Queer, Queer Vladimir

When the BBC asked Vladimir Nabokov in 1968 what authors had influenced him most, he responded, "I'd much prefer to speak of the modern books I hate on first sight: the earnest case histories of minority groups, the sorrows of homosexuals, the anti-American Sovietman sermon . . ." (Nabokov 1973, 116). With an uncharacteristic flourish of generalizing, Nabokov groups together what had by then become a familiar coupling of Cold-War villains: minorities, homosexuals, and communists. But what troubles Nabokov most is not the existence of various political interest groups—he makes much in Strong Opinions and Speak, Memory of his lack of interest in matters political—but that such interests are cast into fictive discourse: "case histories," "sorrows" and "sermons" employ narratives that indulge and promote their authors. Like Alfred Kazin, 'for whom the love that dared not speak its name' in the nineteenth century "cannot, in the twentieth century, shut up" (quoted in Sklepowick 1977, 525), Nabokov signals his disdain for the narcissistic indulgence of homosexual and political narratives. Viewed through this lens, then, his 1962 Pale Fire would appear to be a parodic romp across the phobic landscape of Cold-War America, in that Charles Kinbote, the novel's exiled king and homosexual commentator, gives us precisely that earnest case history, and does so with a narcissistic self-promotion that reaches almost demonic proportions in Nabokov's hands.

Such a diagnosis of narcissism, at any rate, is made by Nabokov's critics: they find Charles Kinbote an "incurable pederast and lunatic," a "narcissist and madman" whose "invulnerable egotism and megalomania" (Haegert 1984, 405, 415) characterize "a boringly tenacious pedant with homosexual urgencies" (Galef 1985, 427), and whose "rampant homosexuality, . . . mad egocentricity . . . [and] preposterous unreliability" (Boyd 1991, 426) refract and distort John Shade's poem, upon
which he is commenting. Indeed, the only thing more painful than the homophobia of *Pale Fire* is the license it has given critics to volley diatribes against the purported apposition between Kinbote’s homosexuality and his madness, an apposition conveniently coalescing in the term “narcissist.” And as I shall discuss momentarily, this equation of narcissism and homosexuality has been, at least since Freud, a central trope in the diagnosis and persecution of the Western gay man. Nabokov, it would seem, wreaks his revenge on those “earnest case histories” and “sorrows of homosexuals” by casting them in a narrative whose narcissistic self-delusion is so palpable and parodic.

The critical evidence for and condemnation of Kinbote’s narcissism is his egomaniaclal “misreading” of Shades poem; Kinbote, like Narcissus, sees the world entirely through the lens of his own desires. For some weeks, Kinbote had been feeding Shade the story of the land of Zembla, a pre-revolutionary utopia over which Charles the Beloved (Kinbote in earlier days) presided as king. After a revolution instigated by the Shadows, Charles flees to New Wye, Appalachia, where he suspects that he is hunted by the assassin Jacob Gradus. In his version of the story, Gradus attempts to murder him, but shoots Shade instead. (Actually, Shade is shot by Jack Grey, an ex-con who mistakes the poet for Judge Goldsworth, who had sent him to prison.) Upon Shade’s death, Kinbote finds the poem on which Shade had been working, but it contains nothing of the history he had been giving Shade over the past weeks. Kinbote complains,

> Where was Zembla the Fair? Where her spine of mountains? Where her long thrill through the mist? And my lovely flower boys, and the spectrum of the stained windows, . . . and the whole marvelous tale? None of it was there! (Nabokov 1962, 296)

As Shade lies dead, Kinbote bewails the lack of his life-story in the poem, and then writes that story through paranoid and intrusive endnotes. For Kinbote, the poem becomes a carefully crafted account of the commentator’s life-story, of “the under-
side of the weave that entrances the beholder and only begetter, whose own past intercoils there with the fate of the innocent author" (17). Like the mythical Narcissus, this “beholder and only begetter” is unable to distinguish self from other. Indeed, “without my notes,” Kinbote proclaims in the Forward, “Shade’s text simply has no human reality” (28). As the critics point out, Kinbote narcissistically appropriates Shade’s life and work in a pathological distortion of the real.

But what are we to make of the ethical implications of Kinbote’s distortions when he is defended by John Shade, the voice in *Pale Fire* that is clearly closest to Nabokov’s own? For Shade, the “lunatic” is that familiar Nabokovian artist “who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention” (238). And what are we to make of Kinbote’s distortions when they flow from the pen of an author who, like Kinbote, was, “as far back as I can remember . . . subject to mild hallucinations” (Nabokov 1966, 33).\(^1\) What are we to make of a seeming homophobic narrative that proceeds from a man firmly self-identified as “queer”? The term itself, signaling vitriol rather than joyful transgression in the 1960s context, becomes a recurrent referent in *Speak, Memory*, as Nabokov describes his career as a butterfly collector. And while I am not suggesting that every man who collects butterflies is gay, what are we to make of lepidopterological descriptions like the following:

> In the summer of 1929, every time I walked through a village in the Eastern Pyrenees, and happened to look back, I would see in my wake the villagers frozen in the various attitudes my passage had caught them in, as if I were Sodom and they were Lot’s wife. (Nabokov 1966, 131)

While Nabokov may gesture to a rather simple homophobia in my opening quotation, his self-proclaimed queerness and his love of creating new worlds through fictional reverie suggest that there may be more to the “lunatic” Kinbote than the homophobic lens can encompass.

Viewed through a different lens, then, Kinbote’s reading
of Shade's poem points to a problem of authorial identification that the novel implicitly raises. When Kinbote seeks "Zembla the Fair" and "my beautiful flower boys," he indicates a problem of gender politics written out of Shade's poem. Indeed, while the homosexual story that Charles inserts into the commentary is meant in some ways to signify madness and paranoia, it also contains elements of real persecution: early in the Foreword, Charles is called before his department head to hear a student complaint, which he and we are sure will involve his attractions to his male students. Moreover, King Charles has emigrated from a land of gay freedom where, based on Greek models, male homosexuality seems almost the norm, and manlier than love between men and women (Boyd 1991, 428); he has come to the America of the fifties where, conversely, his "fancy pansy" desires are constantly derided (268). He is told: "Your majesty will have to be quite careful here" (248), a warning that echoes that of his department head. Kinbote's enforced closetedness reflects the intense homophobia that characterizes America after the war, homophobia that saw gay men as by definition subversive. Thus, Kinbote's narcissistic appropriations of Shade's poem provide a safe closet in which to express a censored sexuality: "despite the control exercised upon my poet by a domestic censor [Shade's wife Sybil],... he has given the royal fugitive a refuge in the vaults of the variants he has preserved" (81). Given Nabokov's sympathies for such closet lunacy, I want to argue here that Kinbote's narcissism is not merely a symptom of madness; rather, narcissism is the central trope by which Nabokov defines politics and sexuality as they express themselves in the phobic culture of 1950s America.

As Lee Edelman (1993, 556), Michael Rogen (1984), and David Savran (1992) all document, straight America during the Cold War was plagued by the feeling that homosexuals were, on the one hand, everywhere in culture and politics and, on the other hand, impossible to detect. Like communists, their very invisibility led them to be "seen" everywhere; indeed, in 1951 Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer argued in Washington Confidential that there were no fewer than 6,000 fairies in government offices, yet they can go easily unperceived: "some
are deceptive to the uninitiated” (quoted in Katz 1976, 101). Caroline A. Jones argues that this paranoia was not only the property of right-wing government, but even permeated artistic circles: she locates a “paranoid talk of a ‘homointern’ among the aggressively masculinist painters of abstract expressionism” in 1950s New York (1993, 652). For Edelman, this troubling (in)visibility engenders what he calls “homographe-sis,” the attempt to posit homosexuality as a readable phenomenon while simultaneously accounting for the frequency with which it manages to escape detection [;] it undertakes to construct male homosexuality in terms of what the “public eye” can recognize even as it situates it in a perpetual ontological shuttle between sameness and difference. (558)

In Edelman’s analysis, what “the ‘public eye’ can recognize” is effeminacy, which becomes the diagnostic homographic designation that absorbs the different (the gay man) into a familiar sameness, the recognizably feminine; and this sameness is then marginalized for its very difference. I want to suggest here that this critical, homographic destabilizing of the sameness/difference opposition, essential to the designation of both the “fairy” and the communist, is especially exacerbated by another “recognizable” difference in the gay male: his palpable narcissism. For the narcissist’s difference is defined by his orientation toward sameness—the sameness of object choice, the sameness of the disparate elements of the object-world as they are drawn together and equalized through the narcissistic lens—and whose orientation to sameness renders him, in the America of the late fifties and early sixties, dangerously different.

I. Freud’s Fairy Tales

The equation of homosexuality with narcissism has a long shelf-life, one that goes back to the late nineteenth century. Havelock Ellis described in 1898 the “Narcissus-like tendency”
in auto-erotics "in general and in some feminine-minded men" in particular (1928, 7: 355). As Michael Warner reminds us, homoerotics was, in the late nineteenth century, "an unrecognised version of auto-erotics, or more precisely, of narcissism; both [were] seen as essentially an interest in the self rather than in the other" (1990, 190). The year following the publication of Ellis's *Studies*, German psychologist Paul Näcke transformed this tendency into the "Narcissmus" of sexual perversion, which Otto Rank then firmly located as homosexual in 1911. Following this early work, the most crystalline explication came from Freud, whose 1914 essay "On Narcissism" claimed to discover,

especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love-objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking *themselves* as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed "narcissistic." (88)

With Freud, narcissism comes to be seen as a *sine qua non* of homosexuality, and Havelock Ellis quotes Isidore Sadger as epitomizing the psychoanalytic take on gay narcissism: "We can say of homosexuality that it is the narcissistic perversion *par excellence* . . ." (1928, 7: 364). In mid-century America, we find the gay man represented as narcissistic in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), and in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958). We find him underwriting the whole idea of the "clone," the distaste for whom, as Wayne Koestenbaum has argued, is a homophobic hatred for "sameness" (1990, 182–83), a hatred that, I would argue, assumes the gay search for sameness in the love-object and condemns that search. And we think of the image of Jamie Gumb, the murderous homosexual of Hollywood's *The Silence of the Lambs*, as he narcissistically caresses his own body while dancing before his video camera. Gay subjectivity, then, not only occupies the contradictory position of difference that purports to love sameness, but it presumably does so under the
aegis of narcissism, a condition whose noteworthiness as different depends precisely on its remaining in the registers of sameness.

Nor did psychoanalysis soon abandon the doctrine that gave us this cultural image: while the psychopathologizing of narcissism occurred early in the century, not much had changed in regard to theories of homosexuality in the 1950s and 60s, the time of the publication of *Pale Fire*. In *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1962, the year of *Pale Fire*), Irving Bieber and the Society of Medical Psychoanalysts adopted Freud’s understanding of narcissism more or less wholesale: “Freud’s formulations on so-called ‘narcissistic’ love object choice,” they wrote, “are supported by our findings in the Adolescent Study [chapter 7 of the book]. Reciprocal identifications and love for an exchanged self-image were noted among adolescents” (1962, 307). One particular adolescent narrative is cited as evidence. The report documents the patient’s attractions to another boy:

“He was just like me” [said the patient]. The partner was an effeminate homosexual. They shared many interests and intimacies; they embraced and kissed each other when they met. Apparently, they had a genuine liking for one another. Their sexual activities consisted of mutual fellatio, during which they cooperated in a mutual fantasy. Each one imagined that he was the other and that at the same time each was a mature woman performing fellatio on this image of himself. (210)

Now, Bieber’s book sets out to overturn some fundamental Freudian assumptions about homosexuality—including the notion of a castration complex and the paranoia that Freud located at the heart of Schreber’s and all homosexuality. Similarly, in a 1954 essay later reproduced in *Homosexuality and Pseudohomosexuality* (1969), Lionel Ovesey resists Freud’s assumptions of an instinctual homosexual drive. Yet, both texts hold tenaciously to Freud’s narcissistic hypothesis. Indeed, it would seem that the only vestige of Freudianism in the 1950s’ psychiatric understanding of homosexuality, along with the Oedipal attraction to the mother, is that of narcissism. And the
moral weight that Freud introduced to the term accompanies the fifties' appropriation of it.

According to psychoanalytic paradigms, narcissistic sexuality's "love of the same" locates its object in the narcissist's own body. As Freud tells us, Paul Näcke used the term "to denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated . . ." (1914, 73). Nabokov depicts such homosexual narcissism in his novel, Despair, translated in 1966 from the Russian Otchaianie of 1932. We are presented with a madman, Hermann, whose relationship to his wife is blatantly narcissistic: "I loved her because she loved me" (Nabokov 1966, 35). Moreover, this love is rooted in his own body. During sex, he seemingly projects himself outside his own corporeality where he watches himself make love to his wife: "From my magical point of vantage I watched the ripples running and plunging along my muscular back" (37). Significantly, this self-division, was, by Nabokov's own admission, "an important passage which had been stupidly omitted in more timid times"—that is, in the Russian version of 1932 (quoted in Grayson 1977, 78–79). In the later, fuller version, Hermann's libidinal cathectic upon his own body is clearly meant to explain his primary relationship in the novel, his befriending and exploiting a man named Felix who, in his imagination, looks exactly like him (although we learn later there is no resemblance): "He appeared to my eyes as a double, that is, as a creature bodily identical with me. It was this absolute sameness that gave me so piercing a thrill" (23). And then, as if to drive the point home, Nabokov adds, "With a condescending grin he offered his hand, hardly bothering to sit up. I grasped it only because it provided me with the curious sensation of Narcissus fooling Nemesis by helping his image out of the brook" (23). The magnetic attraction—what Hermann calls a "masonic bond" (220)—that holds the two men together throughout the novel denotes the erotic vibrations of narcissism as the foundation for homosexuality and emphasizes the degree to which Nabokov homosexualized the English revision. Perhaps the most significant of these additions combining narcissism and homosexuality is Hermann's recollection of his younger brother:
At first we shared a bed with a pillow at each end until it was discovered he could not go to sleep without sucking my big toe, whereupon I was expelled to a mattress in the lumber room, but since he insisted on changing places with me in the middle of the night, we never quite knew, nor did dear mama, who was sleeping where. (147)

What Freud joined together Nabokov does not put asunder.

Whereas Freud first theorized narcissism as an instinctual drive that cathexed upon one’s own body, later psychoanalysts down-played the role of instinct and focused instead on the patient’s interrelations with the object-world. Narcissism became not an interruption of “natural” libidinal progress from self-to-mother-to-heterosexually-defined-other, as Freud had hypothesized, but rather a defense mechanism (as Wilhelm Reich described it in Character Analysis [1972, 217]) or “adaptive strategy” (according to Bieber) for orienting oneself to a hostile and malignant world. Thus Heinz Kohut could write in 1971 that

some of the most intense narcissistic experiences relate to objects; objects, that is, which are either used in the service of the self and of the maintenance of its instinctual investment, or objects which are themselves experienced as part of the self. (1971, xiv)

By moving from instinct to object-relations, clinical definitions of narcissism came to accommodate the patient’s obvious attraction to external objects in the construction of an isolated and protected self, and in so doing opened a narrative space for novelists such as Nabokov to exploit the narcissist’s relation with—rather than isolation from—the material world.

Similarly, Pale Fire negotiates the dialectic between the investment in one’s own body and in the object world. The cathexed body becomes so overdetermined that it eradicates all sense of difference in external objects. As Kinbote explains, his (fictional, projected) land of Zembla is a land where all people look like him: “all bearded Zemblans resembled one
another—and... in fact, the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian zemlya, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections, of ‘resemblers’” (Nabokov 1962, 265). Like Hermann, Kinbote uses external objects—other people, Shade’s poem—“in the service of the self and of the maintenance of its instinctual investment.” Indeed, this instinctual investment is figured in a scene that literally appropriates the Narcissus myth: having escaped revolutionary Zembla, Charles traverses the countryside in a red sweater. His supporters stymie the Shadows by donning red sweaters as well, so that the real king cannot be detected in the context of widespread public masquerade (one thinks here of the King of Norway who, along with his subjects, wore Stars of David to confuse the Nazis). However, there is some suggestion that the villainous Gradus too may be wearing a red sweater, and so the enemy and the hero have become indistinguishable. During the escape, Charles comes to a pond and, looking into it, first sees a “counterfeit king” reflected—who is actually, he then realizes, standing on the ledge above him. This reflection—either enemy or supporter or self—soon gives way to “a genuine reflection, much larger and clearer than the one that had deceived him” (143). This narcissistic moment moves Charles from the anxiety of personal threat and fragmentation to an affirmation of self, whole and strong. As Lacan suggests in “The Mirror Stage,” the response to external rupture and fragmentation—in this case national exile and, we assume, some kind of sexual trauma—is to gather the different pieces of one’s self into a seeming whole, one that produces a self (1977, 2). Such constructions of similarity or doubleness (whose political implications I shall discuss momentarily) narcissistically attempt to display a unified self. But it is only an attempt. As Nabokov has said, “there are no real doubles in my novels”—only people’s obsession with seeing similarity where none exists (quoted in Proffer 1968, 263).

When the exiled Charles looks into the pond and sees himself in the other and the other in himself, he registers the Cold-War fear of collapsed identities, a fear that Edelman and Rogin identify as proceeding from a similarity that makes difference unreadable, a homographic fear. For Nabokov, this homographic crisis, this orientation toward sameness that
appropriates and transforms the other, has a political element: it marks Russian communism's eradication of individual identity. Kinbote "resembles" not only King Charles but also Gradus, the revolutionary murderer with whom he shares a birthday, a homeland, and a physiognomy (all Zemblans look alike). The King's bedroom mirror, the very signifier of his identity, was made by Sudarg of Bokay, "Jacob Gradus" spelled backwards (111). The word "kinbote," we are told, is Zemblan for "regicide" (267). And in a way, Kinbote's distortion of Shade's poem kills the author as Jack Gray kills the man. Thus the narcissist resembles the communist in a way that fifties America both feared and exploited for the purposes of persecution. Nabokov makes this equation most clearly in Despair, where Hermann theorizes his propensity to see doubleness thus: "This remarkable physical likeness probably appealed to me (subconsciously!) as the promise of that ideal sameness which is to unite all people in the classless society of the future . . ." (168). Hermann has "such faith in the impending sameness of us all" that "Communism shall indeed create a beautifully square world of identical brawny fellows, broad-shouldered and microcephalous" (30). This hatred of the Leninist regime—the one political opinion Nabokov never shied away from expressing—becomes eroticized in the English version of Despair, metamorphosing the homoerotic into a politicized dissolution of difference and individuality, a dissolution that was especially threatening to the fifties, where fairies and communists—narcissists all—lurked in every closet.

II. "We are those others"

To this point, I have been reading Nabokov straight by placing Hermann and Kinbote in standard, although continuous, psychoanalytic paradigms. But as any reader of Nabokov will know, the use of psychoanalysis to locate a sexual politics is slippery. Nabokov invokes "the Viennese quack," as he repeatedly calls Freud, only to contradict him. Whereas Freud's theory of homosexual narcissism articulates the fear of losing identity by one self narcissistically appropriating another,
Nabokov mirrors this theory to show us its reverse. The source of this reversal may be Havelock Ellis, whom Nabokov read in his father's library and preferred to Freud. While Ellis too saw the homosexual as a narcissist, desiring himself in the love object, he also argued the opposite:

It remains true, however, that there may be usually traced what it is possible to call a pseudo-sexual attraction, by which I mean a tendency for the invert to be attracted towards persons unlike himself, so that in his sexual relationships there is a certain semblance of sexual opposition. Inverts are not usually attracted to one another. . . . (1897, 18)

One such invert is King Charles: he desires difference—inference in class, in age, in look. He can enjoy the high-born dauphin Oleg, whose blond Nordic features contrast with his own, or he can desire the revolutionary guards watching over him in prison. There is a similar orientation toward difference in the way Kinbote transgressively desires his students who are clearly in asymmetrical power relations to him; indeed, his erotic attraction to "two charming identical twins and another boy, another boy" (23) signals both thematically and syntactically an orientation toward similarity while at the same time evoking a spectrum of differences (the identical twins are remarkable for a similarity that is juxtaposed with a world that looks different from them, a world synecdochically embodied in "another boy, another boy"). As a professor, Kinbote reminds us of the Greek models of desire discussed by Foucault (1985) and David Halperin (1990), one whose erotic charge magnetizes around fundamental differences in age and status. What Charles's transgression points to is that, for all the vaunted desire for difference, contemporary surveillance still constructs very strict limitations on that difference, in that only certain differences are appropriate to introduce to the arena of male eros. The gay man must be somewhat narcissistic but not too much, somewhat other-invested, but not too much.

Nabokov's use of the trope of narcissism to suggest difference at the same time as registering similarity has a long
history that begins in the originating myth. The Ovidian story has come to signify a homosexual love in that it refuses to recognize otherness but, as Michael Warner argues, such a reading cannot be justified by the story: "Ovid tells us that Narcissus rejects not just the girls who love him, but also the boys. These boys, then, have an interest in other persons, if not in the other gender, and the myth of Narcissus does not collapse the two" (1990, 193). I would argue, furthermore, that while the taxonomic force of narcissism as a diagnosis of the homosexual centers on the collapsing of others into the self, such was not Narcissus's crime. As Louise Vinge's survey of the Narcissus myth demonstrates, almost all versions of the story depict a lover ignorant of the identity of the beloved (1967). Indeed, as Yves Bonnefoy writes, "Narcissus must first believe he loves another in order to be able to love himself" (1991, 493), and Ovid himself stresses that Narcissus "unwittingly... desired himself, and was himself the object of his own approval, at once seeking and sought" (1955, 85; emphasis added). Thus the originating myth of Narcissus not only obliterates the distinction between self and other, but also emphasizes that distinction profoundly. Narcissus is unable to identify the other precisely because he is so intent on the other as other.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Freud's essay on narcissism, then, is its reversal of the Ovidian story from a recognition of difference to a refusal of that recognition. But in Nabokov's text, the original Ovidian splitting returns. If narcissism means collapsing all others into one, Kinbote's perceptions are hardly narcissistic: his disposition to see the world through his own interest does not contract the possibilities for object-relations in that world but rather expands them. He fragments the murderous Jack Grey into Jacob Gradus, Jack Degree, Jacques de Grey, James de Gray, Vinogradus, and most importantly, Leningradus. He sees his colleague Gerald Emerald as both faculty member and the Shadow Izumrudov. And Kinbote himself is both academic and exiled king, two selves operating in independent narratives, yet who gradually get revealed as the same person.5 His bedroom mirror in Zembla, whose significance I shall discuss in a moment, is a triptych in which the self is reflected not once but thousands of
times in infinite arcs. If the homosexual in this novel is narcissistic, his is a narcissism that multiplies personalities rather than collapsing them into one. Such difference is most forcefully and queerly inscribed in Kinbote's gloss on Shade's syllogism, "other men die; but I / Am not another; therefore, I'll not die" (ll. 213–14); Kinbote responds, "This may please a boy. Later in life we learn that we are those 'others'" (164; emphasis original). And it is precisely that fragmentation of the self into the spectrum of political differences—from Kinbote to Leningrad, from Emerald to Izumrudov—that registers Nabokov's resistance to the Cold-War politics of narcissism, a politics that dangerously aligns the communist and the homosexual.

That resistance is most obviously conveyed in Nabokov's representation of Kinbote/King Charles as the gay man. Unlike the later Despair, translated and amended at a point in the sixties when the Anti-American Sovietam sermon and homosexual case history were proliferating (much to Nabokov's disgust), Pale Fire casts the aristocratic king and not the communistic Gradus as the gay. In this novel, Nabokov bifurcates the equation between the queer and the communist that he would easily inscribe in Hermann—and that Cold-War America homographically inscribed on the gay male body—and returns us to a perhaps pre-modern notion of the aristocrat as sodomite. Indeed, in Pale Fire, homoerotic bliss is pitted against Bolshevist-style revolution and sameness to mark a difference that could easily be identified and persecuted. But more to the point, we see Nabokov employing the alleged tendency toward sameness in gay subjectivity to figure its opposite—the inexorability of difference and individualism, the hallmark of Nabokov's aesthetics.

The psychoanalytic tendency to see the gay man as a "type," a constellation of easily identifiable traits, is analogous to the tendency to generalize, the obsession to see similarity where none exists. Indeed, Nabokov has suggested that it is not narcissism but psychoanalysis that breeds fascism: "what a great mistake on the part of dictators to ignore psychoanalysis," he writes in Speak, Memory, "a whole generation might so easily be corrupted that way" [300–301]. This resistance to typing underlies among other things his troubled relationship to his gay
brother Sergey. “For various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about my . . . brother . . . his boyhood and mine seldom mingled. He is a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections” (1966, 257). In 1932, Nabokov visited Sergey and his lover in the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris. Nabokov later wrote, with the happy incredulity of a tolerant liberal, “The husband, I must admit, is very pleasant, quiet, not at all the pederast type, attractive face and manner” (quoted in Boyd 1990, 396). What we have here is the epistemology of a closet that is both homophobic and queer, one that sees the gay man as a “type” yet that ostentatiously dissociates him from typology. Like John Shade of Pale Fire who generously allows Kinbote to visit him in his bathtub—“Let him in, Sybil, he won’t rape me” (264)—the straight Vladimir registers both the assumption surrounding gay male behavior (pederasty, seduction, male rape) and the liberal distance from such assumption.

But what is more urgent in Nabokov’s troubled reflection (and in the text of Pale Fire) is the way gayness slips from the psychological condition of narcissism into political victimization. Years after the Luxembourg visit, Sergey was imprisoned by the Nazis for his homosexuality. He was later released, but his proclamations against the Nazi regime returned him to prison under suspicion as a British spy, and he died in a concentration camp from complications stemming from malnutrition. Moreover, Sergey’s persecutions did not come solely from the Nazi—and not only Nazi—equation of homosexuality and political perfidy. Vladimir himself was guilty of persecution. When the two were still young boys, he snooped through Sergey’s diary and discovered that his brother was gay. Vladimir immediately conveyed this information to their tutor, who told their father who, despite his liberal juridical and political stances, was not sympathetic. For Boyd, this moment of invasion engendered a guilt that expressed itself in Nabokov’s later work: “Perhaps Vladimir’s self-reproach for that glance at the diary and his unthinking impulse to pass on the information may account in part for his fierce opposition in later years to any infringement of personal privacy” (1990, 106). If Nabokov hated homosexuality, that hatred was self-contested:
the notorious condition of loving sameness gets eradicated by
a political and domestic regime seeking real sameness in a pure
society of like-minded, like-blooded (narcissistic?) individuals.
As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out, what we think of as
homophobia is often really heterophobia, the fear of difference
(see especially chapter 10 of Between Men). And this fear united
the homosexual with the communist as common targets of
persecution. For Nabokov, narcissism is as much a national
expression of homophobia as it is a sexual psychodynamic.
As a trope of difference, homosexual narcissism can also
figure an American social fabric whose texture is different
from Russian communistic sameness. Kinbote’s love of John
Shade is a love of “bad gray poet” (74), a term of endearment
linking this “celebrated American poet” to Walt Whitman. And
who, we might ask, is more narcissistic than Whitman, for
whom the nation could be structured on 1) a narcissistic
appropriation of others—“What I assume you shall assume”
(Song of Myself 1.2)—and 2) homoeroticism—the love of com-
rades in “Calamus”? Yet who more than Whitman employs this
narcissism as a means of affirming individual difference and
self-affirmation outside of object-relations? We think for ex-
ample of Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, where Whitman stares Narcis-
sus-like into the waters of the East River and sees the “fine
spokes of light” encircle his head at the same time as they
encircle the head of every other viewer: all similar in the
perception of their individuality and difference. In some ways,
then, Whitmanian America looks little different from Zembla
the Fair. And this similarity in/as difference, moreover, under-
writes the career of John Shade, who teaches American poetry
at the university, and who must by definition teach a line of
male influence that defines masculinity in the context of other
men as much as it did for T. S. Eliot’s notion of tradition. If
Leslie Fiedler was right to suggest that the American literary
fabric is built on “a delicate homosexuality” (1960, 330), then
such homophilia must authorize Nabokov at the same time
that it troubles him, because America was, after all, Nabokov’s
ideal site of individualism and freedom.

The very mechanism which, for Nabokov, registers that
connection to the American literary tradition defines his third
use of narcissistic appropriation: the mechanism of memory, through which tradition is constructed and understood. In *Pale Fire*, that memory works through an imagination that is startlingly similar to Kinbote’s narcissistic one; it both celebrates and obliterates difference as it places one within history. The king’s bedroom mirror, we remember, is a triptych, multiplying images. When Fleur, Charles’s spurned lover, steps into it, its reflectivity takes on a significance that connects the Lacanian split identity to national history:

> She turned about before it: a secret device of reflection gathered an infinite number of nudes in its depths, garlands of girls in graceful and sorrowful groups, diminishing the limpid distance, or breaking into individual nymphs, some of whom, she murmured, must resemble her ancestors when they were young... (111–12)

Like the red-sweatered king moving through Zembla and staring at the pond, Fleur sees herself many times over, and in so doing suggests affinities with the people in her past, people she resembles but whom she has never known. The ancestry of the nation, it would seem, is visible only through our own optics, through the narcissistic moment of beholding a self that both includes us and is other than us, the self that is isolated synchronically in history but stretches diachronically through history in selves we do not know.

If the almost indiscriminate interweaving of self through other defines the relation between memory and history—if memory and history are ultimately narcissistic—such an interweaving also defines the memory of the Nabokovian artist. The description of memory in *Speak*, *Memory* differs little from what gets condemned in Kinbote as narcissistic “hallucination.” For John Burt Foster, Jr., memory in Nabokov’s *oeuvre* is modeled on Proust’s “willed recovery of lost time,” a pondering and probing of the mnemonic image that “restores [the subjects] self-esteem along with bringing back forgotten aspects of his life-story, and much later even helps him achieve his long-postponed artistic aims” (1993, 17). While Foster places this
attraction to Proust in an intellectual history of European modernism, we must also see it in a queer history and homoerotic influence (let’s not forget here that Lolita’s Humbert Humbert, who may also have a homosexual past, considers “calling part 2 of his confession Dolorès disparue [Nabokov 1970, 255], thereby placing his beloved Lolita in the role of Proust’s Albertine” [Foster 1993, 220]). This homoerotic influence is most clearly registered in Nabokov’s Uncle Ruka, the avuncular homosexual whose ostentatious gayness embarrased the young Vladimir, yet whose death made the boy a millionaire until the money was lost in the revolution. In chapter three of Speak, Memory, Ruka is clearly remembered for his affinities with Proust: his “belle époque affluence, his poor health, and his homosexuality”—indeed, “in the Russian version of the autobiography, Nabokov even states that his uncle looks like him. . . . Ruka is also the one poet in the family, and when he writes, he does so in French, driven by what is called a ‘Proustian excoriation of the senses’ (Speak, Memory 74)” (Foster 1993, 204–5). Nabokov remembers most vividly Ruka’s and his own reading of the children’s books of Madame de Ségur, and as the older Vladimir re-reads the books, he connects to his queer uncle in significantly Proustian ways: “I not only go through the same agony and delight that my uncle did, but have to cope with an additional burden—the recollection I have of him, reliving his childhood with the help of those very books” (Nabokov 1966, 76). No anxiety of influence,¹⁰ this passage demonstrates an aesthetic transmission whose queer resonances are multivalent. Along with the reference to Proust, Nabokov remembers that “the only person who memorized the music and all the words [to Ruka’s composed romance] was my brother Sergey, whom he hardly ever noticed, who also stammered, and who is also dead” (1966, 74). And, significant for its omission, who was also gay. Here we have an artistic production centered in the homosexual who both hypostasizes queer individualism and incorporates that individuality into a history of influence and depersonalized aestheticism.

The narcissistic self-definition achieved through and against
Uncle Ruka comes to define Nabokov’s definition of memory, one that, as we have seen, he shares with Kinbote. In writing about his tutors, he turns “the queer dissonances they introduced into my young life” into “the essential stability and completeness of that life” (1966, 170): thus, “the pulsation of my thought mingles with that of the leaf shadows and turns Ordo into Max and Max into Lenski and Lenski into the schoolmaster and the whole array of trembling transformations is repeated” (171). Indeed, Kinbote’s queerness would seem here merely to “retwist” Nabokov’s own experiences, rather than be opposed to them (Nabokov 1973, 77). And what is even more striking here is the way the dialectic of self and otherness is gendered. In the specifically heterosexual memories of *Speak, Memory*, women are either isolated and presented for their particular, individuating characteristics (see for example page 86), or all collapse synecdochically into the idea of one: “all would merge to form somebody I did not know but was bound to know soon” (1966, 213). These aspects of narcissistic remembering, what Nabokov ultimately calls “a bothersome defocalization” (1966, 240) that we might as easily attribute to Ovid’s Narcissus, *either* isolate *or* erase female subjectivity altogether, whereas the passage describing male tutors moves in and out of male subjective space. Moreover, these scenes replicate and eroticize the male self in ways reminiscent of *Despair*’s Hermann: “In looking at it from my present tower I see myself as a hundred different young men at once, all pursuing one changeful girl in a series of simultaneous or overlapping love affairs” (*Despair* 1966, 240). We have in this heterosexual register, then, a sexualized aesthetic of memory whose primary prophet is narcissistically homosexual: an erotic subject whose self is continually split, bifurcated, and defocalized yet always kept fully in view. As Nabokov states in an interview in *Strong Opinions*, it is through “the combination and juxtaposition of remembered details” that one probes “not only one’s personal past but the past of one’s family in search of affinities with oneself, previews of oneself, faint allusions to one’s vivid and vigorous Now” (1973, 187).
III. The Politics of Feigned Remoteness

In Nabokov's representation of memory, subjects (and in the example quoted above, specifically male subjects) intertwine and fuse in a narcissistic bifurcation of the distinction between self and other: Nabokov's aesthetic, like Nabokov's and Fiedler's America, is delicately homosexual. Yet, the narcissistic identification of self within the other and other within the self is precisely what Shade's poem is unable to accomplish. While it is on the one hand a narrative about American individualism, it is also a study of narcissism: Shade opens the poem by stating, "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (ll. 1–2). The subject of the poem is the self as it exists within and is obliterated by art. The death of the author occurs by an act of artistic similarity, a "feigned remoteness" (l. 132) that replicates him as poetic subject at the same time that it displaces him as speaking subject. This displacement has clearly narcissistic overtones in that Shade describes how, Narcissus-like, "I'd duplicate / Myself" (ll. 5–6), constructing in a false, chimerical reflection an object into which one can never enter, a mirror division that leads, in classical literary and psychoanalytic accounts, to death. Only the darkness of night "unites the viewer and the view" (l. 18), in that it simultaneously increases the intensity of the image reflected in the window and foreshadows how such reflection metaphorically suggests death and everlasting darkness. If Kinbote's narcissism is a symptom of madness that is conveniently associated with gayness, then Shade too is narcissistically engulfed. Both authors, by this standard, are queer.

Shade's narcissism, moreover, reflects Kinbote's in its tendency to see the object world through the lens of its own desires. In Canto II, Shade looks at his fingers and constructs a "dazzling synthesis" of "certain flinching likenesses" between his digits and his neighbors: "the thumb, / Our grocer's son; the index, lean and glum / College astronomer Starover Blue" (ll. 184–89). When he has a near-death vision of a white fountain, and reads of another person who had the same vision, he seeks in this similarity a theory of the afterlife; he hopes to use another's experience to validate his own. How-
ever, despite his narcissistic desire to affirm himself, he also hopes to avoid in the woman any “fond / Affinity, a sacramental bond, / Uniting mystically her and me” (ll. 791–92). And he is in luck: the woman has seen a mountain, not a fountain; the article he had read had misprinted the word. From this misprint, Shade establishes as the meaning of life no pattern of order or connection, but rather “topsy-turvy coincidence” (l. 809), “accidents and possibilities” (l. 829) whose interconnectedness is mere wishful thinking. Shade thus counters Kinbote’s affirmation of similarity by proclaiming “there is no resemblance at all. Resemblances are the shadows of differences. Different people see different similarities and similar differences” (265). Unlike Kinbote’s narcissism, Shade’s does not celebrate the possibilities of a social fabric so much as it avoids them in favor of an individualizing difference that Nabokov is famous for promoting. Whereas Kinbote’s narcissism constructs differences in order to meld them into a communistic one, Shade’s narcissism cuts the self off from participation in society, and from acts that could be said to construct a history. It engulfs the self in the paranoid individualism of fifties Cold-War culture.

Shade’s protective individualism, and its fifties correlative of anti-communist sentiment, provide the crowning irony for the novel. For in the end, it is not the communist subversive that enters New Wye and kills the American citizen; rather, America’s social woes come from inside America itself. Shade’s murderer is not Leningradus, but Jack Gray, who mistakes Shade for the judge who sent him to prison (perhaps all Americans look alike as well?). And while Nabokov would come to hate the suggestion that America was “just as oppressive” as Russia—that detestable “anti-American, Sovietnam sermon”12—he does represent in Jack Gray the possibilities of unlawful violation. Shade’s assumption that he is “slain / By feigned remoteness” is more accurate than he intends: if “remoteness” means an inoculated safety from the social context in which he lives; if “remoteness” assumes disconnection from the political forces of American culture, then such remoteness is indeed revealed to be “feigned.” While the States in the 1950s loved to see the Soviet Union as its antagonistic
opposite, its political and military other, *Pale Fire* identifies post-revolutionary Russia as America’s narcissistically reflected self, an image repeated, albeit reversed, in a mirror. Through the trope of gay narcissism, Nabokov homographically turns the male-male bond by which American democracy is figured—a trope that both reveals and hides the homosexual—into the terrifying obliteration of difference whose implications cut across both gender and national boundaries. And like *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* takes upon itself the task of inventing America (1970, 314). Homosexual narcissism is not only detested by American Cold-War purity, it is also omnipresent to it. While used ostensibly to engender post-revolutionary Russia, narcissism turns its triptych mirror and engenders America as well.

In his inscription of gay narcissism that is at once psychological and political, Nabokov makes of writing itself a queer enterprise. The queerness of Nabokovian prose in *Pale Fire* is that it registers through the homosexual a desire for difference in what is commonly understood as a facile attraction to sameness (a queerness he would abandon, alas, in the translation of *Despair*). One object of *Pale Fire*’s satire is the very homogeneity that assumes all gay men are the same, and that they all want the same thing. Nabokov queers the representation by exploiting in the “narcissist” the desire for otherness, for individuality, for difference. And this homosexual otherness is itself germane to the Nabokovian aesthetic project, in that samenesses are invoked only to be overcast with shades of difference. The very signifiers that constitute the Forward and Commentary to the poem vacillate between a textual display of authorial lunacy, which is the “same” as Kinbote’s demented brain, and a constant relocating of origins elsewhere, “borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet’s fiery orb” (81). Indeed, it is precisely this vacillation that marks for Lee Edelman the transgressive potential of queer discourse, for

the homographic element in the notion of homographesis reinterprets what seems to be a mirroring or (re)production of identity—which is to say, a structure of metaphoric correspondence—as a relation of contiguity, of items so close in the graphic register that they
share a single signifier though they may be radically different in meaning and derivation both. (1993, 572)

That signifier is sometimes "shadow"—modifying both Shade and Gradus—sometimes "shade" itself, sometimes "botkin," and sometimes it is the entire textual fabric that plays between the worlds of Appalachia, Zembla, utopia, and dystopia, always marked by similarities, yet also marked by differences. By employing the "tongue of the mirror" (242), Kinbote ultimately constructs an erotic relation not to Shade but to his text; and in his fond repetitions we have, in Kinbote's words, "something more than mirrorplay and mirage shimmer" (135). We have a queer self whose replications shatter the centrality of the unified, protected, Cold-War self; a queer politics that reflects American and Bolshevik ideologies at the same time as it distorts and parodies them; and a queer discourse whose repetition "gives the ear a kind of languorous pleasure as would the echo of some half remembered sorrowful song whose strain is more meaningful that its words" (135).

Department of English
Mount Saint Vincent University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada B3M 2J6

Notes
Preparation of this essay was assisted by a generous grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
1. Pale Fire presents numerous similarities between Kinbote and Nabokov. For example, the scene in which Kinbote pushes Shade's car down the icy driveway parallels Nabokov's helping his philosopher/neighbor Max Black push his car out of the snow (Boyd 1991, 359). Moreover, Black contended that the view from Shade and Goldsworthy's houses was taken from the surroundings of his and Nabokov's house in Ithaca (the New Wye of the novel being New York, and Wordsmith University being Cornell).
2. This phobia can be tracked through Nabokov's torturous attempts to publish Lolita, another novel of forbidden love. While the novel did eventually become a best-seller and made Nabokov famous, it was first turned down by Simon and Schuster, Viking, New Directions, Farrar, Straus, and Doubleday. Finally, it was published by the European Olympia Press, whose aesthetic and moral credentials were not beyond reproach, before being picked up by G. P. Putnam's Sons in 1958. Upon its release, a critic for the New York Times slammed it as "highbrow pornography," and it faced the continued threat of legal persecution. For more on the history of Lolita, see Boyd 1991.
3. “To consider replication degrading,” writes Koestenbaum, “is, literally, homophobic: afraid of the same. If the patriarchal pen is, figuratively, a fertilizing penis, let us enjoy the fact that the gay male instrument of textual dissemination may well be a xerox machine. . . .”

4. Another symptom of this need to construct resemblances is Kinbote’s supposed similarity to Hazel Shade, John’s daughter who commits suicide. Kinbote compares Hazel’s love of word-play to his own, and concludes that “Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects” (193). Another of these respects, apart from the word-play, is the sexual queerness that defines the two. Each of them is outside traditional, successful, heterosexual paradigms.

5. Nor should we forget what Nabokov wondered in his diary if we might miss altogether, that Kinbote, Shade, and Gradus are themselves all fantasy-projections of Veselav Botkin, a disaffected scholar in the Russian department of New Wye (Boyd 1991, 443). In the search for a single, unified consciousness in this novel, we are constantly displaced into another act of splitting.

6. One model of this multiplication of self as a queer aesthetic is Oscar Wilde, whose representation of Dorian Gray on the canvas mirrors the replication of the modernist self through art. For Wilde, self-replication is “a method by which we can multiply our personalities” in order to experience more fully “myriad lives and myriad sensations” (1987, 142–43). As a nine-year-old, Nabokov read Wilde in his father’s library.

7. Nabokov seemed fascinated by portraying the aristocrat as queer. Jane Grayson reminds us that,

in a prefatory note to the English translation of Sots Reks he speaks of the “restoration of a scene that had been marked in the Sovremenyya Zapiski by suspension point.” This turns out to be a graphic description of the Prince’s homosexual practices: “With fat fingers, the prince undid Ondriks fly, extracted the entire pink mass of his private parts, selected the chief one, and started to rub regularly its glossy shaft.” (1977, 78–79).

For the context of this section, see Nabokov’s A Russian Beauty and Other Stories. Like the translation history of Despair, this moment indicated Nabokov’s growing fascination with the representation of queer sexuality, and his alignment of it with the aristocratic world for which he had some nostalgia, even if it were troubled.

8. This paternal persecution carries its own ironies, given that Nabokov’s father was a tireless advocate against the persecution of gay men in turn-of-the-century Russia. And Sergey was not the only victim of a man whose theoretical poses could not seem to make their way into domestic policy: Vladimir’s favorite nanny, an English woman named Miss Norcott, was dismissed, much to the boy’s heartache, on the grounds of lesbianism (Boyd 1990, 52). Thus Nabokov’s widely-documented homophobia has a long history of trouble spots in which queers in his immediate sphere fall victim to persecution.

9. Perhaps, but one cannot miss the irony that in Pale Fire the invasion of privacy is conducted at the hands of the gay man Kinbote, who spies on Shade’s house. Significantly, he trains his binoculars on the mirror in Shade’s study.

10. Nor is this intersubjectivity what Eve Sedgwick describes as “homosexual panic.” For Sedgwick, panic accrues in “the wildly dichotomous play of solipsism and intersubjectivity” where “the transmutability of the intrapsychic and the intersubjective” allow one man’s mind to be “read by that of the feared and desired other” (1990, 186–87). Nabokov’s Proustian reminiscences here foster the play between the self and the male other, rather than fear it, thus re-writing in queer terms what for Sedgwick is a paralyzing terror.

11. Nabokov of course did not invent the association between the artist and Narcissus. Both Anton and Friedrich Schlegel defined the artist as a narcissist, thereby instituting the Romantic convention of self-attention and self-analysis, a
convention in which the Romantically displaced Kinbote can be said to participate. If New Wye suggests New York, it must also suggest a new Wye valley, site of Wordsworth’s musings on Romantic memory in “Tintern Abbey.” In a strictly American context, this is perhaps what Herman Melville’s Ishmael means when, describing the artist, he finally settles on “the story of Narcissus . . . who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to all” (1964, 26).

12. I do not want to suggest here any watering down of Nabokov’s hatred of what the Soviet Union had become and of communism in general. As Brian Boyd points out, in 1957 Nabokov befriended the FBI agent assigned to route out communism at Cornell—investigating, among others, Roman Jakobson—and declared that he would have been proud to have his son join the FBI in the same capacity (1991, 311).

References