

# The Afterlife of *Timon of Athens*: The Palest Fire

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## Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's novel about a fictional poet and his delusional commentator cleverly and consistently alludes to the relative obscurity of *Timon of Athens* in the Shakespearean canon. Nabokov's use of *Timon* as a point of reference in this novel both highlights the complexity of *Pale Fire*'s interest in light, shade, and obscurity and serves as a metaphor for the afterlife of this infrequently referenced Shakespearean play. *Timon of Athens* — a shadowy, unfinished, and co-authored play — works very well as a companion piece to *Pale Fire*, itself constructed as a multi-authored, heavily-edited work that undergoes repeated revision.

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Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) is structured as a work of textual criticism on a 999-line poem written by an Appalachian poet named John Shade. The poem itself (written in four cantos and also called "Pale Fire") is only a fraction of the length of the whole work because the introduction, commentary, and index on Shade's poem comprise the bulk of Nabokov's book. This *apparatus criticus* is presented as the work of a colorful professor of literature named Charles Kinbote, who insists that he was a close friend of John Shade and claims to hail from a distant land called Zembla. Kinbote is no ordinary commentator, however. His inflated ego causes him to believe that he inspired the poem with his tales about the exiled king of Zembla, Charles the Beloved, so despite the fact that the poem seems to be completely autobiographical (i.e., about Shade's life), Kinbote insists that hidden deep within "Pale Fire" is his own story. Although we can readily tell that Shade's poem has nothing to do with this subject, Kinbote persists in his deluded belief (more understandable when we later learn that he himself claims to be this exiled king).

Despite his professed admiration for Shade, Kinbote freely criticizes many lines in this work, frequently offering suggestions for improvement or condemnation of certain poetic images. In a note explaining Shade's allusion to Browning's "My Last Duchess" in one line of the poem, Kinbote directs the readers to the proper source and then suggests that they should

condemn the fashionable device of entitling a collection of essays or a volume of poetry — or a long poem, alas — with a phrase lifted from a more or less celebrated poetical work of

the past. Such titles possess a specious glamour acceptable maybe in the names of vintage wines and plump courtesans but only degrading in regard to the talent that substitutes the easy allusiveness of literacy for original fancy and shifts onto a bust's shoulders the responsibility for ornateness since anybody can flip through a *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Romeo and Juliet*, or, perhaps, the *Sonnets* and take his pick. (Nabokov 1989, 240)

The notion that anyone could look to these Shakespearean sources as inspiration for titles or allusions is predicated upon the popularity and cultural relevance of the plays. However, although it may be easy to use lines from *Midsummer*, *Romeo*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, or *Lear* as the basis of a title or an allusion, the same cannot be said for all of Shakespeare's plays.

For instance, take the case of one of his least known and quoted works, *Timon of Athens*: some readers will not have even heard of the play, much less be able to pick out allusions to it unless they are looking. Nonetheless, it is a phrase in *Timon* that inspires the title of Shade's poem as well as Nabokov's book. Kinbote's comment above ("or a long poem, alas") reflects his own frustration with Shade's decision to look to Shakespeare for his title. In lines 961-62 of his poem, Shade writes, "But *this* transparent thingum does require / Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*" (Nabokov 1989, 68, italics in original). The words "pale fire" are lifted from act 4 of *Timon*, but this is more than just a passing reference, because this play is relevant, in complex and provocative ways, to both Shade's poem and Kinbote's own narrative. While the allusions to *Timon* in *Pale Fire* are often explained in books and articles about Nabokov, my objective is slightly different. I would like to look more closely at *Timon's* role in *Pale Fire* and to suggest not only that Nabokov's book has more to do with *Timon* than others have assumed, but that *Pale Fire* can also change the way that we read *Timon*.

### The Talisman

When he writes his commentary note about Shade's invocation of Shakespeare for the title of his "transparent thingum," Kinbote is perplexed: "But in which of the Bard's works did our poet cull it? My readers must make their own research. All I have with me is a tiny vest pocket edition of *Timon of Athens* — in Zemblan! It certainly contains nothing that could be regarded as an equivalent of 'pale fire' (if it had, my luck would have been a statistical monster)" (Nabokov 1989, 285). This parenthetical comment about the "statistical monster" becomes one of the book's great jokes, for despite the fact that it is highly unusual for anyone to possess *Timon* as his only Shakespeare play or for the average author to allude to this drama, the title does indeed, against all odds, come from *Timon*. The lines in Shakespeare's play are given by Timon in his misanthropic

rage, speaking to the thieves who have heard that he has found gold in his wilderness retreat. Timon insists that these men who have come to rob him blind are emblematic of the nature of existence, because everything is a thief:

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;  
 The sea's a thief whose liquid surge resolves  
 The moon into salt tears . . . (*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.431-35)

Timon's discourse about the thievery upon which the natural world is built points to this theme in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote has, in fact, stolen Shade's poem, pocketing it at the very moment that Shade is shot and killed in a mysterious accident.<sup>1</sup> Against the wishes of the poet's widow and his colleagues at Wordsmith College in New Wye, Kinbote sneaks off with the index cards on which the poem is written and produces his own edition of Shade's work, which has far more to do with Kinbote than with the poet. Literary thievery connects with other motifs about theft in *Pale Fire*, such as the unsolved case of the missing crown jewels of Zembla. More provocatively, the theme of thievery suggests Kinbote's tendency to steal identities. He claims to be Charles II of Zembla (which of course seems like a fictional identity), but there are also clues in the book that suggest he could be a Russian scholar named Botkin, an unknown lunatic from Russia, or perhaps even a creation of Shade himself (see Boyd 1999 and Takács 2002, 100-102).

Further clues that point to the title phrase of "Pale Fire" emerge because Kinbote "accidentally" quotes the exact passage from *Timon* 4.3 in an entirely different part of his commentary. Pontificating on what he claims as a variant reading of Shade's lines 39-40 (which, like Kinbote's other variants, has nothing in common with the original), Kinbote writes,

One cannot help recalling a passage in *Timon of Athens* (act 4, scene 3) where the misanthrope talks to the three marauders. 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.  
 The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon. (Nabokov 1989, 79-80)

The joke here, of course, is that "silvery light" is the "pale fire" phrase that Kinbote is unable to locate when looking for the inspiration for Shade's title earlier in the work. On the very next page of Kinbote's commentary, we see him using this same metaphor of "pale fire" to describe his relationship with Shade: "In many cases I have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb, and unconsciously aping the prose style of his own critical essays" (81). Kinbote thus seems to set himself up as the moon to Shade's sun, but the irony of Shade's name brings us much closer to the tendency of Kinbote's moon to eclipse this poet-sun, casting him, indeed, in the shade. A further irony emerges as we see that the Zemblan translation has reversed the genders of the sun and moon from Shakespeare's original, making the sun feminine and the moon masculine and thus suggesting the superior role of the moon.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see later, for Kinbote the male sex is always superior. Thus when Kinbote speaks of the moon as masculine, he is also arguing for the superior role of the commentator over the poet — a claim that he makes throughout the commentary, despite his protestations about Shade's genius.

Having noticed the extraordinary coincidence of Kinbote's possessing only one Shakespearean play, an extremely obscure one that just happens to be the source of the title of Shade's poem, we must also ask the obvious question: *Why* is Kinbote carrying around a Zemblan translation of this play? No answer emerges if we take Kinbote to be what he at first claims, an ordinary citizen of Zembla. However, if we accept his initial hints and eventual assertions that he is the exiled king of Zembla of whom he speaks, he provides an account of why he is carrying this play. Kinbote explains that the Zemblan king (Charles II) stumbled upon a closet when he was thirteen years old that was "stuffed with disparate objects," including "a thirty-twomo edition of *Timon of Athens* translated into Zemblan by his uncle Conmal, the Queen's brother" (Nabokov 1989, 125).<sup>3</sup> A further connection is established by the added detail that the passageway goes under three transverse streets in the Zemblan capital: Academy Boulevard, Coriolanus Lane, and Timon Alley (126).

When the king opens the closet thirty years later, this time as a prisoner in his own country and desperate for escape from the palace in which he is being held against his will, he finds the closet empty except for the "tiny volume of *Timon Afinsken* still lying in one corner" (Nabokov 1989, 128). Later that same night, removing the shelves of the closet so that he can escape through that passage in utter darkness, "an object fell with a miniature thud; he guessed what it was and took it with him as a talisman" (132). This object, of course, is the Zemblan translation of *Timon*. The king discovers also that the secret passage opens into the green room of the theater, where he is rescued by the actor Odon, one of his supporters, and whisked away in a narrow escape down Timon Alley. We find later that this is, indeed, the only book with which the king escapes, and it

is also the only book that Kinbote seems to have in his mountain retreat where he works on the edition of Shade's "Pale Fire" after the poet's death.

### The Misanthrope

As this escape passage shows, the connections between *Timon* and *Pale Fire* are not limited to the title phrase and metaphors associated with stealing light. One of the most intriguing points of comparison, unnoted by others who have written on *Timon* and *Pale Fire*, has to do with a key element of Kinbote's personality: his flamboyant homosexuality, coupled with a persistent misogyny. His first childhood discovery of the secret passageway is told against the background of his relationship with Oleg, Duke of Rahl, with whom he has recently shared a bed as well as his earliest sexual encounter. When the two explore the tunnel that leads to the green room, they never get as far as opening the door into the theater because they hear "Two terrible voices, a man's and a woman's, now rising to a passionate pitch, now sinking to raucous undertones" (127), followed by the woman's shriek and a silence. Horrified by this inexplicable threat of heterosexual lust, the boys retreat immediately to their own room, where they lock themselves in because "the recent thrill of adventure had been superseded already by another sort of excitement" and "both were in a manly state and moaning like doves" (Nabokov 1989, 127). This initial homosexual experience for Charles II is the start of a series of escapades with young boys that persists throughout his kingship and continues on the other side of the Atlantic, where Kinbote entertains numerous ping-pong playing boys and employs a young muscular Negro gardener.

As Brian Boyd notes, the escape passage juxtaposes the colors red and green, associating red with homosexuality (the fugitive king accidentally puts on a red suit in the dark, which makes him dangerously visible) and green with heterosexuality (the green room where the actress Iris Acht had carried on an affair with Charles's grandfather, Thurgus the Third, which was the reason for the passageway in the first place).<sup>4</sup> Many of the heterosexuals in *Pale Fire* are associated with green, such as a resident of New Wye named Gerald Emerald, who resists Kinbote's advances and is scornful of the Zemblan king, whom he derides as "quite the fancy pansy" (Nabokov 1989, 268).

Kinbote's homosexuality seems to go hand-in-hand with his misogyny. He is unable to accept the advances of any woman, whether it be Fleur (the daughter of a countess who attempts to seduce Charles when he is a prince), a mountain girl he encounters during his escape from his kingdom, or his own wife Disa (all of whom are associated with greenery). His attempts to sire an heir are futile because "the anterior characters of her unfortunate sex kept fatally putting him off" (Nabokov 1989, 208). With this attitude in mind, it is no surprise that Kinbote develops a vehement hatred for Sibyl Shade, the poet's wife, of whom Kinbote is intensely jealous, for he can understand neither

her protective attitude toward her husband nor the poet's affection for his helpmate. To Kinbote, Sibyl is a "spider" and an "impossibly rude hostess" (162) who disliked and distrusted Kinbote from the first time she met him (171). Despite the fact that he characterizes his relationship with Shade as spiritual, when Sibyl is absent Kinbote feels like "a lean wary lover taking advantage of a young husband's being alone in the house" (287). He insists that Shade was "mortally afraid of his wife" despite the fact that the "Pale Fire" poem shows nothing but tenderness toward her.

Interestingly, *Timon* is the play that includes the fewest lines for women of any Shakespearean play. The only female characters are a group of dancers dressed as Amazons (part of the entertainment in act 1, scene 2), and two whores named Phrynia and Timandra who travel in the company of the Athenian captain Alcibiades (act 4, scene 3). Timon's world is one dominated entirely by men; his lavish parties, designed for male friends such as Alcibiades, whom he showers with gifts, are a model of homosocial bonding. Although Shakespeare's play does not hint that Timon and Alcibiades have the type of relationship that Marlowe's *Edward II* and *Gaveston* do, the associations between Alcibiades and homosexuality were well-established in the classical texts and certainly known in early modern England. Plutarch, for instance, described Alcibiades as a beautiful young warrior who was Socrates' friend and lover. Act 3, scene 6 of *Timon of Athens* shows Alcibiades arguing on behalf of a young soldier who has killed a man in a rage; his passionate attachment to the soldier (who is never seen in the play) is suggestive of a male-male relationship. The Athenian captain sues for this soldier's release and finds his desperate plea ignored by the senate; the result is Alcibiades' banishment, during which he, Coriolanus-like, seeks revenge by raising an army and laying siege to his home town. Like Alcibiades, Coriolanus is often associated with homosexual longing (signaled by his admiration for his rival soldier Aufidius, his overbearing mother, his conflicted feelings for his wife, and even his name). Thus, the mention of Coriolanus Lane alongside Timon Alley in Nobokov's book brings these associations close together — these are the plays of Shakespeare that well might be the most attractive to a man like Charles/Kinbote, who is as repelled by women as he is attracted to men.

When he leaves Athens and retreats to the woods in his misanthropic rage, Timon curses everyone, taking a particular pleasure in the curses that he bestows upon Alcibiades' whores (who are, inexplicably, traveling with him on his way to sack Athens). Like many Shakespearean characters, Timon associates women with rampant sexuality and the spread of disease. But nowhere do the curses reach the same height as they do in 4.3, when Timon addresses Alcibiades' companions. He gives them money, telling them, "Hold up, you sluts, / Your aprons mountant" (*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.134-35) and encourages them to continue their trade so that they can corrupt the Athenian society with venereal disease: "Consumptions sow / In hollow bones of

man, strike their sharp shins / And mar men's spurring" (150-52). The only use to which women can be put is the destruction of the male society in which Timon once reveled.

Unexpectedly, the names of these two whores turn up in Kinbote's commentary when he discusses his conflicted feelings for his queen, Disa. Although he cannot feel any passion for her, he does feel a deep tenderness, describing their love as "an endless wringing of hands, like a blundering of the soul through an infinite maze of hopelessness and remorse" (Nabokov 1989, 210). He repeatedly swears that he will not cheat on her, but finds himself carnally drawn to men again, speaking of them as "prickly-chinned Phrynica, pretty Timandra with that boom under her apron" (210). Adopting the names of Alcibiades' female whores to refer to Charles/Kinbote's male whores is a curious detail added by Nabokov. The sexualized androgyny in Kinbote's description highlights both Alcibiades' supposed homosexuality and the all-male nature of the early modern theater. For Kinbote, it is always the males who are pretty and desirable, and the female body is discomfiting and dirty. He laments that once when he went away, his resident lover had spent the week with "a fiery-haired whore from Exton who had left her combings and reek in all three bathrooms" (26-27). The invocation of Phrynica and Timandra in Kinbote's narrative reinforces the connection between *Timon* and *Pale Fire* — not just in terms of the overt references, but in terms of the thematic connection between the two works with regard to homosexuality and misogyny.

Both Timon and Kinbote distrust and are repelled by females, but find themselves shunned by males. Kinbote's strangely tender meeting with his wife in Nice before he completes his journey to North America can be read in light of Timon's meeting with his faithful steward Flavius in the wilderness (whom Timon characterizes as womanly because he sheds tears).<sup>5</sup> Both men realize on some level that an extraordinary kindness is being extended to them, but in both cases it is not enough. Timon dismisses Flavius' honesty with the bitter comment that the one honest man in the world is only a steward (*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.493). Similarly, Disa's love for Kinbote is not enough because she is a woman; he ignores her comment that she could come visit him in New York, compliments her on her hairdo, and whispers, "I must be on my way" (Nabokov 1989, 214).

### The Epitaphs

Kinbote's and Timon's stories do indeed share a similar shape: a man at the top of his glory is eventually cast down, finding himself friendless and in exile. This similarity is noticed by Kinbote, who not only ruminates on his tiny edition of *Timon*, but fashions himself as an outcast living, like Timon, in a "bookless mountain cave" (Nabokov 1989, 194). Such isolation and misanthropy become, in both works, a kind of madness. Kinbote harbors fantasies of all sorts, leaving the reader to question his sanity. He seems to suffer from persistent delusions of grandeur, a conviction that

he was Shade's closest friend, and a demented belief that the bullet which kills Shade was intended for him. The characters around Kinbote also recognize his unstable and intractable personality. As one of his colleagues at New Wye puts it, "You are a remarkably disagreeable person. I fail to see how John and Sybil can stand you . . . What's more, you are insane" (25).

Timon's misanthropy is also connected to a loss of sanity; he digs for roots in the wilderness and greets his visitors with a long strain of curses, sometimes giving up on words and throwing rocks and medlars instead. When the wilderness to which he retreats becomes populated by his visitors, he cannot endure the situation any longer, so he resolves to die and thus finally escape the society that has caused him unbearable suffering. His cause of death is unknown, but the implication is that he kills himself, for he even carves his own epitaph before he dies. Yet ultimately the death remains a mystery, for we have no body and no witness to Timon's final moments. A similar mystery surrounds Kinbote at the end of *Pale Fire*. Suicide has already been established as a key thematic point because of Shade's daughter Hazel, who drowned herself after being shunned on her first date (an episode that serves as the ending to canto 2, the center of Shade's poem). Kinbote expresses admiration for Hazel's desire to take her own life, escaping the squalor of this world: "We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins" (Nabokov 1989, 222). As many critics have suggested, the probability that Kinbote will also take his life at the end of this work is quite high.<sup>6</sup> Like Timon, though, he provides us with neither the certainty of his death nor the satisfaction of finding his body (in sharp contrast to the vivid description of Shade's fallen body on Kinbote's lawn).

An added piece of evidence that Kinbote might take his own life is that the name "Kinbote" presumably means "regicide" in Zemblan (Nabokov 1989, 267), and thus Kinbote is set up to be his own (Charles's) killer. The phrase "king-killer" also passes Timon's lips when he directly addresses his now useless treasure of gold. He characterizes the gold as a "sweet king-killer and dear divorce / 'Twixt natural son and sire" (*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.377-78). This happens at the point when Timon is speaking about carving his own epitaph:

Then, Timon, presently prepare thy grave:  
Lie where the light foam of the sea may beat  
Thy gravestone daily; make thine epitaph,  
That death in me at others' lives may laugh. (4.3.373-76)

This premeditation shows the ways in which Timon was also his own king-killer. Kinbote, the killer of himself as Charles, was also, as was said of Shade, "his own cancellation" (26).



Timon's epitaph is the most curious aspect of the play, for a soldier discovers it in the woods, seeming to read it there:

*Timon is dead, who hath outstretched his span,  
Some beast read this, there does not live a man. (Timon of Athens, 5.4.3-4)*

The soldier then claims he cannot read the language in which the epitaph is written, so he takes a wax impression and presents it to Alcibiades, who reads the epitaph at the end of the play. Or rather, he reads *both* versions of the epitaph, which contradict one another:<sup>7</sup>

*Here lies a wretched corpse, of wretched soul bereft.  
Seek not my name. A plague consume you wicked caitiffs left!  
Here lie I, Timon, who alive all living men did hate,  
Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass and stay not here thy gait. (5.5.70-71 )*

Scholars have suggested many reasons for these contradictory epitaphs, which both come from Plutarch, but are presented there as the work of two separate authors; the general agreement is that Shakespeare had intended to omit one of the epitaphs in performance, but what we have is a text that reflects a moment prior to that decision.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, if Timon's objective was, as he says above, to use his death to laugh at others, he has some measure of success. In the case of Shakespeare's most famous tragic hero, Hamlet, we know exactly how he dies, hear his final words, see his body on stage, and witness the acclamation of his life. With Timon, on the other hand, we do not know the cause of his death, do not know that his final words are final, have no presentation of the body or suggestion that it has been found, and listen to two epitaphs (or three?) that are contradictory about whether Timon will reveal his name, yet share a common desire to curse us. Timon is like a cenotaph, laughing far beyond the grave.

Now the tantalizing question emerges: did Kinbote leave an epitaph? During a discussion among the faculty of New Wye about the vanished Zemblan king, one professor pronounces, "History has denounced him, and that is his epitaph" (Nabokov 1989, 266). Yet we know that the most remarkable epitaph that Kinbote leaves is *Pale Fire* itself, with all of its word games, complex interwoven patterns, and contradictory versions of a story. Though we are left uncertain whether the author is Kinbote, Botkin, or Shade himself, regardless of the theory, the dead manage to keep speaking. This poem was presumably intended to be 1000 lines long and ends at line 999, but despite the fact that Shade dies, Kinbote allows the "Pale Fire" poem to have a voice (albeit a bizarre one). And if Kinbote is about to die, it will not be without having the last laugh of publication. Shade's remark near the end of the poem — "I'm reasonably sure that we survive / And that my

darling [i.e., Hazel] somewhere is alive" (69) — seems at first glance to be contradicted by his sudden death on the very day he writes these lines, but there is ample evidence that Hazel speaks throughout the poem.<sup>9</sup> No matter who the author is (ultimately, of course, Nabokov), the work is filled with poltergeists, visions of the afterlife, and communications with the dead. Like Shade's poem that discusses the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter (IPH), Nabokov's book stands as a testimony that death is anything but silence.

### The Variants

I would like to conclude by making some comments on how the complex interplay of Shakespearean texts within *Pale Fire* can help us to understand the afterlife of *Timon*. Although the title of Nabokov's book undoubtedly points, at least in part, to *Timon*, there is another possibility that critics have suggested for the source of the title. Priscilla Meyer notes that there is a "pale fire" turn of phrase in *Hamlet* as well, when the ghost bids his son farewell: "The glow-worm shows the matin to be near, / And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.89-90). Critics have effectively shown that the verbal echo is not accidental, for *Pale Fire* includes key allusions to a "glow-worm" (i.e., firefly).<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Meyer takes this connection to an extreme: "Nabokov embeds hints in Kinbote's commentary that point to *Timon of Athens* as the source for the title of Shade's poem. But just as Kinbote's Zemblan etymologies conceal Nabokov's, Nabokov's clues lead to a false bottom that conceals his own purposes. Shade's "Pale Fire" may come from *Timon*, but Nabokov's *Pale Fire* comes from *Hamlet*" (Meyer 1988, 113).<sup>11</sup> The assumption that *Hamlet* must be the "real" source while *Timon* is just a decoy seems to me entirely misguided. *Timon* is no more of a false bottom than *Hamlet*; the point is, and always was, that texts shadow and reflect one another, and sometimes the light might come from unexpected sources. Furthermore, if *Hamlet* was the "source" of the first "pale fire" phrasing, it must also be relevant that Shakespeare was in effect stealing from himself when he wrote *Timon* several years later. Just after *Pale Fire*'s publication, Nabokov articulated the essence of his philosophy: "You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (quoted in Boyd 1999, 5).

It is precisely because *Timon* is an unlikely Shakespearean source with a limited afterlife that its presence in *Pale Fire* strikes us as so unusual and provocative. As I have already shown, the connection between these two works goes far beyond what others have assumed, particularly in the mirrored characters of Kinbote and Timon. When Meyer claims that "The 'pale fire' of *Timon of Athens*, a hermit in his cave in exile from his kingdom, has no relevance to Shade's poem about

family love, loss, and death" (Meyer 1988, 132), she first fails to recognize that *Timon* is certainly about loss and death, and second, discounts the fact that Kinbote's story is, as he himself notes, an interesting echo of Timon's. We cannot privilege the *Hamlet* connection over the *Timon* connection any more than we can privilege the Shade poem over the Kinbote commentary. Instead, we are prompted to ask about these two plays, with Calinescu, "Why does one of them occupy perhaps the most peripheral place in the Shakespearean canon, while the other holds perhaps the most central one?" (Calinescu 1993, 128).

The "pale fire" of *Timon* and the "pale . . . fire" of *Hamlet* are, in essence, variants of one another, which is appropriate, given the emphasis upon variants in Nabokov's work. Kinbote's index contains an entry entitled "variants," in which he cites the passages for which he has given Shade's earlier versions of particular lines. The first example is the variant that prompts Kinbote to cite the sun/moon passage from *Timon* in his Zemblan translation. Kinbote later informs us that at least one of these variants was wishful thinking, so he composed his own lines and presented them as one of Shade's own variants; despite this confession, however, Kinbote refuses to return to the earlier place in the commentary and omit this spurious passage. Kinbote's index and editorial practice point to different kinds of variants — not just the instances when an author revises his own text, but also when an editor corrects what he considers to be spurious readings. In the case of *Pale Fire*, of course, the editor eventually becomes so intrusive that the work gives us the illusion of having two authors. What we also learn from reading Shade's "Pale Fire" is that some "variants" are actually errors in the publication process. Shade encounters an instance of this when he has a near-death experience and sees a great white fountain; later he seeks out a woman who wrote of a similar experience, but when he meets her, he finds that her account had misprinted "fountain" when in fact the woman saw a "mountain" (Nabokov 1989, 62). Nabokov constantly reminds us that the text is in a state of flux, dependent on the writer's revisions, the scholar's editing, and the audience's re-reading.

Such a reminder gives us an excellent occasion to think of the peculiar textual situation of *Timon*. Although the play exists in only one copy (the 1623 Folio), it is a text that is co-authored (with Thomas Middleton), probably unfinished, and full of what seem to be errors.<sup>12</sup> Because *Timon* has only one authoritative source text, but inconsistencies in character names, entrances announced hundreds of lines before they occur, and multiple epitaphs for the protagonist, editors of this play are placed in the position of realizing that if they emend the text they are departing from what is actually printed in order to conjecture what may have originally been written or intended — a ghostly process, indeed. Luckily most editors are not subject to the lunacy that plagues Kinbote,

but nonetheless, as an editor of *Timon* myself who has read the commentary notes on most editions of *Timon* ever published, I am particularly aware of how much influence editors have had on the way we read this play.

Because *Timon* is so seldom studied and performed compared to most of the other plays in the Shakespearean canon, its marginalization seems to leave it in the perpetual place of reflecting the light of Shakespeare obliquely.<sup>13</sup> Yet if Shade's sense that "maybe Shakespeare floods a whole / Town with innumerable lights" (Nabokov 1989, 192) is correct, then each point of light can in turn be its own sun. Kinbote's preferred title for Shade's poem, *Solus Rex*, uses a chess metaphor to point to his own story of the exiled king. In addition to "alone," *solus* can also mean sun, which might suggest a sun king,<sup>14</sup> but I prefer to read it as an echo of Timon's soliloquy in 4.3 to the "blessed breeding sun" and our sun/moon passage later in this same scene. This passage, quoted in *Pale Fire* in the original and as a back-translation from a fictional Zemblan edition, can also cause us to pause on the puzzling textual debate over the word "moon." Here is the passage again, in fuller context:

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;  
 The sea's a thief whose liquid surge resolves  
 The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief  
 That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n  
 From general excrement. (4.3.431-37)

Although the word "moon" in line 445 makes sense because it allows for a closed system in which the sun, sea, and moon are all robbing one another, editors have always been perplexed by the logic of the sea dissolving the moon into salt tears. Thus the eighteenth-century editor Lewis Theobald suggested that this word should be emended to "mounds," which destroys the closed system of thievery in lines 441-45, but gestures toward "earth" later in that same line, while also making a bit more sense logically.<sup>15</sup> Although most editors retain "moon," "mounds" is worth considering, or at least worth playing with, as Nabokov would undoubtedly agree. In *Pale Fire*, the invitation to play with the word "moon" appears in reference to Aunt Maud's transmutation: "Moon, Moonrise, Moor, Moral" (Nabokov 1989, 36). And according to Shade, the title "Pale Fire" is itself a "moondrop title" (68).<sup>16</sup>

Like the words fountain/mountain, variants invariably (pun intended) resemble one another in some crucial way. Nabokov's interest in word games — anagrams, word golf, foreign

translations, etc. — brings out the close relationships of linguistic systems. Similarly, people in the book often resemble one another in surprising ways. Shade seems to have been killed by the escaped convict (Jack Grey) who is intending to kill Judge Goldsworth, whom Shade resembles. Charles's escape is successful only because forty of his subjects dress like him and go in different directions to confuse the authorities.<sup>17</sup> These resemblances become all the more important when it is revealed to us that the name Zembla means resemblance (Nabokov 1989, 265). Near the end of the commentary, Kinbote cries in excitement: "He [Shade] was reassembling my Zembla!" (260), which suggests that this closely connected word is also at play. The proliferation of resemblances and reassemblances is a prime example of what Shade refers to as the "contrapuntal theme":

But all at once it dawned on me that 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. (Nabokov 1989, 62-63)

*Timon of Athens* — a shadowy, unfinished, and co-authored play — works very well as a companion piece to *Pale Fire*, itself constructed as a multi-authored, heavily-edited work that undergoes repeated revision. *Timon* is part of the "correlated pattern" to Nabokov's game, while providing more thematic and linguistic material for the book than people ever give it credit for. And thus *Timon* is, against all odds yet all the more intriguing for being a "statistical monster," one of the suns that Nabokov reflects. Furthermore, Nabokov's text invites us to explore with a new sense of purpose the uneven texture of *Timon*, both as it was first printed and as it has come down to us.<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

1. If we believe Kinbote's version of the murder, the killer was Gradus, an assassin hired to kill the last king of Zembla, Charles II (whom Kinbote claims to be). In Kinbote's version, Shade is accidentally hit by the bullet intended for him. A likelier version of the story that emerges is that Jack Grey, a convict escaped from an asylum, goes on a quest to find and kill Judge Goldsworth, who is responsible for his sentencing. Kinbote is renting his place while Goldsworth is away, and Shade (his next-door neighbor) is said to resemble him.

2. For more about the gender switching in this passage, see Meyer 1988, 82 and Calinescu 1993, 129.
3. For more on the character of Conmal and his Shakespearean translations, see Schuman 1999, 172-73.
4. "Redness and homosexuality had been associated with Shakespeare and *Timon of Athens* when Charles, retracing his childhood exploration with Oleg, took that copy of *Timon Afinsken* with him and unwittingly donned scarlet clothes before emerging through a green door in the Royal Theater and thence into Coriolanus Lane and Timon Alley" (Boyd 1999, 167).
5. This meeting is also reminiscent of Richard II's final meeting with his Queen in Shakespeares play.
6. Kinbote recognizes, "Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects" (Nabokov 1989, 193), which further suggests that his end might also be parallel to hers. Boyd 1999, 103-106 discusses other evidence that Kinbote may be planning suicide.
7. The first of these epitaphs is cut from the Arden 3 edition.
8. See the Arden 3 edition of *Timon*, 100-109.
9. See Boyd 1999, Chapter 9.
10. Reflecting upon the moment when he first gains access to Shade's complete poem, Kinbote writes, "For a moment I found myself enriched with an indescribable amazement as if informed that fire-flies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits" (Nabokov 1989, 289). See also Boyd 1999, 77-79.
11. Meyer bases this argument largely upon Nabokov's biography, focusing on his need to avenge his own father's accidental and unjust murder: "In *Pale Fire* [Nabokov] both avenges his father's murder through his verbal assassination of the mentality of political murderers and immortalizes his love for his father in a series of reflections of martyred royalty in history and art. In the process, he recapitulates the history of *Hamlet's* role in literature, beginning before and ending after Shakespeare wrote it" (Meyer 1988, 113). See also Calinescu 1993, 125-27.
12. See the Arden 3 edition of *Timon*, especially 1-18.
13. As Timon says, "All's obliquy" (*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.18). This word seems to be a combination of "obloquy" and "obliquity," though Pope emended the line to "All is oblique" (see Arden 3 *Timon*, 273).
14. See Takács 2002, 99.
15. A few decades later Edward Capell, more concerned with the circularity of the imagery than a plausible misreading of the manuscript, emended this word to "earth."

16. See Meyer, who points out that "The moral of Shade's story may be that he should take the mysteries of the moon and of that Moor [i.e., Kinbote's gardener] with the wheelbarrow to heart, not only to improve his art but as a matter of life and death" (1988, 133). Calinescu points out the broader importance of textual play within *Pale Fire*: "This kind of sophisticated literary game . . . aims at persuading the reader to constantly reread and playfully reconsider the text from a variety of new perspective suggested by the text itself" (1993, 125).
17. This tactic is, of course, also used in the battle of Shrewsbury in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.
18. I would like to thank Mark Bayer for co-organizing the Shakespeare Association of America seminar that inspired this paper, Tony Dawson for so many conversations about Timon's epitaphs, and Michael Sexon for always giving me reasons to return to Nabokov.

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