

“The Shadow in the Windowpane”: Containment, Privacy, and Censorship in *Pale Fire*

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Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is a difficult text to introduce. The setup seems straightforward enough at first: there is a “Foreword,” a “Poem” titled “Pale Fire,” a “Commentary,” and an “Index.” The poem is ostensibly written by the poet and scholar John Shade, while the paratext's author is Charles Kinbote, a fellow literature professor and close friend of Shade's, who takes it upon himself to prepare the poem for publication after Shade's untimely death at the hands of a gunman named Gradus.

However, *Pale Fire* would not be a novel by Nabokov without a large dose of linguistic and narrative playfulness. Thus, the critical commentary, while anchored to the poem by references to line numbers, contains another, entirely unrelated narrative, which spans the entirety of the commentary, as well as reaching into the “Foreword” and the “Index.” Even within the “Commentary,” many footnotes have little to do with the poem and simply refer to one another and the second narrative. This narrative, which I refer to as the Zemblan narrative, reveals that Charles Kinbote is really Charles Xavier, the exiled king of a northern European country named Zembla; Xavier was overthrown by a populist plot and had to flee to a remote college town in America, where he lives disguised as Kinbote a professor of literature. John Shade is his neighbor and close friend. The connection between the two lives of Kinbote is the assassin Gradus, a member of a secret organization sent to kill the fleeing king but who ends up shooting Shade instead. Then there is a further possible narrative, in which Kinbote is a madman who only believes he is a king masking as scholar; or perhaps it is really Gradus (whose real name might be Jack Grey), a mad murderer escaped from a nearby prison out to kill Judge Goldsworth: the man who put him behind bars and whose house Kinbote is renting. In short, nothing is completely certain in *Pale Fire*, and any attempt to pin down the structure of the text leads to another trapdoor into other possible meanings. Scholarship on *Pale Fire* has usually focused either on the question of the characters' “real” identities and their relationship to each other; on attempts to untangle the many narratives that the text hints at; and on the question of authorship in the novel. In the face of such epistemological uncertainty, it comes as no surprise, then, that some have read *Pale Fire* simply as a parody or lampoon of literary scholarship, a sly jab on Nabokov's part at the methods of dissection and over-analysis practiced in the study of literary texts.

In my paper I want to shift the focus away from debates about authenticity, fictionality, and authorship, and instead propose a reading that puts *Pale Fire* into a particular cultural context: Cold War America. In her literary biography of Nabokov, Andrea Pitzer makes a claim for Nabokov as a politically aware writer—specifically, a Cold War writer—and for *Pale Fire* as a commentary on American society during the Cold War. In fact, it could be said that Nabokov smuggles in Cold War history and cultural commentary in the pockets of his narrative in the same way that his character, Charles Kinbote smuggles out the poet Shade’s manuscript in the pockets of his coat. I read *Pale Fire* along similar lines but ground my analysis of the text in the wider historical and cultural context rather than in Nabokov’s individual history. My interest in the Cold War context of *Pale Fire* lies in an idea of privacy that is grounded in containment culture. Reading *Pale Fire* in relation to containment culture and its obsession with privacy opens up questions of legibility, especially in relationship to the (in)accessibility of domestic space, and on the other hand, the interplay of privacy and questions of reading and literary interpretation in the context of scholarship and institutionalized reading. Both domestic space and textual space in the text perform similar moves of containment and are concerned with the protection of privacy against intrusive outside forces.

I will first focus on the question of privacy in relation to American domestic politics. The three protagonists, Shade, Kinbote, and Gradus, are afforded varying degrees of privacy, depending on their domestic setup, and I will show how this is reflected in their narratives. Depending on how high the stakes of privacy are, that is, the more stable their domestic situation, the more closely their privacy (i.e. the inviolable domestic space) is protected. Inversely, the more stable the home space, the more impenetrable it is, or rather, the greater is the respective protagonist’s control over how much of their inner life can be accessed by others. This corresponds with Cold War politics of containment, whose narrative fetishized the domestic sphere as the bastion of democratic freedom against Communist totalitarianism. Following my discussion of domestic spaces, I will turn to Kinbote, and to a lesser extent John Shade, Sybil Shade, and Gradus as readers. I will consider how literary interpretation bears upon the privacy of a text, and finally how domestic and textual spaces intersect in *Pale Fire*.

Before I delve deeper into an analysis of Shade, Kinbote, and Gradus, I want to briefly unpack the central strain of my argument. Deborah Nelson’s book *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* provided me with a key idea in her claim that “[m]oving beyond the fantasy of a spatial privacy—the container that must be sealed tightly at all costs—suggests a new and paradoxical model of privacy in the era of generalized exposure” (xviii). What was “lost” in cold war containment culture, she says, was a model of *patriarchal* privacy; but this loss in turn led to new, alternative privacies being found (xiii). *Pale Fire*

presents the reader with a mixture of both old and new models of privacy. I therefore want to take up Nelson's idea in slightly modified form and argue that each of the three protagonists, Shade, Kinbote, and Gradus, occupy different positions on a spectrum of privacy that is connected to their respective domestic situations. This model of privacy relies on the closed container of domestic space as well as alternative models that allow the continuation of privacy by shifting to an emphasis on normativity even as the domestic sphere is breached. In other words, I read the extent of privacy that each of the three protagonists is allowed as connected to how closely their living situation adheres to normative standards of domesticity. For example, John Shade, the model American, has a wife as well as a house of his own, and his portion of the narrative, the poem "Pale Fire," therefore proceeds with the utmost stability, guaranteed by his use of heroic rhyming couplets.

Since my analysis rests to a significant degree on the different characters and their capabilities for reading and narration, it will be helpful to begin by touching on the question of *Pale Fire's* narrator or narrators. The question of which character has really authored the different texts within the novel (in other words, the "true" narrator of *Pale Fire*) has been a central and complicated mainstay of scholarship from the start; William Dowling's article "Who is the Narrator of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*?" provides a helpful summary and explanation of the different positions. Briefly, they range from claiming Kinbote as the author of everything, to suggesting that Shade's ghost dictates the poem and commentary to a mad Kinbote. A dual-author model, in which the poem is the work of Shade and the prose paratext is Kinbote's narration is most productive for my argument. As I will show, Kinbote's narrative represents his frustrated attempts at becoming part of American society via Shade's poem. Kinbote repeatedly refers to Shade as the most important *American* poet, and thus close surveillance of the poet and scrutiny of his work seem to Kinbote the straightest road to achieving his goal of becoming Americanized.

Mary McCarthy, in her 1962 review of *Pale Fire*, agrees with Kinbote's assessment of Shade, calling him "homey ... in the style of Robert Frost," thus confirming that with this character, Nabokov created a kind of ur-American artist. Kinbote hopes that by appropriating this American text, which is steeped in autobiographical details of the poet's life and presented in orderly, rhyming couples, his own self as well as his narrative will become legitimized and ordered in turn. However, to do so, he has to contend with the very American, specifically Cold War, concept of privacy and thus with normativity, as Nelson shows effectively in her study of Cold War privacy: normativity determines the kinds of behavior worth protecting and being afforded privacy. While Kinbote objectively speaking is mad, his reasoning is sound in the cultural context; he would most likely be able to become part of an American community by studying this paragon of normative Americanness. The Cold War American community was constantly on high alert against intruders into American

domesticity and privacy. Kinbote, the exiled king peeking into normative Americans' lives is Nabokov's version of such an intruder or spy. The outsider "other" replaces the American enforcers of normative culture and thus provides a putatively scholarly point of view that is a mockery of critical distance.

However, Kinbote is an Other in too many ways to achieve true assimilation; he is a foreigner from an ostensibly Communist or at least socialist country and gay to boot. Nelson points out that a crucial avenue of Cold War surveillance of private life in the middle and later decades was directed at questions of gender and sexuality. While, as Nelson writes, "anxieties about police surveillance are most often treated in legal history as parallel or even unrelated to the controversies over privacy in the domains of gender and sexuality" (13); these anxieties would have begun to contribute to the fragmentation of privacy right around the time *Pale Fire* was published. Ultimately, a form of containment ideology extended the reach of Cold War politics into domestic life and sexual expression, arguably two of the most private aspects of American society. In this context, then, Kinbote unites two of the main threats to democracy and normativity. In addition, Kinbote's status as exiled king means that he is still too much of a body politic to be granted a private self that could be legitimized. His spying and peeping after Shade, however futile, should be read as an attempt on the one hand, to become privy to the American household and the private self at its center, and on the other hand, to merge his narrative with Shade's poem in an attempt to gain a credible identity for himself. But as I have suggested, Kinbote's foreignness continually excludes him from the American space; he does not possess the cultural knowledge (or linguistic proficiency) to fully participate and can thus never progress further inside than the metaphorical and literal entrance hall. Thus Shade ultimately remains unknowable to him. As Kinbote puts it in the novel's "Foreword," "[Shade's] whole being constituted a mask" (23); the identity that Shade projects is at once a highly controlled fiction and an impenetrable barrier to Kinbote or other outsiders—hence McCarthy's assessment of him in her 1962 review of *Pale Fire* as "*deceptively homey*" (emphasis added).

In 1959, the *Partisan Review* included in its Summer edition an essay-speech by Lionel Trilling, the influential cultural critic, scholar, and a contemporary of Frost and Nabokov. The central question of his piece is "What did I say that could so nearly have approached a scandal?" (445). The words that caused this near-scandal had been uttered in a speech on the occasion of Frost's eighty-fifth birthday: in the speech, reproduced in full after a short prefatory note, Trilling had called Frost "a terrifying poet" (445). What Trilling is driving at is the nature of Frost's poetry; in fact, his interpretation is not so different from McCarthy's. Indeed, both of their remarks hint at the two defining aspects of Frost's public image: his status as Americanness personified, as *the* poet of America, and his poetry's emphasis on an "old America" marked by images of nature, loneliness, and self-sufficiency. Citing

D. H. Lawrence, Trilling argues that Frost's apparent naiveté, pastoralism, and nostalgia are in fact important moves in a turning-away from European poetic values: "That enterprise was of an ultimate radicalism. It consisted, Lawrence says, of two things: a disintegration and sloughing off of the old consciousness, by which Lawrence means the old European consciousness, and the forming of a new consciousness underneath" (451). Frost's poetry, then, is not nearly as straightforward and simple it may seem at first glance, and Trilling would likely have been in agreement with McCarthy's later assessment that the homeliness of Frost's poetry is deceptive. What is important about this in relationship to *Pale Fire* is that a person with a truly American mind would be able to see through this deception and recognize the project behind it. Nabokov suggests that a European or un-American mind such as Kinbote's, on the other hand, will perceive only the surface message that Shade's poem "Pale Fire" projects. Kinbote falls for the deception of openness and accessibility in Shade's Frostian poem precisely because he is not American and therefore does not have the critical apparatus to correctly read Shade or his poem.

In fact, Kinbote's attempts at getting to know Shade reveal the different degrees of privacy and legibility at play in the novel. Kinbote learns quickly that Shade is not as accessible as he seems, but that he is, in fact, a rather private man. He can only be accessed either obliquely from behind windows and shrubbery, in the watchful presence of his wife, or through gross violations of privacy, such as when Kinbote storms into the Shade house while Shade is in the bath (207). While it seems that Shade himself is not very worried about outside threats, his wife is, and so she is the one who works hardest to keep the private space of the Shade home impenetrable. However, Shade is by no means naïve enough to let just anyone in. This becomes evident in a textual variant of the poem provided in Kinbote's commentary, which reads:

The light is good; the reading lamps, long-necked;
 All doors have keys. Your modern architect
 Is in collusion with psychoanalysts:
 When planning parents' bedrooms, he insists
 On lockless doors... (77)

Here it is obvious how much Shade values the nice, old-fashioned, impenetrability of his very American house, and also perceives some of the Cold War anxiety about breaches of the domestic sphere. To unpack the tension between inside and outside further, I want to turn to the poem's opening stanza:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
 By the false azure of the windowpane;
 I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I
 Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.

And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate 5
 Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:
 Uncurtaining the night, I'd let dark glass
 Hang all the furniture above the grass,
 And how delightful when a fall of snow
 Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so 10
 As to make chair and bed exactly stand
 Upon that snow, out in that crystal land! (29)

I first want to draw attention to the imagery of mirroring and the note of duplicity it contains. The speaker-as-bird crashes against the window because the window shows it a false sky, a false sense of freedom. The "I" here has been betrayed by the window; however, there is a further layer of falseness. At first, it seems that the window gives us access into the private interior of the house, but a closer examination of the verbs yields *duplicate*, *let*, and *exactly stand*, words that hint at a highly controlled fiction that is projected onto the outside. The image that seems to allow access to the poem's and, by extension, the speaker's, interiority, in truth does not reveal much about the "I" at all, showing, as it does, merely generic objects in his possession. In reflecting both the sky outside and the bedroom inside, the window proves its dual function as both inlet into the house and a protective barrier against the outside.

In the same way, Kinbote's spying on Shade is controlled by windows and window-frames which frequently cut off features essential to observation, such as Shade's face, thus limiting and controlling Kinbote's true access to Shade while he deludes himself into thinking he is actually seeing something. In fact, Kinbote's description of Shade's house rests solely on these opportunities of visual ingress: "Let us turn to our poet's windows... Today it would be impossible for me to describe Shade's house in *terms of architecture or indeed in any term other than those of peeps and glimpses, and window-framed opportunities*" (71, emphasis added). In his textual analysis, Kinbote continues to focus on deceptive windows even after he has found his efforts to become Americanized through observation frustrated; the poem in his hands thus becomes a collection of fragmented opportunities to get an insight into the life of Shade, this quintessentially American man, and like the diegetic windows and doors of Shade's house, it resists Kinbote's very attempts at readerly intrusion. Even more guarded than closed entryways, however, the ultimate gatekeeper to Shade's privacy is his wife. Sibyl Shade most effectively and completely frustrates Kinbote's desire to know Shade. Her censorship is enforced in three ways: by the physical exclusion of Kinbote from the Shade household (by drawing the blinds, not inviting him into the house, and refusing him on the phone); by withholding information about the poet's life after his death (she does not reply to Kinbote's letters); and in excising those parts of the

poem that concern Kinbote's narrative (or so he thinks), thus excluding him figuratively, she quite literally separates his narrative from Shade's.

Sybil Shade's censorship activities will be relevant to my discussion of the tense relationship between literary scholarship and privacy below. For now, I turn instead to Kinbote and his status in terms of privacy. Kinbote occupies a middle ground between Shade's absolute inaccessibility and Gradus's absolute knowability. He lives in rented houses and cabins, but he does not move as frequently as Gradus, and his mind is moderately accessible, if not entirely sane. However, as Steven Belletto points out in his discussion of Gradus, "the textual association with him as a 'caller' to the Goldsworth house ... echoes Kinbote's earlier remark about how the house was architecturally inviting to a 'chance caller'" (769). This is an interesting remark with regard to Kinbote, because it figures the Goldsworth house, which Kinbote is renting, as a penetrable space, unlike the sealed-off property of the Shades's. As Belletto shows in his article on homosexual panic during the Cold War, the American party line about homosexuality figured its danger in the homosexual's susceptibility to subversion; thus, Kinbote's position in a rented house that is apparently open to anyone shows that his exclusion from the American community is justified on Cold War logic due to his perceived vulnerability to outsiders. Moreover, while he ostensibly controls the prose sections (that is, "his" part of the narrative), it soon becomes clear that Kinbote's control over the narrative and thus over privacy is illusory; as Belletto rightly suggests: "it is a textual control that Nabokov suggests has little relevance to what Shade would call the 'texture' of real life" (763). Thus, this illusory control cannot contribute anything to Kinbote's project of becoming Americanized because it is validated neither by the community he hopes to join nor by the text of the poem, which he fails to interpret correctly.

Truly, Kinbote's section of the narrative, the "Commentary," is a sprawling, anti-linear mess, and despite repeated attempts to control it, it mushrooms wildly. In his note to lines 47-48 (incidentally one of his longest), he declares: "I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel" (71, Nabokov's emphasis). Of course, that is exactly what happens. Not only does he end up telling his own story in an attempt to counter Sybil's perceived censoring of it in the poem, but as his frustrated attempts to get at Shade lead to a proliferation of verbiage, his behavior is revealed as quite queer and un-American, such as in the note to lines 47-8, where he details his "orgy of spying" on Shade in almost excruciating detail (72).

On the spectrum of legibility, the assassin Gradus is diametrically opposed to Shade, who is nearly impossible for Kinbote to read. Gradus is the most mobile and knowable of all three protagonists. *Gradus*, from the Latin for "step," is always on the move. He traverses several continents and only stays in hotels. The most stable environment that he "inhabits" is the prison, which is of

course an institution that affords its inhabitants little to no privacy. Accordingly, he functions as Shade's diametrical opposite and as such is fully accessible to Kinbote: his actions are fully legible and he is completely knowable (even if, as Kinbote claims, there is not much to know). Unsurprisingly, then, the Gradus commentary is the one place in which Kinbote seems to have complete narratorial and organizational power. In the note to line 171 he demonstrates this control by laying out his organizational principle: "I have staggered the notes referring to him in such a fashion that the first (see note to line 17 where some of his other activities are adumbrated) is the vaguest while those that follow become gradually clearer as gradual Gradus approaches in space and time" (123). And indeed, he is not wrong: the sections about Gradus are the most orderly in all of the prose paratexts.

It seems that Kinbote, for all the lack of control that the rest of his narrative shows, actually has a relatively solid grasp on Gradus; however, in the context of Cold War containment, despite his insight into Gradus, Kinbote actually fails to fulfill a crucial tenet of containment: he fails to prevent the enemy coming in from outside. While Kinbote was trying to get closer to Shade, Gradus has come to occupy the position of the feared "enemy within." Nelson clarifies the American anxiety about the "enemy within" as follows: "The power and mobility of this metaphor of containment were equal only to the power and elasticity of the metaphor of intrusion—the enemy within—which conveyed the uncanny experience of finding one's borders already violated. The impossible purity of the internal space meant the perpetual breakdown and failure of the containment product" (xviii). Kinbote is not even aware of his oversight. Instead, in the note to line 949, he is still keen to show off his insight into Gradus and imagines himself as omniscient, godlike narrator: "From my rented cloudlet I contemplate him" (216). He then moves to expose Gradus's interiority: "We see, rather suddenly, his humid flesh. We can even make out (as, head-on but quite safely, phantom-like, we pass through him) ... his magenta and mulberry insides..." (218) In making this move, Kinbote missteps once again. His overdetermined control of Gradus does give him access to Gradus's interiority, but it is in the form of his intestines rather than his mind. Kinbote therefore fails again to defend against the enemy, this time as a reader, because he focuses on the wrong detail. Kinbote fails to overcome the exclusion created in the name of privacy not only in his inability to enter the poet Shade's house, but also in his inability to break down textual barriers through scholarship.

Before writing *Pale Fire*, Nabokov had spent two years assembling a behemoth commentary on *Eugene Onegin*, completely caught up in his dizzyingly obsessive commentary on Pushkin's verse novel. According to Pitzer, it was this monumental work that led him to imagine a novel in which a whole life would be tucked into a commentary on a poem (267). However, even though Nabokov himself wrote his novels on index cards—like John Shade

does in *Pale Fire*—and despite the overt parallels between Nabokov’s biography and some of the novel’s plot points, *Pale Fire* is more than a *roman à clef*. Rather, these parallels are part of a cultural commentary on postwar America at large, which is in turn linked—via the concept of privacy—to an exploration of the contradictory nature of critical reading.

On the face of it, Kinbote’s critical project follows the rules of literary scholarship. In essence, all scholarship effectively constitutes an invasion of privacy; to provide an adequate commentary, the scholar necessarily has to dig into the poet’s or author’s biography, correspondence, or diaries. However, all of this is normally done with a mind to finding evidence that helps parse the text that is being edited or explicated. Kinbote not only takes these editorial privileges by force (he breaks into Shade’s house and steals the manuscript), he takes them to a selfish end: to become part of an American community. Compounding his guilt, Kinbote is a bad reader for not understanding the “texts” that are presented to him, as I have established discussing of his “reading” of *Gradus*.

In the context of literary analysis and critical reading, *Pale Fire* can be read as a response to contemporary criticisms of literature and its seemingly inextricable link with scholarship such as Karl Shapiro’s, who argues in his 1959 article in the *New York Times* titled “What’s the Matter with Poetry?”: “[w]hat we have in our time is not a flourishing poetry but a curious brand of poetry compounded of verse and criticism. It is accurate to call this hybrid ‘criticism-poetry.’ ... This is why almost every college and university in America must *teach* modern poetry” (21). Shapiro was being somewhat facetious, of course, in his lament on the institutionalization of poetry and poets, but there is a grain of truth in his assertions that points to a wider cultural debate about the work of art. In this debate, Nabokov took a somewhat ambivalent stance. As a professor of poetry at Cornell his livelihood depended on the inextricability of poetry and criticism, but *Pale Fire* is also a mordant satire on literary scholarship and interpretation. Kinbote is, after all, and despite his efforts, a terrible reader and only a slightly more worthy editor.

When it comes to editorship, the general consensus is that a good scholar, like a Victorian child, should neither be seen nor heard, except when absolutely unavoidable. Kinbote, of course, is not a good editor. While his introduction to the poem starts out promising, giving the reader background information on John Shade’s life and work, he promptly and abruptly lapses into his own narrative in the third paragraph of the “Foreword.” Thus, he writes:

A methodical man, John Shade usually copied out his daily quota of completed lines at midnight... he marked his card or cards not with the date of his final adjustments, but with that of his Corrected Draft or first Fair Copy. I mean, he preserved the date of actual creation rather than

that of second or third thought. There is a very loud amusement part right in front of my present lodgings. (13)

Kinbote's editorship has been variously read as a persona he adopts in order to mask his true identity and as an identity in which he really believes; either way, the fiction's central idea—Kinbote as editor—does not hold. The majority of the paragraph is taken up with explaining Shade's highly methodical approach to writing his poem, but the editorial commentary is suddenly interrupted by a personal observation. The intrusion is jarring because editors tend at best to be conceived of as disembodied scholarly minds rather than attached to living, breathing persons, or, at the very least, as persons who write their commentaries and introductions in a study or library; thus, Kinbote breaks the rule of scholarly impersonality. This instance also marks the first intrusion of Kinbote's own narrative into the space of Shade's poem, and so constitutes another breach of the scholarly "contract." It has nothing to do with the text at hand, and is wholly irrelevant to anyone but Kinbote himself. Furthermore, this paragraph is an early demonstration of Kinbote's unfitness as a reader, which I have already established. On a first reading, the reader might take the interruption as an amusing aside, and think nothing of it. But actually, it is the first hint of what is to come. That is, the intrusion puts a crack into the façade of the poem-narrative that will widen further and finally give way under Kinbote's commentary, so that the "original" text is overrun by the paratext.

Kinbote's relentless battering of the poem's walls with his own narrative is born out of two sets of motivations. First, he wants to fully explicate this most American poem in service to its readers, and he does not shy away from even the most egregious invasions of privacy to get at the information he needs to do so. In relation to that, he also pursues the underlying desire to align his text with Shade's. Second, Kinbote's persistence is motivated by his personal wish to become Americanized; a wish that cannot be fulfilled due to the Cold War American paranoia against foreigners and "Others" of any kind, as Alan Nadel shows in his seminal work on containment culture where he talks of the contradictions that "reveal repeatedly the need for and the inability to stabilize the distinction between Other and Same" (20). The exclusion of the Other is a necessary contributing factor to upholding the authority of Cold War rhetoric and discourses surrounding concepts like privacy and democracy—core American values, so to speak. And so, in his unremitting pursuit of two instances of privacy that keep eluding him, Kinbote embodies the two chief violators of privacy: the unscrupulous reader and the queer and foreign spy. This makes him the unifying force behind the two strands of invasion of privacy that might inform a text: one, a sort of "on-the-street" invasion of an American person's domestic life and the other in the form of scholarship. Read with Cold War containment ideology in mind, Kinbote's repeated instances of misreading work to distort the poem to fit his intentions, completely overwhelming the

poem's text with his Zemblan narrative in the process of making his own text more Shadean, and therefore American, by association—a project that due to the circumstances of its conception is guaranteed to fail. Against all this Cold War paranoia, Michael Trask provides a convincing argument in *Camp Sites* for the relative innocuousness of Kinbote's imposition; he suggests that all of it is merely Kinbote's attempt to make sense of Shade's death. I have already established that Kinbote's control is illusory and therefore this attempt at control is as futile as his attempt at legitimizing his Zemblan narrative and becoming Americanized, which compounds the impression of his harmlessness. While none of this exculpates him as a bad reader, admittedly this particular instance of misreading in the "Foreword" is not intentional: in the commentary to lines 609-614 it transpires that "what I thought was some kind of amusement park, across the road...turned out to be camping tourists." (186) At any rate, whether his misreadings are intentional or accidental, he betrays early on that he is a poor reader, and that is ultimately where the problem with Kinbote as a scholar lies.

In the context of Cold War paranoia, the "Commentary" section as a whole could be read as a document of subversion for its insistence on pushing the Zemblan narrative—which is arguably what Sybil Shade does. By extension of this logic, the personal nature of Shade's poem makes of its contents sensitive information that gets into the wrong hands and leaves its author open to Kinbote's foreign readings, which latch onto his American lines and use them as points of access to the American community. As I have shown, though, Kinbote's intentions are not hostile, but merely selfish. Kinbote latches onto the poem precisely because it is so quintessentially American, and because he hopes to validate his own narrative by association with Shade, in order to become Americanized. The attack, then, is in a somewhat paradoxical way, benign. However, this does not mean that it can be allowed from a Cold War American standpoint—it remains, after all, an intrusion, an attempted breach of privacy. This is why Sybil Shade censors Kinbote's access to John Shade. He perceives further signs of her censorship in John Shade's poetry, which lacks the Zemblan elements he had been planting: "We know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem... about the King of Zembla. We have been prepared for the horrible disappointment in store for me... Mrs. Shade will not remember having been shown by her husband who 'showed her everything' one or two of the precious variants" (232-233).

As I say, Sybil's censorship takes on a variety of forms, but her betrayal seems the most acute to Kinbote because he expected her to be his ally in the editorial process: "Needless to say...I had been looking forward to Sybil Shade's providing me with abundant biographical data..." (17) However, Sybil is actually his adversary, as she is a most active keeper of her husband's privacy, in terms of both his house and his writing. However, removed from Kinbote's paranoia and resentment, her behavior becomes legible as Cold War

containment work. She is part of the American nuclear family, and thus part of what Nadel calls the “cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security” (3). Or, to put it in Nelson’s words, “the sanctity of the private sphere was generally perceived to be the most significant point of contrast between the two regimes. . . .not [cold war rhetoric’s] cultivation of a vibrant and free public discourse but its vigilant protection of private autonomy” (xiii). Sybil, then, does very important work, and Kinbote simply misreads it as antagonistic because he is not part of the same context. Let it not be forgotten either that Kinbote is an inveterate self-deceiver; in truth, Sybil’s involvement in Shade’s work actually makes her an editor in her own right—and certainly a better one than Kinbote.

It seems, therefore, that at the heart of the poem is not just the single voice and mind of the poet, but that of the heterosexual couple, the unbreakable unit of man-author and wife-editor. This unit is what Kinbote works to dissolve, because he sees it (perhaps rightly) as the main impediment of his access to the American domestic sphere. In fact, Sibyl is not merely the one who is keeping Kinbote out but she actually occupies the very position he covets, that of editor-confidante. Furthermore, the visible display of heteronormativity that is presented in the poem works to exclude Kinbote by dint of his queerness—the relationships he conducts are simply not fit for the community of which he hopes to become a part.

In the end, while Kinbote is the one who commits the most egregious mistakes as reader and scholar, reference is unstable for all three of the main characters. Interestingly enough, Sibyl Shade never misreads anything or anyone. In fact, she is not only a better editor than Kinbote, but also a better reader than all of the male characters. John Shade, unlike his wife, repeatedly miscomprehends Kinbote. While some of Shade’s misconstructions are purposeful, designed for gentle ribbing, as in their discussion about religion (178-180), some others are completely justified, such as the misunderstanding over what, exactly, Kinbote’s secret is. In the note to line 991 Kinbote recalls the following exchange with Shade:

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

‘What theme?’ said Shade absently . . . [Kinbote:] ‘Our blue inenubitable Zembla, and the red-capped Steinmann’ . . . ‘Ah,’ said Shade, ‘I think I guessed your secret quite some time ago.’ (226)

Despite his best attempts, Kinbote cannot always fix his meanings to make himself understood to Shade. I would argue that the repeated misunderstandings can partly be explained by Kinbote’s madness, which destabilizes his referents,

and partly by his foreignness. The two combine to make him unintelligible to his American audience.

Finally, there is Gradus' miscommunication with his associates. Their telephone exchange that uses two distinct sets of codes and different languages leads to a complete breakdown in communication, since each side erroneously assumes the other's competence. Thus their telephone conversations always necessarily devolve into a series of misunderstandings (Belletto 770). The exchange somewhat recalls Tony Jackson's argument about the importance of correct reading in the Cold War strategy of deterrence. In his article "Postmodernism, Narrative, and the Cold War Sense of an Ending" Jackson argues that during the Cold War, the central question for Americans was not whether, but when the world would end. To this end, he analyzes the historical elements that combined to create a unique atmosphere of anxiety concerning the other side (325). Jackson argues that reading correctly was of vital importance to keeping the fragile balance brought about by the paradoxical logic of limit-case thinking (329). For that reason alone, a bad reader like Kinbote cannot possibly be admitted to the community, because his misreadings might actually be fatal; in the Cold War context, a mistake like Kinbote's misconstruction of his enemy Gradus would have fatal consequences, and might even bring about the end of the world.

Pale Fire is a text concerned with the interrelating concepts of legibility and privacy, which Kinbote encounters at every turn. Instead of offering us Americans spying on other Americans, Nabokov confronts the reader of *Pale Fire* with another American anxiety at the very core of the Cold War; that is, an anxiety about foreigners infiltrating American society and passing as socially "normative" citizens. Nabokov subverts the usual pattern of the Cold War narrative even further and presents the story of intrusion from the point of view of the would-be-infiltrator, Kinbote. Shade represents one half of the domestic unit that formed the center of American protection efforts, allegedly the only thing keeping America on the path of democratic freedom and thus becomes simultaneously Kinbote's greatest desire and his main opponent, as well as an ultimately illegible text. Kinbote's attempts to insert himself in the Shadean narrative and thus in the American domestic community must fail because he is a danger to it. Belletto describes him aptly when he states: "Kinbote appropriates the logic of containment ... and figures Shade and himself as the domestic front in need of protection. In this way he converts himself, nominally confined to the role of political threat by the homophobic narrative, into an anti-subversive, into a Cold Warrior" (765). However, this is simply a misconstruction on Kinbote's part—one of his many misreadings, and this one culpably so. Following the logic of Cold War containment, Kinbote is not on the same side as Shade, not part of the domestic community, and thus he cannot claim a right to protection from the enemy Gradus either. Rather, he is himself an intruder, and thus an individual that Shade needs to be protected against.

Only in one of the very last of Kinbote's remarks on the poem comes an admittance of defeat, a confession that his project has failed: "In other words, everything will be done to cut off my person completely from my dear friend's fate" (234). After everything, both Kinbote's paranoia about being excluded as well as the exclusion itself are justified. Nabokov presents the containment project from the standpoint of the Other who cannot and must not gain access because he is not American enough to support its continuation. With *Pale Fire*, Nabokov has written a cultural critique disguised as a caricature of scholarship in which the question of privacy becomes relevant both for the historical Cold War American community and those who would join it, as well as the bad scholar attempting to wrest meaning from a text he cannot fully understand. Out of the tension between text and scholarly work emerges Nabokov's playful side. It was he, after all, who said that chaos is the novelist's prerogative, while order is the critic's perverse pleasure.

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