

The Rapture of Reading in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

Dominant Narratives and the Assassination of the Story

Jelige: palefire

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"True art is above false honor" (Kinbote)

Introduction

The aim of my paper is to demonstrate the constructive nature of reading and its implications regarding the narrative techniques of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. My hypothesis is that this novel thematizes the act of reading, as well as its constructive nature. Apart from the analysis of narratology, my investigation will revolve around two fictional characters in the plot: Charles Kinbote, professor of literature and the assumed narrator of the story, and Gradus, the mysterious assassin, whom I consider the most problematic character. In my reading, Gradus's role will represent the various instances of metalepsis applied in the narrative of *Pale Fire*. Metalepsis is the rhetorical tool by which, according to Gérard Genette, the narrative can transcend multiple layers of diegetic reality. In my analysis, Gradus comes into focus due to his problematic identity: the indeterminacy of his role is manifested in his dual position as either occupying the diegetic world shared by Kinbote or the world of Kinbote's narrative. I will argue that according to the latter case Gradus is rendered a rhetorical tool employed by Kinbote to validate his annotations accompanying "Pale Fire," the poem written by the third main character, poet-professor John Shade. In my interpretation, the metaleptic shift occurs when Gradus eventually transgresses Kinbote's narrative to become the assassin of John Shade. This phenomenon of transcending diegetic levels will be expressed by the metaphor of the mirror, and will serve as an analogy to discuss the possible readings of the novel itself, more specifically regarding postmodernist reading strategies and the concept of the "dominant narrative" offered by Brian McHale. In my conclusion, I will point out why the implicit consciousness of "being read" can serve as a mental backdrop for the reader to locate his or her reading either among other individual readings or mirrored in the (re-)construction of an interpretation of the narrative.

Dominants of (Post-)modern(ism)

According to Brian McHale, *Pale Fire* coincides with a paradigmatic shift both in the self-awareness of 20th century literature and the focal target of literary criticism, altogether labeled as the "postmodernist breakthrough" ("Telling" 556). This does not necessarily mean that Nabokov's novel should be the product of such shift, or that its characteristics unveiled by postmodernist reading strategies are symptomatic of its age, but such reconsiderations of

the critical approach may provide a whole new set of keys to my investigation. One of the reasons I opt for sketching a postmodernist story *of* the novel (as a form of “metanarrative” [cf. Genette 228]) is the inherent necessity of such approach to define itself in terms of what McHale calls “rightness or fit, such as validity of inference; internal consistency or coherence; [...] and pro-conversation, to keep the discursive ball rolling” (“Telling” 553). Such an approach, I believe, offers a favorable basis for my critical investigation, since it constantly requires double-checking my interrogation. This self-reflexivity does not function as an exterior device in my approach; rather, the process of reading is itself aware of its own constructive nature. From this perspective, the paradigmatic shift mentioned above will manifest itself in the realization that criticism must confront itself as being formed in the context of discourses, where these contexts are constructed precisely by the discourses themselves. If we claim that reading is construction, we defy the notion of a hidden truth lying beneath the strata of the text (which would only require careful excavation and proper taxonomy of the found material). In my analysis regarding *Pale Fire* I choose such a self-reflexive approach not only in favor of a reading strategy, which, due to its scholarly modesty, always leaves the door open to further interpretations, but because, as I will try to point out, the Nabokovian realm of fiction with its self-mirroring metanarratives is precisely the mirror of readings. To extrapolate the stratum-metaphor, Nabokov’s fiction resembles a land amidst a silent earthquake, where the critic must count with the unfortunate contingency of carefully shaped tunnels being constantly rearranged by the destabilized (that is, reread) crushes or landslides of their previous hypotheses. To summarize the characteristics of postmodernist criticism, among its most important revelations is the revitalized consciousness focusing on its own reading process.

The multiple bracketing I employed in my title above the previous paragraph illustrates the various problems the very term ‘postmodernism’ implies. Here already we confront the primary methodological and ontological self-reflexivity of this literary approach: therefore, the coinage entails its need of immediate clarification. McHale favors the term *postmodernism* instead of the more general (or colloquial?) ‘postmodern,’ since it better demarcates the distinction between the so-called (post-)modernist movement and the etymological interpretation of the word (‘[after the] present’). As for the prefix ‘post-,’ a more sensible definition lies beyond its trivial translation, thus it denotes “historical consequence” instead of “sheer temporal posteriority” (*Postmodernist* 5).

Such groundings of the definition of postmodernism are necessary yet not sufficient to properly outline the nature of the new critical paradigm. At this point, McHale borrows the

“formalist concept of the dominant,” formerly utilized by Jurij Tynjanov and Roman Jakobson, but deconstructs the term in order to avoid any further connotations of “deterministic and imperialistic language” (6) inherent in Jakobson’s theoretical approach to “poetic evolution” (quoted in *Postmodernist* 5). In fact, he points out that Jakobson himself used his term in various contexts, thus pluralizing the targets of its critical approach, and, parallel to this, defying the fact that there ought to be an objectively framed process of evolution leading to an ever-better understanding of poetics or culture. In short, McHale borrows and cleanses the term ‘dominant’ and applies it as a type of paradigm, which defines (or, from the other way around: symptomizes) “[the] questions we ask of the text and the position from which we interrogate it” (6). McHale does acknowledge the fact that the emergence of a dominant is not an overriding rule of previous dominants; such interpretation of the concept would automatically result in a dismissive and ignorant scholarly attitude, the problem of which is not that it is arrogant or rude, but the fact that it contradicts postmodernist reflection on the constructive nature of reading and interpretation. Thus, in McHale’s argument, the concept of dominant will eventually stand for the priorities of investigation: “since discourse, even a philosopher’s discourse, is linear and temporal, and one cannot say two things at the same time [...] it only specifies which set of questions ought to be asked first” (*Postmodernist* 11). Priorities outlined by dominants are not merely strategies for creating a rank of importance, but tools to establish the basis and nature of reading. The hierarchy of the discourse determines the direction of one’s approach. In the case of my investigation of *Pale Fire*, the dominant question could be phrased as: “who is the reader?” instead of the more traditional (see: Boyd 1999, Foster 2005) approach inquiring: “who is the author?” (of “Pale Fire”, the poem, or the “Commentary”, or both).

After settling some of the potential concerns pertaining to methodology, McHale continues by finally drafting a possible set of criteria to distinguish between modernist and postmodernist fiction. This distinction can be traced through the “shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being* (*Postmodernist* 10). By transcribing this condensed definition to philosophical terminology, we acquire the distinctive foci of raising either epistemological or ontological questions. While modernist fiction still believed in a specific truth (the discovery of which is only hindered by the blinding aporias of epistemology), postmodernist fiction rejects the notion of a single, accessible truth. In turn, it offers a fiction where either the possible paths of the reader’s approach are explicit, and actually form an organic part of the narrative (as, for example, in the short stories of *Ficciones* of Jorge Louis Borges; quoted by McHale, *Postmodernist* 61, 114, 163), or the

frontiers of fiction are blurred by means of the conventions of the narrative being erased or inserted into the story. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* will be my primary example of the latter version: as I will come to discover, techniques of narrative become fictionalized by the impersonation of the process of reading (enacted in the role of Gradus), while, as a result, the position of the narrator within the novel will constantly remain indeterminate.

Reading the Reader

Reading *Pale Fire* means reading a narrator's interpretation of a text ("Pale Fire," the poem by John Shade), who himself is also a character of the novel, and whose identity remains indeterminate throughout the story (he is either a scholar, Charles Kinbote, or the last king of the mysterious Zembla, Charles II, or a runaway madman imagining the entire story). Furthermore, his narrative is not homogeneous in the sense that he could coordinate a single text. Instead, his attention shifts between two different texts: "Pale Fire," and his own "Commentary," where the latter is a long critical footnote intended as a documentary explaining the conditions in which the poem "Pale Fire" was written. As opposed to the descriptive (or extrapolative) nature of a literary commentary featuring a neutral viewpoint, critical attitude, and verifiable data, Kinbote's narrative aims to interpret Shade's poem as the last and only trustworthy source of Charles II's life in exile. His aim to decipher the assumedly hidden references in "Pale Fire" is singlehandedly motivated by retracing all the details embedded in either the form or the content of the poem pertaining to the events of the Zemblan king's life. Referring to his theory that the poem's sole purpose was to serve as a Zemblan chronicle, he exclaims, "At length I knew he [John Shade] was ripe with my Zembla, bursting with suitable rhymes" (Nabokov 58). In short, his approach implies a fixed focus based on the assumption that Shade's poem necessarily presents itself as something with which he is already familiar and the purpose of which he already knows; his only task henceforth is to unveil the artistic process of the artist as converging to an already established goal of producing a poem on Charles II.

Initially it may seem as if Kinbote was not aware of his preconditioned critical approach to the poem "Pale Fire." Various instances of his self-reflexivity, however, show that his self-criticism manifested in the "Commentary" sometimes proves just as strong as his overpowering hypotheses. For example, he must acknowledge, too, that due to certain contingencies, John Shade could not complete his work as he might have wanted: "... we

may conclude that the final text of 'Pale Fire' has been deliberately and drastically drained of every trace of material I contributed" (59). His reasoning, however, avoids blaming Shade, and instead accuses external effects that derailed the poem without leaving it a chance to accomplish its Kinbotean aim: "despite the control exercised upon my poet by a domestic censor and God knows whom else [...] in his draft as many as thirteen verses [...] bear the specific imprint of my theme, a minute but genuine star ghost of my discourse on Zembla" (59). Kinbote's emphasis on only a couple of verses in a poem of 999 lines already seems somewhat exaggerated. Furthermore, his lengthy annotations to line 70 and 71, incorporating an almost complete genealogy of Zemblan kings, is justified simply by the parallel that Shade in these lines enumerates some members of his own ancestry (which might or might not bear resemblance with that of the Zemblan family tree). In many of the cases, only such assumed analogies lead Kinbote's investigations. When his genuine criticism fails to respond to either empirical or logical verification, he invokes his close friendship with Shade to justify his unscholarly approach. Even so, he cannot defy the fact that John Shade did not precisely follow his orders and that such disobedience leads to a literary work which, due to its inconsistencies, requires his lengthy "Commentary."

I will later argue that Kinbote employs in the role of Gradus a more articulate justification for his annotations through the means of metalepsis. But even the implications manifested in Gradus's rhetorical transgression of diegetic levels are expressed in the trajectory of a slow evolution of Kinbote's awareness. In order to properly contribute to that analysis of rhetorics, I will first consider the problem of Kinbote's preconditioned reading and its implications regarding the literary criticism of Nabokov's novel. So far we have seen how Kinbote's narration of "Pale Fire" is riddled by his preconceptions, which are mostly expressed unsystematically and in form of scattered instances of his self-reflexivity. I will consider these unsystematic occurrences of introspection not as genuine confession of bias but as instances where Kinbote's critical digression indirectly highlights the inconsistency of his criticism. In the followings, I will argue that his reading of the poem does not merely serve as a disguise or obstacle in front of Shade's poem; neither is it a parasite text, the existence of which is being merely justified by the necessity to interpret Shade's original work. More specifically, I consider Kinbote's narration two-sided: it is both the account of how Kinbote formulates a response to "Pale Fire" and the gradual process of (the late) acknowledgement that this response tends to behave independently and provoke further responses from other readers or other texts. Kinbote's role as an authentic reader is questionable in terms of his inadequacy to provide a logically supported argument to why his

reading revolves around the possible interpretation of the poem as a Zemblan chronicle; but his formulation of the “Commentary” highlights his emerging awareness of the construction of his narrative. Such awareness or consciousness will first serve as an analogy to all critical approaches reading *Pale Fire*, and provides means of understanding the (re-) formulation of a text through one’s reading.

Mirrors in Kinbote’s “Reading”

Much of *Pale Fire* scholarship has deciphered the various occurrences of symbols—assumedly—inserted by Nabokov into his fiction. Brian Boyd’s monograph on the novel, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire* bears the subtitle “The Magic of Artistic Discovery,” already assuming the necessity to delve into Nabokov’s world and unearth its secrets from inside. Boyd enumerates Nabokov-scholars whose various interpretations of the text imply the assuredness of finding a fixed truth by which the mysteries of *Pale Fire* could be unlocked (see: Mary McCarthy, Pekka Tammi, Carol T. Williams: *Nabokov’s Pale Fire* xi). Boyd also touches upon a motif hinted at by Nabokov himself, namely, that reading a multi-leveled text such as this novel may resemble the search for the proper solution in a chess game (141). Such approaches generally follow a certain Ariadne’s thread to whatever possible interpretation can be gained from a specific perspective. For example, concerning the authorship of various texts in the novel, scholarly attention already divides into two camps: the Shadeans and the Kinboteans, interpreting either John Shade as the author of both the poem entitled “Pale Fire” and the “Forward,” as well as the “Commentary” attached to it, or Charles Kinbote as the real poet, disguised by the fictional Shade. While these approaches disagree on the issue of authorship, they generally agree that the more deeply hidden the signs or metaphysical trapdoors they uncover, the better. This agreement also entails the ontological certainty: Nabokov’s novel is a private realm of signs and symbols, the fuzzy and intricate relationship of which determines the final outcome of one’s reading, but which still offers a concrete solution to the meaning of the text. To put it the other way around: there must be a final truth, and only the overlapping symbols provide challenge to the reader. It is important to note here that although two completely opposite interpretations of authorship within *Pale Fire* may tolerate each other’s scholarly contribution, nevertheless their goal of an ever-perfected synthesis generally excludes opposing insights due to their expected inconsistency. It is therefore interesting to read how Boyd towards the end of his book on *Pale Fire* confesses his

constantly renewed surprise whenever he rereads the novel in terms of how these new discoveries result in crucial shifts in his previous interpretations (245). Even so *Nabokov's Pale Fire* is a very consistently "Shadean" reading of the novel, written on the assumption that by arguing for John Shade's authorship of "Pale Fire" or even of the "Commentary," the mysterious themes of the novel and their relationship with Kinbote's footnotes could be unraveled.

Considering such controversies, it may seem as if no verifiable truth could be derived from the indeterminacies concerning authorship and reality in *Pale Fire*. But in terms of a postmodernist reading, not the acquired truth (ontological approach) but the acquired awareness (epistemology) of the process of reading becomes relevant. Focusing on reading is not equivalent with dispersing and relativizing interpretations (since the sense of truth is there to beckon): but it does imply the awareness of a present discourse, in which a piece of criticism may inadvertently shift its place. In the previous chapter I examined Kinbote's preconditioned criticism as well as the scattered traces of his awareness of him manipulating the text. In Brian McHale's context of the ontological and the epistemological paradigms, Kinbote's focus can be characterized as hesitating between the two. He assumes the existence of a hidden truth in "Pale Fire"—most notably, the chronicle of the last Zemblan king—but also becomes aware of the fact that in order to acquire this truth, he must manipulate his reading. Apart from the scholarly concerns regarding his possible authorship of "Pale Fire," Kinbote's character was mostly interpreted as the archetypical representation of the narrow-minded critic. Generally, Kinbote's identification as an incompetent scholar serves the purpose of arguing in favor of dismissing the traditional debate of whether he or Shade is the real author of "Pale Fire." In the novel, Kinbote's self-deceptive approach is visualized by the metaphor of the mirror. In my chapter on *Gradus* I will argue that Kinbote's self-awareness in his annotations is just as important as his self-awareness, but for the sake of elaborating on the mirror-metaphor, I will first trace some of the discursive paths in Nabokov-scholarship which evolved on the assumption that Kinbote being deceived by his own pre-conditions (reflections) in his criticism of "Pale Fire" serves as an example of the scholar who becomes entrenched in a single-perspective critical approach.

Considering the image of the mirror, already the first couplet of "Pale Fire" reads as follows: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (Nabokov 16). This image offers the first glimpse of the mirror as motif, which depicts, rather tellingly, the death of a bird, killed by the lure of the sky's reflection in a window. Since these lines are part of the poem assumedly written by John Shade, Kinbote's immediate

confrontation with them results in the irony that he himself cannot recognize the implications of Shade's metaphor. In the first paragraphs of his "Commentary," Kinbote already digresses from focused criticism regarding the poem, and speculates whether the image of the waxwing in the first couplet of the poem is inspired by this type of bird's frequent occurrence in New England, where Shade had lived throughout his life (52).

Many scholars discussing *Pale Fire* recognize the analogy between the mirror-effect and Kinbote's collision with his own projection of a Zemblan chronicle on Shade's poem. For instance, while discussing the theme of literary supplements in Nabokov's works, Michael Seidel remarks that "supplemental places have to be imagined and articulated because [...] they do not exist in a reachable form;" for Kinbote "the only way out of the supplement is through Shade's poem—he must make all experience a kind of vision, a kind of dream of his own story" (841). I quote Seidel to illustrate the fact that Kinbote's dependence on "Pale Fire" is already manifested in the genre of his "Commentary," and that in a sense every piece of literary criticism becomes a supplement in view of the original text. Following this train of thought, according to John O. Lyon in his essay on Kinbote's logically derailed annotations and its implications, "the exegete is caught between the work of art and life, and his mediation is awkward. He is afraid of murdering to dissect and yet out of reverence wishes to become the work of art" (245). Kinbote's dilemmas become mirrored in the process of giving a critical response, including his very own annotations to "Pale Fire," as well as the work of Nabokov-scholarship regarding *Pale Fire*, the novel. Regarding scholarly criticism on the novel, in her review on Priscilla Meyer's work—which aims at unearthing and cataloguing the hidden symbols and intertextual links of *Pale Fire*—, Jane Grayson describes the examples of "pallid pastiche, painful pedantry, narrow and apparently inexhaustible exegesis" (547), and associates this phenomenon with Nabokov's narrator, "[it is the] salutary warning of how *not* to go about the business of commentating—Kinbote, the commentator of 'Pale Fire' being a case in point." By citing a review instead of the actual critical text by Meyer I intend to highlight the layers of critical discourses; in Grayson's view the mirror of scholarly self-reflexivity is precisely the critic who examines the critical commentator (that is, Kinbote) employed in Nabokov's novel. This way Grayson adopts the mirror-structure to reflect Meyer's approach in her analysis of *Pale Fire*. Another indirect criticism of the "Kinbotean" ignorance appears in Maurice Couturier's essay on authorship in *Pale Fire* where he argues in favor of discovering a "text-based author" and resisting the temptation of "emulating Kinbote's unscholarly stance" (55). Couturier refers to other Nabokov-scholars (more specifically those referred to by Brian Boyd in *Nabokov's Pale*

Fire), and argues in favor of transcending the traditional concerns of unraveling the logical fallacies of narratology regarding Kinbote's indeterminacy. This way, Couturier's criticism forms itself in the context of an already thriving discourse. But the "discursive ball" rolled on, because when his essay appeared in the Cambridge textbook entitled *Nabokov and his Fiction – New Perspectives*, edited by Julian W. Connolly, it also evoked a critical review by Zoran Kuzmanovich. Here Kuzmanovich discusses Couturier's initiation of focusing on a "text-based author" in a discourse about the necessity of freeing scholarly disputes on *Pale Fire* (653), which might otherwise drown in "narrow exegesis" (Grayson 547). Here a fourth level of meta-discourse was necessary to consciously reflect on a criticism (third level) which took Kinbote's critical approach (first level) as metaphor to reflect on the exhausted scholarship of authorship-oriented Nabokov critics (second level).

As the previous examples show, Kinbote's unreflective critical approach is generally regarded as an epitome of unscholarly work, due to his failure of entering a discourse similar to the multileveled discussions and reinterpretations mentioned above. In my following—final—chapter, I will argue that Kinbote does not always unconsciously deceive himself, and, as mentioned previously, in many cases is well aware of his presumptions. He does not manifest his consciousness in terms of outlining the possible epistemological (re-) considerations which his "Commentary" may evoke for justification, but in terms of the possible transition between his narrated world and his own. I will now consider Gradus, the assassin, and his role in Kinbote's narrative; I will argue that his role of metalepsis is precisely the means by which Kinbote in the very last lines of his "Commentary" unveils the means of transition from the forced Zemblan interpretation of "Pale Fire" (level of narration) to John Shade's assassination (Kinbote's own diegetic level).

Reflections on Gradus

The reader remains unsure whether Kinbote's interpretations of "Pale Fire" are caused by a certain constellation of events in reality (for example, the assassination of John Shade), or if these events are arranged to serve a specific interpretation. The reader may never be able to decide where Kinbote's reading ends and where *Pale Fire*'s story begins, or if the two are ultimately identical (either in the sense that everything Kinbote writes in his "Commentary" is true, or that the entire story is the output of a madman's fantasies). Further blurring his identity, Gradus also bears a set of different names, such as Vinogradus, Jacques de Grey, or

James de Gray, which are iconically built around the same stem (“Gray,” or the first syllable of “Gradus” pronounced identically), yet instead of using these variants in a mutually exclusive way, Kinbote applies them almost in an ad hoc manner. Gradus’s identity is thus rendered to the play and intermingling of quasi-homonymic designations. Kinbote’s explanation for the assassin’s obscure identity constantly refers to the fact of Gradus’s secret mission to track down the King; it serves Kinbote’s interpretation well to assume the necessity of Gradus to constantly change his name. Furthermore, the pronunciation of “Gradus” may—in the case of an English-speaking reader—invoke the word “grade.” Kinbote also detects the words “gradual” and “gray” in lines 17 and 29 of “Pale Fire,” and remarks on the curious coincidence, “our poet seems to name here (gradual, gray) a man [Gradus], whom he was to see for one fatal moment three weeks later, but of whose existence at the time (July 2) he could not have known” (Nabokov 54).

Kinbote’s consciousness of his role as not simply a commentator on “Pale Fire” but a narrator, whose forming of his text results in possible alterations of reality, becomes transparent in the process of distinguishing various levels of diegesis. The distinction between these levels may only become apparent when we encounter a transgression between two separate levels. Gérard Genette highlights the importance of distinguishing these levels in terms of hierarchy: “we will define this difference in level by saying that *any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed*” (228). Genette here refers to instances of narratives where a character of the story becomes the narrator of another story (taking place in the wider context of the first one). To differentiate between the two levels, Genette coins the term “extradiegetic” to refer to the first (higher) level of diegesis, and “intradiegetic,” alluding to the narrative told inside the first narrative (229). Genette’s definition of the narrative of the second degree is that it is a metadiegetic narrative compared to the narrative of the first degree. Considering the fact that in these domains of meta-level discourses occupy the first degree, he admits that “this term functions in a way opposite to that of its model in logic and linguistics” (228). A possible answer to this reversal could be the fact that the narrative’s existence is a prerequisite to that of the narrator. In a general sense, every narrative is narrated by someone, but in the case of a second-degree narrator, a first-degree narrative must provide context. Therefore, defining the meta-level of a text is important from the perspective of identifying its narrator. In the case of second-degree narratives, the wider context of the first-degree narrative provides such means of identification. By implying the notion of “context,” my aim is not to relativize a narration pertaining to the second degree;

Genette, too, emphasizes the fact that “the possibly fictive nature of the first instance does not modify [the] state of affairs any more than the possibly ‘real’ nature of the subsequent instances does” (230).

Regarding the different diegetic levels of his narrative, at one point in his “Commentary” Kinbote remarks on the possible circumstances of the birth of Shade’s poem: “one can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of the story acted as a catalytic agent upon the very process of the sustained creative effervescence” (58). If we assume that the diegetic level of the cantos is a consciously separate narrative level from the perspective of Kinbote, the diegetic level of Kinbote—as character—will count as a metadiegetic level of the narrative. Such distinction becomes crucial in the act of Kinbote consciously referring to his reading of the cantos; it is precisely his conscious reference to the dialogue between his “Commentary” and “Pale Fire” that renders Shade’s poem’s diegetic level as subnarrative compared to his own. This dialogue is manifested in Kinbote’s remark on the “family resemblance in the coloration of both poem and story” (58). This division of diegetic levels is problematic because as a counter argument, the “family resemblance” alluded to by Kinbote could be one of the main arguments applied by Kinbotean scholars to prove why Shade’s authorship can at the most only be considered secondary to Kinbote’s. Conversely, Kinbote’s importance could be interpreted as an illusion, and thus it can be said that a more sensible criticism is available to the reader of *Pale Fire* if we accept John Shade as the real author. But accepting Shade’s authorship would provide tools to decipher exactly those themes and signs of Nabokov’s narrative which become marginalized through the interface of Kinbote’s “Commentary.” It is therefore impossible to clearly prioritize between the two versions, but due to the metaleptic transgression between the different narratives, there will not be a need to do so.

After mapping the distinct levels of diegesis and their relation to each other, Genette proceeds to define the rhetorical tool of metalepsis as “the transition from one narrative level to another” (234). For example, in a more traditional form, transitions can be achieved by simply narrating two embedded stories in parallel. However, “any other form of transit is, if not always impossible, at any rate always transgressive” (234). Such a transgression is achieved by “any intrusion [of the] extradiegetic narrator or narrate into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe etc.), or the inverse [...] produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical [...] or fantastic” (234).

As a response to Genette’s concept, John Pier points out that two separate forms of metalepsis could be distinguished: the rhetorical and the ontological (Paragraph 7). Genette’s

descriptions in his work *Métalepse* would imply the rhetorical metalepsis, while McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* the ontological. I have already mentioned McHale's arguments on certain types of narratives, such as *Ficciones*, which uncover the process of reading in their narrative. Ontological metalepsis is what "foregrounds ontological issues of text and world" (*Postmodernist* 20), that is, if the narrative includes the realization that its ontology is formed precisely along the line of its own narrative, in that case the ontological truth implied in the text transgresses the level of diegesis on which it is expressed. According to Pier the boundaries of the two types of metalepsis are rather vague; for instance, Genette himself does not distinguish between the two and instead favors another typology based on the various contexts in which metaleptic transgressions may occur. But emphasizing the rhetorical aspect of Genette's definition highlights the importance of the "rhetorical effects produced by representation through discourse or other semiotic means," (Paragraph 11). In turn, Genette's two main types of metalepsis, the "figural" (e.g. tropes) and the "fictional." The case of figural metalepsis outlines the process of "a figure taken literally and treated as an actual event" (*Métalepse* 20). In contrast, fictional metalepsis "introduces into narratology the problem of ontological transgression in representation" (Paragraph 10). This means that the reader may participate in "a playful simulation of belief" (*Métalepse* 25), that is, the reader is aware of the fact that a certain narrative is fictitious but maintains the conscious illusion that it should be comprehended literally. Pier identifies this mutual illusion as the "reading contract." McHale's ontological metalepsis is similar to Genette's fictional version due to the "shared illusion" between both the reader and the text; however, instead of the necessity to foreground certain ontological issues within a narrative, Genette's typology focuses more on the rhetorical implications of metalepsis.

In *Pale Fire*, metaleptic transgression is represented by Gradus, whose role may be identified as either an autonomous character within the diegetic world shared by Kinbote or the textual "automaton" of his "Commentary" (in this case, he is considered an intradiegetic character in relation to the diegetic world shared by Kinbote). If considered an intradiegetic character, Gradus's role is rendered a mere rhetorical tool—metalepsis—necessary to legitimate Kinbote's possession of "Pale Fire" (that is, its first manuscript inherited from John Shade) and his special relationship to it, namely, that it is the only narrative about him as the last king of Zembla. One of the most striking evidence for this is the fact that Gradus's character almost always appears in Kinbote's "Commentary" as the figure whose role, attitude, and importance are only determined by Kinbote himself. In the context of the "Commentary," Gradus is the assassin from Zembla, Kinbote's or Charles II's homeland,

whose duty is to track down and murder the King, the last legitimate ruler of Zembla, currently a refugee, who, during his escape, emerges in various places around Europe. In this context, Gradus is defined by Kinbote as an “automaton,” an almost self-less character driven by the sole motive of assassinating the king. He becomes the personified fate of Charles II, whose pursue must follow that of the king.

Gradus is emerging gradually in the narration of Kinbote as the assassin of John Shade. In this case, Gradus’s emergence is articulated in his transgression from being the physical assassin of Shade to being the final resolution in Kinbote’s “Commentary.” Gradus’s physical journey through Europe and America, in pursuit of Charles II, is also determined by the necessity of the diegesis formed by Kinbote: his approach to New Wye, where the King is located is closely synchronized with the story of John Shade working on his long poem, as well as with the King escaping through secret tunnels and transgressing multiple state borders. Furthermore, this careful synchronization is self-reflexively acknowledged and explicitly approved by Kinbote himself: one of the most important instances of a detectable metaleptic shift occurs when Gradus reaches New York. At this point, while Kinbote refers back to his previous explanations of Gradus (him being an automaton and a vaguely identified character), he continues with an almost microscopic analysis: “Gradus is now much nearer to us in space and time than he was in the preceding cantos. [...] We see, rather suddenly, his humid flesh” (258-259). As opposed to his role when entering Kinbote’s own diegetic world, Gradus “did not have as much body” (260) during the time when his presence in Kinbote’s narrative functioned only as Kinbote’s reasoning to the necessary exile of the Zemblan king. Furthermore, Kinbote employs a symmetrical structure in his narrative on Gradus when after Shade’s death he erases Gradus from his “Commentary” with a rhetorical exclamation resembling the instructions of a screenplay: “enough of this. Exit Jack Grey” (282).

Sorting out the “Pale Phosphorescent Hints”—A Conclusion

Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* is a novel of reading. Its only access leads through the process of reading, the fact of which becomes important when we find in Kinbote’s compulsive interpretations, his blurred boundaries of fiction and reality, and the layers of (re-)readings smeared onto one another the analogy of our very own reading process within the narrative. Gradus may prove to be both a metaleptic device and the assassin of the story (killing Shade,

one of the possible authors of “Pale Fire,” and also literally ending Nabokov’s novel). But the last metaleptic shift must be performed by us, readers, when entering the text by both becoming aware of its contradictory levels of diegesis—and providing legitimacy for such contradictions by being constantly aware of our reading becoming the medium for others to decipher. Perhaps it is not a surprise how contradictorily but enthusiastically scholars working on *Pale Fire* could be lured into the novel’s world. The readers’ necessity of a possible synthesis is not important so to attain ontological determinacy but to be able to recognize how every new reading provides a new entrance into the text. The problem of authorship may be considered relevant not in terms of whether Kinbote or Shade are the primary narrators of the story, but in terms of where the reader as constructor steps into the creative process.

Nabokov’s narrative provides not merely a self-reflexive account of representing the artificiality of the story; rather, artificiality becomes one of the most important themes of the story. The (mis-)interpretations of Shade’s poem by Kinbote reflect not just on how distortive the process of reading can be, but point out how the reader can recreate the text and legitimate his or her interpretation by being “righteous and fit,” to keep that “discursive ball rolling,” despite the fact that it may result in an other Kinbotean commentary. As it may turn out such annotations could very well overgrow and redress the original text to the extent that a later reader may not be able to distinguish between the primary text and its appendices.

On a last note, it is worth considering how Kinbote’s self-awareness—manifested in the trajectory of Gradus’s metaleptic emergence—reaches full accomplishment at the very end of his narrative. At first he remains inconsolable when he envisions the possible scenarios of his academic colleagues responding to his work: “[such] heart, such brains, would be unable to comprehend that one’s attachment to a masterpiece may be utterly overwhelming, especially when it is the underside of the weave that entrances the beholder and ultimate begetter” (Nabokov 4). In this sense, his exclusivity in receiving Shade’s poem overrides the possibility of further critical dialogues. This exclusiveness of interpretation entails that a sense of ontological certainty must be first provided by the reader to recognize the text as target of investigation. Even so, Kinbote resignedly admits at the very end of his narrative that Gradus, after transgressing the narrative level of his “Commentary,” may even transcend the world of his own as simply as passing onto another level of fiction: “whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere will quietly set out—[...] and presently he will ring at my door—a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus” (284).

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