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Nomina nuda tenemus: Postmodernist Method in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

Nomina nuda tenemus: Postmodernistická metoda v *Pale Fire* od Vladimira Nabokova

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Abstrakt

Vladimír Nabokov je nepochybně jedním z nejvýznamnějších autorů postmoderny. Tato bakalářská práce si klade za cíl analyzovat metodu, kterou užívá v *Bledém ohni* a díky níž je tento román možné nazvat postmoderním dílem. Jeho práce s textem způsobuje, že *Bledý oheň* představuje typický příklad Lyotardovy nedůvěry k metanarativům, Barthesova skeptického přístupu k autorovi a Ecova znovunalezení nominalistického *flatus vocis*.

Nabokov vede impozantní dialog již se samotnou formou románu, který způsobuje oslabení jeho formálních prvků. *Bledý oheň* je příběhem, jenž vypráví přinejmenším jeden nespolehlivý interní autor, Charles Kinbote, který relativizuje a popírá svoji vlastní roli jakožto odborného komentátora básně *Bledý oheň*, což výrazně přispívá k destabilizaci samotné formy románu. Tento subversivní prvek je zkombinován s nekonvenčním pojetím nadpisů a terminologie, které nezjednodušuje přístup k obsahu, jenž je jimi označován, nýbrž jej naopak komplikuje. Dokonce i ten nejzřejmější předmět románu *Bledý oheň*, tedy předmět akademického komentáře, básně *Bledý oheň*, nemá jednoznačně danou formu. V důsledku tohoto nelze určit, jestli je verze poskytnutá čtenáři tou konečnou a skutečně zamýšlenou autorem. Tedy ani dominantní interní autor, ani názvosloví, ani předmět zkoumání nepřispívají ke stabilitě formální stránky románu, ba naopak, vedou k její relativizaci.

Obdobně nekonvenční je Nabokovův přístup k identitám jednotlivých postav v *Bledém ohni*. Toto se projevuje zejména, avšak nikoliv výlučně, na postavě nejvýznamnějšího interního autora, Charlese Kinbota. Kinbote se ve svém příběhu pohybuje na dvou dramatických křivkách, z nichž jedna patří do města New Wye a druhá do státu Zembla. Zatímco vypráví o osudech postav na těchto dvou místech, přebírá dvě až tři rozdílné identity, tj. Charlese Kinbota, krále Charlese II. a dost možná též dr. Botkina. K těmto identitám přivádí pozornost v obou světech, nebo se ji od nich naopak snaží odpoutat – což činí zejména tím, že se pro sebe snaží získat specifické vlastnosti tím, že je prezentuje čtenáři. Proto se prohlásí za dobrého přítele nedávno zesnulého básníka Johna Shadea, dále též za krále státu Zembla a v neposlední řadě i za cíl střeleckého útoku, při němž Shade umírá. Žádná z těchto rolí však nefunguje způsobem, v nějž by Kinbote nezbytně doufal, neboť jeho snahy upevnit určitý vztah vedou k jeho relativizaci či vyvrácení. Proto nemůže být prokázáno ani jeho skutečné jméno či vztahy k jiným postavám a jeho identita zůstává neurčitá.

Taktéž i Nabokovovo využívání připodobnění vede k relativizaci a destabilizaci *Bledého ohně* jako konvenčního románu. Ačkoliv se v díle vyskytují opakující se témata a symbolika, nelze nalézt jejich jednoznačný význam ani způsob, jak by mohly přispět k interpretaci samotného románu. *Bledý oheň* poskytuje v obou světech názvosloví, které lze seřadit do dvou zřetelných abecedních systémů a jež se do značné míry zrcadlí. Avšak volba jednotlivých jmen, která dosáhnou zařazení do samotného abecedního systému, je jednak náhodná, a dále též dohromady nepodporuje žádnou ucelenou hypotézu. Stejná je i situace Nabokovových připodobnění z oblasti zoologie, jejichž nejvýznamnějším zástupcem je průběžně se objevující motýl babočka admirál. Nakonec Nabokov využívá připodobnění i k tomu, aby relativizoval jakýkoliv pokus využít symboliku k odhadu dalšího děje mimo román, např. osudu Charlese Kinbota poté, co dokončí komentář k *Bledému ohni*. V tomto ohledu je symbolika sice impozantním a vskutku nabokovovským *lusus verborum*, ale neposkytuje žádné řešení pro příběh, který skýtá samotný román.

Thesis Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov is usually regarded as one of the most important authors of postmodernism. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the method which Nabokov employs in *Pale Fire* and which earns it classification among postmodern novels. His approach to the text causes *Pale Fire* to be emblematic of Lyotard's incredulity toward metanarratives, Barthes' reservations to authorial figures and Eco's reinvention of *flatus vocis*.

Nabokov's dialogue with the form results in a subversion of the formal elements of the novel. *Pale Fire* introduces at least one unreliable internal author, Charles Kinbote, who undermines and defies his authority as an academic commentator, which vastly contributes to the destabilisation of the novel's form. This combines with an anti-rationalistic approach to inscriptions and names which do not simplify the access to the content that they indicate, but rather complicate it. Even the first obvious subject of *Pale Fire*, that is the subject of the academic commentary, a poem "Pale Fire", has an unstable form as it cannot be determined whether the version as presented is a final one. Therefore, neither the narrative voice, nor the terminology, nor the main subject contribute to the stability of the novel's form, on the contrary, they disintegrate it.

Similarly unconventional is Nabokov's approach to identities of individual characters in *Pale Fire*. This manifests chiefly, though not exclusively, in the most dominant internal author, Charles Kinbote. He narrates two distinct storylines, one belonging to New Wye cosmos and the other to Zemblan cosmos. While he oscillates between these narratives, he claims two to three different identities, that is Charles Kinbote, Charles II and possibly also Dr. Botkin. He draws or diverts attention to or from these individual identities by solidifying them through various attributes and stories. By these means, he declares himself the friend of John Shade, then also the exiled king of Zembla and the intended target of the shooting in which Shade perishes. Nonetheless, neither of these attributes works in the way that Kinbote could desire, since his attempts to prove them actually subvert them. Hence, his real name and relationships cannot be determined with any satisfaction and his textual identity remains extremely unstable.

Even Nabokov's utilisation of symbols works to subvert any views of *Pale Fire* as a conventional novel. Though he introduces recurring themes and symbology in the novel, their meaning cannot be determined with any satisfaction and they cannot be used to explicate the content of the novel. *Pale Fire* features in both universes names that can be ordered into two distinct alphabetical sequences and which to a degree reflect one another. However, the choice of the nomenclature which reaches the sequences proves not only arbitrary but also does not attest to any particular hypothesis. Similar is the issue with Nabokov's favourite zoologic imagery, epitomised in the contradictory recurrence of the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly. Finally, Nabokov also subverts any attempts to use symbols to estimate events outside the novel, such as Kinbote's fate after finishing the commentary. In this way, the symbols feature an interesting Nabokovian *lusus verborum* but do not offer any definitive solution.

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Introduction

When Vladimir Nabokov doubts the possibility of postulating the objective existence of a “modern world” on which an artist could hold a definite or important opinion, it is emblematic of the reasons why he is regarded as one of the most prominent figures of postmodernism.¹ His work and its textual reality not only allow but even instigate a multiplicity of readings, opinions and interpretations. In this sense, *Pale Fire* is probably his most epitomic novel on this subject. It presents a parody on the “occupational mania of commentators” and features a commentator with a desire to find a definite meaning.² These efforts of his are proved absurd, the assignment of meaning fully fails, no teleologic judgements are achieved, and room remains only for aesthetic judgements.³ The novel’s “transcendental primacy of the sign against the meaning” thus makes it an exemplary work of postmodernism in Lyotard’s sense of manifesting a profound “incredulity towards metanarratives”.⁴

This thesis will analyse the method Nabokov uses to make sure that the postmodernist “transcendental primacy of the sign” permeates every aspect of *Pale Fire*. He destabilises the conventional form of the novel, the ability to draw a line between individual identities and the possibility to assign a meaning to a symbol. Chapter one focuses on Nabokov’s parody of the conventional form of the novel and its destabilisation in *Pale Fire*. Nabokov achieves this by providing an academic commentary (the Foreword, the Commentary, the Index) by an unreliable internal author who defies all conventions. Nabokov combines this disrupting element with inscriptions and names which are not telling of any definitive content and also with a poem whose length and exact wording cannot be determined. Thus, he further destabilises the form of the novel.

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 95–96.

² Mary McCarthy, “A Bolt from the Blue” in *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), vi.

³ Thomas Karshan, *Pale Fire and the Genre of Literary Game* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 126.

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

Chapter two provides an analysis of the issues which arise when referring to individual characters in *Pale Fire*. Even though Charles Kinbote carefully distinguishes Zembla and New Wye and the story of Kinbote, Botkin and Charles II, these individual characters cannot be clearly separated or defined. The relativity of descriptions is emblematic in relation to Charles Kinbote in particular, who calls himself John Shade's friend, a king and the intended target of the shooting when Shade was killed. However, these attributes are only relative, and no final terminological stabilisation is possible with characters in *Pale Fire*.

Chapter three discusses whether and to what degree it is providential to use symbols and motifs to explicate the plot of *Pale Fire* or to predict events that take place outside the novel. When a certain set of symbols is chosen to provide an explanation, some of its opaquer instances are omitted for not fitting the framework. This creates unstable hypotheses which can be subverted by the instances of symbols which were not used to fit into it. Therefore, this rash epistemic approach – particularly in the case of ordering names of characters into alphabetical sequences, of the meanings of *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly and of projecting *Pale Fire* outside the novel, demonstrates the instability of symbols and their interpretations in *Pale Fire*.

1. The Instability of Form in *Pale Fire*

When Hélène Cixous states that “there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman”, it is symptomatic of postmodern views on the narrow interpretation of being and of mental concepts assigned to language.⁵ This philosophical shift similarly influences the conventional views of the novel and as a result, some of the constitutive elements of the novel are lost or questioned to a degree unparalleled during modernism. *Pale Fire* is an emblematic case of this change – it is a novel which has lost some of its formal elements. The destabilisation of *Pale Fire*’s form as a novel will be the subject of this chapter.

First, this chapter discusses the loss of reliability of the authorial figure, particularly the role of Charles Kinbote as the most prominent of the novel’s internal authors. Next the chapter examines nomenclature and inscriptions when the content does not correspond with what is indicated by the title, which further destabilises the novel’s formal aspects. Lastly, the chapter analyses the role of external influences in shaping the final version of the “intrinsic” or “final” work as available to the recipient and relativises the possibility to claim that the printed novel is “intrinsic” and “final” in form. Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* thus benefits from the label “a novel” although Nabokov’s work has many exceptions to the naturally present attributes of a typical novel.

When this chapter claims that *Pale Fire* is a novel which lacks some of its formal aspects, it will, philosophically, feature the debate about the concept of Plato’s ideal things and their representatives.⁶ In this sense, the thesis remains faithful to Alfred North Whitehead’s statement that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato”, as the analysis that appears further in this chapter is based on a particular form of the Platonic triangle, namely the semiotic triangle.⁷ *Pale*

⁵ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 876.

⁶ Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 189–240.

⁷ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 39.

Fire is treated as a referent of the reference “a novel” and the discussion focuses on the differences between the “ideal” form of a novel and *Pale Fire* as a singular representation. The novel clearly demonstrates that existence cannot be exhausted with conventional referents and that epistemic certainty can never be reached.

1. 1 The Authorial Lack of Integrity

The first attested etymon of the word “author”, that is, the Latin “auctor”, illustrates well the competencies expected from such an individual, a “person who has weight or authority, spokesperson, representative, advocate, supporter”.⁸ However, this “authority” and “weight” is much at odds with *Pale Fire*, as Charles Kinbote, one of the internal authors of the novel, is neither credible nor reliable. He operates subversively and is vastly different from the above-mentioned “auctor” or a literary author as conceived of prior to the 20th century.⁹ With such authorship it is impossible to search for an explanation of the work in the internal author.¹⁰ This lack of narrative integrity stems in Kinbote’s case from three facts. Firstly, he is continually interrupting the task he has undertaken, that is, to present an academic commentary, which is ultimately unfulfilled and incohesive. Secondly, he forcibly introduces himself into the action and thus acts in ways that are unbecoming to typical scholarship. Thirdly, the text testifies to a strong psychical instability which results in an authorial bias inappropriate for an academic commentary. Hence the most dominant authorial figure present in *Pale Fire* contributes to the serious instability of the author, one of the conventional properties of a novel.¹¹

⁸ “author, n.,” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Last modified June 2021, accessed July 13, 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/13329.

⁹ Several exceptions to the authorial convention can be found already before the 20th century, such as F. Kafka or G. Flaubert. [Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: The New York Press, 1998), 206.]

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author” in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 143.

¹¹ Barthes, “Death of the Author”, 142–143.
Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 54–56.

Kinbote should focus on the task of delivering an academic commentary to John F. Shade's poem "Pale Fire", whom he introduces as his friend and a "celebrated American poet".¹² John Shade is recently deceased, killed by a murderer of unsound mind near his home in New Wye and "Pale Fire" is his last poem, which Kinbote claims to be finished.¹³ He has set himself the task of accompanying it with an academic commentary. Kinbote's writing, nonetheless, makes many interruptions from the undertaken quest and raises doubts as to whether he is reliable. The beginning should serve as an introduction of the content of the poem that will be the subject of his analysis, but already here he is careless enough to summarise Canto One simply as "all those amusing birds and parhelia" instead of noting all the emotional difficulties that Shade discusses in this part. This hardly presents an academically apt summary and makes the reader focus on the inadequacy of the commentator rather than on the content of the commentary.¹⁴ Kinbote distracts the audience further by using excessively emotional language in his summaries, such as "Canto Two, your favorite, and that shocking tour de force, Canto Three".¹⁵ These distractions have a gradable tendency, as Kinbote starts to elaborate on subject different from the poem, such as "there is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings".¹⁶ When this is combined with the "I mean" from the preceding sentence, it is almost verbal and audible – the stance instigates the feeling as though Kinbote was trying to sound his thoughts aloud. He tries to resonate them loud enough that it shouted down the amusement park from the following sentence, which later recurs in "and damn that music".¹⁷ It is obvious that he has difficulties to focus on his role as a commentator. Therefore, the first seed of doubt about Kinbote's competencies is successfully rooted in the novel's early pages.

¹² Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin Books, 2016). For references to their friendship cf. p. 13, 73, 84, 90, 134, 154, 172, 207, 227, 240. Shade as a renown American poet: p. 15, 223.

¹³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12.

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 11, 27–32.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11.

¹⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11.

¹⁷ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12–13.

These interruptions from a clear focus on the poem become more regular with the result that Charles Kinbote forcibly introduces himself into the academic commentary and makes *Pale Fire* a novel about his life. By presenting his views, emotions and his current situation, such as with the above-mentioned “damn that lodgings”, Kinbote puts himself *in medias res*, thus considerably exceeding his own role as an academic commentator and featuring himself far beyond any explicable explanation which he could include at the beginning, such as “he asked me [to write an academic commentary], since I was his friend and colleague”. He commences this takeover by inconspicuous argument about his own experience of Shade, such as “knowing Shade’s combinational turn of mind” or concerning the issue of unused drafts, “I recall seeing him from my porch, . . ., burning a whole stack”.¹⁸ Similarly, he uses his memories as an authority when he contributes to the debate over the length of “Pale Fire”. He claims that the poem was designed to have four cantos.¹⁹ Apart from evidence present in the poem itself, he also supports his argument by memories of Shade’s wife Sybil and lastly, also by “I [Kinbote] myself have heard him speak of it, in the course of a sunset ramble”, by which he makes himself indispensable for the understanding of the subject which he should comment on neutrally.²⁰

Regardless of his efforts to humble himself at times, such as “*his discreet companion* kept trying in vain to adapt the swing of a long-limbed gait to the disheveled old poet’s jerky shuffle”, Kinbote’s figure gradually dominates that of Shade, whose work is supposed to be the book’s main subject.²¹ When Kinbote thinks about how to crack the metaphor “five minutes were equal to forty ounces”, he states that he cannot come up with a solution but perhaps simply because he is “only tired”.²² By this he brings more attention to himself than to the content of

¹⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 13.

¹⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11, 13, 26.

²⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12.

²¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12. Italics mine.

²² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 97.

the poem. Similarly then, he indulges in descriptions about how he seized control over the manuscript or what were the weather conditions upon his arrival to New Wye, in which case demonstrates how the space he gained makes him lose all restraint: he makes a very non-academic comment that “the heating system was a farce”.²³ This shift of focus from the poem and its author to Kinbote is completed when Kinbote notes that Shade is a vegetarian: he does not include this as a biographical fact about the author of the poem, but rather as a result of his recollection of his first meeting with Shade. He remembers how Shade offered meat to Kinbote and Kinbote declined, after which Shade made a comment about his own preferences.²⁴ Therefore, the subject of the scene is how Kinbote got to know Shade, not that Shade is a vegetarian – if Kinbote was never asked about meat, he would probably never care to introduce that fact about Shade’s food preferences separately. In this refocus of the content of the commentary from Shade and his poem to the commentator, Kinbote becomes yet more unreliable and further fails in the role of the author of an academic work.

The more room Kinbote allows for his own recollections, the more doubts appear to his mental stability. His psychological profile further questions the verity of his authorial figure, since he seems incapable of evaluating the relevance of various pieces of information, which leads him to being secretive about things which would not require such an approach and vice versa. Though the regal self, Charles the Beloved, is in danger of his life from hired killers, and thus the revelation that Kinbote is Charles II may lead to his demise, Kinbote does not fail to plant evidence that he is the king as soon as the Foreword.²⁵ On the other hand, he tries to conceal the harmless fact that he is a homosexual, even though he fails to hide it.²⁶ This inability to evaluate facts leads to doubts about Kinbote’s choice of information for the commentary – if

²³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 16.

²⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 17.

²⁵ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 20–22.

²⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 17, 19, 204.

he is incapable of evaluating what would secure his mere survival, he is incompetent for a task as complex as presenting an academic commentary.

Kinbote's issues with evaluation combine with his delusions. This rupture between his view and the general view appears gradually. He suggests his good looks by glorying in mirrors and gazing at his multiple reflections in "a triptych of bottomless light, a really fantastic mirror, signed with a diamond".²⁷ Contrary to this narcissistic view, he is referred to by his colleague as "the Great Beaver" and the various mentions of his relations towards men lead to the conclusion that many of his endeavours are combined with bribes and that even this part of his narrative cannot be believed.²⁸ A similar dual view appears with his academic skills. His colleagues dispute Kinbote's competence for the undertaken task and he, as payback, attacks them and names them "prof. Hurley and his clique", blames them that they have for him only "the thick venom of envy" and finds in Hurley's work "the preposterous defects of that little obituary".²⁹ His fear of cooperation with them – which could reveal his incompetency – even results in an abrupt break in relations with Sybil Shade once she calls Kinbote and asks him to make other New Wye literary experts co-editors of the work.³⁰ Gradually one comes to understand that Kinbote is not just unreliable but that he is insane. This is obvious when he hears distinctly Shade's voice whisper to him "Come tonight, Charlie", though he is alone.³¹ He not only hallucinates, he does not hesitate to act on this figment of his imagination, because he calls Shade's house and plays a manipulative tirade to meet Shade and furthermore, he is so

²⁷ David Galef, "The Self-Annihilating Artists of Pale Fire", *Twentieth Century Literature* 31, no. 4 (1985): 426–427.

Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 93.

²⁸ Galef, "The Self-Annihilating Artists of Pale Fire": 427.

James F. English, "Modernist Joke-Work: 'Pale Fire' and the Mock Transcendence of Mockery", *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 1 (1992): 83.

Volker Strunk, "Infinity and Missing Links in Nabokov's Pale Fire", *English Studies in Canada* 7, no. 4 (2019): 462.

²⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12, 19, 84.

³⁰ Steven Belletto, "The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold, or Nabokov's 'Pale Fire', Chance, and the Cold War", *ELH* 73, no. 3 (2006): 760.

³¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 203.

Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 45.

convinced about it that he does not fail to include it in his commentary.³² Therefore, it is not only difficult to believe that Kinbote was able to evaluate what should belong to the commentary, but also that the choice he made was from real events instead of imaginary figments motivated by Kinbote's desire for appraisal.

It has been demonstrated that Charles Kinbote as a representation of an author is an opaque referent of the reference "author" since he lacks some of the author's conventionally assigned qualities. Kinbote differs from the typical, "ideal" author by not fulfilling the task he has undertaken, using inappropriate diction and commenting distractedly on events which influence his current situation. Another contributory factor to his unreliability is his self-introduction into the text and his self-attribution of relevance, which shifts him from his role as designated at the beginning. Lastly, mental instability makes Kinbote manipulative and unfit for the responsible fulfilment of the task he has undertaken – he could be a good author of memoirs of his illness or coping with trauma, but he is unfit for the task of creating an academic commentary. Therefore, though an author he may be, he would make for a very bad and unrecognisable shadow in Plato's cave.³³

1. 2 Misleading Titles in the Novel

The tradition of definitions, abbreviations and inscriptions was conventionalised very early in the history of Western culture.³⁴ It was a norm for a long time that this type of title operated as a summary of a certain thought, content or convention and was beneficial to those who were deciding as to whether they should read further.³⁵ However, in the case of *Pale Fire*,

³² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 203–204.

³³ Plato, *The Republic*, 189–240.

³⁴ This is for example the case of Roman inscriptions and their conventionalised content, which help to shed light on the period when Britain was a part of the Roman Empire. Cf. Roger Tomlin, *Britannia Romana: Roman Inscriptions and Roman Britain* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017).

³⁵ Surely, there were always possible more versions of interpreting a term, such as IHS being both a Christogram and *in hoc signo* but the set was still limited when compared with postmodernism.

the container-contained relationship does not work and it actually destabilises the form of the novel.³⁶ The aim of this section is to analyse how language becomes unstable and loses its functors. First the section discusses this phenomenon in its most striking instance – the section of Nabokov’s book labelled “the Commentary” does not actually contain a commentary. The second part of this section focuses on the same neglect as it gradually appears at the microscopic level as well, that is, the same object or subject is described by different names. Consequently, the issue of the credibility of language, so relevant for most novels, further contributes to the dissolution of conventional form in *Pale Fire*.

Kinbote proposes the inscription “the Commentary” to a part of the book which does not function as a proper referent to the reference “a commentary”, since it lacks one of its important attributes: it does not meticulously operate with evidence. Kinbote does not bother himself with the burden of proof and he does not accompany his *magnum opus* with detailed research, but admits that he lacks a “library in the desolate log cabin where [he] live[s] like Timon in his cave”.³⁷ Except for one interview, he did no research at all, although it may be argued that without research, he cannot present a commentary.³⁸ This lack of a preparedness is exemplified in his struggles to recognise quotes from Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* in the text of “Pale Fire”. He succeeds in connecting the line “Help me, Will. Pale Fire” with Shakespeare but remains at odds about the origins of the quote, so he suggests that readers conduct their own research, since all he has available at the moment is a pocket edition of *Timon of Athens*.³⁹ The quote, however, belongs to no other work than *Timon of Athens* – therefore, Kinbote not only lacks a library but also does not know the content of the only book he could possibly look into.⁴⁰

³⁶ Peggy W. Corn, “‘Combinational Delight’: The Uses of the Story within a Story in ‘Pale Fire’”, *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 17, no. 1 (1987): 84.

³⁷ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 68.

Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 37.

³⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 69.

³⁹ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 41–42.

⁴⁰ Michael Seidel, “Pale Fire and the Art of Narrative Supplement”, *ELH* 51, no. 4 (1984): 851.

And when he later refers in his commentary to his copy of *Timon of Athens*, he delivers the information in a very odd way: he hurriedly retranslates a certain passage from the Zemblan translation back to English, because he has no English copy available at the moment, instead of waiting for the opportune moment to obtain it.⁴¹ The poem is in English, not in Zemblan, as Shakespeare was originally English – hence this digression and Kinbote’s inability to use appropriate sources further undermines the worth of this section’s title: “Commentary”.

Kinbote’s lack of textual sources must be replaced by a substitute source: Kinbote solves this by using himself as an authority, as discussed in the previous section. This gesture appears repeatedly and sometimes serves as a replacement for evidence altogether. For example, Kinbote mentions that Shade might have recopied his lines from drafts on multiple occasions, but does not support this assertion with evidence. Kinbote only states “as *I suspect* he sometimes did”, which does not reveal any particular knowledge and suggests that Kinbote does not fully conduct his research.⁴² Hence, it becomes to a degree truth when Corn states that the body of text written by Kinbote ceases to function as an academic commentary – “the Commentary” of *Pale Fire* operates similarly to Eco’s platypus, as an opaque instance which has some functors of a commentary and some of a novel, just as platypus is a mammal and at the same time oviparous.⁴³

Terminology in *Pale Fire* gradually loses its stability, and not only in the title of the “Commentary” section. The text features several names for the same characters. Gradus has two Zemblan spies to his aid and in the Commentary, their names are indiscriminately Andronnikov and Niagarin, then Andron and Niagaruskhka.⁴⁴ The prior combination “Andronnikov and Niagarin” is listed in the Index – however, this indexical entry refers also to

⁴¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 68.

⁴² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11. Italics mine.

⁴³ Corn, ““Combinational Delight”: The Uses of the Story within a Story in ‘Pale Fire’”: 84.

Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000), 89 et seq.

⁴⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 193, 197, 201.

pages which concern the latter combination “Andron and Niagaruskhka”.⁴⁵ In a world which is purely textual, it cannot be determined which spelling is correct. Whilst this slip might go unnoticed, Kinbote himself draws attention to one other inconsistency but is not capable of fixing it. Instead he gets confused and enhances it. This concerns him featuring indiscriminately an uppercase and lowercase spelling for the same object. This is the case of academic entries pertaining to *Bombycilla S/shadei*: in the Commentary, Kinbote remarks that this bird was named after Samuel Shade, the late poet’s father.⁴⁶ He suggests that the proper Latin spelling should be with lowercase “shadei” instead of the uppercase “Shadei” for which the biologists opted.⁴⁷ In the Index, he uses the corrected version instead of the canonised version, which he does not list at all. In this sense, the Index points back to Kinbote’s view of nomenclature rather than to its real state. He creates an even greater ambiguity when he does not list *Bombycilla S/shadei* under this title, but under “waxwing” without explaining why, only stating ambiguously that it is an “interesting association belatedly realized”.⁴⁸ He thus implies that *Bombycilla (S/shadei)* is a Latin equivalent for the waxwing which appears in the poem from the very first line. Kinbote never states this relation expressly – he only classifies the Latin counterpart under the waxwing entry without further elaborating on it or explaining in which cases they should be taken indiscriminately, since waxwings (*Bombycillae*) are a more general term than *Bombycilla S/shadei*.⁴⁹ Suddenly then, *Bombycilla* has a multitude of links even to these places in the book where the name waxwing appears, which further destabilises the function of language as an unambiguous pointer as it functions in typical novel.

⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 237, 242.

Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 101–102.

Galef, “The Self-Annihilating Artists of Pale Fire”: 428.

⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 84.

⁴⁷ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 84. This particular species of the waxwing is fictional.

⁴⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 245.

⁴⁹ Lars Svensson, *Collins Bird Guide* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 272, 415.

The possibility of believing in what is said or indicated is the prerequisite of any successful communication. If this possibility is not present due to the absence of a relation between the inscription and the content, it leads to a decrease of verity, which for a novel presents a considerable problem. In *Pale Fire*, the Commentary loses the attributes usually assigned to the reference of “a commentary” because the content can hardly be said to be a proper commentary. Similarly, the stability of other nomenclature is also questioned in the text, of which *Bombycilla shadei* is an emblematic example, since despite its differentiation based on upper and lowercase “s”, it is used indiscriminately. As a result, inscriptions and terminology in *Pale Fire* are misleading and their referents are more distant from their central reference. Hence, this substantial communicational entropy contributes further to a destabilisation of the novel’s form and adds a second reason why it shifts from the attribute “traditional” to “postmodern”.

1.3 *Magnum Opus* Approximated

When a text is printed and available with a handsome-looking cover in a bookshop, it creates the impression that it is *the* book or in this case, *the* “Pale Fire” which provides the authorised and the most authentic experience. However, in some cases, especially when a work is published posthumously, when the authors cannot effectively defend themselves, it may as well be the case that the more hands the work goes through, the less it can be intrinsic and final to the author’s satisfaction. “Pale Fire” in the hands of the recipient can suffer some faults as well and needs not to be the final version of the poem as intended by the late John Shade. This section first focuses on the process that led to the textual version of the “final product”. A selection by a person different from Shade can relativise that the available form respects Shade’s wish and creates the authentic final “Pale Fire”. Nonetheless, this is not where the journey ends for Kinbote since he does not stop at the selection. This section shall follow him

further on this route and analyse how he wraps the poem in his own commentary and manipulates the reader into his perception of the final form. If so little is enough to shift the meaning, one cannot be sure that the text as he receives it is the genuine, final version and not only a misinterpreted draft – in that sense, the final form is a fuzzy approximation of the original text as intended by the author.

The compilation of the final textual version of “Pale Fire” is a very delicate issue. It is difficult to determine what should have been selected as the proper word-by-word manuscript for publication: there existed two sets of cards on which Shade wrote down the poem. Kinbote opted for utilising the cards in the “Fair Copy” version over the “Corrected Draft” version based on his own judgement, about which one might have some reservations by this time.⁵⁰ The arbitrariness of the selection creeps back as an even stronger suspicion when Kinbote emphasises the presence of extra material in the drafts and at the same time claims that the poem is complete, as he states, a 999-line long poem in heroic couplets.⁵¹ He solves the problem of the missing 1,000th line by filling it with the first line of the poem.⁵² However, professor Hurley claims that the poem should have been far longer.⁵³ If we take into account the presence of extra material, it might as well have been some attempt of Shade’s on the following cantos as Hurley saw them. But Kinbote, with his narrow view of the poem, left these out.

Doubts about the verity of the compilation do not extend only so far as to the choice of the source and the length of the poem. A problem appears also in the microscopic world of a line-by-line rewriting from Shade’s manuscript cards. Kinbote admits that on the card with Canto Four, there were “devastating erasures and cataclysmic insertions”.⁵⁴ Hence, the selection of Kinbote’s particular wording might not have corresponded with the text as it was

⁵⁰ If, surely more versions exists, as Kinbote claims (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 11–12).

⁵¹ For the “heroic couplets” cf. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12–13 and for the unused material cf. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 13, 64, 70, 83, 98, 135, 155, 161–162, 182–183, 211.

⁵² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 229.

⁵³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12.

⁵⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12.

intended by the author. Some words could have been left out and some that were supposed to be left out could have been included. This impasse is hinted at in the text itself when Shade reads about a woman with a near-death experience who saw in the world beyond a “m/fountain”. The “fountain” is a typist misprint. But Shade, who had a similar experience seeing a “fountain”, seeks her out to share his own experience, only to find later the enormity of the blunder.⁵⁵ Similarly to the in-text article, the poem also resembles a testimony that went through inept hands. Apart from these alterations that Kinbote thus might have made unawares, he does not deny that he made some adjustments to the poem. Their nature remains fuzzy and could have gone beyond the checking of the printed text against the phototype.⁵⁶ Therefore, the final product might not correspond both in source and length with Shade’s intentions and the line-by-line reading possibly also does not relate to his wishes.

After having destabilised the poem with these inept choices, Kinbote further affects the perception of the formal aspects by surrounding it with a body of text which is supposed to manipulate the reader’s perception of the poem. His Foreword, Commentary and Index work with one agenda: to shift the text from an autobiographical poem to a poem including Zemblan themes or at least to motivate the reader in attempts to seek them there, to see it formally not as a confessional poem but rather as an elegy or an ode.⁵⁷ To do this, Kinbote strengthens his position by suggesting a method for the reading and interpretation of the entire book: he implores the reader not to commence by reading the poem, but to read the Commentary first, then consult it whilst reading the poem and possibly, after that, to conclude with one more look at the Commentary.⁵⁸ This approach would, however, inadvertently influence the perception of the poem and Kinbote’s explication would become the unconscious grid for understanding the poem and the reader’s overall impression. Furthermore, it means that the Commentary would

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 50, 52, 53, 203, 205.

⁵⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 15.

⁵⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 39.

⁵⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 22–23.

be read thrice, whilst the poem only once. Thus, the accompanying body of the text would be prioritised over the poem.

Kinbote recommends this because he gradually gains control over the would-be-read-thrice Commentary and makes sure that it only utilises the form of “Pale Fire” as a point of departure for his own Zemblan narrative and its linkage to the poem. He does this at the beginning seemingly inconspicuously, that is, by making parallels outside of the poem into his own life. This is well summarised in his “I do not doubt that our poet would have understood his annotator’s temptation to synchronize a certain fateful fact, the departure from Zembla of the would-be regicide Gradus, with that date” and in making the date of Shade’s marriage a point of departure to introduce that 30 years later on the same day, King Alfin of Zembla was married.⁵⁹ This tendency is gradable and he goes beyond only deriving parallels between the poem and Zembla: he increasingly presents explanations which have no relation to the poem’s lines, thus can be hardly labelled “explanations”.

A striking example of such an approach is the note to line 62, in which appears the word “often”. This only serves as a stimulus for Kinbote to start the text with “Often” and then carry on with the introduction of his own worries. He thus gradually weakens the role of “Pale Fire” in favour of his Zembla, which is epitomised in the Index where “Pale Fire” is lost. Kinbote indexes only his own Foreword and Commentary, whilst entirely omitting any mention of the poem and the references to Shade are half the length of those dedicated to Kinbote.⁶⁰ In this sense, very little understanding of the poem can be found in the commentary and if taken literally, it would stimulate the arguably false view that the poem is based on or influenced by Kinbote’s meetings with Shade.

⁵⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 64, 85.

⁶⁰ The prior is the case particularly of the first edition: James Ramey, “Parasitism and Pale Fire’s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh”, *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 2 (2004): 191.
Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 63 et seq.

Kinbote's actions therefore contribute to the fact that the copy of Shade's poem at the reader's disposal is not final in form but only a version influenced by external stimuli. It is possible that a different version of the poem should have been published, possibly with a different length. Even the poem's precise word-by-word reading cannot be determined, both due to illegible text and Kinbote's intentional alterations. This arbitrary compilation is then surrounded by a body of academic text written by a commentator whose *modus operandi* is to shape the perception of the poem and its form to his benefit. Consequently, the form of the novel suffers one final blow: not only that the figure of the author cannot be relied on, and the inscriptions do not indicate the conventional content, but the poem, the original subject matter, cannot be conclusively determined – hence, the novel itself is strikingly unstable, or, in other words, postmodern.

2. The Instability of Identities in *Pale Fire*

Barthes' statement that "we don't know where one ends and another begins: writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing", sums up the situation in *Pale Fire*.⁶¹ Despite the evidence accumulated by Charles Kinbote, *Pale Fire* does not provide enough material to define where the identity of one character ends and another begins. At least two storylines can be identified in the novel, that is, the New Wye plotline and the Zemblan plotline. Three characters from the "Kinbotian set" appear in the respective storylines: Charles Kinbote, King Charles II and Dr. Botkin. They cannot be separated from one another due to the characteristic nature of a textual environment and despite being contradictory to a certain degree, none can be ruled out or given a set of definitive attributes. This chapter discusses three key relationships in the novel, which allow for a demonstration of how unstable Kinbote's identity is and how difficult it is to either add or refute attributes of characters in a textual environment. These interactions are firstly that of Kinbote and Shade, which Kinbote calls friendship, secondly of Kinbote and Charles II, whom he reveals to be his true identity, and lastly, Kinbote and Gray, whose intended victim he claims to be. It is the relativity of the above-mentioned attributes that demonstrates how the desire to absolutely prove something in a textual world needs to be saturated only by a knowledge of a relative nature – a knowledge textual, far less definitive but more truthful to the textual environment.

Therefore, this chapter will provide a good example of how a novel allows one to create one's own personal reality but cannot claim "a stable, essential identity that is not both anticipated and reflected somehow in that of another".⁶² It will, philosophically, follow the concepts from the last chapter with one difference: whilst the previous chapter differentiated

⁶¹ Barthes, "Death of the Author", 142.

⁶² Jill LeRoy-Frazier, "'Playing a Game of Worlds': Postmodern Time and the Search for Individual Autonomy in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*", *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 27, no. 2 (2003): 323.

between a reference and a referent (i.e., the Platonic idea and representation), this chapter does not deal with universal concepts from the ontological world (the novel, the author, etc.), but with particular concepts from the textual world, namely characters (Kinbote, Botkin, Charles II). In this case, it is not of any benefit to distinguish between the idea and the representation, since there is no ideal Kinbote and real Kinbote, only a “Kinbote-in-the text” – this chapter will focus on what it means to be a “Kinbote-in-the text”. Whilst in a “real” world the issue of who is who would be dealt with very swiftly by a DNA analysis or an ID database, a textual world offers no definitive solution, hence no claims about what “is” are possible, and the realm of being can never be reached. Writing is thus indeed “the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin”.⁶³ Therefore, what Nietzsche states becomes important for postmodernism and should serve as a reminder in any textual analysis of *Pale Fire*: “one must be indifferent; one must never ask whether the truth is useful, whether it is fateful”.⁶⁴ In this sense, the text is purely nominalistic and none of the *Pale Fire* concepts exists outside the text.

2. 1 The Poet’s Friend

Charles Kinbote declares himself the friend of the late poet and even states that he “valued my society above that of all people”.⁶⁵ Hence, one of the attributes that should belong to “Kinbote-in-the-text” should be “Shade’s friend”, which serves also as his justification for writing the Commentary. However, the relationship is not as straightforward as one might think, and that is for three reasons. Firstly, statements and actions of other characters in the New Wye cosmos do not treat Kinbote fully as Shade’s friend. Secondly, Kinbote offers throughout the text many examples of magnanimous and exaggeratory behaviour which could discourage Shade from building an intrinsic relationship with him. Lastly, Shade’s compassion and

⁶³ Barthes, “Death of the Author”, 142.

⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Antichrist” in *Ecce Homo & The Antichrist* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004), 101.

⁶⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 19.

stability imply that his behaviour towards Kinbote was less of an equal relationship and more about compassion than the latter would have wanted. Therefore, the textual nature of Kinbote does not allow for a full verification of their friendship – it may as well have been on Shade’s part an act of commiseration with a fellow human creature.

Concerning the behaviour of other characters in *Pale Fire*, it is very suspicious that Professor Hurley makes no reference to Kinbote in his academic work on John Shade.⁶⁶ As much as this indeed could have been an act of sheer animosity, when combined with the fact that Shade shares “Pale Fire” with his wife to whom he reads the poem aloud, and not with Kinbote, who claims that he had enjoyed his company, it is not supportive of the attributed friendship.⁶⁷ Kinbote is not even invited to Shade’s birthday party and in total, the novel describes three encounters with the poet, no less, no more. Kinbote himself, furthermore, admits that they have not known each other long.⁶⁸ Though he claims that *despite* that fact, he was much valued by Shade, the first seed of doubt is successfully planted.⁶⁹ This factual lack of attention on Shade’s part is fully revealed when Kinbote desperately wishes his so-called friend to have a heart attack so that he could introduce him to some Zemblan recipes and medicine.⁷⁰ Whilst considering himself a knight on a white horse, Kinbote remains adamantly incapable of evaluating his own appearance, which, however, is attested to by other New Wye characters. He receives an anonymous note “You have hal.....s real bad, chum,” where he claims that the “hal...s” means “hallucinations”, while critics point out that it was more likely “halitosis”.⁷¹ He cannot reflect upon his breath any more than he can reflect on the behaviour of others, which suggests that he is exaggerating his friendship with Shade.

⁶⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 85.

⁶⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 145.

Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 77.

⁶⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 181, 15.

⁶⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 19.

⁷⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 80–81.

⁷¹ McCarthy, “A Bolt from the Blue”, viii.

This inability to see his own flaws stems on Kinbote's part from his personality, namely his magnanimous behaviour, which further dismantles the concept that Shade and Kinbote were friends. Despite the poem being about Shade and his experience coping with the death of his daughter and his own mortality, Kinbote does not hesitate to call himself the subject of the poem. He even praises most the variant of the poem which he calls "Kinbote's contribution" – the existence of which cannot be verified or falsified, or the author decided upon, whether Kinbote created it, or Shade indeed decided to include Zembla in some of his unused manuscript material. Kinbote patronisingly demands that Shade use all the material that he had allegedly given him on Zembla, calling Shade quite derogatorily "gray poet", that is "you really should promise to use all that wonderful stuff, you bad gray poet, you".⁷² With this treatment he prioritises his Zemblan agenda over decent behaviour towards a man he considers his friend.

Kinbote's magnanimous behaviour induces him to disturb Shade though he was *in medias res* with the most important part of the poem – only because Kinbote had his unstable episode, as a result of which, Shade promised to leave his endeavours for a time and go with his future commentator for a walk. Kinbote's lack of empathy manifests during this stroll when he is thinking "Where was I? Yes, trudging along again as in the old days with John, in the woods of Arcady, under a salmon sky" without having a single bit of remorse for disturbing him from the work. On the contrary, he considers it a victory.⁷³ The only reason why he then seems to come to terms with Shade leaving for home, is *only because* he thinks the major part the poet was writing about was on the Zemblan theme and the story of Charles II. Kinbote's magnanimity is then epitomised when he prioritises the poem – which allegedly praises his Zembla – over his friend's life. Once Shade is shot in the street, his so-called friend firstly conceals the manuscript and only then calls an ambulance.⁷⁴ He even does not bother providing

⁷² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 64.

⁷³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 204.

⁷⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 86.

any sort of first aid, but rather takes a glass of water and waits on the porch.⁷⁵ Finally, not only his conduct during the shooting, but also his interpretation of the events testify of his self-centred behaviour. A reference to line 1,000 appears in the Index under four names, that is, Charles II, Gradus, Kinbote and Shade. However, in Shade's case, this is because line 1,000 allegedly equals "his death from a bullet meant for another" and thus Shade becomes simply an object and a point of reference to the King of Zembla.⁷⁶ All such conduct, thoughts and textual proofs of his magnanimous behaviour make it even less likely that he and Shade would be friends.

When Kinbote's magnanimity interacts with Shade's personality, it further gives a different shape to their potential friendship: the psychological profile of the poet himself indicates that he was more compassionate than actually friendly to the allegedly exiled king.⁷⁷ Whilst Kinbote writes his commentary to convince himself of the existence of Zembla and to root it in the academic sphere to solidify his hypothesis about Shade's demise, Shade is aware of life's ambiguities and is not afraid to think and write about the uncertainty of human existence. Contrary to Kinbote, Shade does not believe in one definite reading and does not require this from his students, he is "generally very benevolent".⁷⁸ Similarly, at a certain point, Shade and Kinbote amuse themselves over "certain tidbits from a book I had filched from a classroom: a learned work on psychoanalysis..." which provides too definite a conclusion on human psychology for Shade.⁷⁹ Kinbote's enjoyment of the text stems more likely from having a common activity with the poet and his will to reduce the relevance of a work which might as well hint at his concealed homosexuality and other behavioural patterns.

⁷⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 231.

⁷⁶ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 63–64.

⁷⁷ Kevin Ohi, "Narcissism and Queer Reading in *Pale Fire*", *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998): 153.

⁷⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 127.

⁷⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 213.

Shade is also a very stable personality with an unchanging routine and friends. He lives chiefly in solitude with his wife, whilst Kinbote is continually trying to be in the centre of attention and surrounded by people, be it his colleagues or sexual partners. However, whilst Shade's world is stable, Kinbote's affiliations are very temporary and abruptly changing. The poet's life is balanced and he wishes to keep his privacy.⁸⁰ By devaluing this simplicity of Shade's life and especially by sneering at his wife, Kinbote misses another important aspect of his friend's life. Kinbote is incapable of appreciating a relationship between a man and a woman or the infinite support that is provided by Sybil to her husband, who was his childhood sweetheart. He never wavered in love in 40 years and kept living an undisturbed life in a small academic town – very much unlike Kinbote.⁸¹

Kinbote's claim that Shade is his friend is supposed to stabilise his identity and it serves as a point of departure for his justification why he is writing the Commentary. However, this stabilisation is only a textual effort contradicted by several elements. The conduct of other characters in *New Wye* demonstrates that Shade and Kinbote were not so close to each other as Kinbote claims. He is incapable of seeing this because his magnanimous behaviour induces him to see himself in a far more amiable light, but the less amiable characteristics of his personality keep leaking through the text and dispute his claims to be an ideal acquaintance of the poet. When this character of Kinbote's interacts with Shade's vastly different life experience, it is obvious that their habits and views are too far from one another to build a genuine friendship. Therefore, though Kinbote and Shade were certainly acquaintances and Shade pitied him, Kinbote's introduction of them as friends is not convincing and does not provide a stable attribute to his identity. Kinbote's borders become unclear and thus inevitably we lose some aspects even of the very shape of the thing we are looking for in the Platonic cave.

⁸⁰ Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (London and Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17.

⁸¹ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 27.

2. 2 The King

Apart from the attribute “friend”, the textual existence for Kinbote is also defined by “the exiled king” which is based on a relationship that he develops for and with himself throughout the text. In a sense, the novel is a story of Kinbote’s revelation that he is the exiled king. The further one reads in the text, the more references to Zembla can be found and anyone who progresses enough cannot escape the knowledge, since Kinbote makes it clear that he is Charles II the Beloved, the exiled king of Zembla, a realm to be found on the map somewhere between Scandinavia and the Eastern Soviet Republics.⁸² However, Kinbote’s desire to reveal his “true self” is by no means so weak that he would plant only this single route for the reader and hope that he keeps reading long enough. As Corn and Boyd point out, it is possible to arrive at this conclusion via a set of references to the Commentary as soon as the end of the Foreword.⁸³ This full control of the revelation suggests that Kinbote is trying to gain full possession of the text with the intention of diverting attention from a different fact. First, this section deals with “king of Zembla” as a compensatory mechanism by which Kinbote aims to conceal his homosexuality in the New Wye cosmos. The second point of analysis is how he reveals his homosexuality in the Zemblan cosmos, a universe that he possibly constructs for himself, a safe environment in which his sexuality does not affect his social status. The implications that the Zemblan world is only invented for such reasons destabilises the regal attribute of Kinbote’s identity and the perception of his identity becomes even less clear.

Kinbote makes various advances on men in the New Wye cosmos and only haphazardly conceals his homosexuality. Though being secretive about the fact, he at the same time cannot refrain from planting references to his inclinations as soon as the Foreword. As was already mentioned in Chapter one, Kinbote’s relative effort to conceal his homosexuality does not

⁸² Belletto, “The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold, or Nabokov’s ‘Pale Fire’, Chance, and the Cold War”: 756.

⁸³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 19–22.
Corn, “‘Combinational Delight’: The Uses of the Story within a Story in ‘Pale Fire’”: 85.

suggest sound judgement on his part, because he at the same time obsessively keeps revealing his regal identity, by which he can threaten the safety of his life. He cannot evaluate the relevance of either of the “secrets” and does everything to hide the harmless fact that he is a homosexual whilst wanting meticulously the reader to arrive at the conclusion that he is the exiled Zemblan King. Nonetheless, he is thus virtually inviting other Graduses to arrive in New Wye to try to kill him. It seems quite unlikely that a king on the run would act in such manner, provided that this behaviour could set other murderers on the trail of his whereabouts.

As soon as his first conversation with Shade, Kinbote does not resist asking about one of his newly “acquired students who also attended his course, a moody, delicate, rather wonderful boy”.⁸⁴ By his inability to hide curiosity even despite talking for the first time with a man who is a great inspiration and a model poet to him, Kinbote reveals how uncontrollable his desire is. This behaviour is gradable, as he later excuses himself from a dinner with Shade and his wife because he was “about to have a kind of little seminar at home followed by some table tennis, with two charming identical twins and another boy, another boy”.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Kinbote does not limit his behaviour only to his private property, but makes his sexual advances public, such as in the case of a meeting of students and teachers, at which he had “exuberantly thrown off [his] coat and shown several willing pupils a few of the amusing holds employed by Zemblan wrestlers”.⁸⁶ His conduct in the academic sphere even extends so far that he is reprehended for his advances by his superior, though Kinbote readily invents another meaning for the statement “a boy had complained to his adviser”, that is, the criticism of his work instead of the more likely inappropriate behaviour.⁸⁷ As the Commentary continues, his personality further disintegrates and therefore, Kinbote finally states that he was in a relationship with a

⁸⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 17.

⁸⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 19.

⁸⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 82.

⁸⁷ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 20.

man when he admits that such a fit that instigated him to call Shade has not happen to him “since Bob left me on March 30”.⁸⁸

Despite the finality of the last statement, references to Kinbote’s homosexuality are scarce in the New Wye cosmos compared to these found in the allegedly fictitious universe of Zembla. Kinbote plants elements attesting his homosexuality into his Zembla, which serves as a vent for his emotions. It is claimed that homosexuality is not inhibiting in Zembla, compared with the McCarthyist United States.⁸⁹ He firstly reveals his taste by the substantial disquiet that Charles II demonstrates when it comes to relationships with women. One of the most beautiful women in the kingdom tried to seduce him to become the queen. Fleur’s advances are all but pleasant for him and he defines her attempts at seduction as a “ridiculous cohabitation”, with his feelings being that “the sight of her four bare limbs and three mousepits (Zemblan anatomy) irritated him”.⁹⁰ When he is later made to marry Disa, he even calls his later nuptials a “dramatic ordeal”.⁹¹ He tried to overcome his nature with aphrodisiacs, but as he does not fail to point out very expressively, “the anterior characters of her unfortunate sex kept fatally putting him off”.⁹² Kinbote does not deny that he grew to like her – perhaps only because at the masquerade where they met, she was dressed as a Tirolese boy.⁹³

These unpleasant experiences with women are in a stark contrast with the relations the Zemblan king had with men. He describes his first sexual experience which he dates back to a time when he was still only a prince. The future king does not fail to state quite expressively that “the recent thrill of adventure had been superseded already by another sort of excitement ... both were in a manly state and moaning like doves”.⁹⁴ Though he tried to keep his desires

⁸⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 204.

⁸⁹ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 49.

⁹⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 92.

⁹¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 94.

⁹² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 165–166.

⁹³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 140.

⁹⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 105.

at bay once he had married to Disa, he succumbed to them more or less often and she finally abandoned him for his escapades. Following this, he amused himself “with a band of Eton-collared, sweet-voiced minions imported from England”.⁹⁵ Even when his life hung in the balance and he was hiding in the mountains, followed by killers, he gave in to his desires and imaginations. When a farmer let him sleep in his mountain cottage, the farmer called for his child named Garh. The king attested that though the name is given to both sexes, it is “strictly speaking, a masculine one, and the King expected to see emerge from the loft a bare-kneed mountain lad like a tawny Angel”.⁹⁶ His hopes to see “a tawny Angel” permeate the Zemblan cosmos and demonstrate that it is a way to compensate for his straining concealment in the New Wye cosmos.

In this sense, even the poem serves as an artistic justification of Zembla and becomes nothing more than an instrument of his efforts to prove his identity of an exiled king and as a point of departure for his fancy. The origins of the title “Pale Fire” are somewhat emblematic of the conclusions derived from this section. “Pale Fire” or *Pale Fire* remains the only title Nabokov ever took from another work.⁹⁷ It is an allusion to Timon’s denunciation against universal thievery – Kinbote becomes the literal thief of the manuscript and a metaphorical thief of its content, which he exploits to create his Zembla.⁹⁸ Kinbote’s textual reign over the manuscript and the commentary serves his desire to obscure his homosexuality from the New Wye cosmos, whilst directing it to a more amiable world. In the Zemblan cosmos, Kinbote holds a better position, and his advances are accepted and more successful. He exaggerates his efforts to convince others of this “better reality” in which he is the king, making all along the regal self less likely, the attribute doubtful and his identity unstable.

⁹⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 166.

⁹⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 115.

⁹⁷ Ramey, “Parasitism and Pale Fire’s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh”: 190.

McCarthy, “A Bolt from the Blue”, xx.

⁹⁸ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 33.

2.3 The Intended Target

Another important attribute of “Kinbote-in-the-text” is as “a target”, that is, the intended victim of the assassin Jakob Gradus. The exiled Zemblan king Charles II is followed by hired guns who aim to rid the world of the symbol of the pre-revolutionary era and thus the king is running for his life. Shade then, according to this version of the events, only stumbles into the line of fire and is the accidental victim of the murderer. However, the attribute “a target” is of a relative value similarly to “a friend” and “a king”. Firstly, the events of the New Wye narrative suggest an alternative identity for the killer, a different solution and its likely proportions. Secondly, Kinbote tries to compensate for this irrefutable alternative possibility with efforts to textually prove Gradus but the lengths and breadths to which he dedicates himself suggest that he is fabricating evidence rather than giving a true account of the events. Therefore, Kinbote loses another link to his regal self and not only that he is not “a friend”, “a king”, but he is not even “the intended target”, which makes him even less a king and more a Kinbote or possibly a Botkin. The lines of the identities become less clear, without the chance to definitively prove either in a textual environment.

Though Kinbote readily attests that the man who killed Shade was named Jakob Gradus, other New Wye events suggest a different identity of the killer. The police identifies the killer simply and only as a certain John Gray, a homicidal maniac who escaped an asylum, which is a point of endless refutations for Kinbote.⁹⁹ Kinbote lives at the house of Judge Goldsworth, who sentenced a killer named John Gray and whose verdict contained this one Gray behind the bars of an asylum. Goldsworth has at his home an album of all his life convicts, among whom Kinbote finds John Gray and glosses on the similarities in his countenance with Jakob Gradus. When chatting in the university club, Kinbote learns that the judge is said to look like John Shade.¹⁰⁰ This background-play of identities is suggestive of a hypothesis that Gradus is a

⁹⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 214–234.

¹⁰⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 210.

compensatory mechanism of Kinbote's mind, whilst the man who really killed Shade was John Gray. Shade was not an accidental victim in the line of fire meant for Kinbote as an escapee king, but the poet was the intended victim of the revenge of one John Gray, who aimed to kill Judge Goldsworth. Due to Shade's similar looks, Gradus mistook him for Goldsworth. If Kinbote indeed fabricated the identity of the killer, then the gunman did not know that Kinbote was any kind of a king and the whole part about how Gradus is approaching to New Wye may be fabricated. Even the identity of Charles II and Zembla can then be a figment of imagination and Kinbote only an academic, whose name, as some critics point out, might be Botkin.¹⁰¹

Kinbote does everything in his powers to compensate others' lack of belief in the Gradus hypothesis by his endless endeavours to prove Gradus textually. Kinbote's obsession with narrating every detail of his life is more symptomatic of his fictitious character than otherwise and further suggests that "Kinbote-the-target" was rather "Kinbote-the-witness". The closer Gradus gets to New Wye, the closer he is followed by the narrator, who is Kinbote. Kinbote carefully notes his appearance and family background and lavishes in every fault of his.¹⁰² However, at a certain point, the narrator becomes omniscient, knowing what the killer was thinking when seating himself in the airplane and all the details about his digestive issues.¹⁰³ This amount of knowledge is not unlikely, it is impossible. The evidence is obviously a fictitious figment trying to prove Kinbote's agenda, which concludes in the very last section of Kinbote's commentary. He states that he may write a play about "a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two

¹⁰¹ David Walker, "'The Viewer and the View': Chance and Choice in *Pale Fire*", *Studies in American Fiction* 4, no. 2 (1976): 218–220.

Ohi, "Narcissism and Queer Reading in *Pale Fire*": 153.

Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 91–92.

Ramey, "Parasitism and *Pale Fire*'s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh": 191.

¹⁰² Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 121–125, 214–223.

¹⁰³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 214–223.

figments”.¹⁰⁴ This “old-fashioned Melodrama with three principals” sounds very much like a confession that Gradus was fictional and Kinbote was not the target.¹⁰⁵

Therefore, Kinbote’s construction of himself as a target becomes misleading and ambiguous. The events from the New Wye reality are suggestive of a different hypothesis and imply that Kinbote accidentally stumbled into the line of fire of a killer named John Gray, not Jacob Gradus. Kinbote is trying to divert the reader’s attention to the Gradus storyline, which correlates with his own increasing omniscience. By letting the reader know things about Gradus which he could not know, he reveals the fact that he is fabricating at least a lesser part of it. His indication that he might write about a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king adds final weight to the hypothesis that Gradus does not exist. Hence, though the attributes “Shade’s friend”, “a king” and “a target” seem as possible aspects of Kinbote’s identity and as means of its stabilisation, it is at the same time emblematic of the difficulty of the act of proving anything in a textual environment. Kinbote grants himself all these attributes, whilst circumstantial evidence disputes his claim. Then the issue of adding attributes becomes the question of one’s belief in the credibility of the narrator – and a lack of trust in Kinbote leads to an instability of the content of his identity: it cannot be positively determined who Kinbote *is* not only ontologically, but also textually.

¹⁰⁴ Galef, “The Self-Annihilating Artists of Pale Fire”: 435.
Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 235–236.

¹⁰⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 235.

3. The Instability of Evidence in *Pale Fire*

When William of Baskerville states in Eco's *The Name of the Rose* that "there was no plot... and I discovered it by mistake", it is truly emblematic of the ensuing discussion of creating structures and meanings when reading a work of fiction.¹⁰⁶ In the case of *Pale Fire*, several sets of symbols and motifs interweave the novel and facilitate readings subversive to that of the narrator. This selection, however, is always arbitrary and if a sufficient number of threads is chosen from this infinite and open set, one is in the end not given a final and conclusive solution but rather several contradictory possibilities. Every construction thus fails to function, similarly to the Zemblan framework introduced by Charles Kinbote. This is because any selection of symbols serving as evidence concerning a certain hypothesis is chosen arbitrarily, whilst some opaquer instances of the given symbol are omitted. However, no instances of the given symbol, regardless of its source narrative, can be devalued or omitted without an impact on the quality or verity of the newly built construction. In this sense, symbols are considerably unstable because their selection depends on the agenda of the selector, be it Charles Kinbote or any external critic.

This chapter will firstly focus on symmetries in nomenclature in the Zemblan and New Wye plotlines and on the fallacies committed when interpreting them due to an arbitrary selection of the content of the nomenclatural structures. The second point for analysis will be the recurrence of the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly and hypotheses usually attributed with it, which are demonstrative of an omission of opaquer *Vanessa* references. Lastly, evidence sometimes serves as a *raison d'être* for not only explicating the content of the novel, but also for projecting outside the novel and predicting the past or the future of the characters. The mistakes which accompany this attitude will occupy the last part of this chapter.

¹⁰⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (London: Vintage, 2014), 527.

Finally, before moving to particular instances of the instability of selecting symbols, one terminological amendment is necessary. The terms “symbol” and “motif” make any literary theorist imagine an element which in the phenomenal world might be defined as “evidence”, that is, a thread of units pertaining to a possible meaning. Due to the subversive stance with which postmodernism approaches any attribution of meaning, the author of this thesis opts for using the term “evidence” because it demonstrates more vividly the thought process of collecting elements pertaining to a larger narrative based on a sufficient similarity and rational inference. It is this particular thought process that should be imagined when studying the subsequent pages, rather than only the terms “evidence” or “symbol”.

3. 1 Order: Nomenclatural Sequences

The Commentary introduces at least two distinct alphabetical sequences of names, which to a certain degree mirror the realities of Zembla and New Wye. Their suspicious symmetry suggests that the two lands reflect each other, which usually results in critics discarding the Zemblan narrative as a mere reflection of the New Wye cosmos, partly based on this nomenclatural argument.¹⁰⁷ The aim of this section is to demonstrate that if Zembla should be discarded, it should by no means be done based on nomenclature. The opaquer instances of nomenclature demonstrate how evidence is instable in *Pale Fire* and any explication only relative. The first subject of analysis will be the alignment of names from the New Wye narrative into an alphabetical sequence, its framing and structure. This New Wye sequence then requires comparison with a similar alphabetical sequence as appears in the Zemblan cosmos. These two sequences will then serve as a basis for a discussion about the limits of the

¹⁰⁷ Walker, “‘The Viewer and the View’: Chance and Choice in *Pale Fire*”: 218–220.

Ohi, “Narcissism and Queer Reading in *Pale Fire*”: 153.

Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 91–92.

Ramey, “Parasitism and *Pale Fire*’s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh”: 191.

alphabetical framework, the appropriateness of the choice of the names and whether one set can be discarded in a merely textual world. Hence the issue of choosing, ordering and prioritising names in *Pale Fire* addresses the ultimate question of how evidence is instable and if under such conditions meaning can or cannot be attributed in a textual world.

In the New Wye narrative, the first letters of the alphabet are attributed to names of daughters of Judge Goldsworth, whose house Kinbote had rented. We do not meet them in the novel – they are introduced by photos through which the temporary resident is browsing. They are, by name and age “Alphina (9), Betty (10), Candida (12), and Dee (14)”.¹⁰⁸ It seems as though the family was expecting that there would be four children already when Dee, the eldest, was born and that they would be born in regular intervals. The reversed order of the names suggests “a deliberate countdown, a comically confident case of family planning” of a traditional American family.¹⁰⁹ This simple straightforwardness is too unnerving for Kinbote and his homosexuality, hence he hides the photos: he perceives the daughters as but a result of a conventional heterosexual alliance, whence they once shall become “smart young ladies and superior mothers”, which he finds rather stressful.¹¹⁰ Boyd points out that the symmetry operates also on the other end of the alphabet: the terminal letter is the last letter of the Greek alphabet and is represented in the story by Lake Omega, in which Hazel ends her life. Therefore, nomenclature starts to imply a larger pattern: at the beginning of the alphabet, Alphina is the youngest existing instance of human life in the story (usually more simply defined as an emblem of the beginning of life, but so were her sisters), whilst with Omega, life ceases.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 70.

Conall Cash, “Picturing Memory, Puncturing Vision: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*” in *The Goalkeeper* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 131.

Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 97.

¹⁰⁹ Cash, “Picturing Memory, Puncturing Vision: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”, 131–132.

¹¹⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 70.

¹¹¹ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 152.

Apart from these first and last names often noted by the above-mentioned critics, medial letters can be also related to New Wye nomenclature. This is the case of Goldsworth, Grey, Hazel, John, Sybil. Firstly, Goldsworth and Grey – the intended target and the culprit – share the same letter, as if they were locked up in an infinite struggle for power and revenge, which is not resolved in the novel. Grey also precedes Hazel and John – this is relevant to theories on the subject of the very conclusion of the New Wye narrative, which features the fateful meeting between Grade and John Shade, resulting in the poet’s murder. Boyd proposes that Hazel Shade is present in the scene in the form of *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly and though she be deceased since the end of Canto Two of the poem, she exerts a degree of control over the events of the story.¹¹² Positioning her alphabetically between the elements of the murdered and the murderer might also imply her physical presence. By aligning them nomenclaturally, their connectedness is emphasised. Hazel and John – the father and the daughter – reflect alphabetically the proximity with respect to their similar looks. Hazel’s visual relation to her father and their mutual understanding suggest a reason why John and Hazel are relatively close in the alphabet to one another, whilst Sybil is quite distant.

A similar pattern applies to the Zemblan narrative, where the first letters belong to the names of members of the Zemblan royal family: late King Alfin, Queen Blenda, King Charles and his wife Disa.¹¹³ The names strikingly remind of those of Judge Goldsworth’s daughters and are also introduced through photos. In this neat order, it seems almost as though Charles, who was begot by the person with the first letter in the alphabet, chose his wife according to her name rather than any other quality. The names of two women who unsuccessfully tried to seduce Kinbote – Fleur and Garh, almost immediately follow Disa. It usually escapes any notice – but Charles the Beloved has two more names, with his full regal title being Charles Xavier

¹¹² Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 186–187.

¹¹³ Cash, “Picturing Memory, Puncturing Vision: Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire”, 139–140.

Vseslav, the latter two almost neatly preceding the last letter in the alphabet.¹¹⁴ “Zembla” then presents the other end of the alphabetical system and a disintegrating influence on the characters just as Lake Omega does, with Kinbote becoming homesick or insane.

However, this nomenclatural symmetry raises more questions than it answers. The first problem appears already with the choice of evidence. It can be hardly explained why one set ends with a letter of the Greek alphabet and the other with one from the Latin alphabet, if both sets begin with a word deriving itself from alpha. But even if we agree that Zembla is the appropriate last letter for the Zemblan system, then some critics suggest that Zembla is based on the word “semblance” and therefore might as well be “Sembla”, but then it does not present the last letter and in fact precedes “Xavier” and “Vseslav”.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the system is combined rather arbitrarily with respect to the usage of first names, second names, surnames and geographical names. If “Zembla” is featured in the Zemblan system, one might argue it could be providential to include “New Wye” in the New Wye nomenclatural system. In this particular case, either the first or the second name needs to be selected over the other, with not even the most ambitious critic having a chance to stand his ground about the reasons for this choice in the textual world. Nonetheless, neither “New” or “Wye” is usually chosen and nor are many others: names of Kinbote’s New Wye colleagues, of Charles’s lover or other Zemblan characters, even though they do make an appearance in the book, compared to Judge Goldsworth’s daughters. Except for the photos these characters never appear and yet they reach the alphabetical list in the system simply based on the symmetry with the Zemblan system.

It has been illustrated that in a textual environment, any proposal for order is only an arbitrary selection supported by the authority of human reason. The two nomenclatural systems

¹¹⁴ Cf. Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 96–98.

Cash, “Picturing Memory, Puncturing Vision: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”, 131 et seq.

¹¹⁵ McCarthy “A Bolt from the Blue”, ix.

Belletto, “The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold, or Nabokov’s ‘Pale Fire’, Chance, and the Cold War”: 764–765.

Galef, “The Self-Annihilating Artists of *Pale Fire*”: 428.

in *Pale Fire* provide many similarities at the beginning of the alphabet, but they vastly differ at the end. Their medial positions can be filled with nomenclature based on a degree of internal logic, which does not mean that the structure is definitive. Both systems are relatively random, as one of them is based on the Greek, whilst the other on the Roman alphabet. Furthermore, the choice of name ignores the fact that some of them are irrelevant for the story, whilst some relevant names are omitted. Therefore, the only claim possible is that there are certain patterns recurring in the book, but they cannot be assigned with a definite and ubiquitous *telos* because they are not sufficiently stable.

3. 2 Identities: Butterflies and Hazel

The issue of instable evidence also pertains to the vast corpus of zoological imagery which is present in the novel. Emblematic of the problems with selecting, ordering and attributing meaning is the evidence concerning the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly, which appears in the novel indiscriminately in several forms. Critics usually assign *Vanessa* a solid relation to Hazel Shade, whose symbol or postmortal form the butterfly they claim to be.¹¹⁶ However, this theory does not concern some opaquer appearances of *Vanessa atalanta*. In order to analyse the variability of the *Vanessa* evidence, this section will first introduce the theories that surround the butterfly. Secondly it will be necessary to introduce the particular occurrences of the butterfly which support the hypothesis. This requires comparison with the opaquer appearances which contradict the usual understanding of the *Vanessa* butterfly. Therefore, *Vanessa atalanta* becomes another example of how explicating a novel based on evidence needs not to enrich by bringing a solution but can impoverish by reducing the diversity of possibilities at hand.

¹¹⁶ Cf. René Alladaye, "Through the Looking-Glass: *Pale Fire* as Anamorphosis: An Alternative Theory of Internal Authorship", *Nabokov Online Journal VI* (2012): 25.

Critics argue that this resurfacing of the butterfly implies that even though Hazel Shade died in Lake Omega, she was then reborn as the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly.¹¹⁷ Whilst this is quite generally settled, there is not an agreement as to the degree to which she actually influences the story – some critics are more reluctant and extend the metaphor only so far as noting that the poet is accompanied on his last journey by a *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly, who was primarily linked to his wife but as Hazel died, she became more like her.¹¹⁸ Hazel was originally compared to the dingy Toothwort White and in death was reborn as a beautiful *Vanessa*.¹¹⁹ When compared with Corn, Boyd is more optimistic about the abilities of *Vanessa atalanta*, whom he treats as Hazel’s incarnation. He attributes the butterfly with the ability to inspire Kinbote to create Zembla and suggests that it is her who leads Kinbote’s hand and mind when turning Alphina Goldsworth into Alfin the Vague and in return Alfin, who died in a plane crash, incarnates into the opening line of Shade’s poem, the image of the “waxwing slain ... in the windowpane”.¹²⁰ On the contrary, critics such as Ramey are more suspicious of the butterfly theme, which occurs not only in *Pale Fire*, but also in *Lolita*.¹²¹ In *The Annotated Lolita*, a prefatory essay by Alfred Appel – the publication of which accompanying the work Nabokov permitted – the function of butterflies in the novel is explained. According to Ramey, such a final and deterministic explication could have been Nabokov’s internal joke, because it is “but cheap symbolism of the most exhausted sort, precisely the kind of symbolism Nabokov relentlessly pilloried in his lectures, interviews and published works”.¹²² Similarly, he resists

¹¹⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 152.

¹¹⁸ Corn, “‘Combinational Delight’: The Uses of the Story within a Story in ‘Pale Fire’”: 89.

¹¹⁹ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 140–141.

¹²⁰ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 185–187.

¹²¹ Ramey, “Parasitism and Pale Fire’s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh”: 185.

¹²² Ramey, “Parasitism and Pale Fire’s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh”: 185.

Boyd's thought that the transmutation of Hazel into a *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly can offer a definite construction which would solve the issue of internal authorship.¹²³

The above-mentioned theories derive from the recurrence of the butterfly in various forms. The three following appearances usually serve to prove the link between *Vanessa* and Hazel, then to establish a link between Hazel/*Vanessa* and Shade, only to re-affirm it in one last appearance of the butterfly. The first hint about the relationship appears in Shade's line "When, lo! *Vanessa* in her bloom".¹²⁴ Kinbote states that the personal name "Vanessa" derives its origin from a poem by Swift which Kinbote cannot locate in his current lodgings, which are quite modest.¹²⁵ Kinbote's lack of resources is not binding outside the text and hence this trail can be pursued to the conclusion that there exists a poem by Jonathan Swift named "Cadenus and Vanessa", where "cadenus" is an anagram of "decanus", or, in English, "a dean". Swift wrote this poem as a tribute to a woman he was involved with, a certain Ester Vanhomrigh.¹²⁶ He was at that time the dean of St. Patrick's in Dublin.¹²⁷ The title "dean" then finds itself in *Pale Fire*'s character "Pete Dean", the young man whose rejection is the last step to Hazel's suicide. Therefore, after death was brought on Hazel by a certain *decanus*, she became a *Vanessa*.

The second occurrence that is important for this hypothesis can be found in the poem's "A dark Vanessa with crimson band".¹²⁸ These lines appear near the very end of the poem, as if they mirrored that Shade is at the end of the novel crossing the road, shortly before his own murder. Thus *Vanessa* is accompanying him both at the metaphorical and literal end and a relation between him and the butterfly is established.¹²⁹ Finally, the relation between Shade and Hazel/*Vanessa* can be re-established when she appears in the message from Shade's Aunt

¹²³ Ramey, "Parasitism and *Pale Fire*'s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh": 185–186.

¹²⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 36.

¹²⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 139.

¹²⁶ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 171.

¹²⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 171.

¹²⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 60.

¹²⁹ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 136.

Maud, who instigates Hazel to tell her father “pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alant her tale feur far rant lant tal told”.¹³⁰ The inarticulacy is caused by Aunt Maud’s speech impairment shortly before death and results into “atalan” reappearing three times within the statement.¹³¹ It means that Shade is not to go across the lane to old Goldsworth’s as an atalanta butterfly dances by, after he finishes “Pale Fire” (*tale fleur*), at the invitation of someone from a foreign land who has told and even ranted his tall tale to him.¹³² Therefore, a system of how Shade is accompanied by a butterfly and its identity are seemingly established.

Apart from these three occurrences, there are several more traces of the *Vanessa* butterfly which do not fit the theory so neatly. This is the case when Disa, the wife of Charles II, also carries *Vanessa* imagery with her, particularly in her coat of arms which contains a Red admirable.¹³³ As was already mentioned, this butterfly was attributed to Sybil, John Shade’s wife. Disa is Charles’s wife, and this may instigate a certain parallel. Just as Kinbote does not have a particularly high opinion of Sybil, Charles considers Disa partly as an obstacle to his homosexual desires. Therefore, if Zembla is indeed a figment of Kinbote’s mind, it can reflect his annoyance with the wife of his favourite New Wye poet – which he projects into Disa. Other explanations are possible as well. This occurrence could support the theory of Shade’s authorship of the entire novel, not only the poem: he cannot resist giving his imaginative narrator a wife which would in a way pay tribute to his real-life wife Sybil, whom he deeply loves and compares to *Vanessa*. Nonetheless, every theory proves finding a link back to Hazel Shade very difficult. If Hazel committed suicide and Kinbote may be also inclined to do so, as shall be discussed further, this small and inexplicable recurrence of the butterfly may be a reminder of the omnipresent death, but even if that was the case, its positioning does not make much sense.

¹³⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 151.

¹³¹ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 196–208.

¹³² Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 110.

¹³³ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 139.

Similarly inexplicable is the recurrence of *Vanessa* on Gradus's tie, as found by Boyd.¹³⁴ He emphasises the description of a tie which the future murderer takes on the final flight towards New Wye, in the "color chocolate brown, barred with red (...) magenta and mulberry insides".¹³⁵ Reference to this appearance of *Vanessa* is present also in Index, under "*Vanessa*, the Red Admirable ... caricatured, 949".¹³⁶ Even if we believe the unreliable internal author this connection, since it could just similarly be a tie coincidentally coloured in the same manner as an Admirable, it does not shed much light on the relation with Hazel. *Vanessa* appears on the tie of the enemy, whilst all the other appearances are more melancholic or at least neutral. Furthermore, Hazel was never an enemy to her father but accompanied him on his last journey. Though the word "caricatured" implies that this *Vanessa* instance is twisted in some way, one cannot know which is the cause and which the result: whether *Vanessa* is caricatured due to Gradus as a distorting and negative element or a caricatured *Vanessa* simply means a bad omen and a foreshadowing of Shade's murder. Boyd avoids any judgement in this particular case.¹³⁷ Nonetheless, neither the first explanation nor the second present a viable link to Hazel.

As was demonstrated above, there does not exist a single explanation which would include all existent pieces of evidence concerning *Vanessa atalanta*. There exists a "canonical evidence" which is usually used to support a hypothesis: the relation of Hazel and *Vanessa* based on Swift's poem, the relation of Shade and *Vanessa* based on the last lines of "Pale Fire" and on Aunt Maud's inarticulate sentence. This implies the omission of *Vanessa* in Disa's coat of arms and Gradus's tie. Therefore, caution against rash epistemic certainty concerning the role of Hazel Shade must be advised – every such "truth" is paved by sacrifices of the seemingly opaquer appearances of the butterfly.

¹³⁴ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 218.

¹³⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 218.

¹³⁶ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 245–246.

¹³⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 222.

3. 3 Projections: Life, Death and Ambiguity

Evidence does not always serve only to explicate the events in *Pale Fire*, but in some cases, even to construct what happened following the events of the novel, or more generally, outside the novel. These situations also require caution if they rely merely on symbolical evidence. This will show in the dissatisfaction of critics with the poem having 999 lines and its need to find the last, 1,000th line, which is usually derived from the “waxwing theme”.¹³⁸ The second example will be the claim that Kinbote commits suicide after having finished the commentary. Lastly, the “faculty club scene” demonstrates the ambiguity that is inadvertently achieved when using evidence to deconstruct Zembla and decide on its future or past. In all cases, the aim of moving outside literal expressions in the text proves to be problematic and does not offer a satisfactory solution.

Charles Kinbote claims that “Pale Fire” is a 999-line poem in heroic couplets and advocates that the 1,000th line is supposed to be the first line, should we trust Kinbote that the poem was indeed to have only 1,000 lines.¹³⁹ In that case, according to him, the last line would read “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain”.¹⁴⁰ The argument for this is based on the prevailing theme of the struggle of life and death which permeates the poem from the very first line. The waxwing is confused by the blue reflection provided by the window and hence flies right into it, believing that it is the sky. The image of the waxwing is closely related to Shade – as Kinbote points out, the poet’s parents were ornithologists and his father even had *Bombycilla shadei* named after him, with *Bombycilla* being the Latin counterpart for a waxwing, as was mentioned in the last chapter.¹⁴¹ If the waxwing is therefore a metaphor for Shade, then the

¹³⁸ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 229–236.

Corn, “‘Combinational Delight’: The Uses of the Story within a Story in ‘Pale Fire’”: 89.

Michael Carasik, “Transcending the Boundary of Death: Ecclesiastes Through a Nabokovian Lens”, *Biblical Interpretation* 14, no. 5 (2006): 433.

¹³⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 229.

¹⁴¹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 84.

Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 241.

lyrical subject “I” can stand for the external author of “Pale Fire” (but one of the internal authors of *Pale Fire*), John Shade. When Shade is shot to death at the end of the novel, the “I” then literally crashes into the azure similarly to the waxwing of the poem. Becoming his own “slain waxwing” has its irony and indisputable poetry. However, this co-occurrence of the poetic and literal death cannot provide a reason to fill the last line with “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain”. Though his demise underlines exquisitely the metaphor of the “slain waxwing”, it is not an explanatory moment for the last line because the murder occurs before Shade had the chance to write the 1,000th line. Therefore, though it may be alluring or poetic to state that the last line equals the first based on the waxwing evidence and deaths and suicides in the poem and the commentary, this can never be asserted with any degree of certainty.

The second evidence-based projection is related to Kinbote’s life and sanity after the novel. The novel does not directly state whether Kinbote commits suicide, but he seems quite obsessed with the idea of how one should kill himself and many critics suggest that this is the route that he inevitably takes.¹⁴² They base this view on Kinbote’s relationship to Hazel Shade, whose death makes an important mark on him. This stems partly from the fact that the only person Kinbote went to see during his research on Shade was Jane Provost, whose statements are explored more closely with relation to Hazel than to John Shade.¹⁴³ Kinbote seems to be obsessed by Hazel not much on the pages of the Commentary, but he devotes to her quite considerable space in the Index. The closer is the end of the novel physically, more space is devoted to the one who already is not, whilst references to Zembla are becoming scarcer in number. Apart from this gradual replacement of focus, Nabokov also expressed himself on this matter. He labelled the date October 19 – the date under which Kinbote signs the Foreword – as the day of his suicide.¹⁴⁴ Kinbote’s suicide might therefore seem as firm and imminent. Boyd

¹⁴² Cf. Galef, “The Self-Annihilating Artists of Pale Fire”: 434.

¹⁴³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 48.

¹⁴⁴ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 106.

argues that the act itself could not have been introduced by Nabokov directly in the novel because the Foreword cannot be written by an “external” editor as in *Lolita*.¹⁴⁵ If it was, it would lose the function of introducing Kinbote as the editor. Therefore, this lack of direct statement has to be saturated by the recurrence of Hazel and suicide evidence and it should not hamper one from arriving at the conclusion that Kinbote is no more. He does not view it as possible for Nabokov to choose the path of including an external editor whilst remaining tacit about the fate of the internal one. Such a situation would not, according to him, allow the external editor to refrain from addressing the issue of Kinbote’s death.¹⁴⁶

However, though there might have been an almost palpable connection between “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain” and the timing of the real death of John Shade, neither his death can be inferred from the poem nor Kinbote’s suicide can be inferred strictly from the notes, as both happen *after* the text and are not stated in the text. It can be taken as almost certain that if Nabokov wanted to be explicit, he would have found a way – by adding a Foreword to the Foreword, placing an *in memoriam* inscription before the text or some other means. But he did not – and hence the lack of the final unambiguous verbal statement (if we should choose the narrow path of believing that in a postmodern novel such as Nabokov’s there is anything such as unambiguity) allows readers to combine the pieces into Kinbote’s suicide but never for certain.

The last projection concerns the deconstruction of Zembla, which eradicates the entire Zemblan plot and timeline. *Pale Fire* features a momentous scene which not only subverts but negates the possibility of choosing one piece of evidence and one explanation over another, one projection over another. The appearance of a photo of Charles II during the meeting of the New Wye academic staff in the faculty club has just such an impact.¹⁴⁷ A visiting German lecturer

¹⁴⁵ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 106.

¹⁴⁶ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, 106–107.

¹⁴⁷ Cash, “Picturing Memory, Puncturing Vision: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”, 147–148.

aims to demonstrate the striking similarities in countenance of Charles II and Kinbote and thus fetches a photo of the monarch to compare them. It is the very same scene whereby we learn that Shade and Judge Goldsworth resemble one another – and if one wants to state that Grey mistook one for the other during the shooting, this scene must be taken as genuine because otherwise their similar looks could not be asserted. Therefore, when the “Grey theory” is prioritised over the “Gradus theory” and Gradus is considered fictional, this scene becomes the first step to discarding the Zemblan narrative. However, if such fate should meet all scenes which support the Zemblan narrative, so must be discarded the faculty club scene because it presents a photo of Charles II. Without this scene, nonetheless, it becomes impossible to declare that Goldsworth and Shade look similarly.

Surely, the middle ground would be to discard part of the scene and take the story of Shade looking like Goldsworth as the only real part or as an insertion from another event. How can a scene be divided into more and less likely? This conundrum delivers a very clear and raw articulation of the leitmotif of this chapter: no piece of evidence, regardless of its source narrative, can be devalued or omitted without an impact on the quality or verity of the newly built construction. In this particular case, it implies not only a problem of a minor kind – it has a profound impact and fundamentally transforms a simple disinclination to accept epistemic judgements based on evidence into the necessity to keep at hold the tendency to select anything from the plurality of evidence. As was demonstrated on the 1,000th line of the poem, Kinbote’s suicide and attempts to falsify Zembla, all such approaches lead only to epistemic cherry picking from the plurality of available evidence. Evidence in the novel cannot serve to verify either the content of the alleged 1,000th line, or Kinbote’s fate or Zembla’s existence. Therefore, its value in *Pale Fire* is not teleological, but aesthetic one, with no definitive *telos*, but rather serving as a reminder of the pitfalls when trying to attribute one.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis of *Pale Fire* revealed that the novel is constructed with a postmodernist method on several separate levels which contributes to its ambiguity and contradictoriness. It lacks a conventional structure, clearly separated identities and meaningful symbology. Hence, it is inevitable that any conclusion that was articulated so far fits better with the tradition established already by apophatic philosophy than with those who seek an unequivocal solution: all attempts to determine what *Pale Fire* is end by exceptions and contradictions which rather stimulate the thinking what *Pale Fire* is not. In this sense, the novel is a “mock transcendence of mockery” and a clear example of the transcendental primacy of the sign against the meaning, as it was articulated in the Introduction.¹⁴⁸ Adopting anything other than a postmodernist method would be in the case of *Pale Fire* somewhat reminding of Chesterton’s “thoroughly people” who would “rely altogether on a few cynical maxims which are not true”.¹⁴⁹

The form of the novel is instable partly because of the figure of the internal author, Charles Kinbote. The question of authors and narrators was discussed profoundly during postmodernism by Barthes and alluded to in many novels, be it *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, *The Name of the Rose* and *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry*. In this sense, *Pale Fire* remains faithful to the postmodernist tradition and the authorial figure does not shed much light on the content of the novel. Apart from this disintegrating influence, *Pale Fire* also employs other means to destabilise the structure of the novel. Ambiguous inscriptions and confusing terminology perplex the readership and the proper content of the names cannot be easily determined. In this sense, *Pale Fire* follows the tradition of *The Name of the Rose* which begins with “a manuscript, naturally”, though it is a manuscript probably as much as we can

¹⁴⁸ James F. English, “Modernist Joke-Work: ‘Pale Fire’ and the Mock Transcendence of Mockery”: 74.

¹⁴⁹ Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), 20.

believe Kinbote that his work is “a commentary”.¹⁵⁰ The name does not correspond with its conventional content, as the sign lacks its usual meaning. Even the meaning of “Pale Fire” cannot be satisfactorily determined, because the poem went through many hands and might have suffered possible alterations which relativise the finality of the work of art as introduced in the novel.¹⁵¹

The identities in *Pale Fire* also lack unambiguous content. Borders between individual characters remain unclear. Charles Kinbote grants himself attributes of a friend, a king and a target of a shooting but none of these can be verified and one cannot assert if Charles II and Botkin are only his other aliases. In this sense, the novel epitomises the development from the careful distinction of characters of *Tom Jones* and shifts towards a situation when definitions and descriptions do not serve any purpose. Characters are similarly unavailable for verification of their properties as the long-deceased monks in *The Name of the Rose* and thus remain no more than a simple *flatus vocis*.

Symbols in the novel do not profess any final and definite meaning. On the contrary, if all instances of a certain symbol should be used to support a hypothesis, some of the opaquer instances (that is, opaque with respect to the particular hypothesis) would negate it. Hence, symbols in *Pale Fire* do not serve a general *telos* and they do not facilitate any ubiquitous explication of the content of the novel. In that sense, it becomes truly symptomatic in *Pale Fire* that “the question of referring, in all its ramifications, is one that would put the fear of God into even the strongest among us”.¹⁵²

The novel thus becomes not only a typically Nabokovian *lusus verborum*, but also a complex example of the postmodernist method. It follows the tradition established by Barthes and his “we must not talk about ontology – when a fact is narrated it ceases have any other

¹⁵⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, iv.

¹⁵¹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1.

¹⁵² Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, 280.

function than symbolical”.¹⁵³ *Pale Fire* reminds that contrary to a real world with its ontological grounding, fiction does not permit validation through scientific verification. The novel hampers such efforts by its instable structure, identities and symbols on which it is impossible to rely. It is also no easier with introducing a purpose to these “facts”, since a textual realm such as that of *Pale Fire* justifies no riddle-solving which could result in a closer understanding of “a *telos* or a transcendent Truth”.¹⁵⁴ The form does not bring one any nearer to either comprehending the purpose of the plot, or to a better academic knowledge of “Pale Fire”; the characters are not attributed with any *raison d’être* for their conduct; the symbols do not bring one to any particular solution. Only the names remain in *Pale Fire*, without a definite purpose, or a grounding – in that sense, indeed, *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Barthes, “Death of the Author”, 142.

¹⁵⁴ Jill LeRoy-Frazier, “‘Playing a Game of Worlds’: Postmodern Time and the Search for Individual Autonomy in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*”: 314.

¹⁵⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 538.

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