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Priscilla Meyer
Wesleyan University, pmeyer@wesleyan.edu

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Pale Fire *as Cultural Astrolabe: The Sagas of the North*

PRISCILLA MEYER

> I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe. I have to make a rapid inventory of the universe.... I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of it is taken off.
>
> Vladimir Nabokov
> *Speak, Memory* (p. 297)

Pale Fire may be understood as a kind of historical atlas in four dimensions of the piece of space-time relevant to Nabokov. It contains a complex set of coordinates for its own interpretation, so that the novel can be used as an astrolabe to navigate in both the fictional and the historical world. The particular "mortal love" that is the center of Nabokov's personal universe in *Pale Fire* is his love for his father; the "remote point of the universe" is the North of the time of the Vikings.[1]

A web of disguised details in *Pale Fire* refers to entire realms of history, through which Nabokov sketches the evolution of Anglo-American culture from its beginnings, discerning a thematic unity in a thousand years of cultural evolution that adumbrates his personal fate. Nabokov parodies this endeavor in Kinbote's superimposition of his imaginative universe on Shade's poem.

Nabokov's atlas of the North alludes to the historical, geographical, botanical, zoological, literary, and linguistic evolution of that part of the globe. This richly interconnected material begins chronologically with the origins of five northern cultures in their national epics, each representing a different language group:

[1] The Viking material has gone almost totally unnoticed. In *The Underside of the Weave: Some Stylistic Devices Used by Vladimir Nabokov* (Uppsala, 1973), Jessie Thomas Lokrantz notes Swedish and Norwegian place names that are mirrored in *Pale Fire*, as well as the origins of the name Disa in Nordic mythology, but he does not interpret Nabokov's use of them. Peter Lubin has a lot of fun with kennings, Anglo-Saxon, and Slavic etymologies in "Kickshaws and Motley," *TriQuarterly*, no. 17 (1970), pp. 187-208, though he makes no explicit interpretive use of his rich material.

1. The *Kalevala*—Finland (Finno-Ugric).
2. James MacPherson's *Ossian*—Scotland (Celtic).
3. *The Song of Igor's Campaign*—Russia (Slavic).[2]
4. The life and works of King Alfred—England (Anglo-Saxon).
5. The Icelandic Eddas—Scandinavia (Germanic).

Regicide, murder and revenge are recurring themes in Scandinavian lore; in the Eddas they are shown to be transcended through poetry. That idea is central to *Pale Fire:* the story of Amloði is emblematic because of its transformation into Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*[3] Analogously, Cromwell's regicide is redeemed by Marvell's poetry, a truer restoration than that of Charles II.[4]

Literary art is made of language, the principal instrument of cultural evolution; travelers and translators effect cultural cross-fertilization. *Pale Fire* sets out these principles through a system of intertwining allusions to actual Scandinavian and medieval travelers, translators into and out of French, Russian, Anglo-Saxon, Latin and English, encyclopedists, and editors, suggesting a parallel between the evolution of human literary culture and that of the natural world.[5] In *Pale Fire*, an entire country grows out of a new linguistic synthesis: Kinbote constructs his own imaginary world, Zembla, out of Slavic and Germanic elements.[6] The artificial Zemblan language appears to be a sterile dead end, since Kinbote is its only speaker. Behind the more easily accessible roots, however, lie Old Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon roots that point to Nabokov's personal concern with regicide and revenge.[7] The Scandinavian material, then, is but one of many icebergs that peek through the mirroring surface of the seas of *Pale Fire*, often only through the use of one highly specific word.[8] Before

[2] For a discussion of 2 and 3, see Priscilla Meyer, "Nabokov's Non-Fiction as Reference Library: Ossian, Igor and Kinbote," *Slavic Review*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1988).

[3] See Priscilla Meyer, "Reflections of Shakespeare: *Pale Fire* and Cultural Synthesis," forthcoming in *Russian Literature Triquarterly* (fall 1988).

[4] See Priscilla Meyer, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Restoration of Charles II," *The Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 15, no. 1 (July 1988).

[5] To be demonstrated in Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden*, forthcoming from the Wesleyan University Press.

[6] In "Nabokov's Zemblan: A Constructed Language of Fiction," *Linguistics*, vol. 31 (1967), pp. 44-49, John R. Krueger notes the "overlays" of Northern Germanic (i.e., Scandinavian) borrowings in Zemblan which he finds to be essentially West Germanic with Slavic loans and a few Romance words.

[7] See Priscilla Meyer, "Etymology and Heraldry: Nabokov's Zemblan Translations," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*," vol. 29, no. 4 (1987), pp. 432-441.

[8] E.g., Queen Yaruga's name comes from a "comparatively rare" old Russian word for "ravine" used three times in *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, as Nabokov notes in his commentary to it (New York, 1960, p. 95). Names are, of course, even more specific kinds of words; conspicuous examples are Kinbote's friend "Billy Reading" (William Reading was an English minister who read a sermon deploring regicide on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Charles I [William Reading, *David's Loyalty to King Saul*, London, 1715]), and Shade's neighbor "Paul Hentzner" (an actual Paul Hentzner wrote a vivid account of meeting Elizabeth I in 1598 [William B. Rye, ed., *England as Seen by Foreigners*, London, 1865, pp. 101-113]).

embarking on detailed explication, it will be helpful to outline some of the ideas governing Nabokov's selection and articulation of materials.

Pale Fire is constructed of multiple mirrorings, as many have noted.[9] The reflections are generated by Nabokov's personal synthesis of several cultural traditions. Nabokov can declare "I was an English child" and with equal justification lovingly recall his "Russian childhood."[10] His earlier books were written in Russian and translated into English, his later ones written in English and translated into Russian. His *oeuvre* thus sets up the Anglo-American and the Russian cultural traditions as mirror images of each other, in a very personal sense. For example, *Lolita* effects a synthesis of American and Russian culture by its hidden incorporation of *Eugene Onegin*, using the hundred-year interval between Pushkin's birth in 1799 and Nabokov's in 1899;[11] *Pale Fire* outlines the thousand-year evolution of the Anglo-American tradition from the end of the reign of King Alfred in 899 to the birth of Vladimir Vladimirovich in 1899. History mirrors Nabokov's personal biography: British culture had early connections to Russian culture, the beginnings of both being bridged by the Vikings, who traveled east to Novgorod, west to Vineland, and conquered parts of what would become England.

Nabokov's method of relating his personal world to remote points of the universe may be seen in the accumulation of precise details designed to interweave life and art, fact and fiction, history and literature. Nabokov creates his own "web of sense" through the careful investigation of multiple fields of data gleaned from the man-made and natural universes, in order to explain, explicate and somehow justify, even expiate, his own fate. As we know, dates play an important role in Nabokov's system of deciphering the hidden patterns of creation, the recurring motifs and themes of his own existence.[12] Chronology functions as the universal joint between the verifiable world of natural and human history and the world created by human imagination. Through scrutiny of the interplay between these spheres, Nabokov considers the nature of death and the hereafter. Laughing at the impossibility of his enterprise as he engages in it, he tries to interpret the workings of fate by forcing it into his very personal schema.

Nabokov's well-known outrage at the cliché of death, at its thuggish ability to obliterate the exquisite universe of a human mind, is coupled to the pain he felt at the death of his father, who was accidentally shot by a political assassin. *Pale Fire* conspicuously refers to that tragedy in the manner of John

[9] Especially Mary McCarthy, "A Bolt from the Blue," *A Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays*, London, 1970, pp. 15-34.

[10] *Strong Opinions*, New York, 1981, p. 81, p. 10.

[11] See Priscilla Meyer, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and Pushkin's *Onegin:* McAdam, McEve and McFate," in George Gibian and Stephen Jan Parker, eds., *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov*, Ithaca, NY, 1984, pp. 179-211.

[12] Compare Pekka Tammi's discussion of Nabokov's "theme of correlations" in *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics*, Helsinki, 1985, pp. 18-20.

Shade's accidental murder. Nabokov's attempt to make sense of this fatal moment in his life is the ultimate moving force behind his correlation of the history, literature, natural evolution, and language of the North over the last one thousand years with the problem of murder and revenge. Nabokov seeks to transcend fate through immortal art. In his four-dimensional universe throbs a love and reverence for a creation infinitely complex and beautiful and only partly knowable. Astonishingly, Nabokov manages to mirror all this in *Pale Fire*, creating his own universe that is at once temporal and specific as well as infinite and universal. As Kinbote says of Shade's work, "the poet's plan is to display in the very texture of his text the intricacies of the 'game' in which he seeks the key to life and death" (Note to lines 734-5).

Nabokov therefore structures his novel as an annotation of history from his personal viewpoint, weaving a hidden tale into a vast public tapestry. Here the strands of Viking history and literature will be explicated.

Viking History

Viking civilization is the earliest point to which Americans can trace their history. The Vikings of Iceland and Greenland were the first to discover Vineland, which they named for the grapes they found growing wild there. Erik the Red landed by mistake on the northeast coast of Canada in 982 after he was banished from Iceland for manslaughter. According to the *Greenlanders' Saga*, his son Leif Erikson landed on the northernmost coast of Newfoundland, arriving at what is now Belle Isle Strait,[13] after Bjarni Herjolfsson had found it when blown off course in 986. Norsemen made several attempts to settle there, but hostilities with Eskimos and Indians ended these efforts by 1020, although trips were known to have been made in the twelfth century and as late as the fourteenth.

Vikings also founded colonies in the British Isles and Normandy. In Ireland, the small Celtic settlement of Dublin was occupied in 836 by Turgeis (in *Pale Fire* Thurgus the Third, called the Turgid, is Kinbote's grandfather), who had it fortified in 840. Only then did Dublin become an important international market. In England, Norwegian Vikings settled Cumbria in the tenth century, while Vikings from Denmark had been colonizing East Anglia from the mid-ninth century. King Alfred drove the Danes out of Wessex in 876, although Cambridge continued under Danish rule intermittently until the Danish king Canute became king of England in 1016, increasing unity among England's varied peoples and reigning as a wise and popular king until his death in 1035. Cambridge, then, (and Nabokov went directly to Trinity College on fleeing Russia) was under Danish rule intermittently for hundreds of years.

The Vikings also traveled east, landing along the north coast of Russia and forming colonies there from the middle of the eighth century. The Russians called them Varangians, and called the Baltic the Varangian Sea. Kinbote calls

[13] The Vineland material is also important in *Ada*, as is clear from the name of Ada's husband, Andrew Vinelander.

himself and his friend Oleg "handsome, long-legged specimens of Varangian boyhood" (line 130). The *Russian Primary Chronicle* of the eleventh-twelfth centuries describes how the Russian tribes summoned the Danish king Rurik in 860 to help them unite. Rurik, who had harried both coastal England and Russia, founded Novgorod and the dynasty that was to rule Russia for four centuries. The Vikings maintained control of trade and military power in Russia into the eleventh century. The Scandinavian word for Russia was *garðr*, meaning "the land of towns." It may be cognate with the Russian word for "a fortified place," *gorod*, which in modern Russian means "city," and is the East Slavic equivalent of *grad*.

In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote's Note to line 17 connects Jakob Gradus directly to the Viking material by the etymology of his name: "[Gradus] contended that the real origin of his name should be sought in the Russian word for grape, *vinograd*, to which a Latin suffix had adhered, making it Vinogradus." Gradus is made by Kinbote to personify the movement of fate; his approach to his rendezvous with Shade is synchronized with the writing of Shade's poem. Gradus, "the Danish connection," moves geographically from Zembla to Copenhagen to America. By analogy, the Vikings of Scandinavia journeyed to Northern Russia and the New World. Nabokov's note to *Eugene Onegin* confirms these connections, showing the identity of the Slavic *gorod* and the Scandinavian *garð* in the context of Novgorod's early Viking history: "Novgorod, ancient Holmgard, was founded by the Vikings at the *grey* dawn of our era."[14] Jack de Grey is one of Jakob Gradus's pseudonyms listed by Kinbote in the index, and he and the Danes are associated with the color gray: "Spacetime itself is decay; Gradus is flying west; he has reached gray-blue Copenhagen" (Note to line 209;" compare Note to line 181).[15] Gradus's other pseudonyms are Vinogradus and Leningradus. Kinbote finds Gradus's name in "Lenin*grad us*ed to be Petrograd" (Note to line 596). This connects Gradus to the Russian upheaval, which changed the name of St. Petersburg first to Petrograd, and then to Leningrad. This association is appropriate, inasmuch as Gradus himself is an agent of the extremist Zemblan revolutionary group, the Shadows, who are based in Copenhagen. In the continuation of his note about Novgorod, Nabokov suggests that the fall of Novgorod is a thematic echo of the Russian Revolution: "...with the lugubrious rise of Moscow and its ruthless despots the 'Volhov republic' fell amid horrible massacres." By associating Gradus's murder of Shade with the Russian revolution Nabokov establishes Kinbote's paranoid fantasy as a mad echo of his own view of the fate of Russia.

[14] Vladimir Nabokov, ed., *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse by Alexander Pushkin*, Princeton, NJ, 1964, vol. 3, p. 271.

[15] See also Note to line 171: "At the foot of the scaffold, on a raw and gray morning, it is Gradus who sweeps the night's powder snow off the narrow steps."

The Elder Edda

The richest of the literary monuments of Viking culture is the Eddas. Kinbote refers in passing to the Elder Edda: "[Shade] and Mrs. Shade had heard me quote...a charming quatrain from our Zemblan counterpart of the Elder Edda, in an anonymous translation" (Note to line 79). This is the only direct reference to the Elder Edda; it and other key Viking texts mentioned in *Pale Fire* do not have their own entries in the index but are buried under other headings. The Edda is mentioned under "Translations" and also under "Variants" with the parenthetical note "(Kinbote's contribution, 1 line)." The other specific reference to Viking literature, the *Kongs-skugg-sja*, does not appear in the index at all—its inclusion would call too much attention to a central document. The literary investigator is forced to mimic the exploratory routes of Viking navigation on the treasure hunt prepared by Nabokov in order to experience the pleasure of finding the hidden interconnections.

Besides the Elder Edda and the *Kongs-skugg-sja*, which are mentioned explicitly in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov alludes to the Younger Edda and a few works of individual poets by means of names and themes that mirror the whole of Scandinavian lore, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. While only the clearer reflections will be discussed, it is important to recognize that the less substantial echoes are no less part of Nabokov's plan.

Old Norse poetry is divided into the Eddaic, or oral, anonymous tradition and the written, skaldic (from *skald*, a professional poet) poetry. The Elder Edda is a collection of about twenty fragments of chants of the tenth and eleventh centuries gathered by an Icelander in Iceland. It contains the myths and legends of early Scandinavia in the simple, archaic style of an oral tradition. The first and generally considered the best poem is the *Voluspa*, or "Sybil's Prophecy," of the late tenth century. The Sybil addresses Odin, telling him of the world's beginning with the creation of the gods and of the world's end with their downfall in *Ragnarok*. She foretells how the witch of Iron Wood will breed the wolf that will swallow the sun.

In *Pale Fire* Kinbote derives Sybil Shade's maiden name, Irondell, from the French *hirondelle*, meaning "a swallow." But the Nordic association of Sybil Shade's name, Iron Wood, is equally applicable and is in keeping with her prophetic aversion to Kinbote, who notes, "from the very first she disliked and distrusted me" (line 247). The confusion between "swallow" as verb or noun, as well as the misleading derivation from an incorrect language group have precedent in Zemblan etymology in which significant Anglo-Saxon roots are camouflaged by resemblance to Germanic or Slavic roots.

A later poem, the "Rigspula," tells how the race of thralls descended from Edda (great-grandmother), the churls from Amma (grandmother), and the Jarls (warriors), of whom the first was Harald Harfar (Fairhair), from *faðir* and *moðir*. In Zembla there is a Baron Harfar Shalksbore, whose name is supposed to mean "knave's farm." He is "a phenomenally endowed young brute" (line 433) who indulges with Charles the Beloved in Zembla's manly pursuits. Kinbote states that "Shalksbore" is the probable derivation of "Shakespeare."

Shakespeare's version of the Hamlet legend that is first recorded in the Norse sagas is crucial to Nabokov's concerns about regicide and revenge in *Pale Fire*. Nabokov makes this same connection between Scandinavia, Hamlet, and "manliness" in *Bend Sinister*, where Viking "manliness" is related to political tyranny: in a parody of a totalitarian reading of *Hamlet*, Fortinbras is said to represent "the healthy, vigorous and clearcut Nordic theme."[16]

Another legend tells how Odin fashioned the first man, Ask, from an ash tree, and the first woman, Embla, from an elder. In *Pale Fire*, "Embla" is "a small old town with a wooden church surrounded by sphagnum bogs at the saddest, loneliest, northernmost point of the misty [Zemblan] peninsula" (Index). From the time of the Phoenicians, a term for the northernmost known point has been Ultima Thule, a name that in Nabokov's work becomes synonymous with the afterlife. Taken together with Hazel Shade's supernatural ability to communicate with the spirit world, "Embla" becomes an emblem of the continuing presence of tree spirits. The continuity between people and trees is part of the Viking system of metaphors: many masculine words for genera of trees are used in the kennings to mean "man," while feminine tree words are used in kennings for women, goddesses, and supernatural beings. In keeping with widespread views of the divining powers of hazel wood, Nabokov names John Shade's daughter Hazel, as she is a feminine tree of sorts, who is in contact with supernatural powers. The message she receives from the "roundlet of light" in the barn is a warning not to go to Goldsworth's house.[17] The hazel wood divining rod is believed to have the property of discovering fugitive murderers.[18] Hazel Shade does precisely this in receiving the warning of her father's impending murder. The theme of tree spirits is further emphasized by Shade's references to Goethe's "Erlkönig," the avenue of Shakespeare's trees on Wordsmith's campus, and evocations of Shakespeare's "The Tempest."[19]

An appendix to the Edda, possibly a forgery by an Icelandic monk imitating the Edda, is the *Solarliod*, "The Song of the Sun."[20] In it the spirit of a dead father addresses his living son, exhorting him to live a righteous life. He describes his journey to Hel where ravens tear out the eyes of the dead, and "iron gore falls from their nostrils which kindles hate among men" (line 76). He sees the sufferings of the wicked through whose breasts "passed strong venomous serpents" (line 51).

[16] For the full parody, see Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, New York, 1974, pp. 105-120. For an analysis, see Meyer, "Reflections of Shakespeare."

[17] Gene Barabtarlo, "Vanessa Atalanta," *The Nabokovian*, fall 1984, pp. 27-28, n. 13. Barabtarlo quotes Mrs. Nabokov's confirmation of the decoding.

[18] Alexander Porteus, *Forest Folklore*, London, 1928, p. 263.

[19] Compare the same constellation of ideas in *Bend Sinister:* Nabokov notes in his foreword that he has "emblematized" the dead Olga in Chapter 9, where she is imagined at her aunt's estate which is heavily timbered with fir trees and alder bushes.

[20] My reading suggests that *Pale Fire* is Nabokov's "song of the son."

The Viking Hel is mirrored in Zemblan mythology, where the *narstran* is "a hellish hall where the souls of murderers were tortured under a constant drizzle of drake venom" (Note to line 433-4). Valhalla, the great hall where Odin feasts the heroes who have fallen bravely in battle, comes from "valhöll," meaning the "hall of the slain." *Narstran* is a hybrid translation of Valhalla: *stran* is the Slavic root meaning "country," "land" or "side," and *nar* is Old Icelandic for "a corpse," "a dead man." In inventing the name, Kinbote presumably is thinking of Shade's murderer, Gradus, in Hel. But Nabokov's etymology hints at a slain hero in Valhalla, of whom John Shade is only a shadow: Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov. In the *Solarlioð* the father urges the son never to atone evil with evil, and concludes: "This lay, which I have taught thee, thou shalt before the living sing, the Sun Song which will appear in many parts no fiction[...] Here we part, but again shall meet on the day of men's rejoicing" (lines 81-82). The theme of the hereafter in the *Solarlioð* is related to Nabokov's own thoughts about his father as refracted in the poem he wrote after his father's death, "Easter;" in *The Gift*; in Vera Nabokov's foreword to *Stikhi* about *potustoronnost'*; and in Nabokov's letter to his mother written shortly after his father's death: "we shall see him again, in an unexpected but completely natural paradise."[21] Nabokov, too, refuses to avenge evil with evil; instead he wreaks revenge for the murder of Vladimir Dmitrievich through art, embedding dozens of Scandinavian revenge tales in *Pale Fire* while debasing Gradus, the quintessential assassin, by means of parody.

Skaldic Poetry

Skaldic poetry, stylistically more complex than the poetry of the Edda, is distinguished by a rich tradition of periphrastic metaphors called kennings. For example, *hranrad*, literally "whale road," means "the sea." The skalds were professional poets and court historians who handed down their craft through their families for generations.[22] One such skald, Egil Skallagrimsson (910-990), is remembered for his unconventionally personal poem, *Sonatorrek*, written around 960 on the death of his drowned son. He speaks of the impossibility of taking revenge on the gods of the sea and blames Odin for his suffering. Yet, he says, "the god has furnished me with things that atone for his evils. He gave me the unblemished skill of poetry."[23] In return for Egil's worship, Odin gives him gifts more valuable than the life of a kinsman. This resonates with Nabokov's words in our epigraph about taking the edge off his mortal love through art; they in turn echo Humbert's words about the "palliative of art" in *Lolita*. In *Pale Fire*, it is Nabokov who takes revenge and relieves the pain of loss through poetry.

[21] Quoted in Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, New York, 1977, pp. 181-82.

[22] One famous family of skalds was called the Myra-men. Compare the Zemblan *miragarl*, defined by Kinbote as "mirage girl," who is the subject of a poem in Kinbote's Note to line 80.

[23] Quoted in Peter Foote and David McWilson, *The Viking Achievement*, London, 1980, p. 403.

Scandinavian myth tells how the gods created poetry. The divine Kvasir was killed by dwarves who mixed his blood with honey to make the mead of Inspiration. The myth is the source of the kennings for poetry, which include "Kvasir's blood," "the dwarves' drink," and "Odin's drink/gift/discovery," since Odin also drank the mead.

The idea of poetry offered in exchange for a life is the basis of the skaldic genre of poem called the *hofuðlausn*, or "head redemption." This was a panegyric written to a king to save the poet's life. A famous skald, Ottar the Black, wrote one to King (later Saint) Olaf of Norway. While Ottar had been court poet in Sweden, he had written a love poem about King Olaf's future wife, so that when Ottar came to Norway, Olaf put him in prison. Ottar redeemed himself with his "head ransom," a poem in praise of Olaf's military victories.[24]

That payment for a wrong is a central concept for *Pale Fire* is made clear in the Old Icelandic etymology of Kinbote's name. *Bot* means 1) a bettering, a cure, a remedy, and 2) an atonement, a compensation, especially in the sense of *weregeld* (in Russian *golovnichestvo* or *vira)*—that is, payment for a murder, a practice that came to replace the reciprocal murder of a relative. Thus the derivation of Kinbote's name can be translated as "recompense for a murdered relation."

Ottar the Black's *Hofuðlausn* has historical importance. His account of Saint Olaf's battles in England and how he was beaten by King Canute treats the same events that are reported in the English chronicles of the period, one of the rare instances when skaldic poems can be checked against historic records, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* supports the poem's accuracy. The interconnections between Viking and English history, with Saint Olaf as link, are made in *Pale Fire* in connection with King Alfred in Shade's anecdote about

> King Alfred who...liked the stories of his Norwegian attendant...but drove him away when engaged in other business: "Oh, there you are," rude Alfred would say to the gentle Norwegian who had come to weave a...variant of some Norse myth...: "*Oh there* you are again!" And thus it came to pass, my dears, that a fabulous exile, a God-inspired northern bard, is known today to English schoolboys by the trivial nickname: Ohthere. (Note to line 238).

Ohthere is the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Scandinavian Ottar. There is a Zemblan Otar, a "pleasant and cultured adeling" (*adeling* is the Scandinavian equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon *aetheling*, a prince [Note to line 71]). Nabokov is deliberately conflating the Scandinavian bard with a Scandinavian traveler who told King Alfred about the Viking trade routes to Russia, and whose account Alfred included in his translation of the History by Orosius. The word "atheling" evokes the place name Aethelingey, which is the site of the famous legend "known today to English schoolboys" of how King Alfred burnt

[24] G. Turville-Petre, *The Heroic Age of Scandinavia*, London, 1951, pp. 141-44.

the peasant woman's cakes while hiding from the Danes. And in the same scene in the Note to line 71 where Otar of *Pale Fire* is called a pleasant adeling, there appears "a peasant woman with a small cake she had baked" to confirm the association. Thus Nabokov sets up an array of kings in exile: King Olaf's exile in Novgorod is the mirror image of Nabokov's Russian exile in Cambridge; Alfred's in Aethelingey mirrors a similar legendary flight alluded to in *Pale Fire*, that of Charles II of England, who hid from his enemies in a hollow oak in Boscobel. There is a Boscobel in Zembla, "the site of the Royal Summer-house."[25] These echoes are embedded in Kinbote's tale of his own Royal Escape from Zembla; he chooses the optimistic examples from history—both Alfred and Charles II returned victorious to their thrones—though he has no hope of being restored to his imaginary kingdom. By contrast, the very creation of this royal mirror within *Pale Fire* suggests that Nabokov has never been deposed, never been in exile, from his true kingdom.

The Younger Edda

The so-called "Younger" or "prose" Edda was actually finished about two hundred years earlier than the Elder Edda, in 1220. It is the work of one author, Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241). It consists of a preface and five parts: the first and second parts outline the myth system of ancient Scandinavia, interpolating quotations from skaldic poetry. Snorri's compendium makes it possible to reconstruct the mythology contained in the Elder Edda, and preserves the best poetry of his age, which would otherwise have been lost. The third and fourth sections have particular relevance for Nabokov. They are technical essays on the art of poetry. Section three, the *skaldskaparmal*, is the Icelandic *gradus ad parnassum* or manual of style: it contains the rules and theories of ancient Icelandic verse complete with extensive illustrations of poetic usage based on quotations from the skaldic poets. Section four is on prosody, with examples illustrating metrical forms, like Nabokov's *Notes on Prosody*, which is section four of his commentary on *Eugene Onegin*.

The *gradus* is a compendium of stock phrases, a "step" (*gradus*, in Latin) toward Parnassus, the sacred mountain of Apollo and the Muses. In *Pale Fire*, the approach of "gradual Gradus" (Note to line 171) is synchronized with the writing of Shade's poem and linked by Kinbote to verbal style:

> We shall accompany Gradus in thought as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia, through the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm, riding past in a rhyme, skidding around the corner of a run-on, breathing with the caesura, swinging down to the foot of the page from line to line as from branch to branch, hiding between two words...reappearing on the horizon of a new canto, steadily marching nearer in iambic motion, crossing streets, moving up with his valise on the escalator of the pentameter, stepping off, boarding a

[25] There are many other exiled kings in *Pale Fire:* Shakespeare alone provides Coriolanus, Timon, Prospero, and Hamlet.

> new train of thought, entering the hall of a hotel, putting out the bedlight, while Shade blots out a word, and falling asleep as the poet lays down his pen for the night. (Note to line 17).

In his foreword to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov writes "Death is but a matter of style, a mere literary device."[26] Thus Kinbote's name for Shade's assassin, Gradus, links fate, death, and stylistic cliché in *Pale Fire*.

Snorri's other important work is the *Heimskringla*, the lives of the Norse kings, written some ten to fifteen years later.[27] It includes the *Ynglinga Saga*, the lives of Harald Harfar, and of three kings named Eystein. In *Pale Fire* the name Eystein is given to Zembla's court painter. He is a "prodigious master of the *trompe l'oeil*" (Note to line 130), whose methods prompt Kinbote to discuss the relation of art to reality. Kinbote finds something "ignoble" in Eystein's inserting real cloth among his painted wools and velvets. From the present analysis it becomes clear that Nabokov's own trick, like Eystein's painting, is to have embedded the real in the fictional so cleverly that the vast historical ballast of *Pale Fire* appears to be fantastical fiction.

Chapter 13 of Snorri's *Heimskringla* contains the life of Saint Olaf; it is considered a model of judicious use of historical and literary documents. Saint Olaf himself is an historical link between the Vikings and ancient Russia. His brother-in-law was Prince Yaroslav of Novgorod; Saint Olaf spent two years in exile with him in Novgorod in 1028-1030, where a church was dedicated to Saint Olaf. Snorri's *Ynglinga Saga* links the Vikings to early English history, telling the tale of yet another Ohthere, the king of the Swedes, who fought the Danes as described in *Beowulf*.

The *Heimskringla* is filled with tales of revenge too numerous and complicated to recount. *Beowulf* is a conspicuous example, as is another revenge tale central to *Pale Fire*, the tale of Amloði, or Amleth.[28] This, the earliest, reference to the Hamlet tale, is contained in Snorri's third section of the *Younger Edda* as a popular story in Viking and Icelandic folklore. The *Heimskringla* records the same legends that were the source for Saxo Grammaticus's version of the tale in his *Historia Danica* in the twelfth century (Kinbote refers to the *Historia Zemblica)*. Shakespeare learned the tale from Saxo via Belleforest,[29]

[26] Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, p. xii.

[27] Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, or The Lives of the Norse Kings*, edited by Erling Monsen, Cambridge, 1932.

[28] Nabokov uses this form of Hamlet's name in *Bend Sinister*, p. 114. *Bend Sinister* was first published in 1947, but evidence of Nabokov's identification with *Hamlet* may be found in his Russian translations of excerpts from the play published in *Rul'*, Berlin, no. 3010, October 19, 1930, p. 2 and no. 3039, November 23, 1930, p. 2.

[29] One of the systems of references contained in the name "Boscobel" (Beautiful/*Belle*/bel forest/bosk/*bosquet*) evokes both Shakespeare's French source and the oak tree on the Boscobel estate where Charles II of England hid during his royal escape. He and his mother had been in exile in France. In *Pale Fire* French translations play a central pollinating role in the history of Anglo-American literature from Belleforest to Sybil Shade's French versions of Marvell and Donne.

who retold it in his *Histoires Tragiques* (1559-1582).[30] *Hamlet* is a key text for *Pale Fire*, treating as it does the ghost of a murdered father urging his son to avenge him. Nabokov confirms its importance for the novel: the words "pale...fire" occur in Act I, Scene V of *Hamlet* in which King Hamlet's ghost exhorts his son:

> ...Fare thee well at once!
> The glow-worm shows the matin to be near,
> And 'gins to pale his ineffectual fire;
> Adieu, adieu! adieu! Remember me.

The Royal Mirror

There is one other major Scandinavian work referred to in *Pale Fire*, but in such a fantastic context that the *trompe l'oeil* effect makes it look like mere Zemblan foolery:

> Of course, it would have been unseemly for a monarch to appear in the robes of learning at a university lectern and present to rosy youths *Finnigan's Wake* as a monstrous extension of Angus MacDiarmid's "incoherent transactions" and of Southey's Lingo-Grande ("Dear Stumparumper," etc.) or discuss the Zemblan variants, collected in 1798 by Hodinski, of the *Kongs-skugg-sio (The Royal Mirror)*, an anonymous masterpiece of the twelfth century. (Note to line 12).

The *Kongs-skugg-sja* is the most important scholastic work of medieval Scandinavia. It was written in Icelandic in the thirteenth century; Kinbote is off by 100 years, conflating the Scandinavian document with the *Song of Igor's Campaign* of the twelfth century. It is a didactic compendium of knowledge in the *speculum regale* tradition. In Icelandic *kongs* means kings; *skugg* means 1. a shade, a shadow; 2. a shadow, a spectre; *skugg-sja* (or *-sjo*) means a shade show, i.e., a mirror. The compendium is couched as a dialogue between father and son. The father tells the son about the geography, climate, flora, and fauna of Ireland, Iceland and Greenland, explaining how to navigate among them. He also discusses politics, religion, and customs of court, using analogies from the Bible, which he quotes from an Old Norse paraphrase, since he is apparently writing away from any monastery or other source of books.[31] The author breaks off when he reaches the political issue of his day, the conflict between his king and his church under the Archbishop Eystein. Eystein had succeeded in subjugating the state to the church in 1163 when he crowned Magnus, his choice for successor to the throne. This resulted in fifty years of civil war in Norway that

[30] See Israel Gollancz, *Hamlet in Iceland*, London, 1898, and his *The Sources of Hamlet*, London, 1968.

[31] Laurence Larson, trans., *The King's Mirror* (Scandinavian Monographs, vol. 3), London, 1917, p. 9.

caused Eystein to flee to England, where he excommunicated the king. But ultimately he tired of exile, returned to Norway, and was reconciled to the new king. Note that by naming the Zemblan master of *trompe l'oeil* Eystein, Nabokov links exile in England and restoration to artistic illusion. The theme of exiled royalty as represented by King Alfred, King Charles, Eystein, and Prince Hamlet focuses on England as place of exile. The infinite regress of kings in the mirror (compare Fleur's reflections in Sudarg of Bokay's mirror) reflects Nabokov's own exile in England. His memoir of his years at Cambridge in chapter 13 of *Speak, Memory* describes his attempt to preserve his lost Russia through language and poetry.[32] The pain of exile was further intensified when Vladimir Dmitrievich was killed during Nabokov's last year at Cambridge.

Conclusion

> "How ludicrous these efforts to translate
> Into one's private tongue a public fate!"
> (*Pale Fire,* lines 230-231)

The *Kongs-skugg-sja* contains a portrait of the northern world and an outline of the knowledge of the natural and historical phenomena of its time; the Eddas are compendia of myth, history, literature, and poetics. *Pale Fire* creates its own universe in a similar spirit. The Viking material allows us to grasp two guiding principles of *Pale Fire:* 1.) Nabokov, using *trompe l'oeil*, embeds real historical characters and works in what appears to be a totally fantastical universe; as Nabokov says of "The Overcoat" in his book on Gogol, "we did not expect that, amid the whirling masks, one mask would turn out to be a real face."[33] 2.) Nabokov is guided by the desire to retrace fate's footsteps as far back as can be verified by written texts, in order to discern the "web of sense," the pattern in the weave, of his own life.

Because Kinbote does not seek out the real world in libraries or nature, he can only superimpose his own very private universe on Shade's text. But Nabokov very consciously "superimposes" his private universe on the public domain of the history of the last thousand years. In Kinbote he parodies his own endeavor, but he makes the distinction between them clear: Kinbote fabricates Zembla out of the jumble of northern legends he has read and creates a vivid semblance of a kingdom. But the reader's only access to the hidden crown jewels of Zembla is through Kinbote's private fantasy; we need his plan of the palace (which got lost at the Shades' house). What is more, his private fantasy displaces reality rather than enhancing it, preventing him from entering into Shade's personal or literary concerns. Nabokov, by contrast, does what an artist is supposed to do: he transforms our shared reality—the reality of events, texts,

[32] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, New York, 1966, p. 265.
[33] Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, New York, 1961, p. 141.

nature—by passing it through his personal prism, but in such a way that we all have access to it. The jewels have been nationalized, and are accessible to us all in the "emerald [egg] case" (line 238), the "diamonds of frost" (line 19), "the opal cloudlet" (line 119), the "topaz of dawn" (line 881) and the "gemmed turf" (line 887) that poetry sensitizes us to. The idea is expressed in the foreword to *Bend Sinister* in which the dead Olga "divest[s] herself of herself, of her jewels, of the necklace and tiara of earthly life" (p. ix). Or, as Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev puts it in *The Gift*, "our days here are only pocket money, farthings clinking in the dark, and [...] somewhere is stocked the real wealth, from which life should know how to get dividends in the shape of dreams, tears of happiness, distant mountains" (p. 176).

To enjoy the Creation we are led in widening spirals to regions where we may never have been. Nabokov's private fate, then, becomes in *Pale Fire* a metaphor for the very personal angle of artistic transformation unique to any work of art.