Presentation on *Pale Fire*: Projection and Unprojection

In this presentation, I will analyze the role of Gradus in *Pale Fire*. First, I'll propose a system for understanding the work based partially on mathematics, and then I'll apply that system to the enigmatic character. In explaining my system, I'm going to take quite a bit of latitude, but I promise it will return satisfyingly to the text, so bear with me.

In literature, we often speak about projection, which is a **polyvalent** word simultaneously recalling Freudian psychology and, among other evocations, the flat presentation of images on a surface. In mathematics, projection has its own, rigorously defined meaning. It is a function which takes as input a high dimensional space and returns as output a lower dimensional space. A plane may become a point, a cube may become a plane, a hyper dimensional figure may return to three dimensions. In short, an input is compressed into a lower dimensional state where it may more easily be computed, interpreted, and re-interpreted.

However, as a rule, **projection cannot be undone without information about the original not contained solely in the function's output.** One might immediately think of Plato's cave–from the shadow alone, without knowledge of the world there is no hope of recomputing the world which creates the shadow. When we view puppets on a screen, we know there is no mechanism by which the child viewer can recreate the puppet from their shadow—the creepy button eyes, the worn skin, the players behind the mask—unless the child themselves is a puppeteer.

Such is the unique problem and the unique capability of literature as a technology. The process of writing, we might say, is a projection downwards, the satisfaction of a weighty and unstable internal emotion condensed into the single prismatic metaphor which, by nature of the word unit, has a lower dimension than a more literal explanation of that emotion. However, in reading, one is challenged to interpret the polyvalent metaphor, **unprojecting it back into the multidimensional space from which it came, and thereby recovering, reproducing, or displacing, the original projected object.**

In mathematics, the process of unprojection can only occur via an agreed-upon code between the producer and user of a specific instantiation of that process**.** If we have not read *Macbeth*, tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow replanted in a new text cannot recover its existential despair and thus a dimension has been lost. So as students of literature we are intuitively comfortable with not only the presence of a compact between author and reader by which unprojection may occur but also with the constant instability of that compact. Of course some might argue, as Paul De Man does in *Autobiography as Defacement*, that all reading involves writing and all writing involves reading—the instability of unprojection implies the continuous individual creation and prediction of the code which the author must perform when they imagine what the reader will understand and which the reader must perform when they imagine what the

author might have meant. And thus via a lengthy introduction we have reached our novel, and Nabokov.

Nabokov's predecessor's were well-versed in the process of compressing the object into the image, and even, at least as early as in *Jane Eyre*, with the decompressive step, through the miscues and hilarious mistellings which happen anytime an unreliable consciousness is both reader and writer, as we all are in the world. However, Nabokov makes explicit this second decompressive step, separating one consciousness into two, which he does not do in *Lolita*, and which enables something far more unique.

I argue that the technological innovation of this work lies not in the original tale, the depressing relationship between two relentlessly neurotic men, nor the attempt to read Kinbote in his entirety, wherein we must interpret an interpretation and end up caught in Nabokov's vast web. Nabokov does not need, or perhaps even expect, us to interpret Kinbote into an even higher dimensional space. Rather, separating the two consciousnesses enables the reader to analyze the interpretive functions themselves, the solar flare by which the puppet of Shade's life becomes the shadow of his poem, and the reflection of that flare, Kinbote's pale, lunar luminescence in the window, just visible in its snowy, doubled realm, by whose light the shadow has been unprojected back into the world and become something else entirely.

This understanding of *Pale Fire* helps us illuminate the enigmatic Gradus. Gradus is a character full of contradictions. During the commentary Kinbote mocks him relentlessly, designating him into a shadowy mirror role, where he is a clockwork man re-experiencing Charles's fantastical journey, but without any of the whimsy or queerness or humanity and therefore only as a leering joke. However, we notice that in many ways the story of Gradus is the complement rather than the mocking retelling of Charles's story. We know from the Index entry about Charles II (page 306) that Charles travels from the palace to the port, then through Paris, then through Switzerland, visits Villa Disa, and then finally arrives in America—but other than both *ends* of this journey, and his brief visit to Villa Disa, we see nothing of this journey except through the eyes of Gradus. And there is evidence his visit to that Villa is nothing more than a dream. On page 206, Charles's entry into Villa Disa has him simply appear in garlands of shade; soon after on page 210 he describes his dreams of her as both awfully tender, constantly aware of her helpless love for him, and haunted by a confession of his, perhaps to homosexuality. Her begging for him to stay on page 213, which includes the offer for him to "bed here as many as forty guests, forty Arabian thieves," satisfies both dream requirements. And he says on the bottom of 211 that these dreams are finished by his seeing a faint smile of hers in the corner of his eye, but turning to find her not to be there. Indeed, the Villa Disa sequence closes on page 214 with his vision of her as a white figure bending over the garden table, when a "fragile bridge was suspended between waking indifference and dream-love," only to realize that it was not her at all, but Fleur.

All this to say that it is Kinbote's telling of Gradus that creates Charles's own journey from Zembla to America, excluding the actual sections in Zembla and America. At the bottom of page 177, we find out briefly and in parentheses only in a Gradus section that Charles had reclined on that Parisian sofa where Gradus currently sits; later, at the bottom of page 200, we find "*The King was here*" scrawled in charcoal in the lavender villa Gradus both sullies and, perhaps, creates.

And thus, is there Zemblan King Charles without Gradus? Is there Odon to enable that king's escape without Nodo to shuffle and deal the fated, cheated card, as he does on page 150, which sends Gradus after the King? Gradus, then, is the structural support which enables Kinbote's fantasy not only in form and language, as when he slips and slides through caesuras and rhymes, but also in the crucial narrative fiber which allows us to see, and Kinbote therefore to create, his own journey.

This process-based definition of Gradus recalls Bakhtin's definition of heroic creation through the loving bestowal of death which Naiman quotes and interprets in his chapter on Hermophobia. Bakhtin says that "memory begins to act as a gathering and completing force from the very first moment of the hero's appearance; the hero is born in this memory (of his death)... in this sense we could say that death is the form of the aesthetic consummation of an individual" (Naiman 116). Shade's constant preterist tendencies, where he recognizes death in every sloughing moment of his life, builds to this aesthetic consummation, when the *Pale Fire* poem is freed from its earthly container and brought into Kinbote's arms through Shade's murder by Gradus.

Just as a function is both the transportation of a specific input to a specific output, it is also a structure and system which exists outside and agnostic of any input and output. So to is Gradus both the key enabler of aesthetic consummation which in accompanies each line of the poem, carries its prosaic interpretation, and enables its ultimate apotheotic release, but also is itself a frustrating, common, clockwork mechanism which can only be an enabler and never a participant—as we see on page 154, Gradus points out the right instrument and directs the carving, but never himself takes part in the infernal sacrament.

This polyvalent role requires Gradus to exist not only as Gradus the function but as d'Argus, Jacques de Grey, and finally Jack Grey, specific narrative instances of our endless Gradus. The tragic madman Jack Grey is allowed to end, as we are told on page 299, in a gesture of humanoid despair, not a feeble splutter of clockwork. But we know from page 301, the end of the novel, that despite poor Jack's death, our instance's death is not the functin's death, as no matter Kinbote's final destination, no matter the manner of his great sob, no matter the conduct of any future unprojection, a bigger, more respectable, and more competent Gradus will be waiting at the door.