

Pale Fire Upon the Page: the book as object, mutilation, and
the transformative touch of the reader

Research Thesis

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Introduction

It is not often, when we read, that we reflect heavily and meaningfully on the physical object we hold in our hands. Rarely, do we reflect on the long history of the codex or the ways that time, utility, and standardization have shaped the object into what we know today. Most codices, regardless of genre or purpose, do not require their readers to consider the page the text is on, nor how they interact with it. For the regularly abled, the effort required to peruse a text, the force and dexterity needed to turn a page, the movement of one's eyes as they track the text, is trivial. Therefore, we often disregard the physical characteristics of a text as meaningless when considering its evaluative analytical worth. The tangible only seems to matter in the realm of the economic, aesthetic, or functional. As such, we devalue the importance of our own physical presence when it comes to a literary work. But codices are inherently interactive objects, and our engagement with a codex is a transformative action. Even the lightest touch, from the most pristine human hand, leaves behind the residue of sweat, oil, and dead skin cells on the extremely porous paper. The trace materials your skin has absorbed will transfer to the paper of every page you turn. To touch is to transform, even on a minute scale.

Not all texts take this interaction between the reader and the medium for granted. Ergodic literature, for instance, requires nontrivial effort to traverse the text, focusing “on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange.”¹ Thereby placing the reader in the role of actively constructing the text in terms of physical arrangement of the book object and narrative control. Some such notable ergodic works include: Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1*, a ‘book in a box,’ unbound, unpaginated pages in a box that the reader may shuffle, deciding the order of the loose pages as

well as what pages to include or exclude. Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*: a set of ten sonnets—all with the same rhyme scheme and sounds—printed separately by line allowing them to be interchanged. Raymond Cortázar's *Hopscotch*: a novel of 155 chapters with the last 99 being “expendable.” The reader may read follow the author's methods – a linear progression through chapters 1 through 56, leaving the rest unread, or a progression where the reader “hopscotches” through the chapters according to a non-linear progression laid out by the author. Alternatively, the reader may ignore these methods and forge their own way through the text. Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, a novel split into three cross-referenced dictionaries with no discernible chronology, can be similarly read in any order the reader chooses. The information found in each dictionary often contradicts what is stated elsewhere, requiring the reader to “put together the book for himself, as in a game of dominoes or cards.”² At the heart of these books is the playful grapple between a book's text and its form, necessitating the reader's physical engagement with the book in order to read its text and to construct their narratives.

Another novel that, while not necessarily firmly categorized as such, is often understood as ergodic literature or proto-hypertext is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. In fact, when asked how *Pale Fire* fits in to any traditional literary traditions or forms, Nabokov responded, “the form of *Pale Fire* is specifically, if not generically, new.”³ Nabokov does not expand on his statement, deciding to use this “pleasant opportunity” to correct a few misprints in the 1962 Putnam edition of *Pale Fire*⁴. The novel does not necessarily chafe under the classification of ergodic as it is a work quite conscious of its own materiality and the work it requires of its reader. *Pale Fire* has two fictional authors: John Shade, an elderly poet and professor of English at the nearby Wordsmith College, and Charles Kinbote, neighbor, friend, colleague in addition to self-

appointed editor of Shade's final work. Comprising four segments—Foreword, "Pale Fire: A Poem in Four Cantos," Commentary, and Index—*Pale Fire* can be read "either unicursally, straight through, or multicursally, by jumping between the comments and the poem."⁵ The poem itself is a metaphysical meditation on the poet's fraught relationship with death throughout a life marked by loss. His grief over his daughter's suicide casts a long shadow over the work. When the escaped convict, Jack Grey, kills Shade, mistaking him for the Judge who condemned him to an asylum for the criminally insane, Kinbote steals the manuscript of "Pale Fire" from Shade's still cooling corpse. He assumes editorial control over the poem, penning his paratextual additions through which he infers that he is the exiled king of a distant northern land named Zembla.

I've selected *Pale Fire* as a representative work through which to view issues of materiality that arise when we posit the reader's interaction with the book object as meaningful context to their experience of the text. Because the novel invites readers to think meaningfully about their role in actively reconstructing the narrative in conjunction and allows them to author their own experience, it thereby prompts inquiries about the reader's physical interaction with the text. Additionally, the existence of two editions of *Pale Fire* that significantly change the form of the book provides interesting avenues into the reader's experience when that interaction is limited or decided for them.

Mutilation or Alteration?

Before delving into the explicit example of *Pale Fire*, a larger contemplation of how we, as readers, relate to, and conceive of, books as tangible objects is necessary. I will be specifically examining how the physical manipulation of books, whether that be cutting, gluing, folding, and so on, elicits strong reactions from readers. In order to classify these differing reactions, I will be

using essayist and reporter Anne Fadiman’s description of two kinds of readers. First, there is “courtly love” where “a book’s physical self [is considered] sacrosanct... its form inseparable from its content.”⁶ The courtly lover feels duty bound to “a noble but doomed attempt to conserve forever the state of chastity in which it had left the bookseller.”⁷ Then there is “carnal love” where “a book’s words were holy, but the paper, cloth, cardboard, glue, thread, and ink that contained them were a mere vessel.”⁸ To the carnal lover “it [is] no sacrilege to treat them as wantonly as desire and pragmatism dictated. Hard use [is] a sign not of disrespect but of intimacy.”⁹ In essence, a courtly lover views the object and text as one, thus treating the object reverentially; whereas the carnal lover sees the object as incidental to the dissemination of the text, and any subsequent damage as proof of being well-loved.

Under these two categories, the contemporary reading populace tends towards the attitude of courtly love—a claim I will provide anecdotal evidence to support in a moment. Even the more liberally inclined courtly lovers, who can tolerate the practice of writing in the margins of a book or dog-earring a page’s corner, will object to the wholesale destruction of a book. When books are cut up for the purposes of creating art, crafting, or ease of reading, readers will respond with accusations of moral repugnance, cries of murder falling from their lips. Minimal wear-and-tear may be the transactional cost of reading a physical book, an inevitability a courtly lover will try to minimize, but the intentional act of “mutilating” a book denotes maliciousness that courtly lovers can’t reconcile. For example, take the public response involving television personality Lauren Conrad and a now defunct episode of her do-it-yourself craft videos for YouTube titled *Lauren Conrad’s Crafty Creations*. In this infamous episode, Conrad took apart the book bindings of several volumes from the popular children’s books, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Using the severed spines, Conrad decorated a storage box with them, giving it the façade of

books lined up on a shelf. The video quickly went viral, provoking immense backlash from viewers and considerable media coverage from a range of online news sources. Four hours after BuzzFeed posted an article on what they called, “the worst craft idea ever,”¹⁰ the video was removed from her channel, never to be uploaded again.¹¹ One viewer remarked in the comment section of Conrad’s video, “I feel like I’m watching some sort of terrible snuff film”¹², while BuzzFeed contributor Cates Holderness likened the act to “murder”¹³. In response to the BuzzFeed article, one user wrote, “there’s a special circle in hell reserved for pedophiles, animal abusers and people who destroy books.”¹⁴ As these remarks show, the general tenor of responses emphasized the perceived violence of the act and the intentional moral depravity of Conrad for committing the act as well as documenting it. The fact this incident gained the amount of attention it did speaks to the sheer force of condemnation that the ‘destruction’ of books can generate. Perhaps the tendency to characterize book destruction as murder has to do with the anatomical relevance of book terminology: a book’s spine, it’s head, it’s ‘foot’ notes—originally called glosses from the Greek word for tongue¹⁵, it’s fingerprint*. In fact, the trend continues beyond calling book destruction murder; for instance, the “vice of breaking up two (or more) copies of a book to achieve a complete set of variants never otherwise found within the same covers” is referred to as cannibalization.¹⁶

However, this reaction, and courtly love itself, isn’t necessarily a given, especially when considering reading habits of past. In the old days of book production, before the large-scale automation of printing, when large sheets of paper were folded to form leaves of a codex, readers would buy books with unopened edges. Reading a novel *required* taking a pen knife to the page,

*Spine: “that part of a book which is visible as it stands closed on the shelf. (235)”, Head: “the top of the book, as in *head-margin* or *head-edge* (140).” Footnote: a marginal note located at the bottom of the page providing ancillary information, such as this note here. Fingerprint: “a biographical device... designed to distinguish between a book set and one printed from standing type.” (118). Citations for these definitions found in the endnotes.

cutting open the folded edges of the leaf, and physically slicing a path through the text. Surely, many a gentleman and lady must have enjoyed the simple tactile pleasure—the sheer visceral joy—of pulling a sharp-edged blade through the uncut pages. But, as the production of books became steadily more automated, the task of cutting pages fell to machines, making the opening of the bolts by knife no longer necessary. This account is not intended to romanticize the bookmaking process before the automated age, but to simply to make the point that cutting was once necessary to the project of reading. Perhaps because of the physical cutting needed to read a new book, the reading populace of the past felt comfortable altering their book to a great extent and more given to carnal love. One might be inclined to think that the greater the individual effort put into making the book object, the more highly the reading public would treasure it. But in the 19th century, an age awash in ephemera, keeping books of scraps was a popular and common pastime. Readers, undaunted by propriety, would excise colorful die-cuts, newspaper clippings, literary excerpts, and countless other items of interest to paste into the pages of their scrapbooks. In the late 1700's, James Granger authored *Biographical History of England*, publishing his work with blank leaves for readers to add their own illustrations in. The practice of “grangerizing” became so popular, readers would have the binding of other books taken apart to add in blank leaves to facilitate the trend. Even books that were truly considered sacrosanct, i.e. the Bible, weren't exempt from alteration. In the centuries following the invention of the printing press, the practice of using family bibles as record keeping devices grew in popularity. The Holy Book, a sacred text, became a repository of a family's personal information: important dates were written on blank leaves, clippings, photographs, and other scraps tucked between pages. A more visceral example is that of The Jefferson Bible, constructed by the founding father Thomas Jefferson. The Jefferson Bible, an 84-page bible, sandwiched between red leather

wrapped boards, contains excised selections of biblical verses from four separate translations, focused only on Jesus but devoid of any of his mystical works. Imagining the venerated figure Jefferson bent over the good book, carefully cutting columns of text to paste into a version of his own creation certainly makes Conrad's own crafting harmless by comparison. Not only does she figure into a long history of people altering books, but she shares celebrated company.

Yet, despite this history of book alteration, at some point a certain degree of fetishization of the codex form became ingrained in our understanding of print. Even so, the line that separates mutilation from alteration isn't always clear-cut. Mediating factors trouble the distinction between a licit alteration and an illicit one, or less kindly, a mutilation. To illustrate, the college professor and artist, Julia Strand, earned modest attention for her intricate book carvings she continues to create and sell independently online. The PBS article covering Strand and her works had a remarkably different spin than the Conrad affair. The article, titled "Artist saves old books by cutting them to pieces," positions Strand not as a book murderer, but a savior. The books she carves are given "second life," saved from being discarded and turned into art. Aware of possible backlash akin to Conrad, Strand remarks, "Because some people are uncomfortable about the idea of cutting up books under any circumstances, I want to be really careful that when I do cut them up I'm only using books that people aren't likely to use for other purposes."¹⁷ She explains further what kind of books she selects for carving on her personal website: "I only use books that are no longer valued for their content, and never carve rare or new books."¹⁸ Strand's critical reception, while much smaller than Conrad's, paints her in a more flattering light. Similarly, Hawaiian artist Jacqueline Rush Lee, known for her book art, buys "old, worn books... in bulk."¹⁹ Much like with Strand, the article's author and artist herself take pains to delineate between artistic rebirth and senseless destruction: "While some viewers are

quick to criticize art that ‘destroys’ or ‘desecrates’ books, Lee points out that these books have been given another life.”²⁰ As a result, what may elsewhere be called desecration by courtly lovers may become permissible under certain circumstances.

Between Conrad, Strand, and Lee, the conditional circumstances that define an alteration over a mutilation start to emerge. The work must be significantly transformative in nature—carving sculptures into old tomes or die-cutting a pre-existing text to create a new sculptural object. However, in the act of doing so, one usually renders the text into a sculptural object; something to be marveled at rather than actually read. A process that appears permissive especially when the source text has been deemed to be of no value. Old textbooks, outdated references, a book of atlases – the kinds of text one would be exceedingly unlikely to choose for their nightly reading and much more likely to use as a doorstop or paperweight, these are the type of books suitable for alteration. Strand and Lee both stress their use of texts that are both culturally and economically worthless. Conrad, however, made the mistake of using books that had both economic value and cultural relevance. Notably, Conrad gained her fame from her role in the reality television series *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County*, created a video for the generally harmless low-stakes world of crafting, and used books from a wildly popular children’s series. Strand and Lee, on the other hand, were creating ‘art’ not ‘crafts’ and had titles that were positionally higher than the ‘trashy’ occupation of reality television star turned celebrity personality. Clearly, the cultural status of both the book being used, the item being created, and the person doing the altering features significantly affects how the action is perceived.

Carving up such a book, unless mediated by the factors covered above, too keenly reminds us of erasure—the transient nature of all things no matter how everlasting their physical forms may seem. Book destruction, as a whole, whether intentional—like the campaign of book

burnings conducted by the Nazi Germany—or accidental—such as the fire that destroyed the Library of Alexandria—appears unacceptable to contemporary readers.

Pale Fire's Paratext as an Invitation to Alteration

Pale Fire however is not a text that shies away from provoking its readers nor positions them as a distant, unengaged audience. The text invites the reader's active engagement in constructing the narrative. Additionally, it explores such engagement on the diegetic level of Kinbote's editorial intrusions which shape, or warp, depending on one's reading of the text, the narrative of "Pale Fire." Kinbote reinterprets the poem within his own critical apparatus and physically transforms the *Pale Fire* object with his paratextual additions. Indeed, Kinbote places emphasis on the material reality of "Pale Fire," writing, "the manuscript, mostly a Fair Copy, from which the present text has been faithfully printed, consists of eighty medium-sized index cards... held together by a rubber band."²¹ Obviously, the poem, both in the diegesis and the 'real' world, cannot be distributed in the same manner it was originally written. Repackaging the poem into codex form is necessary to the project of reproducing and retailing the text. With the manuscript firmly in his grasp, Kinbote is in the unique position to control this repackaging by way of paratextual elements. In addition to the poem, which, as Kinbote informs us, "has been faithfully printed" from the Fair copy manuscript, then "carefully rechecked... against the phototype of the manuscript,"²² Kinbote has included a Foreword, a Commentary, and an Index. Gerard Genette states, "by definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it."²³ Lacking the author's ability to legitimate the paratext, Kinbote is asked by Frank, his "present publisher," "to mention in [his] Preface... that [he] alone [can be held] responsible for any mistakes"²⁴ therein. The paratext is legitimated, even though

Kinbote, in his efforts to prove his authority, introduces doubts concerning his acquisition of the manuscript, his expertise as a Shadean scholar, his status as John's friend, and his own sanity.

Still, Kinbote has accepted responsibility for his paratext and assumes authorial, or at least, editorial, authority over his text. Despite these hints towards Kinbote's unreliability,

“[paratextual] devices are legitimized by the proximity to the treatise and wield interpretative power over it. Indeed, readers rarely regard the title of a book with suspicion, or interrogate its chapter divisions. The paratext says, ‘the text is thus,’ as if it were a statement of fact.

Authorized by its own presence, the paratext is trusted because it exists.”²⁵ The positioning of the Foreword, and its paratextual status, legitimizes its presence within the codex, despite evidence to the contrary. A fact Kinbote relies on to assert his editorial authority and validate the claims he makes in the Foreword and beyond. One such claim being the ‘proper’ way to navigate the different sections of *Pale Fire*:

Other notes, arranged in a running commentary, will certainly satisfy the most voracious reader.

Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture.²⁶

To the imagined reader, this claim, bolstered by its paratextual status and professed authority of the editor, may seem worth following. Those suspicious of Kinbote and his aims may view this as a self-motivated instruction; one that promotes a reading where Kinbote's own narrative serves as the central text of the book. Either way, Kinbote introduces the freedom of cursality to the reader. Espen J. Aarseth distinguishes between two modes of cursality: “the unicursal, where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center; and the multicursal, where

the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia.”²⁷ Kinbote outlines that while the text is presented in a linear, chronological fashion, it does not require a unicursal reading. He advises a multicursal reading which reorients the Commentary as the central text of *Pale Fire*. Consequently, by introducing another mode of cursality to the reader, Kinbote additionally opens the avenue of total freedom regarding cursality. If the reader is not beholden to the expected unicursal navigation of a novel, then neither are they bound to the multicursal structure Kinbote lays out. Kinbote’s instructions become an invitation to the reader to choose their own cursality. One could read it straight through in the order it is presented. One may treat it as an axial narrative: “a narrative where digressions are present in the form of glosses or notes that are secondary to the main narrative [where] typically, [the] reader returns to the main text after the digression,”²⁸. treating either the poem or the commentary as the central text Different paths generate their own crossroads of interpretation. The reader chooses the cursality of the narrative discourse and this choice invariably effects their reconstruction of the narrative’s events.

Invariably, anxiety over how best to approach *Pale Fire* figures crucially into the experience of the novel. First-time readers in the internet age turn to the online forums to air questions regarding cursality. One such reader asked, “Does anyone have a preferred order to read this in? ... I did wonder how the experience would change if you read in the order Kinbote suggests.”²⁹ Questions about how other readers authored their own experience and what effect it had is a common theme in online discussions of *Pale Fire*. Readers, so rarely given the choice to determine the cursality of a book, nervously engage with the prospect, correctly deducing that this choice matters and will crucially and irrevocably impact their experience of the story. Because this is a degree of active engagement most texts do not require of their readers, another frequent question levied is, as one person phrased it, “And most importantly, is it worth it?”³⁰

Regardless of the cursality the reader chooses, *Pale Fire* will require an immense amount of work to read and to understand. Another commenter, Andrew Cheong, discussing how his “depth-first search” reading of *Pale Fire* differed from his friend’s linear read through, wrote,

obviously, my friend and I had completely different experiences. My experience seemed to have more clarity about the story from the beginning, and also it was interesting not having a sense of when the book would end despite holding a physical copy. Meanwhile, my friend’s experience seemed more surreal, fragments and ideas not fitting into any storyline until much later, entirely dependent on what his memory held on to, making a Joyce-like impressionist effect. I envy I’ll never experience this.³¹

Cheong’s understanding of how his reading of *Pale Fire* differed both experientially and physically from his friend’s coupled with his envy over the equally valid but undeniably different impression it yielded goes to show how vitally important the choice is. Furthermore, online readers also accurately judge that one’s experience with *Pale Fire* ends not with the full consumption of the text but occurs only when the reader chooses to end it. For this reason, readers point out that full comprehension of the novel after one reading isn’t necessary, nor is it possible³². Understanding comes as information begins to cohere with subsequent re-readings, due to the segmented nature of the book. A sentiment Nabokov himself supported when reading any text. In “Good Readers and Good Writers,” Nabokov observed,

One cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader... When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation... We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its

details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do a painting.³³

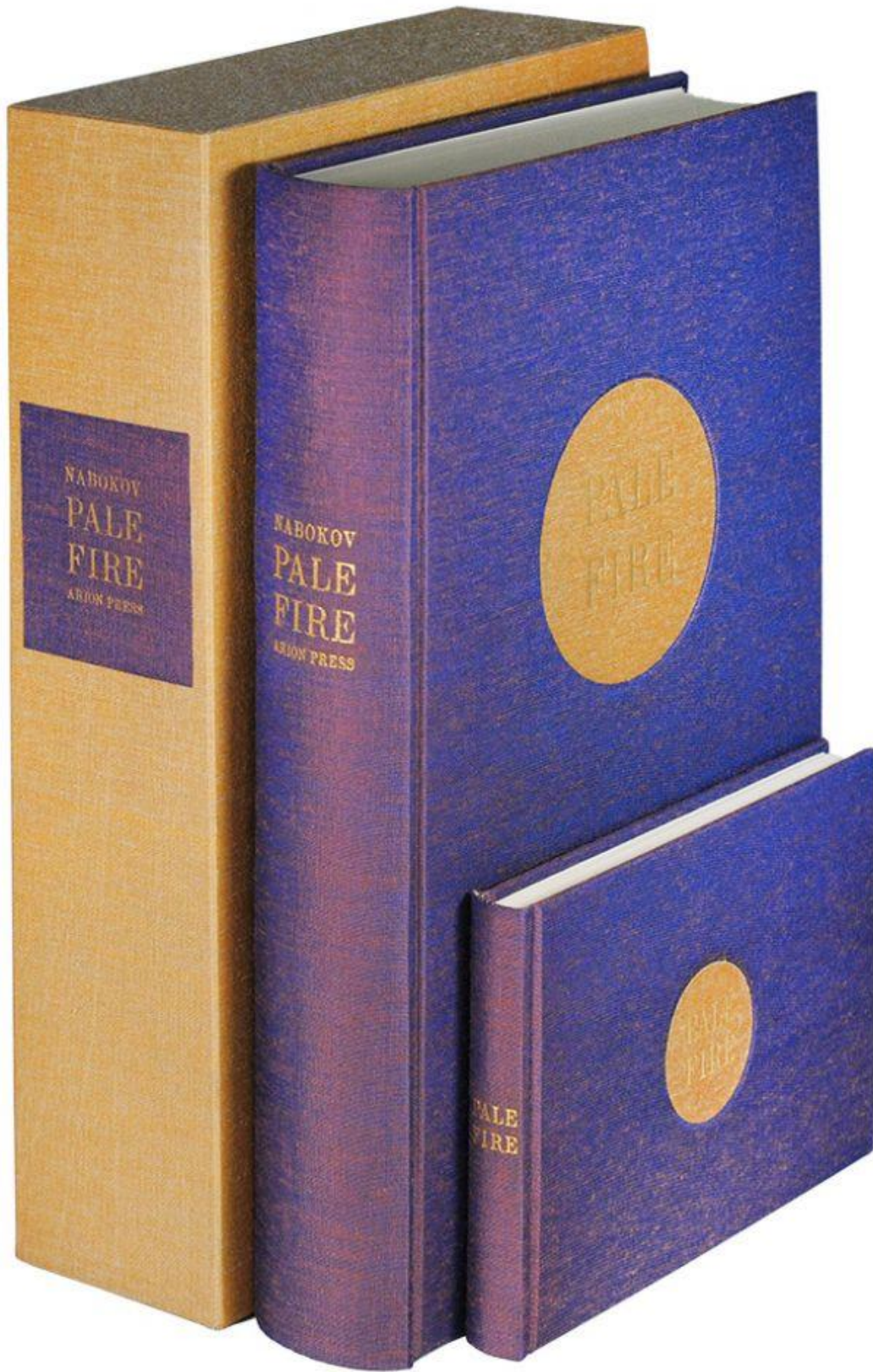
These issues of active, creative engagement and the physical work reading requires—work Nabokov considers laborious rather than trivial—are clearly at play throughout *Pale Fire*. In fact, Kinbote goes further than just suggesting a multicursal reading in his foreword and advises the reader to physically alter the object in their hands:

I find it wise in such cases as this to eliminate the bother of back-and-forth leafings by either cutting out and clipping together the pages with the text of the thing, or, even more simply, purchasing two copies of the same work which can then be place in adjacent positions of a comfortable table.³⁴

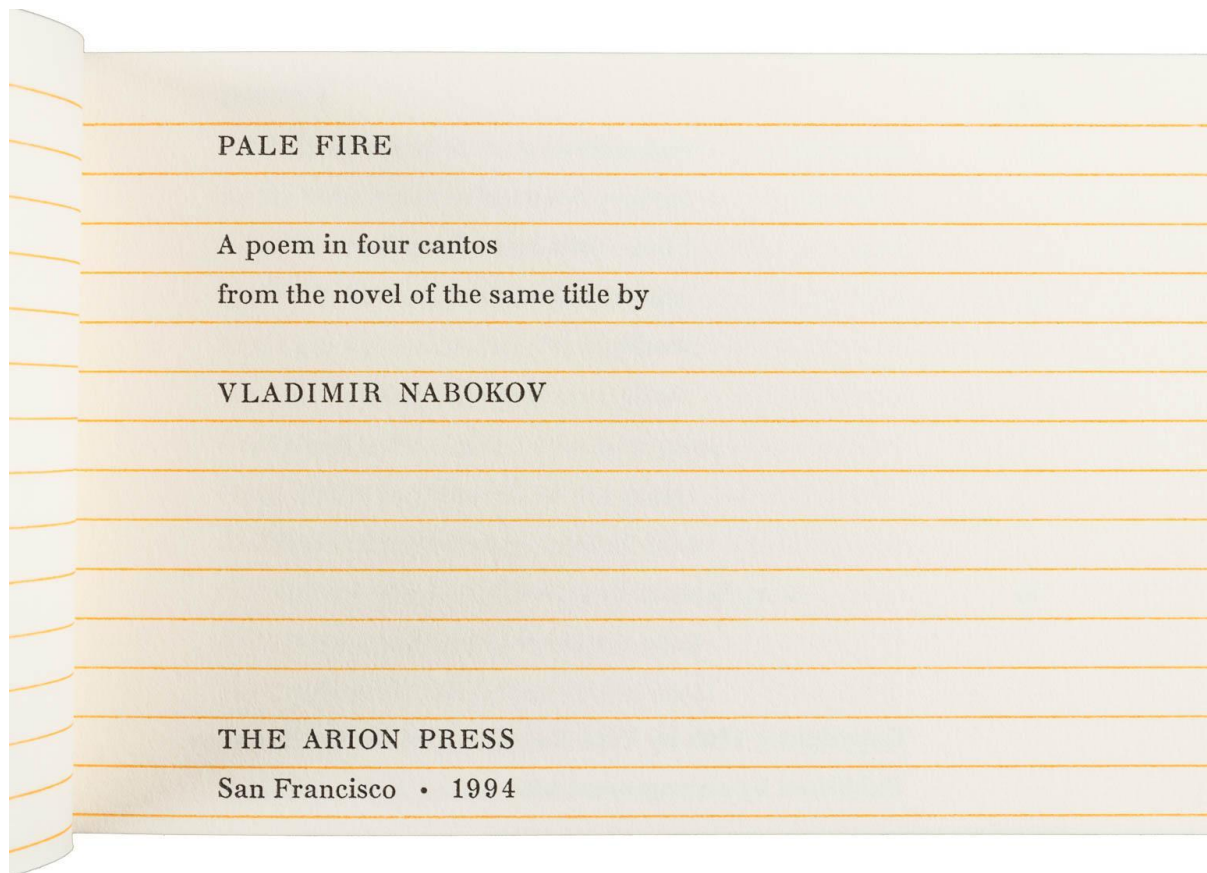
If a reader chooses to adhere to this suggestion, what does the resulting object register as? An alteration or a mutilation?

Licit Alterations

As previously mentioned, there are two specially produced editions of *Pale Fire* that alter its format to varying degrees and do so in ways that claim to be both licit and viable. The 1994 Arion Press version comprises two volumes within a gold cloth slipcase: the larger volume contains the novel as originally laid out, including Shade's poem and Kinbote's editorial additions; the smaller volume contains only the Poem and "conforms to the set of index cards described as its manuscript in the novel." There is an additional Prospectus written by Arion Press founder and director Andrew Hoyem in the form of an unbound paper booklet held together by a staple. The rest of the edition is handsomely produced, the volumes bound in "iridescent purple cloth with inset gold cloth disks [and] gilt titling."



Picture of Arion Press Edition³⁵



Picture of Arion Press “Pale Fire”³⁶

The paper is mould made—a technique of papermaking that combines the appearance and quality of hand-made paper with the uniformity of machine-made paper. Mouldmade paper is primarily used for Fine Art products and is renowned for the qualities of handmade paper—its deckle edges and its clear watermark[†]. The Arion Press *Pale Fire* foregrounds aesthetics and materiality of great literature in the editions it creates. Notably the Arion Press *Pale Fire* produces the poem separately from the critical apparatus surrounding it. This crucially allows for the poem to be both read on its own and makes the “back and forth leafings” completely unnecessary. By the same merit, the “cutting out and clipping together” is equally rendered

[†] A distinguishing mark or device incorporated in the wire mesh of the tray in which the pulp settles during the process of papermaking, and visible in the finished product when held against the light. (Carter 258).

unnecessary. Moreover, the high production of the volumes, its scarcity, and its economic value make the reader resistant towards altering such a book. Appropriately, Hoyem writes: “the poem is not regarded as an independent work, for it is embedded in a novel that takes its title from that of the poem and is a part of the fiction in verse, yet it is self-contained and unreliant upon the rest of the novel, which is cast in prose and revolves around the poetry, referring to it, commenting and elaborating upon it, purposely distorting its meaning to mislead the reader. Still, it is possible to read the poem by itself and to recognize its greatness as a distinct literary work.”³⁷ Explicit in Hoyem’s reproduction of *Pale Fire* is the project of reading the poem on its own. His claim that the poem is self-contained and unreliant upon the novel is arguable, but certainly the poem may be read independently from the critical apparatus. In fact, even in ordinary mass market paperback editions many readers do prioritize reading the poem separately before reading it in conjunction with the notes upon subsequent readings, even supporting it as the best way to read the novel. However, Hoyem’s assertion does not end there: “It is my assertion that the poem ‘Pale Fire’ can and should be read for its own merits, above and beyond the rest of the novel. This is not to say that the reader may ignore the balance of the book; indeed one would do so at peril, for Nabokov wrote, through his wife, to his editor at Putnam’s: ‘The entire book is supposed to be the production, without any editorial interference, of the mad commentator.’”³⁸ How indeed one can read the poem “above and beyond the rest of the novel” while not “ignoring the balance of the book” is uncertain as the two seem rather antithetical. Ironically, Hoyem quotes Vera Nabokov here and her insistence that the *novel* be presented without interference—Nabokov’s reaction to Walter Minton’s suggestion the Zembla theme be “clarified and tabulated.”³⁹ Yet Hoyem here produces his own editorial interference despite identifying how

Kinbote distorts and misleads although the thematic development of Kinbote's Zembla remains a large project of the novel at large.

In a similar fashion, the 2011 Gingko Press version of *Pale Fire* produces a version completely separate of Kinbote's critical apparatus. Originally conceived by artist Jean Holabird, the project was produced in conjunction with Brian Boyd and Gingko Press. Unlike the Arion Press edition, the Gingko Press version produces the poem in isolation. Housed within a black cloth-bound fold out box that resembles a hardcover book. Inside the box is a booklet with the poem inside, a facsimile of the index cards as Kinbote describes in his foreword, and another booklet tucked off into the side that contains two essays—one by Boyd, another by R.S. Gwynn. Harvey Giles, in his review of this edition, wrote, "The Gingko Press 'Pale Fire' is a fetishist's dream, an extravagant plaything to be unpacked and fondled with glee."⁴⁰



*Picture of Gingko Edition of Pale Fire*⁴¹



Picture of Gingko Press Edition of Pale Fire – Booklet of Essays on right and cards on left⁴²

Canto Two

6th July 1959

~~Strange Other World where all our still-born dwell,
And pets, revived, and invalids, grown well,
And minds that died before arriving there:
Poor old man Swift, poor ———, poor Baudelaire~~

How ludicrous these efforts to translate
Into one's private tongue a public fact
Instead of ~~Disjointed notes, Insomnia's mean verse.~~

Life is a message scribbled in the dark.
Anonymous.

Picture of Gingko Press Edition of Pale Fire – Close up of facsimile index cards⁴³

Much like the Arion Press version, Gingko's Pale Fire focuses on the material recreation of Pale Fire as Shade wrote it. The essays delve into the artistry of the poem's composition and themes to support the overall project of the poem being read independently. While the essay mostly reflects on the artistry of the poem's composition and themes, they do contain some interesting justifications for the physical object itself. Pale Fire, Boyd writes, is "the tragic target of a scholarly outrage perpetrated by his first editor, campus-town neighbor and would be friend K (not in this afterword). Cruelly, the commentary continues to divert attention from the poem. This lovingly assembled package returns the poem to readers as Shade left it, in his own hand, before unspeakable others intervened."⁴⁴ Interestingly, Boyd speaks as if Shade inhabits the world larger than the diegetic storyworld of the novel. His goal is a courtly one to deliver the

object as it ‘was’ with the object’s chastity preserved, despite the fact that the very material reality is based off of an explanation Kinbote alone provides. This is not to suggest that this is incorrect, although Kinbote does suggest other variant cards exist—ones which are not found here—but that Boyd must still rely on the interventions of “unspeakable others” to even materialize the object. Like Hoyem, Boyd believes “the greatness of the novel and its interpretive challenges have obscured both the greatness of the poem and its interpretive challenges. We have not paid Shade and his poem the respect, the care in reading, they deserve.”⁴⁵ The poem deserves to be read as its own work, no longer “delayed by the distractions of the commentary” which Boyd characterizes as ‘hysterical’ in relationship to the ‘calm poem.’⁴⁶ Yet in Boyd’s effort to unshackle “Pale Fire” from its paratextual wrappings—he still provides his own paratextual additions both textual and material.

Both projects share similar goals of wanting to produce the poem in a form as close to its original penning as possible. For their edification in importing their goals of courtly love to other readers, Hoyem and Boyd find the production of the poem’s initial form important in their deliverance of the text. Even so, they both add in paratext of their own, but downplaying its presence. Hoyem’s Prospectus is much less conspicuous when compared to the lavish binding of *Pale Fire* and Boyd’s essays are tucked into a pocket in the tri-fold, out of sight of the reader.

Author H.J. Jackson writes in Marginalia—“the better produced and more beautiful the book is, the less hospitable it is likely to be to manuscript additions.”⁴⁷ Indeed, these two editions of *Pale Fire*, handsomely produced and beautifully bound, do not cry out to its reader: *write in me, cut me up, do with me what you will!* They are editions which demand courtly love—created by people who value the unsullied page to the point they find Nabokovian invention Kinbote’s unwarranted additions offensive. Yet, like their friend, their projects are not without their own

agendas. Albeit much more in the favor of Shade's work than their own, both men pursue similar arguments of how the book should be read—both in terms of analysis, order, and understanding. The difference is their yoke of editorial authority proves stronger than “some peculiar ink written in red blood.” Hoyem—founder and director of Arion Press—and Boyd—pre-eminent scholar of Nabokov's life and works—have greater and more valid claims than the madman Kinbote. These Pale Fire editions—unlike the mutilations we discussed earlier—are bolstered by the cultural status of the text, the authority of the project leaders, the costly and refined price/nature of the materials, and the wrapping of legitimate publishers.

Illicit Alteration

There remains, on the other end, the issue of illicit alterations of *Pale Fire*; ad-hoc editions made to facilitate one's reading of the novel in conjunction with the poem. Compared to the licit versions, there is little to be found of reader's making physical copies. Perhaps, it is because no one has done so—a suggestion that seems statistically unlikely—or perhaps because any illicit alterations have gone undocumented. What we do have is electronic mitigations, seemingly more stomachable than the option of slicing up one's copy of a book as well as a more palatable, and less damning, alteration to suggest to others online. Savvy modern-day readers have found their own electronic workarounds—creating quasi-digital/physical objects of their own. Zem of reddit wrote, “what I did was get [a] hold of a pdf and open the poem on my laptop, so I could refer to it as I read the notes without flipping back and forth.”⁴⁸ Another goodreads user noted that he read the e-book version of *Pale Fire* on two tablets at once, like a modern fulfillment of Kinbote's suggestion to place two copies adjacent one another. There have also been a few hypertextual envisioning's of *Pale Fire*. Ted Nelson—who coined the term hypertext in 1963, coincidentally only a year after *Pale Fire*'s publication—working with IBM at Brown University, gained permission to use a hypertext version of Pale Fire at a technical

demonstration. Unfortunately, the idea was eventually dismissed, and the product was never publicly demonstrated.⁴⁹ There are two unofficial hypertext versions available online—one by an unnamed author, hosted at tundra squid, and one by Richard Davis hosted on palefire.tiddlyspot.com.

Combinational Magic

In “Pale Fire,” Shade speaks of understanding his existence, through the lens of his art, “in terms of combinatorial delight.” Disheartened by his frustrated search for meaning in death, Shade has a revelation, penning the following section as a result:

But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.⁵⁰

Like Shade, I believe the joy and lasting impact of *Pale Fire* comes from the combinational joy of navigating between its text and playing the game Nabokov sets out for us, regardless of whether we arrive at a ‘correct’ reading of the book. An undeniable aspect of that combinational joy is the physical manipulation of the book as we learn to traverse its looping self-referential structures and get lost in a maze of meanings. In Mary McCarthy’s famous review of Nabokov’s book, she wrote, “Pale Fire is a Jack-in-the-box, a Faberge gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine.”⁵¹ It has elsewhere been called a labyrinth, a Rubik’s cube, and a set of Russian nesting dolls; regardless of how one chooses to envision *Pale Fire*, therein lies a

need to understand it as an object. The material reality of the novel matters because the combinational delight relies upon the reader's willingness to engage with it. The courtly love of Hoyem and Boyd's editions attempts to control the reader's interpretation of the text and their manipulation of the physical object. While these men may be well-meaning in their intent, ultimately their projects limit or deny the combinatorial delight that is so crucial to *Pale Fire*.

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² Pavić, Milorad. *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Vintage International, 1988.

³ Appel, Alfred Jr. "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2, Spring 1967, pp. 138.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Aarseth, pp. 8.

⁶ Fadiman, Anne. "Never Do That to a Book." *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. Macmillan Publishers, 2000, pp. 37. Google Books. Web. 22 Oct. 2019.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Holderness, Cates. "The Worst Craft Idea Ever." *Buzzfeed*, 16 August 2012, www.buzzfeed.com/catesish/the-worst-craft-idea-ever, Accessed 12 November 2019.

¹¹ Eugenios, Juillian. "Lauren Conrad removes book-destroying DIY video after backlash." *NBC News*, 16 August 2012, www.nbcnews.com/news/other/lauren-conrad-removes-book-destroying-diy-video-after-backlash-v13319859, Accessed 12 November 2019.

¹² Lewis, Andy. "Lauren Conrad Deletes Book-Destroying Craft Video After Negative Backlash." *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 August 2012, www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/lauren-conrad-deletes-book-craft-video-363298, Accessed 12 November 2019.

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¹⁵ Carter, John. *The ABC for Book Collectors*, edited by Nicolas Barter and Simran Thadani. 9th ed., Oak Knoll Press, 2016, pp. 123-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 67.

¹⁷ Melin, Amy. "Artist saves old books by cutting them to pieces." *PBS News Hour*, 12 August 2014, www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/artist-saves-old-books-by-cutting-them-to-pieces, Accessed 12 November 2019.

¹⁸ Strand, Julia. "Information." *Hokey Stokes! Book Carvings by Julia Strand*, Blogspot, hokeystokes.blogspot.com/p/faqs.html, Accessed 12 November 2019.

¹⁹ Wadell, Elizabeth. "Jacqueline Rush Lee: The Fossils and Skeletons Books Leave Behind." *Quarterly Conversation*, issue 12, Summer 2008, quarterlyconversation.com/the-book-art-of-robert-the-cara-barer-and-jacqueline-rush-lee, Accessed 12 November 2019.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. Vintage International, 1989, pp. 13-15.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 13, 18.

²³ Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 9.

²⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. Vintage International, 1989, pp. 18.

²⁵ Mak, Bonnie. *How the Page Matters*. University of Toronto Press, 2011, pp. 35.

²⁶ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. Vintage International, 1989, pp. 28.

²⁷ Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. John Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 4-5.

²⁸ Ciccoricco, David. *Reading Network Fiction*. University of Alabama Press, 2007, pp. 6.

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