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Priscilla Meyer
Wesleyan University, pmeyer@wesleyan.edu

Jeff Hoffman

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INFINITE REFLECTIONS IN NABOKOV’S PALE FIRE:
THE DANISH CONNECTION (HANS ANDERSEN AND
ISAK DINESEN)

PRISCILLA MEYER AND JEFF HOFFMAN

[...] reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels
of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquench-
able, unattainable.
(Vladimir Nabokov)²

The Doppelgänger subject is a frightful bore.
(Vladimir Nabokov)³

Nabokov’s art grows out of Romanticism in the Platonic tradition; because
he sees this world as a pale reflection of another, his novels abound in
doublings, mirrorings and inversions.⁴ The glimmerings of another existence
beyond our own may occasionally be discerned in nature, in fate’s workings,
and in art; the puzzles and rich referentiality of Nabokov’s texts are designed
to send the reader on a quest for the transcendent. The artist in his work
mimics the Creator and his creation; both provide clues and a method of
inquiry that can reward the quester with the discovery of a world beyond our
own, beyond the “real”, a word Nabokov said must always be used with
quotation marks.⁵

Pale Fire is structured on the idea that reality has an infinite succession
of false bottoms. The Danish material, almost invisibly embedded in
Nabokov’s novel, provides a rich illustration of the principle. Nabokov selects the Gothic tales of Isak Dinesen and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen as literary reference points, which anchor echoes of Danish history, and are the point of origin for echoes of the English Gothic novel and its parodies. We will first consider literary doubling in Nabokov’s work, and then establish Denmark’s presence in *Pale Fire*, before examining the mutually illuminating tales of Andersen and Dinesen and their relevance to Nabokov’s purposes in his most mirror-lined novel.

I. Doubles in Literature

Nabokov has seemed to scorn the idea of the double in literature, telling his students: “If we consider *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as an allegory – the struggle between Good and Evil within every man – then this allegory is tasteless and childish.” Nonetheless, doubling is an organizing principle in Nabokov’s work. It was the allegorical oversimplification of the idea that Nabokov rejected. The *Doppelgänger* is a literary topos embodying the neo-Platonic Romantic opposition of real and ideal that was first explored by German philosophers and artists. After the success of such tales as Tieck’s and E.T.A. Hoffmann’s, the double theme began to be popularized in ways that trivialized the real/ideal opposition, reducing it to an allegory of Good/Evil. Double tales illustrating German Romantic philosophy depict the dilemma of the impossibility of embodying the ideal in the real world; characters go mad attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable. The popularized double tales, however, interpret the problem not philosophically, but morally and psychologically, as the conflict between super-ego (*Doctor Jekyll*) and suppressed id (*the Frankenstein monster*), leaving out altogether the problem of an otherworld, or reducing it to mere spookdom.

In Schelling’s view, the one place that the ideal could be brought into the real and reconciled with it is in art. This principle underlies the original German Romantic *Doppelgänger* tales and explains why their mad heroes are often failed artists, people who have not accepted the contradiction inherent in their calling. The question of literary doubles was crucial to Nabokov’s Romantic idealist aesthetic philosophy because it located madness as an aesthetic rather than a psychological phenomenon; Nabokov’s vigorous rejection of Freudian theories of personality was a corollary of this view. His failed “artists” (e.g. Hermann, Luzhin, Humbert, Van Veen) are often given mock psychological motivations, but their true problem is the unattainability of an ideal (usually misconstrued) in reality.

In his fiction, Nabokov plays with the many possible varieties of doubling – simple duplication, false duplication, mirror image left-right reversal, and real (this world) vs. ideal (an otherworld). The varieties of
doubling convey how difficult it is to discern the ideal through the veil of the everyday; Nabokov uses them to show art and reality intertwine. The mirrors reflect a succession of (illusory?) images of eternity barely perceptible from the shifting vantage points of our world. Zemblan, the "tongue of the mirror" (note to line 678), reflects these resemblances.12

*Pale Fire* is built on this problem of shifting point of view. Thesis: Shade's poem; antithesis: Kinbote's commentary; synthesis: Nabokov's novel - three genres, three worlds, an Hegelian spiral. *Pale Fire* has from the first been recognized as a hall of mirrors that reflects infinite tales.13 Doublings abound, and appear to be haphazard, as if they were splinters of colored glass flung far and wide by the explosion in the Zemblan Glass Works.

Kinbote's commentary contains a pair of mirrors. Since Kinbote (like Humbert) consciously structures his narrative on the principle of Good/Evil doubling, his commentary contains a Good and an Evil mirror, Sudarg of Bokay's cheval glass and Kinbote's "goetic" mirror.

1. The Evil Mirror

Using his goetic (necromantic) mirror, Kinbote envisions surprising the Shades at their summer hideaway:

> During the fortnight that I had my demons fill my goetic mirror to overflow with those pink and mauve cliffs and black junipers and winding roads and sage brush [...] and an endless sequence of green-shorted Kinbotes meeting an anthology of poets and a brocken of their wives, I must have made some awful mistake in my incantations [...] (note to line 287)

Kinbote's mirror shows only himself and his lustful landscape, as does his commentary to Shade's poem. Like the "endless sequence of green-shorted Kinbotes", the King in his flight from Zembla has at least a hundred scarlet-clad "doublegangers" who "impersonated him and aped his flight" (note to line 70). Kinbote's reflections in his commentary diminish into lesser doubles and merge into Nabokov's larger pattern: as the king approaches the mountain pass, he stops to look at his reflection in a small lake:

> [...] oddly enough [...] this reflection was not at his feet but much further; moreover, it was accompanied by the ripple-warped reflection of a ledge that jutted high above his present position. And finally, the strain on the magic of the image caused it to snap as his red-sweatered, red-capped doubleganger turned and vanished, whereas he, the observer, remained immobile [...] High up in the deep blue sky jutted the empty ledge whereon a counterfeit king had
just stood. A shiver of alfear (uncontrollable fear caused by elves) ran between his shoulderblades [...] At a high point upon an adjacent ridge a steinmann (a heap of stones erected as a memento of an ascent) had donned a cap of red wool in his honor.

The reflection appears to have an independent existence. Indeed, another Steinmann, also an impersonator of the king, appears in the index, "the tennis ace Julius Steinmann" who perfectly imitates the King's voice. The source of the reflection and the product of its ripples become confused. Steinmann is Zemblan for cairn. In ancient Athens, these markers were called Herm or Herma, comprising a head, usually of Hermes (= Mercury), atop a quadrangular stone pillar with the proportions of a human body. Here at the Bregberg Pass is the head to the "headless statue of Mercury, conductor of souls to the lower world" that King Charles passed in the tunnel out of the palace (note to line 130). What for Kinbote are infinite replicas of himself are for Nabokov reflections of a world above and below, before and after our own, receding into ancient Greece and Romantic Germany.

2. The Good Mirror

This mirror juxtaposes infinite transparency to the opacity of Kinbote's black magic. The magnificent cheval glass that belonged to King Charles' grandfather is "a triptych of bottomless light, a really fantastic mirror, signed with a diamond by its maker, Sudarg of Bokay". This mirror's infinite reflections of the seventeen-year-old Fleur de Fyler are a metaphor of Pale Fire's workings:

She turned about before it: a secret device of reflection gathered an infinite number of nudes in its depths, garlands of girls in graceful and sorrowful groups, diminishing in the limpid distance, or breaking into individual nymphs, some of whom, she murmured, must resemble her ancestors when they were young — little peasant garlien combing their hair in shallow waters as far as the eye could reach, and then the wistful mermaid from an old tale, and then nothing.

For Nabokov, the mirror of infinite successive images is the antithesis of Kinbote's solipsistic repetitions of varieties of self. The doublings in Kinbote's commentary are based on the opposition of Zemblan king, incognito as C. Kinbote, to American professor V. Botkin. Kinbote casts some pairings as Good/Evil according to Zemblan politics where the pro-Charles Royalists are pitted against the anti-Karlists, for example the Zemblan patriot Odon and his epileptic half-brother Nodo who "cheated at cards" and belongs to
the Zemblan revolutionary group, the Shadows; or the loyal Baron Radomir Mandevil and his “traitor” cousin Baron Mirador. Some mirror-image pairs reverse left and right by nationality or by gender: the King’s English and French tutors Mr. Campbell and Monsieur Beauchamp who reach a draw at chess (as do Shade and Kinbote [note to line 549]); the Zemblan mountain girl Garh whose advances the King refuses and the “rosy-cheeked goose-boy found in a country lane” (index) who is more to the King’s taste. Some pairings are simply multiples, like “the White twins (nice fraternity boys accepted by the Shades” [note to line 1871]) whose (possibly homosexual) mirror images are the “two charming identical twins” (note to line 23) with whom Kinbote plays ping-pong. An important category of doubling depends on the Zemblan/New Wye opposition: the Wordsmith music professor Misha Gordon/the musical prodigy Gordon Krumholz; Gerald Emerald/Izumrudov; the Shadeans in pursuit of Shade’s manuscript “Pale Fire”/the Shadows in pursuit of King Charles’ life.

Nabokov creates the shimmer of ambiguity around the idea of shade(s) and shadow(s) so that it is impossible to resolve who is the Good and who the Evil double, Shade or Kinbote. Kinbote’s commentary, however, has at its core a clear Good/Evil doubling: the palindromic pair Sudarg of Bokay and Jakob Gradus. Gradus, despatched by the extremist Shadows to assassinate King Charles, personifies approaching death, while Sudarg’s mirror promises eternal life through the infinite reflections of art, myth and reality.

This typology of doubling should help to clarify the much-discussed question of the priority of Shade or Kinbote. The Shadeans prefer their heroes sane and believe Shade to have invented Kinbote; others suggest that the fantastical Kinbote has invented not only Zembla but New Wye with Shade in it as well. At first glance, Shade and Kinbote appear to be simply Jekyll and Hyde, the good (heterosexual) professor-poet and the evil (homosexual) mad professor-editor. But in Nabokov’s novel good and evil are more ambiguous and complementary: Shade the atheist struggles toward faith in an afterlife as he writes his poem, but is immune to its signals; Kinbote the Protestant is susceptible to alfear and creates a brilliant and hilarious fantasy, but does not know he is mad. The first has a commonsense American faith in the pragmatic; the second has an Old World acceptance of the magical. From Shade’s vantage point, Zembla is mad fantasy, while for Kinbote it is vivid reality. For Nabokov Zembla is one mad version of an otherworld, but New Wye is an equally possible mundane version. The characters’ opposing views are mutually exclusive and equally tenable. Pale Fire is predicated on the tension of this opposition, as one of Nabokov’s earliest file cards for Pale Fire written in 1957 makes clear:

A wonderful point in favor of some kind of hereafter is this:
When the mind rejects as childishly absurd a paradise with musical angels or abstract collonades [sic] with Horace and Milton in togas conversing and walking together through the eternal twilight, or the protracted voluptas of the orient or any other eternity — such as the one with devils and porcupines — we forget that if we could have imagined this life before living it would have seemed more improbable than all our hereafters.20

The novel, then, is an exploration of the possibility of an otherworld from three vantage points: Shade’s, Kinbote’s and Nabokov’s. Like Nabokov, Shade is sceptical of an afterlife with “porcupines and things” (line 226), but struggles toward some “faint hope” that one exists, motivated by his grief at his daughter Hazel’s death. Kinbote’s Zembla is one man’s version of the “voluptas of the orient”, a parody of the concepts of the ideal (Disa), the imagination (paranoid pathology) and the universe (tiny isolated kingdom). Kinbote has been evicted from Zembla; his fall to America in a parachute parodies Lucifer’s, and residence in New Wye is merely a temporary refuge from the Zemblan Shadows, but nonetheless one where, like Horace and Milton above, he and Shade stroll conversing in the (temporary) twilight.

For Nabokov, Zembla masks his own concerns: a tracing of his personal fate through one thousand years of history back to the Vikings. Almost every name in Pale Fire contains a set of allusions and echoes of these allusions. They refer equally to the geographical, historical world and to the world of art, interconnecting art and reality as well as sketching the evolution of several cultures through translation and adaptation. The history of the northern countries and the development of their cultures is outlined through evocations of The Song of Igor’s Campaign, the Ossianic forgeries, the Viking Eddas, Charles II of England, Shakespeare’s plays, English poetry and more. Nabokov selects these frames of reference to show the parallel development of Russian and Anglo-American culture (remember Wordsmith’s “United English Department”) as linked by the Vikings who traveled to all three countries. Nabokov selects the Danes, the principal occupiers of England until Alfred the Great drove them out, as the modern representatives of the Vikings.

The most conspicuous body of material relating to Denmark in Pale Fire is the Hamlet tale; references to the Viking legend of Amlothi, its evolution into Shakespeare’s tragedy, the translation of that tragedy into Russian by Andrej Kroneberg reissued in 1888, and the definition of “botkin or bodkin” as a “Danish stiletto” keep Denmark in view throughout Pale Fire.21 But Nabokov updates the Danish connection almost invisibly by subtle parallels to Danish history and geography, as well as by references to more modern Danish literature.
II. **Denmark (geography and history)**

Denmark is the center of a carefully selected set of reflections in *Pale Fire*. In addition to the literary references, there are geographical and historical points of contact between Zembla and Denmark.

For Kinbote, Denmark is important as a link between Zembla and America: the Shadows have their headquarters in Copenhagen, whence they direct their assassin Jakob Gradus. Gradus leaves Zembla on a Russian plane for Copenhagen (note to line 181), his first stop on his way to America (from Z to A) as he approaches ever closer to Kinbote throughout the novel. The Danish connection is Kinbote's umbilical cord to Zembla, the source of his identity as King Charles the Beloved; it is equally the point of origin of his impending doom.

Kinbote's geography of Zembla clearly evokes Denmark:

> The Bera range, a two-hundred-mile long chain of rugged mountains, not quite reaching the northern end of the Zemblan peninsula (cut off basally by an impassable canal from the mainland of madness), divides it in two parts [...] Several trails cross the mountains at various points and lead to passes none of which exceeds an altitude of five thousand feet; a few peaks rise some 2,000 feet higher [...] and from the highest and hardest, Mt. Glitterntin, one can distinguish on clear days, far out to the east, beyond the Gulf of Surprise, a dim iridescence some say is Russia.  

(note to line 149)

Aside from the large Scandinavian peninsula, Denmark (Jutland in particular) is the only peninsula off the northern coast of Europe. It is cut off from the mainland by the Kiel Canal which runs through Schleswig-Holstein, and is about two hundred miles long. High mountains, however, are further north, in Norway, where Mt. Glittertinden at 8,110 feet is the highest point. To the west, in Sweden, is Kronoberg County, and there is a Kronborg Castle in Denmark, in Elsinore. The geographic resemblance of Zembla to this part of the world is about as closely rooted in geographical fact as Kinbote's literary, historical and etymological borrowings are in verifiable reality. Zembla's generalized Scandinavian geography is designed to reflect the region's shared Viking past.

While Kinbote's invented King Charles of Zembla is clearly modeled on the English Charles I and II and the theme of restoration to a rightful throne, Denmark's mad King Christian VII (1749-1808) also provides Kinbote material for Zembla's King. Christian was early debauched by "depraved and dissolute" pages. Crowned at the age of seventeen, he was married to Caroline Mathilda (then aged fifteen) shortly thereafter in order to curb his depravities, but soon after their honeymoon "began to loathe her".
The King abandoned the Queen completely, and devoted himself to rampaging around Copenhagen by night, incognito, with prostitutes and court favorites. Over the next six years he declined into madness. His Queen was accused of infidelity with Christian's all-powerful adviser, Dr. Struensee.

Christian's stepmother, the dowager queen Juliana Maria, conspired with others to persuade the then mentally incompetent Christian to sign orders for the arrest of Caroline Mathilda and Struensee in 1772. This was to take place on the night of a masked ball in the Christianborg palace theater. One of the conspirators wanted to back out, and had his feet wrapped in flannel, pleading gout, but was nonetheless conveyed to the palace across the ditch in a sedan chair. The ball ended at two-thirty; at four in the morning, the conspirators seized Caroline and Struensee in their palace bedrooms; Struensee had only the pink trousers of his domino at hand and so wore them to prison (but was allowed to take his furs, as it was cold). The Queen was confined in the Kronborg Castle at Elsinore. The Danes rejoiced at the revolution.

Kinbote's escape from the palace room where he is imprisoned is hardly more fantastic; clad in scarlet flannel, he emerges from a secret tunnel into a dressingroom at the Royal Theater (note to line 130). This theater, where Kinbote's rescuer Odon plays in "The Merman", is Kinbote's transition point between one reality and another; similarly, the Christianborg palace theater was a world of mirrors in which the stage is indistinguishable from the audience:

Innumerable chandeliers and lamps displayed the rich gilding of the boxes, with their hangings of violet and silk. The pit, appropriated on other occasions to the spectators, was raised to a level with the stage, so that the whole formed one hall; while a numerous orchestra occupied the sides of the stage, which represented a grove. In the background, a large bower, dimly lighted with variegated lamps, led to some small lateral cabinets, hung with red damask, the rich decorations of which - splendid mirrors, sparkling chandeliers, and gilt sofas - plainly showed that they were destined for royal personages. A semicircular saloon at the back of all closed the grand perspective, which was doubled by mirrors against the walls, for it was the dressing room of the theatre.

Thus the fantastical events of the Danish revolution in 1772 color the Zemblan affair more than do the Russian or English (where it is the restoration that is stressed). The comic aspects of the Zemblan revolution in particular echo Danish history, both the Revolution of 1772 and the German occupation during World War II, when the Danes were renowned for their courageous resistance, and their heroic evacuation of 94% of their 7,000 Jews in small private boats across the sound to Sweden. The "Churchill Club", a group of young Danes, sabotaged the Germans so amusingly that
they were taken up by the American comic strips: they confused the Germans by sending out false handbills signed in the enemy’s name, transported weapons in baby carriages, used bird feeders to transmit letters, circulated cartoons of Hitler being spanked by Stalin, and printed books with instructions for making explosives. Scores of navy ships simply disappeared from the harbor, stranding German soldiers.30

The farcical aspect of King Charles’ escape are reminiscent of these Danish pranks (“Could a dwarf in the police force pose as a pigtailed child?” [note to line 149]). From the Rippleson Caves at northern Zemblan shore, Kinbote escapes in a small boat. It is manned by the actor Odon, who wears a grotesque mask of an “atrociously injured” person (note to line 149). Kinbote remembers having once lunched nearby incognito. The king is camouflaged by the red-flanneled Royalists, causing the government to jail and screen hundreds of impostors, who eventually “clown their way to freedom” (note to line 171). Part of the charm of Pale Fire rests in its combination of the imaginative and playful resistance to tyranny of the Danes together with the representation of serious philosophical thought in fairy tale form.

III. Hans Christian Andersen

The description of the Zemblan revolution evokes the Danish revolution at the same time as the English one. Similar use is made of Danish literature, which carries English associations for Nabokov. The tales of Hans Christian Andersen and Isak Dinesen share themes of eternity in mirrored worlds of sea and air that set off reciprocal ripples of their own.

The “wistful mermaid from an old tale” among the nymphs in Sudarg’s mirror evokes Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’. Nabokov himself had early memories of Andersen’s tale; his English governess, “lovely, black-haired, aquamarine-eyed Miss Norcott”, read him ‘The Little Mermaid’ when he was four – the tale is associated with his grief at her sudden dismissal in Speak, Memory.31 Nabokov has John Shade too refer to Andersen; Shade associates his daughter Hazel with Andersen’s ‘Ugly Duckling’ in his poem: “Alas, the dingy cygnet never turned / Into a wood duck” (lines 318-319). The line is a mirror in itself, as Andersen’s duck matures into a swan, not vice versa; by plunging into the water, Hazel Shade reverses life’s time direction by entering the mirror world below the surface, the eternal world of mermaids.32

Andersen (1805-1875) wrote a rather Kinbotean account of his life that contains several echoes of Pale Fire. As a child, he read Shakespeare’s plays “in a bad translation” and performed them in his puppet theater, relishing the role of Hamlet’s ghost in particular.33 He wrote a story about a king and queen.
I asked my mother [...] how a king ought properly to speak, but no one knew exactly [...] but that he certainly spoke in a foreign language. I procured [...] a sort of lexicon, in which were German, French, and English words with Danish meanings [...] I took a word out of each language, and inserted them into the speeches of my king and queen. It was a regular Babel-like language, which I considered only suitable for such elevated personages.

Similarly, Nabokov concocts Zemblan out of Germanic and Slavic roots. As an adult, Andersen wrote the libretto for an opera based on a Danish folk song, entitled 'Agnete and the Merman', which mirrors his later tale of the mermaid. We remember that Kinbote's rescuer Odon has starred in "The Merman" at the Zemblan Royal Theater. Andersen's fairy tales were told from the stage of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen. Six years younger than Puškin, Andersen met the great Romantic writers of his day, Tieck, Chamisso, Hoffmann, Heine, the Grimm brothers and Schelling.

The theme of an infinite series of reflections pervades Andersen's tales. Many are about transcending this life through art, love, magic or faith. The idea of multiple and complementary perspectives structures such tales as 'The Snow Queen', 'The Shadow', 'The Ugly Duckling' and 'The Little Mermaid'; Nabokov alludes to the last two explicitly in *Pale Fire*, while the first two have more protective coloration.

1. 'The Little Mermaid'

The little mermaid longs to know "the world of humans up above the sea". Her garden is designed to reflect the upper world: she only plants flowers that are red like the sun. In it is "a statue of a handsome boy, hewn from the clear white stone and come down to the bottom of the sea from a wreck" (47). The mermaid is allowed to visit the surface when she turns fifteen; there she falls in love with a prince (who, like her, is celebrating his birthday; in *Pale Fire*, Kinbote, Shade and Gradus have the same birthday). She saves him from shipwreck, leaving his body on the shore near a temple. The mermaid longs to return to the human world which seems larger than her own, and where humans have an eternal soul. She wants to "share in that heavenly world" (54), but to do so she must win the love of a human. Just as Kinbote uses his magic mirror to try to enter another world, the little mermaid must resort to black magic to shed her fish's tail and walk among the humans; she sacrifices her beautiful voice to the sea witch in return for legs. When she returns, she finds that the prince loves the girl from the temple, thinking it was she who saved his life. He tells the mermaid, "you are so like her that you almost take the place of her image in my heart" (59), but
marries the girl. This means that the mermaid will be turned to sea foam. When she cannot bring herself to kill the prince to save herself, she is transformed into one of the "daughters of the air" who can win an immortal soul by good deeds. Her ideal of the upper world represented by her statue had been embodied in the prince, but this mortal love is replaced by her desire to enter heaven; the false bottoms of Nabokov's "reality" here are false tops from the mermaid's underwater perspective. A reflection from Kinbote's Good mirror, the little mermaid uses magic, love and good deeds to attain immortality; in her quest she enters worlds which recede ever upwards.

The mirror surface of the sea divides the interpenetrating worlds. From the perspective of the prince, the girl from the temple has given him life; he never realizes that she is a reflection of the mermaid's still more ideal love. The mermaid's double succeeds where the mermaid herself apparently fails. But which is more ideal? The happy earthly love of prince and temple girl or the possibility of the mermaid winning an immortal soul? The prince or the statue? Sybil Shade or Queen Disa? The little mermaid is an emblem of the conflict between two worlds, of the dilemma of an immortal soul in a mortal body, and of earthly existence as an interlude in eternal life.

2. 'The Shadow'

Andersen's tale 'The Shadow' is a typical tale of the hero's displacement by an evil impostor, his double. A "learned man" from the cold countries travels to the hot countries, where he is intrigued by the music coming from the opposite house. He bids his shadow enter the house and tell him what he sees. The shadow slips inside and does not return. Years later, the shadow reappears at the home of the learned man, who continues to write about what is true, good and pretty. The shadow has become a man. He tells his former master that the house across the way belonged to "the fairest of the fair - Poetry!". The shadow recounts how he had spied on everyone:

I ran about the streets by moonlight; I stretched myself quite long up the wall; that tickled my back quite agreeably. I ran up and down, looked through the highest windows [...] where nobody could see, and I saw what nobody saw and what nobody ought to see. (304)

Kinbote, like Andersen's Shadow, spies on Poetry in the making, and sees family scenes he ought not to see. Andersen's "tickles" is part of Kinbote's confession that, "having the itching desire to see [Shade] at work", he "indulges in an orgy of spying". He strains to detect Shade at work:
Windows [...] have been the solace of first person literature through the ages [...] I found, at the end of the veranda, an ivied corner from which I could view rather amply the front of the poet's house. If I wanted to see its south side I could go down to the back of my garage [...] If I yearned for the opposite side, all I had to do was walk uphill [...] (note to lines 47-48)

Kinbote's Shade also spies, but figuratively: "Now I shall spy on beauty as none has/Spied on it yet" (lines 835-836).

The former shadow, now a prosperous man, tries to force the learned man to become his shadow; he refuses and the Shadow puts him to death. In Pale Fire, Kinbote shadows Shade. He fears death at the hands of the Shadows as he lies awake in his "solitary double bed", but it is the learned John Shade who is put to death by the Shadow Gradus. The reversal takes place as Shade and Kinbote cross the lawn, and then the street, from Shade's house to Goldsworth's. The sun is setting, covering the path in shadow. Shade walks in front, while Kinbote walks behind him:

Through the back of John's thin cotton shirt one could distinguish patches of pink where it stuck to the skin above and around the outline of the funny little garment he wore under the shirt as all good Americans do. I see with such awful clarity one fat shoulder rolling, the other rising; [...] the broad deformed pelvis; the grass stains on the seat of his old khaki pants, the scuffed back seams of his loafers [...] (note to line 1000)

Kinbote's description emphasizes the mundanity of Shade's physical self; he has divested Shade of his poem as they left his porch, and there is nothing transcendent about him on his way to his death. Kinbote the shadow has usurped the properties of Shade, the learned man.

When Shade notices Kinbote has a visitor, Kinbote rushes ahead: "In my fury and hurry to dismiss the intruder, I outstripped John who until then had been ahead of me" (note to line 1000). Gradus/Grey kills the poet; the spying neighbor lives to abscond with the poem. Andersen's Shadow, having killed the Learned Man, marries a princess and becomes the prince of a great foreign kingdom. The order of events is reversed in Kinbote's mirror world - he has left his crown and princess in a foreign kingdom before his Shadow (Gradus) kills Shade.

3. 'The Snow Queen'

'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Shadow' are about the shifting points of view between mirror worlds. 'The Snow Queen' is a tale about actual mirrors. A
mirror created by the Devil (i.e. a goetic one) causes the separation of two loving neighbors, the children Kay and Gerda. The mirror makes everything look worthless and ugly; when the devil flies it up to heaven to scoff at the angels, it bursts “into a hundred million billion and more fragments”. The fragments fall to earth, where they stick in peoples’ eyes so that they see the worst aspect of the world, or lodge in their hearts so that they become blocks of ice. Kay is struck by a fragment and becomes cold and logical. He is taken away by the Snow Queen to her castle in Finmark (compare Nabokov’s merged Scandinavian lands), where she sits in the middle of “a frozen lake, which had burst into a thousand pieces; but each piece was like the rest, so that it was a perfect work of art [...] and she said that she sat in the mirror of understanding” (78). The Snow Queen sets Kay to playing “the ice game of reason”, that is, making “patterns so that they formed words – but he could never manage to make the word he wanted – the word ‘eternity’”. Gerda sets out on a long journey to rescue him, on which she is assisted by two kindly women, a Lapp and a Finn. When Gerda finds Kay, her tears thaw him as well as the pieces of ice, which dance for joy, and lie down themselves to form the word Kay had been unable to make. Gerda’s devotion animates icy reason and makes possible eternal life through human love.

Like Kinbote, Shade too has a mirror which reflects a king, himself. He imagines how a future biographer may describe him:

“He’d fixed a sort
Of hinge-and-screw affair, a steel support
Running across the tub to hold in place
The shaving mirror right before his face
And with his toe renewing tap-warmth, he’d
Sit like a king there, and like Marat bleed.”
(lines 889-894)

The emphatically mundane detail paired with the dreadful forced rhyme and scansion he’d/bleed match the soap fairy the Shades watch on a TV commercial in defining the poet’s earthbound vision. No wonder Shade fails to discover the “remoteness of the windowpane” in his poem, imagining his furniture transferred to the lawn by the reflection, rather than entering another world, though he is given several opportunities. He does not recognize visits from the hereafter despite his stay at the IPH. Kinbote almost detects Aunt Maud in the frantic Vanessa, but Shade’s shaving mirror reflects only his nicked face. His historical allusion functions as fashionable adornment but has no resonance, since Shade gives the French revolution no context in his poem. Shade is capable of loving his wife and daughter; Kinbote can only love his fantasy of Zembla. Were the two neighbors to
combine forces like Gerda and Kay, they might attain access to eternity, to the otherworld Nabokov hints at.

IV. *Isak Dinesen*

As the reflections in Sudarg's mirror recede into the background in space, in time, and in relation to their importance in Nabokov's design, so do the references to history, geography and literature in *Pale Fire*. These are often indicated by a single word, as with "bodkin" which instantly evokes Hamlet's soliloquy. Nabokov uses this method to include Dinesen's tales among the sub-texts of *Pale Fire*. Kinbote has a colleague, mentioned five times in *Pale Fire*, who is named Oscar Nattochdag. The surname means "night and day" in Swedish; in Danish it is Nat-og-dag. Two characters in Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales* have the extraordinary name Nat-og-Dag, a man in 'The Dreamers' and a woman in 'The Flood at Norderney'.

In 1957 when Nabokov began to have glimmerings of *Pale Fire*, Dinesen was much discussed in the press. She came to New York in 1959, where she read at the YMCA, leading to the republication of her *Seven Gothic Tales* in America in 1961. Dinesen wrote in English, and herself translated the collection, as well as her memoir, *Out of Africa*, into her native Danish, mirroring Nabokov's translation of his English works into Russian.

Besides Andersen, Dinesen is the best known Danish writer outside Denmark, and her life and art are richly intertwined with his. She was inspired by Andersen from childhood. Her nurse used to read her an Andersen tale every night, and gave her a two-volume collection of his tales to take to Africa. As a child, Dinesen would lie in bed and call "Uncle Andersen" to come and play with her, thrilled by his ability to "make big things small and to make small things big", and to make "all things speak". Dinesen's family knew Andersen personally; her paternal grandfather, Adolph Wilhelm, traveled to Italy with him. Like Andersen, Dinesen played in the Deer Park of Rungstedlund as a child. The castle and royal hunting grounds of the mad King Christian VII were in the Deer Park, so that the scandals of his reign were part of her early awareness of Danish history. She wrote about the fabulous events surrounding Christian VII in her *Last Tales*: he appears on the run from the police in 'Converse at Night in Copenhagen'.

Dinesen, like Nabokov, was from an ancient aristocratic family, and saw the end of the heyday of Danish aristocracy at the same time he had seen the end of the Russian one in 1919. Her father and grandfather had been members of Parliament; the latter was the Minister of Finance who was honored by Jewish Danes for having them admitted to the stock exchange. Nabokov's grandfather Dmitrij Nikolaevič was a liberal Minister of Justice...
Infinite Reflections in Nabokov’s ‘Pale Fire’

from 1878 to 1885; Nabokov’s father was a statesman whose work to combat anti-Semitism was attacked in the reactionary press. Dinesen, tutored by her grandmother and by governesses, knew French and English, and said that “reading Shakespeare was one of the really great events of my life”. Her whole life was deeply affected by the death of her father when she was ten. His suicide, attributed to his having syphilis, is perhaps the antithesis of Nabokov’s father’s heroic martyrdom, but, like Nabokov’s loss of his father, the loss of her father gave Dinesen a sense of exile from her childhood self that determined her life and art. Her feelings of abandonment after his death and her first unrequited love caused her to identify with Andersen’s little mermaid, and her early notebooks are filled with drawings of mermaids.

To an unusual degree, Dinesen’s stories share many of Nabokov’s distinctive themes and use a similar frame of reference. She writes about the workings of fate and the characters experience occasional revelations of their destinies. The metaphor of life as a stage along with the Platonic view this implies is everywhere in her work, and Shakespeare’s plays, especially *Hamlet* (‘Supper at Elsinore’, ‘Sorrow-Acre’), but also *The Tempest* (‘Tempests’) and *Timon* (‘The Flood at Norderney’), are an active presence in her plots, along with Andersen’s tales and Nordic mythology. The interplay of art and reality in which art is the predominant force is Dinesen’s subject, overtly in ‘Tempests’ and ‘The Immortal Story’. Dinesen, like Nabokov, treats homosexuality, incest and doublings with parodic glee. Throughout her tales runs a consideration of the possibility of immortality.

Like Andersen, Dinesen had a play staged at the Royal Theater in Copenhagen. The Zemblan Royal Theater, then, is a royal mirror of sorts reflecting plays by Andersen and Dinesen; as in Sudarg’s mirror, the shimmers of Denmark provide a succession of reflections: Dinesen and Andersen, the effect on them of Shakespeare’s plays, King Christian VII, and all of this is in turn mirrored by Nabokov’s own use of *Hamlet* in *Pale Fire*. For Dinesen and Nabokov, all the world is a stage; the theater influences reality and is the point of transition from one world to another.

1. ‘The Flood at Norderney’

It would be an amusing parlor game, or material for an improvvisatore, to be given a set of wildly disjoint reference points to embed in a novel. Incorporate Nattochdag and the following components: Timon of Athens and St. Petersburg; the game of chess, black and white, botany and hothouses, hidden treasure, heraldry, *Eugene Onegin*, the Protestantism of the north, a “man of fashion”, a Prince descended from Russian nobility who loves riddles and puzzles, Atalanta, a collection of emeralds, a medieval castle filled by its homosexual Count with countless catamites and a spurned young
virgin who gazes at herself in a long looking glass, suicide, a sybil, a Revolution in the background, a seashell, actors whose roles are indistinguishable from real life. Furthermore these elements are to be combined to address the problems of truth vs. duplicity, art vs. artifice, madness vs. art. And at the center of it all must be the parallel between the Creator and the story-teller.

All these bizarre features of Pale Fire appear in Isak Dinesen’s ‘The Flood at Norderney’, the first of the Gothic Tales. Nabokov has set off an explosion in Dinesen’s glass factory and rearranged many of the most eccentric shards into an entirely new composition. We will examine only a few of them here and leave the pleasures of recognition to those who will be moved to read Dinesen’s tale.

In ‘The Flood at Norderney’ four people are stranded in a barn on the west coast of Holstein by the great flood of 1835. They enliven this last night of their lives by telling each other their histories.

Dinesen’s story is about Genesis, about the Creation. In it the characters are called upon to invent the world anew, and this must be done through the power of the imagination. The loft where the four characters shelter is like the venerable Bede’s barn in his parable, a metaphor for earthly life, and the characters’ “long shadows which were really alive, and which kept up the spirit and the talk of the gathering” (15) recall Plato’s metaphor of the cave.

The evening’s discourse is conducted by old Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag, “a maiden lady of great wealth, the last of the old illustrious race which carded arms two-parted in black and white”. It has been said that she was a little off her head. Still, to the people who knew her well, it sometimes seemed open to doubt whether she was not mad by her own choice [...] Neither had she always been mad. She had even been a woman of great sense, who studied philosophy, and held human passions in scorn. If Miss Malin had now been given the choice of returning to her former reasonable state [...] she might have declined it on the ground that you have in reality more fun out of life when a little off your head. (17)

Kinbote too combines madness with brilliant powers of imagination. Shade defends him from the charge of madness by saying that “One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention” (note to line 627).

Miss Malin recreates the flooded barn as a salon by her witty conversation and the telling of tales. With her in the barn is a sixteen-year-old young woman called Calypso. Miss Malin tells Calypso’s tale: she was brought up by her uncle, Count Seraphina, who “disliked and distrusted everything female [...] His idea of paradise was [...] a long row of lovely
Infinite Reflections in Nabokov's 'Pale Fire'

young boys, in transparent robes of white, walking two by two, singing his poems to his music" (43). He tries to turn his huge medieval castle at Angelshorn into a "waxwork elysium". Calypso is the one female there. The Count educates her as if she were a boy until she grows into a beauty, whereupon he rejects her. She grows "fierce" and resolves to cut off her hair and her breasts. One midnight she takes an axe and walks through the castle with her candlestick to a room where she knows there to be a long mirror. As she looks into it, she sees the painting on the wall behind her:

It represented a scene out of the life of the nymphs, fauns and satyrs, with the centaurs playing in the groves [...] In the foreground three naked young nymphs were holding up branches of trees. (47)

These are the first other females Calypso has ever seen, and they allow her to realize that she is their sister. She considers killing the Count, but flees the castle instead.

In Pale Fire, Fleur de Fyler, like Calypso, is rejected by the homosexual lord of the castle. After she fails to seduce King Charles, "she kept trying, as one quietly insane, to mend a broken viola d'amore" (note to line 80). Nabokov has borrowed the instrument from Calypso's uncle, who plays one in his tapestry-hung castle (44). Thus the nymphs in the painting that save Calypso also turn up among the infinity of mermaids and "garlands of girls" in Sudarg's mirror. Dinesen's captive nymph in the castle herself mirrors a succession of heroines from Gothic romances, such as Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho, as well as their parodies, like Jane Austen's Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey. Catherine's swain Henry Tilney parodies for her the Gothic heroine's night-time search among dark tapestries by guttering candlelight - the heroine finds "the remains of a broken lute". Kinbote's own Shadows, he says, "must strike one as something definitely Gothic and nasty" (note to line 171), while Nabokov's garlands of Gothic games provide a series of delightful trouvailles in the drawers of the abandoned armours of a forgotten genre.

Also in the barn with Miss Nat-og-Dag is a man who appears to be the Cardinal Hamilcar von Sehestedt, a "half-mythical figure" who is felt by the people to be a "guardian angel" (4-5). His life task has been to write a book on the Holy Ghost. The Pope has said of him: "If after the destruction of the present world, I were to charge one human being with the construction of a new world, the only person I would trust with this work would be my young Hamilcar" (6).

The Cardinal believes he would have made a fine world, but upon my word of honor, I should not have dared to arrange these matters of love and marriage as they are, and my world would have lost sadly
thereby. What an overwhelming lesson to all artists! Be not afraid of absurdity; do not shrink from the fantastic. Within a dilemma, choose the most unheard-of, the most dangerous solution. (55)

Nabokov had similar ideas about the composition of works of verbal art and of chess problems. He describes

the ecstatic core of the process [of problem composing] and its points of connection with other, more overt and fruitful, operations of the creative mind, from the charting of dangerous seas to the writing of one of those incredible novels where the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients – rocks, and carbon, and blind throbings.⁵⁰

The Cardinal too uses chess as a metaphor for divine creation:

[...] the play of the Lord is divine. Not the bishop, or the knight, or the powerful castle is sacred in itself, but the game of chess is a noble game [...] So are we sanctified when the hand of the Lord moves us to where he wants us to be. (15)

The link between divine and artistic creation is made in *Pale Fire* by a lady who tries to pretend she has not just called Kinbote mad:

You must help us, Mr. Kinbote. I maintain that [...] the old man [...] at the Exton railway station, who thought he was God, and began redirecting the trains, was technically a loony, but John calls him a fellow poet.

(note to line 627)

This question of the nature of truth and the relationship of the imagination to reality underlies Kinbote’s deranged inventions and the Cardinal’s imposture. The Cardinal has a sort of valet or secretary named Kasparson, “a former actor and adventurer, a brilliant fellow in his way, who spoke many languages and had been given to all sorts of studies” (5). At the end of the tale, after the Cardinal has sustained the assembly throughout the night with his moral presence, he removes the blood-soaked bandages from his head and reveals that he is not the Cardinal, but Kasparson. “I am an actor, Madame, as you are a Nat-og-Dag” (72). As he had said earlier when disguised as the Cardinal:
there was never a great artist who was not a bit of a charlatan; nor a great king, nor a god. The quality of charlatanry is indispensable in a court, or a theater, or in paradise. (59)

Zembla is a combination of the court, the theater and paradise for Kinbote. He agrees with Miss Nat-og-Dag and Kasparsen in preferring art over truth. Miss Nat-og-Dag says:

Where in the world did you get the idea that the Lord wants the truth from us? [...] Why, he knows it already, and may even have found it a bit dull. Truth is for tailors and shoemakers [...] I have always held that the Lord has a penchant for masquerades [...] The Lord himself [...] seems to me to have been masquerading pretty freely at the time when he took on flesh and dwell amongst us. (24)

Kinbote "never could decide what he enjoyed more: the study of poetry [...] or attending parades, or dancing in masquerades with boy-girls and girl-boys" (note to line 71). He uses Miss Nat-og-Dag’s logic when trying to persuade Shade to turn his Zemblan tale into poetry. Shade asks:

“How can you know all this stuff about your rather appalling king is true?” “My dear John,” I replied [...] “do not worry about trifles. Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff will be true, and the people will come alive. A poet’s purified truth can cause no pain, no offense. True art is above false honor.”

(note to line 433-434)

This is Kinbote’s credo, and it is one of the things that Nabokov shares with him. In Pale Fire, Denmark, associated with the Hamlet tragedy, Andersen’s magical fairy tales, and Dinesen’s fantastical Romantic tales, serves as a magic lantern slide, “a delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge [...] that is intrinsically artistic”. Its images project the Zemblan (for Kinbote) and Russian (for Nabokov) past onto (Shade’s) American present, the Old World onto the New, the imagined onto the actual.

2. ‘The Dreamers’

Nabokov’s Oscar Nattochdag represents a combination of the female Nat-og-Dag of ‘Norderney’ with Waldemar (the Germanic equivalent of Vladimir) Nat-og-Dag of the sixth Gothic Tale, ‘The Dreamers’. There the narrator is sent by the colonel of his regiment, one Prince Oscar, to Saumur where he spends time with his “rich, young friend” Waldemar. This Nat-og-Dag explains his black and white coat of arms as representing death and life (304-305). Together with his narrator, Waldemar is in pursuit of a mysterious
woman. Once a diva, she has lost her voice; with the loss of her art she casts off her old identity, and assumes different identities to each of her lovers. They pursue their beloved up a snow-bound mountain where she dies.

Nabokov's use of Nat-og-Dag refers, then, to both of Dinesen's stories, combining the male and female names. Kinbote's nickname for Oscar Nattochdag is "Netochka" (note to lines 376-377), a woman's name inevitably associated with Dostoevskij's heroine, Netočka Nezvanova (Kinbote is prone to reverse genders, grammatical and biological). Here the mixture of male and female befits an allusion to a woman writer who signs her work with a man's name, and who treats the ambiguity of sexual identity in her tales.

Oscar Nattochdag, "that distinguished Zemblan scholar", as Kinbote calls him, is the head of Kinbote's department at Wordsmith College. He plays a minor role in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote introduces him in the foreword as "Dr. Nattochdag, head of the department to which I was attached". Nattochdag is the only other member of Kinbote's unspecified department. Kinbote speaks of two other department heads: Professor "Paul H. Jr., the fine administrator and inept scholar who since 1957 headed the English department" (note to line 376-377) and Professor Pnin, "a regular martinet in regard to his underlings" who is "Head of the bloated Russian Department" (note to line 172), "(a farcical pedant of whom the less said the better)" (note to line 579). This rules out the two principal cultures that govern Nabokov's book as candidates for Nattochdag's discipline.

"Good old Nattochdag" is the one character in New Wye besides Shade for whom Kinbote maintains a consistent affection, and who appears independently to subscribe to Kinbote's version of Zemblan history. He defends Kinbote from the charge of resembling King Charles, remarking "in his gentle voice how sad it was to think that such a 'sympathetic ruler' had probably perished in prison" (note to line 894). What department can he possibly be head of?

Isak Dinesen, a Dane who lived in Africa and wrote in English, fits into no clear university curriculum. Andersen too would have trouble finding a department, even though, as Miss Nat-og-Dag says when discussing 'The Emperor's New Clothes' in 'The Flood at Norderney', he is a "brilliant, rising young author" (41). Wordsmith College, however, appears to have established a department worthy of their work, one that accommodates the Zemblanists Nattochdag and Kinbote - the Department of Fantastical Metamorphosis, perhaps, that studies the transformation of life into art, the temporal into the eternal, and night into day.

The reflections of Andersen and Dinesen in *Pale Fire* create infinite perspectives on the permeability of our world by an otherworld: the mermaid's underwater idealization of this world is mirrored in the prince's idea of his savior from the temple in an infinite succession of concepts of immortality. As children, Gerda and Kay look through facing windows that in
the course of the tale develop into opposing principles, the Ice Queen’s ideal of crystalline perfection and the Lapp woman’s earthly devotion, which present complementary paths to immortality. In ‘The Shadow’ (as in Pale Fire), the poet and his shadow hold differing views of reality and immortality that are meant to be somehow combined. The several tales show multiple paths to an ideal world, itself depicted as mirroring transcendent realms beneath the sea and in the air.

The motto of Dinesen’s Nat-og-Dag family is “the sour with the sweet” (41), their coat of arms, black and white signifying death and life. As we have seen, the Danish material in Pale Fire is emblematic of counterposed worlds, temporal and eternal. The Copenhagen-based Shadows and “grjajuščij” goon Gradus are the agents of death; the immortal Danish tales of Andersen an Dinesen are themselves about eternal life.

The Danish material, then, provides a model for interpreting Pale Fire. Shade and Kinbote have facing windows. Shade’s quest for the secrets of an otherworld through earthly love and flawed poetry is no more valid than Kinbote’s longing for his lost Zemblan ideal in which he seeks to immortalize himself by having Shade record the material of his skewed imagination. His goetic mirror was filled by demons, relatives of the devil whose shattered mirror trapped Kay in Finmark (a distant Northern land) in ‘The Snow Queen’.

In Speak, Memory Nabokov shows us his own mirror. When Nabokov was a boy, his Uncle Ruka had rediscovered “with an ecstatic moan” volumes of the ‘Bibliothèque Rose’ with “stories of boys and girls who led in France the idealized vie de château which my family led in Russia” (76). Speak, Memory is itself an idealized vie de château (the Good double of the Gothic novel), which in turn contains Nabokov remembering his uncle remembering his childhood in an infinite succession of reflected images:

When I come over Sophie’s troubles again [...] I not only go through the same agony and delight that my uncle did, but have to cope with an additional burden – the recollection I have of him, reliving his childhood with the help of those very books. I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book [...] That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die. (76-77)

We can easily be trapped in our earthly room, like the bumblebee, or in an illusory sense of infinity that is a solipsistic hall of mirrors reflecting only ourselves. But these reflections may also lead outwards to other worlds, to
the infinite images found in history, myth and art. We may be able to transcend the limits of our present existence by following the brimming brightness in the mirror, where nobody will ever die.

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NOTES

1 We are grateful to the Ford Foundation for the summer research fellowship that made this collaboration possible, and to Susanne Fusso and Eleanor Wolff for their valuable editorial suggestions.


3 *Strong Opinions*, Interview with Alfred Appel, p. 83.

4 D. Barton Johnson calls this Nabokov’s “two-world theory” in *Worlds in Regression* (Ann Arbor 1985), Chapter 5.

5 Vera Nabokov identified the “otherworld” as Nabokov’s watermark in her introduction to his volume of poetry (*Stichi*, Ann Arbor 1979); Vladimir Alexandrov has devoted a book to the subject: *Nabokov’s Otherworld* (Princeton 1991).


7 Of *Despair*, Nabokov emphasizes that “Felix was really a false double” (*Strong Opinions*, p. 84), thereby acknowledging, in the same interview in which he dismisses it, that he himself has played with this frightfully boring subject.

8 For a catalogue of doubles in literature, see Ralph Tymms, *Doubles in Literary Psychology* (Cambridge 1949). In *The Double: a Psychoanalytic Study* (Chapel Hill, NC 1971), Otto Rank relates literary doubles to beliefs in many cultures that shadows and mirror images represent the soul.


10 Gogol’ opposes real/ideal using inverted pairing in ‘Nevskij Prospekt’: the artist finds his ideal but she turns out to be a prostitute, so he goes mad and dies; the realist pursues an attractive woman but she turns out to be the faithful wife of Schiller the tinsmith, who thrashes him with the help of his friend, Hoffmann the bootmaker. As the name Hoffmann suggests, reality frequently parodies art.

11 Counter-examples are Victor in *Pnin* who escapes his psychologist parents entirely, but he functions purely as Pnin’s magical helper and does not have to reconcile his artistic gift with reality: the crystal bowl miraculously escapes destruction. Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev (*The Gift*) suffers only a temporary thwarting, and this after the end of the book when he will realize he lacks the fourth key needed to enter the flat where he hopes to possess his muse: thus
Nabokov can assure us that the artist will succeed without bringing the ideal (the muse) into the real (Zina as mere lover).

It is the constant shifting of point of view in *Ada* that has kept critics so far from defining *Terra* and *Anti-Terra*, since these are defined variously by each character.

Mary McCarthy used the term in ‘A Bolt From the Blue’ in 1962, reprinted in *A Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays* (London 1970), pp. 15-34.

Note that *bereg* means “shore” in Russian, hence “Mountain shore pass”; Kinbote departs from the Zemblan shore for other shores; Nabokov’s departure from France for America is described in the earlier Russian version of his memoir, *Speak, Memory, Drugie berega* (Other Shores). In the memoir, Nabokov commemorates his own ascent toward verbal art with “a pillared heap of stones marking a mountain trail” (217). I am grateful to Susanne Fusso for noting this latter connection.

For Nabokov, the *steinmann*‘s doubles include *Buchmann, Bachmann, Bokmann, Blostman*, treeman and caveman. See Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden* (Middletown 1988), pp. 190-191 (hereafter referred to as *Sailor*). The present paper is the overflow of that book.


As indicated by the *Z* motif in his work. See *Sailor*, p. 184.

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For the Viking lore in *Pale Fire* see *Sailor*, Chapter 1.

Carrying a French passport, which emphasizes the “translator” function of French and Danish cultures in relation to the Russian and Anglo-American traditions. See *Sailor*. Kinbote’s father, King Alfin, speaks “a few phrases of French and Danish” (note to line 71).

Jon Stefansson, *Denmark and Sweden with Iceland and Finland* (New York and London 1917), p. 100. Lascelles Wraxall, *The Life and Times of Caroline Matilda* (London 1864), 3 vols., discusses the influence of Christian’s page von Sperling upon him: “Sperling was older than his master, and a thorough debauchee. He filled the prince’s mind with dangerous knowledge, and contrived to influence his imagination and corrupt his heart.” Christian’s tutor Reverdil adds: Nous jetterons un voile sur les désordres où Sperling put l’entrainer. Il en est dû contribuer aux progrès de sa demence” (vol. 1, p. 71).

Stefansson, p. 101. See also Lascelles Wraxall: for the story of the marriage see vol. 1; for the revolution see vol. 2, chapters 4 and 5.
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26 Wraxall details how the prostitute known as “Milady” was introduced to Christian, which “unfortunate connexion” led him into “the most horrible and open profligacy” (vol. 1, pp. 103-104).

27 Wraxall, an Englishman, stalwartly defends her against this charge; Stefansson accepts Struensee’s and the Queen’s confessions obtained while they were in captivity.


29 Wraxall, vol. 2, pp. 94-95.


31 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory (New York 1966), p. 87. Brian Boyd tells us that Miss Norcott was dismissed when it was discovered that she was a lesbian. The Russian Years (Princeton, New Jersey 1990), p. 52.

32 We are grateful to Rachel Trousdale for this insight. It is supported by the view of physicists, who think of time reversal as looking into a mirror where time runs backwards. We are grateful to William Trousdale for that observation.


34 See Sailor, Chapter 4.


36 Nabokov wrote an ending for Aleksandr Puškin’s unfinished drama, ‘Rusalka’ (Water Nymph or Mermaid), in which the water’s surface similarly divides mortals from their beloveds who inhabit an underwater ideal kingdom. See Sailor, pp. 120-122.

37 Hans Andersen, Fairy Tales (New York, no date), p. 47.

38 The tales were first published in 1934 when they were selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, and immediately sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The Danish translation appeared 1935. Out of Africa was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1938, selling 92,000 copies (Pelensky, p. 142).

39 Pelensky, p. 43.

40 Compare Nabokov recalling that, one hundred years later than Puškin, he too had been “walked by a tutor” in the Summer Garden. Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Onegin, trans. with commentary, 4 vols. (New York 1964), vol. 2, p. 41.

41 Pelensky, p. 45.

42 Speak, Memory, p. 188.

43 Quoted in Pelensky, p. 47.

44 Trying to shield his friend Pavel Miljukov, Vladimir Dmitrievič Nabokov was shot by two assassins on March 28, 1922 in Berlin.

45 Pelensky, p. 57.


50 *Speak, Memory*, pp. 290-291.

51 *Speak, Memory*, p. 167.

52 None of the three Heads is given an entry in the index.

53 Nabokov embeds an echo of the Lapp woman from ‘The Snow Queen’ in *Pale Fire*. During King Charles’ escape, “a pilot from a Lapland base flying on a mission of mercy got lost in the fog and was so badly harassed by Zemblan fighters that he settled atop a mountain peak” (note to line 171).

54 Ballooning is the national sport of Zembla and Kinbote arrives in America by parachute; his father King Alfin, on the other hand, perishes in an airplane accident. The hero of Dinesen’s story, ‘The Diver’, tries to build wings and fly; when he realizes he has been subverted by reality in the form of a woman disguised as an angel, he becomes a diver for pearls instead.