

Transcending the Boundary of Death: Ecclesiastes through a Nabokovian Lens


by Michael Carasik

“Nothing new under the sun? Then beyond it!”¹

There has been a consensus among biblical scholars that the epilogue of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 12:9-14) was written by an editor—the same one who supplied the title of the book, “The words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1)—in order to frame “the words of Qohelet”² in a particular way. According to this understanding, the editor was someone of a mainstream religious viewpoint, whose advice to “fear God and obey His commandments” (12:14) served to package Qohelet’s more radical teachings in a framework that renders their radicalism harmless. The rabbinic remark that Ecclesiastes was accepted into the canon because “its beginning is words of Torah and its end is words of Torah,”³ though not based on a two-voice theory of the composition of the book, provides an early attestation of the book as a radical teaching within a normative frame. The medieval commentator Samuel b. Meir (Rashbam), in his comments to 1:2 and 12:8, was apparently the first to attribute the frame to editors other

¹ Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 184. Thanks to Marc Brettler for referring me to this book.

² I use “Ecclesiastes” here to refer to the book, “Qohelet” to refer to its author or, more precisely, to the first-person voice of most of the book, and “the epilogist” or “the framework narrator” to refer to the author of 1:1, the words “said Qohelet” in 1:2, 7:27, and 12:8, and the epilogue ((12:9-14).

³ B. abb. 30b. **note special character**

than Qohelet,⁴ but he does not suggest that the editors were trying to tame the book's radical content.⁵

Michael Fox⁶ and J.-M. Auwers⁷ have argued for an alternative position suggested long ago by Delitzsch⁸: that a single author did indeed write Ecclesiastes, deliberately choosing to speak in two different creative voices. The point would be that (as Auwers puts it) the epilogist is the real author of the book and Qohelet a purely fictive personage to whom the author shifts responsibility for his daring opinions. This in itself is not at all an unusual phenomenon; writers frequently present the main part of their narratives as being taken from a manuscript that has come into their possession or as the first-person narrative of a stranger who has insisted on telling them his story. A somewhat more complicated literary structure appears, however, if we read this phenomenon in Ecclesiastes through a more specific lens, the writings of Vladimir Nabokov. I believe that reading Ecclesiastes with a Nabokovian eye will bring into

⁴ Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir on Qoheleth* (Jerusalem and Leiden: Magnes Press and E. J. Brill, 1985), 34 with n. 80.

⁵ Rashbam's comment on the repetition of 12:13 ("the end of the matter ... fear God and observe His commandments") somewhat complicates the picture. The comment to 12:8 makes clear that the editors (in the plural) speak from that point on, but here Rashbam remarks in the singular, "he repeats his rule." (The translation is that of Japhet and Salters, 214; the Hebrew text, 215, includes three separate singular forms, which would seem to preclude the possibility of a scribal error.)

⁶ Michael V. Fox, "The Voices in the Book of Qohelet," in *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 363-77.

⁷ J.-M. Auwers, "Problèmes d'Interprétation de l'Épilogue de *Qohèlèt*," in A. Schoors (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, BETL 136 (Leuven: Peeters/Leuven University Press, 1998), 267-282.

⁸ "In the book Koheleth-Solomon speaks, whose mask the author puts on. Here [in 12:9], letting the mask fall off, he speaks *of* Koheleth." (Cited in Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 372.)

clearer focus a *different* and more significant reason for the double voice in Ecclesiastes: not an attempt by the outer voice to control, contain, and frame the inner one, but an attempt by the inner voice to burst a boundary, escape a cage, avoid a limitation. The limitation to which I refer is the central problem of Nabokov's work, as it is of Qohelet's: death.

From the perspective of those who live in the world we know—"under the sun," as Qohelet has it (Eccl 1:3 and *passim*)—death is unavoidable. Indeed, it is the inevitability of death that causes Qohelet to regard life as *hevel*, existential absurdity⁹ or simply "illusion." The literal meaning of the word is "vapor";¹⁰ one can see it but not grasp it. It is this same now-you-see-it-now-you-don't quality that, no doubt, prompted the choice of the word as the name of Abel, the son of Adam and Eve who appears in Genesis 4 only long enough to be murdered by his brother Cain.

Nabokov, too, apparently thought of the world as a kind of illusion and, it would seem, for the same reason: The finality—indeed, the grotesqueness—of physical death makes life absurd. But Nabokov sensed, by analogy with his own experience as a writer, the possibility of a transcendent realm that could somehow ennoble the illusion of life even as it exposed its comparative tawdriness. For if death was the central *problem* of his novels, their central *theme* was *potustoronnost'*, literally "over-to-that-side-ness": to

⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 30-33.

¹⁰ E.g. Ps 62:10, "Men are mere breath." (Except where noted, biblical translations in this article are taken from the NJPS translation; but I have altered the spelling of Qohelet's name used there to the one used throughout this paper.) The medieval commentator Abraham ibn Ezra uses a denominative verb from this root to refer to one who "spouts hot air." See his remarks at Exod 19:12, in the short commentary.

the other side of mortality or reality.¹¹ Let us look at two novels in which Nabokov unmask the conjurer's trick and reveals that his fictional world is really an illusion, in both cases by a sudden transformation at the end. The first is his 1938 Russian novel *Invitation to a Beheading*. Here the main character, Cincinnatus C., sentenced to death for "gnostical turpitude," is waiting for the executioner's ax to fall when suddenly he feels "a clarity he had never experienced before." The spectators who have gathered to watch his execution become "quite transparent," and, leaving "one Cincinnatus" face down on the execution platform, "the other Cincinnatus" climbs down and walks off. As he does so, the world in which he has lived up until now begins to disintegrate and shrink into nothingness:

<begin block quote>

Little was left of the square. The platform had long since collapsed in a cloud of reddish dust. The last to rush past was a woman in a black shawl, carrying the tiny executioner like a larva in her arms. The fallen trees lay flat and reliefless, while those that were still standing, also two-dimensional, with a lateral shading of the trunk to suggest roundness, barely held on with their branches to the ripping mesh of the sky. Everything was coming apart. Everything was falling. A spinning wind was picking up and whirling: dust, rags, chips of painted wood, bits of gilded plaster, pasteboard bricks, posters; an arid gloom fled; and amidst the dust, and the falling things, and the flapping scenery,

¹¹ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 253 and 289 n. 10.

Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices,
stood beings akin to him.

<end block quote>

Though the nature of the higher-order world is not made explicit, Cincinnatus' transfer to it is clear. (Nabokov hints at this earlier in the novel, when a fellow prisoner, who will turn out to be M'sieur Pierre, the executioner, explains why he has been jailed: "I was accused of attempting to help you escape from here."¹²) In the fictional world of *Invitation to a Beheading*, "one Cincinnatus" has been presumably been executed. But "the other Cincinnatus"¹³ has transcended that world, seeing it for the stage set it really was, and reached a meta-world in which the cruelties of the world he had known are seen to be illusory, a world in which, at last, Cincinnatus will find "beings akin to him."

Everything this paragraph (*mutatis mutandis*) has its analogue in ch. 12 of *Ecclesiastes*, when:

<begin block quote>

sun and light and moon and stars grow dark, and the clouds come back
again after the rain: When the guards of the house become shaky, and the
men of valor are bent, and the maids that grind, grown few, are idle, and
the ladies that peer through the windows grow dim, and the doors to the

¹² *Invitation to a Beheading*, ch. 10.

¹³ "The other Cincinnatus" has in fact made his appearance several times earlier in the novel, the first time as early as ch. 2, where he is described as "the double, the gangrel, that accompanies each of us—you, and me, and him over there—doing what we would like to do at that very moment, but cannot...." It is possible to interpret the ending, too, as simply the last fantasy of Cincinnatus as he lies waiting for M'sieur Pierre's ax to fall. But the switch to "the other Cincinnatus" as the viewpoint character ends the novel by giving his world a reality that the world of the merely dead Cincinnatus no longer has.

street are shut — with the noise of the hand mill growing fainter, and the song of the bird growing feebler, and all the strains of music dying down.... Before the silver cord snaps and the golden bowl crashes, the jar is shattered at the spring, and the jug is smashed at the cistern. And the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the lifebreath returns to God Who bestowed it.

<end block quote>

Michael Fox has pointed out that this “unsettling ... almost surrealistic” poem is not merely an allegory of death, but something much stronger: “Through the prism of symbolism the reader sees more than an ordinary death and burial.... Behind the surface, looming in the background, is a disaster of cosmic magnitude.... [The author] musters images of universal disaster to evoke the unimaginable experience of one’s own death.”¹⁴ Similarly, C. L. Seow observes that the author here is “drawing upon the imageries of cosmic doom to depict the end of human existence.”¹⁵ Death, after all, is the end of the world—for the dead man. Though “the lifebreath returns to God Who bestowed it,” Qohelet does not look forward as clearly as does “the other Cincinnatus” to the possibility of continued experience in a different realm. But, in showing the disintegration of the quotidian world, the author of Ecclesiastes has tacitly taken a step

¹⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 338, 339, 342 f.

¹⁵ C. L. Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 209-234, at 225. See also *ibid.*, *Ecclesiastes*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 351-82. Seow, however, sees this as the general eschaton, not the individual eschaton caused by death: “All the images in vv. 2-7 are consistent with the author’s intent to depict a permanent end of human existence and, hence, the end of all possibilities to enjoy life either on earth or in the hereafter” (“Eschatological Poem,” 212).

beyond it. It is just at this point that the framework narrator once again steps into view, this time for good, by closing the poem with Qohelet's melancholy tag line, "all is *hevel*," but with the addition that "Qohelet said" it.

In similar fashion, Nabokov, too, steps into view at the end of a later novel. That novel, his second written in English and first written in America, is *Bend Sinister*, in which another Cincinnatus, this time called Adam Krug, is trapped in a dystopian reflection of the two totalitarian regimes that affected Nabokov's own life, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. At the end of the novel, there is a final, violent confrontation between Krug and his old schoolmate, "the Toad," who has now become dictator. A bullet takes off part of Krug's left ear, but "he stumbled on cheerfully":

<begin block quote>

He saw the Toad crouching at the foot of the wall, shaking, dissolving, speeding up his shrill incantations, protecting his dimming face with his transparent arm, and Krug ran towards him, and just a fraction of an instant before another and better bullet hit him, he shouted again; You, you—and the wall vanished, like a rapidly withdrawn slide, and I stretched myself and got up from among the chaos of written and rewritten pages, to investigate the sudden twang that something had made in striking the wire netting of my window.

<end block quote>

The Toad begins to dissolve, his face dims, and his arm (like the crowd watching Cincinnatus' execution in *Invitation to a Beheading*) becomes transparent, as the fictive world of the novel comes unraveled. Then it simply vanishes, "like a rapidly withdrawn slide," and "I"—Nabokov, the novelist and lepidopterist, stretches and gets up. A moth

has struck his window screen. The final page of the novel is set in his world: a meta-world from the perspective of Adam Krug, the real world from the (possibly also limited) perspective of Nabokov and of us, his readers. It is, as the author concludes, “A good night for nothing.” The fictional reality of Krug and the Toad has been reduced, by the bullet that would have ended Krug’s life, to nothing. But a subtle shift in perspective, signaled by a modulation of the authorial voice, transforms the “nothing” of a fictive world that seemed real to its inhabitants into “nothing” in the transcendent reality of the writer who created that world.¹⁶

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the contemporary playwright Tom Stoppard has one of his characters say, “Occasionally ... there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality.”¹⁷ At the end of

¹⁶ Some would consider the authorial voice of the last page of *Bend Sinister* to be another persona and not the “real” author. Michael Wood, for example, refers to “the four major or most frequent meanings of the name” Nabokov: 1) the historical person whose biography was written by Brian Boyd; 2) a set (also historical) of attitudes; 3) a (real) person who keeps himself hidden, “the textual revenant rather than the face on the dustjacket”; 4) identifiable habits of writing and narrating (*The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1994], 22). For present purposes this is an unnecessary distinction. The traits of this persona are such that Nabokov clearly intends the reader to understand it as being the Vladimir Nabokov who lives in the same world as the reader. He notes in his introduction to a paperback reprint of the novel ([New York: Time Life Books, 1964], xi f.): “The book was finished on a warm rainy night, more or less as described at the end of Chapter Eighteen” (that is, the end of the book), and he identifies the “I” there as being, from the perspective of Krug’s world, “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (xviii).

¹⁷ In fact, it is “the Player,” the leader of the troupe that performs for Hamlet’s mother and stepfather, who says this; like those of us outside the world of Elsinore, he somehow understands that his life is part of someone else’s play. Note Charles Kinbote’s remark in *Pale Fire* that he “may turn up yet, on another

Invitation to a Beheading, Cincinnatus steps through this rent. In *Bend Sinister*, it is the author who steps through it:

<begin block quote>

It was at that moment, just after Krug had fallen through the bottom of a confused dream and sat up on the straw with a gasp—and just before his reality, his remembered hideous misfortune could pounce upon him—it was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light—causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate.

<end block quote>

As Nabokov explains, Krug has been aware of this “crack in the shell of mortality” without quite understanding what it was:

<begin block quote>

The plot starts to breed in the bright broth of a rain puddle. The puddle is observed by Krug from a window of the hospital where his wife is dying. The oblong pool, shaped like a cell that is about to divide, reappears subthematically throughout the novel, as an ink blot in Chapter Four, an inkstain in Chapter Five, spilled milk in Chapter Eleven, the infusoria-like image of ciliated thought in Chapter Twelve, the footprint of a phosphorescent islander in Chapter Eighteen, and the imprint a soul

campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art” (comment to l. 1000), which is what Nabokov the composer of chess problems might call “a simple two-mover” to the words of Jaques in *As You Like It* (II vii 171-72): “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”

leaves in the intimate texture of space in the closing paragraph.... [T]his little puddle vaguely evokes in him my link with him: a rent in his world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty.¹⁸

<end block quote>

Brian Boyd suggests that the puddle's shape is halfway between Krug's circle (see below) and "the lemniscate symbol of infinity."¹⁹

The puddle that Adam Krug sees is in some sense a *revelation*, albeit an incomprehensible one. The deaths of his wife and son, and his own anguish, are the direct results not of the victory of cruel might over weak right, nor of cosmic indifference, but of esthetic and philosophical choices made by his creator, Vladimir Nabokov. He does not reach the transcendent world himself, as Cincinnatus did, but before descending into madness he sees its light—a lesser, but still substantial, gift.

"Krug" means "circle" in Russian, and the tension between the circular rhythms of life and the straight line that leads from birth to death provided Nabokov, as it did Qohelet, with a recurring theme (though Nabokov preferred to see the circle as a spiral²⁰). I have discussed this theme in *Ecclesiastes* elsewhere,²¹ and we shall return to it again later. But let us honor Adam Krug's memory by beginning our examination of this theme with his own work.

¹⁸ *Bend Sinister* (1964), xiv f.

¹⁹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 105.

²⁰ From the beginning of Chapter Fourteen of his autobiographical *Speak, Memory*: "The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free."

²¹ Michael Carasik, "Qohelet's Twists and Turns," *JSOT* 28.2 (2003):192-209.

<begin block quote>

Oh, that exquisite sight: a wary logician picking his way among the thorn bushes and pitfalls of thought, marking a tree or a cliff (this I have passed, this Nile is settled), looking back ('in other words') and cautiously testing some quaggy ground (now let us proceed——); having his carload of tourists stop at the base of a metaphor or Simple Example (let us suppose that an elevator——); pressing on, surmounting all difficulties and finally arriving in triumph at the very first tree he had marked!

<end block quote>

So, too, Qohelet concludes his investigation with the same observation with which he began: All is illusion.

A hint of this theme recurs in Nabokov's 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, which takes its name from a passage in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* that evokes the beginning of Ecclesiastes:

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.

Timon of Athens, IV iii 421-425

The element of circularity is clear. The sun robs the sea, which robs the moon, which robs the sun. The theme is one of the most familiar in Ecclesiastes:

<begin block quote>

The sun rises, the sun sets, and it hastens to the place where it rises again. Going to the south, and circling around again to the north, circling, circling, goes the wind, ever returning on its circuits. All streams go into the sea, but the sea is never full; to the place where the streams go, there they return again (Eccl 1:5-7).

<end block quote>

In *Pale Fire*, the circular theme finds its strongest expression in the poem by John Shade, also called “Pale Fire,” which constitutes the first of the novel’s two major sections.²² (The other is a commentary to the poem by one Charles Kinbote; a foreword and an index are also actually part of the novel.) The subject of this far-from-somber poem is death—the poet’s own, experienced (temporarily) in fainting fits as a child (Canto 1) and again when his heart stops briefly as an adult (Canto 3), and that of his daughter, Hazel (Canto 2), who sinks into a pond, a suicide like Ophelia, in line 500, at the exact center of the 999-line poem. Hazel’s death is the grain of sand at the heart of the pearl that is “Pale Fire,” but the engine that drives the poem forward is Shade’s own experience:

<begin block quote>

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

It had the tone,

The quiddity and quaintness of its own
Reality. It *was*. (lines 698-700, 737-739)

²² I will use *Pale Fire* in italics to refer to the novel, “Pale Fire” in quotation marks to refer to the poem.

<end block quote>

The opening lines of Canto Four make a bold claim:

<begin block quote>

Now I shall spy on beauty as none has
 Spied on it yet. Now I shall cry out as
 None has cried out. Now I shall try what none
 Has tried. Now I shall do what none has done. (lines 835-838)

<end block quote>

And yet, as the commentary to these lines points out, this promise “will not really be kept.” It may be, though, that Shade’s promise was not meant to be kept in the poem itself. “Pale Fire” can hardly be described as something “none has tried”—unless it is merely the jumping-off point for a more audacious attempt: to cross, at will, the “border” whose crossing Shade had previously experienced only by means of a “bump and wobble on the part / Of ... an old unstable heart” (lines 735 f.). The clue that this is so is an aside he makes while describing what goes through his mind while he shaves:

<begin block quote>

Man’s life as commentary to abstruse
Unfinished poem. Note for further use.(lines 939 f.)

<end block quote>

Charles Kinbote—the madman whose bizarre commentary on the poem makes up the third and longest section of the novel—remarks, “If I correctly understand the sense of this succinct observation, our poet suggests here that human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece.” From what we have seen of Nabokov’s novels so far, this may indeed be correct. But if so it is only a partial

understanding of what Shade meant. For the poet's plan *was* eventually carried out—in the commentary to his own poem.

This, at least, is the suggestion made by Brian Boyd in his biography of Nabokov.²³ For, with the poem essentially complete, John Shade is shot dead (see the commentary to “Line 1000”). The mystery of a poem in rhymed couplets with an odd number of lines is solved when we circle around to find the appropriate rhyme for line 999 in line 1:

<begin block quote>

A man, unheeded of the butterfly—
 Some neighbor's gardener, I guess—goes by
 Trundling an empty barrow up the lane.
 ...
 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. (lines 997-999, 1-4)

<end block quote>

²³ Boyd, *American Years*, 439-447. Boyd's suggestion was a reaction to the various clues that had led readers to think Nabokov intended us to notice that both poem and commentary were really written by the same person. One such example is Kinbote's remark (in the commentary to lines 433-34) that Shade's description of his wife Sybil was “a plain unretouched likeness” of Queen Disa of Kinbote's country of Zembla: “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.”

“One waxwing” flies into a windowpane and dies, but “the other waxwing” lives on. “And I”—John Shade—was both of them.

When the poem ends, John Shade indeed becomes a shadow, stilling his own voice and letting that of Kinbote pick up the story, as commentary to his “unfinished poem” (line 940). Shade has been slain, but he has lived on. He has imagined himself beyond death into a world utterly strange to him: one in which his death has already taken place.

<begin block quote>

As John Shade, autobiographical poet, he may assert all he likes his confidence in waking up safely tomorrow, but he knows on the other hand that he is as subject to the unpredictable contingencies of life as anyone else. He can dramatize that discrepancy in the starkest possible way by stepping outside his poem and his self and right there subjecting himself to an accidental killing, like the waxwing stunned against the azure, but then project himself into the Kinbote who flies on in the reflected sky of his commentary. For as his poem itself makes clear, he senses the need somehow to reach beyond his death, and to allow himself a meaning he can express not through the text of his life but only through the texture of interacting poem and commentary, self and nonself, life and whatever follows afterward. He wants to try to enter another soul and to play the role of life-dealer and death-dealer, to suggest as if from beyond the confines of his own existence how his own death may suddenly turn the dead end of his whole life’s search into the portal of discovery.²⁴

²⁴ Boyd, *American Years*, 443.

<end block quote>

Shade's purpose in imagining himself into "the undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns" is the one he set himself as a young man:

<begin block quote>

to explore and fight

The foul, the inadmissible abyss (lines 178-79)

<end block quote>

—the abyss that makes all of life *hevel*: death.

Shade and Kinbote share a birthday—July 5th—though Shade is 16 years older.²⁵ A third character shares this birth date:²⁶ Jakob Gradus, the assassin sent by the Shadows (the Zemblan revolutionary secret police) to kill King Charles the Beloved (Kinbote's "real" identity). Shade accidentally takes the fatal bullet meant for King Charles. The police claim that "Gradus" is really Jack Grey, a convict who has escaped with the purpose of killing the judge who sent him to prison; Kinbote is renting the judge's home for a year while he is on sabbatical in England.²⁷ Whether Gradus/Grey's bullet is aimed

²⁵ This is according to Kinbote's remark to Sybil in the comment to line 181; but according to the index, King Charles (Kinbote's alter ego) and Gradus (born the same day as Kinbote) were born in 1915 and Shade in 1898, a difference of 17, not 16, years. It's not clear whether Kinbote's remark to Sybil is intended to alert the reader to his unreliability or is simply a mistake due to Nabokov's momentarily lending Shade his own birth year, 1899.

²⁶ According to the second note to line 949, where Gradus reads in the *New York Times* about a note due July 1, 1979, and (perhaps, says Kinbote) idly notices that he will be 64 four days after that.

²⁷ Nabokov spent many years living in such houses; he and his wife Vera "took pleasure in constructing the character of their absent hosts from the artifacts of their homes." See Boyd, *American Years*, 220, citing a recollection by Morris Bishop.

at Kinbote or at Judge Goldsworth—no matter which version of the novel’s reality we choose—Shade is killed by mistake, killed by a man who didn’t know him from Adam. This is *hevel* indeed: “a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments.”²⁸

The heading of the index to *Pale Fire*—an integral part of the novel—advises us to see the entries for “G,” “K,” and “S,” which “stand for the three main characters in this work.” “G” sends us to the entry for Gradus/Grey, “K” to those for Kinbote and King Charles. But there is no “S,” merely an entry for the poet and scholar John Francis Shade, the one “real” character of the three (from the novel’s perspective). From the perspective of Nabokov (as writer) and us (as readers), however, all three are equally fictional; just as G & K share a birthdate, so too Shade’s life runs in tandem with Gradus’ journey to America, moving inexorably to its end:

<begin block quote>

We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought, as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia, through the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm, riding past in a rhyme, skidding around the corner of a run-on, breathing with the caesura, swinging down to the foot of the page from line to line as from branch to branch, hiding between two words,²⁹ ... reappearing on the horizon of a new canto, steadily marching nearer in iambic motion,

²⁸ Commentary to l. 1000, last page of the novel.

²⁹ See the commentary to l. 596 of the poem, where Kinbote notes a draft variant containing these lines:

“Do objects have a soul? Or perish must / Alike great temples and Tanagra dust?”

crossing streets, moving up with his valise on the escalator of the pentameter, stepping off, boarding a new train of thought, entering the hall of a hotel, putting out the bedlight, while Shade blots out a word, and falling asleep as the poet lays down his pen for the night.³⁰

<end block quote>

In fact, Gradus departs on his mission “on the very day that an innocent poet in an innocent land was beginning Canto Two.”³¹ We may guess that G is born (with K) on Shade’s 17th birthday, on

<begin block quote>

the sleepless night

When I decided to explore and fight

The foul, the inadmissible abyss,

Devoting all my twisted life to this

One task. (lines 177-181)

<end block quote>

We may presume, too, that it is a different G, “the big G” (line 549), to whom Kinbote refers when, at the end of his commentary, he foresees his own death:

<begin block quote>

History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom, and with a great sob greet the gray coastline and the gleam of a roof in the rain. I may huddle and groan in a madhouse. But whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere, will quietly set

³⁰ Commentary to l. 17.

³¹ Ibid.

out—somebody has already set out, somebody still rather far away is buying a ticket, is boarding a bus, a ship, a plane, has landed, is walking toward a million photographers, and presently he will ring at my door—a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus.³²

<end block quote>

Here, just before its conclusion, *Pale Fire* for the first time hits a note that would not be out of place in Ecclesiastes. The over-all tone of Kinbote's commentary is quite humorous (though we more often laugh at him than with him); Shade's poem, though not without humor,³³ is not comic, but (despite its subject, his daughter's suicide) it is warmly life-affirming, as when he predicts at the end of the poem that he will wake at six the next morning "and that the day will probably be fine" (line 982). But we the readers know that "G" will shoot him dead just a few minutes after he lays down his pen—by mistake, it is true, but (as Yossarian asks in *Catch-22* when advised that the Germans are shooting not just at him but at everybody) what difference does that make? If "a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus" is waiting for each of us, then ... all is *hevel*. A Kinbote who can make this statement is "but mad north-northwest." He is, in fact, a voice that John Shade has chosen with which to continue his lifelong exploration of "the inadmissible void."

It is true that Nabokov dismissed all theories of which character in the book had "really" written poem, commentary, and index;³⁴ moreover, Brian Boyd has subsequently

³² Commentary to l. 1000, last paragraph of the novel.

³³ A curio: *Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4*

On Chapman's Homer, thumbtacked to the door. (ll. 97 f.)

³⁴ According to his son Dmitri; see Boyd, *Pale Fire*, 253.

exchanged his original theory—transcended it, really—for the idea that Hazel Shade, the poet’s dead daughter, has shaped both poem and commentary from a reality beyond death.³⁵ But let us cut the Gordian knot: The reality beyond death from the perspective of the novel is the reality of our own world, in which all of *Pale Fire*—foreword, poem, commentary, and index—was indeed written by a single author, Vladimir Nabokov. Given the leakage between worlds that we saw in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, it is clear that the absent rhyme of the missing line 1000 of “Pale Fire” was the crack between worlds through which John Shade was to enter a higher level of reality.

Nabokov wrote in *Speak, Memory*, “I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern on another.”³⁶ Allow me to superimpose my cutting of the Gordian knot of authorship within *Pale Fire* onto the snapping of the silver cord in Eccl 12:6 and, with it, to return to the end of Qohelet’s powerfully evocative poem about a death. With the perspective given us by the novels of Nabokov, we may wonder whether the death in Qohelet’s poem is not, in fact, his *own* death. Indeed, just when “the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the lifebreath returns to God Who bestowed it” (12:7), Qohelet’s voice in the book begins to peter out.³⁷ As he recites for the last time his signature phrase, “Utter *hevel!* All is *hevel!*” (12:8), the epilogist smoothly steps in and, without missing a beat, intersperses his own voice—“said Qohelet”—and picks up the narration as if he had been waiting in the wings throughout the book: “A further word: Because Qohelet was a sage, he continued to

³⁵ Boyd, *Pale Fire*, 208 and more generally 107-126.

³⁶ Chapter Six, last paragraph.

³⁷ Kinbote, too, says on the page before last of his commentary, “Yes, better stop. My notes and self are petering out.”

instruct the people” (12:9). If, indeed, the epilogist was the author of all of Ecclesiastes, then Qohelet “continued to instruct the people” by recounting his own death and transcending it in order to speak from a reality beyond the world about which he was so pessimistic.

The 14th-century commentator and philosopher Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides) understands Qohelet’s famous formula that “All is *hevel*” to refer not to the things he has observed “under the sun” but to (some of) the statements he is making about them.³⁸ This view inspires me to suggest that, occurring as it does in two of the three verses where the epilogist signals his own presence in the midst of Qohelet’s discourse,³⁹ we may be meant to understand the phrase both from Qohelet’s perspective and from the epilogist’s. The way of the world is indeed correctly observed by the former as being existentially absurd; but from the perspective of the latter it is all illusion, a pseudo-reality that he has created for his own purposes.

The epilogist can speak with confidence, if not about the God to whom Qohelet’s spirit returned, at least about the proper relationship between that God and the inhabitants of Qohelet’s world: “Revere God and observe His commandments! For this applies to all mankind” (12:13). Qohelet viewed all the *hevel* in the world under the sun—what we might call the lower-order reality of the world in which we ourselves live—and termed it “a twisted thing that cannot be made straight [*litqon*]” (1:15). Later, he names the

³⁸ See the introduction to his commentary on Qohelet (*Perushei ha-Megillot le-Rabbenu Levi ben Gershom*, ed. Yaakov Leib Levi [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2003], 15 f.), and the discussion in Julia Schwartzmann, “The Commentator as Editor: Gersonides’ Commentary on Ecclesiastes” (in Hebrew), *Jewish Studies* 41 (2002): 169-186, esp. 184.

³⁹ 1:2 and 12:8. On the third such verse, 7:27, see below.

culprit: “Consider God’s doing! Who can straighten [*letaqqen*] what He has twisted?” (7:13). But the epilogist informs us in 12:9 that, as Qohelet “continued to instruct the people,” he “straightened [*tiqqen*] many proverbs.”⁴⁰ It seems that the epilogist has broken through to a level of reality in which he can see the positive, and not just the negative, consequences of Qohelet’s insight that our world under the sun is one of *hevel*, of illusion. The frame narrator is not a later writer who has neutralized the dangerous teachings of Qohelet. He is, rather, a writer who has imagined himself into the persona of the sage “Qohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1) and then transcended that persona, casting it aside like a costume that no longer has an actor inside it, for one higher and wiser still. The epilogist is the butterfly that emerged from Qohelet’s cocoon.

Besides his appearance in the first verse of the book (and the third and fourth words of 1:2), the epilogist makes one other seemingly inexplicable appearance in the book, in the words “said Qohelet” of 7:27.⁴¹ Seow⁴² suggests that the reappearance of the third-person voice means this verse must indeed have had special significance for the editor. The phrase in which Qohelet describes what he has found (literally “one to one to

⁴⁰ This is my own translation. In *Pale Fire*, in the commentary to l. 810 of the poem, Kinbote finds the following lines in *The Letters of Franklin Lane*, a book lent him by the owner of the motel where he is staying: ““The crooked made straight. The Daedalian plan simplified by a look from above—smeared out as it were by the splotch of some master thumb that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line.” Franklin Lane was Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of the Interior, and this is in fact a genuine quotation, from a manuscript fragment written the day before Lane’s death. See *The Letters of Franklin K. Lane: Personal and Political*, ed. Anne Wintermute Lane and Louise Herrick Wall (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1922), 464.

⁴¹ On the grammatical and textual difficulties of this phrase, see the commentaries.

⁴² *Ecclesiastes*, 272.

find an accounting”⁴³) is usually understood to be an arithmetical metaphor, matching the ratio of “one in a thousand” that follows in v. 28. I confess I find it difficult to understand what this phrase means in straightforward Hebrew. Seen through a Nabokovian lens, I can read it—at least literarily—as the attempt of “one Qohelet” to find “another Qohelet.” All the while, unbeknownst to the “real” Qohelet, the “other” Qohelet (who, as the epilogist, is twice as real as the Qohelet who is the main voice of the book) is standing in the middle of the verse, visible to all but him.

Could two such different writers have had such similar ideas independently of each other? It is of course obvious that the author of Ecclesiastes did not read the novels of Vladimir Nabokov. Let me make clear as well that, despite the echoes in his work of themes from Ecclesiastes—Michael Wood speaks of “Nabokov’s own theology for skeptics”⁴⁴—there is no reason to think that Nabokov was influenced in any way by Ecclesiastes. Nabokov abandoned organized religion, painlessly, at an early age. As Boyd tells the story, “Vladimir told his father on the way back from a service, sometime before he was ten, that he found it boring. ‘You don’t have to come then.’”⁴⁵ It is hard to imagine that a man as well-read as Nabokov would not have read and absorbed the Bible as well, but I can find no evidence that this is so. Boyd notes that Nabokov does allude in *Bend Sinister* to a biblical verse when he writes, “the glory of God is to hide a thing, and the glory of man is to find it,” but traces the allusion not to Prov 25:2 but to its

⁴³ The NJPS translation is “item by item in my search for the reason of things.”

⁴⁴ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, 190. The word “skeptic” is not uncommon in discussions of Qohelet; see, e.g., Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 85 f.

⁴⁵ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 72.

use in an essay of Francis Bacon.⁴⁶ I am not, then, suggesting any direct connection between the two authors, but a literary technique developed independently by each of two thoughtful and creative minds. Michael Fox writes, “I consider parallels of this sort not just curios, but serious functional analogies, such as evolutionary biologists use.”⁴⁷

To continue Fox’s analogy, my claim here is that *Ecclesiastes* and *Pale Fire* are as alike—and as different—as a human’s thumb and a panda’s. The panda’s “thumb” bears no genetic relationship to the human thumb but evolved from the radial sesamoid bone, which is part of the wrist in humans.⁴⁸ The implication of such a “functional analogy,” in literature as in biology, is that similar problems call for similar solutions, and that these solutions develop from whatever materials are at hand. Nabokov, like the author of *Ecclesiastes*, found death an existential absurdity. To avoid this conclusion, I believe, both writers reached an understanding of our world—what the medieval philosophers would have called “the sub-lunar world,” the equivalent of Qohelet’s “under the sun”—as the imaginative creation of a being from a higher-order reality. Moreover, both writers expressed this idea artistically by allowing a higher-order reality to appear in their own works as the result of an apparent death in the lower-order reality of the world they had created with words.

⁴⁶ Boyd, *Pale Fire*, 9. The reference is to ch. 7 of *Bend Sinister*, where it is Shakespeare who is called “[t]he person who said (not for the first time) that the glory of God is to hide a thing, and the glory of man is to find it.” It seems that Nabokov is winking at the reader here with regard to Bacon’s alleged authorship of Shakespeare’s plays.

⁴⁷ Personal communication, 1 August 2003. My thanks to Professor Fox for his encouragement.

⁴⁸ See Stephen J. Gould, *The Panda’s Thumb: More Reflections on Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1980).

Despite the vast gap in time between the two writers, I believe the plausibility of the analogy is strengthened by the fact that reading through a Nabokovian lens adds meaning and artistic power to other biblical texts besides Ecclesiastes. I have found the last paragraph of *Invitation to a Beheading* particularly fruitful in this regard. When Nabokov writes of “the ripping mesh of the sky” as the world of Cincinnatus meets its apocalyptic end, I could not help but think of the prediction of Isa 34:4, “All the host of heaven shall molder. The heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll, and all their host shall wither like a leaf withering on the vine, or shriveled fruit on a fig tree.” The same paragraph, where Cincinnatus’ existential loneliness disappears with his transition from a world of illusion to a real world where he senses that he will find companionship, also very much enriches my reading of Psalm 1. The righteous man of this psalm is singular and alone all through vv. 1-3 as he avoids the company of the wicked, until they are blown away like chaff in v. 4, at which point the righteous begin to appear in the plural. A biblical writer could indeed have had a vision of the world comparable to that of a twentieth-century writer.

What I am suggesting is akin to, but slightly removed from, Jeffrey Tigay’s “empirical model,” where “we are dealing not ... with techniques borrowed by one culture from another, but with common-sense techniques which developed independently among the transmitters of literary traditions when they faced similar tasks.”⁴⁹ I could hardly claim that what I am describing is a “common-sense technique”; in the present case we are dealing rather with writers who solved similar *metaphysical* problems with comparable *creative* techniques. In addition, John Shade’s authorship of the commentary

⁴⁹ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 18.

to “Pale Fire” is itself a hypothesis, not a known fact available to serve as a model. Yet it matches the several explicit indications in Nabokov’s work that he took death to be in some sense a figment of the imagination.

Should death matter less to us if we conclude that, from our creator’s perspective, we are less than real? Nabokov understood that his was a literary achievement, not a metaphysical one: “I knew that the immortality I had conferred on the poor fellow was a slippery sophism, a play upon words. But ... it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style.”⁵⁰ Perhaps the author of *Ecclesiastes*, too, realized that his *sof davar* (12:13) was not “the final word” on the matter, merely “the end” of his book. Of Nabokov, we can say at least that he was not quite willing to confer upon his own father—who on March 28th, 1922, after subduing a man who had tried to kill Paul Milyukov, was shot dead by the assassin’s accomplice⁵¹—the same sort of “slippery” immortality that he had granted his creature Adam Krug in *Bend Sinister*. In his memoir *Speak, Memory* Nabokov writes of an earlier time, when his father would be tossed in the air by a happy group of peasants whose request he had granted:

<begin block quote>

From my place at table I would suddenly see through one of the west windows a marvelous case of levitation. There, for an instant, the figure of my father in his wind-rippled white summer suit would be displayed, gloriously sprawled in midair, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome, imperturbable features turned to the sky. Thrice, to the mighty

⁵⁰ *Bend Sinister*, last page.

⁵¹ Boyd, *Russian Years*, 190. The date on which John Shade dies, July 21st, was Nabokov’s father’s birthday (Boyd, *American Years*, 456).

heave-ho of his invisible tossers, he would fly up in this fashion, and the second time he would go higher than the first and then there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin.⁵²

<end block quote>

Nabokov's father reclines, "as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon," but the sentence brings us back down inexorably to earth, where we find the coffin of—whom? someone anonymous, with face concealed.

There is, of course, a similar coffin in Eccl 12:5, where a corpse—perhaps Qohelet's, perhaps that of "Everyman"—"sets out for his eternal abode, with mourners all around in the street."⁵³ In the context of the apocalyptic vision of this strange passage, these "mourners," no less than the crowd that attended the execution of Cincinnatus C. at the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*, are scurrying around a set that is

⁵² Boyd, *Pale Fire*, 237, calls the last sentence of this paragraph perhaps the finest sentence that Nabokov ever wrote.

⁵³ On this verse, see Carasik, "Qohelet's Twists and Turns," 208 with n. 54.

about to be struck by a stage manager who has no further use for it.⁵⁴ Paradoxically, it is the man in the coffin who has found a crack in the shell of mortality. When he slips through it, naturally, he is changed. We have seen how Nabokov's creature "John Shade"⁵⁵ moves on, at the end of his not-quite-finished poem, to write about his own death from the perspective of a new persona. Qohelet, too, will emerge from his coffin/chrysalis as someone quite different, someone whom the author of the book of Ecclesiastes might have called, anticipating Nabokov, "an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me."⁵⁶

Admittedly, the kinship of Qohelet and the epilogist is strictly conjectural. And, despite his assurance that "the lifebreath returns to God Who bestowed it" (Eccl 12:7), the lasting impression of Qohelet's words is not a hopeful one. The author of Ecclesiastes shows us only the coffin, not the luminous picture of kingly Qohelet in a white summer suit, levitating in the cobalt blue. But perhaps nonetheless, he meant his injunction to "remember your creator" (12:1)⁵⁷ and the return of the spirit to God to assure us that there is a reality beyond the one we recognize under the sun. If so, then we too are meant to hope that (like Cincinnatus C., like John Shade, like Qohelet) when

⁵⁴ Nabokov uses this metaphor in his writing about the real world of his own life as well as in his fiction: "Meanwhile the setting has changed. The berimed tree and the high snowdrift with its xanthic hole [made by a Great Dane named Turka] have been removed by a silent property man" (*Speak, Memory*, ch. 5, section 5).

⁵⁵ I would note here the likeness between "Shade" and *hevel*.

⁵⁶ See the end of n. 16.

⁵⁷ It has been suggested that one is also expected to read this phrase to say, "remember your grave" (see, e.g., Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351 f.), a *double entendre* that would be even more appropriate in light of our discussion in this paper.

“one” of us returns to the dust from which it came, “another” of us will get up and walk away, to a place where we can dimly begin to perceive other beings like ourselves—like us, because we were created in their image.