

# Translating Autobiography into Fiction: Chiasmus and the Play of the Authorial Mind in *Hamlet* and *Pale Fire*

Delia Ungureanu, Harvard University and University of Bucharest

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## Abstract

The traditional view of Nabokovian criticism holds that Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* is the major intertextual source for Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*. In this paper, I will argue that *Hamlet*, not *Timon of Athens*, is the major source for Nabokov's rewriting. To do so, I will use historical, biographical, linguistic, stylistic, and rhetorical arguments, and examine chiasmus as a structural device used both by Nabokov and Shakespeare.

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There's letters sealed, and my two schoolfellows,  
Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged,  
They bear the mandate . . .

. . .

Oh, 'tis most sweet

When in one line two crafts directly meet. (*Hamlet*, 3.4.227-33)<sup>1</sup>

*Hamlet* is perhaps Shakespeare's most discussed play, and despite Freud's assumption in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that he had found, once and for all, the reason for the play's long-lasting success, *Hamlet* has continued to stir the scholarly milieu. Moving beyond the era of New Criticism, the most influential Shakespearean criticism of the past decade has returned in various post-Freudian modes to contextualized and biographical readings of *Hamlet*, as in Alexander Welsh's *Hamlet and His Modern Guises* (2001), Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2003), and James Shapiro's *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (2005). But this is not a new approach, nor is it limited to scholars; writers of all times have engaged at some point in their careers with *Hamlet*, directly or obliquely. Some have projected their own cultural and ideological

agenda onto the play (Goethe's Romantic Hamlet who is pure thought and no action, Coleridge's and Schlegel's philosophical Hamlets), sometimes finding in Hamlet an autobiographical reflection of their own anxieties and a way to explore the father-son relationship. This led Coleridge to say that "I have a smack of Hamlet myself" (Coleridge 1990, 61) and Schlegel to anticipate Freud's influential psychoanalytic reading by talking about "hidden purposes" and "a foundation laid in such unfathomable depth" (Schlegel 2004, 141). Freud, Ernest Jones, Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard (on the scholarly side), and Aleksandr Pushkin, James Joyce, and Vladimir Nabokov (on the writers' side) have all read the play from a psychoanalytical, psychological, or autobiographical point of view.

This essay explores Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* as an intertextual reworking of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* — a play that is ultimately more central to Nabokov's novel than the more frequently discussed *Timon of Athens*. I will argue that there is a symmetry between Shakespeare's life at the moment of writing *Hamlet* and Nabokov's life at the moment of writing *Pale Fire*, and that both authors translate into fiction their anxieties over their own father-son relationships. I will use historical, biographical, and linguistic evidence to point out that Nabokov, like the trickster he was, engages with *Hamlet* obliquely in order to sublimate through art a painful memory: the assassination of his father. I will argue that the mechanism Nabokov uses for hinting at *Hamlet* while referring openly to *Timon of Athens* is reversal, described by Freud as the mechanism not only of dreams, but also of literature (Freud 2010, 264). I will show how reversal operates both in *Hamlet* and *Pale Fire* through one of Shakespeare's major rhetorical devices: the chiasmus. And finally, I will analyze four examples of chiasmus in *Hamlet*, to which Nabokov refers obliquely and which help structure *Pale Fire*. Chiasmus is more than a rhetorical device; for both Shakespeare and Nabokov, it encompasses their negotiation of the father-son relationship, understood both autobiographically in terms of identity and metatextually as the question of authorship.

### Translating Painful Memories into Fiction

*Hamlet* was completed in 1601, the year of the death of Shakespeare's father, John. It has long been noted that Hamlet's name echoes that of Shakespeare's son Hamnet, who had died in 1596, but it is equally notable that Shakespeare played the Ghost (the father) on the stage rather than Hamlet (the son). He was at the same time father and son, reversing the real roles by bringing the fathers back to life, vividly though fleetingly, on stage. Shakespeare seems to have identified his own position in the younger Hamlet while also identifying with his father on the stage by playing the Ghost who addresses his own son. For this reason, father and son in the play have the same name: Hamlet.

Three and a half centuries later, another writer fictively sublimated the pain of his father's murder, but in a different way: the names of father and son were identical not in fiction, but in reality. Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, son of a father shot by mistake in 1922, wrote a novel entitled *Pale Fire*. It explores several instances of the father-son relationship, directly or obliquely, while at the same time rewriting the autobiography in which his father plays a central role. And at the same time, he was translating Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

For a Russian writer, *Onegin* resonates with *Hamlet* as a prototype of the "superfluous man" (see Oswald LeWinter's *Shakespeare in Europe* [1963] and Eleanor Rowe's *Hamlet: A Window on Russia* [1976]), a connection strengthened by the death of both characters in duels. In his death as in his life, Eugene Onegin traditionally has been read as mirroring his creator, who suffered the fate proleptically experienced by his hero. Nabokov mentions Pushkin's death in a duel several times in *Pale Fire*; in *Speak, Memory*, he cites it in reference to a duel in which his father almost participated. The duel scene was doubly connected with a real scene for Nabokov: it is how Pushkin died and how his father almost died. Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* was published in 1964, two years after *Pale Fire* and two years before his revised and extended *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. While Nabokov translated the verse novel into something close to prose and added massive notes far more extensive than the original poem, his character Kinbote's activities mirrored his own: in *Pale Fire*, Kinbote writes his introduction to Shade's poem (written in cantos, like Pushkin's verse novel), then gives the text of the poem — though the larger part of the entire text is made up of Kinbote's comments on Shade's poem. Pushkin is thus in this period for Nabokov at the heart of three texts — *Pale Fire*, *Eugene Onegin*, and *Speak, Memory* — that have in common the idea of *death through a duel*, either fictional or real.

It is striking that not even in his autobiography does Nabokov dwell long on narrating the painful event of his father's death. Instead, in *Speak, Memory*, he shifts the attention from the real murder to the duel that almost killed his father in 1912, ten years before his actual death in Berlin, an assassination by "a sinister ruffian" (Nabokov 1989b, 177) who later became the Nazis' administrator of émigré Russian affairs. By giving almost six pages to the duel that never took place and only the chapter's last few concluding lines to the real murder, it is almost as if Nabokov secretly wishes that this duel could replace the real scene in 1922 when his father was killed, as if this autobiography could somehow avenge his father's death and keep him alive, at least, in the son's memory. Nabokov remembers that, going back home that day in 1912 and fearing his father's death, he was pondering, not unlike Hamlet, what the weapon would be: "What would his adversary choose, I kept asking myself — the blade or the bullet?" (Nabokov 1989b, 190). Here, Nabokov himself seems to wonder how to narrate this painful memory: obliquely through literature

(the blade, Hamlet), or directly (the bullet)? *Pale Fire* makes the opposite choice: the bullet is kept, but the blade is there too, hidden in Kinbote's reversed, *Hamlet*-derived, name — Bodkin — and inside the words, as in Hamlet's "wordswordswords" and the daggers he speaks to Gertrude. Ultimately, as Richard A. Lanham says, "Hamlet will use the play . . . as a weapon" (Lanham 1976, 133; emphasis added).

### *Timon of Athens*, a Sublimated Reference to *Hamlet*

Perhaps it is not surprising that Nabokov's poem "On Translating Eugene Onegin" (1955) defines translation as "a pale reflection" of the author:

What is translation? On a platter  
A poet's pale and glaring head. (Nabokov 1955, 34)

If translation means a pale reflection of the source text, *Timon of Athens* would be no "pale" reflection, being too obvious a reference, as Kinbote quotes it in his comments. Though the joke is on Kinbote for missing — and mistranslating — the crucial reference to "pale fire," the joke is on ourselves, the readers, as well, if we pride ourselves simply on seeing the overt reference that Kinbote has missed.

Nabokov uses the same deceptive mirroring method that Hamlet himself does by playing the madman to redirect attention from the real situation. The title *Pale Fire* seems to point without doubt to Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun. (*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.439-41)

Much of the criticism of the novel is based on this assumption, Brian Boyd and Priscilla Meyer having the best-informed arguments. But as Boyd has pointed out (Boyd 2001, 177), the phrase "pale fire" also occurs in the final words the Ghost speaks to Hamlet:

The glowworm shows the matin to be near,  
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.  
Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me. (*Hamlet*, 1.5.89-91)

The trick is that these two words appear at a distance in *Hamlet*. But in this case, *Timon of Athens* is just the sublimated reference for the more logical one — *Hamlet* — for Nabokov, who at this time is renegotiating his own relationship with his father. And it is in *Timon of Athens* that Nabokov

places the key to his own oblique mirroring and sublimation of the more logical reference: the very passage where the phrase "pale fire" occurs speaks of theft, which is Nabokov's metaphorical way to refer to translation and intertextual writing (as Meyer points out [1999, 111]).

Two characters in *Pale Fire* translate: Kinbote retranslates the passage from *Timon of Athens* from Conmal's Zemblan version back into English, and Conmal — a fictional reworking of the real Russian translator Andrej Kroneberg, famous for his *Hamlet* translation — is the translator of Shakespeare into Zemblan.<sup>2</sup>

Having no library in the desolate log cabin where I live like Timon in his cave, I am compelled for the purpose of quick citation to retranslate this passage into English prose from a Zemblan poetical version of Timon which, I hope, sufficiently approximates the text, or is at least faithful to its spirit:

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea  
and robs it. The moon is a thief:  
he steals his silvery light from the sun. (Nabokov 1989a, 79-80)

Much as the moon is but a reflection of the sun's light, *Timon of Athens* is the oblique reflection of *Hamlet*. For this sublimation of one of the major events in Nabokov's life — his father's murder — he turns chiefly to one of Shakespeare's major plays rather than the more minor ones, and also to a play whose plot is so similar to his own rewriting of his painful memory.

Freud himself cites *Timon of Athens*, of all plays, in connection with *Hamlet* in his discussion of reversal in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He discusses Hamlet's "distaste for sexuality" and connects this to an autobiographical reading: "For it can of course only be the poet's own mind which confronts us in Hamlet," and this distaste "reached its extreme expression in *Timon of Athens*" (Freud 2010, 282). Yet there is a chiasmic doubling and reversal between Hamlet's perception of sexuality and the way *Pale Fire* plays it out. Hamlet's love for the lovely Ophelia turns into Shade's soft sentimentalism towards the two women in his life: his dictatorial wife Sybil and their plump, ugly daughter Hazel. What is passion in Hamlet becomes placidity and sterility in Shade, especially in relation to the women around him. From his poetry class, he seems to remember only "an extramural lady on crutches" and not the sexy blonde:

"Come, come," said Professor Hurley, "do you mean, John, you really don't have a mental or visceral picture of that stunning blonde in the black leotard who haunts Lit. 202?" Shade, all his wrinkles beaming, benignly tapped Hurley on the wrist to make him stop. (Nabokov 1989a, 21)

Turning the lover Ophelia into the daughter Hazel is a consequence of constructing a non-visceral, non-sexual Hamlet in Shade. While Shakespeare turns Ophelia's drowning into a moment of eerie aesthetic beauty, line 500 in Shade's poem bluntly describes Hazel's disappearing in the water of the lake, an indefinite shape, not the memorable beauty adorned with flowers:

A blurry shape stepped off the reedy bank  
 Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank. (Nabokov 1989a, 51)

*Pale Fire* itself seems to encourage autobiographical reading. Kinbote treats Shade's poem as essentially a fictionalized account of Kinbote's own life, while also acknowledging it as an autobiography of Shade. The autobiographical elements, Kinbote suggests, lie in the variants of Shade's poem: "Here and there I discovered in it and especially, *especially in the invaluable variants*, echoes and spangles of my mind . . . all the many subliminal debts to me" (Nabokov 1989a, 297; emphasis added). This could apply to Nabokov as well.

The whole process of reworking memories into fiction, like the process of sublimation, supposes a reversal of the terms involved: father-son, author-character. The structural device for making this reversal is the chiasmus, a rhetorical figure natural for Zemblan: "'the tongue of the mirror' as the great Conmal has termed it" (Nabokov 1989a, 242). In Zemblan, as in the name "Zembla" itself, the alphabet goes backward from Z to A, just as Gradus moves from Zembla to Appalachia, and as Kinbote writes his last/fore-word, the last pointing to the first. Genders as well as letters are reversed in Zemblan translation, as Shakespeare's female moon becomes a "he" in Kinbote's retranslation. Taken metatextually, this gender reversal reflects Nabokov's perception of his textual mechanism and pale fire as a *she*. The moon changes gender once more, from the rewritten "she" as "he" in Kinbote's translation back to the feminine nature of "pale fire" in Shakespeare: "Thus any machine is a she to its fond user, and any fire (even a 'pale' one!) is she to the fireman, as water is she to the passionate plumber" (Nabokov 1989a, 243). This reverses the roles in the play, though Shade seems to mirror both Hamlet, who remembers his dead father, and King Hamlet, who lost a child. But Kinbote too is a Hamlet figure with a disturbed mind in which his country is burning, like the Ghost's words tormenting Hamlet.

Switching roles in the next line, Kinbote becomes the Ghost of Shade's poem: "I mesmerized him with it, I saturated him with my vision, I pressed upon him, with a drunkard's wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse" (Nabokov 1989a, 80). Kinbote claims that he cannot write poetry. But in fact, he wears Shade's mask, much as while writing poetry under the pen name of Sirin, Nabokov switched to another mask — Shishkov — when the critics failed to recognize Sirin's poetical talent. If Hamlet perpetually hears the Ghost's voice asking him to come to action,

so too Shade hears Kinbote, who writes that "I kept urging him at every opportunity to surmount his habitual sloth and start writing" (1989a, 80).

### Overlapping Handwritings: Who Writes Whom?

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov compares his own "mousy hand" and "massacrous revisions" of texts, never clean, to his father's clean copies of his proclamations and editorials, written in a perfectly regular hand:

The preserved drafts of some of his proclamations . . . and editorials are penned in a copybook-slanted, beautifully sleek, *unbelievably regular hand, almost free of corrections*, a purity, a certainty, a mind-and-matter co-function that I find amusing to compare to *my own mousy hand and messy drafts*, to the *massacrous revisions and rewritings*, and new revisions, of the very lines in which I am taking two hours now to describe a two-minute run of *his flawless handwriting*. His drafts were *the fair copies of immediate thought* . . . [in] his flowing, "celestial" hand (as the typesetters said, marveling at the absence of corrections). (Nabokov 1989b, 177-78, 242; emphases added)

This memory is reworked in the opening pages of *Pale Fire*, where Kinbote describes Shade's manuscript as being composed mainly of fair copies, minus the final four cards, which are the corrected draft that Shade never got to copy. It is as if the "mousy hand" is hidden throughout all the text behind the fair copies, and only in the end is this hidden hand revealed. Behind the hand of the "father" (Shade), the hand of the "son" (Kinbote) is hidden: "The manuscript, mostly a *Fair Copy* . . . writing out with a fine nib in a *minute, tidy, remarkably clear hand*, the text of his poem . . . the last four [cards] used on the day of his death give a *Corrected Draft instead of a Fair Copy*" (Nabokov 1989a, 13; emphasis added).

Thus Shade transcribed in fair copies all his revised drafts (we are not told how much they were revised, but we can infer from the remaining uncopied drafts, as well as from Kinbote's note on Shade's burning these drafts in a "pale fire," that it was a lot, but he would date them with the date of the initial copy, not of the later revised one, to make them look as if they had never been rewritten: "[he] preserved the date of actual creation rather than that of second or third thoughts" (1989a, 13). But behind this corrected draft and its mousy hand there's wit that one can see only by going beneath the surface:

. . . a Corrected Draft. This is *extremely rough in appearance*, teeming with *devastating erasures and cataclysmic insertions*, and does not follow the lines of the card as rigidly as the Fair Copy does. Actually, it turns out to be *beautifully accurate* when you once make

the plunge and compel yourself to *open your eyes in the limpid depths under its confused surface*. It contains not one gappy line, not one doubtful reading. (1989a, 14)

Polonius has a similar revelation when he hears Hamlet's nonsensical words: "Though this be madness, yet there is a method in 't" (2.2.200).

It is no wonder that Kinbote is ready to discard a Shadean critic who malevolently pointed out that *all* of Shade's manuscript was written in this messy hand and then masked in the tidy writing: the claim that the manuscript "consists of disjointed drafts none of which yields a definite text" — is a malicious invention" (Nabokov 1989a, 14). And he terms "nonsensical" the claim made by other critics referring to "a structural matter": that Shade may have left only a small part of what his poem was to be. But Kinbote needs to make the poem look (all but) complete and, hence, confirm its perfectly chiasmic structure.

Nabokov's father's son did not inherit the clarity of his handwriting, nor his rhetorical force. Nabokov describes himself as stammering in front of an audience without the help of a written text, unlike his father: "he was also an admirable speaker, an 'English style' cool orator, who eschewed the meat-chopping gesture and rhetorical bark of the demagogue, and here, too, the ridiculous cacologist I am, when not having a typed sheet before me, has inherited nothing" (Nabokov 1989b, 178). The son Vladimir, unworthy of his father Vladimir, does not inherit his admirable rhetoric or clean hand, and the ironic phrase "ridiculous cacologist"<sup>3</sup> mirrors Hamlet's way of representing himself in relation to his father as "a dull and muddy-mettled rascal" (2.2.519), as well as a rogue (2.2.502), a coward (2.2.523), a villain (2.2.524), and an ass (2.2.535). All these words embody the same semantic constellation that Nabokov and Kinbote, in turn, use to refer ironically to themselves: coward, thief, unreliable.

Kinbote actually steals the poem, and we can never know to what extent he has rewritten it. His actions recall Hamlet's theft of Claudius's letter ordering his murder and changing it so that it will backfire on the messengers. Kinbote's rewriting has a similar effect: it redirects the murder from himself to Shade, who is now understood to have been killed accidentally in Kinbote's place, echoing Nabokov's father's accidental assassination in place of the intended target. In *Hamlet*, the letter becomes an explosive murder weapon: "There's letters seal'd," Hamlet says:

Let it work;  
For 'tis the sport to have the engineer  
Hoist with his own petard." (3.4.206-208)



In the same scene, Hamlet continues to exploit the explosion imagery as he sees himself digging deeper than the plotters: "But I will delve one yard below their mines / And blow them at the moon" (3.4.209-210). Earlier in the play, it was the Ghost who was delving below the scene, forcing Hamlet and the others to swear by his sword. Who is writing whom — the father his son, or vice versa? This is an issue that Nabokov borrows from *Hamlet* at the time he is writing both his autobiography and *Pale Fire*. Two handwritings meet in Hamlet's forged letter: "O, 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.210-11).

These two crafts — the father's and the son's handwriting described in *Speak, Memory* — meet in Kinbote's and Shade's text. In the chapter of *Speak, Memory* dedicated to his father, Nabokov writes about his own father's attempts at autobiography, and as he does so, he notes how his voice and his father's overlap: just before his death in 1922, his father "started to serialize his boyhood recollections (he and I are overlapping now — too briefly)" (Nabokov 1989b, 179).

We see Hamlet writing twice in the play: on his table of memory, blotting out his handwriting to replace it with another's; and when he forges the King's letter by imitating the tidy style of bureaucrats (then uses his father's seal to make it look authentic):

Being thus benetted round with villainies —  
 Or I could make a prologue to my brains,  
 They had begun the play — I sat me down,  
 Devised a new commission, wrote it fair.  
 I once did hold it, as our statists do,  
 A baseness to write fair, and labored much  
 How to forget that learning, but sir, now  
 It did me yeoman's service. (5.2.29-36)

Kinbote, in turn, labors to remember how to "write fair" — that is, to write like Shade and thus forge the text and redirect the murder. He steals Shade's poem and seals it with his "last word"; Hamlet forges the letter and seals it with his father's seal. Both of them are cowardly, and shyness is a feature that Nabokov ironically evokes in describing his own handwriting in *Speak, Memory* as "mousy." In *Hamlet*, the play within the play is called *The Mouse-trap*, a metatextual way to refer to the great trap that Shakespeare has prepared for his readers. The characters themselves echo this metaphor: Polonius is called a rat by Hamlet when he kills him, and Claudius's term of endearment for Gertrude is "mouse." Nabokov has prepared a similar trap for his readers in *Pale Fire*.

### Chiasmus: A Dream Mechanism

In an interview with Alfred Appel, Nabokov remarked that "The verbal poetic texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has known, and is immensely superior to the structure of his plays as plays. With Shakespeare it is the metaphor that is the thing, not the play," echoing *Hamlet* to make his point (Nabokov 1967, 150). Yet what Nabokov does is to take Shakespeare's verbal chiasmus to a structural level, a process that can already be observed in *Hamlet* itself: a play, as Lanham has said, in which "Shakespeare is up to his old chiasmatic business, writing a play about the kind of play he is writing. The main play overlaps as well as glossing the play criticized — again, a strategy of superposition" (Lanham 1976, 130).

The way memory functions in dreams and is then unfolded through the account of the dream is based on a chiasmic structure of reversal, very much at work in *Hamlet*, which Victor Hugo called "the chef d'oeuvre of the tragedy-dream" (Hugo 2008, 178). Freud thinks that writers with deep insight about the human mind cease to be the tools of dreams and, instead, create them. Hence, literature can be read as a reversed dream: "It sometimes happens that the sharp eye of a creative writer has an analytic realization of the process of transformation of which he is habitually no more than the tool. If so, he may follow the process in a reverse direction and so trace back the imaginative writing to a dream" (Freud 2010, 264). Freud remarks that the mechanism of dream-distortion operates also by reversing the order of events; a dream can begin with an effect and end with the cause (2010, 343).

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov himself reverses the order of things when he replaces the moment of his father's death with the scene of the duel. This reversal of chronological order is also the mechanism by which *Pale Fire* reworks *Hamlet*: Nabokov totally blurs the father-son distinction, and the pairing Kinbote-Shade can be read in both ways. Kinbote reworks some of the details of Nabokov's father's life, and acts like the Ghost when he commands Shade to tell his story in the poem, but reverses the outcome of *Hamlet*. If the Ghost tells Hamlet how he died, Kinbote tells Shade a story about how he *could* die, but in the end, the wrong man is killed. But Kinbote's madness also echoes Hamlet's, and from that point of view, the roles of father and son are not as clear as in Shakespeare's play. And things get more complicated when Shade, in turn, acts like Shakespeare (who portrayed the Ghost on stage) when he writes his autobiographical poem about the death of his daughter.

#### Four Examples of Chiasmus

There are four major instances of chiasmus, symmetrically used, that connect *Pale Fire* to *Hamlet*: two that function semantically at a sequential level and only later turn to the macrostructural one, and two that function by structuring the poem and the novel as a whole.

### A. "words words words" and "bare bodkin"

The first pair groups the phrases "words, words, words" and "bare bodkin," personified by Nabokov as Kinbote/Botkin and defined in the novel's index as "a Danish stiletto." These two phrases are shaped using Shakespeare's major poetic device: a complex chiasmus of mirrored style and characters, described by William L. Davis as Shakespeare's dominant structural principle for his works (Davis 2005, 241).

Nabokov overlays "words words words" and "bare bodkin" in the word "stiletto," which occurs only twice in *Pale Fire*: once in Shade's poem and once in the index, where the textual plays out as the metatextual through the mirror game that turns Kinbote into Botkin: "Botkin, V., American scholar of Russian descent. Botkin or bodkin, a Danish stiletto" (Nabokov 1989a, 306). Kinbote's commentary to Shade's line "Stilettoes of a frozen stillicide" opens up a ring structure, which encircles both the poem and the novel through the opposites "foreword" and "last word":

In the lovely line heading this comment the reader should note the *last word*. My dictionary defines it as "a succession of drops falling from the eaves, eavesdrop, cavesdrop." I remember having encountered it for the first time in a poem by Thomas Hardy. The bright frost has eternalized the bright eavesdrop. We should also note the cloak-and-dagger hint-glint in the "svelte stilettoes" and the shadow of regicide in the rhyme. (79; emphasis added)

The last word is "stillicide," but the last words written in *Pale Fire* are Kinbote's foreword to the book; written at the end of Kinbote's editorial work, the foreword is both the last word of the novel and also Kinbote's own last (s)word as it prefaces his evidently imminent suicide. "Stillicide" itself changes its meaning due to the overlap with "stiletto," which Kinbote describes as illustrating "his delight and amazement at a portentous meeting of syllables in two adjacent words" (Nabokov 1989a, 309).

As Hamlet announces in the oath scene, his words will function as matricidal stilettoes in his confrontation with Gertrude: "I will speak daggers to her but use none" (3.2.357). Subtly, pervasively linking Kinbote and Hamlet is the stylish stiletto of the "bare bodkin." This sword mighty as a pen is an instrument for killing, writing, and embroidering, for Nabokov as for Shakespeare. Interestingly, the bodkin appears in the play when the key question — that of suicide — is raised:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? (3.1.70-76)

Nabokov in turn plays on this association in the novel, both in the index and in Kinbote's note to Shade's line about the stillicide. To this, we should add Kinbote's *Hamlet*-infused note to line 493:

With this divine mist of utter dependence permeating one's being, no wonder one is tempted, no wonder one weighs on one's palm with a dreamy smile the compact firearm in its case of suede leather hardly bigger than a castlegate key or a boy's seamed purse, no wonder one peers over the parapet into an inviting abyss . . . I am choosing these images rather casually. There are purists who maintain that a gentleman should use a brace of pistols, one for each temple, or a bare botkin (note the correct spelling), and that ladies should either swallow a lethal dose or drown with clumsy Ophelia. (Nabokov 1989a, 220)

#### B. "*Remember me*" and "*To be or not to be*"

The second pair of chiasitic references that echo through the poem and the novel as a whole are the Ghost's words, "Remember me," and the beginning of Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be, or not to be." Hamlet twice repeats his father's command "Remember me" as the resonant "remember thee," where "me" becomes "thee." And while he writes, the "word" turns into the resonant "sworn't," suggesting the "sword" embedded both in the "word" and in what is sworn:

Ay thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee?  
 Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
 That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain (1.5.96-103)  
 My tables, —  
 . . .  
 [*Writing*]  
 So uncle, there you are. Now to my word:  
 It is "Adieu, adieu, remember me."

I have sworn 't. (1.5.107-12)

Interestingly, Hamlet blots out his own name from the Ghost's command, which was "Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me" (1.5.91), as his identity disappears when he blots out his memories.

The oath scene plays on the triad word/sword/sworn't, structuring the relation Hamlet-Ghost, with the Ghost making him and his friends swear four times in a row, while Hamlet tries to escape the Ghost's voice coming from beneath the stage. "Sword" turns into "sworn" through the pun in Hamlet's "Upon my sword," to which Marcellus replies, "We have sworn."

The fourth instance of chiasmus in Hamlet on which Nabokov plays is "To be, or not to be," which develops threads in Hamlet's speech through the repetition of the couple "to die, — to sleep" — which is only an expansive development of "or not to be" in the climactic sequence "To die, — to sleep; — / To sleep, perchance to dream" (3.1.64-65). Shakespeare thus develops the second part of the initial *inclusion* in a climactic sequence that equates death, sleep, and dreaming. Shakespeare brings together these three units into a single phrase that turns into another chiasmus, with its pivotal center on *dream*:

To *die*, — to *sleep*; —

To sleep! Perchance to *dream*: — ay, there's the rub;

For in that *sleep* of *death* what *dreams* may come . . . (3.1.64-66; emphasis added)

Davis notes that in Hamlet's soliloquy, Shakespeare uses what will become his "pattern of invention": a blueprint taken to several levels and multiplied infinitely (2005, 253-54).

The opening line of Hamlet's soliloquy evolves from a grammatical chiasmus in Shakespeare to a structural chiasmus in Nabokov. Nabokov confronts his hero Shade with the same issues raised by Hamlet in his soliloquy, now ordered chiastically in Shade's poem: life, suicide/death, the beyond, sleep, and dreams. And he connects them as an expansion of Shakespeare's chiasmus, which opposes being and non-being.

As Hamlet moves between "to be" and "not to be" only to end up, full circle, back at the initial option, Shade performs this action twice to a surprising outcome: being/non-being — being/non-being — being *and* non-being. On this level, we might assert that Nabokov takes Shakespeare's chiastic pattern of invention one step farther. The choice of life over death, and fighting the abyss to think of the hereafter, paradoxically turns reason and conscience itself into a grave as Shade joins the "Iph" — the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter.

But while Hamlet has no representation of the "undiscover'd country" and turns to life and "the pale cast of thought" only out of dread of the unknown, Shade projects the beyond as a continuation of this life, and it is only this representation that prevents him from following his daughter:

And I'll turn down eternity unless  
 The melancholy and the tenderness  
 Of mortal life; the passion and the pain  
 [. . .]  
 Are found in Heaven by the newly dead  
 Stored in its strongholds through the years. (Nabokov 1989a, 53)

But the hereafter can also be the unknown hell, and Shade turns now to Hamlet's own dread of the beyond, while the possibility of life after death — *being* — is replaced by Hamlet's *non-being* — the chiasmus "To be, or not to be:"

A wrench, a rift — that's all one can foresee.  
 Maybe one finds *le grand néant*; maybe  
 Again one spirals from the tuber's eye  
 [. . .]  
 That tasteless venture helped me in a way.  
 I learnt what to ignore in my survey  
 Of death's abyss. And when we lost our child  
 I knew there would be *nothing*. (Nabokov 1989a, 56-57)

Thus, the being of the hereafter, turned to non-being, returns to life after Shade's near-death experience when he had a stroke:

My vision reeked with truth. It had the tone,  
 The quiddity and quaintness of its own  
 Reality. It *was*. (Nabokov 1989a, 60)

But then this being reveals itself as only the same ironic non-being, which only seemed the opposite due to a misprint in the account of a woman who supposedly came back to life. The *mountain* she claimed she saw in the afterlife came out in print as *fountain*, and Shade thinks for a second that he has found truth, as in his own trip to the beyond he had seen a fountain: "Life Everlasting — based on a misprint!" (Nabokov 1989a, 62).

However, where Hamlet stops investigating the overlapping of life, death, sleep, and dream, Shade picks them up and proposes a solution: life as text(ure) of sense that melds together the opposition of being vs. non-being:

. . . *this*

Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;

Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream

But topsy-turvical coincidence,

Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.

Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find

Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind

Of correlated pattern in the game,

Plexed artistry, and something of the same

Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (Nabokov 1989a, 62-63)

Perhaps it's not without significance that Freud described dreams based on reversal as presenting "a topsy-turvy world" (Freud 2010, 443).

The perfect chiasmus of Shade's poem exists in *Pale Fire* only if we take Kinbote's word that there *was* a last line: line 1000, not found in the surviving index cards but postulated by Kinbote as the poem's necessary conclusion, symmetrically repeating line one. If true, the pivotal center "or not" in *Hamlet* becomes literally the "not" of the poem's structural center, the empty space between line 500 and line 501 in the gap between the poem's second and third parts, a textual gap that embodies the empty space where the body of Hazel, this "clumsy Ophelia," disappears into the lake.

Through the mirroring device by which *Pale Fire* upends the social and familial relations, gender distinctions, and generational relations in *Hamlet*, Nabokov rewrites the family relation Ghost-Hamlet as the social relation Kinbote-Shade, with the loving father-son relationship in *Hamlet* replaced by monomaniacal affection on Kinbote's side and indifference on Shade's. Secondly, Nabokov turns his own device upside down as the love relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is rewritten as the father-daughter relationship between Shade and Hazel — an ironic rewriting by the anti-Freudian Nabokov of Ernest Jones's single-mindedly Oedipal interpretation in his 1949 *Hamlet and Oedipus*. The grandeur of the King of the Danes is replaced by the obsessiveness of the mad Kinbote as he only *dreams* of himself as a grand king dispossessed of his kingdom. Hamlet's deep fear of the "undiscover'd country," which keeps him from committing suicide, is ironically mirrored by Shade's initial embrace of atheism, only to fall afterward into the pathetic hope of a beyond, triggered by a typo.

When Hamlet cites the line "For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot" (3.2.119-20) from an old song alluding to the Morris dance, in order to refer to remembering his father after the others have forgotten him, he associates the idea of forgetting with the shape of the letter *o*, the empty position, while he plays on a reversed rhyme (For O — forgot) embedded in an *inclusion* around the central pivot, which is the hobby-horse. In the Morris dance, the hobby-horse would die only to come back for revenge (Rose 1955, 363-64). In *Pale Fire*, the *o* as void plays out as Shade's Zero, turned into Kinbote's twin Lakes Ozero and Zero; the emptiness of the beyond turns meaningful with Kinbote's Ozero, the Russian word for "lake," echoed in the poem by the lake in which Hazel drowns; her death will become Shade's gateway to the dream of a more meaningful beyond.

The fourth chiasmus thus structures the form and length of Shade's poem, as shown in Diagram 1 below, according to the standard form of chiasmus: ABXB'A'. Diagram 2 below shows how the entire novel is organized through the ring composition into two concentric circles centered on an empty center, the X pivot or climax of the chiasmus around which the inverted repetition is balanced. The ring composition of both the poem and the novel unite all relevant levels of *Pale Fire*: they can be a frame for the painting of time as space (the metatextual/theoretical level); Hamlet's wax writing tablet of memory (the intertextual and textual levels); Shade's windowpane in lines 1 and 1000 (the textual, intertextual, biographical/dreamed-memory levels); or the butterfly (the metaphorical, textual, and metatextual levels).

On this ultimate level, the chiasmus' form alludes to a butterfly, a pervasive image for the entomologist Nabokov, indicated as the "waxwing" of the opening (and putative closing) line: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain" (1989a, 25). As Welch has written of the purpose of the chiasmus in Renaissance rhetoric: "The artistic ideal [of the chiasmus] appears to have been to create a text which could frame the body or central purpose of the writing like the borders around a tapestry or the wings at the sides of a triptych" (1981, 39). For Nabokov, the wings of the chiasmus are butterfly wings.

### Chiasmus, Authorship, and Worldview

Nabokov thought that Shakespeare's genius lay in his poetic language, not the structure of the play itself. Perhaps this is why *Pale Fire* builds on this verbal poetic art and rewrites *Hamlet*'s sequential chiasmus into a device structuring the entire text. But for both Shakespeare and Nabokov, the chiasmus is a sign of the hand of the God-like creator present in the text, and its function as a structuring device encloses each author's worldview. For Shakespeare, the chiasmus in *Hamlet* points at a world of contraries, a world at the crossroad of history, where ghosts cease to have reality and move into the poetic realm of fiction, a world where Catholicism



and Protestantism dispute the territory of the imagination (Greenblatt 2001, 5). And ultimately, the chiasmus negotiates the question of authorship between the Ghost and Hamlet: who writes whom?

One of the effects of the chiasmus in *Pale Fire* — the question of authorship — is expressed in terms adapted from Hamlet's lessons in reading and writing. Lanham has identified two "superposed plays" that are played out metatextually: Hamlet's and Laertes' (1976, 130). I would like to supplement this by arguing that Hamlet plays a double role that structures the play even further, as Shakespeare develops an entire series of plays within plays. The largest and most all-encompassing one seems to be Horatio's story of Hamlet, as the ending foretells; the second one, inscribed in the main play, is the Ghost's directed revenge tragedy, which makes Hamlet the main character almost against his will; the third one is Hamlet's own play of and play on madness; and finally, the fourth one, Hamlet's play within the play, directed by himself. But how can the play *Hamlet* be written by Horatio, as it includes Hamlet's two soliloquies, which Horatio could not have heard? Who, then, authors the play? Perhaps another ghost, the ghost of the playwright, who was Ghost and Hamlet at the same time, father and son, addressing both his son Hamnet and his father, John Shakespeare. Like the Ghost, Shakespeare is an omnipresent God hidden below the stage ("*hic et ubique*," as Hamlet puts it).

The Ghost controls Hamlet and Hamlet controls all the other characters in the play. Yet it is famously unclear whether Hamlet is fully in control of his act. The King says that Hamlet is not himself anymore, "Since nor th'exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was" (2.2.6-7). Like Kinbote/Botkin, refugee from Zembla, land of semblances, Hamlet is led by his own images and the hallucinations produced by his disturbed mind.

Nabokov's king-bot echoes Hamlet's worm or maggot, the real emperor of our bodies; so Botkin/Kinbote, described as a "maggot fly," is the real emperor of the body upon which it becomes parasitic. The relation between Kinbote and Shade is that between the Ghost and Hamlet, as when Hamlet talks to Claudius about Polonius' murder: "Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table; that's the end" (4.3.20-23). Just a few lines later, Hamlet himself turns into the disease that consumes Claudius, playing for Claudius the part that Ghost plays for him, driving Claudius to arrange

The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England,  
For like the hectic in my blood he rages,  
And thou must cure me. (4.3.61-63)

For Nabokov, too, the question of authorship is expressed by the open structure of *Pale Fire*, a structure described as dialectical and Hegelian by Priscilla Meyer (Meyer 1999, 5) and as a spiral by Brian Boyd, establishing a homologous relation between the lepidopterist and the writer (Boyd 2001, 7). Meyer uses Anglo-Saxon language arguments, the history of the English Restoration, and literature (with *Hamlet*) to argue that authorship is a question of several authorial masks: Nabokov to Botkin to Kinbote to John Shade, unless the reverse is the case, and it is Shade who has invented Kinbote. *Pale Fire* can be so puzzling that even the same critic can come up with two different readings on the question on authorship at a ten years' distance. This is the extreme case of Boyd, the champion of Nabokov criticism who, from *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (1991) to *Nabokov's "Pale Fire": The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (2001), changed his own answer to the question of authorship from the poet John Shade to his drowned daughter Hazel, arguing that "She has Kinbote's imagined story of *his* life inspire Shade to recount the true story of his own" (Boyd 2001, 179).

In Nabokov, the chiasmus translates a commanding and dazzling worldview. Nabokov goes back to the initial function of the chiasmus as displayed in ancient religious texts, which was not only to remember an unwritten text, but also to point at a worldview, based on symmetry and balance, a world that speaks incessantly of its creator. The entire question of the chiasmus is connected for Nabokov to an ontological drive, the need to return to one's origins and to know the absolute source of the nature of art.

Clarence Brown has argued for a unity of structure pervading of all Nabokov's novels: "In *Pale Fire* not only the relationship of the characters but the very structure of the book itself partakes of the nature of a paradigm" (Brown 1967, 288). It can take the form of alliteration on a textual level or the form of double characters on the level of construction, but it signals an unseen hand that unites everything: the hand of fate. Stephen Belletto adds that "For Nabokov . . . it seems that part of a pun's work is to suggest, even on the minute phonemic level, that in a fictional world all ostensibly chance moments are the work of an authorial guiding hand" (Belletto 2006, 762). These puns configure a "pattern of cruelty," as Leland de la Durantaye has called it (Durantaye 2006, 302).

Once Nabokov found God's hand in the pattern of life, he also found the artist's signature in the structure of art. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov rewrites a dream memory that tells how this discovery coincided with the first moment he lived life as poetry — a memory that structures Canto One of *Pale Fire*. In both texts, the chiastic structure of life and art reveals the etymological, intimate, oneiric link that exists for Nabokov among poetry, the form and metamorphic nature of the butterfly, and a chapel-like Russian *pavilion* with stained glass. An obsessive, haunting image that

pervades Nabokov's dreams, the "pavilion" has the same etymological root as the butterfly genus "papilio": "Etymologically, 'pavilion' and 'papilio' are closely related" (Nabokov 1989b, 216).

This is the very poetics of *Pale Fire*: "I dream of my pavilion at least twice a year . . . It hangs around, so to speak, with the unobtrusiveness of an artist's signature. I find it clinging to a corner of the dream canvas or cunningly worked into some ornamental part of the picture" (Nabokov 1989b, 215). The moment when a raindrop falls from the tip of a leaf is poetry itself: rhythm is born, escaping time in a perfect unity between the poet's heart and the leaf:

A moment later my first poem began. What touched it off? I think I know. Without any wind blowing, the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief — the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat . . . for a moment heart and leaf had been one. (Nabokov 1989b, 217)

Poetry is thus a frozen moment of time turned into space, expressed in Shade's poem as "Stilettoes of a frozen stillicide." The "stillicide" elaborates the memory of the papilio/pavilion, while the raindrop shining in parasitic luxury will become Kinbote parasitically penetrating Shade's text in quest of his own hidden self, forcing the poem to tell the story of his maddening, imagined Zembla.

### Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare are to the Oxford editions (see Shakespeare 2009 and Shakespeare 2003).
2. "Kroneberg's translation of *Hamlet* is a peak in the mirror tongue of Zembla, and *Hamlet* is a summit in Nabokov's kingdom of verbal art" (Meyer 1999, 118).
3. "Cacologist" is one of Nabokov's invented words, meaning one who studies cacophony or the dissonance in words.

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