory via contact with a transcendent order in which events and relationships that have been only partially understood are subsumed into a higher reality, the suggestion of this release is also present in *The Waste Land's* concluding lines.

Shade moves closer to a release from self-consciousness, ironically, through his toleration of Kinbote's delusions, behaving remarkably politely towards one whom Sybil Shade describes as "an elephantine tick" (138). To be prepared to spend time, even if it is sometimes grudgingly, in such a person's company suggests that Shade has taken a less self-conscious and more open approach to the lives of those woven into the "web of sense" within which he lives. That he and his poem should end up absorbed into another man's obsessive fantasy is a cruel outcome, but it should not conceal from the reader Shade's willingness to engage in another person's world, which the close of *The Waste Land* suggests as a remedy for excessive self-consciousness:

The awful daring of a moment's surrender  
Which an age of prudence can never retract  
By this, and this only, we have existed  
Which is not to be found in our obituaries  
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms.

(403-9)

Such moments of engagement often leave no trace in the wider world, but they redeem the individual from the exclusive torment of his or her own concerns. Although he has guessed Kinbote's delusional 'secret' Shade responds to his invitation for drinks by telling him he will "sample your wine with pleasure" (226), and out of a desire to humour the unstable exile strolls calmly to his fatefully mistaken death, attaining as he does so a release from selfhood which Kinbote manifestly fails to attain. In the conduct of Kinbote, by contrast, self-consciousness is taken to the lengths of psychological excess. Even in his critical re-working of Shade's poem, his unwillingness to entertain any reading other than his own isolates him from the scholarly community, and his readiness to turn another man's loss into a reworking of his own concerns shows his inability to understand anyone other than himself, evident in the callousness with which he dismisses Hazel Shade as a "flabby, feeble, clumsy and solemn girl" (134).

Both *The Waste Land* and *Pale Fire* incorporate instances where voyeurism becomes an inadequate substitute for genuine emotional engagement. *The Waste Land's* characters are frequently seen (or rather spied on) by the wandering presence of Tiresias, a figure who, given the 'gift' of visionary understanding, finds it to be little more than a recipe for boredom because once you have "foresuffered all" there is little left to discover. Describing the union of the typist and the 'young man carbuncular' he tells us that he "perceived the scene, and foretold the rest," having seen a wealth of such

encounters "enacted on this same divan or bed." To such a consciousness nothing is ever emotionally valid.

In place of Tiresias, *Pale Fire* features a man who, concealed by greenery, spies on his 'friend' through lit windows. There are several occasions when Kinbote enters the Shades' world unobserved, from his first sighting of them (they almost run him over by accident) to his final meeting with John in his garden and subsequent invitation for drinks. Like Tiresias, Kinbote is isolated from those around him, physically and emotionally, and cannot adopt an outlook by means of which such a condition may be overcome. Commenting on lines in which Shade expresses his love for his wife, he suggests that it would have been better if the reader had been spared these "embarrassing intimacies" (140), showing as he does his inability to understand that such emotional openness is precisely the source of Shade's strength as a rounded character.

This difference is evident when Kinbote's snooping interrupts Shade in the act of reading Canto II of the poem to his wife. Seeing Sybil Shade "huddle-shaking and blowing her nose" (74), and with John's face all wet, Kinbote fails to see why the cards (playing cards, he assumes) spread on the divan between them could be the cause of such distress. The reader has perhaps by this point deduced that that cards in question are actually the index cards on which Shade has written his poem, and that the couple's distress stems from his having read to his wife the description of their daughter's last night. Compared to this the baldness of Kinbote's footnote in glossing the word 'she' in line 293 of the poem – "Hazel Shade, the poet's daughter, born in 1934, died 1957 (see notes to lines 230 and 347)" (147) – highlights the complete breakdown of any

correlation between his editorial efficiency and the emotional trauma that fuels and finds release in Shade's verse.

In Kinbote's conversations with Shade, which predictably come to revolve around Zemblan material, we may also see a link with the chess-playing woman of *The Waste Land* Part II, peppering the air with questions while her companion sits lost in his own thoughts:

Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.

(112-14)

This woman never *does* know her companion's thoughts because as her questions fall upon him thick and fast she never gives him time to communicate them. She is interested in his thoughts only in so far as they support her constructed and fragile sense of self. In this respect she resembles Kinbote who, forcing the tale of King Charles's exile from Zembla on Shade, adds that "we never discussed [...] any of my personal misfortunes" (24): a line that, in the reader's mind, suggests that Shade was polite enough to humour his neighbour, and that Kinbote, like Humbert Humbert, could only interpret his dealings with others on his own compromised terms.

In both works, then, isolation is a very real problem, whether seen in the multiple isolation of *The Waste Land*, or the breakdown of Shade's relationship with his daughter, or Kinbote's total lack of contact with wider reality. In this regard, both works provide examples of a perceived need to 'construct' the self and buttress it against the threat of

dissolution. Paradoxically, the more the self is 'defined' the further removed from the world it becomes, for only in a willingness to concede that there may be a degree of reality greater than the individual's perception is true interaction between self and world to be found.

*SELF-DEFINITION / SELF-DOUBT*

Acute self-consciousness impels the self to seek confirmation of its perceptions in the wider world in order to obtain proof of its own 'rightness'. For John Shade points of intersection with a greater reality become a route to overcoming self-consciousness because they direct his thoughts to a state into which individual concerns are subsumed. Kinbote, on the other hand, can only project onto the world around him a version of what he keeps within, and as such echoes more strongly the characters of *The Waste Land*, who constantly seek reassurance from those around them, each trapped inside an individual, if well-constructed, hell. Both works illustrate, however, that such construction does not in itself preserve the self in the world but rather removes linkage between self and world, leaving the self secure only the scope of its illusory existence.

We meet the first example of a 'constructed self' early in *The Waste Land* in the form of Marie, the German countess who is at pains to assure us of her 'true' Germanic roots (which are themselves something of an illusion as she comes from Lithuania) and who locates a sense of identity in the memory of past winters holidaying with her cousin, the Archduke.<sup>11</sup> Such issues also come to the fore in the exchange between the chess-

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Rainey translates Marie's line as "I am not a Russian. I come from Lithuania, a real German" (Eliot / Rainey, *Annotated Waste Land* 77).

playing couple of Part II. The woman is in constant need of reassurance and peppers the air with unanswered questions in an attempt to gain from her silent partner the replies that would buttress her own sense of reality:

‘What is that noise?’

The wind under the door.

‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’

Nothing again nothing. [...]

‘What shall I do now? What shall I do?’

(117-120, 131)

The woman needs the man’s replies to set her own troubled mind at rest. When these are not forthcoming (he answers only *within* his own consciousness, and does not actually talk to her) her thoughts become still more disjointed, threatening bizarre action in order to reaffirm her tenuous grip on reality. These lines are echoed in ‘Pale Fire,’ when John and Sibyl Shade, grief-stricken by their daughter’s death, initially try to play down any signs that her spirit may be returning to them:

‘What is that funny creaking – do you hear?’

‘It is the shutter on the stairs, my dear.’

‘If you’re not sleeping, let’s turn on the light.

I hate that wind! Let’s play some chess.’ ‘All right.’

'I'm sure it's not the shutter. There – again.'

'It is a tendril fingering the pane.' [...]

'And now what shall I do? (48)

John Burt Foster describes these lines as "a brief, rather episodic parody" (Foster 65) of *The Waste Land*, but if we read both passages as examples of an individual anxious to have their reality confirmed by another party, reminders of how flimsy our construction of the 'real' may turn out to be, Nabokov's borrowings from Eliot's poem suggest a deeper degree of engagement. At the very least the resonances in the passage cited above make his claim, made in a 1958 letter to Edmund Wilson, that Eliot's verses never lodged in his head, sound rather disingenuous (Nabokov–Wilson, *Letters* 323).

Shade's poem is concerned with the transcendence of self-conscious via reference to a greater reality, but once in the grip of Kinbote's commentary it becomes subject to his editorial delusion. Kinbote needs to locate Zemblan references in the poem because without them the whole edifice of his fantasy becomes null and void. This explains the venom with which Kinbote disparages the 'Appreciation' of Shade published by Professor Hurley, which "contains *not one reference* to the glorious friendship that brightened the last months of John's life" (83) and is therefore an attack on his very existence. To call into question any part of his illusion is to impugn the whole – hence Kinbote's jealously guarding the manuscript of Shade's poem, only promising to hand over the original text once he has safely 'prepared' it. Like 'V', the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1939), Kinbote's editorial activities are neither as altruistic nor as transparent as they initially appear.



Throughout his Commentary Kinbote attempts to locate himself in Shade's poem via oblique and tenuous means, at one point even using the innocuous word 'often' as the starting point for a lengthy passage on his own fear of assassination, but the lengths to which he pursues such connections are suggestive of his need to define himself through them. As Alvin Kernan notes, Kinbote "is trying to get Shade to confirm his identity, to validate the Zemblan reality which is his hope of salvation by making it into a poem" (Bloom 118). We gain an insight into his reasoning on this subject in his words to Shade when the poet has questioned the veracity of the Zemblan material:

'My dear John,' I replied gently and urgently, 'do not worry about trifles. Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff *will* be true, the people *will* come alive. A poet's purified truth can cause no pain, no offense. True art is above false honor.' (170)

In this context, we hear such words only through Kinbote's delusional reality, but whilst they serve to illustrate the importance of self-definition (and the confirmation of that definition by another person) they also testify to the ability of art to make sense of reality. Having located in a draft variant lines from Pope's *Essay on Man* that refer to a world in which a "sot" may be a hero or a "lunatic a king" Kinbote attributes the exclusion of such lines from the final poem to Shade's unwillingness to offend "an authentic king", whose secret he had, by that point, guessed (161). Shade may well have omitted the reference out of a desire not to offend, but it is more likely that it was Kinbote the lunatic who he was anxious to shield from the allusion, not Kinbote the monarch. Such speculations show the extent to which Kinbote is prepared to warp

Shade's reality in order to legitimate his own vision, coupled with his refusal to concede that he lacks relevance to "anything outside the desperate compensations of his own mind" (Boyd, *Magic* 61). It is, as he tells the reader, "evil piffle to assert that he [Gradus] aimed not at me" (231) or to accept that Jack Grey was not an assassin sent from Zembla. The absence of the Zemblan theme would deprive Kinbote of his very reason for living, and Nabokov went on to suggest in an interview with Alfred Appel, that Kinbote actually killed himself when his editorial labours were completed, suggesting that Kinbote's words "my work is finished. My poet is dead" (236) connect his fate inextricably with that of his book's subject and subject matter.<sup>12</sup>

Lecturing on *Don Quixote* at Harvard in 1952, Nabokov described the Don as "a crazy sane man, or an insane one of the verge of sanity; a striped madman, a dark mind with lucid interspaces," a man for whom "reality and illusion are interwoven in the pattern of life" (*DQ Lectures* 17). Kinbote, however, is too far-gone in his delusion to see even a blurring of the distinctions between 'real' and 'invented' reality. Compared to him the Don's madness is largely benevolent, whereas his own insanity is an attempt not just to read his illusions into the world around him but to attempt to re-write that world in order to validate his own perspective. As Michael Seidel points out, "Kinbote has the kind of blindness characteristic of too much vision; he either interprets too much (the Zemblan master key) or too little (stopping the seepages so detrimental to his sanity)" (Seidel 853).

In his Foreword Kinbote even tries to subvert the practice of reading a book sequentially, telling the reader that although his notes follow Shade's poem the reader

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<sup>12</sup> See Alfred Appel Jr, 'An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov' in Dembo (ed.) *Nabokov: The Man and his Work*, p. 29.

would be well advised to read them *first*, then study the poem “with their help” and then read them again, “having done with the poem” (25). Thus his commentary supplants the original text, reading into the “many pithy lines carelessly rejected” (25) by Shade a form of order that admits “not one gappy line, not one doubtful reading” (14). For the reader, however, increasingly aware of how forcibly Kinbote’s fantasy is interwoven with Shade’s poem, this ‘clarity’ seems somewhat questionable, and it may not be coincidence, perhaps, that the majority of the Zemblan theme resides in the poem’s marginalia. It is indeed quite conceivable, given that we are told of Shade’s habit of burning draft material once it was no longer needed, that the drafts and variants produced by Kinbote to substantiate some of his claims may not even be Shade’s work at all. In his note to Line 12, where Shade’s usage of the words ‘crystal land’ is pounced upon by Kinbote as an allusion to Zembla, he proceeds to cite a couplet to reinforce the connection – “Ah, I must not forget to say something / That my friend told me of a certain king” (62) – but immediately adds that such lines come not from the fair copy of the poem but from a “disjointed, half-obliterated draft which I am not sure I have deciphered properly” (62).

Such comments remind the reader of how Kinbote is searching for meaning in Shade’s poem, anxious to find his delusions corroborated. Shade, for his part, is searching for a matrix of meaning within which his life and associated events will make some degree of sense. In *The Waste Land*, characters are aware, sometimes only briefly, of the fragility of their constructed ‘selves’ and troubled by the sense that they are lacking a connection with a greater reality, or higher ‘meaning’. It is this search for meaning that informs the most interesting connections between the *The Waste Land* and *Pale Fire*,

revealing in the end the extent to which Nabokov, as dismissive of its author as he was, may well have found within Eliot's poem a template for the search for meaning he was later to weave into his novel.

*THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: GLIMPSES OF A TRANSCENDENT REALITY*

Within the tradition bequeathed by the Romantic poets, the 'spots of time' that animate Shade's poem are suggestive of a transfigured reality that exceeds that of the individual. Canto I of 'Pale Fire' traces Shade's Wordsworthian search for meaning amidst the experiences of childhood, where the 'child of nature' (both parents having died in his infancy) forges his worldview from his early perceptions of life. These moments of insight in early years often take the form of fits or seizures ("a sudden sunburst in my head") and momentary lapses in consciousness. For a suitably attuned outlook, however they offer glimpses of a world beyond existing reality, points of intersection between the individual and the wider universe that irradiate the present to which the individual returns after being "distributed through space and time" (33). A similar experience lies at the heart of *The Waste Land* Part I, and is arguably, as David Moody notes, "the centre from which the entire poem radiates" (Moody 81), imbued as it is with a trace of mystical, as well as sexual, rapture:

Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

(37-41)

This fusion of emotional and spiritual awakening is phrased in negative terms because they are the only means by which the perceiving consciousness can relate the force of its experience. The man who says these lines has, briefly, glimpsed a higher form of reality, much the same as the young John Shade, whose seizures, leading as they did to a similar suspension of sensory activity, become signposts on the route to infinity that his poem now tries to retrace.

To have experienced and then lost such an insight is a source of pain for the individual. Although a doctor passes Shade's fainting fits off as "mainly growing pains", he adds in his poem that such experiences are not so easily set aside, and his line "the wonder lingers and the shame remains" (33) suggests that normal life is no longer satisfactory in the wake of such a vision. Kinbote sees in these lines evidence only of "a mild form of epilepsy, a derailment of the nerves at the same spot, on the same curve of the tracks, every day, for several weeks" (119). If he could truly appreciate what Shade had glimpsed here, however, he would see 'Pale Fire' as a search to regain the intensity of such early experiences, fuelled by the sense that a greater (or at least more complete) reality is eluding the individual. The death of Hazel, the single most traumatic event related within the poem, thus becomes a focal point that legitimates this quest for a greater, unifying order.

Shade initially subverts suggestions of an afterlife in his description of the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter, whose initials, phonetically, give a far from

convincing 'iph' (if). In his first dealings with the Institute he doubts the validity of its claims, and whilst the residual interest left by his childhood insights into eternity makes him reluctant to dismiss the afterlife altogether in the wake of Hazel's death he expresses his doubt in the ability of the spirit world to return to the material, adding that "I knew there would be nothing: no self-styled / Spirit would touch a keyboard of dry wood / To rap out her pet name" (48). When his childhood insights are themselves replaced with a near-death experience in adulthood, however, his search for meaning returns with renewed vigour. Although the doctor who revives him disputes that Shade was able to hallucinate in his unconscious condition, the poet, like a character in Eliot's verse, keeps "replaying the whole thing" in mind in an attempt to locate meaning in it:

My vision reeked with truth. It had the tone,  
The quiddity and quaintness of its own  
Reality. It *was*.  
(51)

As if to give the lie to Shade's visions, however, his point of contact with an afterlife is initially founded upon error and delusion. Having been gifted with a glimpse of the hereafter illuminated by 'a tall white fountain,' he seizes upon the reported vision of a woman who, in near-death state, recorded a similar vision, only for his enquiries to reveal that she actually encountered a tall white *mountain*, and that what seemed at first to be a bond between their visions of the afterlife is little more than an erroneous illusion. 'Life everlasting,' it would appear, is founded on little more than a misprint (53).

At the point of failure, however, Shade finds renewed belief in the ‘rightness’ of his search for meaning. As Boyd notes, “it is not that deflating recognition [...] but the resolve that follows it, that forms the core and key to the poem” (Boyd, *Magic* 30). The ‘contrapuntal’ theme within which disparate strands are interwoven is not evidence of the lack of order, but rather testimony to the richness and diversity of order around us – not ‘flimsy nonsense’ at all, but the ‘sense’ that makes things cohere. Thus while the disappointment of Canto III ends with Shade’s words to his wife, “I have returned convinced that I can grope / My way to some – to some [...] Faint hope” (53) this tentative affirmation fuels the expansiveness of Canto IV, in which Shade gives free rein to his belief in unifying, if well-concealed order beneath the world as he sees it, ending the poem as he does in a vision within all things occupy an assigned place. Unsure of how to set this down for his reader, he turns to the harmony of poetry to describe such an ordered creation:

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.  
(58)

Within such a formal union (something that Eliot did not explore in depth in *The Waste Land* but which was central to his vision in *Four Quartets*) Shade is able to make sense of his pain and confusion by aligning it with a transcendent reality. This is, in its own way, a variation on the 'guiding myth' of Romantic poetry – the integrity of the individual consciousness and its simultaneous relationship to an Absolute guiding force – and shows that Shade's poem, taken aside from its Commentary, pursues a route to a higher reality similar to that sketched out in *The Waste Land*.

Set against Shade's experience of life and death, Kinbote's delusion seems little more than a form of mania, but in his own way he too is a displaced consciousness insofar as his mental instability functions as a form of 'insight' into a higher, more cohesive, world-view. Kinbote tells the reader that on his first skimmed reading of the Shade's poem, "as a furious young heir through an old deceiver's testament" (232) he felt let down by its exclusion of the thoughts and 'memories' he supplied, and felt it necessary both to attribute this to Sybil Shade's all too effective editorial work and then supply himself the clarifying commentary at any point where a link could (tenuously) be drawn.

In his Foreword Kinbote tells the reader that "I alone am responsible for any mistakes in the commentary" (17), but when he concedes that there has been *one* instance in which he has jumped too hastily to a wrong conclusion, and adds in a note to line 550 of the poem that his earlier desire to see a reference to Zembla in the "crystal land" of line 12 was "distorted and tainted by wishful thinking" (180) he simultaneously singles out his *only* error and stresses the veracity of all his other interpretations, even his assertion that the proposed final line of the poem was actually a reprisal of its opening



one, thereby testifying to his belief that a greater pattern is located behind Shade's poem than even its author understood.

In both *Pale Fire* and *The Waste Land* we find the suggestion of an absolute realm of order and meaning glimpsed briefly, if at all, but whilst notions of a 'guiding myth' are often frustrated and downplayed it does not mean that the search for such a myth has been of little or no use. Rather, in both works there is evidence of a desire for such myths to exist and the suggestion that, via the medium of art, they may be briefly discerned.

*'REAL' LIFE (RE)ORDERED AS ART*

Interviewed in 1962, Nabokov described the relationship between memory and consciousness as "a matter of love: the more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it is" (*Strong Opinions* 12). In *Pale Fire*, as in *The Waste Land*, it is in the sphere of memory that order is sought and located. In Shade's poem and, in a mirrored manner, in Kinbote's commentary, past events are revisited and glossed in order to assume their full meaning. This process can result in error as much as success, but it can also function as a genuine insight into our own lives and the wider matrices of the world around us, as found in 'Pale Fire' itself, a hymn to an ordering principle faintly glimpsed but nevertheless present in the flux of lived experience.

Both works are concerned with the relationship between life and death, and the extent to which our awareness of one colours our perception of the other. Writing on the Institute or Preparation for the Hereafter Shade recalls that in the midst of its work

getting people ready for death it overlooked something fundamental about the relationship between death and life:

For we die everyday; oblivion thrives  
Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives,  
And our best yesterdays are now foul piles  
Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files.  
(44)

These lines, echoing Macbeth's words upon his wife's death, posit the view that our end is an integral element in our life, and that preparation for what comes next should see us reconciled to that ordering principle, something that, in making death more mysterious than it is, the Institute fails to do. The poem 'Pale Fire' expresses Shade's desire to believe in a form of order that makes sense of the world around him, and in his usage of rhyming couplets (popular in the Eighteenth Century or 'Age of Reason') he draws his reader back to a time when belief in an orderly universe was more widespread and when harmony and proportion were highly valued. Re-working life into art helps Shade understand a higher form of reality than he has hitherto explored, uniting his childhood 'visions,' the loss of his daughter, and his near-death experience into a cohesive and satisfying whole.

Deluded as he is, Kinbote's 'memories' are as real to him as Shade's, and they inform his search for order and meaning in the same manner, providing instances of deep emotional loss and pain, like his account of how Charles the Beloved, unable to renounce his homosexual tendencies, parted from his wife Disa in a French Riviera garden, a

parting that increasingly came to occupy a place in his memory out of proportion to the original event:

He dreamed of her more often, and with incomparably more poignancy, than his surface-life feelings for her warranted. [...] These heartrending dreams transformed the drab prose of his feelings for her into strong and strange poetry, subsiding undulations of which would flash and disturb him throughout the day, bringing back the pang and the richness – and then only the pang, and then only its glancing reflection. (166)

In its exploration of the extent to which memory, coupled with aesthetic creation, works to transform an event into a ‘scene’, this passage has strong echoes of Eliot’s ‘La Figlia Che Piange’, where a departing lover tries to restage the actual moment of farewell in a more aesthetically satisfying manner that accords better with his desired ‘memory’ but drifts ever further from the less regulated emotional focal-point from which it was drawn:

She turned away, but with the autumn weather  
Compelled my imagination many days, [...]  
And I wonder how they should have been together!  
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.  
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze  
The troubled midnight and the noon’s repose.

Eliot's poem, like Shade's, attests to the process by which lived life is transmuted into art – something that, even in the midst of his fantasy, Kinbote endeavours to attain. For David Rampton the episode of Charles's parting from Disa is the "clear emotional centre" (Rampton 153) of *Pale Fire*, and in its poignancy it is hard to be as dismissive of it as one can be with other parts of Kinbote's delusions, as he is clearly searching, like Shade, for coherence and meaning, locating the contents of his fragmented consciousness into a frame supplied by the other man's art, reminding us that, as Humbert says at the end of *Lolita*, "the refuge of art" is "the only immortality" that can be shared in a world where the individual's experience is otherwise lost (*Lolita* 309).

Critics of *The Waste Land* have often delighted in teasing out each of its myriad textual references and echoes, arguing that in employing such material Eliot is suggesting that the present is a debased copy of the past, or that life is much less poetic than art lets us believe. It may also be argued, however, that the poem's wealth of citation is meant to resonate in the reader's consciousness, not simply to stand out in contrast to modernity, but to inform it and give it meaning. Our perception of reality is, in part, conditioned by culture, and if that culture is seen as being in decline in *The Waste Land* Eliot sounds a call to store 'fragments' of it whenever possible, so that creation may begin again out of modernity's 'dissociated sensibility' and disjointed failure.<sup>13</sup>

Whilst the individual's emotion may be lost in time, *The Waste Land* reminds us that a work of art can capture emotion and store it. When, at the close of Part II the conversation of the women in the pub gives way to Ophelia's parting words from *Hamlet* their talk of female sexuality and male infidelity takes on a keener edge. When the crowd

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<sup>13</sup> For Eliot's analysis of the "dissociation of sensibility" in modern culture see his 1921 essay 'The Metaphysical Poets' in *Selected Essays* (1932, London: Faber, 1999), pp. 281-291.

crossing London Bridge is likened to the souls in a Dantean Hell their condition is thrown into sharper relief. In the same capacity, the unhappy life of Hazel Shade, a modern Ophelia who “stepped off the reedy bank / Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank.” (43) is processed not in the form of “Freudian mysticism” but via the transmutation of life into art.<sup>14</sup> In both *The Waste Land* and *Pale Fire* human life is rendered anew in the medium of poetry.

*Man's life as commentary to abstruse*

*Unfinished poem.* Note for further use.

(57)

Nabokov told an interviewer in 1962 that “art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex” (*Strong Opinions* 33) but, although it is often constructed and (as his own novels so playfully explore) resistant to analysis, it is also, paradoxically, arguably the best vehicle we have for locating meaning and order in life. In 1967 he described his seemingly chaotic technique of writing a novel on index cards that could be shuffled around until he was happy with the end result as the best way he knew of negotiating a much bigger canvas:

I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job

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<sup>14</sup> In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov explores via art his own childhood, but has little time for what he calls the “vulgar” and “shabby” world of psychoanalytic approaches (*Speak* 20). Kinbote is similarly dismissive of Freudian thought in his notes to ‘Pale Fire,’ asking rhetorically whether the “clowns” who put such ideas forward really believe in them themselves (213).

is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to.  
(Dembo 25)

Nabokov's vision of the cohesive artwork, assembled from seemingly unrelated fragments is similar to that proposed by Eliot, who later re-worked the more disparate vision of *The Waste Land* into the harmony of *Four Quartets*. When Shade writes in 'Pale Fire' that "we are most artistically caged" (32) he draws attention not just to humanity's philosophically imprisoned state but also to our ability to locate in art the pattern that makes sense of our situation. Kinbote recalls Shade's telling a colleague that it is not always appropriate to apply the term 'madness' "to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention" (188). Madness, in certain forms, is the stuff of poetry, as the 'mad' Kinbote suggests when he adds "we are all, in a sense, poets" (188). Like the words of Hieronymo, "mad againe" at the close of *The Waste Land*, what the world takes to be madness can also be the expressive potential of artistic creation – an attempt, flawed but nonetheless valid within its own parameters, to weave the "web of sense" that transmutes reality into a cohesive vision.

### CONCLUSION

To write about works that by their very nature call into question the value of commentary is to invite the charge that one is, perhaps, arguing for the importance in *Pale Fire* of a poem only tangentially connected with it. As wonderfully sophisticated

and original as Nabokov's creations are, however, it is occasionally possible to discern when another work has been interwoven with them, whether acknowledged or not, serving him perhaps as a useful sounding board as he formulated his ideas. Nabokov's disparaging allusions and echoes of Eliot's work cannot be based on anything other than a careful reading of the poetry, and whilst it may still be seen as a parody of Eliot's verse, *Pale Fire* owes more to it than has hitherto been acknowledged. Furthermore, the poem we may most usefully introduce into our reading of the novel is not necessarily *Four Quartets*, as most critics have chosen to do to date, but *The Waste Land*. Both works address the pitfalls of self-consciousness, the extent to which competing individual realities reveal what Marilyn Edelstein calls "the different patterns of sense that can be created out of the same set of events by different minds" (Rivers & Nicol, 214). On one level, both *Pale Fire* and *The Waste Land* offer devastating critiques of the crisis to which excessive self-consciousness can lead us – to a worldview incapable of admitting or even acknowledging the thoughts of another and a vision of reality in which everything functions only through its relation to us. To counter this, both works appeal to a higher level of reality, glimpsed and signposted within the formal harmony of the work of art, and enlist their readers in a search for meaning which, even if it seems unsuccessful, is both valid and desirable, suggesting that art may offer some defence against the spectres of loss.

There are, then, numerous echoes of *The Waste Land* in *Pale Fire*, sometimes taking the form of direct textual allusion, sometimes wrapped carefully in the mantle of the novel's symbiotic Poem/Notes/Commentary format. Whilst it may be argued that Nabokov may not have seen *Pale Fire* as being fundamentally indebted to *The Waste*

*Land*, in setting before his readers such an elaborate literary work he was nevertheless enlisting them on a journey similar to that mapped out by Eliot some forty years previously, perhaps realizing as he did so that 'big fakes' may sometimes express more truth than we may at first suppose.

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