

Solipsism and Idealism: Humbert, Kinbote, and Shade

I. Introduction: Romanticism and its Bearing on Nabokov's Work

Romantic philosophy and literature was founded on the Platonic distinction between real and ideal. Romantics believed that these two realms could only make contact in specific contexts such as art and nature. Heroes in Romantic tales are often failed artists like Humbert, who have not accepted the contradiction between life and art and go mad struggling to actualize the ideal in the real world (Meyer, p. 197). The dichotomy between real and ideal is a central theme in many of Nabokov's novels. Protagonists (Fyodor, Cincinnatus, Shade) favor contact with the transcendent over material gain and struggle to bridge real and ideal in their art.

Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote are travesties of this model. Kinbote represents a parodic distortion of the Romantic principles Shade embodies. Shade evokes the intertwining of real and ideal in his art, whereas Kinbote seeks refuge from reality in a remote otherworld. Kinbote's poeticizing upon receiving Shade's finished manuscript parodies Romantic revelation:

"I do not consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do—pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web. Solemnly I weighted in my hand what I was carrying under my left armpit, and for a moment I found myself enriched with an indescribable amazement as if informed that fireflies were making decodable signals on behalf of stranded spirits, or that a bat was writing a legible tale of torture in the bruised and branded sky. I was holding all Zembla pressed to my heart" (*Pale Fire*, p. 289).

Like Kinbote's idealization of Shade, Humbert's attempt to "fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (*Lolita*, p. 134) is a travesty of Romantic evocations of the transcendent:

"A normal man given a group photograph of school girls or Girl Scouts and asked to point out the comeliest one will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs—the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate—the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power" (*Lolita*, p. 17).

Humbert parodies the Romantic poet-protagonist, insisting that he is an artist rather than a criminal: "The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—not crime's prowling ground" (*Lolita*, p. 131).

Kinbote and Humbert distort and deflate Romantic principles, replacing idealism with solipsism. The preponderance of windows in their respective narratives reflects this parodic undercurrent. In much of Nabokov's work, windows are a symbol for superseding the spherical web of temporal existence in order to make contact with the transcendent. In *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, windows are associated with the solipsistic fantasies Humbert and Kinbote present as "ideal." Humbert glimpses unattainable nymphets through a "jewel-bright window" ("*Mes Fenetres!*") (*Lolita*, p. 266), while Kinbote peers into his neighbor's glass house through his own bedroom window.

In Nabokov's novels, idyllic windows are often juxtaposed with solipsistic mirrors, which are associated with mundane, temporal existence. In different ways, mirrors are associated with both Humbert and Kinbote's solipsism. For Humbert, mirrors reflect the impermeable surface of reality that constrains him, while for Kinbote they are a symbol for encountering reality as an infinite series of reflections of self. This limited, solipsistic perspective is at odds with the acknowledgment of multiple perspectives that both Shade and Nabokov embrace.

In different ways, Humbert, Kinbote, and Shade each see themselves as imprisoned in a finite, temporal reality that they must supersede in order to make contact with a transcendent otherworld.

II. Humbert

Prison imagery abounds in Humbert's narrative. He wonders whether "in this wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect [...] the hidden throb [he] stole from [nymphets] did not affect *their* future" (*Lolita*, p. 21). Worrying that Lolita may mature before he has had a chance to consummate his love for her, Humbert likens his predicament to that of the "tiny madman in [the] padded cell" of the womb (*Lolita*, p. 47). The initial inspiration for *Lolita* came from an article Nabokov read about a gorilla in the Paris zoo who produced a charcoal drawing of the bars of his cage. As Alfred Appel notes, "[Humbert's] narrative is the 'picture' of the bars of the poor creature's cage." In a poem to Lolita, Humbert writes: "I talk in a daze, I walk in a maze / I cannot get out said the starling," an allusion to Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France Italy* (1768), in which the narrator, Yorick, encounters a caged starling, who repeats the refrain: "I can't get out" (Appel, note to 255/4).

Humbert sees himself as a prisoner of the circumscriptive real world of time and space. As he notes, "the idea of time plays [...] a magic part in the matter" of nymphets (*Lolita*, p. 17). The "enchanted island" on which nymphets dwell is enclosed by the temporal-spatial boundaries of nine and fourteen. Upon learning of Charlotte's plan to send Lo to camp for two months, Humbert writes: "In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn into a 'young girl,' and then, into a 'college girl'—that horror of horrors. The word 'forever' referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood" (*Lolita*, p. 65). Humbert sets up a dichotomy between his eternal love for Lo and the temporal reality that limits his time with her. He repeatedly expresses his indignation at the limitations of this reality: "Let them play around me forever. Never grow up" (*Lolita*, p. 21). By attempting to reenact his childhood affair with Annabel by "incarnating her in another" (*Lolita*, p. 15), Humbert tries to transcend these limitations.

Mirrors, coincidental repetitions, and doubles are hallmarks of the real world that circumscribes Humbert. "Nine" and "fourteen," the spatio-temporal boundaries of the enchanted island on which nymphets dwell, are "mirrory beaches and rosy rocks" (p. 16). Humbert and Lo have their conjugal night in room 342 at the Enchanted Hunters (p. 118), which is also the address of the Haze household (p. 35) and the number of hotels and motels Humbert and Lo visit (p. 248). The repeated appearance of this number reflects the fact that Humbert escapes from one set of real-world limitations (Charlotte's presence and her plan to send Dolly to boarding school) into another. It is in room 342 that

Humbert first confronts the emotional ugliness that haunts his affair with Lo—his “ashen sense of awfulness” and Lolita’s post-coital grumpiness (she throws the clothes he gives her into a corner). Humbert catches a glimpse of Lo’s “sulky face” in one of the mirrors that line the room (p. 137). Later, he recalls glancing an “expression of helplessness” on Lo’s face in a mirror after retracting a promise made to her in the heat of passion (p. 283). Mirrors reflect an adversarial real world in which Humbert’s solipsistic attempt to actualize the “ideal” has real consequences.

Doubling and reflectivity are associated with Humbert’s adversaries. He is thwarted by his double, Clare Quilty. Cue and Humbert both have “hairy hands” (Appel, 123/2) and don purple bathrobes (*Lolita*, p. 294). One of the cars with which Quilty pursues Humbert and Lo is a Crest Blue Oldsmobile, which Humbert has trouble distinguishing from his own Dream Blue Melmoth (*Lolita*, p. 299). Quilty’s house, like room 342, is lined with mirrors (*Lolita*, p. 294). Humbert likens Charlotte Haze’s words to a polished surface reflecting the world of conventionality (*Lolita*, p. 37).

The Haze’s trip to Hourglass Lake is rich in mirror imagery. While Humbert awaits the promised picnic (and his fantasized escapade with Lo), he thinks the name of the lake is “Our Glass”; his misspelling suggests a reflective, frozen lake—here reflectivity is associated with McFate’s conspiracy to thwart Humbert by repeatedly postponing the trip. When the Haze’s finally make it to the lake and Humbert learns its correct spelling, Charlotte informs him of her plan to send Lolita to boarding school, causing him to miss out on the apex of her appeal. The correct spelling of “Hourglass Lake” evokes the temporal reality that once again circumscribes Humbert.

After he learns of Charlotte’s intention to send Lo away, Humbert plans to break through the circumscriptive mirror of reality like the ice-hacking Eskimo in his dream (*Lolita*, p. 54) by drowning Charlotte beneath the reflective surface of the lake. Although the setting is “really perfect for a brisk bubbling murder” (*Lolita*, p. 86), Humbert’s anticipation of guilt prevents him from acting on his plan: “Were I to catch her by her strong kicking foot; were I to see her amazed look, hear her awful voice, were I still to go through with the ordeal, her ghost would haunt me all my life” (*Lolita*, p. 87). Significantly, Humbert’s waterproof watch still works when he gets out; Humbert remains a prisoner of the all-too-real world of time and consequences.

Humbert’s thwarted scheme to drown Charlotte, however, is not the last of his attempts to break through the mirror of the real. When Lolita identifies Quilty as her abductor, Humbert recalls the failure of his first attempt: “Waterproof. Why did a flash from Hourglass Lake cross my consciousness?” (*Lolita*, p. 272). Elizabeth Prioleau suggests that Humbert seeks to redeem himself for his earlier sheepishness by killing his double: “Through the murder of his mirror image, Humbert perceives a way to break the surface of the looking glass, to foil his waterproof watch” (Prioleau, p. 431). After his struggle with Cue, the reflective crystal of Humbert’s wristwatch is gone. The watch still tells time, but, as Prioleau points out, it is no longer waterproof. Having shattered the reflective surface of temporal existence, Humbert “[loses] contact with reality for a second or two” and is finally able to achieve transcendence by revisiting a place and time when Lolita was still accessible to him: “A kind of momentary shift occurred as if I were in the connubial bedroom, and Charlotte were sick in bed” (*Lolita*, p. 304). Humbert celebrates his long-awaited liberation from circumscriptive reality by driving on the wrong side of the road, the “queer mirror side” (*Lolita*, p. 306).

III. Kinbote and Shade

Like Humbert, Kinbote and Shade see themselves as prisoners of the real world. Shade likens temporal existence to a cage (*Pale Fire*, p. 36) and a prison-like hive, in which “space is a swarming in the eyes; and time,/A singing in the ears” (*PF*, p. 40). Kinbote describes Shade Hall, the workplace of his real-world alter ego, Professor V. Botkin, as a “prisonlike edifice” (*PF*, p. 92). Just as Humbert seeks to overcome the passage of time by “incarnating [Annabel] in another,” Kinbote seeks to restore the former grandeur of his kingdom by having Shade versify its history. And like Humbert immortalizing Lolita by writing his “confessions” (*Lolita*, p. 309), Kinbote wants to immortalize Shade by publishing “Pale Fire.” Kinbote is convinced that Shade intended to write a thousandth line, identical to the first, which “would have completed the symmetry of the structure” (*PF*, p. 15). Had Shade carried out this plan, his poem would have circled back on itself like the waxwing’s shadow flying through its reflection into eternity. Kinbote strenuously rejects claims that Shade intended to write more than four cantos, as this would have disrupted the circular structure of “Pale Fire,” whereby the poem and its creator achieve transcendence.

Watches and clockwork are hallmarks of the real world that hinders Kinbote. He says of Gradus, the personification of this world: “Mere springs and coils produced the inward movement of our clockwork man” (*PF*, p. 151). Kinbote synchronizes the development of Shade’s poem with Gradus’ gradual approach in time and space and even suggests that Gradus and Shade might have woken up on the morning of Shade’s death at “the same crushed beat of their Timekeeper’s stopwatch” (*PF*, p. 272): “The force propelling [Gradus] is the magic action of Shade’s poem itself, the very mechanism and sweep of verse, the powerful iambic motor” (*PF*, p. 136). This sets up a counterpoint between the themes of temporality and eternity in Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary. In his note to lines 209-210 (“What moment in the gradual decay/Does resurrection choose?”), Kinbote writes: “Spacetime itself is decay; Gradus is flying west; he has reached gray-blue Copenhagen [...]. After tomorrow (July 7) he will proceed to Paris. He has sped through this verse and is gone—presently to darken our pages again” (*PF*, p. 163).

Kinbote and Shade both wrestle with the limitations of space and time, Kinbote in bemoaning the gradual approach of Gradus and Shade in contemplating the nature of life after death. Shade is haunted by the question of an afterlife and devotes his life to investigating it: “There was the day when I began to doubt/Man’s sanity: How could he live without/Knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom/Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb?/ And finally there was the sleepless night/When I decided to explore and fight/the foul, the inadmissible abyss/Devoting all my twisted life to this/One task” (*PF*, p. 39). Like Kinbote, Shade uses watches and clocks as a symbol for temporal existence. Hazel’s body is discovered by “a watchman, Father Time” (note the pun) (*PF*, p. 50). As the Shades wait for Hazel to return home on the night of her suicide, “the tall clock/kept on demolishing young root, old rock” (*PF*, p. 50).

But although they both evoke temporality and eternity, Shade and Kinbote express antithetical attitudes on these themes. Shade initially sees eternity as remote from temporal existence and scorns the mundane: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain/By feigned remoteness in the windowpane./ I had a brain, five senses (one unique),/ But

otherwise I was a cloutish freak./In sleeping dreams I played with other chaps/But really envied nothing—save perhaps/The miracle of a lemniscate left/Upon wet sand by nonchalantly deft/Bicycle tires” (PF, p. 36). Deceived by his misperception of the ideal as remote from mundane existence, Shade is completely disinterested in his peers except when they accidentally produce an infinity sign. But after he learns that the apparent correspondence between Mrs. Z’s vision and his own was “based on a misprint,” Shade realizes that there’s no need to obsess over the existence of a transcendent otherworld, since meaning abounds in the patterned surface of this world: “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 topsy-turvical coincidence,/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” (PF, pp. 62-63).

Significantly, Shade writes about the deflation of his “miracle” on the same day that Kinbote witnesses a “miracle” of his own. After praying at two different churches, Kinbote strolls home in an “elevated state of mind,” optimistic about the possibility that he may be granted salvation “despite the frozen mud and horror in [his] heart.” Suddenly, he hears “with absolute distinction, as if he were standing at [his] shoulder and speaking loudly, as to a slightly deaf man, Shade’s voice say: ‘Come tonight Charlie’” (PF, p. 258). Kinbote, with his superstitious dogmatism, takes the incident to be an acknowledgment of his piety. Shade, by contrast, realizes that there’s no need to deceive oneself looking for verifications of the existence of a transcendent otherworld; the patterned surface of reality is an immanent reflection of the ideal, and Shade seeks to capture this reflectivity in his neatly patterned verse: “Maybe my sensual love for the *consonne/d’appui*, Echo’s fey child, is based upon/A feeling of fantastically planned,/Richly rhymed life. I feel I understand/Existence, or at least a minute part/Of my existence, only through my art/ In terms of combinational delight;/And if my private universe scans right,/So does the verse of galaxies divine/Which I suspect is an iambic line” (PF, p. 68). The title Shade chooses for his poem reflects the theme of his revelation. In *Timon of Athens*, “the moon steals its pale fire from the sun,” just as the real world reflects the light of the ideal.

Kinbote has no patience for his neighbor’s apotheosis. He writes of Shade’s attempts to find “some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind/Of correlated pattern in the game” (PF, p. 63): “I abhor such games; they make my temples throb with abominable pain” (PF, p. 189). Kinbote’s objection is based on his dogmatic Christian faith, which is antithetical to Shade’s agnostic, Romantic spirituality: “I am [...] obliged to observe that I strongly disapprove of the flippancy with which our poet treats, in this canto, certain aspects of spiritual hope which religion alone can fulfill” (PF, p. 223).

Shade personifies the ideals of Romanticism, seeking to capture mundane reflections of the transcendent in his art. In his foreword, Kinbote describes the “unique physiological phenomenon” of the poet receiving idyllic inspiration: “John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse” (PF, p. 27). Kinbote likens Shade to a magician he saw as a boy, whose “marvelous fluid-looking fingers [...] could if he chose make his spoon dissolve into a sunbeam by twiddling it, or turn his

plate into a dove by tossing it up in the air” (*PF*, p. 28). Just as the Zemblan conjurer used magic to transform mundane objects, Shade brings out the transcendent in the mundane through his poetry. In contrast to Shade, Kinbote fails at bridging the ideal and the real. After he refuses to kiss Disa, the king glances back and sees “in the distance her white figure with the listless grace of ineffable grief bending over the garden table, and suddenly a fragile bridge was suspended between waking indifference and dream-love” (*PF*, p. 214). But the bridge collapses when he realizes he is looking at Fleur, not Disa.

For Shade, the aesthetic perfection of nature reflects the transcendent. He writes: “My picture book was at an early age/The painted parchment papering our cage:/Mauve rings around the moon; blood-orange sun;/Twinned Iris; and that rare phenomenon/The iridule-when, beautiful and strange,/In a bright sky above a mountain range/One opal cloudlet in an oval form/ reflects the rainbow of a thunderstorm/ which in a distant valley has been staged—/for we are most artistically caged” (*PF*, p. 36). Shade’s evocation of Iris, a messenger between the divine and mortal worlds, one of whose epithets meant “wondrous one,” reflects his wonder at the communion between real and ideal.

In contrast to Shade, Kinbote is continually thwarted by nature. Excessive foliage occludes his view of the Shade household. Disa, Kinbote’s unappealing second wife, reproduces Shade’s poem, “The Sacred Tree,” in a letter to Kinbote. We learn that “sacred trees” on the Wordsmith campus stood in the way of the construction of the new Episcopal church and that only an arc of trees was preserved (*PF*, p. 93). This underscores the mutual opposition of Kinbote’s dogmatic Christianity and Shade’s pursuit of spiritual communion with nature. The word for “tree” in Zemblan is *grados* (*PF*, p. 93). Trees are associated with shadows (a staple in Shade’s nature-inspired verse), and Gradus, Kinbote’s arch-nemesis, is a member of the Shadows, the anti-Karlist extremist organization. Kinbote’s adversarial relation to nature underscores a deeper hostility to life. He wonders whether nature has intentionally obstructed his view of the Shade household “so as to conceal from a possible predator the mysteries of generation” (*PF*, p. 89). Kinbote has his most distressing encounters with solitude on the “masquerading spring nights with the sounds of new life in the trees cruelly mimicking the cracklings of old death in my brain” (*PF*, p. 95).

Kinbote’s views on suicide are a corollary to his hostility to nature and life. Kinbote is no stranger to suicidal ideation, as we learn from his enumeration of all the possible ways of ending one’s life (*PF*, p. 219-220). Kinbote suggests that Gradus’ suicide was his one act of humanity: “His life ended not in a feeble splutter of the clockwork but in a gesture of humanoid despair” (*PF*, p. 299). In his note to line 493 (“she took her poor young life”), Kinbote offers his “simple and sober description of [the] spiritual situation” of suicide:

“The more lucid and overwhelming one’s belief in providence, the greater the temptation to get it over with, this business of life... What can stop one from effecting the transition? What can help us to resist the intolerable temptation? What can prevent us from yielding to the burning desire for merging in God? We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins” (*PF*, pp. 219, 221).

Kinbote sees suicide as the ultimate expression of faith and a way out of the misery of temporal existence. Shade, on the other hand, is not interested in an afterlife unless it preserves memory of mortal life:

“I’m ready to become a floweret/or a fat fly, but never, to forget./And I’ll turn down eternity unless/the melancholy and the tenderness/Of mortal life; the passion and the pain;/the claret taillight of that dwindling plane/Off Hesperus; your gesture of dismay/On running out of cigarettes; the way/ You smile at dogs; the trail of silver slime/Snails leave or flagstones; this good ink, this rhyme,/This index card, this slender rubber band/Which always forms, when dropped, an ampersand,/Are found in Heaven by the newlydead/Stored in its strongholds through the years” (PF, p. 53).

Whereas Kinbote is tempted to skirt the misery of mortal life by escaping into eternity, Shade looks for bridges between the ideal and the real, as his lemniscate-forming rubber band suggests.

The mirror motif is even more prominent in *Pale Fire* than in *Lolita*. Zemblan is the “tongue of the mirror;” all Zemblans look alike, and Kinbote observes that “in fact, the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian *zemlya*, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections, of ‘resemblers’” (PF, p. 265). Mirrors, reflections, and doubles abound in the story of the king’s escape from the castle: Charles uses a hand mirror to flash signals from his turret (PF, p. 121); when the king emerges onto the street from beneath the Royal Theater, he glances his reflection in a puddle (PF, p. 135); this prefigures the proliferation of Karlist impersonators who abet the king’s escape, including the one whose reflection Charles mistakes for his own (PF, p. 143). The Zemblan glass industry is associated with the Royalist status quo; “crystallographers” are listed among those who, in Gradus’ view, “[hold] an unfair share of power of which others were cheated” (PF, p. 152). We learn that Gradus pursued the glass business professionally, but his only accomplishments were the “remarkably ugly red-and-amber windows” of a public lavatory and “the so-called *feuilles-d’alarme* used by grape growers and orchardmen to scare the birds” (PF, p. 151). Gradus’ ineptitude is in stark contrast to the artistry of the former kingdom—Sudarg of Bokay’s triptych mirror and the stained glass window in King Charles’ grandfather’s dressing room. Sudarg’s palindromic double, Jakob Gradus, singles out the glass industry as a focal target of the insurgency. One of Gradus’s first subversive acts is to organize strikes at glass factories (PF, p. 77), and we learn that the revolution starts in one of these factories (PF, p. 120).

Mirrors are an appropriate symbol for Kinbote’s solipsism, his inability to acknowledge the perspectives of people besides himself. Kinbote is unable to understand people except through his own distortive mirror, through which he views John Shade as a reserved but affectionate friend (PF, p. 25) and Sybil as an “anti-Karlist” adversary (PF, p. 74). He thus sees reality as infinite reflections of his own limited perspective, like the “endless sequence of green-shorted Kinbotes” that flood his goetic mirror (PF, p. 183) or the countless scarlet-capped impersonators who abet his escape. Kinbote is eager to emphasize the resemblance between aspects of Shade’s life and his own, as when he notes the similarity in appearance between Sybil and Disa, adding the interjection: “I trust the reader appreciates the strangeness of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all” (PF, p. 207). In contrast to Kinbote, Shade attributes apparent resemblances to mere coincidence, preferring to acknowledge individual differences of perspective: “Resemblances are the shadows of differences. Different people see different similarities and similar differences” (PF, p. 265).

Kinbote’s infinite repetitions of self are juxtaposed with the countless Fleur’s who fill Sudarg of Bokay’s cheval glass, as Priscilla Meyer points out (Meyer, p. 200). After

the king ignores her sexual advances, Fleur tries to enhance her appeal by brushing her hair in front of the “triptych of bottomless light”:

“She turned about before it: a secret device of reflection gathered an infinite number of nudes in its depths, garlands of girls in finite graceful and sorrowful groups, diminishing in the limpid distance, or breaking into individual nymphs, some of whom, she murmured, must resemble her ancestors when they were young—little peasant *garlien* combing their hair in shallow water as far as the eye could reach, and then the wistful mermaid from an old tale, and then nothing” (*PF*, p. 111).

The triptych, which represents Fleur’s hope that Kinbote will overcome his disinterest in her, produces countless variations on the image of the nymph, in contrast to the uniform mass of Karlist impersonators and green-shirted Kinbotes. Sudarg’s masterpiece reflects multiple perspectives, the infinite succession of “false bottoms” that for Nabokov comprised the “unquenchable, unattainable” nature of reality (Nabokov, quoted in Meyer, p. 197).

III. Conclusion

Humbert and Kinbote both distort the Platonic/Romantic dichotomy between real and ideal, using it to justify their solipsistic disinterest in the plight of other people. Humbert’s version of the “ideal” is a world in which he would not have to account for the reality of Lolita’s suffering and could exclusively encounter his “safely solipsized” nymphet (*Lolita*, p. 60), “perhaps, more real than [the actual] Lolita,” whom he likens to a “photographic image rippling upon a screen” (*Lolita*, p. 62). Kinbote’s parodic “ideal” is the history of Zembla and his friendship with Shade, whom he believes to be versifying that history. Like Humbert, Kinbote resents the fact that other people’s feelings get in his way. Kinbote is insulted when Shade, still grieving after completing his second canto, slaps his index cards on the table after catching sight of him. Shortly after this incident, Kinbote hopes Shade will suffer another heart attack, leading to his “being called over to their house, all windows ablaze, in the middle of the night, in a great warm burst of sympathy, coffee, telephone calls, Zemblan herbal receipts (they work wonders!), and a resurrected Shade weeping in my arms (‘There, there, John’)” (*PF*, p. 96). Like Humbert with Lo, Kinbote is more interested in his solipsistic image of his neighbor than in the wellbeing of the real John Shade.

Humbert and Kinbote both center their narratives around doublings that reflect their distorted “idealism.” Humbert is thwarted by his “shadow,” Clare Quilty. Kinbote is threatened by the extremist Shadows, the “shadow twins of the Karlists,” including Nodo, the epileptic half-brother of Odon, and Jakob Gradus, the regicidal double of Sudarg of Bokay (*PF*, p. 150). The double theme in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* parodies the work of Mary Shelley and Robert Louis Stevenson, whose good/evil doublings Nabokov regarded as a grossly impoverished spin-off on the real/ideal doubles of German Romantic literature (Meyer, p. 198). Humbert and Kinbote, with their simplistic, narrow-minded perspectives, produce equally simplistic narratives, depicting those who stand in their way as evil.

Nabokov, by contrast, avoids portraying either Humbert or Kinbote as purely evil; both characters have momentary glimpses of a reality outside themselves. After he is arrested, Humbert recalls a day following Lolita’s escape when, hearing a chorus of

children's voices, he reflected on the fact that "the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (*Lolita*, p. 308). Kinbote is hopelessly disinterested in his second wife, Disa, but the love and concern he feels for her in his dreams indicates that there is more in his heart than "frozen mud and horror" (*PF*, p. 258). These momentary lapses in self-involvement are Nabokov's attempt to acknowledge the humanity of Humbert and Kinbote as they are unwilling to do for their own adversaries.

In spite of Nabokov's indications to the contrary, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* do have a "moral in tow" (*Lolita*, p. 314). In his afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov lists "curiosity" among the qualities of real art (*Lolita*, p. 315). As Richard Rorty suggests, Humbert and Kinbote, with their conspicuous "incuriosity," teach us to "notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering" (Rorty, p. 163). In his two most widely acclaimed novels, Nabokov challenges us to open our ears to the stories of characters who display reproachable deafness to the plight of people other than themselves.

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