To my readers:

Although I have proofed this paper as carefully as possible, at least one error exists which was not an oversight. The College's Diablo 630 printer, on which this paper was printed, has no square brackets in its present font wheel, and no other fonts, I'm told. So I was forced to substitute parentheses for their squarer big brothers.

Also, I understand I am to suggest several secondary readings which might prove thought provoking. How about the following?: chapter four from *Pnin*, the final chapter of *Speak, Memory*, and Peter Rabinowitz's article, "Truth in Fiction: A reexamination of Audiences," from *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 1977, pp. 121-141.

Best luck,

[Signature]
Vladimir Nabokov, as critics have often pointed out, neatly contained his greatest concerns within the realm of his twin obsessions, books and butterflies. In many ways, in fact, his two passionate interests proved redundant—an overlapping of which he grew increasingly aware during his life. According to Nabokov, a work of art exists at the imaginary point where language and lepidoptery intersect. Here, he says, "there is a kind of merging between the two things, between the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science." But perhaps Nabokov best described the merger when he expressed in one medium the importance of the other:

Wide open on its pin (though fast asleep),
and safe from creeping relatives and rust,
in the secluded stronghold where we keep
type specimens it will transcend its dust.

Dark pictures, thrones, the stones that pilgrims kiss,
poems that take a thousand years to die
but ape the immortality of this
red label on a little butterfly.

Although he never directly compares specimens caught in his net to those captured on his pages, Nabokov's works provide an abundance of references to their author's ambivalent position as captor, killer, and cataloger of his heroes and heroines. The implications of these references in many ways echo the thoughts of John Fowles in The Collector. (Fowles' work describes the struggles of a slightly deranged
young lepidopterist intent on expanding his collection to include a young woman, who ultimately dies in, and probably of, captivity.) Both authors display a frustration with the restricted, suspended quality of a person or place trapped in a work of art. Each grapples with the writer and butterfly collector's paradox: To preserve a specimen, one must kill it, robbing the creature of many of those attributes which made it desirable in the first place.

Many of Nabokov's characters attempt to escape their prisons, but few achieve satisfactory results. In Invitation to a Beheading,4 Cincinnatus C. apparently escapes his tormentors by physically tearing down the stage-like walls and doors they have used to confine him. However, although he has escaped from a political nightmare, Cincinnatus has not clearly escaped with his life. In fact, because his identity seemed as dependent on props as his captors', one gets the feeling that the "voices" (p. 223) he follows in the final sentence may belong only to other inhabitants of some kind of literary purgatory.

A more intriguing departure occurs at the end of The Defense.5 Luzhin, a chess prodigy whose life outside the sixty-four squares becomes increasingly unbearable, arranges his own sui-mate. Looking down from a high bathroom window, about to jump, he sees the window reflections divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he (sees) exactly what kind of eternity (is) obligingly and inexorably spread out before him.

(p. 256)
In this case, there is no question about the character's destination. His eternity is a chessboard of cosmic proportions, with no link to the world he left behind. What is left unclear, however, is whether the unfortunate chessmaster could have been saved from an eternity trapped in a distant and dead world. Does chess have to exist in an unconnected realm or could a more ambitious Luzhin have made further moves to the outside of the castle's file, moving toward, instead of away from, the reader? Was the game with his world and the audience really inevitably finished, or could it have continued--on a board extending beyond the margins--even after the reader had followed Luzhin to the body-puncturing bullet hole of the book's final punctuation mark?

Nabokov describes the tragic plights of both captor and captive in Lolita. The paradox and tragedy of Humbert Humbert and his nymphet is revealed when the hero realizes that the Lolita in his arms can never be the same as the one in his mind. Early on--specifically, while achieving sexual climax in the presence of, but supposedly without the knowledge of, Lolita--he believes he has "safely solipsized" the nymphet (p. 57). Temporarily, perhaps Humbert is correct; but as possession of Lolita spreads from his imagination to their lives, she changes in subtle yet fundamental ways. Humbert realizes the damage he has inflicted while describing the fourteen-year-old Lolita playing tennis:

Had not something in her been broken by me--not
that I realized it then—she would have had on the top of her perfect form the will to win, and would have become a real girl champion.

(p. 212)

Four paragraphs later, Nabokov interrupts his description of the tennis match to insert the single sentence: "An inquisitive butterfly passed, dipping, between us." This observation seems to mock the sort of immortality mentioned by the author in "A Discovery." But it is important to recall that the pinned insect's red label—that interactive link between scientist and specimen—not the butterfly itself, brings immortality. Although the insect itself does not change, its relationship to the scientist—like any great work of art to its audience—continues to change until the object is entirely understood or until it ceases to provide sufficiently intriguing clues. The butterfly's posthumous ability to maintain a vital link with its former world provides a continuing existence. Conversely, its failure to intrigue, or the scientist's refusal to continue searching, severs that link, leaving the creature stranded and truly dead. Humbert's homicide comes from his desire to stop time and change in the midst of Lolita's pubescence, to preserve, not study, the lepidopterous nymphet. She proves a victim of solipsism, not art or science.

The pedophile's technique, of course, results in his own death as well—certainly literally and probably literarily. Captors are frequently victims of their own art. Humbert, losing himself in the separate and unchanging aes-
thetic realm that is his solipsized Lolita, dies, ultimately, of a broken heart (heart disease). The fifty-six-day creation of the novel is his last ditch attempt to find immortality in "the refuge of art" (p. 281). But the verdict from his winged jury never comes in and one suspects that he, like Luzhin, draws an infinite term in the world of spent and static characters. In a Nabokovian universe, the scrambling figure with net in hand often faces an even greater threat of extermination than his fragile and elusive prey.

In large part, *Pale Fire* is an attempt to avert the seemingly inherent tragedy of artistic captures, to somehow sever the link between art and death. More importantly it is an effort to show the necessity of art to human life. The novel is Nabokov's definitive statement that art is not for art's sake, but for life's sake, and that humans must live in a state that simultaneously encompasses both "real" and imaginary realms. To do this Nabokov fuses the poem to its commentary and the book to a world whose cartographers cannot exclude Zembla, and in so doing, forces the reader to explore the all-important link between words and worlds.

The book, despite its elusive, four-part construction--preface, poem, notes, index--provides a highly cohesive and coherent discussion of both the nature and purpose of art. At one level, it shows the important role of simple artistic escape--which may take the form of imagination, puzzles, or memory--in human survival. *Pale Fire* 's poet, John Shade, finds this form of escape in pure aesthetics, the shape left
by a bicycle tire in the sand, for instance. Its commentator, Charles Kinbote, derives similar solace from warm and hazy memories of Zembla, the distant northern land he believes was once his home. Those unable to discover a realm untouched by everyday cruelty and unhappiness prove extremely vulnerable. Hazel Shade, the poet's homely daughter, and Gradus, the incompetent assassin who mistakenly kills Shade, both commit suicide when unable to escape their ugliness and failure, respectively. The novel also points out the very real dangers of artistic misinterpretation. As is aptly demonstrated by the poem's opening lines about a bird's fatal flight into a glass window's reflection of the sky, an inability to distinguish one's own world from its artistic reflection often results in tragedy.

But the benefits and dangers of art at this level, though important, are ultimately not terribly interesting. To such aesthetic experts as Shade and Kinbote, indulging at length in the former proves unsatisfying, and avoiding the latter quite simple. They are each obsessed with death and the realm beyond it. They seek understanding in art—of mortality and immortality, of the pattern of their world—as well as solace. Sand tracks and remembered kingdoms fail to provide the sort of information for which they search, and for which Nabokov believes all humans search.

Answers to queries of a more cosmic nature may be found, or at least sought, in a type of art that emphasizes the butterfly's label over the butterfly itself, in other
words, art which stresses the viewer's, or reader's, role. Here, objects are less important than relationships, and art exists as a process not a product. The relationship between Kinbote and the poem is more important than either the verse itself or commentator himself, the relationship between the reader and Kinbote more important still. In fact, much like a book of chess problems, *Pale Fire* depends on a reader's presence in, and interaction with, the text to become complete. Unlike Luzhin's games, however, in this work the author has made certain there can be no winner or loser—playing, not winning, is the point. As long as the reader remains in hot pursuit, and Kinbote one step ahead, a link is maintained between the two worlds. That link contains his immortality.

Notes


2Vladimir Nabokov, "A Discovery," from *The Portable Nabokov* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978) p. 518. These are the penultimate and final stanzas of the poem, which was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1943.


4Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York:
Paragon Books, 1979). Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.

5Vladimir Nabokov, The Defense (New York: Perigree Books, 1980). Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.

6Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1977). Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.

7Vladimir Nabokov, Pale Fire (New York: Berkley Books, 1981). Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.
Art and Death:  
No Exit?

Where art exists in *Pale Fire*, death—often with a butterfly as its harbinger—follows close behind. Andrew Field, in fact, claims that death is the book's subject. A less morbid description might say that art provides the subject of *Pale Fire*, but that art and death are inextricably and paradoxically related. Art's escape helps Kinbote survive, yet its falseness kills the unfortunate waxwing. Aesthetics always appears in a life-or-death context. Many critics—including Field, David Walker, and others—have touched upon this central relationship, which provides a simple and direct defense against those who believe much of Nabokov's art unconnected to any vital human issues.

The connection also reveals a framework of authorial concerns too often forgotten by critics such as Mary McCarthy, exploring the author's more sophisticated and intellectual themes. McCarthy makes the mistake of trying to solve the novel's puzzles and riddles without first attempting to decipher the author's intent. *Pale Fire* demands considerable spelunking beneath its foundations prior to such high flying analysis. As Robert Alter comments, many critics have done more harm than good by merely uncovering patterns, "assume(ing) that intricacy itself is sufficient evidence of masterful imaginative achievement." The artistic games, like all games in Nabokov, are a trap if interpreted as an end in themselves, but a part of the solution if approached in the proper context.
Throughout the work, Nabokov explores the intimate and apparently inevitable connection between art and mortality. The book's poet, John Shade, discovers his artistic talents through trips into a death-like state. Charles Kinbote, the novel's commentator, believes his very life may be contained in Shade's lines of verse. A lack of art, and its cushion against pain and failure, results in the suicides of Hazel Shade, the poet's daughter, and Gradus, an incompetent assassin. The latter's death is also caused by his inability to recognize false images in art: he fails when he mistakes a look-alike for his intended victim. But the most obvious example of art's connection with death, and life, comes in the much-analyzed central image of Shade's poem—a bird dying on impact with a glass window's reflection of the sky. For the bird itself, misinterpretation proves lethal; but for the poet, who sees himself as the shadow of the bird (line 1), the collision reveals a death-like escape to an aesthetic world where the bird's shadow "lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky" (line 4).

Shade's own life has been marked by a series of "deaths," which have greatly influenced him. As a young boy, he recalls the first "sunburst" in his head, followed by "blackness" (lines 151-152). For the duration of a winter, he experiences similar (epileptic?) episodes daily, which make him feel "distributed through space and time" (line 153). Although the attacks gradually disappear, Shade has discovered one of art's simplest and most appealing quali-
ties. It gives him an aesthetic escape from his own ugliness and awkwardness—his "thread of subtle pain / tugged at by playful death" (lines 139-140). As Walker points out, he discovers that "the only intelligent response to human pain is an aesthetic one" (p. 207). For Shade it is a form of salvation, but, like Kinbote's Christian salvation, hovers dangerously near the edge of mortality.

The poet's second venture into the metaphysical realm occurs when he has a heart attack following a lecture on "Why Poetry is Meaningful to us" (line 684). Again, he enters the zone of "blood-black nothingness" (line 703). This time, however, the vision's content proves more substantive. He sees a white fountain against the darkness (line 707). Although Shade never discovers the fountain's significance or possible origin, it, like his earlier vision, becomes a source of both solace and poetic inspiration:

Often when troubled by the outer glare
Of street and strife, inward I'd turn, and there,
There in the background of my soul it stood,
Old Faithful! And its presence always would
Console me wonderfully.

(Lines 741-746)

Shade's final venture into the black region of art and death is, of course, the one from which he does not return. This last escape completes the poem and seems to further cloud the already mysterious link Nabokov is drawing between artistic creation and violent death. Shade's poem is, in
large part, an autobiography; and at death, the chronological threads of author and work-in-progress must necessarily be snapped. The paradox of such a creation lies in the difficulty of completing one's life and life story simultaneously. Assuming only a single line remained, the poet comes as close as any literary figure could to achieving this feat. "Pale Fire" (the poem) winds its way through the poet's childhood, metaphysical experiences, marriage, daughter's suicide, and poetical dotage. Death seems the inevitable conclusion of this artistic process. The poem gradually (by Jacques Degrees) catches up to a place in time only a few pen strokes behind its author, who apparently records the sighting of his murderer's shadow just minutes before he dies:

Where are you (Sybil)? In the garden. I can see Part of your shadow near the shagbark tree. Somewhere horseshoes are being tossed. Click, Clunck. (Leaning against its lamppost like a drunk.) A dark Vanessa with crimson band Wheels in the low sun and settles on the sand. 
(Lines 989-994)

Although this portion of the final stanza appears a long distance thematically from the first, it actually provides a morbid symmetry to the structure of the poem. The Vanessa acts as Nabokov's foreshadower of death, which opens and closes the poem (if Kinbote is correct in saying that the first line is also the last); and just as the waxwing must have collided with its own image swooping out of the reflected azure, Shade dies when he and his poetic reflection
intersect in time. The lines also introduce some of the simple dangers of misinterpretation that accompany the obvious benefits of artistic escape. The violent death of a waxwing mistaking its reflection for the sky is paralleled by Shade's assumption that a shadow seen in the garden belongs to his wife. Apparently, even the master artist occasionally fails to question the truth of two-dimensional representations—and pays the price.

The lepidoptera Nabokov links with death, Shade links, metaphorically, with his wife. Sybil has long been associated with the dark Vanessa (line 270). That butterfly's heraldic appearance outside his window seems to help cloud the poet's judgment: he assumes a real presence to lie behind or beside the emblematic one. A migratory insect, known as "the butterfly of doom" in nineteenth-century Russia, the Admirable lands on Shade's arm a minute prior to his death. The "velvet-and-flame" (p. 195) creature's flight across the close of Shade's poem and life story is interestingly paralleled in Nabokov's own autobiography, in which another Red Admirable flashes across a distant, remembered scene in the final chapter. The autobiographer, after all, can do no more than foreshadow his own demise.

Shade's is not the only dangerous misinterpretation resulting from artistic indulgence, however. The killer himself fails, and ultimately dies, because he trusts a false reflection. By the police account—which posits that the man is an escaped lunatic rather than an incompetent
assassin—Shade dies because Gradus mistakes the poet for his intended victim, a judge of Shade's general description who sent him to prison. Unable to reconcile himself to his failure, and his intended victim's continued survival, Gradus takes his life with a safety razor. Here, the presence of art's false reflection in the world (it lets a poet look like a judge) claims one victim, while its absence in a human (Gradus can see nothing beyond inescapable failure in is his own reflection) claims another. Art proves both dangerous and necessary.

Despite their obvious and important differences, Gradus and Hazel Shade confront the world with equally little protection. Unlike the poet, the two possess no art, no available realm of solace in the face of failure. Gradus, like so many of the characters in Pale Fire soars from place to place, both metaphorically through the text and physically via numerous international airlines. But his is the gawky flight of a retarded though malignant predator, not the precise glide of a Shadean waxwing or colorful flutter of a touring Admirable. Nonetheless, like the waxwing, Gradus is easily fooled by verisimilar representations and destined, as Kinbote points out, "to meet, in his urgent and blind flight, a reflection that will shatter him" (p. 89). The commentator's pun neatly encompasses both possible reasons for the killer's failure: that he mistook Shade for a look-alike, a reflection of another man; or that he simply bungled his regicidal assignment and, when forced to reflect upon his incompetence, "could not live down his last crown-
ing botch" (p. 202). In either case, Kinbote reluctantly recognizes the killer's suicide as one of hopelessness, "a gesture of humanoid despair" (p. 202).

Hazel Shade's exit also comes from despair. Unattractive, lonely, she has inherited her father's flaws without his saving gift. The only glimmer of hope seems to come from a fascination with and connection to a metaphysical world. Aunt Maude's ghost apparently responds to her, as does the ghost of Shade's strolling companion, Paul Hentzner, which she encounters in the old barn. But unlike Shade's art or Kinbote's religion, Hazel's involvement with the supernatural provides her with little comfort. There is no message which she can decipher, no solace or hope implicit in her ghostly contacts. She, like Gradus, like the unwary waxwing, is a literalist, unable to see in her own reflection anything beyond the superficial image; and as Walker points out, she meets her death in the reflecting surface of the lake (p. 206). Kinbote praises Hazel for "having preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life" (Index, under Shade, Hazel), but it is not clear that Hazel saw beauty in death, only escape.

Kinbote's commentary follows a strange path, strangely similar to the poem's. During times when his other, New Wye life proves intolerable, Zembla serves the exiled king in the comforting, necessary way poetry serves Shade. The alleged king's sanity is not the important focus here, only his reaction to the everyday world, which is not unlike
Shade's. Kinbote, too, feels the pain of loneliness, and the rejection of others caused by his supposed defects—although these are not physical, like Shade's, but psychological: his belief in Zembla, his homosexuality. And like Shade, he finds solace in a distant, highly aesthetic land. The exiled king's life contains "that cold hard core of loneliness which is not good for a displaced soul" (p. 61), and only during Zemblan reminiscences does he seem to shed that unbearable loneliness. Quite simply, Kinbote cannot survive without Zembla. Small wonder, then, that he falsely considers Zembla the inspiration and focus of Shade's poem.

The commentator also finds solace and safety in religion—a type of escapist art, in his case. Kinbote's beliefs are inevitably intermingled with death. His version of Christianity emphasizes the afterlife nearly to the exclusion of an earthly one. Its solace for the exiled king consists of providing "a warm haze of pleasurable anticipation" (p. 147), and one as distant and solipsistic as Humbert's (Dolores) Haze. Kinbote's contemplation of a happier hereafter only tempts him to cross the line (or lane) between life and death and achieve that unchanging, blissful, and dead state he foresees. Unfortunately the logical action necessary to do so clashes with religious doctrine:

The more lucid and overwhelming one's belief in Providence, the greater the temptation to get it over with, this business of life, but the greater too one's fear of the terrible sin implicit in self-destruction...

(p. 147)
Oddly, although the poem's commentator displays the greatest dependence on aesthetic escape, he seems least satisfied with this state. Artistic escape, death, and religion merge and spin in Kinbote's prose, none ever surfacing as a completely satisfactory answer to his needs. The commentator proves too curious and complex to find more than temporary relief in an isolated aesthetic realm. He is confused, and his confusion results in a combined fascination with and fear of death. He comments that the arrival of a Zemblan assassin might not be unwelcome, that "the sound of a rapid car or groaning truck would come as a strange mixture of life's friendly relief and death's fearful shadow (p. 62). Kinbote seems to sense that relief-filled death, like Luzhin's sui-mate (another solus rex sacrifice), could relegate him to a similarly immutable, unchanging and solipsistic world. Here he would continue to exist, but in a pale state of suspended animation rather one of vivid immortality.

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Notes


5 The image is thought by many to be from Pope's "Pym."

6 Kinbote claims that this butterfly is known as "the heraldic one" (p. 114) in *Zembla*.


8 Kinbotean scholars might draw some connection between my choice of words here and a poem (printed below) the author once composed for his students, instructing them on the pronunciation of his name. I intend to make no subtle inference that a Gradus-like creature inspires him.

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The Querulous gawk of
A heron at night
Prompts Nabokov
To write
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Problems with Pragmatic Art

While the straightforward ways in which art cushions the lives of both poet and commentator are important—in Kinbote's case, clearly necessary—they also prove ultimately unsatisfactory. Simple, drug-like retreats might have satisfied Gradus' needs, but not those of more questioning, creative personalities. Shade finds temporary solace in his mind's creations, but seems driven to pursue understanding at IPH (the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter), and in the initially inexplicable patterns he discovers around him. In a more hesitant, less consistent fashion Kinbote cannot find adequate relief in his religion, which fails to give him sufficient cause to continue living. He also becomes dissatisfied with a distant, idealized, and unreachable vision of Zembla, and cannot resist exploring its dynamic and dangerous relationship with his immediate world in an effort to find an overall order. Both artists discover that they desire a process of revelation in art, not merely a state of temporary solace; and to obtain this revelation they are willing to venture into realms of far subtler and more abundant dangers than those contained in escapist art.

Superficial aesthetic defenses, as they appear in *Pale Fire*, prove insufficient largely because they are flawless and immutable concepts, imposed on the world to make it less threatening. These wholly man-made items imprint a pattern on the world rather than finding one in it; and the characters in such a system are inevitably captured and killed...
rather than immortalized. Kinbotean Christianity merely condenses all things inexplicable into a single entity, whose invisible pattern believers should neither want nor attempt to explain. Purely aesthetic art exists within a frozen lemniscate on the sand (line 136-138) around whose lazy eight pattern one may numbly and solitarily travel forever. Each unsatisfactory option exists as a dead state, not a living process—and entry into either becomes an act of the kind of solipsism Nabokov deplores.

Shade's poetic autobiography charts his progress from dead to living art. As a child he considers his seizures a "sublime" (line 147) escape. But in retrospect he realizes the journeys left him "corrupted, terrified, allured" (line 163). The poet's thoughts turn away from escape and toward answers—more specifically, the ultimate human answer to questions about the nature of death, about "consciousness beyond the tomb" (line 176). The rest of his life, and poem, can be seen as a meticulous and thorough search for this answer. The search is not motivated by a hope of finding the escapist realm of his youth, but rather any realm in which the link between physical and metaphysical realms is not severed, in which he may retain memories of his life. "I'm ready to become a floweret / or a fat fly," the poet says, "but never, to forget" (lines 523-524).

Shade finds only the dead art he has already explored at IPH, and his search leads him back to his poetry. Unlike the options proposed by the Institute or theolatry, his lines of verse are not imposed by him on the world, but seem
to come from it. The poet's role is that of revealer, not moulder; and although the trek never reaches a Shangri-la of insight, Shade's trip away from religion and simplistic solutions clearly takes him in the right direction. His sequence of books begins with the free verse of Dim Gulf, travels through Night Rote, Hebe's Cup, and several volumes called simply Poems, and concludes with the highly structured heroic couplets of Pale Fire. As the poet's search has progressed, his poems have become more and more structured, reflecting the order he increasingly senses in his world. But the order is not imposed. As Shade himself points out, his slow search for a pattern progresses as he learns which directions not to pursue. It also is found in details. Poetry is the detail, the microcosmic representation of an overall scheme that provides the poet with clues. Shade feels he has come to understand a small part of his existence "only through (his) art" (line 973), and that the order of existence is not unlike an iambic line (line 976). He, unlike Humbert, believes in a connection between verse and universe, a logical link between his small road map of poetry and a complete chart of the cosmos: "If my private universe scans right, / So does the verse of galaxies divine" (Lines 975-976).

Like art's simpler escapist attributes, its more sophisticated revelatory qualities also provide a kind of pleasure, but one of a profounder, less passive nature. By finding clues to the universe's "web of sense" (line 810),
its "game of worlds" (line 819), Shade says one enjoys "...something of the same / Pleasure in it as they who played it found" (914-915). The poet knows that no amount of searching will allow him to control his destiny. Like a chess piece, he will always be moved around the board by another. But this does not mean that even a pawn cannot derive a great satisfaction from comprehending the nature of the game he is in.

Kinbote's difficulties and dissatisfactions with superficial, static art can perhaps best be seen after examining a similar Nabokovian exploration that predates and presages *Pale Fire*. In *Pnin*,\(^1\) a very different though equally tragic waltz through academia, Nabokov describes a teenage boy's experiences with live and dead art. Victor, a young, precocious, and astonishingly talented artist is Pnin's wife's son from a previous marriage. Like Hazel, Victor confronts the problems of loneliness—he attends a boarding school and rarely sees his parents; but unlike Shade's daughter, the young artist has created an imaginary, and more "plausible" (p. 424), family situation to which he escapes each night before going to sleep.

The boy manages to console himself by imagining his father—\(in\) truth, a refugee doctor living in South America—\(to\) be the king of a distant northern land not unlike Zembla. (\(In\) fact, Nabokov later smugly claimed that both *Pnin* and the boy dream of a passage from an early draft of *Pale Fire*).\(^2\) But as Victor has grown up, he has ceased changing and improving the images, which have become static and dead.
"They may have been, at one time, intensely affecting," the narrator tells us. But for the nearly adult Victor "they had become frankly utilitarian, as a simple and pleasant drug" (p. 426). For a young child, the re-created family, constantly undergoing subtle changes and improvements, existed as a living work of art. It had a vital and dynamic relationship with its audience, who was also the creator. When interaction began to subside, however, the fluid process reluctantly congealed into a static object, and the increasingly immutable and pragmatic qualities of Victor's daydreams slowly relegated them to the level of dead art.

While the fantasy of Victor's childhood dies away—apparently to be resurrected by an unstable scholar in New Wye—Victor begins to create mature works of art aimed at wider audiences. Taught by the school's resident artist, a "distinguished freak" (p. 434) who preaches that "Dali is really Norman Rockwell's twin brother kidnapped by gypsies in babyhood" (p. 434), he decides to "immortalize" a motor car. The concept might be described as a sort of Pale Fire on canvas. Its immortal quality could be achieved, Victor decides, by

making the scenery penetrate the automobile. A polished black sedan was a good subject.... Now break the body of the car into separate curves and panels; then put it together in terms of reflections.

(p. 434)

These reflections allow the car to encompass most of the
world: trees, houses, people, the sky, a desert. Like the poem and novel, the world is broken up and partially reassembled by the artist; yet, also like the novel, it demands a viewer to complete the reconstruction process. Its fragmented structure, like a jigsaw puzzle of the universe, demands participation and that process's inevitable risks of error and misinterpretation. Chances are, an avid Kinbote could discover a painted Zembla somewhere in the work—and a fast-gaining Gradus.

Nabokov achieves his ultimate foreshadowing of *Pale Fire*, however, when he describes Victor searching for a suitable vehicle along the downtown streets. From time to time, the sun comes out, apparently aiding the young artist. The narrator comments, "For the sort of theft Victor was contemplating there could be no better accomplice" (p. 435). One cannot avoid connecting this statement to the Shakespearean line from *Timon of Athens* which provides the book's title:

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The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n
From general excrement; each thing's a thief. 3
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In the context of Victor's world, Timon's statement describes the process which results in living art. There exists no true source of natural elements. The sun steals
from the sea, the moon from the sun, the sea from the moon, and the earth from a kind of cosmic excrement left by the trio. Each entity steals from another while itself being robbed. The process, nature's form of live art, is one of feeding and breeding, of constant interaction and continual interdependence.

Art's triple role as realm of escape, key to enlightenment and danger zone has embedded itself deeply in Charles. Unlike Shade and Victor, who seem clearly to have left behind the safety of static art, Kinbote wavers between a need for simple solace and a craving for insight. That province which offers a crystalline alternative to his terrible loneliness also threatens his life when he allows it to merge and interact with the world of New Wye. And survival depends not merely on telling a real Shadow (Gradus) from false Shade (Sybil), but in constantly eluding a group of persistent, if untalented, killers. He lives in constant terror of the Zemblan assassins who, he feels sure, will one day arrive at his doorstep.

Despite his declared fear of impending regicide, Kinbote finds death highly attractive. Suicide, in fact, he manages to finally reconcile with Christianity. "We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins," he comments (p. 149). Some of Charles' most lilting and enticing passages are those which allude to, or directly describe, suicide:

The ideal drop is from an aircraft, your
muscles relaxed, your pilot puzzled, your packed parachute shuffled off, cast off, shrugged off—farewell, Shootka (little chute)! Down you go, but all the while you feel suspended and buoyed as you somersault in slow motion like a somnolent tumbler pigeon, and sprawl supine on the eiderdown of the air, or lazily turn to embrace your pillow, enjoying every last instant of soft, deep, death-padded life, with the earth's green seesaw now above, now below, and the voluptuous crucifixion, as you stretch yourself in the growing rush, in the near-ing swish, and the your loved body's obliteration in the Lap of the Lord.

(p. 148)

Yet the joys of this final, falling escape prove an insufficient motivation. The commentator stubbornly continues living, proclaiming, at the end of his notes that he shall continue to exist (p.202). The religion that seems so central to the exiled ruler actually has little effect on his actions and is essentially discarded by him, despite continued references.

Similarly, Kinbote reluctantly leaves the distant, idyllic and frozen Zembla of his memories behind, replacing it with a less palatable, ever-changing northern land of the present. Rather than abdicating his rank and realm completely, as Victor did, the commentator chooses "the unknown quantity of exile" (Pnin, p. 425). This decision keeps Zembla from disappearing into the abyss of solipsism or into heaven's unreachable azure by allowing him a continuing interaction with his former land. In fact, in lepidopterous terms it makes Kinbote (or Botkin, if one wishes to exclude names not included on the faculty of Wordsmith College) the living link, the immortal red label fusing two worlds. To
switch metaphors mid stream-of-thought, the commentator has also become the all-encompassing reflective surface of Victor's automobile.

Yet the Botkin/Kinbote creature finds exponentially increased vulnerability in his immortal role. As an inhabitant of either Zembla or America, he possessed some corporeal integrity, a body, albeit of a mortal and temporary sort. That body had to be protected against various killers and aerobatic accidents, but otherwise belonged to him. As a mirror, however, which contains nothing without someone or something looking into it, the king, like any author, is completely dependent on other entities for existence, immortal or otherwise.

How, then, to insure life everlasting? The answer lies in the book's structure: Achieve a balance between a reflection of one world and a transparent view into another, a magic combination of opacity and enlightenment, refraction and reflection so precise that further information can always be gleaned, but absolute answers never found. Shade's poem achieves this in Kinbote's case, as is shown by the existence of the commentary. Kinbote resurrects the old poet each time he reconsiders the manuscript--usually, and ironically, searching for his own reflection. The commentator's own immortality, in turn, is dependent on the art with which he erects a barrier between himself and the poem, a barrier which simultaneously clarifies and obfuscates until the reader's focus must be the relationship between the texts, his realm of immortality, not the texts themselves. But the
commentator must stay always one small step ahead of the avid reader or he is dead. Nabokov, of course, must stay yet one step further on, his immortality depending, like the earth's in Shakespeare's Timonean scheme of the universe, on small thefts from each of the other symbiotic elements.

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Notes

1 Vladimir Nabokov, Pnin, from The Portable Nabokov (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978) pp. 362-512. If for no other reason, Pnin should be read in this edition because of its typeface, Linotype Times Roman, a family and font set of old fashioned charm and restraint equal to the (assistant) professor's.

2 Nabokov allegedly made the comment during a 1966 interview with Alfred Appel, Jr. in Montreux, Switzerland, which was later published in Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, Vol VIII, no. 2, spring, 1967. One wonders whether its reliability has suffered or been strengthened by the establishment that Mr. Appel does, in fact, exist. At any rate, it appears in the author's reworking of that interview on page 84 of Strong Opinions.

3 William Shakespeare, Timon of Athens, IV, iii, 436-442.
Art and the Reader

Many critics have sensed the presence of predation when writing about Nabokov's works, but few have believed themselves the predators. William Rowe describes some aspects of "reader participation" in his book Nabokov's Deceptive World; his approach, however, suggests that the reader has only a clearly submissive, nearly powerless role. Reader-response criticism, as sketched by such critics as Walker Gibson, seemed to be traveling in the right direction, but has so far failed to yield any better results. Few from that school have closely examined Pale Fire, and those, such as Peter Rabinowitz, who have, invest most of their effort in asking who exactly Nabokov's readers and mock readers are rather than why they exist. Not unlike Mary McCarthy, Rabinowitz ultimately relegates the novel to the level of a literary chess game, "generally unmoving, witty and brilliant as it may be" (p. 139).

Pale Fire should not, at any level, be seen as a chess match, unless one believes that chess strategy orders the universe (a belief which would quickly make Nabokov and Bobby Fischer the two most "relevant" authors of the century). At all echelons it remains an intensely human and humane work. The ways in which characters manipulate and are themselves manipulated in no way detracts from their ability to suffer or die; and even the most simple, pragmatic uses of art as a means to escape human suffering, in or outside of the book, retain great importance to the author. Pale
Fire merely refuses to contain these elements within the finite realm of its 214 pages, and in searching for an escape from its margins, grasps logically and desperately for the reader's hand.

A metaphorical description of the novel's highest echelon might be represented, appropriately, by a butterfly—not the commonplace Vanessa, but one of several rarer types, dearer to Nabokov. The author had a particular fascination for insects which mimic, in their protective camouflage, natural phenomena to a degree inexplicable by any pragmatic criteria. In Speak, Memory he remarks that

when a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generously thrown in. "Natural selection," in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of "the struggle for life" when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation.

(p. 33)

The author returns to this theme in an essay entitled "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," providing a description of one such butterfly as detailed and precise as the phenomenon described:

There is a species of butterfly on the hind wing of which a large eyespot imitates a drop of liquid with such uncanny perfection that a line which crosses the wing is slightly displaced at the exact stretch where it passes through—or better say under—the spot; this part of the line seems
shifted by refraction, as it would if a real
globular drop had been there and we were looking
through it at the pattern of the wing.
(pp. 374-375)

The difference between a chameleon's simple blending and the
butterfly's flawless mimetic feat parallels the Nabokovian
distinction between dead and living art, between Kinbote's
flat and utilitarian Christianity and his sparkling Zembla.
In the former realm one finds a frankly Darwinian aid to
survival; but in the latter there seems to exist not only an
escape from predators but a subtle and fascinating message
from nature to naturalist.

Humans, according to Nabokov, have a nature which makes
them look for order in the apparently inexplicable world
around them, a unity of which they constitute an integral
part. But since no human can look at the entirety of time
and space, it is the closely scrutinized detail, the mini-
cscale section, examined like a butterfly's pinned wing that
provides insight into the nature of the larger, macrocosmic
order. Time provides the greatest hindrance, with death
being the limit that precludes taking all possibilities into
account. Nabokov posits that

in a sense, we are all crashing to our death from
the top story of our birth to the flat stones of
the churchyard and wondering with an immortal
Alice in Wonderland at the patterns of the passing
wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles--no
matter the imminent peril--these asides of the
spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are
the highest forms of consciousness...
(pp. 373-374)
In true Nabokovian fashion, three footnotes in *Pale Fire* actually illustrate this statement. The first is to line 803: "Life everlasting--based on a misprint!" Shade uses the line sarcastically, referring to his disappointment at discovering that his coveted fountain had not, in fact, been seen by another, only transformed by a misprint from the "mountain" in a stranger's preview of death. Kinbote's note seems only to worry about the difficulty of translating such an error into another language. In doing so he shows an example in which a single letter misprint can be translated successfully into not one but two other languages, an event against which the odds "defy computation" (p. 174). The commentary appears unrelated to the poem and Shade's intent. However, in fact, they run a parallel course. The incident which at first dismays the poet, gradually makes him feel some "faint hope" (line 834). He begins to sense that the misprint, the accident itself, may be an important clue--if one considers that it may not have been an accident, but a link, a place where life and afterlife intersect at a misprint, just as Kinbote's three languages did.

"Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense" (line 810) finds Kinbote again seemingly way off target. While the poet talks about finding a trace of order in the universe, his commentator describes borrowing a book from the owner of a motor court in Utana (a place, no doubt, at the intersection of Montana and Utah). Again, the note proves to be precisely linked to its source. The book Kinbote borrows is *The Let-
ters of Franklin Lane, its subject, among other things, life after death and how to make sense of the universe. The commentator even cites a passage, explaining that Lane composed the fragment "on the eve of his death, following a major operation" (p. 175). That fragment reads:

And if I had passed into that other land, whom would I have sought?...Aristotle!—Ah, there would be a man to talk with! What satisfaction to see him take, like reins from between his fingers, the long ribbon of man's life and trace it through the mystifying maze of all the wonderful adventure....The crooked made straight. The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above—smeared out as it were by the splotch of some master thumb that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line.

(p. 175)

The thoughts mimic Shade's to a surprising degree; but perhaps even more surprising are some facts about the author's name and history, which fuse not only the poet and commentator's worlds but begin to attach the reader's as well. A lane—that which runs between Kinbote and Shade's houses, physically and metaphorically separating them—has been a central image throughout the book. Kinbote constantly stalks there, spying on his neighbor, the Red Admirable touches down in that lane, and Gradus makes his attack there. It serves as a separation between the two main characters' worlds and between life and death. Equally evocative is Franklin Lane's middle name, Knight. Kinbote's kingship inspires numerous chess references from Nabokov, and so does Lane's Knighthood. The knight is that piece which can "feel"
squares and files beyond the chessboard's limits.

These "coincidences" all might be considered the painstaking handiwork of the author except that Franklin Knight Lane "an American lawyer and statesman, author of a remarkable fragment" (P.210) exists in the reader's world as well as the commentator's. Franklin Lane, unlike Shade, unlike Kinbote, can be found in the card catalogue of a good library, under non-fiction, as can his collected letters. An author whose final autobiographical pen stroke seems to perfectly coincide with his death appears magically from an amazing coincidence to point to Aristotle as an explainer of the overall order. And because of his existence in the "real" world, Pale Fire begins, like an ambitious chess knight, to invade a portion of the board considered off limits by the reader, who is standing on it. The web of sense, one finds, has woven in the "real" world and written its way out of the margins.

Word golf is the subject of the third footnote, and proves to be one of the details in Pale Fire most seemingly trite and yet, like the mimetic lepidotera, most certainly close to the sort of answer for which humans search. It also provides a sterling example of the complex interaction between reader and author which fuses them, and all elements in between, as the joint search progresses. Finally it hints at the infinite and pervasive nature of a novel which is impossible to complete and increasingly difficult to keep safely between its covers.

Kinbote never explains the rules of word golf, but
offers a clever demonstration in the index, leading the reader through a par-five round. Under "Word golf" the index says "see Lass"; beside which one finds the message "see Mass"; whose entry reads "Mars, Mare, see Male"; which, of course, states "see Word golf." The guidelines are simple: get from one word to another, changing one letter at a time, using only words found in the dictionary, in as few moves as possible. In this example, as in numerous other cases, Pale Fire allows the reader no exit, and leaves one with the feeling that a dynamic force exists within the book itself, propelling Kinbote again and again around his word golf course. But this property is merely a superficial dividend. The implications of word golf in relation to the rest of the book, however, are more profound.

Consider Kinbote's example: Lass, Mass, Mars, Mare, Male. The sequence travels through religion, the universe and a sexual transformation in twenty letters. The path should have been random, and must, given the restraints of the language, have been at least partly beyond the player's control; yet, is there not the ghost of a pattern, a dim reflection of Kinbote's problems, a web of sense? In part this is present because the commentator chose the first and last words, Lass and Male; but the path from one to the other, surely one of life's great mysteries, seems to reveal more than coincidence can account for. The evidence of such a message could hardly be called conclusive, yet one could far more easily glean some understanding from Kinbote's
choice of putts through the dictionary than from another possible solution: Lass, Last, Mast, Malt, Male. Aside from the towering phallic symbol at its center (which Nabokov would undoubtedly dismissed as Freudian drivel) this sequence's revolutionary attributes seem minimal.

Not insignificantly, Shade refers to word golf in the poem as "playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns / To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns." (line 819) Although beneath the superficial description of mythical creatures the poet also seems to be talking about chess, in his description he golfs across a rhyme, from pawns to fawns to fauns. Again, one wonders if there isn't some logic guiding the progression from minor chess piece to young deer to woodland deity. Like the trip from lass to male, the answer falls far short of certainty; but there can be no doubt that Nabokov wants his readers to acknowledge the possibility that they may be participating in the discovery of some shadowy underlying order, some metaphysical force rising out of the language itself to explain the universe.

Kinbote claims he only played the game to humor his poet, but he records several of his favorite triumphs: "hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five (with 'lend' in the middle)" (P.176). The first isn't terribly difficult--hate, have, lave, love--and the second has been solved in the index. But these are relatively simple journeys compared to the ultimate trip between live and dead.

With the clue that "lend" falls in the middle, the
sequence should be an easy series of permutative putts. Not so. Beginning the game from live, one has only three moves to reach lend, meaning that i must become e; v, n; and e, d--though not necessarily in that order--without any intervening steps. Since neither leve\textsuperscript{7} nor livd exists in the dictionary, one must choose line. For the next step, the possibilities are fewer: lind or lene. Again, only one option appears in the dictionary. Although most dictionaries\textsuperscript{8} offer only a proper noun, the maiden name of Jenny Lind, an opera singer, heavier dictionaries--of which Nabokov was nearly as fond as lepidotera--also list a noun: lind,\textsuperscript{9} meaning kindliness or gentleness. Once beyond this lexical dogleg, the green comes into view; and three easy strokes, to lend, lead, and dead finish the round.

This, the longest of Kinbote's courses, perhaps best demonstrates the ways in which reader and author's worlds intermingle. In this instance, all the other participants have been eliminated. Shade apparently invented the game, and seems to sense its revelatory powers. But his comments on it are restricted to a few lines and the example above--live, line, lind, lend, lead, dead--belongs not to the poet but to the commentator. Kinbote, by contrast, has produced a remarkable sequence, but dismisses the game as childish and insignificant. Only the reader remains to play through, so to speak, or leave the author forever on the fairway.

The sequence in itself does not reveal any monumental
truths or monstrous secrets, but does, perhaps predict John Shade's death. If one were to summarize the final moments of the poet's life in six words, they might well be these six—although like most such summaries, they only make sense to those who know something of the source. Consider a possible expanded form of the sequence: The live Shade, with only one line remaining in Pale Fire, performs an act of lend by agreeing to lend his nearly finished manuscript to a rather odd neighbor while they walk, with said poet in the lead, to that neighbor's house, where a lunatic renders the former quite dead.

At about this point, one could say that the flame of hard evidence has been lost in a conjectural darkness of Kinbotean proportions—and perhaps the author is the predator and this his sly victory. But, like the mimetic subtlety of Nabokov's butterflies, the words and their order seem to exceed mere coincidence. Accidental or not, they seem the best bet available to a person falling to his death, his only faint hope invested in finding a pattern, a sign of order on the wall rushing by. Besides, their exist only two other alternatives: to close one's eyes and search for a numbing escape such as religion or solipsism, or to watch, with terrified passivity, the flat stones' fast approach.

Escapists, naturally, will have been lost long before they approach word golf or any of the other gates to new worlds found in Pale Fire. Others however, will be as persistent in trying to gain entrance to the text as its central characters are desperate to claw their way out. Neither
will entirely succeed. Kinbote will never wrench his second foot entirely free of the text and the novel's opacity will always keep readers from seeing through it more than shadows from the next world. He must be clever enough to avoid the mathematical massacre of even a "bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus" (p. 203) plodding through his story. But the constant striving of writer and avid reader will continue its symbiotic relationship, bringing life to one and hope to the other—because, not in spite of, the abyss of doubt and uncertainty placed between them.

Notes


4 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak Memory, from The Portable Nabokov (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978). All subsequent references are in the text and refer to this edition.


6 Franklin Knight Lane, The Letters Of Franklin Knight Lane, 1804-1921 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922).

7 unless one allows the French "leve," which would be
the word golfing equivalent of adopting someone else's ball simply because yours had plunged into the water hazard and his settled obediently on the green.

8 I refer here to a random sampling of a half dozen standard college dictionaries, in the two to five-pound range.

9 Jenny is not only mentioned, but provides a rather Kinbotean coincidence or two to seize upon. Her bird nickname fits right in to *Pale Fire* 's scheme, of course, but her married name, Goldschmidt, proves even more unusual. Kinbote points out that one can extract both Wordsworth and Goldsmith from combinations of Wordsmith (college) and Goldsworth ('s house). Jenny's last name, Goldsmith, or a german variant thereof neatly encompasses the latter of these poetical combinations.


Lind, Jenny (born Johanna Maria Lind; Mme. Otto Goldschmidt) 1820-1887; Swed. Soprano: called the Swedish Nightingale.

10 It should be pointed out that an informative word golf journey can be made from nest to text in two—nest, next, text—perhaps suggesting that the preterist had to proceed to the next world before he could appear in the text. Of course, there is another another possibility: nest, test, text, but this sounds more like the reader's journey.
Honors Project Related Reading

By Vladimir Nabokov: 1. Pnin
2. Speak, Memory
3. Lolita
4. The Defense
5. Despair
6. Invitation to a Beheading
7. Bend Sinister

By other authors: 1. John Fowles, The Collector
2. Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths
3. Italo Calvino, If on a Winter's Night a Traveler