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APPROACHES TO TEACHING

NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE*

Round table

**Priscilla Meyer** (*Wesleyan University*)

**Will Norman** (*University of Kent*)

**Dale E. Peterson** (*Amherst College*)

**Rachel Trousdale** (*Northeastern University*)

**Yuri Leving**, *NOJ*, Moderator

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**Yuri Leving:** *Teaching Pale Fire is much more challenging than any other of Nabokov's texts because of its nonlinear narrative. Let's start with the simplest question (calling it "simple" is a conscious reduction in itself): what part of the text do you begin with in the very first lecture? Is it the title? The foreword? The poem? The commentary? The summary?*

**Priscilla Meyer:** We start with the foreword. It isn't always obvious to undergraduates how to discern, through the scrim of Kinbote's intense narrative, his desperate attempt to gain control of Shade's manuscript, or of his manic condition—e.g. as non-proofreaders, they may not notice or understand the joke of "Insert before a professional." They may continue to wonder if Zembla is a real place. The understanding that Kinbote is a paranoid gay vegetarian voyeur with an accent who proposes to provide the "human

reality” behind his late friend’s poem prepares one for interpreting the commentary, after the shock of the poem.

**Rachel Trousdale:** I actually open by asking the students what their questions are about the first reading assignment. On the first day of the two weeks we spend on *Pale Fire*, they come in having read the Foreword and the entirety of the poem, so their questions often revolve around what relationship there can possibly be between those two pieces of text. That’s an excellent start, and one that lets us cover the central concerns of the poem “Pale Fire” and start to address how those concerns change in Kinbote’s hands.

That is, however, a slightly misleading answer to the question. During the class meeting prior to the one in which we begin *Pale Fire*, I set up the reading by saying something along the lines of “Normally I don’t assign the foreword or preface of the novels you read. For *Pale Fire*, however, be sure you read the Foreword. Don’t worry, though, about trying to read the notes to the poem yet.” This sounds to the students like a common-sense instruction, but to Nabokov scholars it may sound like a position statement.

**Will Norman:** For the last four years I have taught *Pale Fire* as part of an advanced postgraduate module on American fiction after 1960, entitled “The Limits of Fiction.” The format is a two-hour seminar, and *Pale Fire* starts off the module. The students receive no advance instructions from me. They are to tackle the novel as I did when I first read it, by negotiating its complexities on their own terms. They arrive at the seminar each having had their own strange experience with the text. Often I begin the seminar by asking them simply to share with one another their experience of reading it in a frank and personal way.

Everyone has done it differently. One student has just gone straight through cover-to-cover and emerged “ruffling their hair” as VN has it in his introduction to *Invitation to a Beheading*. Another has followed Kinbote’s instructions to the letter and obediently read the notes first, then the poem and then the notes again. And so on...

The conversations that take place focus the students on one of the important thematic questions running through the module: what kind of limits are placed and/or

transgressed in the act of reading and writing fiction? Some feel they have pushed their limits as a reader already (before the module has even begun!), while others have a sense of unexplored territory; new frontiers. Most importantly, they begin with the discovery that they are not the only confused readers of *Pale Fire*.

**Dale Peterson:** Truth to tell, I assign *Pale Fire* at the end of a semester-long seminar on Nabokov's writings. I have never assigned it in a survey course on the modern (or postmodern) novel, which is to say that my students approach the text after significant exposure to Nabokov's experimental short fiction and novels. They are well familiar with unreliable narrators, "doubles," and problematic textual textures, as in "Spring in Fialta," *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* or *Lolita*. Even so, it cannot be denied that *Pale Fire* poses its own unique challenge to forewarned canny readers.

I allow my students a full week to engage with the text in advance of our first class meeting. I begin by asking them, quite literally, how they actually read the work in its entirety. I know of no other work of literature that foregrounds from the beginning the logistics of the act of reading. The reader is advised of the fact that a poem has been appropriated by an enthusiastic commentator who has absconded with the sole physical evidence of its existence. The reader is further advised to consult the annotations in advance of reading the poem, then to reread the notes while perusing the poem and finally to "complete the picture" by consulting the commentary a third time. The published text violently yokes together an "innocent" poetic text and an all-consuming, monstrous critical apparatus. The sophisticated literate reader, eyebrows lifted, well might wonder whether the volume at hand is legible or risible.

Nonetheless, the text is read somehow, some way, by different readers. No student reads as Kinbote advises, but the responses indicate a variety of readerly habits or preferences. Novel readers attempt to read the text seriatim, but are tempted to leap over the poem into the commentary. Poetry students diligently try to attend to the poem and ignore peeking at the apparatus. Some readers give up on the poem and gleefully substitute for it "Solus Rex," the Zemblan chronicle of King Charles the Beloved. Almost no one notices the Index (or the epigraph). What does this tell us? The book can be read. But is it readable?

**Will Norman:** I like Rachel's approach of allowing students to come up with their own questions and to some extent dictate the course of the session. After all, there is no shortage of questions posed by the novel at all stages and levels. You all have a luxury that I don't, of being able to convene with students during the course of their reading experience and therefore of being able to establish consensus on the importance of certain questions, if not on their answers, before moving onwards. You can encourage a certain sense of shared reading experience which, rather than threaten the idiosyncrasy of individual responses, might show them in relief.

**Yuri Leving:** *How do you proceed from your chosen point of entry into the text? If you prefer starting off with the nominal beginning, to what degree are you willing to comment upon the text's inherent incongruities (furthermore complicated by subsequent publishers: the Ardis Blednyi ogon' 1983 edition bears a prefatory note by Véra Nabokov, the Russian translator, to whom the very book is dedicated; the Penguin 1991 edition opens with Mary McCarthy's introductory essay; the Vintage International editions, in print since 1989, are stripped of any additional editorial interpolations, while the latest Gingko Press fancy 2011 edition has an added dedication "To Sybil" prior to John Shade's poem in four cantos)?*

**Rachel Trousdale:** I try to do as little commenting as possible, because I want the students to find the novel's incongruities themselves. So far, in every seminar I've taught, several students have instantly identified the major inconsistencies and many of the most audible echoes between the sections, and have been able to explain them to anyone in the class who didn't pick up on them. I prefer to let students do this work because having a first-time reader point out the novel's peculiarities shows that the text, for all its oddity, is actually quite accessible. If I do the explaining, students who haven't initially caught on may think, "This book is over my head but my professor will give me the answers." If on the other hand the student hears explanations from the person sitting next to her instead, she's more likely to think of the book as potentially within her own grasp. This isn't

always the most efficient way to transfer knowledge (though in general it's worked very well), but efficiency isn't as important as getting students engaged with the text.

I order the Vintage edition, and I don't tend to discuss the later editions. That's because I teach *Pale Fire* in a class on postmodern fiction, so I'm most interested in placing Nabokov's novel in the context of (and in dialogue with) work by writers like Borges, Pynchon, Morrison, and Rushdie, rather than talking about subsequent modifications and receptions of his original text. If I were teaching a Nabokov seminar I might take a different approach.

**Will Norman:** I don't choose an entry point – they do. It is important for me to give my postgraduates a sense of autonomy (and responsibility) in their seminars. I might ask them “what kind of reader do you think Kinbote is?” or “at what point did you begin to question his authority as a reader and editor?” Other times I might simply ask them to pick out and speak about a nodal point in the text, a moment that stuck with them in their reading experience as marking a shift in the gears of understanding, or a moment at which they found themselves confronted and challenged with the strangeness of this novel.

**Priscilla Meyer:** Since I always use the Vintage edition, we don't face the problem of extraneous introductions, which in any case I caution students to read only after they have some initial interpretation of their own. Our second class is devoted to the poem; if there are students who have studied Pope, they may give a presentation on the heroic couplet which opens the question of the quality of Shade's poem. The discussion might start from the heroic couplet's use of enjambment: does that explain Shade's apparently clumsy use of it? Or is Shade parodying the genre? Or is Nabokov parodying Shade's updating of it? Pope's couplets are a *point de repère* for evaluating the quality of the poem, the collision between its mundane and its lyrical passages.

**Dale Peterson:** Having demonstrated how this work exposes, as it were, the phenomenology of reading, we turn to examine more closely the Foreword Kinbote has penned. Who do we have in or on our hands? A violator of intellectual property rights,

certainly, who suffers a persecution complex. A refugee with “a new incognito” who is driven to distraction by carousel music in his head. An avid reader of masterworks, an émigré academic at an Appalachian college who is wonderstruck by the miracle of literacy and the combinational magic of poetic lines. Between the lines, we glimpse a vegetarian, a man with a secret (homosexuality?), someone whose rhetoric betrays a regal authority (“my rented castle,” “at last presented credentials”). Apparently a “Zemblan,” whatever that means. Surely Kinbote is an alien, perhaps a lunatic? One thing is certain: our commentator is vicariously attached to a poem by a certain Shade. In the first classes, I allow only Kinbote the privilege of introductory words; no intrusion from Véra or Mary McCarthy, thank you.

**Will Norman:** I am interested by (and sympathetic to) your hostility to “extraneous forewords” and unwelcome “intrusions” into the text, since it is precisely such paratextual apparatuses that make this novel’s innovative structure possible. This hostility already implies an orientation towards the epistemological questions *Pale Fire* poses, about when literary criticism is made welcome and by whom. Can we imagine a foreword that is not extraneous? I think that Nabokov understands that the experience of an autonomous artwork is always compromised through its framing. Is it simply that we think our students have enough to deal with already, or is it that only Nabokov can be trusted to offer a foreword equal to his own work? Rachel’s later point seems apposite here—it’s okay to read a foreword, but only if you make it an afterword!

**Yuri Leving:** *To what extent is the reader-response theory significant in reflecting upon and then analyzing your students’ initial reactions to the narrative development (as Michael Wood captures the strangeness of the book’s overture, “We wonder at first, I think, what kind of text this is; but soon wonder more seriously whose text it is, and what is the matter with him” [The Magician’s Doubts, 181])?*

**Priscilla Meyer:** What is the matter with whom? It is Kinbote’s, Shade’s and Nabokov’s text. The student’s response by the time s/he reaches Kinbote’s commentary has already been affected by class discussion: close reading of Kinbote’s introduction and of Shade’s

poem prevents exclusive allegiance to either character. It is the commentary that most boggles first-time readers, in part because it reflects some reality they don't know enough to identify, even (or especially) when equipped with an explanation of Novaia Zemlia/Nova Zembla or the eighteenth-century poetic use of it as trope of Ultima Thule/Zembla.

**Will Norman:** Reader response is really where we start, as described above, and Michael Wood's words are indeed apposite but we generally don't theorize response in any formal sense. My own interest in their responses is often directed toward questions of authority and power: when, as readers, do we stop doing as we're told? What kinds of authority do we crave when faced with the unknown in a text? These are questions that might be voiced out loud in the seminar, if the ambit of the discussion invites it.

**Rachel Trousdale:** Nabokov, even more than most writers, takes his readers through stages of discovery. I try to help my students to reach the more sophisticated stages of his puzzle-solving reasonably quickly, but more importantly, one of my main goals in the early stages of discussing the novel is to get them to notice that those stages are built into the text. I think it's important for students to experience that initial puzzlement, followed by a sense of skepticism; from there, they need to learn to identify just when and how their skepticism kicks in. I spend a lot of time asking them to pinpoint specific pieces of text that raise their suspicions that something odd is going on.

Will's point about how we have to stop doing what we're told is a very important one—a lesson Nabokov's readers should keep re-learning at every stage.

**Dale Peterson:** In a second class I insist that all readers respond exclusively to Shade's "Pale Fire." Most undergraduates gloss over it, finding more attractive the comic perversity of the imposed commentary that brackets it. One can usually count on a student of poetry to identify the form and meter (heroic couplets in iambic pentameter) and perhaps to make a generic association with the eighteenth century or Pope in particular. In any case, students will sense a whiff of the archaic emanating from these lines; the regular rhymes are distinctly unmodern, *pace* Frost and Yeats (both of whom



leave ghostly traces in Shade's verse memoir). For those in the know, a long poem in heroic couplets is forever associated with the agile grace and wit of the mock epic and Popean satire. How, then, to accommodate the poet's metric to the poem's content? Readers looking for sense rather than sound cannot help but notice the poet's recurrent struggle to animate "cold nests" (the labor of a "preterist") or to foresee "the verse of galaxies divine." Despite the often jaunty tonality and the multilingual punning, the groundbeat of the poem is threnody. Over and over John Shade's lines retain what remains in the mind's view after great loss, investigating the afterlife of time's fleet passage. The autobiographical speaker, the maker of verses, introduces himself as "the shadow of the waxwing slain," inventing himself, perhaps, as but a shade of Icarus. The point here is to isolate the poetic text so as to dramatize its often neglected awkwardness, its uneasy, even incompatible mixture of light verse and heavy metaphysics.

**Will Norman:** Following Dale's allusion to Frost and Yeats, I can imagine how close attention to the form of the poem might lead to a useful discussion with more advanced students, about the nature of *Pale Fire*'s complicated claims to innovation and novelty—simultaneously untimely and modern—in the context of the evolving modernist canon in the late 1950s/early 1960s. What did it mean to revive heroic couplets at this particular moment? What kind of alternative modernism does *Pale Fire* propose, and what does it have to say about the relative claims of poetry and the novel to be at the vanguard of literary innovation?

**Yuri Leving:** *So where do you go from here?*

**Dale Peterson:** This then serves as preparation for a third class focused on Kinbote's notoriously inappropriate commentary on Shade's poem. It is tempting to think that Nabokov may have been making a mischievous reference to Monarch Notes, the popular schoolroom timesaver. Kinbote's intrusion of the narrative of the exiled king of Zembla into the Appalachian poet's text is patently absurd, but it enables him to live vicariously *inside* Shade's alternative poetic world. It is amusing to follow the blatant twistings and turnings of the text's words to fit Kinbote's preconceived idea that it constantly alludes to

the tale of the deposed king of Zembla. Yet it is useful to ask if it is accurate to say that Kinbote's commentary is always inept and unhelpful. Taking pause, students will admit that the notations often point the way toward a better appreciation of the poem's diction, meter, allusions, and subtexts. How else would the first-time reader realize that the title of the poem and, indeed, of the book itself is taken from a key passage in *Timon of Athens* that reflects on the cosmic "thievery" of the sun's rays by lunar reflection?

**Yuri Leving:** *How is one to balance the rewarding pleasures of a close reading of Nabokov's text (and the gradual revelation of its numerous riddles) with the uncertainties of an unresolved narrative structure, which is likely to hinder the first-time reader's progress?*

**Priscilla Meyer:** All Nabokov's texts involve uncertainty: we seem to have a plotline and a resolution only on a first reading, as modeled by *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Access to the often hidden uncertainties demands close reading. With the benefit of a reading of *RLSK* that spirals outward to include the fact that it is Nabokov's first novel in English, Kinbote's version of Shade's shooting interlarded with the real-world facts and motives is seen to echo the assassination of Nabokov's father. The goal is to experience the shimmer effect of the interplay among Nabokov's refraction of historical reality and the novel's multiple fictional levels. To achieve this entails enough annotation (e.g. King Charles II of England, whose story few American undergraduates know) to reveal the dense referentiality of Kinbote's brilliant and erudite construction of Zembla.

**Will Norman:** I am personally quite resistant to the idea of *Pale Fire* (or indeed any of Nabokov's works, even "The Vane Sisters") as a set of riddles to be solved, even when the author is asking us at some level to treat them as such. Once the notion of riddling is in play, however, I'd like to ask a more interesting series of questions: what does it mean to think of a novel as a riddle? What kind of author might do this and what responses are open to us as readers? My experience has been that turning unresolvability itself into a starting point is often the route into a more exciting and sophisticated understanding of the novel.

Narrative uncertainty and the anxieties or pleasures that accompany it are to be articulated and reflected upon in turn. In foregrounding these vertiginous experiences Nabokov seems, to me, to be opening up possibilities for the post-1960 American novel that my module goes on to explore (in Pynchon's *V.*, for example, which we read next). For this reason I am more than happy for my students to dwell at some length on not knowing, grasping, and above all on the *desire* for an ending to the textual experience that will never come.

**Dale Peterson:** What can be learned from closely attending to Kinbote's lavish notes? Suspicions are finally confirmed when Kinbote describes in the first person the dramatic entry to America by parachute of the last king of Zembla (n line 691). This much-belated discovery of a dual identity within a single environment encourages the reading of other "doublings" within the New Wye Kinbote occupies, and which his mind fantasizes. Here one can introduce (and praise) Mary McCarthy's groundbreaking revelation of the multiple doubles implied within the Faculty Club conversation recorded in Kinbote's note to line 894. In a few pages we learn that Zembla is a corruption of Semberland, a land of reflections, of "resemblers," and that *kinbote* in Zemblan means regicide, "a king's destroyer." We pick up other useful clues from the gossip about how John Shade resembles Judge Goldsworth and the rumor that Kinbote's name is an anagram of Botkin, an American scholar of Russian descent. This trail of dual identities and double meanings can be richly expanded by drawing attention to the Index, where Botkin is etymologically linked to words in several languages signifying, for instance, a mammoth's lethal parasite or a Danish stiletto. Following McCarthy's lead, it is possible to unravel a double plot in which a released killer (Jack Grey) mistakes Shade for Goldsworth and murders him or, alternatively, an emissary of the Shadows (Jakob Gradus) stalks the exiled king and accidentally kills Shade in a misfire. Illuminating as this decoding is, it reduces *Pale Fire* to a detective plot that is neatly resolvable.

**Rachel Trousdale:** I haven't really found that close reading of the text is hard to combine with discussions of the narrative structure. So much of the text is explicitly about the ways that good art doesn't collapse down into a single meaning! For example, we

generally spend some time on the description of Eystein's paintings, which leads into a discussion of the unfinalizability of art and what happens when artists layer different approaches to representing reality—which seamlessly becomes a discussion of the text's instabilities and uncertainties.

**Will Norman:** It seems that we have reached some kind of consensus here over unresolvability as both Nabokovian intention and a literary value. But I would insist to my students, with Priscilla if I understand her correctly, that narrative unresolvability in *Pale Fire* refers us to the social, political, and personal fault lines of Nabokov's historical experience.

**Yuri Leving:** *Could you outline some of the general challenges you have encountered when teaching and guiding a collective reading of this hybrid novel as you see them? In what sense is this particular work of fiction any different from those that we normally teach in our literature courses?*

**Dale Peterson:** Nabokov's book is far richer and more complicated than an invitation to unravel Kinbote's paranoid fantasy of a conspiracy of Shadows and/or Shadeans. Unlike Kinbote, Nabokov does invite his readers to twist an abstruse poem and its critical apparatus into the *semblance* of a novel. And that requires readers to play seriously with the implication that the two apparently mismatched texts bound together in one volume pallidly reflect one another: "*Man's life as commentary to abstruse unfinished poem.*" Or, as Kinbote suggests, though there is no direct echo, there is "a symptomatic family resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story" (n line 42). Indeed, once students are encouraged to place the English poem and the Zemblan autobiographical narrative into dialogue they will discover surprising and uncanny moments of interpenetration; borrowings and resonances become part of the natural order of things, at least in the world of this text. What is one to do when confronted with lines 609–615 in "Pale Fire" in which Shade prophetically evokes the image of an old exile in a motel conjuring in two tongues as bits of colored light reach his bed? Shade is supposedly deceased and therefore unaware of Kinbote's predicament as he writes his Foreword across, he thinks,

from a loud amusement park! Has Shade invented Kinbote and Zembla? What to make of Kinbote's assertion at the end of his commentary that, though his work is finished and his poet is dead, he shall try to exist (live on) in other guises and forms, and perhaps "cook up" a melodrama about a lunatic, a king, and an old poet? Has Kinbote/Botkin invented Shade?

**Priscilla Meyer:** An important opposition asking for synthesis is between Kinbote's/Botkin's Russian identity and Shade's American one. In the Nabokov seminar, we have the advantage of starting with *Speak, Memory*, so that the baseline of Nabokov's losses informs our readings. Without that, students would be the Cynthia, Joan, and Emmy of "An Evening of Russian Poetry." The issue of empathy seems to me more problematic than the structural one. Even professors can fail to detect the satiric-parodic depiction of academe in the US of the 1950s (I remember those guys in chinos and loafers with their girls in leotards), and Russian émigré estrangement is even further from most American readers' understanding. Without these backgrounds, the novel can have no human reality.

**Rachel Trousdale:** One of the big challenges I encounter while teaching the book is also, I think, one of the things that makes the book so interesting and produces so much critical debate: readers have very mixed reactions to unreliability. We train our students to pay close attention to the text, but *Pale Fire*, even more than most texts, demands that the trust we give to the *text itself* be decoupled from trusting the narrator. Some students come in really wanting to take everything Kinbote says at face value. That's easy enough to fix as the book progresses and he shows how unreliable he is, but then the same students may move to the opposite extreme, and take for granted that everything he says is false—that he has hallucinated Gradus completely, that Shade never spoke to him at all. The goal is to get them to be more fine-grained in their approach, looking at each element from several perspectives at once, holding the possibilities of truth and falsehood and misdirection in mind simultaneously. Not unreasonably, some of them find this exhausting—but they get really enthusiastic about it, too. I have a vivid mental image of a student a few years ago miming having her head explode as the class examined the

possibility of three different layers of reality coexisting in the novel simultaneously. It was a joking expression of frustration, but also one that meant she really got what was going on.

The line Dale mentions, “*Man’s life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem,*” is a good example of how this works: the poem on its own *isn’t* abstruse, especially not if we think about how it stacks up next to the texts it draws on and refers to. It’s much more like Pope and Frost, to whom many readers can turn for purely narrative pleasure, than it is like dense, difficult Eliot. But in conjunction with the rest of the novel “Pale Fire” suddenly gains double and triple meanings that render its subtlety and unevenness much more complex and productive.

**Will Norman:** If one jumps in at the deep end then there is a risk of drowning. But, as Michael Wood’s work on Nabokov so eloquently suggests to us, this element of risk is indispensable to an understanding of Nabokov’s aesthetics. To extend the metaphor—if my postgraduate students don’t know what it is like to gasp for breath at the surface then my module has not done its job.

The two main challenges are on the one hand doing something useful with such a complex novel in the space of a two-hour seminar, and on the other asking students who are often newcomers to Nabokov’s work to start with *Pale Fire*. How much easier to grasp the novel if one knows *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, or “Ultima Thule” and “Solus Rex”!

My task then is to try to turn these challenges into advantages. For example, it can be beneficial for a student to arrive at *Pale Fire* unencumbered by an image of Nabokov and his oeuvre, so that the sheer strangeness that Nabokov Studies too often tries to tame and master can be experienced at full volume. We might also argue that having only a two-hour seminar obliges us to disregard the tortuous (and occasionally torturous!) history of squabbling over who wrote what and proceed directly to more exciting and sophisticated concerns.

**Will Norman:** I could not agree more with Priscilla here, in that the question of loss and empathy need to be foregrounded in discussion of the novel lest we or our students get

carried away with the idea of disinterested play. Yes, those questions are historical, both in the sense of Nabokov's personal losses, but also in the sense that he writes at a moment when his own Russian liberalism and the Cold War liberalism of public discourse are in dialogue. The question of how to respond to a privately suffering individual carries a singular valence at a time when liberalism in the United States is continually and anxiously defining itself against its Cold War other (one clear analogue can be found in Pnin's "what not leave their private sorrows to people?").

**Yuri Leving:** *Curiously, even McCarthy's brilliantly concise summary pushes us in a certain interpretative direction (i.e. in the very first sentence of the second paragraph she claims unequivocally: "The poem has been written by a sixty-one-year-old American poet..."). How much information should the teacher of Pale Fire expose to an (under-)graduate audience during the initial stages of a group discussion? At what point do we present and discuss the abounding theories of intricate conspiracy and dubious authorship (the Shadean-Kinbotean-Botkinian controversy), which seem to be the rocking pendulum of the Pale Fire studies in the last decade and a half since the publication of Boyd's The Magic of Artistic Discovery?*

**Priscilla Meyer:** This controversy surprises me. Nabokov carefully sets up a tension between opposing narrators/characters/world views as a thesis-antithesis, to entice synthesis that becomes the basis of a new thesis. To collapse this careful system of construction, present in so many of his novels, is to bypass Nabokov's creation, to freeze it into a simple (at best) solution, not to allow the Expert Solver to embark on a never-ending quest that will explore not just the oppositions within the text, often marked by national identities and associated with particular subtexts, but their refraction in Nabokov's real world. Neither Sebastian nor V. is the unique author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; neither Kinbote nor Shade has priority in *Pale Fire*, however deranged some of Kinbote's views might be. Both are constructed to depend on Nabokov's biography.

**Dale Peterson:** Whole books have been written about this vexed matter of putative authorship, but all the avid speculation is both unresolvable and, to my mind, beside the point. The heart of the matter is that Nabokov has composed this “double tongued” narrative which, if Shade is to be believed, is like existence itself “a texture of topsyturvical coincidence / Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.” Indisputably, *Pale Fire* is Nabokov’s intellectual property; “ownership,” however, is actively in dispute, forever a contestation between the author’s dead letter and the reader’s live imagination. The act of reading *Pale Fire* necessarily re-enacts the effort of appropriation that Kinbote so avidly, extremely represents. In my last few classes, I work with my students to bring into consciousness the aesthetic pleasures and intellectual rewards of searching for analogies between the two seemingly mutually resistant texts that comprise *Pale Fire*. By way of conclusion, students are asked to write an essay that begins by locating something akin, a kinship, between the poetic text and the lunatic commentary and then proceeds to explore the implications of that “semblance,” that “underside of the weave” they have constructed. In advance of this exercise, I supply them with two “keynote” subtexts in which both “pale fire” and “Zembla” appear: Shakespeare’s reference in *Timon* to the pale fire the moon snatches from the sun and Pope’s reference in *Essay on Man* to the extreme of vice as located in Zembla “or the Lord knows where; / No creature owns it in the first degree / But thinks his neighbor further gone than he.” With this encouragement, most essayists begin to glimpse the larger existential, literary, or philosophical affinities that draw Shade and Kinbote more closely akin to one another. It is mad Kinbote, after all, who reminds Nabokov’s readers that “we are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal images, involutions of thought, new worlds...” (n line 991).

**Will Norman:** Following from the previous answer—we tend not to get too entangled in those questions. I think we would proceed differently if this was an undergraduate seminar, but at postgraduate level we tend to acknowledge the fact of critical controversy over the narratological problems of authorship and then try to turn the fact itself into an event worth probing. It opens up interesting discussions about the parallel histories of the novel and academic criticism in the United States since 1960. We talk about New



Criticism, about Nabokov's own academic history, about the rise of poststructuralism in the academy and the persistence of positivist readings of *Pale Fire*. Following Mark McGurl's reflections on Nabokov in *The Program Era*, I try to encourage readings that consider *Pale Fire* and its critical history to be interwoven with a broader history of the American university since World War II.

**Rachel Trousdale:** How much information the teacher should give students probably depends on the nature of the course. If I were teaching a Nabokov seminar or a graduate class, I would assign some of the critical texts outlining the basic theories, at least as much for the insight they provide into Nabokov's reception and the recent trends in scholarship as for the insight they provide into the text. For my undergraduate postmodern fiction class, I tell students about the authorship controversy on the last day of class, and ask them to debate the main positions. They generally settle on McCarthy's interpretation, although there are always a few dissenters.

**Will Norman:** I am not sure that this debate is beside the point as Dale has it, though I think I agree with the spirit of his remarks. My experience has been that students are stimulated by the way the novel opens up and invites the question of who wrote what, but only insofar as it provides a stage of thinking about *Pale Fire* from which they can then proceed.

**Yuri Leving:** *What are the best ways, in your practice, of navigating through Pale Fire within a limited course time (from two to five classes)? You may share your own strategies or consider the ones below: during one class slot, follow any particular thematic thread (for example, laying out the "paradigm of madness" as a starting point for discussion) or allocate Nabokov's prose to a certain genre—for instance, that of the detective fiction, from which the author drew upon and inverted archetypes by exploding formulaic narrative patterns in order to destabilize the reader's relationship with the text.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Helen Oakley, "Disturbing Design: Nabokov's Manipulation of the Detective Fiction Genre in *Pale Fire* and *Despair*," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 36 (3), 2003, 480–496.

**Dale Peterson:** Students who elect a seminar on Nabokov or a course on modern/postmodern fiction expect to be challenged, are eager to enjoy difficult texts. *Pale Fire* can disappoint such readers because it is hard to place in genre or tonality. I regularly teach works by Faulkner, Sartre, Beckett, and I have taught some Pynchon and Bolaño. *Pale Fire* is anomalous in that company because it so unaccountably links together the farcical and metaphysical, the playful and portentous. The fact that *Pale Fire* is non-linear, written in discrete fragments and mixed genres, is nothing new to literature students. But its uncustomary vacillation between the registers of the ludicrous and the serious is disorienting to many bright undergraduates. When Pynchon creates such literary hybrids, the surface hijinks are set against somber backdrops of war and catastrophe. *Pale Fire* just seems inadequately serious—who, after all, can relate to the life narratives of an old poet with private obsessions and mental seizures or to a lunatic foreigner who imagines he is the deposed exiled King of Zembla? The best preparation for understanding how the light touch and subtle seriousness is combined in *Pale Fire* can best be found in *Eugene Onegin* or in Gogol's prose, neither of which most undergraduates carry in their literary résumé.

**Rachel Trousdale:** I spend four 75-minute classes—that's two weeks—on *Pale Fire*. My basic technique in literature seminars is to ask students to provide the basis of class discussions by bringing in daily questions. We spend the first fifteen minutes or so of class putting those questions up on the board. The rest of the time we spend answering them, and I try to show them how the different themes, images, and factual queries they've provided fit together into a map of the text. Naturally if they've omitted any important lines of inquiry I'll add them myself, but I try to do so using the openings they've given me, to show how their questions lead in directions they hadn't foreseen. This rather freewheeling approach works very well for *Pale Fire*, in part because the text itself is so densely networked that every little detail has important thematic ramifications.

But of course I have specific pieces of text that I always steer them to. In the first day, we read the Foreword and the poem. No matter what questions they bring in for that reading, there's always a good reason to spend some time looking carefully at the first

page, and particularly the ways it establishes both Kinbote's unreliability and his understanding of what it means to read a text. What pieces of the poem we concentrate on varies a bit more, but I often have them talk about the "empty emerald case" of the cicada, which sets up Shade's relationship with nature poetry, the poem's themes of romantic and familial love via Sybil's "ruby ring," and most importantly the hunt for the crown jewels (and thus a discussion, to be sustained across the remaining classes, of how literal-minded we should be in our search for immortality).

**Will Norman:** In just one seminar we are very limited in what we can do. If we can include some discussion of genre (not just in the sense of detective fiction, but also the genre of the academic edition), of the various critical practices invited and frustrated by the novel, and of unresolvability, then I'll feel like we've done pretty well.

In addition, though, it's crucial that we consider the historical itself as one of the material limits that *Pale Fire* is unable to transcend. To this end, I make sure that at some point we make the move of historicizing Nabokov's burlesque of the Cold War and go beyond reading it as mere parody. J. M. Coetzee's article on *Pale Fire* ("Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art," *VCT Studies in English* 5 (1974): 1–7) can help with this.

**Priscilla Meyer:** One device is to trace and analyze mirrors, ranging from 1. the infinite regress Kinbote finds in Sudarg's "tritych" to his demonic "goetic mirror," to 2. Shade's shaving mirror. The motif (inevitably including shades, shadows, reflections) becomes the structural principle of the novel. No image, no reflection. Someone will wonderfully make the connection to the spy-memory metaphor in "An Evening of Russian Poetry," which we discuss at the first class meeting that opens with Nabokov reading it.

**Will Norman:** Priscilla's class on *Pale Fire*'s mirrors strikes me as a particularly good idea, and one I might steal since I can't attend it. Actually I did something very similar with a class on *The Talented Mr. Ripley* recently—another novel from this period that uses the trope of the mirror in relation to paranoia, multiple identities, and queerness—so I can imagine how richly students would respond to the mirrors planted throughout *Pale Fire*.

**Yuri Leving:** *An enormous body of scholarly work devoted to the novel has been amassed since the 1960s, containing ample “spoilers” that can make most of the independent discoveries redundant. What is the methodological role of professional criticism, while at the same time studying the text of Pale Fire in a college course? Are there any specific books or articles on Pale Fire (whether of an introductory or conceptual nature) that you usually include in the relevant portions of your Nabokov syllabi or those you would recommend as a supplementary “must-read”?*

**Dale Peterson:** In an undergraduate literature class nothing should “spoil” the primary encounter with and collective discussion of the text itself. I do not assign any critical or theoretical secondary readings, but I do place on reserve Boyd’s two-volume biography, Nabokov’s selected letters and his correspondence with Wilson, Nabokov’s lectures on literature, and the Garland collection of topical scholarly articles. Students who are curious about the life events, literary taste, and social context that may directly or indirectly inform the composition of a text are encouraged to delve into such supplements. Toward the end of the semester I do hand out a selective list of recommended critical writings. Regarding *Pale Fire* specifically, I’d recommend Michael Seidel’s article and book about “exilic writing,” Michael Wood’s brilliant chapter in *The Magician’s Doubts*, and Pekka Tammi’s survey article in the Garland Companion. Those undergraduates headed for graduate school might well burrow further with Brian Boyd and Priscilla Meyer into the subtextual thicket underneath Nabokov’s intricate weave.

**Priscilla Meyer:** It takes a semester for students to learn to fondle the details effectively so that they can develop their own reading rather than adopting someone else’s, so I ask only the students doing presentations to use criticism, often Don Johnson’s articles, Pekka Tammi’s first book, books on literary *Doppelgangers*. If a student has studied, for example, T. S. Eliot, s/he could do a subtext study for class presentation or for a term paper. Close readings of a subtext, a structure (e.g. Shade’s variants), a historical reference, or a motif often turn up new discoveries (some of which have been published in *The Nabokovian* over the years) in ways that undergraduates’ use of criticism may not.

Students' hypotheses motivate an informed exploration of related criticism, causing them to model the quest Nabokov's novels are designed to inspire.

**Will Norman:** No "must-reads" here. I supply a reading list that contains a representative sample of the criticism since publication and invite students to explore it.

Aside from Coetzee's article, and relevant sections from McGurl's *Program Era* I might suggest that students interested in the authorial controversy read Boyd's *Magic of Artistic Discovery* along with Couturier's critique published on Zembla.<sup>2</sup> Those who want to think more about *Pale Fire* as game might be directed to Thomas Karshan's chapter in *Nabokov and the Art of Play*, and I will often recommend Michael Wood's *Magician's Doubts* as a good place to begin if they simply want to read more about Nabokov as they explore his œuvre further.

**Rachel Trousdale:** Over the course of the semester, I ask each student to provide a handout for the class giving in-depth information about a research topic—generally either biographical information on the author, a source study, information on relevant historical events, or an analysis of a critical text. For Nabokov, I ask students doing handouts on criticism to look at critics who spend time solving Nabokov's puzzles (Mary McCarthy, Brian Boyd, Gene Barabtarlo). In their reports, which they distribute on the last day we spend on the novel, I ask them to focus not just on the solutions the critics find but on the import they assign to those solutions. The question isn't just "Who is Kinbote really?" or "Do all the characters actually exist?"; it's "Why does Nabokov make it difficult for a first-time reader to tell what the truth is here?"

**Yuri Leving:** *How do we advance in terms of an epistemological query when it seems like the author/narrator constantly forces us to move in a circle? What kind of digressions do you afford, i.e. leaps into Nabokov's biography; elaborating on his philosophy, ethics and ideology (i.e. attitude toward homosexuality); providing links to Nabokov's other fictional writings or literary scholarship such as his commentary to*

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<sup>2</sup> *Zembla* was an Internet site (active 1994–2012) devoted to Vladimir Nabokov and conceived by Jeff Edmunds, then supported by the University Libraries of the Pennsylvania State University. – *Ed. note.*

Eugene Onegin; reading parallel literary sources, including those belonging to Russian émigré circles; making historical excursions into the first half of the twentieth century (the history of the Bolshevik revolution, etc.)?

**Rachel Trousdale:** The handouts I assign help with this problem, too. For the first day, I have students provide information on Nabokov's biography and some sources—Frost and Wordsworth as sources for Shade's nature poetry; Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" as a formal source; later, I ask for a handout on *Timon of Athens*. I haven't yet asked for one on the Bolshevik revolution, but I intend to next time I teach the book. I also assign a handout on Brian McHale's discussion of impossible geographies, the indeterminate place he calls the "Zone," in his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, which students can use to think about the different degrees of fictionality in the novel's construction of Zembla and New Wye. But while guiding discussions, I try to take refuge as little as possible in discussions of the rest of Nabokov's work, because (while of course it informs my own reading and work) I think a lot of these questions can be thoroughly and productively answered from the text itself. In other words, I don't agree that the text moves us in a circle—it's more one of Nabokov's beloved spirals.

**Priscilla Meyer:** I'd [also] say the author forces us to move in a spiral, of which Nabokov's biography is an essential arc; beginning with "An Evening of Russian Poetry" and *Speak, Memory* necessitates a quick account of the February and October revolutions, Trotsky's ice axe, and of the Russian emigration in Berlin and Paris—history as essential explanatory motivation for the fiction. We then read *Onegin* along with Nabokov's commentary, seen as an autobiography disguised as a scholarly commentary. His ideas about literal translation can be extended to the literary parallels between Pushkin and Wordsworth in the Commentary. Cultural translation is part of an analysis of *Onegin*—e.g. Tatyana's dream as answer to Bürger's "Lenore." Students write their own cultural translations of *Onegin* into the US of 2014 to experience that kind of cultural transposition (as well as to experience Pushkin's dual characterizations). The semester's work prepares for the climactic reading of *Pale Fire*. Last year after the end of classes the seminar gathered over tea for a collective reading (a few hundred lines each) of "Pale

Fire.” After line 999 we were all silent, on the brink, stunned by the effect of the oral performance of the poem.

**Will Norman:** In order to think historically about *Pale Fire* we need to consider Nabokov’s biography and to know at least the contours of the Bolshevik revolution, the rise of Stalinism and Nazism, and the containment culture of the Cold War United States. Most of my students will be able to orientate themselves in these topics already, and some will have detailed knowledge of several of them.

All of my students will have a sense of canonical literary modernism in English—Joyce, Eliot, Woolf—and this tends to be helpful when the question of literary evolution is raised. It can be productive to ask what kind of conversation Nabokov is having with Joyce or Eliot, how *Pale Fire* raises the stakes on *Ulysses* or “Four Quartets.”

I would hesitate, however, to use the term “digression,” since both modern history and modernism’s institutionalization are the very foundations out of which *Pale Fire* emerges. After all, one of Nabokov’s recurrent motifs is the apparent digression that reveals itself to occupy the centre.

**Dale Peterson:** As for digressions from close reading that are “allowed,” they follow the natural course of conversation, responding in an improvised manner to questions asked of the text or interrogations of the author. By the time my students have reached *Pale Fire*, they will have speculated together at length about the “real life of VN” (including his political preferences and sexual biases). In addition, with my encouragement, they will have asked what *cultural* work a text is performing once it is inserted into a reading community. I would hope that the tendency of Nabokov’s prose to invite the reader to run in epistemological circles and to cultivate a tolerance for indeterminacy might become a habit of mind.

**Will Norman:** I am intrigued by Dale’s final sentence here—could you tell us more about the value you might attach to running in epistemological circles and about the senses in which you mean “tolerance”?

**Dale Peterson:** Thank you, Will, for making an opening for me to say a bit more about the *cultural* and *personal* work that *Pale Fire* is latently performing. You and others have rightly drawn attention to the Cold War atmosphere and biographical traumas that provide a deep substrate for the frenetic and playful surface of the text. All of us have spoken to the ultimate unresolvability of the many lines of inquiry the work prods into being. Why is there such a high valuation on uncertainty and the anxieties *and* pleasures that accompany it? The social, political, and personal displacement characteristic of the time, the author, and the characters induces a frame of mind open to coded meanings yet distrustful of them. The last thing one might say of *Pale Fire* is that it enacts disinterested play of mind. Whoever engages with the spiraling levels of implication coiled into its language and structure is likely to be disoriented yet exhilarated by the sheer potentiality of patterning. One has no choice but to tolerate indeterminacy or to quit the game altogether and disengage from empathy.

**Yuri Leving:** *The Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky's Suprematist Tale About Two Squares: In 6 Constructions (designed during his cooperation with Kazimir Malevich in Vitebsk in 1920 and published in 1922 in Berlin) was one the most striking examples of a creative combination of the narrative schematism and arresting optical effects. As an introduction to the story, a special page presented instructions for the reader. The sentence "Don't read" at the top of the page was followed up by a zigzag line that crossed the entire page, leading to the next instruction at the page bottom: "Take." The instruction, then, pointed to the three equally plausible choices of objects and forms of activity: paper (fold), rods (color), woodblocks (build). The rest of the book was a sequence of diagrams that outlined a narrative frame (fabula), which could turn basic actions (take-fold-color-build) into a meaningful story.*

*Both the Gingko Press facsimiles of the index cards that John Shade "used" for composing his poem and The Original of Laura, Knopf perforated edition, bring us a step closer to Mary McCarthy's famous description of Pale Fire as a "do-it-yourself kit." Nabokov himself once said that the best way to read it would be to place two copies of Pale Fire in front of oneself, thus echoing the early critic's suggestion that the novel's separate parts could be assembled, according to the manufacturer's directions. Would*



*you consider the physical dimensions of a book as an object and ask students to purchase a spare copy of the novel, tearing apart its relevant sections in a literal assemblage? Would this action (cost and accusations in vandalism notwithstanding) justify the academic and pedagogical output?*

**Rachel Trousdale:** I would definitely not recommend that students buy and dissect multiple copies of the book. Partly because I worry about how much money they're already spending in college, but primarily because I see the novel as a remarkably seamless whole. Physically separating it into foreword-poem-notes-index might let us look at the different parts in quadruple exposure and see the patterns running across them, but that separation would also, I think, excessively reinforce the dividing lines between the sections. To see the novel clearly and to see it whole, either keep it as a single volume, or rip it up entirely so you can see all the pages at once.

**Will Norman:** I would be happy for my students to take whatever measures they felt justified in reading *Pale Fire*. The limitations imposed by the book-as-object are an essential component of Nabokov aesthetics, and the literal tearing and recombination of its parts might encourage reflection on them.

**Dale Peterson:** It is Kinbote's suggestion, although Nabokov's sentence, that recommends the alert interpreter consider purchasing two copies and placing them adjacent to one another to ease the laborious back-and-forth reading of poem and commentary. Those in the know know that Nabokov composed many works on index cards in no chronological order prior to his shuffling them into the Platonic form he had already envisioned. Does it follow then that readers of *Pale Fire* would do well to join the shuffle-deck, do-it-yourself act of composition adopted explicitly by the likes of William Burroughs or Julio Cortázar? The Kinbotean procedure assumes that each highly digressive note is aligned pertinently to an individual line (or word) in the poem. But we know better. The fun and profit is in finding a higher pertinence, as it were, in aligning disparate sections of commentary and poetry to one another. It seems likely that a "privatized" subcontracting of the novel's construction by rearranging its parts would

yield a mechanical disfiguration of the text that would impede rather than encourage the good reader's inspired, intuitive grasp of the hidden intertextual resonances that point in the direction of an envisaged, unrealized harmony of poem and commentary, of moony poet and lunatic thief.

**Priscilla Meyer:** Whatever fun they want to have is great. Since it's a do-it yourself enterprise, they should do it themselves. And put it on YouTube.

**Will Norman:** The whiff of avant-gardism evoked by the aleatory techniques of Burroughs, Tzara, El Lissitzky, and a host of others seems to me at some distance from Nabokov's index cards and I would probably challenge students who took such comparisons very far. Rather, the chief value of the exercise suggested here would be the reflection on how little it does for our understanding of the novel.

**Yuri Leving:** *Considering some obvious challenges, presented in the previous scenario, what possibilities exist for teaching Pale Fire in the new computerized era of iPads and interactive apps?*

**Priscilla Meyer:** For one of their papers students can create a gaming blog, write a film scenario or record a rap performance, etc. A recent cultural translation of *Onegin* took the form of a graphic novel, excerpt below:



**Will Norman:** The possibilities are endless in theory, but I have doubts about their efficacy. Nabokov's whole *œuvre* is so invested in the book-as-object—its materiality, its annotated margins, its destructibility—that it would seem to me short-sighted to attempt circumvention of these qualities. The tension between the impulse towards transcendence on one hand and its inevitable frustration by the material world on the other is a subject to be interrogated in its own right rather than evaded.

**Dale Peterson:** There are ways, of course, that digital technology can assist and accelerate an individual's familiarity with the densely woven text of *Pale Fire*. It would be a great boon to have a clickable concordance that would enable a reader instantly to locate recurrences of words and phrases—a digital rival to Kinbote's index. The numerous allusions, borrowings, and imprecise citations that lay beneath the surface of the book's prose and poetry could be retrieved by a search engine programmed to provide *accurate* references and quotations disguised by the cunning poet or by Zemblan translations. It goes without saying that collective brainstorming has been extended beyond classroom hours in blogs posted by students as they are reading assigned pages. Should we worry about cognitive overload or blatant misreadings going viral? Not really—as Kinbote's commentary attests, misreading and verbal distortions can provide a productive kick to the imagination.

**Rachel Trousdale:** I'm much more sympathetic with this possibility than with the idea of ripping up a book, especially now that it's possible on some tablets to add hand-drawn annotations as well as typed notes to electronic texts.

**Yuri Leving:** *Pale Fire is the ultimate hypertext written in a time when the notion of a clickable hyperlink had yet to be introduced. Consider the pros and cons of a digital edition of Pale Fire from a pedagogue's point of view.*

**Priscilla Meyer:** In effect it already exists: there is a searchable digitized text online and there is Google. The only difference between reality and a "digital edition" is that this leaves it up to the reader to decide which forking paths to take. S/he may never come out

of the garden. If we're speaking of annotation only, then the analogue is Appel's *Annotated Lolita*, where the unwarned reader may be victimized by Appel's Quilty spoiler. The project of annotating *Pale Fire* is by design infinite. Where does one stop, at which layer of referentiality, which ripple of the cast stone? A digital edition could short circuit exploration.

**Will Norman:** I am not sure I agree that *Pale Fire* is the ultimate hypertext. As I have suggested above, I understand it to be invested in the deep materiality of the book-as-object. To be flippant for a moment—Kinbote distributes the pages of “Pale Fire” about his body, a kind of physical armour or extension of his body (“plated with poetry” as he puts it) which could not be achieved with a Kindle or iPad. The slippage between corpse and corpus is at the centre of Nabokov's concerns from (at least) as early as *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. There is a danger that thinking of *Pale Fire* as a proto-hypertext not only displaces such concerns but also encourages a fantasy of Nabokov as himself history-less and virtual, which fails to take into account his dealings with mortality, materiality and the real spatial challenges of reading and writing fiction in the mid-twentieth century.

**Rachel Trousdale:** The pros: it would be fabulous. Not just because the text could contain links between poem and notes, and be fully searchable, but think of the supplemental content that could be added. Little animations: a cannon emitting a puff of smoke with the words “self-slaughter” appearing in the middle! A cartoon of Alfin the Vague's airplane crash! A video of the movement of the spot of light in the barn! Photos of New Wye's wildflowers, with Latin and English names! And then other links—color-coded to indicate overt and covert references—to the texts Nabokov refers to. The project could provide work for decades of graduate students.

The cons: we would go as mad as Kinbote trying to follow all the links. Or else the editors of the project would go mad deciding what links to omit, so as to avoid having every word linking simultaneously in six different directions.

**Yuri Leving:** *I really like these little animations suggested by Rachel! Let me continue with this multimedia line of thought: while Nabokov's Lolita, Despair, and The Luzhin Defense have been adapted to the silver screen, there is an obvious reluctance on the part of the Hollywood producers to handle his 1962 text. However, it seems as if some directors might be moving in this direction (the Vintage paperback edition of Nabokov's Pale Fire is visible just above and to the right of Joaquin Phoenix in the frame of Spike Jonze's movie Her reproduced below). Most of us in the Nabokov field use the screen adaptations in teaching the writer's novels, but what are the challenges of adapting Pale Fire? How do you think the possible visualization of the novel in some (hopefully, not very distant) future might assist (or, on the contrary, complicate the matters for) both a teacher and a student?*



Screenshots from the sci-fi drama *Her* (Dir. Spike Jonze, 2013)

**Dale Peterson:** Any visualization or film of *Pale Fire* would require split screen techniques to capture the multiple levels of “reality” and the concurrent plots that Kinbote simultaneously experiences. And how to create a simulacrum of Shade’s poem in a series of moving images? It beggars my imagination. Kinbote’s Commentary has richly comic potential for a scriptwriter clever enough to juxtapose the Zemblan paranoid fantasy and Prof. Kinbote’s interactions with the Wordsmith College environment. Such a film would be *Pale Fire* without the pathos and poetry.

**Priscilla Meyer:** One of the challenges would be to represent both the parody and the pathos of CK and JS. How to treat the poem? Could the human pathos be separated from

the parodic aspect of Shade's not-always-heroic couplets? Dramatizing the poem's narrative could look like the comic inserts in "Shoot the Piano Player."

**Will Norman:** As a teacher I might be interested in a speculative exercise designed to precipitate reflection on *Pale Fire*'s relationship to its medium. That kind of discussion might best belong in a different module, however.

**Rachel Trousdale:** I don't see how to make a film of *Pale Fire* without collapsing some of the novel's shifting layers of reality. This may just be because I'm not a filmmaker, and I hope someone proves me wrong.

The plot would be difficult to represent, but not impossible. Scenes in Zembla could be shot using different light or film quality, subtly indicating that the Zemblan material is set in a slightly different universe than the American material. The narratives of Hazel's death and of Charles the Beloved's escape from Zembla could be intercut—I don't know how screenwriters would get viewers to see them as parallel in the way that Kinbote does, but cross-casting could help, as could strategic visual motifs. When the two narratives meet in Gradus' arrival in New Wye and Shade's death, I don't see how the film can avoid overdetermining the audience's judgment of what's "real" in the novel without being frustratingly vague, but that's a problem I imagine a good director can solve.

More fundamentally, though, there's a problem in the difference between the experience of reading and that of watching a film. The temporal structure of film is more unidirectional than that of written text—that is, it's easy for a reader to flip backwards in a novel, thereby removing the text's temporal sequence from the author's absolute control. It's more difficult for an audience in a theater to pause a film and rewind it to compare passages. Even a viewer watching on a computer at home has to do more fumbling to find a scene than flipping to find a page. Most importantly, the information of a video scene doesn't exist in the kind of simultaneous multiple presents that a page of text does. Part of the brilliance of the novel is how non-linear it is, and that will be a challenge for film to duplicate. Flashbacks just don't have the same effect as turning the book's pages in one direction and then the other.

A different adaptation I'd love to see would be a graphic novel, which would face the challenges of representation but not those of temporality.

**Will Norman:** Yes, the graphic novel would seem to me a more fertile medium for the reasons Rachel gives. Which is not to say I wouldn't be interested in seeing an attempt at the movie as a creative/critical project for a postgraduate film student.

**Yuri Leving:** *Among the possible experiential modes of exploring Pale Fire is reading the text with the help of paintings. The relation of the novel's plot and themes to the visual arts has been the subject of several special studies. The novel contains references to the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, David Teniers, William Hogarth, and Pablo Picasso.<sup>3</sup> How can we utilize this cross-disciplinary dialogue to meaningfully engage students in experimental research?*

**Priscilla Meyer:** VN's references to paintings seem to be of a different order from his references to literary texts, or history. We look at some paintings in class and anything is fair game for the investigation students are always meaningfully experimentally engaged in—reading Nabokov reliably stimulates the treasure-hunt instinct; close reading produces discoveries of new connections even by undergraduates.

**Dale Peterson:** A much more promising avenue for promoting visualizations of the text exists, however. One can take advantage of the scholarship on painterly allusions and bring to class relevant images, reading a painting in context with the textual passage that plays "host" to it. Students, too, should be encouraged to share any associations they make when they visualize what's happening on the page. I have found it especially interesting to ask readers how they visualize Vladimir Nabokov—they all create an image of the man and his personality—and then I present them, in the last day of class, with the opportunity to meet him in person, courtesy of a short documentary interview with him in

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<sup>3</sup> Partially, these paintings were analyzed in Gerard de Vries and Donald B. Johnson's *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (2006); see also investigations on *Pale Fire* and photography by Conall Cash; on *Pale Fire* and the art aesthetics by Emmy Waldman; as well as Rene Alladay's study of allusions to Holbein's *The Ambassadors* in the novel (all three articles published in the *Nabokov Online Journal* in the last few years).

Montreux. Stereotypes rapidly collapse as they watch the multi-faceted sides of Nabokov's persona and personality unfold "live" on location.

**Will Norman:** The single two-hour seminar format has not allowed me to experiment with using paintings as a teaching tool, though I would be prepared to if the opportunity arose.

**Rachel Trousdale:** Here, too, I think comparing the novel with other art forms can be particularly interesting as a way to prompt students to consider how artists in general and Nabokov in particular create nested layers of reality. The different ways that da Vinci, Teniers, Hogarth, and Picasso approach representation illuminate the very different forms of realism possible in an artistic text. For undergraduates, a discussion of the paintings can render the novel's abstract or theoretical ambitions much more comprehensible.

**Yuri Leving:** *In Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's Lolita, some authors survey the generic and cultural contexts for Lolita, from Poe and Pushkin to contemporary American fiction. How productive, in your opinion, would the same approach be, of reading the long poem "Pale Fire" through the close comparative analysis of the works of English literature—from Shakespeare's Timon of Athens and Pope to modernist poetry composed by T. S. Eliot, Frost, Lowell, and Yvor Winters?*

**Priscilla Meyer:** Each of these would be productive in its own way, and ideally one should examine as many of the most prominent as possible. Possibly symptomatically of a strangely projective interpretive bias, all those authors named above except for Shakespeare relate exclusively to Shade's poem, as objects of parody. On the door of a stall in a ladies' room in our building, a student had written a heading: "People who deserve more respect"; under it others wrote in nominees, one of whom was Charles Kinbote—texts related to Kinbote are less accessible and equally important. It would be fun to spend a year reading some of each set of subtexts, Kinbote's and Shade's, in parallel.



**Dale Peterson:** While it is important and illuminating to enrich a first-time reading of *Pale Fire* with some knowledge of the more salient specific citations from works by literary predecessors, I am not as confident that a reading of “Pale Fire” would benefit from a close collateral reading of another long poem in English, though the obvious candidates would be Pope, Yeats, or Frost. Such comparisons would only serve to foreground a particular dimension of the oddity that is Shade’s tonally strange poem. But there is one exception. In my estimation, the most pertinent and productive collateral text to bring to a reading of *Pale Fire* (or *Speak, Memory*) is Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. It is, after all, a meditative poem about the formation of the poet’s mind and that, too, is the central focus of Shade’s minor masterpiece, “Pale Fire.”

**Rachel Trousdale:** As the research assignments I give my students show, I find this kind of source study very helpful. But as my resistance to tearing the book up probably also shows, I wouldn’t encourage students to apply their findings to the poem alone. A source study is very much a study of context, and removing the poem from the immediate context of the commentary does not, I think, make the extratextual context of English-language literature more illuminating.

**Will Norman:** This kind of work would indeed be productive given more time. One of the effects Nabokov has on his readers is to color their readings of other writers—Eliot becomes a second-rater, Joyce a genius, Freud a fraud etc. I have found it useful to discuss with students what it is in Freud that Nabokov takes such exception to, what kind of medium the novel might be in which to have an argument with Freud, and where the ideological limits of Nabokov’s argument with him might be located. We are accustomed to thinking of Nabokov as having the last word in such dialogues, and indeed to reading Nabokov *à la Nabokov*, but it is a useful exercise to ask students to step outside the limits of his world and comparative readings offer one way of achieving this, particularly if they are historically grounded.

**Yuri Leving:** *Allegedly, Nabokov’s novel that “sets the standard for misguided interpretation paradoxically manages to free the reader from interpretative anxiety. Pale*

Fire may be the work by Nabokov that readers can enjoy with the least compunction about having missed something important” (Eric Naiman, Nabokov, Perversely, 118). What can we learn with students from either the maniacal obsession of the novel’s commentator-protagonist or from our own process of intellectual pursuit while thinking and talking about Pale Fire?

**Rachel Trousdale:** My students have frequently observed that they become Kinbotes when they write on *Pale Fire*. This definitely happens to Nabokov critics—how many of us have had eureka moments when we’ve found the Crown Jewels in some preposterous new location? (I certainly have.) I wouldn’t say that the novel frees us from interpretative anxiety—there’s definitely such a thing as a wrongheaded misreading of the book—but probably my favorite thing about *Pale Fire* is how it manages to place the highest possible stakes in the most playful possible terms. “Life everlasting, based on a misprint!” The answers matter, but just as much, so does the joyous, comical quest for them. That’s something I think we all need to learn.

**Will Norman:** Naiman is good on this question of anxiety in Nabokov’s readers. I think that there is always the risk (perhaps even the necessity) of becoming a Kinbote. The history of *Pale Fire* criticism demonstrates this very clearly. What I aim to do in my seminar is to help students to become critically aware of Kinbotism as part of what the novel demands of its readers, and to understand what they stand to gain or lose by that process. Such reflections provide a very useful entry point into studying Pynchon’s *V.* and then Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, the two novels which follow *Pale Fire* in my module and which also prompt a consideration of Cold War paranoia. The point is not that we should avoid becoming Kinbotes, but that we should learn to recognize him lurking in all of us.

**Dale Peterson:** Vladimir Nabokov is often regarded by scholars as well as the reading public as one of the last Modernist writers, implying that he builds elaborately organized texts that lend themselves to mastery, to one authoritative, correct reading of a predetermined schema. Nothing could be further from the truth. A close collaborative

reading of *Pale Fire* should dispel such a mistaken idea. No one can read *Pale Fire* without sensing a higher purpose than comedy in the binding together of an old poet's conjury of bygone moments and mortals with an exile's elaborate delusion of a lost kingdom. The implication that there is an imaginative affinity between art and madness cannot be denied—both, in a sense, speak Zemblan, the tongue of dissemblers. An affinity is, however, a semblance of sameness and the poet knows that “resemblances are the shadows of differences.” To read *Pale Fire* alertly is to learn to exercise the imagination while respecting its boundaries and limits. Imagination is the mind's defense against time's relentless erasure of “the melancholy and the tenderness of mortal life.” Only in the medium of art, the craft of knowing artifice, can the quiddity of individual existence attain an afterlife of sorts, a transference of fleeting conscious existence into material shape. The autobiographical poetic “I” of John Shade, unlike the slain waxwing, lives on, flies on, “a smudge of ashen fluff” in a graphic reflection that transposes mental life (Wordsworth's spots of time) into the inky medium of a legible text.

**Priscilla Meyer:** As in *Onegin*, or *Madame Bovary*, the theme of projection of literature onto life teaches readers self-awareness as interpreters. Everyone should always wonder what they are missing, be glad that they are always missing something, and suffer from happy referential mania.

**Will Norman:** It's interesting to me that Priscilla offers us this reflection on happiness at the close of our discussion and that Rachel dwells on the comic and joyous. At the risk of opening Pandora's box, I'd like to know more about how a happy referential mania might look different from an unhappy one.

**Priscilla Meyer:** The unhappy version is the madness of the son in “Signs and Symbols,” caused by the solipsism of his reading of the universe: he sees the world as focused on him, which begets an unbearable paranoia. Nabokov's works lay trails leading the reader from the known into the unknown, rewarding the quest with new knowledge and a vision of the miraculous interconnectedness of everything.

