

# Bile/Pale Fire: Benjaminian Allegory and Nabokovian Melancholy

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“I myself / Rich only in large hurts” — *Timon of Athens*

No one reads letters anymore.<sup>1</sup> Who even *writes* letters today? Why would we, for, if Tom Cohen is to be believed, they are destined to remain unread. And this is only true for the letters that are actually posted, which the majority are not according to Darian Leader.<sup>2</sup> Or at least those letters written by women. Letters that are written but unposted are doubly unread, off-cuts of a conversation that founders before it begins. Misfires. Miscarriages. Or just simply missed. Perhaps the letters that remain unposted are written by a melancholic hand. The melancholic misses. This is what she does best. She misses the one who has inexplicably gone. More precisely, she misses the time in which it is proper to miss. Missing someone ultimately means accepting their absence. Accepting their absence implies one has sufficiently mourned. But the melancholic, as Freud tells us, fails to mourn because mourning ultimately means turning one's back on the loved one, making an about-face towards reality again. Against such a betrayal of love, the melancholic rebels. She rises up against the slow and painful process of detaching her libido from the lost loved object, making of herself in the process, as Freud says, “the greatest nuisance.” Melancholics, Freud writes in “Mourning and Melancholia,” always seem as though they felt slighted and had been treated with great injustice. All this is possible only because the reactions expressed in their behaviour still proceed from a mental constellation of revolt, which has then, by a certain process, passed over into the crushed state of melancholia.<sup>3</sup>

What distinguishes mourning from melancholia, Freud explains is that in the latter, the object flees into the ego which comes to house this foreign ‘king.’<sup>4</sup> Usurped by the introjected object, the ego survives on the margins as a “critical agency,” issuing summonses to the simultaneously loved yet hated object occupying her former realm. Indeed, Freud clarifies, the melancholic's excoriating self-accusations “are really ‘plaints’ in the old sense of the word... everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else.” In this way, through the hollowed out words of the plaintive plaintiff, the loved object lives on, as a “shadow” on the ego.

1 Cohen 2005a, p. 83.

2 Leader 1997.

3 Freud 1917, p. 248.

4 “His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and every story.” Freud 1908, p. 150.

I. "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/  
By the false azure of the window pane"<sup>5</sup>

*Pale Fire* was written while Nabokov was translating Pushkin's famous poem "Eugene Onegin" (or "You-gin One-Gin" as Nabokov liked to call it<sup>6</sup>). His "literal" translation of Pushkin was a daring approach in 1964, ultimately costing him his friendship with Edmund Wilson in a public falling out in *The New York Review of Books*.<sup>7</sup> Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* was notable primarily for its refusal to conform to the unspoken convention of the time that poetic translations should faithfully reproduce the rhythmic and metrical patterns of the original.

In his Foreword justifying his unorthodox choice, Nabokov describes the three ways a translator may approach the work. There is the:

- "free" or "paraphrastic" translation of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form
- the "lexical" or constructional translation that maintains the basic meaning and order of words
- and finally the "literal" approach, which Nabokov calls the "only true translation." This is achieved by using the associative and syntactical capacities of the new language to render "the exact contextual meaning of the original."<sup>8</sup>

Nabokov acknowledges the Sisyphean nature of the literal translator's "task": "He may toy with 'honourable' instead of 'honest' and waver between 'seriously' and 'not in jest'; he will replace 'rules' by the more evocative 'principles' and rearrange the order of words to achieve some semblance of English construction and retain some vestige of Russian rhythm." But if he is still not contented, Nabokov explains, "the translator can at least hope to amplify it in a detailed note." And in his Commentary that accompanies his Pushkin translation, Nabokov does precisely this, writing more than 1000 pages of critical annotations.

With its quadruple structure composed of a lengthy Foreword, John Shade's Poem, Kinbote's Commentary and an ambiguously authored Index, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* ironically mimics the shape of his "Eugene Onegin" translation. In this respect, *Pale Fire* extends Nabokov's fondness for creating doubles in and of his works. His first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), for example, reads as a kind of first-run

5 Nabokov, 1996, p. 457.

6 Boyd, 1991, p. 112.

7 Wilson and Nabokov, 1965, n.p. Wilson accused Nabokov of "flattening Pushkin out and denying to his own powers the scope for their full play."

8 Nabokov, 1964, pp. vii-viii.

for material that would later appear in *Speak, Memory* (1951) (itself subject to a further parodic rewriting in the late novel *Look at the Harlequins* (1974)). A key characteristic of these multiplying textual doubles, also shared by *Pale Fire*, is the way that what they imitate is *already* a fake or bastardized text — each text a "double redoubled" as Alan Cholodenko would say.<sup>9</sup> Thus *Speak, Memory*, putatively the true memoirs of Nabokov's own "real life" and therefore invested with the full aura of autobiographic authority, in fact re-presents a number of events that have been culled from their prior fictional telling in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Complications multiply with the latter novel's titular conceit that the novel is the narrator, V.'s, attempt to set the truth straight following the earlier, unauthorized publication of Sebastian's biography by a certain Mr Goodman. (The novel thus strangely anticipates Nabokov's own future difficulties with his first biographer Andrew Field, but this is another story<sup>10</sup>). To read Nabokov is to roam through a strange hall of textual fun-house mirrors: in the case of *Pale Fire*, the poem-as-novel parodies the English translation of an iconic Russian novel-in-verse, translated by a Russian speaker whose mother tongue has been wrested from him by his exile in America.

Who wrote "Pale Fire"? Presenting as a 'whodunit' mystery, the question of the poem's internal authorship has most exercised the critical reception of the novel to date. Is it John Shade, the ostensible poet named as such in the text. Or his editor, Charles Kinbote (aka Charles II, aka Charles the Beloved)? Or perhaps someone else again, for example the Russian scholar, Professor V. Botkin, whom some see as a thinly-disguised alter ego of the deranged Kinbote?<sup>11</sup> But if this critical question has not yet been satisfactorily answered, it suggests it has not been correctly posed. The obsessive scrutiny of the seemingly impossible coincidences and spiritual concordances among the characters in fact suggests a comically collective, almost 'Kinbotian,' effort on our part to miss Nabokov's point. For it is the total breakdown of authorial identity, of linguistic 'personhood' altogether that is at stake in Nabokov's aesthetic wager, along with the systems of power and legitimacy that underpin these tropes. What is this wager? It is that death can be defeated through literary art — albeit, as we will see, an 'art' of a very particular kind.

Turning to the novel, this twisting Moebius-strip of a text is simultaneously a mourning song — John Shade's 999-line poem torquing under the pain of the poet's loss of his daughter Hazel to suicide — and Charles Kinbote's critical commentary on the poem, which subsequently

9 Cholodenko, 2007, p. 493.

10 Note this account does not even take into account *Speak, Memory*'s own peculiarly doubled history, hints of which are given in the subtitle, 'An Autobiography Revisited.'

11 See DeRewal and Roth, 2009, n.p.

becomes the organ through which Kinbote underhandedly slips us his secret history of Charles II's flight from the Kingdom of Zembla which has been taken over by rebels, Charles's clandestine arrival in America, his friendship with Shade, and the latter's accidental death by a bullet supposedly intended for the fugitive King, shot by a certain Jacob Gradus ("alias Jack Degree, de Grey, d'Argus, Vinogradus, Leningradus, etc." as the Index helpfully informs the confused reader). It rapidly becomes clear from his ballooning Commentary, which gradually overtakes and supersedes the poem, that Kinbote has been imagining all along that Shade's rhyming epic would relate his story Charles the Beloved's heroic escape following the Zemblan revolution, whose details Kinbote has been drip-feeding Shade during their evening walks in New Wye. Kinbote's disappointment when he finally sees Shade's manuscript — which he has squirreled away beneath a pile of girls' galoshes and furred snowboots in the confusion following the poet's death — is profound. Not a peon to his lost kingdom, the poem presents merely the rather "dull" theme of Hazel's portrait which "has been expanded and elaborated to the detriment of certain other richer and rarer matters ousted by it" (Nabokov 1996, p. 556). Of these other "richer and rarer" matters, the poem contains in fact only one vague reference in line 937, which Kinbote annotates in his Commentary thus:

I am a weary and sad commentator today. Parallel to the left-hand side of this card (his seventy-sixth) the poet has written, on the eve of his death, a line (from Pope's Second Epistle of the *Essay on Man*) that he may have intended to cite in a footnote: *At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where*  
So this is all treacherous old Shade could say about Zembla — *my Zembla? While shaving his stubble off? Strange, strange...*  
(Nabokov 1996, pp. 635-6)

## II. "But who is man that is not angry?" — *Timon of Athens*

Upon receiving a rejection for his short story "The Vane Sisters," Nabokov wrote an irritable letter to his editor Katherine White at *The New Yorker* berating her for "failing" him as a reader. White had rejected the tale because she felt the story was irremediably hobbled by Nabokov's "overwhelming style" (White's phrase). But White's critical shortcoming was that she — *somehow* — overlooked the clue to the story's comprehension, namely, a hidden message written in acrostic in the first letters of each word in the final paragraph ("Icicles by Cynthia, meter from me, Sybil"). In his letter, Nabokov anticipates White's objections: "You may argue that reading downwards, or upwards, or diagonally is not what an editor can be expected to do." Even still, he expresses a deep

disappointment that White, "such a subtle and loving reader, should not have seen the inner scheme of my story."<sup>12</sup>

Nabokov's ill-tempered reaction to his failure to be properly read mirrors in inverse Kinbote's disappointment in Shade's poem, which similarly fails to tell 'his' story. For it is clear that what is at stake in *Pale Fire* is a war over poetic intentions, and one in which, at least superficially, the critic is victorious. Kinbote secretes his (anti-)heroic tale of Charles the Beloved's brave escape and exile from Zembla literally in between the lines of Shade's heroic couplets.<sup>13</sup> In usurping Shade's poem in this way, Kinbote covertly cites the book's title *Pale Fire* which, as is well known, itself 'steals' from Shakespeare's own dual-authored play in the form of a citation. Written in collaboration with Thomas Middleton, *The Life of Timon of Athens* is one of Shakespeare's notorious 'problem' plays. Focusing on the definition of generosity, *Timon of Athens* cycles through the stages of melancholy Robert Burton identifies in his magisterial "Anatomy of Melancholy": from man's initial excellency, his fall, miseries, and then to raging despair.<sup>14</sup> Timon is initially a "good and gracious" Greek citizen, the "very soul of bounty," whose extravagant kindness towards his friends will find him denuded of his riches. "Engluttred" by the Athenian's largesse, Timon's friends flee the moment he needs their assistance. "Burn, house! sink, Athens! henceforth hated be / Of Timon man and all humanity!" Timon shouts after them in his fit of legendary rage that for Walter Benjamin has become the prototype of the melancholic, a man he describes as being "past experiencing."<sup>15</sup>

An uncommon cloud of black bile accordingly hangs over the play's entire fourth Act which opens with Timon piling curse upon curse on the people of Athens. By this point, the poverty-stricken Timon has abandoned the city to live as a hermit, feeding only on roots and his accumulating hatred of all humankind. Yet as he digs for sustenance, he comes across a hoard of gold. No sooner he has discovered it, he is again "throng'd" by people who would steal his treasure from him. In scene 3, Timon lectures his would-be thieves on the nature of theft. Everything is a thief, he complains bitterly, although unlike his "knot of mouth-friends," the bandits in front of him are at least honest about their intentions:

12 Nabokov 1989, pp. 115-116.

13 Much of Kinbote's story in fact appears to have been itself plagiarized from the account of Charles the Second of England's escape following his defeat at the Battle of Worcester. See William Harrison Ainsworth's novel *Boscobel, or, The Royal Oak*, 1871.

14 Robert Burton 1638.

15 Benjamin 2003, p. 335.

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun:  
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears:  
(Act IV, scene iii, 2149-2155)

Thievery begets thievery. Stealing his novel's title from Shakespeare's treasury of signifiers is evidently not enough for Nabokov, who will go on to parasitize Timon's speech. Here is how the words appear in the translation by Charles the Beloved's uncle, the aptly named Conmal (one who "cons" or learns badly, especially by rote) whose knowledge of English was apparently acquired by "memorizing a dictionary":

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea  
and robs it. The moon is a thief:  
he steals his silvery light from the sun.  
The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon.

As with Nabokov's Pushkin, the radiant "bloom" of poetic language fades in Conmal's literal translation. A bare, stripped-down imitation replaces the Bard's fulgent language. But with this substitution, what Cohen calls the "whole premise of mimetic representations" is fatally undone. The copy 'prosaically' infiltrates the system of identity through which notions of poetic authority, ownership and linguistic propriety are maintained.<sup>16</sup> Shorn of the Bard's characteristic verbal flourishes, the bastardized Zemblan version "robs" Shakespeare of what makes him "Shakespeare" (although this "Shakespeare" is already, as we know, non-originary, because doubled in the play's murky dual-authorship). As he thieives from English literature's most eminent son, Nabokov implicitly exposes the whole system of literary ownership and identity as a scam. For in Nabokov's hands, the sun, traditional *fons et origo* of a metaphorical exchange system, finds itself hijacked, rerouted by a cinematic *lunacy* that reveals the entire system of transfer of properties in figuration as a massive contraband operation that is as unreliable as it is unlawful.<sup>17</sup> Things get lost. Meaning goes astray. Mysteriously missing from Conmal's version are Timon's concluding lines:

16 .....  
Cohen 2005b, p. 214.

17 See Derrida 1982: "The very opposition between appearing and disappearing, the whole vocabulary of phainesthai, of aletheia, and so forth, of day and night, visible and invisible, present and absent, all this is possible only under the sun," p. 52

The earth's a thief,  
That feeds and breeds by a composture stolen  
From general excrement: each thing's a thief.

Nabokov's real target in this kidnapping operation is what holds the rules of tropological exchange in place, namely, a final ground. There is no substratum that as first origin and infinitely generative source would arrest the *mise en abyme* of literary theft. Instead, in Nabokov, a "cinematic" *dissolve* surrenders the fiction of poetic autonomy to an unstable scene of reflection and counter-reflection ad infinitum. Citation, in this case, turns out to be a lure for advancing another form of literary production that flouts all the sacred rules and protocols of literary propriety.

### III. '[T]hese pencill'd figures are / Even such as they give out' — *Timon of Athens*

Smuggling his narrative like so much illicit 'moonshine' into the margins of the text as critical annotations, Kinbote licenses himself to tell another tale than the one Shade intended in his poem. Which narrative did Kinbote displace? "Pale Fire" the poem is Shade's long and, if truth be told, somewhat rambling elegy to his dead daughter. Centring on the story of Shade's near-death experience, the poem revolves around the promise held out by poetic language of a life that continues beyond death. In Canto 3, Shade recounts how, shortly after delivering a talk titled "Why Poetry is Meaningful to Us," his heart momentarily stopped beating and he travelled to the Other Side.

I can't tell you how  
I knew — but I did know that I had crossed  
The border.

From here, Shade is treated to a vision of a totality:

A system of cells interlinked within  
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked  
Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct  
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.  
(Nabokov 1996, pp. 476-77)

The fountain, he is convinced, was "Not of our atoms" and "I realized that the sense behind/The scene was not our sense" (p. 477).

Later, after recovering, Shade stumbles across what he takes to be a non-coincidentally similar account of a near-death experience by a "Mrs Z," who seems to have had almost an identical vision during the interval

between her heart stopping and its being “rubbed back to life by a prompt surgeon’s hand” (Nabokov 1996, p. 478). Shade describes how, in her version, Mrs Z,

... told her interviewer of “The Land Beyond the Veil” and the account contained  
A hint of angels, and a glint of stained  
Windows, and some soft music, and a choice  
Of hymnal items, and her mother’s voice;  
But at the end she mentioned a remote  
Landscape, a hazy orchard — and I quote:  
“Beyond that orchard through a kind of smoke  
I glimpsed a tall white fountain — and awoke.”  
(Nabokov 1996, p. 478)

This uniformity of their experiences would point to the undeniable and incontrovertible reality of a life beyond death. Shade is convinced that,

Our fountain was a signpost and a mark  
Objectively enduring in the dark,  
Strong as a bone, substantial as a tooth,  
And almost vulgar in its robust truth! (Nabokov 1996, p. 478)

But on conducting further research, Shade discovers that the fountain in Mrs Z’s vision was in fact really a mountain: the *m* had been misprinted as an *f* in her published account. Nonetheless, far from shattering his conviction of the existence of an afterlife, the typographical error only serves to confirm Shade all the more in his belief. In a famous passage from the poem, which is often taken by critics as a statement reflecting Nabokov’s own views on the death-defying powers of art, Shade exclaims,

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

(Nabokov 1996, pp. 478-80)

At one level, of course, it is not hard to see how, from a certain perspective, both “fountain” and “mountain,” despite their Saussurean differences from each other, convey the same poetic or, figurative, “intention,” making Shade’s asseveration of renewed belief in an afterlife somewhat understandable. This is because, even if “Old Faithful” (as Shade calls it) metamorphizes by means of a typographical error into mountain, both images nonetheless reliably lend themselves as archetypal figures for poetry. To take “fountain” first, it is not difficult to hear in it echoes of the medieval concept of the *fons vitale*, that is, the idea of God as the source or origin of creative inspiration, which becomes updated and contemporized by Nabokov’s coeval, Rainer Maria Rilke, as the “fountain of joy” (*Quelle des Freudes*) in the German poet’s own extended mourning song, the *Duino Elegies*.<sup>18</sup> Mountain, on the other hand, irresistibly recalls Mount Parnassus, the sacred home of the Muses, a poetic connection that would seem reconfirmed in passing with Nabokov’s choice of name for Kinbote’s would-be assassin. Jacob Gradus, as Priscilla Meyer reminds us, carries an implicit reference to the famous 17th century versification handbook, the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, or “steps to Parnassus.”<sup>19</sup> There appears to be a deeper connection between the two words, *fountain* and *mountain*, than a chance typographical error would suggest. From this perspective, the typesetter’s mistake would only have served to bring into visibility something that Walter Benjamin in “The Task of the Translator” calls the underlying “kinship” between the two words.

In this famous essay, published in 1921 as the Foreword to his own work of translation of Baudelaire’s *Parisian Scenes*, Benjamin discusses the translator’s task in ways that are strikingly similar to Nabokov’s description in the Foreword to *Eugene Onegin* (although to my knowledge there is no evidence to suggest that Nabokov had ever read Benjamin’s essay, which was published in Harry Zohn’s English translation in 1969, that is, five years after the appearance of Nabokov’s Pushkin translation<sup>20</sup>).

18 An interesting case might be made for Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* as an intertext of Shade’s “Pale Fire.” The resonances between the poems are particularly strong in the Tenth Elegy, which contains explicit references to both fountain and mountain: Rilke writes of the mountains of “Grief-Land” “where the fountain of joy / glistens in moonlight.” The typographical element at the heart of Shade’s poem implicitly cites Rilke’s figure of the southern sky “pure as on the palm of a sacred hand, the clearly shining M.” Finally, Hazel’s name is suggested by Rilke’s “bare hazels”: “But if the endlessly dead woke a symbol in us, see, they would point perhaps to the catkins, hanging from bare hazels, or they would intend the rain, falling on dark soil in Spring-time.”

19 Meyer 1988, p. 70.

20 Nonetheless Nabokov’s much-trumpeted claim neither that he spoke practically no German, despite having lived in Berlin for over a decade during the 1920s and 30s, is considered questionable by Nabokov scholars such as Michael Maar (2009). It is thus possible he did read the Benjamin text, either in its original or in its French translation by Maurice de Gandillac, but this appears in print in 1971, i.e. even later than the Zohn English version.

Here Benjamin similarly describes the work of translation in terms of literality. Arguing that translation concerns precisely the continuing survival of works of art — a work of art's *afterlife* — Benjamin begins by criticizing those who believe that the translator's role is to faithfully transmit the poem's content: a poem's "message," he says, is merely something inessential. Instead, he writes, the translator's true task is to express what he calls the "innermost relationship of languages" (Benjamin 1996, p. 255). But Benjamin cautions that this relationship or "kinship" does not necessarily involve something called "similarity." Rather, it consists in the way that, in all languages taken as a whole, "one and the same thing is meant" (Benjamin 1996, p. 257). This "one and the same thing," Benjamin explains, is a "suprahistorical" kinship, achievable "not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language [*Reine Sprache*]" (Benjamin 1996, p. 257).

As a case of linguistic "kinship," Shade's fountain/mountain convergence might initially advance an understanding of Benjamin's *Reine Sprache* as an original intention or Ur-meaning that succeeds in shining radiantly in and through the Babel-like fall into multiple tongues. Still, this is precisely what Paul de Man in his own critical commentary on Benjamin's text warns against, lambasting as the "naivete of the poet" the idea that the author "has to say something, that he has to convey a meaning which does not necessarily relate to language."<sup>21</sup> De Man clarifies that for Benjamin, "Translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning that could be copied, paraphrased, or imitated" (De Man 1985, p. 34). To gain a proper understanding of what Benjamin means by "kinship," we must look more carefully at his concept of the *Reine Sprache*.

Benjamin's peculiar phrase is usually translated as "pure language." This is how both Harry Zohn and Steven Rendell, for example, render the German original. But another possibility could be "pure speech" or even "sheer" speech. In this variation, Benjamin's concept *Reine Sprache* might suggest something along the lines of Lacan's concept of "full speech" (*parole pleine*), which Derrida (mis)characterized as the dream of a replete speech uncontaminated by the perpetual deferral, errancy and interruption of *différance*.<sup>22</sup> In her suggestive reading of Benjamin, however, Carol Jacobs quickly puts an end to such poetic "temptations" which, as she points out, have already been dismissed in advance through Benjamin's reference to Mallarmé in this text. In the passage Benjamin cites from *Crise de vers*, we find the French poet insisting on the "plurality" of languages, maintaining that the "supreme language is lacking" ("*Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême*").

21 De Man 1985, p. 34.

22 Derrida 1996, n.p.

Venturing another translation of *Reine Sprache*, as "purely language," Jacobs proposes we understand it this time in the sense of "nothing but language."<sup>23</sup> Far from gesturing to a transcendent plenitude, *Reine Sprache* would mean precisely nothing but the "mutual differentiation" of various "manners of meaning."

For when Benjamin says that both "*Brot*" and "*pain*" mean "the same," this doesn't suggest that they mean the same *thing*, Jacobs cautions. What is the "same" is precisely what makes each of these words mean "nothing at all." What a literal or *Wörtlich* translation effects, in other words, is a rupture of the signifying articulation that links the signifier to its signified. This would ultimately render all meaning "extinct." Jacobs puts it in this way, "A teratogenesis instead of conventional, natural, re-production results in which the limbs of the progeny are dismembered, all syntax dismantled" (Jacobs 1975, p. 763). Jacobs first quotes Benjamin:

Translation [...] does not view itself as does poetry as in the inner forest of language, but rather as outside it, opposite it, and without entering, it calls into the original, into that single place where, in each case, the echo is able to give in its own language the resonance of a work in a foreign tongue. (Jacobs 1975, p. 763)

She then glosses Benjamin's text as follows: "Translation's call into the forest of language is not a repetition of the original but the awakening of an echo of itself. This signifies its disregard for coherence of content, for the sound that returns is its own tongue become foreign" (Jacobs 1975, p. 764).

Let us now step back a little from Jacobs' argument and ask what it means for one's own tongue to "become foreign"? Literally, of course, this is the condition of the exile, the figure of the American Nabokov composing in a foreign language, pilfering from his Russian *oeuvre* to produce English texts that are merely "pale fires" of their original "suns."<sup>24</sup> From a psychoanalytic point of view, too, the idea a certain foreignness of one's own tongue is not hard to reconcile with the Freudian unconscious, where a seemingly 'alien' agency wrests the intent from one's spoken words in order to tell a rather different story in the monstrous, misshaped form of the symptom that runs a similarly outsized, ballooning 'commentary' on

23 Jacobs 1975, p. 761.

24 Nabokov's English and Russian works are rife with internecine borrowings. For example, a thinly-disguised Kinbote appears in Nabokov's last and unfinished Russian language novel, *Solus Rex* as the king K, and in the short story, "Ultima Thule" as the "strange Swede or Dane — or Icelander," the "lanky, orange-tanned blond fellow with the eyelashes of an old horse" See *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1997). 'Sirin,' a traditional figure of a maiden-bird in Old Russian folklore with mythological origins in the Sunbird, was Nabokov's Russian pseudonym which he adopted as a young writer to distinguish his writings from those another VN, i.e. his father.

one's unconscious *jouissance*.

In my own mal-conning of foreign dictionaries in the meantime, I have discovered another possible translation for Benjamin's word "*Sprache*," this time as "style." "Pure style" or perhaps, in Katherine White's reported words, "overwhelming style" is Nabokov's most signature characteristic, as he confirms in the letter to White: "All my stories are webs of style [...] For me 'style' is matter" (Nabokov 1989, p. 115). So I am tempted to offer still another understanding the linguistic 'kinship' in play in the fountain/mountain typo, this time as a stylistic matter: *penmanship*. In his commentary on the word "misprint" in line 803, Kinbote remarks that future translators of Shade's poem will encounter difficulty in reproducing the precise effect of the crucial typographical error as the similarity of the two words is not replicated in other languages such as "French, German, Russian or Zemblan." Fountain/mountain is an error, that is, that would be specific to the English language. But in the same note, Kinbote then divagates on another case of a misprint, one which somehow does succeed in traversing both Russian and English languages intact. In an article in a Russian newspaper reporting on the Tsar's coronation, Kinbote recalls how the word *korona* (*crown*) was first misprinted as *vorona* (*crow*). This was then apologetically corrected only to suffer a second typographical error, namely, to *korova* (*cow*). "The artistic correlation between the crown-crow-cow series and the Russian korona-vorona-korova series" he writes, "is something that would have, I am sure, enraptured my poet. I have seen nothing like it on lexical playfields and the odds against the double coincidence defy computation" (Nabokov 1996, p. 627).

Well, let us first pause for a moment to take Kinbote at his word and try following the lines of translation for fountain and mountain. One would expect them to follow fairly straight paths from one language to another, say from Russian to German to French to English. But look at what happens: a quick perusal of an online dictionary gives us the following sequence for fountain: *фонтан*|*Brunnen* or *Quelle*|*fontaine*|*plume*|*pen*. And run through the same 'mechanical' translation process, mountain gives us *гора*|*Bergen*|*montagne*|*mont* as in *Mont Blanc*|*pen*. It is as though there is some unseen obstacle that causes the stream of all languages to circle back around as if swirling around an eddy. The impression is of some hidden object, some kind of 'dark matter' or *black sun* silently exerting its "great attraction" on language, imperceptibly rerouting the chain of signifiers to a spectrographic scene of writing.

What kind of 'kinship' or perhaps better, 'kin-boat' would be registered in this translation process? It suggests a 'suprahistorical' relation that cannot be accounted for through linear logics such as poetic intention. This warping of the translation offers material evidence

of the theft of poetic desire by something else, something that topples all concept of sovereignty and which recognizes the jurisdiction of no linguistic laws. What name could we give to this usurper? In answer, we must look to the errant letters that initiated the sequence, F and M. We should not be surprised to find that they closely, if "grotesquely," mimic the sounds of Vladimir Nabokov's initials, V and N.<sup>25</sup> And with this as our clue, we should also not be surprised to find the same telltale letters haunting the other errant translation sequence Kinbote refers us to in his Commentary (*koroNa-Vorona-koroVa*). Surfacing with an almost clockwork regularity at every scene of writing, this spectral signature functions as the marker of another agent of literary production active in Nabokov's work: a transl(ite)ration that recognizes the borders of no national, linguistic or natural body politic. VN, penmarks of Nabokov's "pure *stylo*," are the calling cards of a consummate thief. For this "other" VN, all borders are equally permeable, including that separating life from death.

#### IV. "Each man apart, all single and alone/Yet an arch-villain keeps him company" — *Timon of Athens*

If, for Benjamin, a translation is part of the "afterlife" of a text, for Nabokov, it would be material proof that *death does not exist*. It is on this point of artistic doctrine that Benjamin and Nabokov now part ways. In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin comments that "the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory."<sup>26</sup> What Benjamin means by the "allegorical way of seeing" involves a double process whereby the object is first plucked from its ordinary surroundings in discourse. In allegorical language, sound and sense become "emancipated" from their traditional meaning. "Any person, any object, any relationship," he explains, can mean absolutely anything else" (Benjamin 1977, p. 175). Drained of their living "essence," words become the shrunken, hollow forms that are the special preserve of the melancholic: "melancholy causes life to flow out of [the object]" (Benjamin 1977, p. 183). This depletion then sets off a train of reactions that pulverizes language down to a molecular level. Benjamin describes this as an "atomization" of language (Benjamin 1977, p. 208). Words present to the melancholic allegorist as fragments but at the point where the fragment breaks down to the letter, language acquires a new luminescence. As if burnished in the crucible of the melancholic reduction, the letter rises Phoenix-like from language's ashes: "In its individual parts fragmented language has ceased merely to serve the process of communication, and as a new-born object acquires a dignity equal to that of gods, rivers, virtues

25 Recall Kinbote's comment on the Mrs Z's "grotesque pronunciation" of, naturally, Mont Blanc (as "Mon Blon"). Nabokov 1996, p. 625.

26 Benjamin 1977, p. 185.

and similar natural forms which fuse into the allegorical” (Benjamin 1977, p. 208). It is a bizarre Carollian court that Benjamin excavates from the ruins wrought by the allegorical vision. An alphabet of rebellious letters whose phosphorescent light is the stolen reflection of no celestial sun rises up, jostling for the title of King:

in its fully developed, baroque, form, allegory brings with it its own court: the profusion of emblems is grouped around the figural centre, which is never absent from genuine allegories [...]. *The confused ‘court’* — the title of a Spanish *Trauerspiel* — could be adopted as the model of allegory. This court is subject to the law of ‘dispersal’ and ‘collectedness.’ Things are assembled according to their significance; indifference to their existence allowed them to be dispersed again. (Benjamin 1977, p. 188)

Taking center stage as a ‘person’ in its own right, the letter thus revolts against the word-image. Yet it is not so much in the service of “the personification of things,” as Benjamin clarifies. The real function of this allegorical prosopopeia is “to give the concrete a more imposing form by getting it up as a person” (Benjamin 1977, p. 187).

It is the “schema” that ultimately determines the character of allegory (Benjamin 1977, p. 184). To approach the world as a schema is to recognize all of nature as “writing, a kind of sign-language” (Benjamin 1977, p. 184). What text does this schematic writing formalize? In allegory,

the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face — or rather in a death’s head. (Benjamin 1977, p. 166)

A deathly prosopopeia would be at “the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world.” “Its importance,” Benjamin contends, “resides solely in the the stations of its decline. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance” (Benjamin 1977, p. 166).

But now we are light years away from Nabokov as, in fact, we are also from Benjamin himself in his later essay, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”<sup>27</sup> In *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, Benjamin could still read in the “death-signs” of the baroque an allegory of the resurrection of the world. In his 1939 essay on Baudelaire, however, he proposes a very different figure, one that overleaps the wish for the “completed mourning”

.....  
27 Benjamin 2003.

which Julia Kristeva in her own treatise on melancholia, *Black Sun*, sagaciously pinpoints as the melancholic theoretician’s secret desire.<sup>28</sup> Where, in 1925, Benjamin described the allegorical dialectic as executing a sudden “about-turn,” enabling it to re-discover itself “not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven,” his conclusion is that allegories “fill out and deny the void in which they are represented” (Benjamin 1977, p. 232-3). Yet by the time he writes his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin has developed another figure for melancholic representation or “spleen” in the form of eyes that have “lost the ability to look” (Benjamin 2003, p. 339).

With this figure of the unseeing gaze (whose own literary genealogy would see us Nabokovianly ping-ponging back and forth between Baudelaire’s *prose* windows and Mallarmé’s *poetic* windowpane), Benjamin is referring to the uncanny effect produced by de-auratic art. In the photograph or cinematic image, we do not have the sense of the object returning our gaze. Benjamin explains, “What was inevitably felt to be inhuman — one might even say deadly — in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records out likeness without returning our gaze” (Benjamin 2003, p. 338). De-auratic art is thus defined by the failure of the personification or prosopopeia that previously held the melancholic-allegorical universe in place. If, previously, the allegorical vision of nature elicited only a message of death, this death nevertheless took place under the all-seeing “eyes of heaven.” But in Baudelaire’s poems, Benjamin observes a “mirrorlike blankness” in the eyes of the loved one. This “remoteness” is paradoxically attributed to the fact that “such eyes know nothing of distance” (Benjamin 2003 p. 340). There is a too-closeness about them that, like the cinematic image or the photograph, prevents the transubstantiating act of seeing ourselves reflected in the other and in nature which depends on the “magic of distance” (Benjamin 2003, p. 341) to come to pass.

When Nabokov, in *Pale Fire*’s opening lines, dashes his poet against the Mallarméan windowpane’s promise of an “azure” realm of art beyond time, his artist, misperceiving the glass’s transparency, smacks up against the hard surface of representation:

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

Yet although art’s “magic of distance” is violently unmasked as a brutal con, in his collision with language’s impenetrable surface the Nabokovian

.....  
28 “To posit the existence of a primal object, or even of a Thing, which is to be conveyed through and beyond a completed mourning — isn’t that the fantasy of a melancholy theoretician.” Kristeva 1992, p. 66.



artist does not die but rather splits in two:

And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate  
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:

The encounter with language's materiality does not kill its object as Maurice Blanchot imagined, but rather initiates an uncontainable, self-perpetuating 'cinematic' self-duplication on *this* side of the representational divide that will take in, retake and displace the entire field of aesthetic representation as privileged site of mourning for lost presence.

If cinema in Benjamin's conceptualization pares the image away from its aura, Nabokov's cinematic style de-auraticizes the literary word. In the new proximity that results from this loss of the word's auratic depth Nabokov obtains a 'mechanical' form of literary reproduction whose implications are, literally, immortal. For with each splitting of the poetic 'intention' as it bumps up against the hard surface of language comes an irrepressible 'stickiness' that attaches itself to each of the internally duplicating "new-born" objects (Benjamin 1977, p. 208) of representation, ensuring that they are always encumbered by an excess. This little smudge of "ashen fluff" — or, indeed, unshakable, unbearable, halitoxic "friend" — is the material witness to our original "shock experience" ("*Chockerlebnis*," Benjamin 2003, p. 343) that is one's encounter with language "as such." Jacques Lacan of course has a name for this pesky "friend" who infests every one of our mourning songs with his own uncanny message of 'life.' Lacan calls him the lamella, the indestructible drive that survives "any division, any scissiparous intervention."<sup>29</sup> Every melancholic reduction of language takes us into the realm of this pure propulsive force, what Mladen Dolar calls "pure life in the loop of death,"<sup>30</sup> and which Cholodenko — in his own immortal words — calls "hyperanimated, hyperanimatic, *hyperlifedeath*: at once a life more death than death, more dead than dead, and a death more life than life, more alive than alive."<sup>31</sup>

Stripped of the necessary "magic of distance" that generates art's illusion of depth and perspective, Nabokov's "pure style" thus discloses art's true function, not as window but as *screen*. Onto its shimmering surface are projected the little letters that the melancholic's blank gaze reveals as the fundamental elements of our world. But if for the Benjaminian allegorist these letters point relentlessly towards death, for Nabokov — although he would never dream of phrasing it in the manner of

29 Lacan 1998, p. 197.

30 Dolar 2005, p. 159.

31 Cholodenko 2009, n.p.

the "Viennese quack"<sup>32</sup> — these little letters have always pulsed with the gift of an absolute generosity without return, the pure life instinct which is another name for the *death drive*.

**V. "I am sick of that grief too, as I understand how all things go." — *Timon of Athens***

Wilson had complained about Nabokov's prosaic "flattening" of Pushkin's poetic language not realizing that it is precisely this compression in fact that allows the "full play" of the prose writer's literary powers. The "full" or extended play would be the insufflation of words as they cartwheel in slow motion around their own axes, presenting at each face the flatness of a two-dimensional plane but which, when strung together, effect the appearance of life and movement. Nabokov's name for this 'animating' play of language is word golf. If one consults this term in *Pale Fire*, one finds the Index instructing us, after noting Shade's "predilection for it," to "see Lass." Flipping back through the Index to Lass, we find the instruction "see Mass." Under Mass come the words "Mass, Mars, Mare" and the instruction to "see Male." Under "Male" the reader is referred again to the beginning: "see Word golf." Like pebbles skimming across a pond, words spin and mutate by degrees (Jack Degree we recall is one of the assassin Jakob Gradus's aliases). What if, Nabokov asks, the dimensions of "reality" were also somehow faceted in this way, and that "live" and "kill" — like "male" and "lass" — were simply steps or "degrees" in an ontological version of the game of word golf? What if, that is, what we perceive as "death" is simply an error in perception, an illusion produced by our desire to see *through* the surfaces of representation to an Other side of the windowpane? All that there is lies on *this* side of representation, Nabokov the materialist insists, but representation is multi-faceted; the limit we encounter as "death" may just be a step in a mechanical rotation or "quarter turn" in the universe of discourse. Here the best figure for the melancholic as the one who is "past experiencing" is not the raging man but one who suffers from "love's melancholy" - the form of melancholy conspicuously absent from *Timon of Athens* but whose "miseries" are affectionately documented by Burton. The melancholic's unshakable love for the lost object comes fully into force as our best tip-off that such a turn has taken place: "Love is a sign that one is changing discourses."<sup>33</sup>

Malallegory. Lamellancholia. It would be a question of reading letters again.

32 Nabokov's satirical name for Freud, whom he also at times refers to as "Sigismond Lejoyeux" (*Speak, Memory*), "Dr. Sig Heiler," "Herr Doktor Sig," "Dr. Froit of Signy-Mondieu-Mondieu (*Ada*), "Dr Bonomini" ("Ultima Thule"), "the Viennese medicine man" (*Lolita*). See Daniel Rancour-Laferrie 1989, p. 15.

33 Lacan 1999, p. 16.

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