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## *The Poetics of re-reading in Nabokov's Pale Fire and Barthes' S/Z*

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Vladimir Nabokov set his novel Pale Fire (1962) in a university, in the academic world, where the traditional assumptions about the 'true' meaning of a text have been largely institutionalized. On the campus of New Wye, the writer also parachuted the strangest professor conceivable and had him write the most denaturing comment on a text that scholarly critics could ever consider. Charles Kinbote is a professor whose only soothing feeling upon landing at New Wye is to become the neighbour of the famous American poet, John Shade. Convinced that he has inspired Shade with his fantastic tale, the lunatic critic forces his annotations into meaning that the poem is a cryptic description of his escape from the realm of Zembla. Kinbote's analysis of Shade's poem has been said to be the most famous example of the way criticism can violate the so-called "true" meaning of a text, and Pale Fire has been interpreted as a satirical work at the expense of "legitimate" criticism. Yet, a plethora of analyses have shown how Kinbote's own strange notes actually cast a light on John Shade's poem. This is still far from implying that such a delirious reading could be seriously considered as a "true" reading.

Brian Boyd recently argued in his analysis of Nabokov's novel 1 that exploring Pale Fire is coming from one discovery to another. More essentially, he proved that the hidden meaning of Kinbote's text could not be construed from any first reading of the text, as thorough as it may be. Pale Fire is a multilayered pattern whose connections can only make sense after it has been read several times over. We should remember that Kinbote himself has read "Pale Fire" quite a few times and the peculiar interpretation he offers of Shade's poem is the result of his successive readings.

In 1970, the French philosopher and critic Roland Barthes wrote a text shaped very similarly to Pale Fire. In S/Z 2 Barthes exposes a new method of reading and applies it to the short-story “Sarrasine” 3 by Honoré de Balzac which he decomposes into 561 “lexias”:

The tutor signifier will be cut up into a series of brief, contiguous fragments, which we shall call lexias, since they are units of reading. [...] The lexia will include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences; it will be a matter of convenience: it will suffice that the lexia be the best possible space in which we can observe meaning (*S/Z*, 13)

Each lexia then leads to a commentary by Roland Barthes amounting to one page or two and identifying the text with five codes present in the narrative: hermeneutic, semantic, proairetic, cultural and symbolic. 4 For example, the title “Sarrasine” relates to the hermeneutic code as it raises the question “What is it? A noun? A name?” and sets an enigma that will be resolved much later in the story. The final “e” in Sarrasine is identified in French as a feminine linguistic property and is construed as the “seme” of femininity that will occur in several places in the story and will combine with other elements; it relates to the semantic code. Unveiling those five codes present in the text, Barthes lays claim to the plurality of meaning inherent in every discourse. Barthes also emphasizes the fact that all narratives employ a limited number of organizational structures that the reader passively receives and identifies in the process of reading the text. The aforesaid scenario describes what Barthes calls the “readerly” reception of the text. As we intend to demonstrate, Kinbote’s first reading of John Shade’s text incarnates such a conventional reception of a text. This first approach is but to be a short moment in Kinbote’s relationship with Shade’s poem, a moment the editor of Pale Fire soon dismisses as irrelevant. Submitting himself to another reading, Kinbote gains in awareness and control over “Pale Fire” and starts perceiving the inexhaustibility of its signifiers.

Though apparently not equipped with Barthes' apparatus of exegetical tools, Kinbote ends up by subjecting "Pale Fire" to a treatment that foreshadows the French philosopher's disassembling of "Sarrasine". Kinbote cuts up the poem into 129 fragments including from one word to several lines and finally rewrites a new Pale Fire. Kinbote's final reading comes to exemplify ahead of his time Barthes' approach of a new reading which would make of the text not a "readerly" text but a "writerly" text, that is, a text whose "reader is no longer a consumer but a producer" (S/Z, 4).

Focusing on Kinbote's descriptive account of the process of his reading "Pale Fire" (PF, 232-233) and in the light of Roland Barthes' later analysis, we offer to show how in the early 1950's, Nabokov instigated a new reading process that, far from being as disparaging at it first sounded, distinguished itself from the fixed scenario of reading held by a tradition of "academic suburbia" as Kinbote might call them.

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The art of reading and re-reading is the principal focus of Pale Fire. The contrapuntal structures of Nabokov's novels imply from us that we read and re-read them but Pale Fire, because of its unusual non-linear structure and system of cross-references insists even more on the necessity of multiple readings. By rereading John Shade's poem, let us not forget we mirror a process undergone before us by somebody else, albeit a fictional "somebody else" within the novel itself. Before writing his annotations, Kinbote has also read "Pale Fire" several times over, and gives us in his closing note (PF, 232-233) an account of the development of his relationship with John Shade's poem. We must bear in mind that Kinbote has been coveting Shade's manuscript from the very moment the poet started writing it, and has been convinced that John Shade was transcribing night after night his own tales of Zembla: "By mid-June I felt sure at last he would recreate in a poem the dazzling Zembla burning in my brain. [...] At length I knew he was ripe with my Zembla, bursting with suitable rhymes, ready to spurt at the brush of an eyelash" (PF, 67). The reader has long known of the deception

that awaits the critic, but to Kinbote, the first encounter with the poem is a real shock. In a moment of honesty coupled with lucidity, Kinbote treats us with his account of agony as being the main feeling that accompanied his initial encounter with his neighbour's poem: "I started to read the poem. I read it faster and faster. I sped through it, snarling, as a furious young heir through on old deceiver's testament. [...] I cannot express the agony!" (PF, 232-233).

Kinbote's initial experience is sealed with a sense of a sudden disillusion: his first approach of the poem is severely prejudiced by the deceptive expectations he has been keeping up on Pale Fire: "I was sure his poem would contain the wonderful incidents I had described to him, the characters I had made alive for him and all the unique atmosphere of my kingdom" (PF, 232). As Kinbote progresses through the four Cantos, his reading consists more and more in searching the text for any likeness to his own story. Kinbote soon grows desperate for a word, a proper name that would obviously design his Zembla. But the alleged exiled King becomes aware of one horrifying reality: John Shade's text does not share any common reference with his own tale:

Where were the battlements of my sunset castles? 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 marvellous tale? Nothing of it was here! (PF, 232)

The very letter of Kinbote's tale is entirely absent from that text, literally denied any mention: "Nothing of it was here" (PF, 233). Kinbote's first reaction parodies our own discomposure at approaching a text whose referents hardly bear any likeness with the way we construe reality. On first reading, Kinbote's commentary, which claimed to be a scholarly exegesis, has been a real shock to us, just as Kinbote's first discovery of Pale Fire is a shock to him. Although Kinbote starts by offering a relatively sober presentation of the poem, we notice an awkward slip in his very first sentence: "Pale Fire, a poem in heroic couplets,

of nine-hundred ninety-lines, divided in four Cantos, was composed by John Francis Shade” (*PF*, 13). The most elementary laws of logics are violated in this sentence where a poem in couplets end up in an impair figure. A few lines later, Kinbote abruptly interrupts his account of Shade’s methods with an incongruous comment on his own writing situation: “There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings” (*PF*, 13). It is utterly disconcerting since we expect from an academic commentary that it be built up around exegetical tools and a scholarly tone that are familiar to us. Regarding these criteria, Kinbote’s commentary is a farce and a scandal. Not recognizing the familiar devices used by academicians to comment on a text, we are entitled to exclaim just as Kinbote did: “Nothing of it is here!”. Indeed it soon becomes obvious that none of the accuracy and devotion one should expect from a critical edition of a poem is to be found in this series of divagations.

Kinbote’s expectations with his beloved neighbour’s poem have gone through a similar treatment. At first, Kinbote feels betrayed as he fails to recognize anything in tune with his expectations. The only recognizable aspect of the poem Kinbote is able to efficiently describe to his reader is its form and its style: Instead of the wild glorious romance – what did I have? An autobiographical, eminently Appalachian rather old-fashioned narrative in a neo-Popian prosodic style (*PF*, 233).

Naturally enough, our process of assimilation of a text first goes to what we know. Kinbote is a scholar trained to basic texts’ analyses and his appreciation of the poem is codified by his previous experiences with literature. Categorizing Shade’s text as an “autobiographical” and “narrative” poem stylistically modelled after Pope’s heroic measure, Kinbote neglects the differential qualities of the text to point instead at its obviously identifiable characteristics.

At that step of his interpretative process, Kinbote’s expectations with Shade’s text incarnate what Barthes describes as a ‘readerly’ reception. Translated from the French “lisible”, the “readerly” text is the “Literature of Signified”; it is a classic text such as the short-story “Sarrasine”, that is, a finished product, which the reader deciphers in a purely conventional response, along with the pre-

supposed ideological codes and norms that inform it. Because of the literary institution that has drawn apart the “producer” of the text and its “user” for ages, the reader is left but with a closed-off product that engages no more than passive attention; reading being based on a pre-ordained system of meanings, a “readerly” textual reception mainly consists in assembling the signifieds the text is composed of and in passively connecting them to one’s sense of reality. According to Barthes, the reader of such a text “is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive, he is in short, serious: instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum” (S/Z, 4).

Now, when approaching Shade’s text for the first time, Kinbote has expected to face such a “readerly” text; he has been convinced the textual referents would immediately connect to his own reality: “We know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem, a kind of romaunt, about the King of Zembla” (PF, 232). But the signifieds he looks for are simply not there and the signifiers he deciphers instead do not make any sense to him: “I even suggested a good title to him [...] instead of which I saw *Pale Fire*, which meant to me nothing” (PF, 232). Kinbote’s reading indeed is similar to the aforementioned scenario: left with a text whose magic he cannot reach, Kinbote rejects the text “What did I have? An autobiographical old-fashioned narrative [...] but void of my magic, of that special rich streak of magical madness which I was sure would run through it and make it transcend its time” (PF, 233).

“How Many readings?” (S/Z, 15)

Kinbote’s first approach to the poem apes the moment of cognitive tension undergone by readers facing a text lying beyond the limits of their literary experience. As regards all those difficult and new texts that extend beyond the set of our familiar keys of interpretation, re-reading becomes an essential step in the

development of our understanding. Informed by his previous failure Kinbote realizes he must overcome his sense of the poem's irrelevance before he is able to incorporate it into the familiar patterns of his own reality: "Gradually I regained my composure. I reread "Pale Fire" more carefully." As Kinbote enters his second and subsequent readings, Shade's text surprisingly takes on a more likable turn: "I liked it better when expecting less" (PF, 233). As Kinbote admits, he re-reads the text more "carefully" this time. More dedicated to his reading, Kinbote now starts discerning some echoes of "the book written in him" (PF, 232):

And what was that? What was that dim distant music, those vestiges of color in the air? Here and there I discovered in it, and especially in its invariable variants, echoes and spangles of my mind, a long ripplewake of my glory. (PF, 233)

And yet, the critic is re-reading the text over and over, reading the "same invariable variants" (PF, 233). The elements he now claims to recognize are no longer the fixed signifieds of the text: rather inconsistent, they seem to be evoked rather than stated by Shade's text: "What was that distant music? Those vestiges of color in the air?" (PF, 233). Reading across the words used by Kinbote to define his reading, we discover that his second and subsequent readings do not focus on the text's signifieds any more: Kinbote now evokes a "distant" music, the "vestiges" of colors, "echoes" and "spangles", "pale phosphorescent hints" (PF, 233). Kinbote claims he has suddenly found his way to Shade's text by being attentive to the text's "echoes", to its subtle "hints". A text can echo a mind only if an original sound has been emitted. It is only by re-reading and henceforth by focusing more attentively on the signifiers of the text that Kinbote perceives its distant echoes, its aura of significations. According to Roland Barthes: "we undertake to reread the text to multiply the signifiers" (S/Z, 165). Rereading the text, Kinbote proves able to enter its web of connotations. The phrase "that crystal land" in the First Canto might now evoke Zembla:



*Line 12:* that crystal land

Perhaps an allusion to Zembla, my dear country [...] Alas he would have said a great deal more if a domestic anti-Karlist had not controlled every line he communicated to her! (PF, 62).<sup>5</sup> Or, from the combination of “gray” and “gradual” several lines apart in Canto One, Kinbote now unfolds a tissue of contrapuntal connections to “Jakob Gradus”:

*Line 17:* And then the gradual *Line 29:* gray

By an extraordinary coincidence (inherent perhaps in the contrapuntal nature of Shade’s art) our poet seems to name here (gradual, gray) a man, whom he was to see for one fatal moment three weeks later, but of whose existence at the time he could have not have known. Jakob Gradus, called himself variously Jack Degree or Jacques de Gray, or James de Gray (PF, 64).

Barthes writes in “IV Connotation, for even so” (S/Z, 7-9) that both scientific discourse and ideology have taken aim at connotation seeking to eliminate its ambiguity and to force all discourse into precise denotative habits “Connotation” writes Barthes “must therefore be rescued from this double contestation and kept as the nameable, computable trace of a certain plural of the text” (S/Z,8). To Barthes, connotation is precisely the medium that enables the reader to enter the plurality of meaning of the text: “Connotation is the way into the polysemy of the classic text” (S/Z, 9). Being now able to create threads between such signifiers as “gray” and “gradual” as hinting at Gradus, Kinbote enters a reading process that consists of dissecting the text’s connoted meanings in order to reveal the set of its interwoven codes hinting at his tale. That Shade intended such or such connotation does not matter just as Barthes attributes a complexity of meanings to “Sarrasine” which might not be what Balzac had originally in mind. As literature is an indirect form of speech between the author and the reader, the reader is the one who, all things considered, has the last word: “Whereby we see that writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice of reading itself: in the text, only the reader speaks” (S/Z, 151). And Kinbote is not the one to dismiss this right: “for better or

worse”, Kinbote triumphantly exclaims at the end of his foreword, “it is the commentator who has the last word” (PF, 25).

Reading Pale Fire for a second time, Kinbote no longer reads the “same” text but he enters a process developing through time. As Nabokov once said to his students at Cornell: “One cannot read a book; one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a re-reader”, 6 words that would be echoed a few years later by the French philosopher: “we must further accept one last freedom: that of reading the text as if it had already been read” (S/Z, 15). Only if we do so, can we perceive the text’s echoes to our mind. Barthes also argues that a reader never encounters a text for the first time since he has already been exposed to the codes that pre-determine this text: “This ‘I’ which approaches the text for the first time is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes” (S/Z, 15). Re-reading thus duplicates the text’s meanings, multiplies its poetic echoes. And Kinbote’s re-readings precisely embody the idea that only re-reading enables a text to display its fullest meaning:

Rereading alone saves the text from repetition. [...] It multiplies it in its variety and its plurality. If then, a deliberate contradiction in terms, we *immediately* reread the text, it is in order to obtain, as though under the effect of a drug (that of recommencement, of difference), not the *real* text but a plural text (S/Z, 16)

Is there a “real” “Pale Fire”? There was before Kinbote decided to be attentive to the obliquity of its signifiers. If Kinbote’s final note to line 999 consists in an descriptive account of his successive readings of Shade’s poem, what is a better account of his ultimate reading than his entire commentary from the first note to the last? Kinbote’s commentary is the enactment of a reading, his reading on the page. As Kinbote explains, he thought he had to “sort out those [...] subliminal debts” Shade owed to him. Madly methodical or methodically mad, Kinbote delineates the 999 lines into fragments considered as many entries for entire lines or mere words that require comments. Regularity does not matter: Kinbote may

linger on four successive lines or on a single pronoun. Reading being considered as a process, Kinbote's method consists in fragmenting the text in a way that is not prejudiced by any conventions. By enacting on the page this "reading-in progress", Kinbote becomes the producer of the text.

Barthes "starring" of "Sarrasine" is inspired by a will for non-prejudicial reading: As Barthes would explain, to remain attentive to the plural of the text, one must not structure it in "large masses", but "one should star the text instead of assembling it" (S/Z, 13). The starred text assembles the blocks of signification and interrupts the flowing discourse of the narration. The commentary's task is not to respect the classical narratorial flow of the text but to "*manhandle* the text, *interrupt* it" (S/Z, 15) so that the initial syntactical, rhetorical structure do not prevent us from seeing the hidden connections lying underneath the smooth surface. But then, who does interrupt and manhandle Shade's poem better than Kinbote? Kinbote is a critic able to interrupt a line such as "Of the stiff vane so often visited" to single out its adverb ("often") and derive from it a three-pages-long soliloquy on unhappiness: ("Line 62: often/ Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring 1959, I had feared for my life. Solitude is the playfield of Satan" PF, 78). Digression might be Kinbote's playfield. The critic has decided to dismantle his neighbour's poem with no regards for its continuity. But Kinbote has no respect for the chronological sequence of his own story either. Two pages into the foreword, he directs his reader to one of his last note "(see my note to line 991)". If we turn to the note, we shall soon find ourselves tracking a whole series of cross-references as we shall be directed then to notes to line 47, and from there to the note to line 661. Hardly have we started reading Kinbote's foreword that we know from those notes that Kinbote has a secret, what that secret is. The concept of suspense does not seem to belong to Pale Fire's world: the forward progression of the plot is only a part of the story that Barthes would define as belonging to the proairetic and hermeneutics codes. But a text is also interwoven with three other codes that have nothing to do with sequentiality. Since the resolution has more or less been unveiled from the very foreword, since suspense is no longer our prior concern when reading *Pale fire*, our reading is from the start very close to a re-

reading. As Barthes puts it: “rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology (this happens before or after) and recaptures a mythic time (without before or after)” (*S/Z*, 16). Not only has Kinbote disrupted the text, but the pattern of cross-references that he set up into the novel distracts the reader from the linearity of the text and make of it a real “galaxy of signifiers” to quote Barthes’ expression.

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In many ways, Kinbote’s reading is in tune with Barthes’ new approach of reading. *Pale Fire* is constellation, a “nebulae of signifiers” for which there is more than one entrance. Now it would be madly eccentric to claim that Kinbote’s reading and his numerous divagations is a model of a commentary. But Kinbote’s reading-in-progress being written down on the page is already the material of our own reading-in-progress. This apparatus of notes, and how we interpret them, the first laugh we get from it and the subsequent multiple interpretations we can draw from them is in its turn part of the whole pattern designed to make us conscious of our own interpretative acts. It is not the right place here to re-expose the analyses that allowed such critics as Michael Wood or Brian Boyd or (*inter alias*) to show how Kinbote’s fantasies were indeed present in the very heart of the poem. Once this step has been made, our concern has consisted in analysing how Kinbote’s method – ironically enough – is also suggestive of a creative method of approaching a text. For once we overcome the initial shock of our first discovery, we actually recognize Kinbote’s method as a model for us, as a model for a reading which enables us to see through the glaze by opening unexpected vistas of surprise, a reading that enables us to “find not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense”(PF, 53).

### Endnotes

1 Boyd Brian. Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* : The Magic of Artistic Discovery. Princeton University Press, 1999

2 Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang , 1974.

3 “Sarrasine” is a classic short story written in 1830. As the story opens, the narrator is attending one of the gorgeous parties held by the Lanty family. A mysterious old effeminate character is there, haunting the mansion and his ghostly appearance terrifies the narrator’s acquaintance. Only when the party is over and the narrator is back home does he tell his friend the story of the eerie personage. Almost a century ago, Sarrasine, a Parisian sculptor, fell in love with a beautiful opera singer called Zambinella on a trip to Italy. Sarrasine, who had created her image in a sculpture, dreamt of marrying her, not knowing of the Italian custom of castrati. When Sarrasine found out that Zambinella was a man, he attempted to kill him but came to be killed instead by Zambinella’s protectors. Eighty years later, Zambinella lives with the Lanty family as being their great-uncle.

4 These five codes are determined early in the book from the analysis of the first three lexia, that is the title of the story and the first sentence: “I was deep into one of those daydreams.” See “the Five Codes” (*S/Z*, 18-19).

5 Kinbote comforts himself in suspecting Mrs Shade to have censored her husband’s work from his contributions.

6 Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*. Ed. F. Bowers. London: Pan Books Ltd, 1980, p.3.

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### First Response

This is a bold article which negotiates adeptly a difficult hermeneutic path between criticism-as-creation (Barthes) and creation-as-criticism (Nabokov). It also implicitly locates "Pale Fire" within a general zeitgeist wherein the boundaries between primary and secondary literature were being called into question both by "authorial" and "critical" practices. Furthermore, it refocuses attention on Barthes's S/Z - a text whose practice of reading was truly revolutionary and whose full ramifications have yet to be explored in literary

criticism. Not only do Nabokov and Barthes make for a "good fit", so to speak, but are here explored in such a way as to suggest the possibilities of a substantial and resonant reading which avoids the crude model of applying a theory to a text.