

THE ZEMBLAN WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD, OR NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE*, CHANCE, AND THE COLD WAR

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In his revised autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1966), Vladimir Nabokov recounts two chance events that had come to haunt his later life and fiction: the moment when his father was murdered by an assassin's bullet meant for another and the moment when as a boy Nabokov happened upon his brother Sergey's diary. That the accidental death of Nabokov's father (born 20 July) was personally significant—and a plausible germ for the accidental shooting of John Shade in *Pale Fire* (1962) on 21 July 1959—seems obvious; what is less clear is why his youthful snooping should be so poignant to him as a man in his sixties. Part of the answer comes toward the end of *Speak, Memory*, when the usually-eloquent Nabokov admits that for “various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother [Sergey].”¹ What he does remember with characteristic vividness, however, is the moment he transgressed his brother's personal privacy: “[A] page from his diary that I found on his desk and read, and in stupid wonder showed to my tutor, who promptly showed it to my father, abruptly provided a retroactive clarification of certain oddities of behavior on his part.”² These “oddities” pertained, no doubt, to Sergey's homosexuality, about which the grown Nabokov had long felt uncomfortable, and which is referred to so obliquely in the autobiography that it remains—like Sergey himself—virtually absent. By couching his brother's homosexuality as an unspoken secret that would have been better left undiscovered, Nabokov in *Speak, Memory* confines the treatment of homosexuality to elliptical code words: Sergey is accorded a scant few sentences and thus barely exists for the reader. In the novel *Pale Fire*, on the other hand, the voluble Charles Kinbote gives over hundreds of pages of his “Commentary” to the tale of mythical Zembla, a narrative that functions, in part, to manage the open secret of Kinbote's own homosexuality. This secret makes him the object of persecution by a Cold War community that displaces a patriotism based on anti-Communism with a patriotism based on something equally pernicious—homophobia. Taking a cue

from the chance events Nabokov insists were significant to his own life, I want to read the numerous and varied chance moments in *Pale Fire* as central to the design of the novel to see how the work intervenes in mid-century controversies about Communism and sexuality.

Although *Pale Fire* may seem to be only an old-world aesthete's novel of wordplay and allusion that is blissfully disengaged from real-world Cold War politics, it is in fact this very wordplay that allows Nabokov to engage cultural narratives that prescribed the limits of mid-century reality—a word that Nabokov tended to use gingerly, with quotation marks.³ In *Pale Fire*, the politics of late 1950s America look enough like the “containment narrative” familiar to Cold War scholars (and Kinbote's invented Zembla looks enough like a Soviet satellite state) that we ought to ask to what end Nabokov is refracting real-world politics through the prism of his aesthetics.⁴ The aspect of Cold War political culture of particular importance to *Pale Fire* is the pervasive practice of eliding differences among the so-called enemies of democratic freedom to read homosexuals as political threats on par with Communists. For Nabokov, the logic of what I will refer to as the homophobic narrative was as tragically absurd as the logic of Kinbote's tale of Zembla, a parallel made visible by noticing how both phenomena attempt to control or manage chance.⁵ Nabokov challenges the cultural logic of the homophobic narrative by allowing chance to infiltrate his novel on the local linguistic level, as well as on the broader level of plot. The novel's form frustrates linear reading not only because we are asked to hop from footnote to footnote—in a manner familiar to contemporary hypertext readers—but also because the text itself is dense with allusions, puns, and other wordplay. Such moments are more than just examples of Nabokov's multilingual virtuosity, however, for they can be read as instances of political intervention. As Jonathan Culler reminds us, puns foreground “an opposition that we find difficult to evade or overcome: between accident or meaningless convergence and substance or meaningful relation. We treat this opposition as a given, presuming that any instance must be one or the other. But puns, or punning, may help us to displace the opposition by experiencing something like ‘meaningful coincidence’ or ‘convergence that affects meaning,’ convergence that adumbrates an order *to be* comprehended or explored.”⁶ Culler's proposition is helpful for understanding *Pale Fire* because it suggests that puns negotiate the difference between

chance and design. As sites of “meaningful coincidence”—of two perhaps-chance vectors meeting to form meaning—puns are also examples of how chance can expose the explanatory poverty of narratives that shun chance and disorder in the hope of diminishing or closing off meaning—as, for example, the Cold War homophobic narrative does when it equates homosexuality with everything from minor forms of subversion to outright treason.

The play among various types of designed coincidence and the sort of chance “meaningless convergence” that, Culler suggests, puns make possible characterizes much of *Pale Fire*. Not only do puns, slips of the pen, life-changing accidents, and uncanny coincidences abound in Shade’s poem “Pale Fire” and in Kinbote’s “Commentary,” but as virtually every *Pale Fire* critic has noticed, the novel also crackles with coincidences and correspondences among its parts. That is, the distinct sections of *Pale Fire*, ostensibly written by two separate characters, exhibit coincidental similarities and echoes that demand attention.⁷ I suggest we take such coincidences as thematic; Nabokov associates the profuse meanings of his text with the complexity of the real world, neither of which can be accounted for by cultural narratives that close down varieties of meaning.⁸

Kinbote’s scholarly work in *Pale Fire* makes meaning from coincidences—he perceives a meaning in Shade’s text that is unrelated to the meaning we presume is intended by the poet, a perception based on chance textual or linguistic associations. This misreading does to Shade’s text what Culler’s puns do for readers: it exposes the uncomfortably short distance between “meaningless convergence” and “meaningful relation.” Some plot exposition will clarify how this relationship works in *Pale Fire*: the mad scholar Kinbote has moved next door to the famed and beloved poet Shade, who is working on a longish poem in heroic couplets called “Pale Fire.” When Shade is accidentally shot by an insane-asylum escapee, Kinbote absconds with the manuscript of “Pale Fire” and begins to compose the annotations that make up the bulk of *Pale Fire*-the-novel. Although Shade’s poem is about his marriage and his dead daughter, Kinbote’s exegesis centers around an imagined version of himself: his notes have little to do with Shade’s subject but instead tell the tale of the deposed King Charles II of Zembla, a political refugee who turns out to be Kinbote himself. We also learn that in Kinbote’s fantasy, he is posing as a college professor in order to evade Jakob Gradus, a Communist-like “Extremist” assassin who is hunting Kinbote across the globe. When Gradus finally arrives in New Wye, home of Shade and quiet Wordsmith College,

he aims for Kinbote but “quite accidentally” hits Shade, which for Kinbote neatly explains the poet’s meaningless death at the hand of a mental patient actually seeking revenge on the judge who put him away.⁹ While, as I will suggest, the genesis of the Zembla narrative is Kinbote’s pariah status as a homosexual in the New Wye (New York) community of 1958–1959, the engine driving much of the tale—the assassination plot—exists to convert Shade’s accidental death from a freak chance event to an effect explicable by clear causal progression.¹⁰ In short, through Kinbote’s narrativization, Shade’s death paradoxically becomes both cause and effect of the Zembla story.¹¹

As Kinbote relates the gripping tale of his escape from Revolutionary Zembla, he also insists that before the Extremists staged their coup Zembla was a land where sexuality could be practiced in all its forms, and King Charles himself was a free homosexual now compelled to keep a lower profile—both politically and sexually—in the States. As I will argue in this essay, Nabokov’s emphasis on Kinbote’s homosexuality serves to parody the contemporary homophobia of Cold War psychiatrists and social critics: the novel suggests that homophobic narratives are as farfetched as Kinbote’s Zembla narrative. I want to thus demonstrate first that Nabokov is writing in and against very specific cultural narratives; and second, to argue that Nabokov, among the many other things he does in *Pale Fire*, also exploits chance, linguistic and otherwise, as a strategy for destabilizing the staid homophobic narrative of the 1950s and early 1960s. In the end, I hope this argument will not only suggest that greater attention be paid to the ways that Nabokov’s ethics are enfolded into his aesthetics in this and all his mature works but also the ways in which *Pale Fire* in particular makes chance legible as political critique.¹²

Nabokov links the chance inherent in language with the chance of homosexual political treason by having Kinbote conflate or confuse his homosexuality with his insistence that he is King Charles, a claim made visible to readers by his coincidental analysis of “Pale Fire.” In the “Foreword,” for example, the chairman of his department at Wordsmith College takes Kinbote aside to urge that he “be more careful” because a “boy had complained to his adviser” (*P*, 25). After explaining that he merely criticized the literature course of a fellow professor, Kinbote laughs in “sheer relief” and muses to himself: “[The chairman] always behaved with such exquisite courtesy toward me that I sometimes wondered if he did not suspect what Shade suspected, and what only three people (two trustees and the president of the college) definitely knew” (*P*, 25). Kinbote figures himself as a “suspect,” yet

the thing that few people “definitely knew” would differ depending on who was asked—the chairman is warning Kinbote about monitoring his sexuality, whereas Kinbote assumes the warning is about maintaining his incognito as mild-mannered college professor.¹³

An iteration of this early conflation bookends the final movement of the novel, when Kinbote and Shade are walking across the lawn where Shade will soon be shot. Knowing that “Pale Fire” is complete, or nearly so, Kinbote makes Shade an offer:

“And if you agree to show me your ‘finished product,’ there will be another treat: I promise to divulge to you *why* I gave you, or rather *who* gave you, your theme.”

“What theme?” said Shade absently . . .

“Our blue inenubitable Zembla . . .

“Ah,” said Shade, “I think I guessed your secret quite some time ago.” (*P*, 288)

This example suggests that despite his best efforts, Kinbote-the-suspect is unable to stabilize the meaning of certain words—in this case “secret.” Although Shade has been privy to the fevers of Kinbote’s mind (unlike the chairman), the guessed “secret” here refers to Kinbote’s mental instability, a state of mind at least partly induced by the fact that the homophobic narrative figures Kinbote’s homosexuality as pathological, the results of which, as Shade has also guessed, trigger the Zembla narrative.¹⁴ By this late in the novel, moreover, most readers also realize that for Kinbote the “extraordinary secret” (*P*, 215) of his homosexuality and that of Zembla are virtually indistinguishable.¹⁵

But this collapse begs three immediate questions: 1) why does Nabokov make Kinbote a homosexual in the first place; 2) why does Kinbote’s homosexuality make him the object of ridicule and distrust by the campus community; 3) why does he cover his homosexuality with a narrative about a king deposed with the aid of the “ruddy Russia of the Soviet era” (*P*, 77)?¹⁶ Admittedly, to phrase the questions this way invites an interrelated answer, but I do think that Nabokov has Kinbote construct a narrative so distrustful of chance that it offers the illusion of linguistic control—the very illusion of control that homosexuality was seen to threaten during the 1950s.

Given Nabokov’s well-known disdain for Freud and his more savage applicators, it is curious that he should endow Kinbote with the battery of negative psychological traits suggested by the homophobic narrative descended from Freud.¹⁷ Kinbote is paranoid, megalomaniacal, disagreeable, jealous, petty, voyeuristic, and predisposed to

seducing boys and young men, all of which were understood by 1950s psychiatrists and psychologists as characteristic psychological traits of homosexuals. Edmund Bergler's *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* (1956) is a representative example of mid-century thinking about homosexuality that identifies a short list of traits homosexual people are "imbued" with:

1. Masochistic provocation and injustice-collecting;
2. Defensive malice;
3. Flippancy covering depression and guilt;
4. Hypernarcissism and hypersuperciliousness;
5. Refusal to acknowledge accepted standards in nonsexual matters, on the assumption that the right to cut moral corners is due homosexuals as compensation for their "suffering";
6. General unreliability, also of a more or less psychopathic nature.¹⁸

Interested readers can find abundant examples of such traits in *Pale Fire*: Kinbote undoubtedly has general "defensive malice" toward people he thinks have injured him, from Shade's protective wife Sybil Shade to Gerald Emerald, the instructor who spurned his advances. His "hypernarcissism," "hypersuperciliousness," and "general unreliability" could be said to characterize the "Foreword" and "Commentary" as a whole, and his remark on the penultimate page of the "Commentary" that "I have suffered very much, and more than any of you can imagine" (*P*, 300) implies an explanation for his moral corner-cutting. Another psychologist, Gordon Westwood (1953), asserted the Freudian notion that "[n]ot all homosexuals become even mild paranoids, but nearly all paranoids have repressed homosexual tendencies."¹⁹ Kinbote is nothing if not paranoid, for even by the "Index" he is not "able, owing to some psychological block or the fear of a second G[radius], [to travel] to a city only sixty or seventy miles distant, where he would certainly have found a good library" (*P*, 309). Jess Stearn begins his best-selling *The Sixth Man* (1961) with a lengthy catalogue of similar ills that accompany homosexuality, from jealousy-motivated murder to the indoctrination of boys, all of which culminates in the warning: "*Homosexuals can be anybody.*"²⁰

I am suggesting, then, that Nabokov is criticizing the sociopolitical implications of a pop-Freudian understanding of homosexuality. This critique is evident not simply because he makes the paranoid Kinbote homosexual but because he has Kinbote displace homophobic logic with a political tale that reflects the norms of classic containment thinking (minus the homophobia). In his capacity as both sexual sub-

versive and Cold Warrior, Kinbote challenges what the homophobic narrative claimed a homosexual could be or do. The sociopolitical valences of homosexuality during the Cold War are by now an old story: throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, homosexuals were dangerous because they could convert heterosexuals and because they were yoked in specific ways to Communist subversion.²¹ One finds a remarkable example of homosexuality being linked to subversion in the 1951 Senate subcommittee report “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government”:

The conclusion of the subcommittee that a homosexual or other sex pervert is a security risk is not based upon mere conjecture. . . . The lack of emotional stability which is found in most sex perverts and the weakness of their moral fiber, makes them susceptible to the blandishments of the foreign espionage agent. It is the experience of intelligence experts that perverts are vulnerable to interrogation by a skilled questioner and they seldom refuse to talk about themselves. . . . It is an accepted fact among intelligence agencies that espionage organizations the world over consider sex perverts who are in possession of or have access to confidential material to be prime targets where pressure can be exerted.²²

According to the Senate subcommittee, homosexuals are dangerous for the opposite reason that spies are dangerous: whereas spies craftily manipulate people and situations to glean information, homosexuals are weak-minded and emotionally fragile and are thus susceptible to the machinations of the subversively strong-willed. In the terms of the present study, then, homosexuals are not suitable for government employment because they are the sites of chance. The presence of homosexuals who “seldom refuse to talk about themselves” (is a better description of Kinbote possible?) heightens the chance of subversion, which in turn threatens the fantasy of governmental control. To remove homosexuals from government office based on the vulgar Freudian theories of Bergler and others is thus to remove another possibility that the liberal democratic status quo would be subverted. *Pale Fire*, on the other hand, presents heterodox sexualities freed from the insistent connotations with treason.²³

Nabokov uses chance to question the logic of such homophobic constructions of sexuality descended from Freud; by focusing attention on how coincidence operates in *Pale Fire*, we see that the chance inherent in the novel’s shifting registers is controlled by both the driving narrative of Kinbote’s Zembla tale and by the containment norms it reflects. There is a moment in *Pnin* (1957)—the *New*

Yorker sketches-turned-novel about another professor who appears at Wordsmith College—when the narrator remarks that a gas station attendant looks markedly like one of Pnin’s colleagues, “one of those random likenesses as pointless as a bad pun.”²⁴ This pronouncement bears special significance to *Pale Fire* because it links the potential for real-life coincidences to textual or linguistic coincidences. For Nabokov, in fact, it seems that part of a pun’s work is to suggest, even on the minute phonemic level, that in a fictional world all ostensibly chance moments are the work of an authorial guiding hand. In 1967, Nabokov was questioned by Alfred Appel about coincidence. Appel noted that “[s]ome critics may find the use of coincidence in a novel arch or contrived.” Nabokov answered:

But in “real” life they do happen. . . . Very often you meet with some person or some event in “real” life that would sound pat in a story. It is not the coincidence in the story that bothers us so much as the coincidence of coincidences in several stories by different writers, as, for instance, the recurrent eavesdropping device in nineteenth-century Russian fiction.²⁵

The response reminds us that coincidence depends on point of view: if Mr. X chances to meet an old friend in real life, it is, from Mr. X’s point of view, a coincidence, since it represents two apparently independent causal chains coming together. Coincidence, then, cannot exist without chance—it is a way of constituting meaning out of chance depending on one’s point of view.²⁶ Indeed, by the end of his response to Appel’s question, Nabokov shifts from what he calls “‘real’ life” to the textual; what concerns him is “the coincidence of coincidences in several stories by different writers.” It is not the mediocre novelist’s acknowledgment that both chance and coincidence exist in real life that annoys Nabokov but rather that popular nineteenth-century literary forms do not allow chance to exist in a fictional world. To exploit stock characters and other familiar devices is to create a world that is meant to be read in a single way, rather like the homophobic narrative that demanded homosexuality be read in the subversive way outlined above.

Returning once again to Culler’s ideas about puns, it is doubly important that the arc of the Zembla narrative is described by Kinbote’s invention of allusions and puns, an invention that seems to him proof of real-life coincidences. As I have said, Kinbote writes over the homophobic narrative—which figures him as a political threat—with the Zembla narrative—which figures him as central to a stable government vulnerable to Communist-like Extremists. Despite its outward appear-

ance of baggy monstrosity, Kinbote's "monstrous semblance of a novel" betrays an avid desire for control reminiscent of George Kennan's famous (and consequential) recommendation of containment and the subsequent cultural narratives it engendered: in Kinbote's necessarily delimited universe, accidents and chance encounters abound, as do linguistic and textual uncertainties, all of which form causal chains to Gradus's accidental murder of Shade (*P*, 86).²⁷ What these numerous moments of circumstantial and linguistic chance amount to is not an imaginary world spun out of control, however, but rather one in which chance is introduced precisely so that Kinbote may control and fit it into his narrative explanation of Shade's death. But by narrativizing chance, Kinbote offers only the illusion of control—he attempts to order the inexplicability of Shade's death just as the homophobic narrative attempts to order the apparent inexplicability of homosexuality. In the end, Kinbote's control, like the control offered by the homophobic narrative, is illusory—it is a textual control that Nabokov suggests has little relevance to what Shade would call the "texture" of real life (*P*, 63). Indeed, Shade's poem "Pale Fire" is in part a meditation on the existence and fertility of chance.

The line from *Pnin* about "one of those random likenesses as pointless as a bad pun" reminds one of Brian Boyd's counsel to aspiring Nabokovians: "Whenever we hear something called 'pointless' in Nabokov, we should look for the hidden point."²⁸ With this advice in mind, recall that, although Shade is a Pope scholar, unlike his subject he will deign to pun. His poem "Pale Fire" demonstrates that contrary to what *Pnin*'s narrator has to say, Nabokov's puns are hardly pointless. Written, as Kinbote informs us in his "Foreword," on index cards from 2 July to 21 July 1959 in New Wye, Appalachia, an imaginary locale that resembles upstate New York, "Pale Fire" is a collection of meditations on the suicide of Shade's daughter, Hazel, and on the poet's own ripening age. The poem centers around both Hazel's suicide and Shade's description of the events surrounding his short lecture position at the "Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter," an organization whose business it is to manage the ultimate unknown, death. For Shade, the Institute represents man's attempt to grasp fully the wonders of the universe, a notion that seems to Shade preposterous after a later epiphanic moment. He parodies this notion with a bilingual pun in the opening lines of canto three:

Lif, lifeless tree! Your great Maybe, Rabelais:
The grand potato.
I.P.H., a lay

Institute (I) of Preparation (P)
For the Hereafter (H), or If, as we
Called it—big if!—engaged me for one term
To speak on death. (P, 52)

Shade's phonetic dexterity here works on several registers: not only does I.P.H. sound like "if," but it also recalls the French *L'if*—yew tree, often associated with death; so thus "you, lifeless tree"; or "life, lifeless tree"—a cross-linguistic pun that points to a play on Rabelais: in "the grand potato" we are meant to hear the "*le grand peut-être*"—the great Maybe. For Shade, this pun, bad or not, is certainly not pointless and in fact allows him to lampoon the idea that the uncertainties of death can be accounted for institutionally. In his gloss on the passage, Kinbote groans over the slickness of the wordplay: "An execrable pun, deliberately placed in this epigraphic position to stress lack of respect for Death. I remember from my schoolroom days Rabelais' *soi-disant* 'last words' among other bright bits in some French manual: *Je m'en vais chercher le grand peut-être*" (P, 222). Kinbote here perceives the explanatory power of puns that Culler articulates: although the narrator of *Pnin* associates puns with randomness, Kinbote worries that Shade has "deliberately placed" the pun to serve epigraphically for the whole of canto three—in other words, Kinbote is put off by the pointedness of Shade's pun. The "grand potato" / "*grand peut-être*" pun does not seem to "stress lack of respect for Death," as Kinbote insists, but rather stresses lack of respect for institutions—and, by extension, other man-made endeavors—that are designed to explain away the mysteries of the universe.²⁹ A pun is a perfect rhetorical strategy in this case, for its very unknowability makes it a metonym for the unknowability of life itself, a semantic instability that any I.P.H. should have a hard time categorizing, much less explaining.

Shade registers the unknowability of death with a moment of pointed semantic instability, a significant move within the context of *Pale Fire* because Nabokov is interested in proliferating a meaning that cannot be easily accounted for. But Shade's pairing also bears broader significance for the historical moment in which the novel was written. Without over-stressing this point, we might recall Tony Jackson's thoughts on the psychic weight of death in the Atomic Age: "[B]ecause the nuclear ending will be absolute, . . . the idea of chance mushrooms into the Cold War mindset in general."³⁰ It is fitting that Shade, participant in an "antiatomic chat," should reflect not only on the chances of death but on the possibility of overcoming the "absolute" nature of death-as-ending (P, 49). Although Kinbote's more radical

excursions into fantasy eclipse the semblance of real life manifest in Shade's New Wye existence, Nabokov sets the action of his novel in the particular cultural moment in which the chance of a "nuclear ending" seems ever urgent. While New Wye is not a real place name, and Wordsmith College only resembles Cornell, the overt social issues and daily rhythms evident in "Pale Fire" and the glimpses of campus life Kinbote allows are very much of a specific time and place: Shade is a Frostian poet and family man who watches 1950s television with "Professor Pink," an atomic bomb-denouncing campus Communist (*P*, 49); who mentions Russian spies (*P*, 58); and who does his best to soften the ostracization of Kinbote-the-homosexual by the campus community (*P*, 266).³¹ Within this context Shade composes his verse on death inspired both by the suicide of his daughter and by the urgency of his own mortality. If we can accept the resemblance of New Wye to real-life America in the 1950s, then we might say that another reason for Shade's probing into the finality of death could be the acute cultural fear of global destruction made possible by the atomic bomb, a fear that contributed to the promotion of cultural narratives such as the homophobic one I have described.

As the careful flickers of Ithaca in New Wye begin to attest, then, the universe of *Pale Fire* is a culturally-specific one, and Nabokov allows flashes of Cold War cultural context to shape the unreal world of Zembla. If the tale of Zembla obscures the politically-motivated homophobic narrative, then it explains why Kinbote should invent a tale about a revolution-plagued northern land bordering Russia.³² Kinbote appropriates the logic of containment by transforming the idea of foreign threat from Communists to Extremists (Gradus and his cohorts) and figures Shade and himself as the domestic front in need of protection. In this way he converts himself, nominally confined to the role of political threat by the homophobic narrative, into an anti-subversive, into a Cold Warrior.

The tantalizing and tenuous connection between Russia and the fantasy land that renders causally explicable Shade's death is apparent in the very name of Kinbote's obsession. As Mary McCarthy was the first to note, Zembla can indeed be found on a map: "[T]here is an actual Nova Zembla, a group of islands in the Arctic Ocean, north of Archangel. The name is derived from the Russian *Novaya Zemlya*, which means 'new land.'"³³ McCarthy does not mention that during the late 1950s, *Novaya Zemlya* did not merely correlate to the icy land evoked by Swift and Pope, it was also a far-off place with a very particular political importance: the site where the Soviets tested

their atomic bombs.³⁴ In the spring of 1958, something like Kinbote's homeland populated newspapers in both New Wye and New York: "Japanese scientist said today that Soviet nuclear tests last month had been carried out at Novaya Zemlya Island in the Arctic Ocean."³⁵ By November, a front-page article, "New Soviet Tests of Atom Weapons Disclosed by U.S.," pegged Novaya Zemlya as the testing ground.³⁶ It is fair to say, then, that Nabokov's readership in the early 1960s could have associated the name Zembla, if only vaguely, with the threat of nuclear war with its mother country, Russia. With the palpable threat of the real Novaya Zemlya in mind, it is clear that the Revolution in Kinbote's Onhava, however romantic and improbable, can stand in its texture as Communism's threat to the status quo in America as well as Zembla. Nabokov in fact insists on the resemblance between Zembla and a Russian satellite state when he has Kinbote return again and again to such a comparison.

Although Kinbote notes that Zemblans are "given to regicide" (*P*, 95), he also insists that he (as King Charles) had brought unprecedented order to the land: "Harmony, indeed, was the reign's password" (*P*, 75). Kinbote goes on to explain how under his reign everything from the "polite arts" to medical care flourished—until, that is, its "gigantic neighbor" began inciting revolutionary ideals (*P*, 75). In this passage, Kinbote names the neighbor as "Sosed" (Russian for "neighbor" and, according to Boyd, "an echo of *Sovietsky Soyuz*, the Soviet Union"), but at other points in the "Commentary" it is clear that the neighbor *is* Russia.³⁷ Kinbote mentions the influence of Russia on Zembla numerous times: "When I was a child, Russia enjoyed quite a vogue at the court of Zembla but that was a different Russia—a Russia that hated tyrants and Philistines, injustice and cruelty, the Russia of ladies and gentlemen and liberal aspirations" (*P*, 245). By the time the hard-won harmony he had brought is challenged, Kinbote associates the chaos of the Zemblan Revolution with the Soviet Union: "The Royalists, or at least the Modems (Moderate Democrats), might have still prevented the state from turning into a commonplace modern tyranny, had they been able to cope with the tainted gold and the robot troops that a powerful police state ["which," Kinbote elsewhere reports, "some say is Russia" (*P*, 138)] from its vantage ground a few sea miles away was pouring into the Zemblan Revolution" (*P*, 119). Not only does the Zemblan Revolution take place on 1 May 1958 (Communist May Day), but when two Russians descend on the Royal Palace to find Kinbote's crown jewels, he remarks that "[s]omewhere an iron curtain had gone up," locating Zembla firmly within the Soviet sphere of

influence (*P*, 131). With the Zemblan Revolution, the power Kinbote has over Zembla is shattered by Communist infiltration—the chaos in Zembla is a result of what Kennan called the Soviet Union’s “expansive tendencies,” a primary justification in his argument for containment.³⁸ The fruit of this Revolution, as might be expected, is “gloom.” In the gloss for Shade’s phrase “gloomy Russians spied,” Kinbote again draws a parallel between Zembla and Russia: gloom “is merely the outward sign of congested nationalism and a provincial’s sense of inferiority—that dreadful blend so typical of Zemblans under the Extremist rule and of Russia under the Soviet regime” (*P*, 243). If the real-life strategic importance of Novaya Zemlya as a Russian stockpile of nuclear weapons is meant to be evoked in Kinbote’s Zembla, then it explains why Nabokov has Kinbote catalogue the news items in *The New York Times* Gradus is reading, the first of which is Khrushchev’s visit to Zembla (*P*, 274).³⁹

With the story of Zembla and its Revolution, Kinbote is not only inverting the homophobia of Cold War American culture, he is also reproducing a narrative that legitimates anti-Communist fears of subversion. Assuming Kinbote’s Zembla narrative has little basis in the real world of *Pale Fire*, and that its textual existence in “Pale Fire” is a product of coincidence, it is striking that he channels his madness into a version of the classic Cold War contest between Communism and democratic freedom. Even more striking, perhaps, is that Kinbote replaces democracy with a monarchy that centers around him, a governmental model that, for whatever else it does, offers Kinbote freedoms unavailable to him in the United States. As we have seen, Kinbote often confuses or conflates these two narratives so the open “secret” of his homosexuality (for everyone else) is masked by the “extraordinary secret” of the Zemblan Revolution (for Kinbote). By reading the politically-motivated homophobic narrative against the obviously political Revolution narrative, it becomes apparent that Kinbote links the American homophobic narrative with Communist-like repression. In other words, Kinbote’s fevered narrative exposes a contradiction in a cultural logic that both assigns pathological status to sexual practices outside the mainstream and that attempts to assert freedom from Communism by denying freedom of sexuality. Ironically, however, though Kinbote’s conflation amounts to a critique—by Nabokov—of both Communism and the homophobic narrative, Kinbote desires to integrate himself back into containment America by mimicking the function of an institution like I.P.H. and attempting to control the uncontrollable—Shade’s accidental murder.

Kinbote controls chance by replacing texture with text: the complexity of life that Shade marvels at in “Pale Fire” is converted in the “Commentary” into a causal narrative designed to account for Shade’s death. Kinbote’s apparent textual control, however, is ineffective precisely because he fails to recognize the importance of wordplay or misprints or other chance moments. To state the obvious for a moment: a goal of academic commentary is to parse texts for connections—in his scholarship, Kinbote, like a Pynchonian paranoiac, draws impossible connection after impossible connection so that in the Zembla narrative even accidents are explained and fitted into causal chains. This is the same civic logic invited by a government intent on exposing the connections between homosexuality and political subversion in order to reduce the chances of Communist infiltration and nuclear war. It thus makes sense that Kinbote resists anything not explicable by his scholarship/fantasy; in one of the mini-dramas that Kinbote relates, the differences between the poet and his commentator are evident:

SHADE: Life is a great surprise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one.

KINBOTE: Now I have caught you, John: once we deny a Higher Intelligence that plans and administers our individual hereafters we are bound to accept the unspeakably dreadful notion of Chance reaching into eternity. . . . The demons in their prismatic malice betray the agreement between us and them, and we are again in the chaos of chance. Even if we temper Chance with Necessity and allow godless determinism, the mechanism of cause and effect, to provide our souls after death with the dubious solace of metastatistics, we still have to reckon with the individual mishap, the thousand and second highway accident of those scheduled for Independence Day in Hades. (*P*, 225–26)

The first thing one might notice here is that chance is textually linked to the potential for political repression, for the “dreadful notion of Chance” recalls the “dreadful blend [of nationalism and inferiority] so typical of Zemblans under the Extremist rule and of Russia under the Soviet regime” (*P*, 243) and the “dreadful days” immediately following the Zemblan Revolution (*P*, 119). Beyond this correspondence, though, the exchange gets to the heart of Kinbote’s interactions with the world: having already confessed to losing himself in an “orgy of spying” (*P*, 87), here Kinbote-the-suspect has “caught” Shade as any Communist hunter might catch a denier of Higher Intelligence. The “chaos of chance” is akin to the chaos introduced into Zembla by the Soviets and the potential chaos introduced into American society by homosexuals.

In order to avoid this chaos of chance, which is “unspeakabl[e]” and therefore textually uncontrollable, Kinbote takes on the mantle of an I.P.H. or God or Author so as not to appreciate life’s “topsy-turvical coincidence” (*P*, 63) as Shade does but rather to manufacture those coincidences. In other words, Kinbote’s suspicion of chance helps him transform from hunted to hunter.

Once we attune ourselves to the presence of chance in the Zembla narrative, it becomes clear that Kinbote includes accidents with the purpose of ordering them in his fantasy world; that is, he assigns accidents causal functions. The accidents contained within the Zembla narrative range from the off-hand and trivial to the momentous. In the former category one includes events associated with mortality and the “chaos of chance” such as the deaths of Oleg, Kinbote’s young lover, “in a toboggan accident” (*P*, 128) and his father, King Alfin, in a flying accident (*P*, 103–4). In addition to such concrete accidents, the language of chance also pervades Kinbote’s narrative, as for example when the fleeing King is offered hospitality by a farmer and he implores the man “to accept an old gold piece he chanced to have in his pocket” (*P*, 141); of his wife Disa, he writes that she “had to listen to the prattle of a chance visitor” (*P*, 211); when climbing the mountains to “freedom,” he repeats to himself lines from a Goethe poem, “a chance accompaniment” (*P*, 239). More importantly, however—as we will see in detail below—Gradus himself is chance manifest, not only in the passing details of the “chance leaflets” that fall his way (*P*, 232) but also in the textual association with him as a “caller” (*P*, 293) to the Goldsworth house that echoes Kinbote’s earlier remark about how the house was architecturally inviting to a “chance caller” (*P*, 19). Nabokov implies that the presence of this chance is precisely what thwarts Kinbote’s attempts for God-like order, even when he tries to put his fantasies on paper: “[An invented ‘Pale Fire’ variant] describes rather well the ‘chance inn,’ a log cabin, with a tiled bathroom, where I am trying to coordinate these notes. At first I was greatly bothered by the blare of diabolical radio music from what I thought was some kind of amusement park across the road—it turned out to be camping tourists—and I was thinking of moving to another place, when they forestalled me” (*P*, 235). Here the “diabolical radio” of the “chance inn” echoes Kinbote’s statement a few pages earlier that “demons in their prismatic malice betray the agreement between us and them, and we are again in the chaos of chance” (*P*, 226). Since Kinbote cannot control everything that happens outside of Zembla, the chance demon of an irritating radio reminds him, and maddeningly so, that despite all his best efforts, he is failing to control chance.⁴⁰

The question, though, is why Kinbote goes to these elaborate lengths to insist on the ostensibly accidental nature of Zembla—and especially of Gradus’s progress—when he is in the end controlling the narrative and its chance components. The short answer relates to the issue of point of view mentioned earlier; for example, neither Gradus nor his fellow conspirators think their coded language or discoveries of clues to Kinbote’s whereabouts are subject to chance, since each side assumes the other’s competence (*P*, 215–16). From Kinbote’s point of view, however, we see that “Chance, in one of its anti-Karlist moods,” is moving Gradus along, not the conspirators’ elaborate plan (*P*, 175). The only character in Zembla for whom chance can in fact have meaning is Kinbote, because, as I have said, he arranges chance events into a causal chain that brings Gradus to New Wye. Retrospectively, then, Kinbote converts the multiple chance events connected to Zembla and Gradus into a series of coincidences that lead to Shade’s death—if we keep in mind, however, that Kinbote is not a historian narrating actual accidents, then it is clear he is crafting a universe governed by chance from its creator’s point of view. But the very fact that he is the creator of this universe means that Kinbote controls chance itself, forcing random acts and chance sightings to conform to a teleological picture. Kinbote, in trying to bridge his God-like stance in Zembla to New Wye, uses the numerous “chance” events concerning Gradus to explain the “chance” event of Shade’s murder, thereby becoming not only master of Zembla but of Shade’s real world as well.

In addition to these relatively trivial chance moments in the Zembla and real life narratives, Kinbote also includes major accidents that inform his whole story. Gradus himself could be read as chance incarnate; this is apparent when we learn that after Gradus was caught “[h]e insisted . . . that when he found himself designated to track down and murder the King, the choice was decided by a show of cards” (*P*, 150). The blind turn of a card makes Gradus an agent of chance. But just as Kinbote orchestrates the accidents in Zembla, so too does he admit the possibility that Gradus’s card-draw was arranged, for he urges us not to forget “that it was Nodo [“who cheated at cards”] who shuffled and dealt them out” (*P*, 150).⁴¹ Like many other things in *Pale Fire*, in Gradus’s beginning is his end: his participation in the assassination plot hinges on drawing the “ace of spades” (*P*, 150); after Gradus shoots Shade, “[Kinbote’s] gardener’s spade dealt [Gradus] . . . a tremendous blow on the pate” (*P*, 294). Gradus, having been dealt the ace of spades, is now dealt for his luck the business end of a real spade.

The counterpoint to Kinbote's willful control over chance in his "Commentary" is, as the passage about I.P.H. suggested, Shade's "Pale Fire," in which accidents are allowed to stand as "ornaments" (*P*, 63) that point to a metaphysical design that cannot be known. Written about a culture that linked chance to nuclear death, it is curious that in the climax of the poem a chance misprint should make "Life Everlasting" (*P*, 62) seemingly available for Shade, only to then be foreclosed when the mistake is revealed. Shade's epiphany is occasioned by a near-death experience in which he saw a white fountain; some time after he reads a magazine article about a woman who says she saw the same fountain in her own near-death experience. After Shade investigates the matter, he discovers from the author of the article that "[t]here's one misprint—not that it matters much: / *Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch" (*P*, 62). Rather than wring his hands over death's uncontrollability as Kinbote does, Shade uses the opportunity to recognize that the "texture" of life makes possible innumerable coincidences or matrices of meaning. He posits a "web of sense" that seems to destabilize the authority of institutional narratives such as the I.P.H.'s line on death:

Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!
 I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
 And stop investigating my abyss?
 But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
 Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
 But topsy-turvical coincidence,
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
 Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
 Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
 Of correlated pattern in the game,
 Plexed artistry, and something of the same
 Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (*P*, 62–63)

It is indeed not accidental that Nabokov has Shade make the following contrapuntal declarative: "Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!" For as the aging poet of the Atomic Age discovers, it is foolhardy to rely on "text" to explain the mysteries of a universe built on "plexed artistry" and "topsy-turvical coincidence." The monumental misprint that momentarily convinces Shade that he has the keys to the afterlife functions similarly to puns; recall that according to Culler puns "may help us to displace the opposition [between accident and substance] by experiencing something like 'meaningful coincidence' or 'conver-

gence that affects meaning,' convergence that adumbrates an order *to be* comprehended or explored." For Shade, the misprint has meaning precisely because it is an accident with substance—the misprint creates a "meaningful coincidence" for Shade not because he has had the same experience as another person but because he has had a unique experience that is nonetheless connected in the universe's "web of sense."⁴² Because a misprint demands we attend to the volatility of text, it invites us to recognize what the text is pointing to, the real, irreducible world of "texture."

What my reading of *Pale Fire* ultimately suggests, then, is that there is more room for political work in Nabokov's linguistic wordplay than has been supposed; indeed it tells us that we should read Nabokov's aesthetics as enfolding rather than shunning political and social critique—not simply in *Pale Fire* but in all his mature novels. Just as *Lolita's* "aesthetic bliss" contains a sober denunciation of Humbert's thoroughly unethical behavior toward his fellow human beings, so too does *Pale Fire* contain a denunciation of Kinbote's behavior in the New Wye community.⁴³ And yet beyond this critique of a man who annoys his community and engages in what Nabokov would probably characterize as unsavory sexual behavior, the whole of *Pale Fire* amounts to a denunciation of the cultural circumstances which made Kinbote's Zembla narrative not only possible but a necessary strategy for survival. For all of Kinbote's infelicities, it is the homophobic narrative which has assigned him pathological status in the first place, which has equated his sexual behavior with political treason, and against which he must position himself if he hopes to participate in a Cold War American community. Nabokov's answer to such apparently pandemic cultural narratives is the incorporation and exploitation of chance in its various forms, from linguistic chance (puns and misprints) to circumstantial chance (accidents and effects with unplanned causes), so that for all his elaborate narrative machinations, Kinbote is in the novel's final moments plucked from the perch of God-like coordinator and relegated by the New Wye community to a mere "chance witness" (*P*, 299). Thus the revelatory "retroactive clarification" once demanded by Sergey's diary entry is unavailable in *Pale Fire*; the chance moments in the novel, however aesthetically just and involutedly mimetic, are ultimately Nabokovian plants that function to expose cultural narratives as at best crude proxies for reality and at worst instruments of willful authoritarianism.

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NOTES

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¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam, 1966), 257. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov gives his father's birthday as 20 July 1870 (173), but some Nabokov specialists disagree about the exact date. Alexey Sklyarenko thinks the correct date is 21 July ("Addendum to 'Ada as a Triple Dream,'" *The Nabokovian* 53 [Fall 2004]: 23).

² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 257–58.

³ See, for example, Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (1973; New York: Vintage, 1990), 94, 118. Understanding *Pale Fire*—and Nabokov in general—as chiefly (or only) an aesthetic exercise has been a common critical assessment since the novel's publication. For the best examples of this sort of reading, see the early reviews from 1962, including Mary McCarthy, "A Bolt From the Blue," in *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 15–34; Frank Kermode, "Zemblances," *The New Statesman* (9 November 1962): 671–72; and Dwight Macdonald, "Virtuosity Rewarded, or Dr. Kinbote's Revenge," *Partisan Review* 29 (Summer 1962): 437–42. See also Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970* (New York: Harper, 1971); David Walker, "'The Viewer of the View': Chance and Choice in *Pale Fire*," *Studies in American Fiction* 4 (1976): 203–22; and Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire* (Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1988).

⁴ The containment narrative is shorthand for the cultural extension of America's foreign policy of containment: just as the United States sought to contain Communism abroad both diplomatically and militarily, so too did Americans attempt to contain people or ideas that threatened the domestic status quo. The most successful articulation of the containment narrative's explanatory power for Cold War literature and culture remains Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1995). Recently some Cold War critics, acknowledging the cultural turn in mid-century literary studies exemplified by Nadel's book, have called for assessments of the period that do not rely solely on the containment model but that instead examine other rubrics such as economics. See, for example, Andrew Hoberek, "Cold War Culture to Fifties Culture," *Minnesota Review* 55–57 (2002): 142–52. While Hoberek's suggested critical intervention is a welcome addition to Cold War studies, because *Pale Fire* engages containment politics directly, Nadel's model is useful in reading the novel in its historical and cultural moment.

⁵ In this essay, when I write of the homophobic narrative doing something, I am treating it metonymically, as a way of referring to Cold War psychologists, social critics, clergy, government officials, and others who were active proponents of the homophobic narrative.

⁶ Jonathan Culler, "The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction," in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 16.

⁷ In light of the critical recurrence of so-called single-author theories, let me say here that, for the purposes of this essay, I assume that Shade and Kinbote are two distinct characters in the world of the novel, and that each character has written the part attributed to him. One of the principal debates about *Pale Fire* over the years has

been whether Kinbote and Shade “really” wrote the sections of the work attributed to them by Nabokov. In order to propose solutions to some of the novel’s most urgent problems (for example, why there are so many subtle correspondences between the poem and the commentary), some critics have suggested that either Kinbote or Shade has really written both poem and commentary. Page Stegner in his *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Dial, 1966) was the first to propose Kinbote as the sole author (116–32); Field argued that Shade was the sole author (291–322). Amplifications of both theories have found their way into Nabokov studies since then, a debate helpfully summarized in Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 114–26. Boyd concludes that there are two authors.

⁸ A recent example of an elaborate and ingenious theory that accounts for *Pale Fire*’s coincidences is Boyd’s *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*. Boyd modifies an earlier argument of his to suggest that the spirits of both Hazel and John Shade influenced Kinbote from beyond the grave; he offers compelling evidence for this argument, and one readily assents to his insistence that the supernatural plays an important role in *Pale Fire*, that Aunt Maud communicated with Hazel in the “Haunted Barn” scene, and that after her suicide Hazel herself has transformed from an ugly girl to a beautiful butterfly that flutters around Shade in the moment before his murder.

⁹ Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962; New York: Knopf, 1992), 294. Hereafter abbreviated *P* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹⁰ The parenthetical next to New Wye is meant to suggest that although in *Pale Fire* even the real locale of New Wye takes place in the non-state of Appalachia rather than New York, this non-state can only be evaluated by us relative to our real world. Even so, there is something of a fictional worlds theory to Nabokov’s novels—if his characters’ narratives are mimetic, they must be said to be faithful not to our real world, but to the real fictional world of the novel, an idea elaborated in Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986). See also Richard Walsh, “Fictionality and Mimesis: Between Narrativity and Fictional Worlds,” *Narrative* 11 (2003): 110–21. Walsh offers an able amendment to the fictional worlds theory: “Readers cannot be content merely to construct fictional worlds, as if this in itself were endlessly satisfying; they must also be concerned to evaluate them, to bring them into relation with the larger context of their own experience and understanding” (114). It is this “relation” between New Wye and New York that Nabokov often exploits in *Pale Fire* and upon which my argument partly rests.

¹¹ I borrow the term “narrativize” from Hayden White and invoke it in the sense that he explains in “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (*Critical Inquiry* 7 [1980]), a pithy version of which is the well-known rhetorical question he uses to close the essay: “Could we ever narrativize *without* moralizing?” (27). For the purposes of the present study, let us say that Kinbote’s moral is that Shade was not in fact subject to accidental death and that the value of his Zembla tale is that it apes containment norms but modifies them to allow for homosexuality. Shade’s death is the cause of the Zembla narrative because Kinbote generates the story based on the text of “Pale Fire” and is spurred by the inexplicability of the murder; it is also the effect because through this very Zembla narrative Kinbote hopes to provide a causal explanation for the accidental death.

¹² I do not presume that Nabokov was wholly comfortable with homosexuality but rather that the construction of homosexuality specific to Cold War America was as ridiculous to Nabokov as Kinbote’s Zembla. Nabokov’s personal attitude toward homo-

sexuality is a complicated matter that shifted over time and I do not intend to engage the question in detail here. Lev Grossman argues that despite his love for his brother Sergey, Nabokov “was a confirmed homophobe” (“The Gay Nabokov,” *Salon.com*, 17 May 2000, <http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/2000/05/17/nabokov/index.html>). As I alluded to above, it is true Nabokov had a troubled relationship with Sergey. Steven Bruhm (“Queer, Queer Vladimir,” *American Imago* 53 [1996]: 281–306) cites a 1932 letter quoted by Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990): “[Sergey’s] husband, I must admit, is very pleasant, quiet, not at all the pederast type, attractive in face and manner” (Boyd, *The Russian Years*, 396). Of this letter Bruhm writes: “What we have here is the epistemology of a closet that is both homophobic and queer, one that sees the gay man as a ‘type’ yet that ostentatiously dissociates him from that typology” (295). While a case can be made for Nabokov’s vacillation between these two poles, what Bruhm leaves out of this mix is Nabokov’s conclusion to the transgression of his brother’s privacy in *Speak, Memory*; after relating that Sergey later died in a Nazi concentration camp (his first confinement to which was warranted by his homosexuality), Nabokov strikes a plaintive note: “It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace or redeem” (258). This reads to me like a man who—with the benefit of a half-century’s reflection—is publicly resisting the homosexual “type” he dropped in a private letter. That this resistance comes only in public silence—since one would never know from reading *Speak, Memory* that Sergey’s “oddities” amounted to his homosexuality—is a problem worth thinking about. Although Boyd does not make too much of homosexuality in *Pale Fire*, he does offer the following comment in a note to a passage explaining how Kinbote often turns away from women rather than toward men: “This, I suspect, happens to reflect Nabokov’s attitude to homosexuality. For all his prodigious imagination, he appears not to have been able to imagine in any detail sexual pleasure between men, but he *could* imagine vividly—and only feel as wonderfully absurd—a man’s turning away from the beauties of women” (*Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 279 n. 10). Stacy Shiff, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Random House, 1999), concurs that Sergey’s homosexuality was something “his brother could not easily abide” (99). On the representation of homosexuality in Nabokov’s work, including *Pale Fire*, see Dana Dragunoiu, “Vladimir Nabokov’s *Ada*: Art, Deceptions, Ethics,” *Contemporary Literature* 46 (Summer 2005): 311–39, esp. 335–36.

¹³ See also Jean Walton, “Dissenting in an Age of Frenzied Heterosexualism: Kinbote’s Transparent Closet in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” *College Literature* 21.2 (1994): 89–105, esp. 101.

¹⁴ See D. A. Miller, “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets,” in his *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 192–220. My use of “pathological” plays on the fact that Cold War dissidence—treasonous, sexual, or otherwise—was often equated with germs and pathogens; see, for instance, David Raney, “Culture of Contagion: Germs, Aliens, and American Identity,” *Popular Culture Review* 14 (2003): 55–66; and Michael Rogin, “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies,” *Representations* 6 (1984): 1–36.

¹⁵ I am not suggesting here, as Kermodé does in “Zemblances,” his 1962 review of *Pale Fire*, that Kinbote’s homosexuality is a metaphor for something else; on the contrary, Kinbote’s sexuality has a historically-specific cultural function—to serve as a springboard for his Zembla narrative.

¹⁶ Appending homosexuality to “evil” or subversive characters was standard fare for many American writers during the Cold War. In Norman Mailer’s 1954 essay “The

Homosexual Villain,” for example, he writes: “At the time I wrote those novels [*The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore*], . . . I did believe—as so many heterosexuals believe—that there was an intrinsic relation between homosexuality and ‘evil,’ and it seemed perfectly natural to me, as well as *symbolically* just, to treat the subject in such a way. . . . What I have come to realize is that much of my homosexual prejudice was a servant to my aesthetic needs” (“The Homosexual Villain,” in *Advertisements for Myself* [1959; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992], 223, 227). Part of the present essay’s work is to demonstrate that Nabokov, unlike Mailer in his early novels, is not uncritically attaching homosexuality to Kinbote’s character. For another example of an apparently uncritical pairing of homosexuality with political subversion, see the novel from which I take my title: John LeCarré, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (New York: Dell, 1963). When Alec Leamas—the titular British spy—is tapped as a potential defector by Ashe, a Soviet agent, Leamas thinks: “a little bit petulant, a little bit of a pansy” (46). Later, when describing Ashe to his superiors, Leamas labels him thus: “A man called Ashe. . . . A pansy.” (50). LeCarré has Leamas insist on Ashe’s visible homosexuality, but, after these initial impressions, the subject is dropped, so it seems the conflation of Communism and homosexuality has little function in the book other than its being symbolically just to LeCarré’s readership.

¹⁷ For a detailed explanation of Nabokov’s aversion to Freud, see J. P. Shute, “Nabokov and Freud: The Play of Power,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 30 (1984): 637–50. For some remarks pertaining directly to Freud, see Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 66; and *Pale Fire*, 271, 109. See also Peter Welsen, “Kinbote’s Psychosis—a Key to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” in *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1989), 382–400. Welsen seeks to identify Kinbote’s psychological issues in precise analytical terms, which he argues has not been done properly by Nabokov’s critics; although he succeeds in psychoanalyzing Nabokov’s characters, in the process he falls prey to innumerable critical traps: “King Charles’s guilt feelings result from his relationship to his mother. After the phase of Oedipal identification, a reaction-formation takes place” (391). And so on. This is precisely the language that Nabokov is parodying, not manufacturing wholesale, so it seems to me unhelpful simply to identify similarities between Kinbote’s character and the types suggested by Freudian psychoanalysts without acknowledging the uses to which Nabokov put such similarities. For a comparable reading, see Phyllis Roth, “The Psychology of the Double in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” *Essays in Literature* 2 (1975): 209–29.

¹⁸ Edmund Bergler, *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), 49. See also: Gordon Westwood, *Society and the Homosexual* (New York: Dutton, 1953); Clifford Allen, *Homosexuality: Its Nature, Causation and Treatment* (London: Staples Press, 1958); Jess Stearn, *The Sixth Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1961); and Alfred Gross, *Strangers in Our Midst: Problems of the Homosexual in American Society* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1962).

¹⁹ Westwood, 145.

²⁰ Stearn, 22. I hope that my brief treatment of some of the homophobic narrative’s details will offer a corrective to the idea that in *Pale Fire* homosexuality was equated most importantly with narcissism. I agree with Walton when she writes: “Nabokov’s fictional construction, however ambivalent, of a specifically gay protagonist in *Pale Fire* was the means by which the author could explore his own partial complicity with the cultural imperatives that marginalized and eventually annihilated people like his brother [Sergey]” (103). In order to see exactly how Nabokov explores—and, I argue, laments—such complicity, it is necessary to read *Pale Fire* in light of homosexuality’s

social and political constructions during the Cold War. Bruhm catalogues the “diagnosis of narcissism” made by some critics who have discussed Kinbote’s sexuality and then analyzes how Freud’s understanding of homosexuality informed Cold War sexual discourse: “[I]t would seem that the only vestige of Freudianism in the 1950s’ psychiatric understanding of homosexuality, along with the Oedipal attraction to the mother, is that of narcissism” (287). While Bruhm is certainly correct to insist that charges of narcissism were an important dimension of the Cold War homophobic narrative, it seems difficult to agree that it was, in light of the work of Bergler and others mentioned above, and Oedipal attraction aside, “the only vestige of Freudianism.” The trouble with a critical focus on narcissism is that it leads one to propositions that seem to exempt Nabokov from politics: “Kinbote’s narcissism is not merely a symptom of madness; rather, narcissism is the central trope by which Nabokov defines politics and sexuality as they express themselves in the phobic culture of 1950s America” (Bruhm, 284). Bruhm concludes, however, that Nabokov questions the logic of Kinbote’s homosexuality-as-narcissism: “One object of *Pale Fire*’s satire is the very homogeneity that assumes all gay men are the same, and that they want the same thing. Nabokov queers the representation by exploiting in the ‘narcissist’ the desire for otherness, for individuality, for difference” (302). Reading homosexuality through narcissism preoccupies much of Kevin Ohi’s “Narcissism and Queer Reading in *Pale Fire*,” *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998/1999): 153–78. Ohi argues that homophobic *Pale Fire* critics—Boyd in particular—assume a conflation of homosexuality with narcissism, and thus their critical dissatisfaction with narcissism is really a sly way to express homophobic sentiments. Whether or not it is true that some Nabokov critics have approached the novel with homophobic assumptions (in his response to Ohi’s article Boyd defends himself by pointing out that he has “never used the term [narcissism] in association with homosexuality in print or speech” [“Reflections on Narcissus,” *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998/1999): 179]), Ohi does not acknowledge that such insistent equations between homosexuality, narcissism, and a great many other things mentioned above, were made repeatedly during the Cold War—and, as I have been arguing, are precisely what Nabokov is critical of in *Pale Fire*. See also, Paul Allen Miller, “The Crewcut as Homoerotic Discourse in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” in *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov’s Prose*, ed. David H. J. Larmour (London: Routledge, 2002), 74–88.

²¹ See David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004); the first chapter of Suzanne Clark, *Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial in the Rhetoric of the West* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2000); the introduction to Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997); Lee Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet,” in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994); David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1992); and Andrea Friedman, “The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics,” *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 1105–29.

²² This document is included in Donald Webster Corey, *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach* (New York: Greenberg, 1957), 274–75, which had been through seven printings by 1957. As the subtitle implies, Corey’s study offers a homosexual perspective on the various misunderstandings and prejudices homosexuals faced during the 1950s; “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government” is

included in an appendix as evidence of the officially-sanctioned discrimination against homosexuals. In "The Homosexual Villain," Mailer names Corey's book as the work that changed his attitude toward homosexuality (224–27); the book was also the object of special attack by Bergler (173, 298–300).

²³ Writing with particular reference to Hazel Shade, Walton remarks that despite Nabokov's treatment of male homosexuality in *Pale Fire*, female homosexuality is scarcely conceivable: "Lesbianism, in the world of New Wye, in the world of *Pale Fire* (and doubtless in the world of 1950s middle America) is invisible—not even on the map of erotic possibilities" (94). If there is one thing *Pale Fire* does, however, it indulges in possibility, even the lesbianism of Shade's unmarried Aunt Maud and friends; according to Kinbote: "Aunt Maud was far from spinsterish, and the extravagant and sardonic turn of her mind must have shocked sometimes the genteel dames of New Wye" (*Pale Fire*, 113). When, moreover, Shade has a birthday party, Kinbote sees "ensconced in their tiny Pulex, manned by her boy-handsome tousle-haired girl friend, the patroness of the arts who had sponsored Aunt Maud's last exhibition" (*Pale Fire*, 160). Granted these observations are coming from Kinbote, and whether or not Aunt Maud or the patroness with which she is associated are actually lesbians seems less important than the fact that Nabokov lets such relationships stand on the "map of erotic possibilities."

²⁴ Nabokov, *Pnin* (1957; New York: Vintage, 1989), 114.

²⁵ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 67–68. Nabokov also once remarked that he "derive[d] no pleasure from . . . the artificial coincidences" in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (*Strong Opinions*, 148).

²⁶ See Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (1983; New York: Semiotext(e), 1990). Baudrillard has written provocatively on chance. He stresses, for instance, the close relationship between chance and coincidence: "For there to be chance . . . there must be coincidence: two series have to intersect, two events, two individuals, two particles must meet" (146). These are examples of coincidence in the sense of two co-incidents; I use the term here to mean co-incidents that take on a meaning (perhaps strange or uncanny) for a particular person.

²⁷ See George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25 (1947): 566–82.

²⁸ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 87.

²⁹ Yet by the end of Kinbote's tale, he himself is guilty of punning on an institution's acronym: Shade's murderer "gave his name as Jack Grey, no fixed abode, except the Institute for the Criminal Insane, *ici*, good dog" (*Pale Fire*, 295). Shade later equates the I.P.H. with other institutions, including Communism: "Among our auditors [at the I.P.H.] were a young priest / And an old Communist. Iph could at least / Compete with churches and the party line" (*Pale Fire*, 56).

³⁰ Tony Jackson, "Postmodernism, Narrative, and the Cold War Sense of an Ending," *Narrative* 8 (2000): 328. There are many other histories that attest to the idea that the atomic bomb brought a sobering sense of mortality that was more immediate or tangible than it had been previously; see, for example, Paul Boyer's excellent *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985). Boyer notes that following the first half of the 1950s, during which strenuous efforts were made to domesticate the atom, there was a renewed fear associated with the "nuclear ending" Jackson describes. By 1959 "[a] full-blown fallout scare gripped the nation" (Boyer, 353). It thus seems apropos that Baudrillard

should select the following metaphor in discussing chance: "Chance is the purgatory of causality, where the souls are waiting to be given back their bodies, where effects are waiting for their cause. Just before the nuclear hell where, decidedly, they will be forever annihilated" (Baudrillard, 157). See also Richard Hofstadter's oft-cited 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965), in which he enumerates several "paranoid" aspects suggestive of Kinbote's world view. With the atomic bomb looming large in the American imagination, Hofstadter writes: "Catastrophe or the fear of catastrophe is most likely to elicit the syndrome of paranoid rhetoric" (39).

³¹ Shade is also purposively responding to the cultural dominance of T. S. Eliot when he has his daughter reading from the unidentified *Four Quartets* (*Pale Fire*, 46) and when he writes a parody of *The Waste Land* (*Pale Fire*, 57) hardly more subtle than Humbert's "Because you took advantage of a sinner" jab at "Ash Wednesday" at the end of *Lolita* (Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. and intro. Alfred Appel, Jr. [New York: Vintage Books, 1991], 299–300).

³² We deduce over the course of the novel that Kinbote's "real" name is Botkin, and that if he is not the deposed king of Zembla, then he is a literature scholar from Russia (*Pale Fire*, 267).

³³ McCarthy, 20–21.

³⁴ McCarthy does, however, intimate a political context: "[T]here is in fact a 'Zembla,' behind the Iron Curtain" (18). The handful of short studies that focus on the sources for Zembla do not mention the political importance of Novaya Zemlya in 1959. See, for instance: Gavriilo Shapiro, "Nova Zembla Revisited Once Again," *The Nabokovian* 26 (Spring 1991): 49–51; and John Rea, "And a Nearctic Zembla," *The Nabokovian* 42 (Spring 1999): 9–10. Kinbote insists that "the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian *zemlya*, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections" (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 265); in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov calls Novaya Zemlya "Nova Zembla" (52, 126).

³⁵ *New York Times*, 9 March 1958, 41.

³⁶ "New Soviet Tests of Atom Weapons Disclosed By U.S.," *New York Times*, 8 November 1958, 1. In a 1959 book on the development of Soviet nuclear technology, one discovers that despite initial talks of a test ban, the Soviets stayed their course: "Resume the tests they did, in the fall of 1958, at their Novaya Zemlya test locale just before serious test suspension talks were to begin" (Arnold Kramish, *Atomic Energy in the Soviet Union* [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1959], 131). See also Hanson W. Baldwin, "Decision in Moscow: Khrushchev Is Seen Starting a New Phase of Power Politics," *New York Times*, 3 September 1961, E3. Baldwin includes a huge world map with graphs showing Novaya Zemlya as having by far the largest stockpile of Soviet nuclear weapons.

³⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, 81.

³⁸ Kennan, 575.

³⁹ Although more recent critics tend to ignore or downplay the resemblance of Communism to Zemblan Extremism, the similarity was obvious to the novel's first reviewers. As I mentioned, McCarthy notes Zembla exists behind the iron curtain (18), and Kermode draws attention to Nabokov's "loathing of Marxism" (671). Macdonald wrote his amazingly captious review for the *Partisan Review*, a cultural arbiter that had become staunch in its anti-Stalinism after World War Two. In the course of disparaging *Pale Fire* and extolling Mailer's "The Man Who Studied Yoga" as one of the "best things" from one of the "best novelists of the middle generation" (438), Macdonald reads the Zemblan Revolution as a version of its Russian counterpart by conflating real and imaginary worlds: Kinbote "escapes his Extremist (Communist) assassins [*sic*]" (440).

⁴⁰ When Kinbote remarks he is trying to “coordinate” his notes, he alludes to the strange design Shade sees at work in the universe: “Coordinating these / Events and objects with remote events / And vanished objects. Making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities” (*Pale Fire*, 63). But this coordinate mastery is again undercut by Nabokov, as the very presence of actual chance in real life, from the minor demon radio to the major accident of Shade’s death, tells us that for all Kinbote’s apparent mastery, he is capable of manipulating only text and never texture.

⁴¹ If we hold *Pale Fire* against Richard Condon’s *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959) for a moment, we may glimpse two examples of a late-1950s cultural trope: the idea that an international Communist-like conspiracy should be tied to the chance inherent in a deck of cards. Or perhaps this correspondence is mere coincidence.

⁴² A pertinent line from *Ada* (1969) may clarify Nabokov’s view of a patterned universe. During a discussion of the movies, the sometime-actress Ada tells Van: “In ‘real’ life we are creatures of chance in an absolute void—unless we be artists ourselves, naturally; but in a good play I feel authored, I feel passed by the board of censors, I feel secure” (Nabokov, *Ada: or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969], 426). Prefiguring Ada here, Shade’s great epiphany as an artist is that the universe is for him akin to a good play, and he feels as though accidents and other chance events are actually “ornaments” designed by unknown game players.

⁴³ Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” (1956), in *The Annotated Lolita*, 314.