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Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov‘s “Pale Fire"

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Introduction

Find What the Sailor Has Hidden

The poet's plan is to display in the very texture of his text the intricacies of the game in which he seeks the key to life and death.

*Pale Fire*, Kinbote's note to lines 734–735*

My title, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden*, comes from the final sentence of Nabokov's memoir, *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov is describing his family's departure from France for America in May of 1940:

There, in front of us, where a broken line of houses stood between us and the harbor, and where the eye encountered all sorts of stratagems, such as pale-blue and pink underwear cakewalking on a clothesline . . . it was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—*Find What the Sailor Has Hidden*—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen.

The sailor has hidden many things in *Pale Fire*; this book unscrambles some of them. The hulk in the background of *Pale Fire* is the history of the northern world over the last millennium, beginning with the Viking sailors, whose travels prefigured Nabokov's by a thousand years.

An earlier embarkation of Nabokov's family had taken them from their native Russia to England:

In March of 1919, the Reds broke through in northern Crimea, and from various ports a tumultuous evacuation of anti-Bolshevik groups began. Over a glossy sea in the bay of Sebastopol . . . my family and I set out . . . on a small and shoddy Greek ship Nadezhda [Hope] . . . . I remem-

*The editions of Nabokov's works, cited in the text by title and page number, are listed in the bibliography.
ber trying to concentrate, as we were zigzagging out of the bay, on a game of chess with my father—one of the knights had lost its head, and a poker chip replaced a missing rook.

(p. 251)

The loss of his Russia is the determining fact of Nabokov’s life and art; he encodes his experience in Pale Fire. Spiraling outward into world history, Nabokov selects his material so as to show history taking the same course as his own extraordinary fate. First an English-speaking Russian child in St. Petersburg, later an emigré in England, Germany, and France, and then a Russian-speaking writer in America, Nabokov saw himself as a living synthesis of a process of literary exchange through translation and metamorphosis that began as far back as Norse mythology and took the same direction as the Viking sailors.

In interviews, Nabokov declared, “I was an English child,” and also lovingly recalled his “Russian childhood.” In Nabokov’s literary biography the Russian and English aspects are Doppelgängers; knowledge of the Russian tradition makes it possible to tell the original from its mimic, the double from the original. His earlier books were written in Russian and translated into English; his later books were written in English and translated into Russian. His two great American novels, Lolita (1955) and Pale Fire (1962), are made to reflect that duality: Lolita effects a synthesis of Russian and American culture by its hidden incorporation of Eugene Onegin signaled by a system of dates based on the hundred-year interval between Pushkin’s birth in 1799 and Nabokov’s in 1899; Pale Fire effects a synthesis of British and American culture, outlining the thousand-year evolution of the Anglo-American tradition from the end of the reign of King Alfred in 899 to the birth of Vladimir Vladimirovich in 1899.

The fateful moment in Nabokov’s life that governs the plot of Pale Fire is the shooting of his father on a certain night in 1922, at a public lecture in Berlin, when my father shielded the lecturer (his old friend Milyukov) from the bullets of two Russian Fascists, and while vigorously knocking down one of the assassins, was fatally shot by the other.

(p. 193)

Pale Fire conspicuously refers to this tragedy in the manner of John Shade’s accidental murder. The attempt to make sense of his father’s assassination is the ultimate moving force behind Nabokov’s exploration of the history, literature, natural evolution, and language of the North over the last thousand years. He relates his findings to the problems of murder, revenge, and the transcendence of fate through the immortality of artistic creation. In his reverence for a creation infinitely complex and beautiful, and only partly knowable, Nabokov manages, astonishingly, to create a universe of his own in Pale Fire that is at once vividly specific as well as infinite and universal.

Nabokov passes his experience through the artist’s prism, retwisting his own biography in Kinbote’s. Kinbote is the incognito king of Zembla in exile in America, where he teaches at Wordsmith College. Zembla is an emblem of cultural synthesis: the Zembian language brings together Slavic and Germanic roots, creating an imaginary meeting place of Nabokov’s two major cultural strains. Words contain information about the early history and evolution of human culture; the predominantly Anglo-Saxon component of Zemblan points to the focus of Pale Fire on English language, history, and literature. Kinbote has transformed the lore of several cultures into a lost personal kingdom. Shade’s subject too is loss—of his daughter Hazel, who drowned herself in despair. That loss shapes his poem “Pale Fire” as an investigation of the afterlife. Kinbote is a poet of the imagination; his neighbor, Shade, is a poet of the word. Kinbote and Shade are made to mirror each other; taken together, they reflect Nabokov’s pain of exile and loss of country, language, and father.

In Pale Fire Nabokov converts his private pain to public history. Nabokov said that the good critic should be a detective; an analysis of Pale Fire must begin with annotation. The hints are less obvious than the ship’s funnel in the scrambled picture, but the same stratagem disguises them: they are embedded in a rich background of dancing details. Identifying the references, the detective gradually connects the dots to outline the history of the North, the texts that document that history, and the way that history has been reflected in literature. Once the picture is drawn, it becomes possible to identify the thematic connections Nabokov has made to his own life history.

The form of this book is Nabokov’s Hegelian spiral, moving from the general to the particular and then outward to the meta-
important are: 1) the number of stages, 2) the metaphor of translation, and 3) the metaphor of metamorphosis. Each stage requires a different approach to the text, as identified by the terms "stage," "intermediate," and "final." The text also discusses the role of the translator in the process of translation and the importance of understanding the context of the original text.

The next page continues with a discussion of the concepts of translation and narrative. It explores the idea of translation as a process of transformation and the significance of the "intermediate" stage in this process. The text also addresses the role of the translator in creating a new text that is faithful to the original while also engaging with the context of the new audience.

The final page of this section discusses the relationship between translation and narrative, emphasizing the importance of understanding the context of the original text and the need for a nuanced approach to translation.
many have been left implicit. The overlapping readings of *Pale Fire* here are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. A name, a word, or sentence will appear in several separate contexts, but will rarely fit perfectly into a single interpretation, as it is designed to engender multiple reflections, the dappling of light that is for Nabokov an emblem of heightened consciousness. Pathways of the novel have been deduced from standing menhirs, as well as from a few chipped flagstones—Nabokov does not insist on a hierarchy of clues or of thematic clusters. Nabokov's works are designed to mimic the effect of life on an ideal reader: they are an inexhaustible and dynamic source of explosions of discovery, large and small, that in turn send us on further quests. This book sketches the contours of some little-known territories we may explore, annotating some of the main articles in the encyclopedia of the universe that is Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. 

The concept of translation is central to Nabokov's work, both in its literal and in its many figurative meanings: through space and time or from one world to another, be it cultural or metaphysical. For Nabokov, the ideal translation is from life to the eternal life, echoing his displacement from his country and language. Nabokov alludes to the hereafter by a set of motifs connoting infinity, from number systems to the all-encompassing alphabet and its associated spectra that become invisible at either end. The alphabet is the alpha and omega of the materials at Nabokov's command with which to capture the infinity of the universe mirrored in *Pale Fire*. 

Translation is related to metamorphosis; the evolution of the species is a model for the evolution of a plot through genres as it reappears in a variety of cultural disguises. Myths and folk tales are transcribed from oral to written culture, reemerge as ballads, and then, through translation and metamorphosis, sometimes develop the wings of individual masterpieces. In Kinbote's commentary, Nabokov traces the development of the English language out of Old Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon etymologies from the primitive kennings of early Anglo-Saxon culture to the linguistic elegance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, whose legend is first recorded in the Norse sagas. Shade's poem meets Kinbote's commentaries in Shakespeare's work and takes the history of English letters from the eighteenth century—his specialty—to contemporary (to 1959) American literature, of which he is a practitioner. 

The interconnections within this book are so abundant that