The Conceptualization of Time in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*

*Space is swarming in the eyes; and time,*

*A Singing in the ears. In this hive I’m locked up.*

(V.Nabokov, *Pale Fire*)

The examination of the concept of time has been one of the main concerns of authors since the ancient days onward. The treatment of time in literature encompasses a broad spectrum of themes and ideas, from the more technical issues of narrative order in a literary text to those fundamental philosophical questions on what the nature of time is and what it truly means to say that we live *in* time. Time remains an inexhaustible topic for discussion - both science and philosophy have gone through momentous changes in their approach to the study of time, opening ever new questions, and closing few, if any. The twentieth century emergence of postmodernism in literature was a period that saw a proliferation of authorial interest in the problem of time, and a challenging of not only the conventions of narrative chronology, but also of the temporal perception of the reader and the nature of the reading experience.

The notion of a subjective understanding of time is certainly not a postmodern invention – the perceived discrepancy between the inner sensation of the flow of time on one hand, and the mechanical movement of the hands of a clock on the other, has never not been one of the central topics for exploration in literature. What postmodernism did was to expand the limits of this exploration in all directions, often under the influence of the groundbreaking scientific discoveries of the early twentieth century which lead to a new conceptualization of time. With the publication of Albert Einstein’s special theory of relativity in 1905 came the abandonment of the Newtonian concept of absolute time, and a radically different interpretation of temporal phenomena. Time was no longer seen as an indifferent cosmic background existing independent of the events that play out on its surface. Under the special theory of relativity, space and time were defined as a unified concept whose examination not only highlighted but was directly dependent on the role of the observer. A parallel can be drawn here between the theoretical breakthroughs in physics at the beginning of the twentieth century and the treatment of time in postmodern fiction during the second half of the century. Non-linear, fragmented narration, seemingly coincidental sequence of events and the employment of highly unreliable narrators became leading vehicles for the discussion of time both within and outside the text. The treatment of time in the novel was now seen as intrinsically connected to the subjective temporal experiences of the characters and the readers alike. As Ursula K. Heise writes,

“One of the most striking developments in the transition from the modernist to the postmodernist novel is the disintegration of narrator and character as recognizable and more or less stable entities, and their scattering or fragmentation across different temporal universes that can no longer be reconciled with each other, or justified by recurring to different psychological worlds” (7).

Postmodern literature did away with all absolutes, dismantled the certainties and celebrated the dissolution of temporal order within the text; it saw as its task to demonstrate the inevitable futility of presenting time as an objective whole. The implications of the newly remodeled perspective of time were not solely reserved for the world inside of a literary text: the very act of writing and reading literature were no longer experiences that could be fixed in time; the text came to be seen as fluid organic matter, restless and renewable with each new reading, detached from any fixed temporal framework. Along these lines, Mark Lipovetsky writes:

“A very important feature of this chronotope, which penetrates all of postmodernist poetics, is the shift of artistic emphasis from the result of a creative act to the unfinished and unfinishable process of creation itself. Its open-endedness acquires an ontological significance in postmodernism; it is presented as a universal metaphor for human life – both for cultural life and for existence in general” (22).

The novel was freed from the cage of linear chronology, and the temporal perspective was no longer the unalterable law laid down by the author; instead, time in the novel was refracted in the observer/reader: each new reading adding an additional temporal dimension. An individual’s inner perception of time took primacy over objective measurements of the passage of moments in time. In the midst of this exciting period for both the scientific and literary investigation of time, the arrival of Vladimir Nabokov’s 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, “a masterpiece of emerging postmodernism in fiction”, provided fresh fodder for the interpretation of temporality in literature and its wider metaphysical connotations (Foster 231).

The problem of time was a perpetual preoccupation for Nabokov, whose “knowledge of and interest in the development of science was central to his effort to conceptualize the world and to make artistic statements about it” (Blackwell 192). His layered texts explore the problem of time in such a way that it is hard to conceive that the critical apparatus could ever exhaust the variety of interpretations of this problem in Nabokov’s novels. Even though historical circumstances which led to the Nabokov family’s exile from Russia and the author’s subsequent nomadic lifestyle undoubtedly shaped his view of time and history, Nabokov’s interest in the passage of time goes beyond the conventional conception of time as an ordered progression of events through past, present and future: “Applied time, measurable illusions of time, are useful for the purposes of historians or physicists, they do not interest me […]” (Nabokov, *Strong…* 38). Examined through an aesthetic lens of a supreme literary master, time in Nabokov’s novels takes on an added significance. Nabokov’s idea of time is primarily related to his rejection of any totalizing reality as such: “You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (qtd. in Graves 9). Nabokov dismisses reality as “permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known”; he replaces the idea of absolute, monolithic truth with the concept of reality as the sum total of subjective interconnected stories, which in turn informs the treatment of time in his novels (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 20). Nabokov writes fiction which categorically denies his readers the comfort of linear narration - time in Nabokov’s novels is mutable, subject to different ways of interpretative reading; he challenges the reader to question the accepted norms of narrative chronology, moving the story though spatial and temporal realms without adherence to any one predictable pattern. As Will Norman and Duncan White argue, “The very fabric of [Nabokov’s] writing is labile, recursive, startling as he sweeps through time and space in the ‘sinuosity’ of a sentence” (2).

In 1964 interview for *Life* magazine, when asked if he would have liked to have lived at any other time that the present one, Nabokov answers:

“My choice of ‘when’ would be influenced by that of ‘where’. As a matter of fact, 1 would have to construct a mosaic of time and space to suit my desires and demands. It would be too complicated to tabulate all the elements of this combination. But I know pretty well what it should include. It should include a warm climate, daily baths, an absence of radio music and traffic noise, the honey of ancient Persia, a complete microfilm library, and the unique and indescribable rapture of learning more and more about the moon and the planets. In other words, I think I would like my head to be in the United States of the nineteen-sixties, but would not mind distributing some of my other organs and limbs through various centuries and countries” (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 11).

Nabokov’s poetic answer serves as a useful indication of his unique literary approach to the problem of time: he is fascinated by the coexistence of the evident rootedness in ‘here’ and ‘now’ on the one hand, and the ability of artistic imagination to transcend the conventional temporal order on the other. Writing about the changes in the sociopolitical situation in the post-soviet era and the resultant shift in the cultural paradigm across different fields, including literature, Alexander Genis notes:

“Linear time, running from past to future, gave way to cyclical time, in which the present is unceasingly produced. Since the end-point disappeared, the scale also changed; from a macrocosm, in which time was measured in historical epochs and economic formations, to a microcosm, measured in seconds” (419).

While the cyclical nature of time is one of the dominant themes in most of his novels, Nabokov’s narratives are never hermetic; as Brian Boyd warns, Nabokov’s “sense of the endless elusiveness of reality […] should not be confused with modern or postmodern epistemological nihilism […]” (*Stalking*… 89). It is not uncommon for postmodern authors to fall into the trap of writing impenetrable, claustrophobic texts, in an attempt to demonstrate the essential subjectivity of time perception. Nabokov avoids this trap by reinventing the concept of time as a circle where the repetition of moments leaves no room for existence beyond the conventional time scale, and offers instead an image of time as a continuous spiral: “The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free” (qtd. in Connolly 45). We will see on the example of *Pale Fire* how Nabokov’s notion of time, despite being cyclical is not oppressively repetitive: the narrative is layered, and yet it allows the possibility of redemptive reading. Ultimately, *Pale Fire* is a text of paradoxes, and as such, it approaches the very essence of the nature of time, as closely and as accurately as a work of art is capable of doing so.

The transformation of the temporal dimension from a locked circle into a liberating spiral is the idea central to understanding Nabokov’s conceptualization of time in *Pale Fire*. Decades after the novel’s publication, the interpretation of its complex plot is still a bone of contention among literary critics. According to the dominant interpretation, the crux of the novel is the eponymous nine hundred and ninety-nine lines long poem in four cantos by an esteemed American poet John Shade; together with a foreword, a long and convoluted commentary and the adjoining index, written by Vseslav Botkin – the paranoid and delusional Russian scholar who believes himself to be the exiled King Charles of Zembla – it makes up the internal structure of the novel. The central story, however, is not arrived at directly by following the conventions of linear reading: Nabokov applies his theory of time as a spiral to the formal structure of the novel, where frequent shifts in perspective, simultaneous events recounted in retrospect and multiple intersecting storylines form an intricate temporal network. As Brian Boyd states, “In *Pale Fire* the process of discovery awaiting Shade and the reader retraces the spiral that runs through all Nabokov's metaphysics and his art, his lifelong image for the opening out of all closed circles into dimensions of ever greater freedom” (*Shade and Shape*… 9). The story is narrated by Charles Kinbote – the adopted alias of professor Botkin – who befriends John Shade hoping that the poet would transform Kinbote’s by all accounts entirely fabricated life story into a work of art. Kinbote believes he is being pursued by a renegade Zemblan anti-royalist Jakob Gradus – who on closer reading is revealed to be Jack Grey, a mentally ill criminal seeking revenge on the judge whose house Kinbote rents. The manner, in which Kinbote – the archetypal unreliable narrator – constructs the story of Gradus’ passage from the kingdom of Zembla to a small American college town of New Wye, illuminates the spiral nature of time in the novel. Kinbote retraces Gradus’ steps in such a way that the reader is not given the complete picture of the “clockwork man” at once, nor is his image ever firmly fixed in time at any point in the text (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 124). Instead, Kinbote announces he will dutifully follow Gradus through the rotating space-time continuum of the novel, and as Gradus advances closer to Kinbote, the reader too is able to slowly discern the increasingly sharper image of the approaching figure: “I have staggered the notes referring to him in such a fashion that the first […] is the vaguest while those that follow become gradually clearer as gradual Gradus approaches in space and time” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 123). At first, the descriptions of Gradus in Kinbote’s notes are too vague for the reader to make the causal connection between the Zemblan revolutionary and the announced death of poet John Shade, yet as Kinbote reminisces: “all the time he was coming nearer” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 214); as the narrative progresses, Kinbote’s commentary deviates from the conventions of literary criticism he had vowed to follow, and Gradus’ storyline begins to overlap more and more frequently with that of Kinbote and Shade’s “one sided literary friendship”, during the period from Febraury to June 1959 in New Wye (Pellérdi 84). The occasional inadvertent intrusions of Kinbote’s dissociative thoughts in the commentary add yet another temporal dimension which intersects with the two mentioned: namely, the time period between August and October 1959 which Kinbote spent in a remote cabin in Cedarn, Utana, organizing his notes and composing the largest part of the commentary for the posthumous publication of Shade’s poem.

Gradus’ journey is spatially removed from, but temporally concurrent with Shade’s writing of his autobiographical poem “Pale Fire”. While the two storylines run side by side in Kinbote’s commentary, they do not form a perfect circle in time: Kinote’s meandering thoughts twist the narrative into a spiral; he seduces the reader with false memories of his childhood spent in Zembla, pulling the narration further back in time – only to intercept it at the next curve of the spiral with an episode closer to the present moment, often a comical anecdote from his days spent at Wordsmith college teaching Russian. The chronological analysis is additionally complicated by Kinbote’s disruptive comments relating to the time of the writing of the commentary, as he sits in his mountain cabin in Cedarn, his mental state deteriorating; he interrupts a sentence midway to express his irritation at the music coming through the window from a radio which he mistakes for an amusement park: “[…] and damn that music”, complains about his worsening headaches: “Migraine again worse today”, and grows increasingly anxious and unable to concentrate: “Dear Jesus, do something” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 12, 78, 128). In this way, Nabokov toys with the readers’ expectations of chronological order, putting the conventional perception of time in a literary text to the ultimate test. Nabokov sees time as an everlasting present – an interconnected totality of all moments that have already happened, or will happen eventually, and it is only the limitations of our senses that prevent us from accessing the true essence of time. Along these lines, Tetyana Lyaskovets illustrates Nabokov’s theory of time as intrinsically inadvisable from spatial reality: “[…] through the spatial metaphor of time as a "magic carpet," Nabokov counters the traditional, uniform clock time […], whose pace the writer can control by folding and unfolding it to superimpose distant images imprinted on it” (*Time*… 2). The concept of time envisaged in this manner allows for events that are geographically separated to converge at various points on the spiral of time. When Charles Kinbote writes about the adventures of Gradus’ odyssey from Zembla to America, he repeatedly reminds the reader what the poet John Shade happens to be doing at that very moment in time: “His departure for Western Europe, with a sordid purpose in his heart and a loaded gun in his pocket, took place on the very day that an innocent poet in an innocent land was beginning Canto two of Pale Fire” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 67). Elsewhere, he writes “John Shade’s heart attack practically coincided (Oct. 17, 1958) with the disguised king’s arrival in America […]” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 194). The gap in the fabric of spacetime between the two storylines grows successively narrower until the fated concurrence on July 21, 1959: “Two silent time zones had now merged to form the standard time of one’s man fate; and it’s not impossible that the poet in New Wye and the thug in New York awoke that morning at the same crushed beat of their Timekeeper’s stopwatch” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 214). Nabokov does not see time as following a straight arrow that extends from left to right, leaving past moments to recede from view, never to be repeated again. Instead, the conceptualization of time in Nabokov’s poetics allows for the meeting points between spatially isolated events: in the place of an arrow, there appears a spiral where time is deeply embedded in the texture of reality(ies), the two forming together an elaborate network, an intricate pattern of meaning, a “web of sense” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 53).

Nabokov’s favoring of the spiral over an arrow or a circle as visual representations of time is related to the idea of liberation from the confines of perception or, as Brian Boyd puts it, “the unique freedom of the mind within the moment and […] its power to reach beyond its time or place by connecting one thing with another in memory or imagination” (*Stalking*… 60). The arrow signifies a single direction in time - a straight line that excludes the possibility of any divergence from the one-lane road: both past and future events stay permanently beyond reach; the circle, on the other hand, while superior to an arrow in so far as it allows the repetition of events, it is deficient in the sense that it leaves no room for change – the reproduction of the same moments in time is ominously endless. Nabokov’s spiral then emerges as a wider, more inclusive concept of time, superior to both the arrow and the circle. As Vladimir E. Alexandrov writes, “The spiral is thus a form that reconciles repetitions with change through time: repetitions are implied by the fact that whorls follow each other even as they describe new arcs, and time is symbolized by the imaginary axis around which the whorls are arranged” (*Nabokov’s*… 39). Similarly, Patricia Drechsel Tobin writes about Nabokov’s spiral as a means of escape from the rigid conventions of linear time:

“Because it is asymmetrical, the spiral does not produce mirror images, but rather imperfect reflections and refractions, catching within its coils the effect of abundant layerings, of wayward surprises. Since time may be spun off at any point along its coils, since its open end refutes any circular enslavement by time, the spiral symbolizes whatever liberation is possible to the human spirit that must exist within a ‘spherical prison’, a ‘ball of glass’” (153).

*Pale Fire* is a text which testifies to both the danger of circular temporal repetition and the inviting prospect of liberation offered in the spiral of time, a form that “transcends the spirit and fact of opposition, while preserving the oppositions even as they are surpassed” (Tobin 154). The former is embodied in the delusional narcissist narrator Charles Kinbote, whose irrational thought patterns prevent him from bypassing the circular confines of his mind, and the latter in the poet John Shade, whose intellectual honesty and genuine empathy offer a glimpse of redemption, and a promise of transcendence. Nabokov thus offers the creative spirit of art which - “seeks out the irregularities, the singularities and incongruous details” - as the prime instrument for casting aside the conventional conceptualization of time as a linear dimension; to think of time as a straight arrow or a closed circle would mean to deny the higher faculties of mind – which give rise to the creative spirit - to go beyond the perceptual limits of the five human senses (Balckwell 198). In a 1964 interview for *Playboy* magazine Nabokov shows Alvin Toffler index cards with some of the notes he made while writing *Pale Fire* - one particularly telling one reads, “Time without consciousness - lower animal world; time with consciousness - man; consciousness without time - some still higher state” (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 7). It is this third stage in one’s relation to time that Nabokov aims for - his sophisticated literary devices become a paragon of temporal transcendence. For Nabokov, it is not enough to be conscious of the passage of time, and have the capacity to measure the fleeting moments using artificial methods; the aim is rather to surpass the boundaries of the senses, and reach through artistic imagination a panoptic view of time and consciousness:

“Because the essential feature of the experience is the individual’s ability to apprehend connection among many phenomena that are not necessarily contiguous in terms of space, time, or causality, as well as between phenomena and himself, the process might also be designated multidimensional metaphoric thinking or cognition.” (Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s*… 27).

The calling of an artist then is to exercise the higher states of consciousness in such a way that, through the supreme act of creation, the mind can reach what lies beyond its self-limiting nature and behind the pre-established models of temporal perspective. As Brian Boyd - writing about the “metaphysical implications” of Nabokov’s style – notes, “Consciousness at full stretch can pass beyond its impromptu range” (*Stalking*… 269). It is the imaginative expression of consciousness that affords an artist a glimpse into the nature of time as an ideal form - an all-encompassing spiral where past, present, and future are matters of perspective, rather than laws of nature: “Inspiration and the writing of poetry are thus an expression of Nabokov’s banging of his fists against the walls of time” (Morris 98). Similarly, Leona Toker uses the metaphor of the Möbius strip to illustrate the way the homogeneity of time and consciousness is reflected in the unique treatment of chronology in Nabokov’s novels: “The consciousness of the transformation of the duality of the physical and the spiritual into a continuum may be regarded as the metaphysical background of the self-reflexive Möbius strip narrative structure in most of Nabokov’s major novels” (qtd. in Alexandrov, *The Garland*… 369). Through the form of the spiral, or a Möbius strip in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov validates the idea that the fundamental properties of time reside simultaneously – and paradoxically - within and outside the conscious self; as the true essence of time can only be reached once the paradox is accepted in favor of the simplistic notion of time as separate from consciousness, it is the task of an artist to highlight the idiosyncratic quality of time, rather than make attempts at resolving the paradox.

In *Pale Fire*, the poet John Shade is the one who intuitively perceives that the mysterious nature of time lies beyond the measurements made by a mechanical clock. By the virtue of being a true artist, Shade is able to – if not fully transcend his temporal self – at the very least to instinctively recognize the possibility of such transcendence. Nabokov offers the creative process as an alternative model of temporal awareness – a symbolic mode of transport through time and space: “Although one cannot escape time, as much as one would wish, in real life, which is too limited for that escape, one can transcend its limits and make the past contemporaneous with the present through imagination and art endowed with intense emotion” (Lyaksovets, *Approaching*… 107). John Shade in *Pale Fire* echoes Nabokov’s confirmed belief in the power of artistic imagination to transcend the traditional conceptualization of time; he embodies Nabokov’s conviction that life and art are inseparable from one another, and that it is only through artistic endeavors that can one reach beyond the commonalities of everyday life, including the conventional notion of linear time. Along these lines, James M. Tonn rightly notes that,

“Nabokov often associates modes of thought that defy time and space with art and artists. Just as they have a capacity for thinking about several things at once, Nabokov's artists generally have an ability to think about many times at once, or in other words, like Nabokov they do not "believe in time" and disregard the notion that events are discrete and discontinuous“ (125).

The artists of Nabokov’s novels challenge the established norms of temporal logic by way of creative imagination that stands in firm opposition to common sense, which in Nabokov’s words, “is square whereas all the most essential visions and values of life are beautifully round, as round as the universe or the eyes of a child at its first circus show” (Nabokov, *The Art*... 1). In the lecture titled “The Art of Literature and Commonsense”, which Nabokov gave as a part of his creative writing course at Stanford University, the author stresses the importance of overcoming common sense in favor of imagination, and states the following:

“The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present and the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the non-ego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner - who is already dancing in the open” (6).

What Nabokov is describing in this passage is the liberating experience of timelessness that manifests itself during the intense moments of artistic inspiration. Such moments cannot follow the conventions of chronological order, since – as Nabokov believes - the work of art exists already in its full form beyond the conventional representations of time and prior to the actual process of creation: “Time and sequence cannot exist in the author’s mind because no time element and no space element had ruled the initial vision” (Nabokov, *The Art*… 7). The flashes of inspiration then afford the artist a revealing insight into the nature of time that is otherwise denied the uninspired mind. The artist has the ability to recall the past and anticipate the future with the same undeniable intensity that characterizes the experience of the present moment. Conceived in this way, the temporal dimension can no longer be seen as a steady linear progression but rather as a totality of repeating cycles, since “not only does time disappear during epiphanic moments, but because events from the past are automatically evoked by analogous experiences in the present, life emerges as patterned with repetitions” (Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s*… 39).

John Shade’s autobiographical poem “Pale Fire” serves as a vivid illustration of how the moments of artistic inspiration throughout the poet’s life combined to allow him an intuitive grasp of the infinite nature of time. In the poem, Shade recalls the first of such moments, or “sunbursts” as he calls them, asserting their illuminating quality: “When I’d just turned eleven, as I lay / Prone on the floor and watched a clockwork toy - / A tin wheelbarrow pushed by a tin boy - / Bypass chair legs and stray beneath the bed / There was a sudden sunburst in my head” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 31). The mystical moments of artistic genius are virtually instantaneous in nature and as such – existing outside of the measurable space and time – they conjure up in the mind of the artist a momentary vision of timelessness that passes human understanding: “During such moments, consciousness slips the confines of time and space as conventionally known to enter a realm where temporal chronology and physical proximity are no longer of defining relevance” (Lyaksovets, *Approaching*… 103). These sudden flashes of artistic inspiration also serve to highlight Shade’s twofold understanding of time. On the one hand, he strives to achieve an aestheticism of temporality that will surpass the sensory perception of time, while and on the other, the aging poet remains painfully aware of his own mortality announced by the fleetingness of each moment, and personified in the clockwork toy which, as Kinbote tells us, Shade “kept as a kind of memento mori” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 112). As an artist, Shade wants to extract meaning from temporal existence, while at the same time struggling against the awareness of the self-limiting nature of consciousness: he is both fascinated by time, and feels trapped beneath the “giant wings” of “infinite foretime and infinite aftertime” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 30). Echoing Nabokov’s own enthrallment with the prospect of being simultaneously present in various places and at various points in time, Shade too experiences an unconscious desire for timelessness brought to light during moments of artistic inspiration:

“And then black night. That blackness was sublime.

I felt distributed through space and time.

One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand

Under the pebbles of a panting strand,

One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,

In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 31).

The moments of creative vision thus serve to secure the reconciliation between the perceptually restricted consciousness and the directly unknowable nature of time; for the poet, they are the vehicles of transcendence fueled by the inner foreknowledge of immortality:

“If time and space tend to isolate the important moments of experience such that their sublime meaning is almost perpetually out of reach, then achieving a form of awareness that negates these divisive forces is not just an opportunity to make a modicum of sense of the far-flung and fleeting episodes of life, but a thrilling feat of defiance against an oppressive force and a means to attain a higher view of life's order” (Tonn 127).

The power of imagination manifested in such moments of inspiration is capable of evoking before the mind’s eye all of time and space in one instant; it does not conform to any established chronological norms, it pays no heed to the false promise of objective knowledge offered by the sensory perception, and as such, leaves no room for the common sense since - in Nabokov’s words - it is “only commonsense [that] rules immortality out” (*The Art*… 5). As Vladimir E. Alexandrov writes, “The characteristic features of Nabokov’s epiphanies are a sudden fusion of varied sensory data and memories, a feeling of timelessness, and intuitions of immortality” (*The Garland*… 569). John Shade is able to intuit a faint promise of a timeless existence precisely by the virtue of being an artist; his desire for immortality – unlike that of Charles Kinbote - is not a narcissistic impulse, as its significance lies beyond the crude instinct to prolong one’s life. Shade’s aspiration towards transcendence of the temporal realm is largely selfless in nature, animated by interpersonal relationships with others, rather than hardened by self-interest. The poet’s genuine quest for immortality is especially associated with the grief for his daughter Hazel Shade, a socially awkward, melancholy girl who drowned in an apparent suicide when she was a student. In the following lines of the poem Shade recalls the night he and his wife Sybil learnt the news of their daughter’s death, articulating the helplessness integral to the human awareness of transience, which prompts him to feel betrayed by the causal indifference of time to human life: “Out of his lakeside shack / A watchman, Father Time, all grey and bent / Emerged with his uneasy dog and went / Along the reedy bank. He came too late” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 42). Still, Shade’s poem is not an expression of a premeditated desire to achieve artistic immortality by drawing on a traumatic event from the author’s life. Instead, “Pale Fire” is informed by pure emotion and honest intention, suggestive of the moments of inspiration that arise from a timeless sense of self and prior to the conception of the poem; as such, it conveys the poet’s sincere desire to transcend time in the hope that his daughter is still alive somewhere, outside of the temporal realm of existence. As Elizabeth Kaye Cook poignantly puts it, “When Shade arranges his memories in the form of art, he burns the dross that obscured truth, and by taking authority over space and time he can snatch his daughter up from an absurd and cruel past and bring her into a posthumous wealth of meaning and love” (29).

Antithetical to the honesty and compassion espoused by John Shade’s poem is the obsessive, self-serving narration of Charles Kinbote. Even though it could be said that Kinbote is an artist in his own right – his supposedly objective piece of literary criticism is actually a fantastical invention relating the story of King Charles the Beloved, ruler of Zembla - his art is false, unrepentantly insular. Kinbote’s megalomania is the point of origin around which his narrative circles manically, seeking to validate itself through fantasy. Kinbote’s delusions keep the scope of his narration within the narrow confines of his increasingly deteriorating mind, where irrational thoughts run an infinite loop. As Stephen H. Blackwell notes, Kinbote belongs to a group of Nabokov’s “characters whose relationship to the world approaches pure solipsism” (12). What this means is that Kinbote’s writing is concerned only with itself, oblivious to the existence of other realities, arrogantly dismissive of different perspectives. The purpose of Kinbote’s creation is not to find evidence of there being a temporal realm beyond one’s immediate reality, as was the case with John Shade’s poem; instead, Kinbote’s narration only seeks to satisfy his desperate need to prove that he truly is Charles Xavier, the deposed king of northern land of Zembla. Everything that takes place outside of Kinbote’s own conception of space and time is filtered through the prism of delusion and paranoia. The moments of inspiration encouraged in Shade the belief in the continuation of existence beyond the conventions of time, but deranged Kinbote fails to recognize them as the source of temporal transcendence; instead, he puts on a narrow-minded interpretation on the flashes of artistic inspiration, taking them merely as a confirmation of his own religious fanaticism:

“[…] but sometimes when the poet paced back and forth across his lawn, or sat down for a moment on the bench at the end of it, or paused under his favorite hickory tree, I could distinguish the expression of passionate interest, rapture and reverence, with which he followed the images wording themselves in his mind, and I knew that whatever my agnostic friend might say in denial, at that moment Our Lord was with him” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 75).

Evidently, Kinbote is incapable of the kind of temporal transcendence granted to Shade through the creative process. Shade is able to recall past memories and transpose them from one temporal dimension into another, in such a way that their fixedness in time or place becomes contingent, and secondary to the reality of the poem. Kinbote’s invention, on the other hand, is steeped in deceit and pretension, impotent to go beyond the boundaries of time-dependent ego. Kinbote arrogantly proclaims that, unlike Shade, he has never experienced the moments of artistic inspiration - “My own boyhood was too happy and healthy to contain anything remotely like the fainting fits experienced by Shade” – and since he cannot conceive of other inner worlds beyond his own, he dismisses the animate bouts of creativity as epileptic fits: ”it must have been with him a mild form of epilepsy, a derailment of the nerves at the same spot, on the same curve of the tracks, every day, for several weeks, until nature repaired the damage” (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 120). Kinbote’s narration is self-admiring and contrived - he fabricates a story so astonishingly rich in detail, whose only purpose is to rationalize the inner compulsions of a deranged mind; Kinbote is disdainful of anyone who threatens to expose the falsehood of his story, refusing to acknowledge the existence of any spatial or temporal dimension that does not emanate directly from his consciousness – which is precisely why his narrative fails to offer a promise of temporal transcedence. Stephen H. Blackwell identifies this self-sabotaging trait in a number of Nabokov’s characters, including Charles Kinbote:

“This is the limit case of epistemological blindness: a character’s deepest flaws, passions, and insecurities cause the creation of an alternate reality in conflict with the one perceived by others. Fragments of “real life” might contradict necessary features of that imaginary world, but they are modified or elided by those same cognitive mechanisms that fill in the gaps of a healthy outlook. The result, in Nabokov’s worlds, is usually harm or even death to someone within reach of the afflicted character” (12).

In Kinbote’s case, the result is most likely suicide, even though this is not explicitly confirmed anywhere in the novel. Nabokov himself stated in an interview that, “Kinbote committed suicide…after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem” (qtd. in Rutledge 81). If Charles Kinbote does end his own life, this only further solidifies the theory that timelessness is denied to him – he remains unable to break away from the circular thought pattern that keeps him permanently confined in space and time.

Kinbote’s relationship to time is different than Shade’s in so far that - even though Shade feels trapped in time - he is able to grasp the meaning of infinity through his art, while Kinbote is completely possessed by time, devoted to noting down the hours of the day and the days of the year of each event he recounts - believing that in this way he can grant legitimacy to his story. As Elizabeth Kaye Cook writes, “Whereas Shade shows only minimal concern for pinning events to exact time/space coordinates, Kinbote shows a mania for matching imagined events of the past to very specific instances in time” (25). Since Kinbote is preoccupied with the conventional ways of measuring time, his story cannot reach anyone as it stays enslaved to the stifling norms of time perception. The narration of Charles Kinbote is always self-referential which keeps the story trapped in the vicious circle of invariably repeating obsessive thoughts. Kinbote remains imprisoned by his interior circular conception of time, mimicking the whirring sounds of the radio - that “rotating, malicious music” - coming through the window of his cabin (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 15). Brian Richardson identifies the circular temporal perception in fiction as one of the six types of “realistic temporality” in postmodern novels, writing that “this kind of fiction […] always returns to and departs from its point of origin – which is also its (temporary) conclusion” (48). This is precisely why Kinbote’s story – unlike Shade’s poem - cannot transcend time, as it represents a self-referential system with no possibility of circumvention. Kinbote desperately wants to escape from the vicious circle - “that carrousel inside and outside my head” - but his inner-directed delusions do not permit self-escapement, which is why he most likely chooses suicide as the means of deliverance (Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 23). Had Kinbote been able to create a work of art that acknowledges the existence of other consciousness, he might have been able to escape the prison of time; but Kinobte is a madman, not an artist, and “Lunatics […] have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power […] to create a new one as harmonious as the old. The artist on the other hand disconnects what he chooses and while doing so he is aware that something in him is aware of the final result (Nabokov, *The Art*… 5).

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* ultimately underlies the paradoxical nature of time and the essential inadequacy of human perception, allowing for a wide range of interpretations concerning its treatment of time. Brian Boyd warns against the conventional reading of Nabokov’s novels when he writes that, “Nabokov suggests possibilities and possibilities within possibilities or, if you like, worlds within worlds: worlds in regression” (*Stalking*… 69). This means that Nabokov never comforts the reader with privileging one interpretative mode over another: even though Shade and Kinbote’s - the artist and the madman’s - understanding of time differ greatly, they are both allowed to coexist stably within the text of the novel. Nabokov – same as John Shade and Charles Kinbote – felt imprisoned by the temporality of existence, and thus he took upon himself the task of demystifying the role of perception in the conceptualization of time, underlining the importance of the never-ending pursuit of liberation: “Always passionately concerned with freedom, Nabokov sought it […] in the possibility that somehow human freedom might escape what he saw as the amazingly spacious but still unreachable prison of time, personality, mortality” (Boyd, *Nabokov’s*… 10). This is why the narrative of *Pale Fire* traverses the fabric of spatial and temporal dimensions, always in search for new perspectives, and different points of view, as “no matter how much we can find out, there is always more behind things – beyond our human sense of space and time” (Boyd, *Stalking*… 88).

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