

Lange, Berndt-Peter

## **Chess as text : Nabokov's Pale fire**

*Brno studies in English*. 1996, vol. 22, iss. 1, pp. [127]-141

ISBN 80-210-1421-0

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104294>

Access Date: 04. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

BERNDT-PETER LANGE

## CHESS AS TEXT: NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE*

### Playing and Games in Nabokov's Prose

Among the great writers of our century, Vladimir Nabokov is undoubtedly the one in whose work playing and games demand most critical attention. In both literal and figurative dimensions Nabokov, from his youth in Russia, the years spent in exile among the Russian community in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s, through to the American and Swiss periods of his career, was preoccupied with playing games. Whether as card or board games, ball games or games involving the use of words, they invariably turned into themes and analogies of art and the writing process.<sup>1</sup> Chess in particular engaged Nabokov's creative interest ever since the early games against his father and other relations in St. Petersburg, Cambridge and Berlin.<sup>2</sup> An imaginary portrait of the Russian émigré community in a Berlin café in the early 1920s that Jewgenij Jewtuschenko has just published shows Vladimir. Sirin (alias Nabokov) involved in solitary study with a miniature set of onyx chessmen pointedly ignoring Viktor Shklovsky at the next table.<sup>3</sup>

Biographically, the composition of chess problems, more than tournament play, was one of Nabokov's serious extra-literary occupations, to be rivalled only by the study of butterflies. In his fictionalized autobiography *Speak, Memory*, the author put the art of chess problem composition on a level with his own poetry, and he deliberately placed the two arts side by side in one book (in *Poems and Problems*).<sup>4</sup> In prose, Nabokov surpasses other modernist writers – T.S.

---

1 L.S. Dembo, "Vladimir Nabokov, An Introduction", *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, VIII (1967), p. 114f.

2 Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years*. Princeton N.J. 1990, *passim*.

3 Jewgenij Jewtuschenko, "Pablo Nerudas Bedingungen", Berlin–Moskau 1900–1950, ed. Irina Antonova u. Jörn Merkert (eds.), München/New York 1995, p.544.

4 Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*. New York 1971 ("Introduction", p. 147.: "Problems are the poetry of chess.").

Eliot, Ezra Pound, Stefan Zweig, Elias Canetti, Louis MacNeice a.s.o.– whose work like his own uses chess imagery. Like Samuel Beckett in his first novel *Murphy*, Nabokov had a strong affinity with the so-called hypermodern school of chess innovators, some of whom – like Aaron Nimzowitsch – he met across the board in simultaneous matches in the 1920s.

Chess not merely pervades Nabokov's writings. The game is used on all levels of textuality: as theme, as symbol, and as structural effect. Brian Boyd's big biography of Nabokov notes the first use of the self mate pattern in the author's early Russian tale "Christmas".<sup>5</sup> (1924. Here as throughout I shall have to use English titles and translations for all of Nabokov's works whatever their original language.) The poem from 1927, "The Chess Knight", is a kind of try-out in miniature format of themes of one of the great chess novels of the twentieth century, *Lushin's Defense*. Among the early novels written in Russian, *Laughter in the Dark* (*Kamera Obscura*), *King, Queen, Knave* and *The Gift* repeatedly draw on chess metaphors. For example, the criticism of a shoddy Soviet chess magazine voiced by Fjodor in *The Gift* complements his biographical and aesthetic critique of the writer Chernishevsky. In a novel like *Invitation to a Beheading*, chess is both a characteristic social activity in the game between Cincinnatus and his executioner Monsieur Pierre, who just cannot bear the idea of losing, and also a symbolic analogy of the author's parodic play with gnostic myth. One of the things that gnostic traditions and chess as signifying systems have in common is that in both signs are combinational and inexhaustible, though finite. One cabalistic tradition that Nabokov seems to have been familiar with is the idea of the cosmos as the aggregate of all possible combinations of letters in all alphabets.<sup>6</sup> Similarly it is by now a standard quote about chess to say that there are more possibilities in just one game of only 40 moves than there are atoms in the known universe.

If anything, the change from Russian to English as Nabokov's main literary means of expression that occurred in 1939 strengthened rather than weakened the employment of chess subtexts in his narrative strategies. It is as if the non-verbal system of chess could be used as an agent of transformation, as a kind of crutch to move about in a new medium. It certainly invades the writer's self-reflexive attitude towards his own text, as in Nabokov's 1963 foreword to the American translation of *Lushin's Defense* where the novel's theme is duplicated by the author's self-perception as reader/translator of his own Russian text:

---

5 Boyd, *The Russian Years*, p. 236.

6 Renate Lachmann, "Mythos oder Parodie: Buchstabenspiele in Nabokovs Einladung zur Enthauptung, in: *Gedächtnis und Literatur. Intertextualität in der russischen Moderne*. Frankfurt/Main 1990, esp. p. 447f.

Rereading this novel today, replaying the moves of its plot, I feel rather like Anderssen fondly recalling his sacrifice of both rooks to the unfortunate and noble Kieseritsky – who is doomed to accept it over and over again through an infinity of textbooks, with a question mark for monument. My story was difficult to compose, but I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a fatal pattern into Luzhin's life and to endow the description of a garden, a journey, a sequence of humdrum events, with the semblance of a game of skill, and, especially in the final chapters, with that of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellow's sanity.<sup>7</sup>

Nabokov's first novel composed in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, has, in its main narrative line, been visualized as a diagram of a chess problem involving a difficult key move and many misguided variants. Likewise, *Bend Sinister* can be analysed as a problem leading to an inexorable checkmate. Similar diagrammatic interpretations have been suggested for *Lolita*, Nabokov's major breakthrough novel in America, which also repeats a blending of sexual and chess imagery that had been a feature of the chess theme in many texts. This is perhaps a consequence of the ease with which the game lends itself to incorporations of the Freudian family romance. *Lushin's Defense* had played on the complex relationship between chess genius and sexual initiation. Its eponymous hero is a typical modern one-sided player who sublimates all energy in his games. He gets drawn into a paranoid vortex as the whole world around him shapes itself into one dominant pattern of black and white squares. Even as he finally commits suicide by jumping from a window, the pavement awaiting his body, in a kind of parody of a self-mate in chess, reassembles into the familiar chess-board pattern. The novel's theme of chess turns into a symbol, along the traditional line of chess as a picture of the game of life and in the shape of a highly specialised figure from chess problem composition. Grandmaster Lushin is unable to cope with "the abysmal horrors of chess" as of life. Nabokov's student from the years as Professor of Literature at Cornell University, John Updike, has pointed to the fashionable kind of chess that Lushin, in spite of the book's title, really finds no defence against.<sup>8</sup> In his match against the brilliant Italian grandmaster Turati Luzhin faces an opening strategy "leaving the middle of the board unoccupied by pawns but exercising a most dangerous influence on the center from the sides."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the opening is a hypermodern one as, characteristically, in the one devised by the Czech grandmaster Richard Réti in the early 1920s. Réti has sometimes been regarded as a model for both Lushin and Turati. Nabokov's thematic use of hypermodern innovations in his prose predates Beckett's *Murphy* equally parodic chess game, complete with annota-

7 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defence*. London repr. 1974, "Foreword", p. 7f.

8 John Updike, "Grandmaster Nabokov", *Assorted Prose*. New York 1974, p. 323.

9 *The Defence*, p. 76.

tions and diagram, by six years. Murphy's central character is rebuked in the bizarre and entropic game's annotations for making a traditional king's pawn's opening move – instead of the knight's jump that his mad adversary Mr. Endon keeps repeating, just as Gyula Breyer, another leading hypermodern chess theorist from the Hapsburg empire, had criticised that traditional opening move as the source of all White's subsequent difficulties.

This parallel between literary texts and hypermodern chess theory can serve as an introduction to the disputed question of Nabokov's status as a writer between literary modernism and postmodernity. Nabokov's place in this discursive field is uncertain, depending, as this usually does, on the definitions and critical evaluations of the terms involved in this debate. While some proponents of postmodernism as both a period concept and one cutting across historical boundaries detect postmodernist features in Nabokov's prose, others prefer to call him a late modernist writer, European modernism being the obvious root of Nabokov's aesthetics, particularly in his formative Russian phase.<sup>10</sup> Still other critics draw the line between modernist and postmodernist elements within Nabokov's various works. Nabokov's American students and pupils have diverged along this divide, Updike keeping to the modernist line, Thomas Pynchon radicalizing the postmodernist traits some see already in Nabokov.

Playfulness and games are significant topics in the postmodernist debate, generally and with particular reference to Nabokov's prose works. The playful dissolution of high modernist art is an important goal of literary postmodernism, the decentring of all totalizing or holistic aesthetics, the parodic undercutting of established forms etc. Similarly, Roland Barthes' idea of "jouissance" is a widely accepted concept in the description of literary effects. Playing a game of chess as text can feed into such conceptions. Here a distinction might help that James Mellard made between two distinct modes of contemporary ludic writing when he distinguishes **game**-oriented from **play**-oriented authors:

The game-oriented writers are those who, like Nabokov, Barth, and Hawkes, take an essentially objective stance toward universe, audience, self, and work. Their fictions tend to be self-contained and, like *Pale Fire*, self-reflexive, a house of mirrors such as Barth adverts to in *Lost in the Funhouse*.... Play-oriented writers, such as Brautigan, Vonnegut, Barthelme, and Sukenick, are much more pragmatic; they emphasize the old values of storytelling, the entertainer's values, the necessity to keep the audience attentive, to move it from moment to moment, to play on its con-

---

10 John Burt Foster, Jr., *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*. Princeton 1993.

ditioned responses to various formulae – of “reality”, of artists and audiences, of literature itself.<sup>11</sup>

The chess connection in Nabokov is surely a factor fixing his place in the first, game-oriented category of writers (not corresponding to the division between modernist and postmodernist writing, it has to be noted). Chess has typically been regarded as an extremely cerebral, controlled, “objective” kind of game with firmly fixed rules. As such it would favour the conscious, clearly focussed construction of texts. And it is precisely this deliberateness that is one of the recurrent motifs in Nabokov criticism, with a wide range of evaluative possibilities. However, the case of Lewis Carroll, who had a similar preoccupation with games and chess in particular, should warn us that an orientation towards games and rules can easily be transformed into playful subversiveness of any kind of text.<sup>12</sup>

### Chess in *Pale Fire*

I would like to look closely at one of Nabokov's major later novels, *Pale Fire*, to discuss the functions of the game of chess in it. Concentration on just one, rather complex, text, might help to highlight the textual role of chess better than any general summary of thematic uses could do. From such a perspective, the chess theme in *Pale Fire* looks fairly peripheral. *Pale Fire* is not primarily a novel about chess. It is that among numerous other kinds of text, as Mary McCarthy pointed out in her enthusiastic review article after the publication of the book in 1962: “*Pale Fire* is a Jack-in-the-box, a Fabergé gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself novel.”<sup>13</sup>

Of the many articles analysing *Pale Fire* since this review in the *New Republic* appeared, not many place much emphasis on the theme of chess. For those that do, the aesthetic value of the game metaphor is questionable. In one view, it detracts from the book's impact and compares badly with *Lolita* in a special way:

“The satisfaction to be derived from [*Pale Fire*], seems largely a cerebral one; it lies in the solving of the puzzle far more than *Lolita* did, perhaps in

11 James M. Mellard, *The Exploded Form. The Modernist Novel in America*. Urbana/Chicago/London 1980, p. 133.

12 Bernd-Peter Lange, “Der Meisterdiskurs: Symbolische Herrschaft in Lewis Carrolls *Through the Looking-Glass*”, *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 18 (1993), 91–125.

13 Mary MyCarthy, “*Pale Fire*” (New Republic 1962), in: Norman Page (ed.), *Nabokov. The Critical Heritage*. London 1982, p. 124.

the contemplation of its meticulous organization as well, but hardly in anything that grips one more deeply.”<sup>14</sup>

Let us look at the puzzle mentioned to see how chess is implicated in it.

On the first of its increasingly vertiginous levels, *Pale Fire* is a parody of an academic edition of a long autobiographical poem written by a poet called John Shade. The poem is composed in rhymed couplets of the type flourishing in English literature between neoclassicism and the Romantics. Shade is a University Professor of English Literature in an Appalachian university town called New Wye, and he specializes in Alexander Pope’s works. His neighbour and colleague at the University, Charles Kinbote, is the ostensible posthumous editor of the 999 lines of the poem whose title is also that of the book. Kinbote contributes a “Foreword”, several lengthy annotations and an appendix. He is also the authority to tell us how the poem was to have been completed by a repetition of its first line:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure of the windowpane.<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between poet and editor serves as the first of the many intertextual injections into the book, since it projects the relationship between Boswell and Dr. Johnson into the setting of what is also a modern campus novel. The poem “Pale Fire” is followed by a long commentary disguised as annotations that tells an entirely autonomous – and also different – story about the King of a North European country called Zembla. He is Charles the Beloved, who is deposed and driven from his country, to be followed by a secret agent called Gradus into his American exile and finally assassinated just after Shade has written the penultimate line of his poem. The plan fails when the killer takes the poet for the King in one of the book’s many ironies. This story about royalty is actually an adaptation of one of Nabokov’s writing projects of the late 1930s. Of the novel planned then, “Solus Rex”, only two parts, both written in Russian, are extant and were incorporated into *Pale Fire*, while the third part concerning games has apparently not survived.<sup>16</sup> “Solus Rex” is a chess motif: the lone black king being chased across the board by the opposing white pieces. Its precise meaning becomes as uncertain, puzzling, as any other identity in *Pale Fire*, as the novel reaches its end in a parodic index to poem and commentary. Every character’s identity, every story told, is contested by alternatives, just as every move in chess calls forth a response that counters its presumable intentions. Charles Kinbote is “in reality” the escaped lunatic Botkin who is an exile from the country Zembla. His native country amalgamates the

14 Laurie Clancy, *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. London 1984, p. 125.

15 Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*. New York repr. 1980, p. 33 (II.1–2).

16 Andrew Field, VN. *The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York 1987, p. 333.

fictional Zembla mentioned in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* and the peninsula known as Novaja Zemlja. He certainly turns into the exiled king at the end of his commentary, so that what looks like a weird biography is made out to be an autobiography. Conversely, Kinbote sees in John Shade's poem a concealed biography of Charles the Beloved that has unfairly been censored by Shade's wife and his academic friends, all hostile to Kinbote's uses of the poet's manuscript that he saved at the killing of the poet. More radically still, there is confusion about the identity of the two narrators. Most commentators on the book agree that there is presumably just one narrator instead of two, the other one being an imaginary construct, as is of course the whole novel. A majority of critics see Shade as the author of the entire text, while some attribute this role to Kinbote.<sup>17</sup>

So, in sum, we have two stories, both in their turn divided against themselves and challenging each other, with two narrators who disagree about the generic status of the stories as either biography or autobiography, and the nature of the entire text runs against the grain of traditional modes of communication in a fictional text. I cannot hope to offer solutions to all the problems of interpretation arising from the novel. It is a bit like the mind-boggling calculation of all possible moves in a chess game. Instead of this, I shall just concentrate on what could be called the basically *agonistic* pattern of the narrative act in *Pale Fire* and its relationship to Nabokov's favourite game.

### **Antagonistic patterns in *Pale Fire***

Using Roger Caillois' classification of basic types of games that has come to be accepted widely in games theory, there is no difficulty in isolating the "agon", the fighting spirit, as the driving impulse in the game of chess. Chess is a fiercely competitive, antagonistic zero-sum game played between two opposed camps. So it comes as no surprise that in yet another work containing paired constellation among its characters, Nabokov should make his narrator/poet John Shade begin the writing of his "Pale Fire" exactly when his academic commentator is playing a game of chess. Equally, both his and Kinbote's narratives end with the only possible solution in a chess problem of the "solus rex" type: with the king's death – even if the king's identity is severely doubtful, and the assassin's victim is the wrong person, if indeed there is a wrong and a right one in a text throwing confusion over all identities.

The poet and his critic are struggling for the true story. In the genesis of the poem "Pale Fire", Kinbote tries to push through his own version, unsuccessfully, of a public story concerning exiled royalty, which in essence is supposed

---

17 Brian Boyd, Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years. Princeton N.J. 1990, pp. 443ff.

to be his own. He can only react to Shade's deviation from his own version by passing comment on Shade's story, expanding on it, falsifying it, and, wherever necessary, pointing out suppressed readings and textual variants that support his own alternative view of the events portrayed. This is a procedure exactly approximating the annotation of a chess game which is also usually monoperspectival. Even so, Shade's poem contains some of the poet's reactions to his colleague and critic Kinbote's strange behaviour. But over and above this basically antagonistic deep structure of Nabokov's book, the two stories contending for representational authority, taken separately, they reveal internal tensions that again resemble characteristics of chess.

In John Shade's poem that gives the book its title, there are a limited number of, but nonetheless prominent references to the game of chess. These hardly ever concern actual play except in one episode that also marks a crucial point in Shade's story of his private life. After the suicide of his and his wife's daughter Hazel, in a surprisingly poignant scene for such a detached kind of fiction, the couple play a game of chess to combat insomnia. The game is symbolically abandoned, however, when Sybil complains: "My knight is pinned",<sup>18</sup>, i.e. the one chess figure that stands for erratic individuality like no other is rendered immobile. At a later stage the poet comes to regard the game as an equivalent for his efforts to find "a web of sense" in his life:

Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find  
Some kind of link—and-bobolink, some kind  
Of correlated pattern in the game,  
Plexed artistry, and something of the same  
Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (ll. 811–815)

Life is here seen in terms of a game of chess between unknown players indulging in another one of its special forms, fairy chess, whose rules allow imaginary pieces to make irregular moves:

... but there they were, aloof and mute,  
Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns  
To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns;  
Kindling a long life here, extinguishing  
A short one there; killing a Balkan king;  
Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-  
Flying airplane to plummet from the sky  
And strike a farmer dead; hiding my keys,  
Glasses or pipe. Coordinating these

---

18 Pale Fire, p.57 (l. 661).

Events and objects with remote events  
 And vanished objects. Making ornaments  
 Of accidents and possibilities. (ll. 818–829)

Along the same lines, Shade the poet eventually arrives at a view of the intelligibility of life's "correlated patterns" through art – like his poetry – "in terms of combinational delight" (971). As has been shown, the combination in his own narrative concerns the conversion (as in pawn promotion of chess) of the public event into private life – however futile this might turn out to be. Like all of Nabokov's stories, Shade's is a self-reflexive, skeptical one:

How ludicrous these efforts to translate  
 Into one's private tongue a public fate!  
 Instead of poetry divinely terse,  
 Disjointed notes, Insomnia's mean verse! (ll. 231–234)

The other narrator, Kinbote, does not share this self-conscious attitude, and his alternative story projects an essentially private problematic into a public one. Even more markedly than Shade's, Kinbote's narrative is conveyed by chess metaphors. His very movements occur along a trajectory of a chess-board pattern, as when he surmises that his landlord expects him to "castle the long way before going to bed" in his home. His zany tale about King Charles's flight into his American exile and his pursuit by the secret-police killer Gradus (who may only be the escaped lunatic Jack Grey looking for his revenge on Judge Goldsworth whose house Kinbote temporarily inhabits) relies on the same imagery. King Charles's flight from his castle in Zembla through subterranean passages can be seen as the equivalent of Kinbote's domestic castling. The royal figure – of course chess is the quintessentially royal game in spite of all republican onslaughts on its terminology around the French Revolution – is equated to a "King-in-the-corner waiter of the *solus rex* type" (118f.), another highly specialised kind of problem composition in chess. Indeed, Kinbote would prefer "Solus Rex" as a title for Shade's poem. He does not, and cannot, understand the title chosen by Shade himself, because the lines from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* it quotes from have been lost in the classic Zemblan translation of that play. Ironically, the passage in *Timon of Athens* is an image of reciprocal expropriation: the moon stealing its light from the sun, the sun stealing water from the sea as the sea (according to the old cosmology Shakespeare leans on) is abstracting water from the moon.<sup>19</sup> Cosmic competition mirrors the one for the right story and its title between the narrative agents.

---

19 *Timon of Athens* IV, 3, ll. 439–445.

King Charles in Kinbote's biography as poetic commentary is surrounded by officials playing chess. Their very names evoke the game, as in that of the courtier Oswin Bretwit who, after the Revolution in Zembla, solves chess problems from old newspapers in his Paris exile, combines German "Brett" (board) with the quality required supremely in chess, according to the old faculty psychology: wit.<sup>20</sup> The name of his ancestor Ferz Bretwit is explained in the Index as "chess-queen". More importantly perhaps than in these metaphoric or referential uses, chess is drawn on, on the metanarrative level, to comment on the ongoing battle of alternative stories between the poet Shade and his critic Kinbote. Such rivalry is duplicated significantly in the chess game Kinbote's diary mentions as a draw between Shade and himself. Similarly, Kinbote's commentary on a dialogue between Shade and himself about providence and the possibility of an afterlife plays off "the preposterous game of nature" with its rules against the rules that govern chess problems. Here as elsewhere he casts irony over Shade's positions. He comments on some lines from Shade's poem: "Another fine example of our poet's special brand of combinational magic" and mocks the "intricacies of the 'game' in which he seeks the key to life and death" – a critique of the key passage from Shade's poem already quoted. Even as he participates in the antagonistic dialogue with Shade about their stories and their meanings, Kinbote expresses his distaste for Shade's searching for an overall design of life, for "the correlated pattern in the game", stating bluntly: "I abhor such games."

I can deal with my second point, the struggle for genre, more briefly. The two juxtaposed stories in *Pale Fire* place different emphases on the chess associations they employ. Whereas Kinbote alias Botkin prefers problem composition of a type featuring an isolated king, Shade looks at the game as a sequence of combinational patterns with a possible overall design, in other words, as an unfolding process involving human, and possibly other, agencies. These divergent preferences entail a generic contest in the complex dialogue between the poet and his commentator. The struggle for the true story necessitates the decision between two kinds of biographical writing. Shade composes an autobiographical poem in the tradition of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, doubting, however, his own grasp of public spheres of action. Kinbote constructs the biography of a public person as a projection of his own fantasies, in other words, what he writes is a concealed kind of autobiography, as his adversary Shade comes to assume. On the other hand, Kinbote would prefer Shade's autobiographical poem to be a celebratory public history of King Charles, or himself, as it turns out. The end of the book resolves this dichotomy, as all narrative lines converge in death. The wrong king is killed, – Shah mat in Persian, – the right king's historian is set on

20 The main Renaissance source for the equation of "wit" and the game of chess seems to be Huarte's *Examen de Ingenios para las Ciencias* (1591). In England, one of the earliest books on chess carried the title *The Pleasaunt and Wittie Play of the Cheasts* (1562).

suicide as yet another figure from chess (the self-mate). But the overall struggle between the kinds of writing appropriate for the plot is insoluble within the perspectives that the novel offers us.

The third dimension of the agonistic deep structure in *Pale Fire* is not the book's story or genre but the process of literary communication in its traditional form. In the central passages of the book, Nabokov contests the customary sequential reading process, whatever the empirical reader will make of it. While there is no doubt about the placing of Foreword and Index at the book's beginning and end, the question of how, i.e., in what order to read the two narratives they enclose is not as easily settled. The poem is followed by a commentary containing line-by-line annotations, so if we consider the parodied format of an academic critical edition of a text we would need to alternate between the lines of the poem and the annotations to them. This would, however, result in a discontinuous reading, since most of the commentary is "an entirely different story" and highly irrelevant to the text it pretends to elucidate. It would also mean transgressing against the totalizing claims of either story that demand uninterrupted reading acts. Another possible reading process is to reverse the usual consecutive order and start with the notes. This is precisely the editor's suggestion at the end of his foreword:

Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them 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.<sup>21</sup>

The reader will be suspicious of this piece of advice by an obviously interested party who is progressively being unmasked as an extremely unreliable narrator. But whichever text we start with, we are always being referred to the other text as we go along. Therefore, the ideal reading act in this case would be a zig-zag between poem and commentary, taking in as we go along the opposed interpretations of the two narrators that alternate like the moves in a chess game. The foreword supplies the helpful advice to use two copies of the book lying side by side to facilitate this kind of reading. There is decidedly no entirely free choice left for the reader: the do-it-yourself-element of the story results from a limited range of reading moves, always alternating between two positions. The reason for such a deconstruction of the customary reading act again lies in the contest between the two narrators for legitimation of the human substance of their differing tales. The editor and writer of the notes points this out at the end of his foreword:

---

21 *Pale Fire*, p. 28.

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide.<sup>22</sup>

However proposterous such domineering claims by Kinbote, their consequence is a shift of the grounds of contest from between the novel's two main characters to the relationship between author and reader. It is this very process that is at issue in one of the analogies between fiction and the composition of chess problems which Nabokov establishes in his autobiography *Speak, Memory*:

It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of 'tries' – delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.<sup>23</sup>

Obviously, this assessment carries much more significance than just helping to read the chess in *Pale Fire*; it has a direct bearing on Nabokov's aesthetics and fictional strategies in this as in his other books.

### Chess and textual artifice in *Pale Fire*

In an interview Nabokov gave in the year in which *Pale Fire* was published, he turned "deception" into a universal denominator of chess, art, and even natural life:

The fake move in a chess problem, the illusion of a solution or the conjuror's magic: ... all art is deception and so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation. ...

---

22 *Pale Fire*, p. 28f.

23 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*. Harmondsworth 1969, p. 223.

I am fond of chess but deception in chess, as in art, is only part of the game; it's part of the combination, part of the delightful possibilities, illusions, vistas of thought, which can be false vistas, perhaps.<sup>24</sup>

In *Pale fire*, the agonistic, deceitful structures organizing its central puzzle are "aufgehoben" (cancelled, preserved, lifted to a higher level) in the artifice that the composition of chess problems and of all literary art require. Again, there is a marked (and as yet unanalysed) period affinity between Nabokov's aesthetic ideas and the movements in chess culture in the 1920s. And again, the closest links between Nabokov and his contemporaries among chess masters are to be found in the hypermodern school of chess. In his contributions to chess strategy Richard Réti, who was also among the foremost problem composers in his day, emphasized the claims of chess as an art – as against its traditional sportive, playful or scientific properties. This is classically formulated in Réti's seminal book *Die neuen Ideen im Schachspiel* where he makes an extended comparison of chess and literary expressionism.<sup>25</sup> In *Pale Fire*, art is the invisible source of all energy, the sun whose light is being reflected in the moon's pale fire.

There is a sense in which all of the fictional characters in the novel function as puppets in one textual maze that tends to call for a unifying interpretation though it ultimately frustrates it. Nabokov's artifice takes the shape of a puzzle similar to, and intertextually supported by, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* which Nabokov translated into Russian early in his literary career. Carroll's second Alice-book, *Through the Looking-Glass*, and *What Alice Found There*, has a central episode foreshadowing the play of competing points of view in *Pale Fire*. In Alice's dream that serves as a frame to the plot of *Through the Looking-Glass*, just as Alice has achieved victory as a queen's pawn reaching the queening square and simultaneously capturing the Red Queen and checkmating the Red King, Tweedledum and Tweedledee declare Alice to be merely part of the Red King's dream and quite insubstantial on the reality level.<sup>26</sup> The representational claims of poet and commentator in *Pale Fire* have the same consequence of the floor being continually pulled out from underneath all textual certainty. This strongly suggests visual metaphors for the textual struggles involved, be it Escher's famous castles or the Moebius strip that condemns to futility all efforts to tell between the inside and the outside of a strip of paper. All the same, as in all these parallel cases, there is a tight central control of the world Nabokov constructs for *Pale Fire*, however puzzling its labyrinth of a text.

24 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*. New York 1973, p. 11f.

25 Richard Réti, *Die neuen Ideen im Schachspiel*. Düsseldorf 1985, p. 56.

26 On his escape from the castle, King Charles is inadvertently wearing a bright scarlet track-suit so as to stress his proximity to Carroll's Red Chess King.

### Some conclusions

I come to some tentative conclusions about Nabokov's place in contemporary fiction. In a later BBC interview, Nabokov qualified the special kind of interest all games had for him in a surprising way: "I'm not interested in games as such. Games mean the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance—chess problems, for example, which I compose in glacial solitude."<sup>27</sup> This lends some support to critics of *Pale Fire* in their bewilderment about the author's grip on the central characters of his self-reflexive metafiction. The chess structures, to at least one of them, seem to be an expression of some aloofness, even hostility, in Nabokov's treatment of his characters in *Pale Fire*.<sup>28</sup> They certainly go along with a high modernist authorial attitude a lot better than with the pluralism some of its proponents usually attribute to postmodernist art. In an American core text of postmodernist theory, John Barth makes just this distinction calling *Pale Fire* a wonderwork of late modernism.<sup>29</sup> The opposed view is developed by Ihab Hassan's critical writing which puts that novel firmly into the postmodernist camp because of its parodic self-consciousness and its tendency to "dissolve the known world" into "a region of articulate silence."<sup>30</sup> Still other literary historians like Malcolm Bradbury keep their place on the critical fence and call Nabokov an essential mediator of European modernism for American postmodernist prose.<sup>31</sup> There is obvious need of more clarification here than I can hope to provide in one paper on just one of Nabokov's novels. Leaving aside the terminological wrangle and placement discourse and sticking to my narrower topic, I would deduce from the analysis of chess structures in *Pale Fire* that these are employed as analogues and formative patterns for Nabokov's fictive world. The antagonistic structures of *Pale Fire*, in the struggle for story, for genre, in the contestation of the traditional process of communication between writer and reader, are eventually synthesized in the book's radical questioning of the identities of its narrators and their creative claims. This self-conscious construct is a definite analogy to the artifice of problem composition in chess. The uses of narrative unreliability cannot be sought in any commitment outside the literary construction itself, apart, possibly, from its value as a hint at the written, and played, nature of reality and its

---

27 Strong Opinions, 117 (1968).

28 Strother B. Purdy, "Solus Rex: Nabokov and the Chess Novel", *Modern Fiction Studies* 14 (1968), p. 395. Also cf. David Pampton, *Vladimir Nabokov. A critical study of the novels*. Cambridge 1984, p. 160ff.

29 John Barth, "Die Literatur der Wiederbelebung", in: *Falsche Dokumente. Postmoderne Texte aus den USA*, ed. Utz Riese, Leipzig 1993, p. 359 (orig. as "The Literature of Replenishment" in: *The Atlantic Monthly* 245 (1980)).

30 Ihab Hassan, "Finnegans Wake and the Postmodern Imagination", in: *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. Ohio 1987, p. 115.

31 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*. Harmondsworth 1994, p. 194.

perception.<sup>32</sup> I admit, let me end on this personal note, to having been impatient, in another historical conjuncture, of the dissolution of representational substance and purposive drive in Nabokov's novels, of his facetiousness, his social snobbery and consciously elitist stances. (Of course, even in 1974 hardly anybody took too seriously the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* whose denigration of Nabokov's status relied on his closeness to Proust's, Belyi's and Kafka's high modernism.) However, in the present period of indeterminacy (or, alternatively, Unübersichtlichkeit) Nabokov's work is showing signs of coming to the fore again, and as (in Oldspeak) a socially relevant force, too, because his carefully controlled artistry lays bare the multiplicity that shapes reality, for all of us.

---

32 Cp. Renate Hof's view of Nabokov's narrative point of view: Das Spiel des 'unreliable narrator'. Aspekte ungläubwürdigen Erzählens im Werk von Vladimir Nabokov. München 1984, esp. pp. 177–184.

