

## DIM CONFLAGRATION\*

A Review of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage, 1962)

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The first person doubles and trebles light  
His mirror's doppelganger means to fright  
An evil spirit evanescent, thin?  
Or more lightly, is Nabokov Botkin?  
Or Kinbote, aka Charles? The least  
He can do, tell us his real name, the beast.  
Like *Ulysses* he has us clearly foiled;  
*Timon of Athens* at once embroiled.  
Concocting stories of dappled briar  
10 Surreptitious glancing into pale fire  
Mention of dim shadows, ice and glass;  
Is the evil man hiding in the grass?

Sidetrack a story of a king's exile.  
Searching a passage going single file  
With his dear friend Odon leading the way,  
Once he is dispatched no more to say;  
Appears again behind the curtain  
Or perhaps this reader mistakes clues plain.  
(Or is that pain?) I wiped the mirrors clear  
20 And tried to annotate the tale from here  
And lo, stopped trying to second guess  
This novelist and his penchant to wrest  
Riddle and rhyme from the simplest plots  
Such as *Pale Fire* with its witty *bon mots*.

When not invited to Shade's birthday fete,  
Kinbote, put out, carries on indiscreet.  
In secret stalks his friend to Idoming,  
A cabin where Shade and wife hide and cling  
To their last bit of privacy. Kinbote  
30 Learns little, grows bored, and begins to gloat.

Second subplot, a diverting device,  
 The death of Shade's daughter Hazel; through ice  
 She fell, or slipped or stepped. For heart-  
 Broken she was, for a lad. For his part,  
 He did not think her comely, as they say  
 In olden-time books, in Nabokov's way.  
 Cantos two through four cover this, mostly.  
 Again the reader asks, "Who is *really*  
 Narrating this story?" Shade we are told,  
 40 Then Kinbote. Shade's killer? Gradus. He's cold.  
 We are clueless. We cannot ascertain  
 To which clues the vast story might pertain.  
 Shade himself, we are told, does not gambol,  
 Mocks games such as "Decipher the Symbol!"

The usual elements for dear Vlad  
 Butterflies, and a reference is had  
 To most of his other books, I believe.  
 I thought to list them. Not now? Just in brief:  
 50 *Bend Sinister*, *Speak Memory* (memoir),  
*Lolita*, *King Queen and Knave*? Must be more.  
*Pnin*, lest I forget (I did not read.)  
 All in the effort to disguise this screed.  
 If one looks for an answer—don't bother.  
 Shade is to shadow as pale is to color.  
 I've added a syllable on that line.  
 (This is my first heroic verse. It's fine.)



### Commentary

*Line 3: evil spirit*

A number of references are made to ghosts, doppelgangers and such. One scholar insists that the entire enterprise is narrated by Hazel Shade. (See note to line 38.)

*Line 8: Timon of Athens*

This is one of Shakespeare's lesser lauded plays, often considered unfinished in the *oeuvre*. A noted scholar whose name escapes me has even suggested that the play was co-authored by someone of

questionable mental faculties, thus giving our work here an obvious reference. Greater elaboration herein will not be forthcoming, other than to say that this play is invoked a number of times in the work under discussion. (See superficial reference, note to Line 19.)

*Line 18: reader mistakes...?*

I could not clearly follow this story and subplot with the king, who is in "luxurious captivity in the South West Tower" (121). He somehow finds an underground passageway and enlists his dear friend Odon to come with him. Odon seems to disappear and reappear later in the threading narrative, although, as I said, I could not clearly follow this thread of the narrator's wily tale (150).

*Line 19: mirrors clear*

The poet wants to focus on mirrors for a moment. Obviously, mirrors, reflections, light in glass, fire (see below) are so copiously dispersed in the text that I lost count. There must be something here, methinks, like the misting on the glass ... or, to quote another poet on his first utterance:

*Our poesy is as a gum, which oozes  
From whence 'tis nourish'd: the fire i' the flint  
Shows not till it be struck; our gentle flame  
Provokes itself and like the current flies.<sup>1</sup>*

*Line 31: see note, Line 3.*

*Line 38-39: "Who is really narrating this story?"*

By story, I mean both the Cantos proper and the commentary and the endnotes, etc. We know the putative author is Nabokov, of course. The whole *festschrift* seems to be a puzzle, as many commentators have made (see Boyd; Wood). I think I could write a book about this subject. But alas, this is merely a review.

*Line 49-51: collected works*

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<sup>1</sup> Act 1, Scene 1, Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*.

The number of times VN references his own works is also, like the mirrors and fires, prevalent and obvious, or perhaps not so obvious. Though obviously meant to provide those kind of ground-sniffing leads that dispense with the demarcation between fact and fiction, I'm getting a headache and would now like to stop.



\*As in lightly sketched, barely noticed, etc.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Robert M. Detman** received an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College in 2006. Prior to this he was educated in architecture at The University of Michigan. Originally from Flint, Michigan, Robert currently resides in San Francisco, where he enjoys writing novels and playing guitar. His work has appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Kitchen Sink*, *Pitkin in Progress* and *NewCity*. He can be reached at [rdetman@gmail.com](mailto:rdetman@gmail.com).