**The Death of The Critic: Barthes’ Royal Treatment in *Pale Fire***

*“Condemn the fashionable device of entitling a collection of essays…with a phrase lifted from a more or less celebrated poetical work of the past”*

- Dr. Kinbote

In *What Is an Author?* Foucault writes, “The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer” (219). This, as we will come to see, is an apt description of *Pale Fire*, in more ways than one. Foucault’s essay, originally given as a lecture in 1969, was a reply to Roland Barthes’s 1968 essay, *The Death of the Author*, which marked a Post-Structuralist turn in Barthes’s career, wherein he writes:

Once the Author is gone, the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is ‘explained:’ the critic has conquered” (521).

Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, published in 1962, may be read as a precursory exploration of Barthes’ idea. Dr. Kinbote’s criticism in the novel, at once thorough and personal (to put it mildly) is a prime example of the “discovery of the Author” cited above (Barthes 521) as he delves deep into Shade’s personal life, and seeks to explain directly, by way of circumlocution, the straight arrow between real life events and the contents of the poem. In doing so, Kinbote’s exegesis is exactly what Barthes rails against. However, Kinbote’s long personal yarn, which critically explains Shade’s text (in the negative Barthian connotation) also helps to destroy the Author (in this case, Poet) by way of its obvious misinterpretation, ironically blaspheming the “Author-God” (Barthes 520). In this way, aided by the incredulity Kinbote’s tale inspires in the reader, *Pale Fire* works as a *reductio ad adsurdum* to the Author-less view wherein the reader is “that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted” (Barthes 521).

Charles Kinbote as critic, in the sense of one who seeks to explain by way of the Author’s “hypostases: society, history, psyche, freedom” (Barthes 521) is hinted at even before the book’s foreword. Nabokov begins with an epigraph from James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson*:

This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave Mr. Langton, of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. ‘Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats.’ And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favorite cat, and said, ‘But Hodge shan’t be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot.’

If the critic is one who finds biography important and Nabokov begins with citing one of the most famous literary biographies, this is a sign the following commentary will be largely biographical. Indeed, Boswell is so synonymous with literary adorer/biographer that the back cover of the Vintage International edition of *Pale Fire* sells the book as consisting of “commentary by Shade’s self-styled Boswell, Dr. Charles Kinbote.” The irony of the epigraph is that John Shade’s “favorite cat”—his magnum opus, “Pale Fire”—will go on to be shot by his own Boswell through severe misappropriation; a misappropriation that reeks of megalomania, or at least, to refer again to the back jacket of the Vintage Internation, “one-upmanship.”

From Shade’s lines “TV’s huge paperclip now shines instead/Of the stiff vane so often visited/By the naïve, the gauzy mockingbird” (Nabokov 35) Kinbote devotes a brief exposition to the phrase “TV’s huge paperclip”, citing an unpublished manuscript poem Kinbote received from Shade’s wife, and from which Kinbote believes “Shade dug out from among his own old papers to what he could use for *Pale Fire*” (Nabokov 95). Kinbote is there supporting the Author, as though realizing Shade referred to an earlier unpublished poem in that line helps uncover the hidden Author-based meaning. However, Kinbote’s note on the word “often” from the very next line is a launching pad into telling his own personal story: “Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring of 1959, I had feared for my life” (95). He goes on for three pages describing his paranoia that political assassins from Zembla, the kingdom from which he fled during a regicidal coupe, would soon kill him. This is Kinbote commenting on one single word from the poem. To claim that such an analysis is the necessary outcome of the Barthian literary picture would be a strawman, but if one exists in a theoretical framework wherein “one could not declare a meaning or referent or truth finally achieved that would not itself be subject to further reference” (Rivkin and Ryan 522) Kinbote’s analysis, understood through fantastic self-referential narratives, may simply be one more referent in an endless regress, none having any more claim than another to “‘theological meaning’ (the ‘message’ of the Author-God)” (Barthes 520).

*Pale Fire* is brimming with similar examples. When Shade writes, “I felt distributed through space and time:/One foot upon a mountaintop” (38) Kinbote comments on the phrase “one foot upon a mountain” by describing his thrilling escape through “The Bera Range, a two-hundred-mile-long chain of rugged mountains, not quite reaching the northern end of the Zemblan peninsula (137). As Barthes tells us, “a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation” (521). In this section on line 149, there are multiple writings (Shade’s verse and Kinbote’s commentary) which issue from several cultures (Shade’s Appalachian, Kinbote’s Zemblan, and in *this* reading, Barthes’s French) as well the writings being in dialogue with each other. Shade’s poem, after all, has been assembled by Kinbote in its current form. And, as Kinbote writes in his foreword, clearly signaling the indispensable importance of the reader (i.e., him), “without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human reality” (28). Kinbote even goes so far as to recommend that one should:

Consult [Kinbote’s own notes] first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture” (28)

Dialogue between writer and reader then, (by which I mean Kinbote, reader of Shade’s poem) is tantamount in *Pale Fire*, as are parody and contestation.

The parody may come through the critical overreach of Kinbote, although it cannot be parodying the Post-Structuralists, as they did not yet exist. The critical fashion of this time period would be the New Criticism, but with Kinbote’s hyper-personal and biographical interest, *Pale Fire* also cannot be parodying that school. Suffice it to say, then, that if this is in any way a parody, it is a highly prescient one, possessing the precognition later found in *The Simpsons*. Critic David Cowart describes the parody thus: “(Nabokov) effects the proleptic parody of a critical methodology not yet in vogue. As Kinbote deconstructs Shade, the reader deconstructs Kinbote” (67). And, it is not as though certain far from accepted but academically fashionable ideals did not exist pre-Post-Structuralism. Kinbote, within Nabokov’s fictional world, offers an unforgiving critique of Freudians, asking, “Do those clowns really *believe* what they teach?” (271). The contestation occurs often blatantly, as when Kinbote refers to Shade’s “execrable pun” (222) or a line of his poetry which “may please a boy” (164) or when he writes “the Gist of the matter…our poet himself missed” before transcribing a debate the two had over theology. In these ways, *Pale Fire* supports a Barthian reading, traversing “the tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture” (Barthes, 520).

However, even as the text does so, it does so while similarly acting out the exact opposite. Kinbote seeks to uncover the hidden meaning imparted by the Author, by way of revealing the Author’s history, personality, and motives, as when, commenting upon line 347 and the words “old barn”, Kinbote goes on for pages, even recreating a short one-scene drama, about the story of Shade’s daughter ghost-hunting in an old barn. The difficulty of accurately describing Kinbote’s efforts is that, ironically, his own motives are opaque. There are three options. Either Kinbote truly is the Zemblan King Charles and everyone else is indeed jealous of him, or else he is completely crazy and is not the king of Zembla—as the “distant northern land” (Nabokov 315) does not exist outside his imagination—or he is completely sane, but is essentially joking; for one reason or another crafting this lengthy eloquent joke.

The line between Kinbote’s insanity and sense-of-humor is very thin. There are times when he shows almost enough self-awareness as to suggest that he obviously does not believe his own story, as when he writes “The whole thing strikes me as too labored and long, especially since the synchronization device has been already worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce” (196). This is ironic, as Kinbote has been writing the synchronization between Shade’s activities and his own and those of Gradus, his would-be assassin, the entire commentary. Or, when Kinbote quotes Shade at a party who at the time was unaware that Kinbote was coming up behind him, Shade seems to be referring to Kinbote: “‘That is the wrong word,’ he said. ‘One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That’s merely turning a new leaf with the left hand’” (238). The word Shade was responding to may well have been *lunatic*, and with Shade’s defense of such lunacy as it being instead a masterful stroke of artistic genius, Kinbote may be vindicating himself. Even here, assuming Kinbote’s recreation of the scene is accurate, one is unsure how much weight to give it. He seems to show such a level of self-awareness that it comes as a relief. He was merely joking this whole time. If not this, then one thinks Kinbote will have a moment where he realizes his delusion. This moment comes most pointedly in his final bit of commentary when he writes “we know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem, a kind of *romaunt*, about the King of Zembla” (296). He was furious that Shade’s poem omitted his epic tales of kings and castles. But then he says that in rereading he started to notice “that dim distant music, those vestiges of color in the air” (297) from Zembla and Shade’s lunacy reappears. Cowart makes reference to “critics who make meaning their first interest projecting their own expectations—sometimes even obsession—onto the text” (80) and this is a fitting description of Kinbote. Kinbote writes on page 86 “I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel” but that is of course what *Pale Fire* is. Because of this instability it is impossible to know just what make of Kinbote, his own name given in the text a sign of his insanity.

“Nabokov seems to be demonstrating the violability of a host text by a guest, including his own text by the critic—Kinbote or Cowart—who desires to engage it” writes Cowart (84). The Barthian literary scholar, mindful of Foucauldian power dynamics and episteme, may here emit an involuntary grimly resigned chuckle. It is no surprise the Author seeks to maintain his status. However, such a scholar should recall that the majority of Nabokov’s novel comes by way of Kinbote’s commentary, suggesting that analysis is as important and creative as the traditional forms of creative writing, and indeed analysis, in some sense, “completes” a work. But this can also mean that analysis, of which Kinbote’s “form of a commentary that mines the host text for those unintended details out of which he can construct a ‘meaning’ at odds with the ostensible one’” (Cowert 82) is the logical end, necessarily must destroy a work to reconstruct a new meaning. Setting aside Kinbote’s commentary as a brilliant novel, would anyone be willing to admit that it actually elucidated Shade’s poem *qua* Shade’s poem in any way? If we lived inside the fictional universe of the novel and bought *Pale Fire* at a bookstore, did it heighten our aesthetic appreciation, help reveal symmetry and beauty, inspire praxis, create or further a discourse, cause us to reconsider power dynamics?

Though it was brilliant in its own right, in this way Nabokov’s text suggest that theoretical criticism may never be able to get to the heart of the work itself, and indeed:

Nabokov, hinting that many a critic is motivated by precisely this ignoble confession of creative importance and envy, anticipates to devastating effect the pretension of a later generation of literary analysts who routinely attempt to place their own necessarily dependent and even parasitic work on the same plane as original works of the imagination (Cowart 81)

Barthes may more or less agree: “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author” (521). And, as Cowart admits, “The irony of course is that Kinbote’s commentary does in fact become part of a literary text larger and richer than Shade’s poem by itself” (81). But again, this comes at the price of Shade’s actual piece. *The Death of the Author* contends this ostensible butchery *is* the actual piece.

The rich ambiguity of Nabokov’s novel makes it impossible to reach a critical conclusion on the criticism therein. If I make briefly resuscitate the Author: “Nabokov once issued a blanket caution to the critic: ‘Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint’” (Cowart 80). Let us not forget Nabokov himself was a professor and a critic, and so was attuned to the sensitivity required in good criticism. In his novel, he presents a picture of a critic gone mad, finding allusions to himself and his fictitious former kingdom where reason dictates there are none. Nabokov therefore offers a parody, “a deconstruction, so to speak, of deconstruction” (Cowert, 67). In this parody, the poet John Shade and his poem “Pale Fire” are metaphorically killed by Kinbote’s commentary: “My work is finished. My poet is dead” (Nabokov, 300). Whether or not this stands in praise of Barthian analysis, or artistically reveals the critic’s own death is, to defer to Barthes, in the hands of the reader.

I conclude with a suggestion for a constant dialectic in criticism; to constantly re-assess and reform ourselves against the equally absurd temptations of intentional fallacy and Kinbotean commentary.Pertaining *Pale Fire* as supporting Barthe’s view, I will call to mind that, if for example, one wanted to prove that the hardworking blue-collar man is somehow better than the starry-eyed songwriter, a reference to the blue-collar-heralding tunes of Bruce Springsteen would not prove the point, as it took the songwriter Bruce to write them. In the same way, if we are to point to Kinbote’s commentary to prove the primacy of the reader in helping to, in some respects, complete a work, we must acknowledge that we are proving this via Nabokov’s art. The Author may be self-referential, but the critic can only be so insofar as he criticizes the Author. We can pretend that what Barthes calls the writer, the shade of the Author, is merely the one born simultaneous with the text, who weaves together these ultimately indecipherable spools of cultural citations and discourses, but it is a flat denial of reality to refuse to acknowledge that it was Nabokov’s “passions, humors, sentiments, impressions” (Barthes 521) which prompted him to create the text by which we may prove his death. Let the dead bury the dead. If the Author goes, so too the critic with him.

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