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WHO'S SPEAKING IN ARCADY? THE VOICES OF DEATH, DEMENTIA, AND ART IN NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE*

Charles Kinbote, the self-appointed editor of John Shade's poem "Pale Fire," returns twice in his Commentary to a formula familiar from art history, the theme of the *Et in Arcadia ego*. At first, he renders the Latin as if it were Death's own speech, etched into a tomb: "Even in Arcady am I, says Death in the tombal scripture" (*Pale Fire* 174). Later in his critical apparatus, our narrator remarks in parenthesis: "Even in Arcady am I, says Dementia, chained to her gray column" (237). Nabokov refers explicitly to this epitaphal formula and meticulously cites his source for understanding its meaning in a letter to Edmund Wilson from 1957 (several years before the publication of *Pale Fire*). "My source for understanding *et in Arcadia ego*, meaning "I (Death) (exist) even in Arcady," is an excellent essay in Erwin Panofsky's *The Meaning of the Visual Arts*, Anchor Books, New York, 1955," he writes (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 320).[1] Retracing

[1] A recent trend in Nabokov studies has been to look at Nabokov's knowledge of and allusions to art history, especially painting. See Gavriel Shapiro, *Nabokov at Cornell* (New York: Cornell UP, 2003), esp. 242 on early Netherlandish painting in *Pnin*, which notes Nabokov's familiarity with (and fondness for) Panofksy's work. For a more in-depth analysis of Nabokov's relation to the visual arts by the same author, consult Gavriel Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio: Nabokov and Painting* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009), in which artists spanning from the Old Masters to contemporary German expressionists are considered. Also see Gerard de Vries and Donald Barton Johnson, with an essay by Liana Ashenden, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006), esp. "*Pale Fire* Zemblematically" 67-87, for an analysis of the painterly references in *Pale Fire*, including "two expressions which are steeped in pictorial traditions, 'Father Time', and 'Even in Arcadia am I'" (77). The authors suggest Panofsky's writings on these motifs are probable sources for Nabokov.

Nabokov's literary tracks – "reading" the "code" of footprints "pointing back" in the snow, to borrow from Shade's poem, ll. 21-4 – we find Panofsky's "*Et in Arcadia ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition." This essay, a revised version of a paper first published in 1936, analyzes three famous paintings of the theme – the first by Guercino (*fig.* 1), the other two by Poussin (*fig.* 2 and 3).[2] Nabokov seems to have had this specific cycle of paintings in mind when he invoked the sentence of the *Et in Arcadia ego*.

Fig. 1. Il Guercino [Giovanni Francesco Barbieri], *Et in Arcadia Ego*, c. 1618-22, Galleria di Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

[2] Like Poussin, Panofsky worked on two versions of the *Et in Arcadia ego* theme, although Nabokov cites the more famous reprisal from 1955. For the original, cf. Erwin Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia ego*: On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau," *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Patton (New York: Harper, [1936] 1963) 223-252. In their evolution, the respective projects of artist and art historian seem strangely mirrored. According to Panofsky, Poussin's first Arcadian painting (intended as a companion piece to his moralistic *Midas Washing His Face in the River Patroclus*) confronts the viewer with the vanity of worldly things and the inescapability of his or her own death. In contrast, Poussin's second and final version, "standing by itself," breaks with this medieval tradition of temporal terror (312). Not dissimilarly, Panofsky's original essay follows the sentence of the *Et in Arcadia ego* to a pessimistic conclusion—it leaves its reader with the description of Watteau's *Gilles*, a "self-revelation" on the part of the artist depicting "a lonely figure…facing the only non-transient reality he can accept, namely the void" (252). Panofsky's 1955 revision, on the other hand, traces the development of the theme not to Watteau but to Fragonard, whose drawing appears to replace all-conquering Death with all-conquering Love.

What might our author have learned from Panofsky's treatment of this particular art historical motif, and how might his understanding reflect itself within the pages of *Pale Fire*? The shadow of the *Et in Arcadia ego* epitaph seems to run over the entire novel, from poem to index. Shade and Kinbote, each in their turn, thematize the problem of mortality and loss, the haunting of life by death. The sudden and unprecedented appearance of Dementia in Arcady, however, opens up new possibilities for interpretation. Seeming to channel some of the lessons of Panofsky's second essay, Nabokov's *Et in Arcadia ego* theme may be seen to gesture in a double way: it reinforces a deceptively simple reading of death's finality, and at the same time points towards the shadow of a hope.

Fig. 2. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds (Et in Arcadia Ego)*, c. 1627, Collection of the Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth (Derbyshire).

Fig. 3. Nicolas Poussin, *Arcadian Shepherds (Et in Arcadia Ego)*, c. 1636-8, Musee de Louvre, Paris.

Panofsky builds his discussion of the *Et in Arcadia ego* motto around a kind of philological puzzle: to whom or what does that nameless, featureless *ego* of the literary formula refer? In Guercino's painting, it must be to the allegorical figure of Death, emblematized by the maggoty skull sitting atop its monument and attended by a fly and mouse, "popular symbols of decay and all-devouring time" ("*Et in Arcadia ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac tradition" 307). The same attribution holds true for Poussin's painting of 1627, where a symbolic skull perches on the upper ledge of a sarcophagus—though smaller this time, not so much the skeletal face of Mortality as an object in a *nature morte*, perhaps. In Poussin's canonical painting from the late 1630s, however, the

talking death's-head holding forth on its rotting masonry disappears as if into the tomb itself. It seems to surrender its speech to the deceased person interred therein; the personified voice of Death warning, "Even in Arcady am I," is made over as the prosopopoetic voice of a defunct Arcadian calling from beyond the grave, "I, too, was born, or lived, in Arcady." By Panofsky's gloss, the thoughtful shepherds of Poussin's final work "are not so much warned of an implacable future as they are immersed in mellow meditation on a beautiful past," so that the "dramatic encounter with Death" shown on Guercino's thunderous canvas shades into "a contemplative absorption in the idea of mortality" (313). In short: "what had been a menace has become a remembrance" (317). Yet as Panofsky also argues, Poussin's new reading—literally silencing death—actually represents a grammatical *misreading* of the Latin formula: "Poussin himself, while making no verbal change in the inscription, invites, almost compels, the beholder to mistranslate it by relating the *ego* to a dead person instead of to the tomb, by connecting the *et* [too, also] with *ego* instead of with *Arcadia*, and by supplying the missing verb in the form of a *vixi* or *fui* [I lived, was] instead of a *sum* [I am]" (316). We have something resembling an art historical equivalent of John Shade's mountain/fountain mistake: "Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!" (l. 803). Nonetheless, as in Shade's case, such a textual error does not illegitimate the vision it subtends.

Panofsky shows how Poussin's a-commonsensical, anti-syntactical reconfiguration of the inscription ends up outlasting the significance of the original, *textual* sense. So the essay concludes with a drawing by Fragonard, which depicts (with typical rococo extravagance) the souls of two departed lovers embracing within a sarcophagus that explodes around them (*fig.* 4).

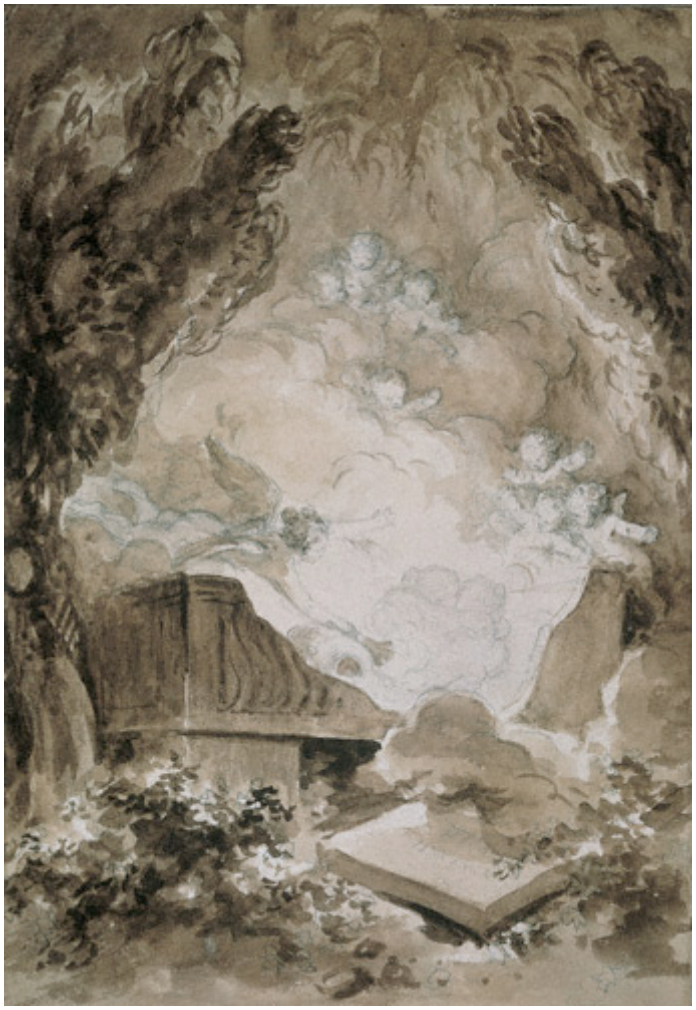

Fig. 4. Honore Fragonard, *The Kiss* (drawing), c. 1785, Albertina, Vienna.

The open tomb erupts in light, revealing an overturned urn from which the lovers' spirits spill, almost genii-like, their faint, black-chalk silhouette emerging as if out of a cloud of ash (*fig. 4*). Fragonard explodes the iconography of the theme: the *memento mori* breaks apart to pour forth a surprising, spiritual hope. A leaning stand of cypresses darkly frames—indeed seems to loom over—the tomb; but if this traditionally funereal flora evokes a cemetery, it also calls up the amorous garden settings of Fragonard's allegories of love. As Panofsky writes, "The development has run full circle. To Guercino's 'Even in Arcady, there is death' Fragonard's drawing replies: 'Even in death, there may be Arcady'" (320). Perhaps we can find in this evolution of the *Et in Arcadia ego* away from its textual origins some premonition of Shade's "contrapuntal theme…not text, but texture" (l. 808). Text relies on conventional structures of sense-making, like grammar and syntax.

Texture, on the other hand, designates that quality given by the combination or interdependence of parts and relates to the overall feeling of the work (almost in a physical sense, as in the grain of fabric or the tooth of paper). Whereas text is verbal, a question of language, texture seems more closely linked to the tactile and the visual—to spatial rather than sequential thinking. Even when we speak about the texture of a poem or novel, we are using the term metaphorically to express shades of meaning, subtle degrees of connotation and allusion, beyond the scope of lexis and grammar. While Guercino's image foregrounds the letters of the *Et in Arcadia ego* epitaph, engraved legibly on the outward face of the stone, Poussin's famous Louvre picture *effaces* the text. Here, the words are only partially legible on the sarcophagus which itself slants away from us, projected into perspectival space. Finally, the literary phrase dissolves entirely in Fragonard's drawing (variously titled, its many names run the gamut from *The Kiss* to *The Tomb*), a work that doesn't technically belong to the cycle Panofsky discusses, but which nonetheless flows out of what Panofsky calls "the new meaning of Poussin's composition" (316).[3] Poussin "did violence to Latin grammar," Panofsky claims, but revived from this deconstruction a *pictorial* (spatial) vision with a new meaning and a utopian promise (316).

Nabokov's variation on the *Et in Arcadia ego* theme similarly pivots around the formula's attributional ambiguity. Who speaks? At first, Kinbote imputes the "I" to Death and identifies Death with Gradus. It all looks fairly straightforward, a traditionally gloomy *memento mori*: Kinbote seems to channel Guercino's threatening—and grammatically correct—message when he writes, "Even in Arcady am I, says Death in the tombal scripture" (*Pale Fire* 174). Since the passage introduces a description of "the activities of Gradus in Paris," it explicitly links the figure of Death to Gradus, the "would-be regicide" whom Kinbote imagines flying closer to New Wye at the same moment that Shade pens his line about "the idyllic beauty of airplanes in the evening sky" (174). Here Kinbote personifies Shade's ever-nearing death in the figure of Gradus, who moves in parallel with the writing of the poem and in fact seems to slipstream the very "sweep of verse," becoming part of its

[3] Panofsky cites the name of the drawing as *The Tomb*, rather than *The Kiss* – the title preferred by the Getty, for example. (See *Consuming Passion: Fragonard's Allegories of Love: February 12 – May 4, 2008 at the Getty Center*, J. Paul Getty Trust.) Panofsky's choice of caption may be seen to strengthen the somewhat forced connection his essay proposes between Fragonard's drawing and the *Et in Arcadia ego* cycle; for nowhere does this picture include the *Et in Arcadia ego* epitaph, and notably absent, too, are the pastoral cast of characters familiar from earlier iterations of the subject. Fragonard did, however, explicitly treat the *Et in Arcadia ego* theme in his drawing of that name in the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh. For a fuller discussion of Fragonard's Arcadian drawings in relation to Poussin's elegiac masterpiece, see Richard Verdi, "On the Critical Fortunes—and Misfortunes—of Poussin's 'Arcadia,'" *Burlington Magazine*, 121.911 (1979): 94-104+107, esp. 98, 101.

texture (136). We recall Kinbote's earlier annotation to Lines 131-2, in which Shade repeats the opening lines of his poem, the prosopopoeia of the slain waxwing. There he compares Gradus' "flight" to the waxwing's, commenting: "We feel doom, in the image of Gradus, eating away the miles and miles of 'feigned remoteness' between him and poor Shade" (135). For Kinbote going back through Shade's poem after the poet's death, writing out of his own guilt and attempting to make sense of the loss of his friend, "death's fearful shadow," life's dread counterpoint, overcasts Arcady from the start (96). Thus, Kinbote reads Gradus into Shade's opening image, attributing to *him* the waxwing's "I," so that now the very voice of the poem seems to speak Death's imminent approach.[4] Had he read his Panofsky, Kinbote would have known that the shadow of Death is no stranger to the Arcadian image and scene (*Pale Fire* 96). Virgil's first *Eclogue* concludes, symbolically enough, at the turning point of dusk, when the shepherd Tityrus notices the lengthening shadows of evening: "And longer fall the shadows from the mountains high" (Virgil *Eclogues* I 83, qtd. in Panofsky 301).[5] The rustic poets kill their singing as the shadows fall over the glen in its idyllic beauty; the verse grades to silence on the sun's schedule. Similarly for Nabokov, Gradus, as a figure of Death, more abstractly expresses the tyranny of temporal progression. Only with succession can there be loss. If shadows herald the end of verse-making in Virgil, so in Nabokov the approach of the Zemblan Shadow coincides with a kind of literary death—the death of the poet Shade, the truncation of his poem, "Pale Fire," and the hasty close of the eponymous novel which contains it. Along with the final line of the first *Eclogue,* Panofsky cites the end of the tenth: "Come home, you've had your fill; the evening star is here; come home, my goats" (77, qtd. in Panofsky 301n). But perhaps the preceding line, which Panofsky omits, better suits our present theme: "Let us rise: the shade is often perilous for the singer; perilous is the shade of the juniper tree; the shadows are noxious even to the crops" (ll. 75-6, my translation).[6] *Pale Fire*'s Gradus signifies more than the gradual decay of daylight, though; he emblematizes the relentless and mechanical linear motion of the clock. It seems significant in this context that Gradus is described as a "clockwork man" (152)

[4] Our identification of Gradus with the "shadow of the waxwing" becomes more convincing when we remember Gradus' status as a Zemblan Shadow. As Kinbote constantly reminds us, Gradus belongs to a secret regicidal organization (the Shadows) that commissions the assassination of Charles II. Kinbote calls attention to Gradus' membership in this secretive group in the sentence immediately following.

[5] The liberties allowed by Latin word-order permit Virgil to give the last word to the "shadows," Latin *umbrae*: "Majoresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae" (Panofsky 301).

[6] Surgamus: solet esse gravis cantantibus umbra, juniperi gravis umbra; nocent et frugibus umbrae" (*Eclogues* X 75-6).

built as if out of mechanical springs and coils and recalling the "clockwork toy" that Shade himself refers to as "a kind of *memento mori*" (137).

But how does this fatalistic message of death-dealing time develop and shift when the *Et in Arcadia ego* resurfaces later in the Commentary? The key lies in its assignation. Kinbote observes in his annotation to Line 629: "Personally, I have not known any lunatics; but have heard of several amusing cases in New Wye ('Even in Arcady am I,' says Dementia, chained to her gray column)" (237). The real humor here is lost on Kinbote – the irony that he himself represents the most amusing case of madness in New Wye. In fact, the story of his "favorite case," the Exton railway man, sounds suspiciously to our ear like a cover-up on the part of Mrs. H, a gracious deflection from the real subject of gossip: our very own eccentric professor. On a simple first level, we take "Arcady" as Kinbote's often-repeated sobriquet for New Wye and re-interpret the line as "Madmen are also in New Wye."[7] Yet in a radical move, akin to the disappearance of the skull in Poussin's Louvre painting, Kinbote has here replaced Death by Dementia, chained as if to her own sepulchral monument. On one hand, the detail of the "gray column" creates a semantic chain linking madness and Jack Grey – the lunatic who murders Shade and whom Kinbote, in his own delusion, reinvents as Gradus.[8] This is not just another figuration of Death coming to New Wye, however. The introduction of Dementia to the mix, the re-attribution of the *ego* to madness, complicates but also re-orients the *memento mori* message. In effect, it re-poses the question "probed by many Zemblan theologians" in the first line of this same annotation: "what is the madman's fate" (237)? Dementia in chains may indicate a kind of imprisonment in mortality. But the image is immediately preceded by an assertion "that even the most demented mind still contains within its diseased mass a sane basic particle that survives death and suddenly expands, bursts out as it were, in peals of healthy and triumphant laughter when the world of timorous fools and trim blockheads has fallen far behind" (237). This joyous explosion from the tomb has something of Fragonard's exuberance about it (we can almost hear the rococo cherubic choir).

[7] Cf. 158; 180; 249; 259; 279; 295. According to Kinbote, Gradus takes on the force of reality – becomes a man of flesh and life, rather than a mere automaton—proportionally as he nears Kinbote's New Wye: "I have considered in my earlier note…the particular dislikes, and hence the motives, of our 'automatic man,' as I phrased it at a time when he did not have as much body, did not offend the senses as violently as now; was, in a word, further removed from our sunny, green, grass-fragrant Arcady" (279). In the next sentence, Kinbote further concludes from Gradus' regicidal journey across the Atlantic "that our half-man was also half-mad" (279). Death and Madness seem to be converging on Kinbote's Arcadian refuge.

[8] In her famous review, "A Bolt from the Blue," expanded in "Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," Mary McCarthy identifies Kinbote as the Wordsmith faculty member, Professor Botkin, and Gradus as Grey.

"Even in Arcady am I [Dementia]" now implies that the madman's soul, too, can live on after and in spite of Death; the madman, rather than Death, gets the last laugh.

The Zemblan theology seems to hint that the soul of the so-called madman actually peels off from and outstrips the common herd of souls. The normals turn out to be the real madmen; while the madman's soul ascends to immortality, *they* are the ones left behind in the temporal world, as if "chained" to the drab gray habit of things. But what are the grounds for such a hope? The annotation containing this parenthetical *Et in Arcadia ego* may yield up some contextual clues. Dementia lays claim to Arcady amid a meditation on madness that posits not only the immortal soul of the madman, but also the resemblance or identity of lunatics and poets. In conversation with Mrs. H. (presumably about Kinbote), Shade objects to calling a person mad "who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention" (238). Shade justifies the so-called "loony" – the Exton employee "who thought he was God," for example – as "a fellow poet" (238). The mind that seems mad or demented according to the commonsensical view resembles that of the artist who similarly abandons or distorts everyday reality and substitutes his own imaginative reconstruction.[9] We recall again the image of the waxwing slain with which Shade's own poem begins ("I was the shadow of the waxwing slain…"). The "I" smashes into the "false azure" but "lives on" within this same glass that now reflects its shadow. (Do Poussin's azure skies reflect themselves in this image as well?) In a double beat, the brilliant image in the glass destroys the mortal being and immortalizes it in a new inversionary realm. The glass presents a "topsy-turvical" (l. 809) madman's vision—hanging all the furniture above the grass, making chair and bed stand on the snow. But it is precisely this falsifying or even delusional space of artistic imagination that promises immortality, or a lawn-view in paradise.

Although to the modern reader the name of "Arcady" probably conjures an image of pastoral perfection, Panofsky demonstrates how this commonplace actually represents an artistic fiction, dating back to Virgil's *Eclogues*: "It was, then, in the imagination of Virgil, and of Virgil alone, that the concept of Arcady as we know it was born – that a bleak and chilly district of Greece came to be transformed into an imaginary realm of perfect bliss" (300). Kinbote's Arcady in New Wye – a pseudonymous disguise for New York, where Nabokov lived for a time? – represents a similarly utopian construct, re-invented out of the raw stuff of a craggy and inhospitable reality (the

[9] Compare Kinbote on the phenomenon of Shade's creativity: "John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle" (27).

experience of exile or expatriation common to Kinbote and Nabokov, perhaps).[10] If we read the Commentary alongside Shade's poem, we further see how the figure of Arcadian Dementia may gather to herself both the delusions of the madman Kinbote and the artistic imagination of the poet Shade. Kinbote and Shade thus join Gradus and Grey as potential Arcadian dwellers in the *Et in Arcadia ego*. We find that the waxwing image with which Shade's poem begins (and rightfully ends, according to Kinbote) has a wingspan wide enough to cover Shade, Gradus/Grey, and Kinbote. As Brian Boyd points out, "Kinbote describes himself as a King whose coat of arms includes a waxwing-like bird (C.1-4, 73)" (*Magic of Discovery* 121). The Index to *Pale Fire* provides another clue. Kinbote lists the missing line 1000, "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain," under the entries for "Charles II" (cross-referenced with Kinbote), "Gradus, Jakob," "Kinbote, Charles, Dr.," "Shade, John Francis," and "Waxwings" (306, 307, 310, 313, 315). The "new meaning" of Nabokov's composition emerges from this fluid counterpoint of candidate-voices and the shifting equivalences between them. For if the substitution of Death by Dementia allies death and dementia as doubles or even metonyms (clinically speaking, dementia would mean the death of a personality, the peeling-off of one's own past), it also suggests that the creative imagination of the artist can replace or even *succeed* Death – shunt Death out of the picture and hijack paradise.[11]

The missing piece of the puzzle here is: in what way does the immortal grain of artistic imagination (the "sane basic particle that survives death") resist mortality? The answer, once again, is John Shade's "contrapuntal theme" of "not text, but texture." [12] Shade bases his grounds for

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[10] Kinbote's exile in the made-up American state of New Wye may be seen to stylize or parody Nabokov's own experience as an émigré teaching at Cornell in Ithaca, New York (Boyd, *Magic of Discovery* 79).

[11] Such a peeling-off and reinvention of the past self describes the Zemblan king's exile and disguise, an enterprise Kinbote himself defines as regicide or self-destruction. In fact, as he informs Shade, "*kinbote* means regicide" in the Zemblan language; and in discussion of the translation of his surname, he longs "to explain that a king who sinks his identity in the mirror of exile is in a sense just that" (267). The demented "I" of Kinbote's Commentary would thus double as the voice of the regicide Gradus, the voice of Death. But Shade's dinner-party reconstruction, by which this same process of self-annihilation and reinvention actually becomes quasi-artistic, allows us to read Kinbote's apparently fatalistic comment in a new way.

[12] Multiple studies investigate the suggestion in Nabokov of a genuine aesthetic redemption—art as compensation for or even an escape from the passage of time. John Shade puts his "faint hope" (l. 834) for immortality in the artist's ability to create patterns, analogous to the providential patterning of human fate. Art counterpoints life, the human counterpoints the divine, as the mortal artist models himself on the Creator standing outside of time. Compare Nabokov's autobiographical claim in *Speak, Memory* that "his highest enjoyment of timelessness" involved "a thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the *contrapuntal genius of human fate* or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal" (*SM* 139, my italics). As Michael Wood observes, "Pattern is the redemption of loss, and perhaps the only redemption of loss there is" (*The Magician's Doubts* 94). For more on patterning in the novels signaling a preoccupation with death, fate, and the hereafter, see Leland de la Durantaye, "The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov," *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 35.4 (2006) 301-26; Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden:*

hope in an Otherworld in the ability of a unique consciousness to coordinate the parallel movements of things, and in this way to play God – finding in life "something of the same/Pleasure in it as they who played it found" (ll.814-5). Now even the railway employee who thinks himself immortal (God) and "starts redirecting the trains" has his place within this Shadean scheme. So too the Arcadian world described in the Commentary reveals a contrapuntal texture: within it, Kinbote appends Gradus' movements to Shade's poem as a kind of counterpoint.[13] Gradus serves as Shade's inverse, or counter-melody. In fact, as many commentators have called to our attention, Gradus' name alludes to the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a dictionary intended to help in the writing of poetry as well as Johann Fux's popular 1725 treatise on musical counterpoint.[14] Thus, Gradus becomes not just the allegorical figure of Death, but also a meta-figure for Shade's "contrapuntal" verbal art.[15] Even as Poussin's second composition does "violence to Latin grammar," so too Nabokov's brilliantly invented, total composition—which we must read in a non-linear way, per Kinbote's recommendation in the Foreword—does violence to the grammar of reality, or to the chronologicity of our mortal lives. Within the poem, Shade imagines the hereafter as a timeless realm that "disarranges" linear "schedules" and strings out their elements simultaneously, such that a widower might encounter his first and second wife and dead child all at the same time (ll. 567-588). But the message is hopeful: mortality itself, the "gradual decay" of "spacetime" as Gradus approaches, becomes part of a *texture* created by imaginative art (163). Time becomes texture as Gradus, a figure of linear clockwork time, is spatialized – transformed into a textural element of a fugal composition. Musical counterpoint provides one heuristic key to understanding how Shade's

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Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1988); Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991).

[13] Brian Boyd discusses literary counterpoint as the "hallmark of Shadean style" in *Nabokov's* Pale Fire*: the Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP 1999). Boyd understands the contrapuntal features of Shade's poem "in several ways, on the verbal level, in the counterpointing of sound and sense; on a narrative level, in the synchronization of Hazel's last night out and her parents' night at home; and on the level of idea and intention" (210). Detecting evidence of Shade's combinatorial aesthetic in the Commentary, Boyd's argument goes on to posit Shade as the ghostwriter for the entire novel. The poet after death takes the divine game of counterpointing one step further, helping Kinbote append the Gradus story to his unfinished poem "Pale Fire." See esp. section heading "The Point of the Counterpoint," 218-220.

[14] The *Gradus ad Parnassum* was first mentioned by Mary McCarthy in her article "A Bolt from the Blue," Rev. of *Pale Fire*, *New Republic* 4 June 1962: 21-7. In his persuasive article, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, its structure and the last works of J.S. Bach," Gerard de Vries compares the structure of the novel to "a fugue by Bach: a theme repeated in variegated forms." Nabokov gives the single theme of *Pale Fire* to three "voices": Shade, Kinbote, and Gradus. Gerard de Vries, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, its structure and the last works of J.S. Bach," *Cycnos* 24.1 (2008), accessible online at <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1052>.

[15] There is a telling philological connection between the idea of "texture" and that of counterpoint. By one line of etymology, counterpoint comes down from M.F. *contrepointer*, to quilt, while "texture" derives from the Latin "to weave."

artistic method defies temporal linearity. In playing a melody simultaneously with its reverse ("retrograde counterpoint"), the end of the musical composition contains the beginning and the beginning contains the end. As Julia Bader notes, the Latin word "Gradus" means "step" or "degree," so that *Gradus ad Parnassum* literally translates as "a step to the place where the Muses live" (*Crystal Land* 34).[16] If Gradus' movements betray the orchestration of an elaborate—though botched—assassination plot, they may further represent a step towards Parnassus, that immortal mountain/fountain sacred to the Muses.[17]

In Poussin's Louvre painting, the melodrama of death's self-assertion has mellowed, attenuated, into the chiaroscuro of a shadow cast onto the gray rectangle of the classical sarcophagus by a shepherd who has bent to read its inscription. Another of the three herdsmen in the scene turns to his companions (the viewer now among them) and indicates the tomb. Nabokov – meticulous in his attention to visual detail – may have followed precisely the shepherd's pointing finger, which directs our gaze not to the engraved letters of the tombal text (already half-effaced), but to the outline of his friend's shade on its surface. I am in no way arguing that the painting actually pointed Nabokov in the direction of his as-yet-unwritten character, John Shade. But might there be something of a Shadean theme here? The question of mortality is also the theme problematized in Shade's poem "Pale Fire." Maybe in Poussin's painting Nabokov finds one particle of the answer that he later gives his own character—"not text, but texture; not the dream/But topsy-turvical coincidence." This means, on the painting's terms: not the literal words or content of the epitaph, but some detail that, once seen, reveals the entire interconnected design of things. If the epitaph says, "I too was in Arcady, once" (as Panofsky claims), then the shadow of the shepherd projected onto the sarcophagus is the counterpoint, the Gradus, lurking in the very texture of the painting: for it says that the living shepherds will join their friend in the tomb. It is a secret "link-and-bobolink" between the deceased, invisible within the monument, and the visible shepherds who contemplate it ("Pale Fire" l. 812). But in Nabokov's unique vision, perhaps, this cast-shadow also suggests the existence of a world beyond time, an Underworld or Otherworld of Shades that will persist. As Kinbote sums it up in the Foreword, "our shadows still walk without us" (15).

[16] In music, the term "step" refers to a degree of the staff or of the scale (as in a half or whole step). "Degree" similarly denotes a tone or step of the scale.

[17] Poetically, the Parnassian landscape of inspiration includes both the actual Grecian mountain of Parnassus and the fountain supposedly found among its cliffs, sometimes referred to more precisely as Castalia's fountain or spring (after the nymph who threw herself into its waters to escape lusty Apollo).

This paper argues that Nabokov penned his novel keeping in mind a cycle of specific paintings, or at least their shadowy adumbrations. In fact, Nabokov claimed to hold *his own novels* in mind as if they were paintings—that is, he conceived of his narratives in painterly, spatial form.[18] Writing about his artistic process, Nabokov claimed:

> There comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I can direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. (*Strong Opinions* 32)

The metaphor analogizes novels to paintings, which appear to their author/scribe as shadowy wholes within an imaginary space. The fact that the written work, in finished form, pre-exists its recording amounts to something like a denial of chronological time. For Nabokov, the world of literature chains us to a linear experience of time in part because it demands that we "move our eyes in a special way" – from left-to-right and from row-to-row (*Lectures on Literature* 3).[19] But Nabokov seems to be implying that his own verbal art, *spatialized* here as a picture or painting, enters into this temporality from a timeless, Platonic realm of ideas – that is, from an *imaginary* where things can be apprehended at one glance and in their original totality (the philology of "imaginary" and "imagination," from "image," seems important).[20] And so the creative artist moves his eye any which way he pleases over the pre-pictured surface and takes down the "parts or

[18] Nabokov's poetry-painting analogy may be traced back to another Latin phrase, *ut pictura poesis* [as painting, so poetry] (*VN and the Art of Painting* 13). By a curious mirroring, while Nabokov analogized his writing to painting, Poussin analogized his painting to poetry, drawing especially from Tasso's *Discorsi*. Jonathan Unglaub investigates Tasso's influence on Poussin's aesthetics in *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting: Pictorial Narrative and the Legacy of Tasso* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).

[19] In full, the passage from the lecture reads: "The very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details" (3).

[20] Priscilla Meyer and Jeff Hoffman invoke Nabokov's Platonic conception of reality to explain the play of doubling, mirroring, and inversion in *Pale Fire*—the structural principle this present essay has called "counterpoint." According to the Platonic view, co-opted by the tradition of Romanticism in art, the temporal world represents only a pale reflection of an ideal realm beyond. Priscilla Meyer and Jeff Hoffman, "Infinite Reflections in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: the Danish Connection (Hans Anderson and Isak Dinesen)," *Russian Literature* XLI (1997) 197-222.

particles" in asequential order. The phrase "parts and particles" jumps out, not just for the acoustical reflection it contains (a typically Nabokovian detail of texture), but because the re-assembly of "particles" suggests that the artist's project is more radical than we might think. It may imply the reassembly of an entire *world*, a real space with its own physics, constructed out of the most elementary units. This is something like the Immortal's "game of worlds" to which Shade refers in his poem and which Kinbote, even (or especially) in his mad fantasy of Zembla, seems to enact (l. 819). Perhaps Nabokov's description of his process now bears comparison to the Shakespearean poet's eye "in a fine frenzy rolling" (*MND* 5.1.8-23).[21] We think of the shared imagination of lunatic, lover, and poet. Indeed, Nabokov's non-linear enterprise, with its fluid or oscillatory strategy of seeing, as well as its violence to traditional narrative structure, appears mad, *deranged*; but understood with etymological literalness, "deranged" just means "moved from orderly rows." Nabokov's spatial model of artistic creation compacts the lunatic and the poet, even as the *Et in Arcadia ego* motif—specifically an art historical image, a theme from painting—establishes a common "I" among Gradus, Kinbote, and Shade. *Pale Fire*, with its shifting perspectives, rolls back and forth between madness and the ideal perfection of an Arcady, between the death-bound world of temporality and the timeless refuge of artistic imagination.

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[21] The analogy to Shakespeare gains textual and textural support from the fact that Shade calls explicitly on Shakespeare in l. 962 of the poem ("Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*"). This is another instance of prosopopoeia in which the voice of the famous dead poet seems to answer Shade, as if from beyond the tomb. Defying the conventions of space-time, Shakespeare's voice literally speaks to Shade and offers up the title.

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