

To Pale Fire, by Richard Rorty

The imagination, Wallace Stevens said, is the mind pressing back against reality. But it is in the interest of reality – that is to say, of the imagination of the dead – to insist that no further pressure is needed: that the imagination of the living can do nothing save reiterate lessons previously learned, instantiate previously known truths. Judicious reviewers must presuppose that nothing genuinely new can be written, for only on that assumption are they in a position to judge, and in no danger of being judged by, the book they are reviewing. Like the judicious reviewer, the common reader is made nervous by books that are insufficiently like the books he or she has read in the past.

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) wrote books which were not much like anybody else's, and they rarely got good reviews. Most reviewers echoed Dr Johnson's dictum that nothing odd can last, and proceeded to diagnose Nabokov's oddities as signs of his egoistical disdain for reality, a disdain which cloaked his inability to imitate reality convincingly. Simon Raven, reviewing *Pale Fire* on its publication in 1962, said that it was 'not a novel, but a blueprint'. Saul Maloff's review explained that 'the novelist's immemorial purpose and justification' was 'to create a world', and that Nabokov had created only 'a constellation of elegant and marvelous *bibelots*, an art which is minor by definition'. Reviewer after reviewer conceded Nabokov's skill while deploring his self-indulgence, his delight in his own tricks – tricks which made clear his lack of respect for both reality and the common reader. Dwight Macdonald called *Pale Fire* 'unreadable', emphasized that Nabokov, even at his best, was 'minor', and urged that 'the

*Warning: this Introduction . . . gives away the plot of *Pale Fire*.

technical exertions he [Nabokov] expends on the project are so obtrusive as to destroy any aesthetic pleasure on the reader's part'. Perturbed by the fact that Mary McCarthy had called *Pale Fire* 'a creation of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality and moral truth', Macdonald explained that both the novel and McCarthy's review were 'exercises in misplaced ingenuity'.

Nabokov had no interest whatever in creating a world like the one to which Raven, Maloff and Macdonald were accustomed. 'We speak,' he once said, 'of one thing being like another thing, when what we are really craving to do is to describe something that is like nothing on earth.' It was just that craving which annoyed so many of the reviewers. To those who wish reality to be given the respect it takes as its due, such a craving is a sign of egotistic self-indulgence. 'Egotism' is reality's name for whatever calls attention to itself – whatever is odd, hard to understand, hard to follow. Those who respect reality, who are sure that it needs no further pressure, insist that what is worthwhile is already a part of reality, and merely needs to be accurately represented. What is not a part of reality is subjective, personal, idiosyncratic, silly, puerile, evanescent, not worth writing down. For reality is, to the respectful eye, the only legitimate authority. The poet's longing to exert pressure upon reality seems not only futile but morally dubious.

Now, thirty years after the publication of *Pale Fire*, critics and literary historians have begun to concede that the book will, in fact, last. It is gradually acquiring the aura of a classic, gradually coming to be seen as the work of one of the most powerful imaginations of our century. This sort of concession is one of the means reality uses to avoid admitting that it has been dented. It is as if, in the dark of night, when no one is looking, reality sent out pseudopods to incorporate the latest oddity. By morning reality looks as smooth and unpressured as before (although just a bit bigger). Something that actually *was* like nothing on earth thus gets turned into one more objective terrestrial fact, waiting to be observed. Sometimes, however, when the oddity is very large or very complexly shaped, the process of assimilation is not over by morning.

Then reality can be caught draining the life out of a metaphor, or reshaping a paradox into a platitude, or repackaging a scandal as a classic.

Lolita was like nothing Morris Bishop – a good reader, a good man, and Nabokov's best friend at Cornell – had ever read; his revulsion from Humbert's sliminess prevented him from finishing the manuscript. Thirty years later, Bishop's granddaughter was assigned *Lolita* in high school. The more often *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* are assigned, made set books for examinations, the more Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote will become well-known literary characters – familiar parts of the reality within which people grow up. The more that happens, the more likely it is that those two will merge with the figure of their creator – that Nabokov's readers will think they are reading about Nabokov when they read about these two charming monsters. The more this unconscious identification is made, the less they will remember the people whom Humbert and Kinbote manipulate – the Haze and Shade families, and, in particular, the youngest members of those families, Lolita Haze and Hazel Shade.

Brian Boyd, whose splendid biography serves Nabokov well by making the incorporation of his books less easy, reports that among all the characters in his novels whom Nabokov admired as human beings, Lolita stood second only to Pnin. But readers of *Lolita* often have trouble getting Lolita in focus. All they seem to remember is Humbert's creature, his invention – the nymphet, rather than the little girl. So Nabokov's suggestion that she is a splendid human being is hard to take in. Still, readers of *Lolita* vaguely recall, Lolita did have guts: somehow she got away from Quilty and managed to find herself a good man who would give her a child. She made a home for him and for the child who was to have been born at Christmastime – a home in Gray Star, 'a settlement in the remotest Northwest', where it is very cold. Nabokov, it now comes back to us, said that Gray Star was 'the capital town of the book'. Then finally it all comes back: it was only *Humbert* who thought that he had invented Lolita. *We* were not supposed to think that. *We* were supposed to remember what Humbert kept forgetting: Lolita's sobs in the night, her dead brother, the

child that might have replaced the brother. How could we have forgotten?

We forgot because Nabokov *arranged* for us to forget, temporarily. He programmed us to forget first and remember later – remember in confusion and guilt. His book keeps on manhandling us even after we close it. The reason it is going to be relatively hard to turn *Lolita* into a classic is that we guardians of legitimacy, we servants of reality, can only make sound observations about a novel, find admirable illustrations of general truths in it, if we can get it under control. We need to stand at a distance from it in order to see it steadily and whole. But Nabokov arranges things so that, just when we thought that we had stepped back and found the proper standpoint from which to see his book in perspective, we get an uncanny sense that the book is looking at *us* from a considerable distance, and chuckling. The resulting discomfiture usually turns into renewed exasperation over Nabokov's egotism, his puerile tricksiness, his silly attempts at novelty.

As with *Lolita*, so with *Pale Fire*. When you read the book for the first time, you find yourself absorbed in a good story, told by an odd but charming man, even before you have finished the Foreword. What follows next – the nine hundred and ninety-nine rhyming lines of 'Pale Fire' – seems a slightly unfortunate interruption. It is perhaps a little unfair to make us lovers of good stories trudge through a long poem on our way back to the plot. But shucks, we fair-mindedly say, it isn't a *very* long poem. After being briefly troubled by the story of Hazel Shade's suicide in Canto Two, and being a bit bored by the reflections on death in Canto Three and those on the creative process in Canto Four, we get back to the story which the poem interrupted. We have rejoined that intriguing, if dubious, Kinbote, and are becoming amused at the way he blithely intrudes himself into what is, in theory, a commentary on the poem we have already started to forget.

Fifty pages into Kinbote's commentary we have forgotten all about John Francis Shade (1898–1959 – as the Foreword told us, we now recall, he died right after writing 'Pale Fire', poor fellow). For now we are immersed in the adventures of a much more interesting person – Charles Xavier Vseslav, last

king of Zembla (1915-?: reigned 1936-1958). Whereas the only big event of Shade's life seems to have been the unfortunate suicide of his young daughter, the story of Charles Xavier's youth is packed with incident. Better yet, it has the deep human interest which always attaches to stories about royalty, not to mention that extra little thrill we get from reading about the copulation of faunlets.

A hundred pages further on, we have become convinced that Charles Kinbote and Charles Xavier are one and the same person. This realization gives us not only the satisfaction of knowing that our interest in Kinbote paid off, but the awed sense that royalty has condescended to treat us as a confidant. A sad, but handsome and well-read, ex-king trusts us enough to tell us things that very few people could have guessed. Shade turns up now and then, and we occasionally suspect that he too may have had the wit to discern, as we have, who Kinbote really is. But Shade's reappearances are always succeeded, and made forgettable, by the revelation of some new and surprising fact about our remarkable host and commentator.

It is only in the final pages of the novel that we are forced once again to think fairly seriously about Shade. For now something does happen to him. He gets killed. Shade wanders back into Kinbote's story just at the point at which Gradus, the regicide sent by the revolutionary government of Zembla, is about to carry out his assignment. Kinbote tells us how he, the endangered king:

...instinctively backed, bellowing and spreading my great strong arms ... in an effort to halt the advancing madman and shield John, whom I feared he might, quite accidentally, hit, while he, my sweet awkward old John, kept clawing at me and pulling me after him, back to the protection of his laurels, with the solemn fussiness of a poor lame boy trying to get his spastic brother out of the range of the stones hurled at them by schoolchildren, once a familiar sight in all countries. I felt - I still feel - John's hand fumbling at mine, seeking my fingertips, finding them, only to abandon them at once as if passing to me, in a sublime relay race, the baton of life.

One of the bullets that spared me struck him in the side and went through his heart.

No sooner is Shade dead, however, than the novel begins to fall to pieces. Our attention is suddenly wrenched back to the poem we have long forgotten. For Gradus has appeared at the moment at which Shade has finally handed Kinbote the manuscript of 'Pale Fire'. As Shade bleeds on the ground, Kinbote hurries inside to get a glass of water for his dead friend and to conceal the manuscript under a pile of nymphets' galoshes on the floor of a closet. After a bit of unfortunate delay (Kinbote has to waste some time coping with Shade's widow, the police, and the like) he is able to retrieve it. He reads it snarling, 'as a furious young heir through an old deceiver's testament', realizing that the poem is not about himself but about its author.

We readers, who are by this time completely caught up in Kinbote's hopes and fears, find ourselves sharing Kinbote's overwhelming disappointment, even though we have read the poem already, and have known all the time that it was about the Shades and not about the overthrow of the Zemblan monarchy. We too wonder why Shade was so insensitive and cruel as to have made no use of the wonderful material his friend Kinbote was constantly feeding him. We sympathize with Kinbote's outraged questions:

Where were the battlements of my sunset castle? 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 Black Rose Paladins, and the whole marvelous tale?

As Kinbote asks these questions, however, the doubts that we loyal monarchists have been impatiently shoving aside for two hundred pages begin to sidle back. We have, perhaps (very probably, in fact), not been the confidant of a king, but only the dupe of a loony. Zembla, we nervously remember, is not on any map we have ever seen. The sunset battlements begin to crumble before our eyes. The whole marvellous tale may have been just the invention of a mad émigré scholar, a monster of egotism who has dragged us into his preposterous fantasies. The only sane, indeed, the only decent, person around (either in the novel or in the room where we sit reading it)

turns out to be the man we have forgotten about for so long, the man who wrote the poem whose central event we did not want to remember: sweet awkward old John Shade, with his old-fashioned family values.

As we watch those battlements crumble, we remember having been warned that cloud-capped towers are subject to dissolution. As we look rather desperately around for Nabokov, in order to ask him to take us to his own point of view, to show us where to stand to see his novel clearly, it dawns on us that he has us just where he wants us: listening to Kinbote saying 'Well, folks, I guess many in this fine hall are as hungry and thirsty as me, and I'd better stop, folks, right here.' It is as if Prospero, after explaining that he will shortly be drowning his book, stepped to the front of the stage to announce that oranges and ale would be offered for sale in the outer courtyard immediately after the performance, that season ticket holders were invited to meet the cast backstage, but that unfortunately the author of the play, who would have liked to be here to greet his many friends, is out of town.

Just as it takes a lot of effort to remember that Lolita sobbed in the night, it takes a lot of effort to remember Hazel Shade, the overweight young woman whose body was fished out of Lake Omega in Canto Two. But Lake Omega, rather than the spine of mountains Charles Xavier crosses into exile, is the central topographical feature of *Pale Fire*. The reader's search for a point of view will eventually lead back to the marshy edges of that lake, to the exact half-way point of the poem: 'A blurry shape stepped off the reedy bank/Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank.'

The death that matters most in *Pale Fire* is, we gradually realize, the one that matters in 'Pale Fire': not Shade's but his daughter's. Shade was sixty-one when he was killed by accident (either, if you believe Kinbote, by an incompetent would-be regicide, or, as now seems more likely, by an incidental walk-on lunatic, Jack Grey, who has mistaken Shade for the judge who committed him to an asylum). But his daughter Hazel was only twenty-three when her misery became unbearable, thanks to the cruelty of a college boy, Pete Dean, who had been disappointed by the plainness of his blind date. We are

told a great deal about self-castrated Gradus, but very little about ballsy Pete. He was, probably, no monster, but a quite decent kid, just a little selfish and hasty, someone much like ourselves. We ourselves may have been a little selfish and hasty in forgetting the Shade family so quickly, but it was not quite fair of Nabokov to let us get so wrapped up in those lovely flower boys, those Black Rose Paladins, all that fabulous stuff about Zembla.

Anyway, the Shades are no realer than Zembla, when we come to think about it. Hazel is, after all, a fictional character. Why should Pete Dean's cruelty be more painful to us than Charles the Beloved's cruelty to his rejected, 'lovely, pale, melancholy' Queen Disa? For just as Disa – and, alas, Charles Xavier himself – were fantasies of crazy Professor Kinbote's, so Hazel was just the creation of an odd, tricky, fantasy-spinning, émigré professor of Russian named Nabokov, a professor whose resemblances to Kinbote are forced upon us in the final paragraphs of the book:

'And you, what will *you* be doing with yourself, poor King, poor Kinbote?' a gentle young voice may inquire.

God will help me, I trust, to rid myself of any desire to follow the example of two other characters in this work. I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile . . . I may pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principals: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments. Oh, I may do many things!

We emerge blinking from these paragraphs, escaping from the the sounds of the plywood proscenium arch being ripped down behind us, trying to shrug the whole thing off as a bunch of tricks to which we have been subjected by an egomaniacal émigré. This is what most of the reviewers of *Pale Fire* tried to do. But that strategy will not work. For there is now a small dent in the real world, right at the place where we forgot about Hazel.

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That forgetting was not a fantasy. That was as real as we are. That dent was made by Nabokov's imagination, but only with our whole-hearted cooperation. When we first read *Lolita* or *Pale Fire* or *Pnin* we laugh our way delightedly through a marvellous tale. But we emerge from the final pages of each novel rubbing our heads, worrying about whether we are all right, wondering whether we like ourselves. In all three of these novels Nabokov arranges things so that we gang up with a particular character (Humbert, Kinbote, one or another of Pnin's condescending colleagues) against some people to whom this character is behaving cruelly. He also arranges things so that we imagine ourselves cosyng up to Nabokov himself, to this amazingly brilliant writer who is giving us such a good time, whose ingenuity is providing us with so much aesthetic bliss. But in each case, at the end of the book, we realize that we do not really *want* to feel as warmly as we did about the character with whom we have been hanging out, the one whose company we enjoyed so much. This realization makes us wonder whether our rapport with Nabokov is quite as great as we had thought. We begin to have the awful feeling that Nabokov may not like us any better than he liked the people he arranged for us to be charmed by. We wish that we had identified with some other people – Shade, Lolita, Pnin – before it was too late.

Our mortification is increased when we hear Nabokov saying to an interviewer:

Recently one anonymous clown, writing on *Pale Fire* in a New York book review, mistook the declarations of my invented commentator in the book for my own. . . .

Maybe we are not much better than this anonymous clown? Is *that* what Nabokov wanted us to feel? If so, surely he is as trickily cruel, as egotistical and uncaring, as his most charming characters? No. Nabokov is as kind and generous an author as he was a man. Even though he has no interest whatever in joining us for oranges and ale after he has washed the Prospero make-up off, he also has no interest whatever in putting us down. He knows that we shall, a few days from now, be all the happier and wiser for having been dented a bit. Massaging

that dent in tranquillity, we shall realize that we, like him and like everybody else, have both Shade-like and Kinbote-like sides. There is the side that pities Hazel and Lolita and the side which forgets them, the side which can pity Pnin's difficulties with the English language and the side that finds these difficulties royally amusing. A person who has these two sides may well become kinder and more generous for having acknowledged his or her duplicity.

The more often one reads *Pale Fire*, and the more one reads it in the context of Nabokov's other books, the more clearly one realizes that each of these two sides emerge only in the light of the other – that Shade would not be fully visible without Kinbote, nor Kinbote without Shade. Donald Malcolm got it exactly right at the end of his brilliant review in *The New Yorker*:

... the vision of the craftsman and the vision of the madman stand in complete equipoise, Kinbote and Shade share equally in the implications of the title. 'The moon's an arrant thief,' declares Shakespeare's Timon, in the passage that provides the novel with its name, 'and her pale fire she snatches from the sun.' One thinks of Kinbote, circling in lunacy around the central fire of the poem and filching lustre therefrom to illuminate his own narrative. But with equal justice one might observe that Kinbote's obsessions provide the only light by which the poem can be read with perfect profit. Kinbote and Shade mark the poles of creation, and over the vast intervening expanse the intelligence of their creator hovers and dips and ranges.

At the end of the interview cited earlier, the interviewer said, 'It sometimes seems to me that in your novels – in *Laughter in the Dark*, for instance – there is a strain of perversity amounting to cruelty.' Nabokov responded:

I don't know. Maybe. Some of my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don't care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade – demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out. Actually, I'm a mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty.

Nabokov became milder as he grew older, as he wrote more novels, as he booted out more and more demons. He wrote

Pale Fire when he was Shade's age – sixty-one – and gave Shade a kind of generosity he had perhaps not been able, twenty-five years before, to give to Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev (in *The Gift*). When Kinbote asks Shade for a password, Shade gives him 'pity'. We can be pretty sure that Shade here speaks for his creator, for in his *Lectures on Literature* Nabokov wrote, '*Beauty plus pity* – that is the closest we can get to a definition of art.' It is tempting to say that Kinbote was good at beauty, and Shade good at pity, and that binding the work of the two men together produced what McCarthy called 'one of the very great works of art of this century'. But this would be too simple. Shade wasn't bad at beauty; there are marvellous lines sprinkled through '*Pale Fire*'. Kinbote pitied Disa fiercely – though only in his dreams – and he was right when he said that 'Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects' (more respects than just being suicidal).

The relations between Kinbote and Shade, as between their counterparts in each of us, are not simply oppositional. They are dialectical, as dialectical as the relations between our first, second, and twenty-second readings of *Pale Fire*. Nabokov was not interested in imitating reality; he was interested in changing it by changing himself and so changing his readers, making them people who could do things and feel things they had not been able to do or feel before. Nor was he interested in tricking us. His so-called 'tricks' were the ebullient over-flowings of a mind far more agile and far better stocked than ours. Nabokov had no need for and no interest in our admiration. He was interested in making himself and his readers better by increasing the intensity of the dialectical exchanges between the two sides of his and our natures – the side that exults in beauty and in the fantasies to which beauty gives rise, and the side that is ravaged by the suffering of the helpless.

Those who see fantasy as irrelevant to the moral sense will have trouble with Nabokov's definition of art. Such people may even doubt that Nabokov really believed in his own definition, for they will have trouble seeing him as more than an egoist infatuated with his own stylistic brilliance. To inspire pity, these people think, we do not need or want style, wit, and formal perfection: the aesthetic can only distract us from the

moral. We need, they will suggest, to be as realistic as possible: we want not to put pressure on reality but to respect it, in the way in which morality commands us to respect each other's feelings – to observe people as they are, not to imagine them.

But Nabokov helps us remember that we can only respect what we can notice, and that it is often very hard for us to notice that other people are suffering. He also reminds us of the main reason why it is so hard: we all spend a lot of time inventing people rather than noticing them, reshaping real people into characters in stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, stories about how beautiful and rare we are. The more poetically gifted we are, the better at telling such stories and, usually, the worse at noticing. In the extreme case, the case of people who are both fabulously gifted and able *never* to let the suffering of others intrude itself into the stories they tell themselves about themselves, these stories may become truly marvellous tales. These tales will be like the one Kinbote tells about Charles Xavier and the one which Humbert tells about those rare spirits who are able to detect a nymphet – an 'immortal daemon disguised as a female child' – at first glimpse. Those stories make it quite impossible for those caught up in them to remember that John Shade has other subjects for poems than Zembla, or that *Lolita* is a female child.

Nabokov was the rarest spirit of all: a fabulously gifted poet whose ability to notice suffering steadily increased as he employed his gifts. He discovered that the best way to get his readers to notice suffering was to show it to them for a moment, then get them to forget it for a long time, and then bring it back again just as the reader has gotten completely caught up in the sheer beauty of the fantasy, the sheer joy of the prose. He knew perfectly well that art can indeed be a distraction from the demands of morality, but he also knew that it can be, for some of us at least, the best means of moral improvement. For even though beauty can indeed drive out pity, it can also create pity of a previously unimaginable intensity: the more beautiful the story that caused us to forget, the greater the pity when we finally remember. That poor lame boy trying to get his spastic brother out of the range of the stones hurled by

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schoolchildren will remain a familiar sight in all countries, but a slightly less frequent one in countries where people read novels.

Richard Rorty