

Combinational Delight: The Poetics of Perception in *Pale Fire*

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"Let us admit what all idealists admit: that the nature of the world is hallucinatory... We (the undivided divinity that operates within us) have dreamed the world."¹⁾ So writes Jorge Luis Borges; one can see from this why he and Nabokov are often paired. Both are disciplined artists who believe in the supremacy of the imagination; both have created a body of work which seeks to replace the "hallucination" of "reality" with the true fictions of mind; and both, through exploring the intrinsic dichotomy between life and art, have achieved a measure of heroism through the success of this exploration. As Patricia Merivale has pointed out: "Artifice, the realest thing we can know, is the only thing that can make reality enduring."²⁾ *Artifex* is perhaps the most appropriate title for game-master Nabokov; and making reality enduring through the poetics of perception is certainly the central focus of the poem *Pale Fire*.

The poem's opening lines contain themes which are expanded and developed throughout; death, nature, youth, perception, art.

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I

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- 1) Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952* (New York:Simon and Schuster, 1965), pp.114-115.
 - 2) L.S. Dembo, ed., *Nabokov: The Man His Work*; article "The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges" (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p.223.

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

(Canto One, lines 1-12)

The style here sets the tone for the remainder of the poem; a lyrical meditation on mortality, on the sad ecstatic evanescence of life. The tone is child-like, an awed wonder before the beauty of the world. The words seem from a voice far away, prophetic and oracular. It is a voice which speaks directly and honestly to the reader; we feel John Shade is incapable of lying. The regular rhymed couplets create an incantatory rhythm which virtually hypnotizes us into the poet's perceptual universe. We are drawn into this universe by our immediate awareness that the poet is in command of his language and has something important to tell us.

The repetition of "I" further identifies the poem as lyric, a poem having its matrix in the author's own sensations, in his own consciousness. "And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate/Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate." The "false azure" of reality has destroyed a bird, but its harshness can be softened by the artist who take refuge in his imagination. The activity of art is precisely this "duplication," this search for analogies in the outside world to the objects existing in the poet's inner world. It is an aesthetic of perception, of the perceived object in the space. Finally it is an aesthetic of *placement*: each object possesses its inviolable *thisness* which, perceived by the poet, is then ordered according to his desire into relationship. There is no ultimate meaning to any "thing" until it has been *seen*. Once seen, by a mysterious kind of inexorable gravity it will be pulled into the orbit of the poet's imagination. It will have meaning if it is seen and loved by *him*.

One is reminded in this context of William Blake's great saying: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, things would appear to men as they are: Infinite." There is a real sense of absolute clarity in these opening lines. When the world is seen clearly, it loses its temporal dimension. The dark glass, the snow, the lawn, chair, bed, apple, plate, lamp and finally "myself:" all seem to exist outside of time, to be caught precisely at their non-moments of true being. They are "there" the way Van Gogh's pipe is captured on his chair. Here is the subject, there is the object: yet each possesses its own integrity and independence as being or object. The poetics of perception is revelatory, seeing things as they are.

In a passage towards the end of Canto One occurs another instance of revelation, of sudden understanding. Here John Shade recounts an experience he had at age eleven while lying on the floor:

There was a sudden sunburst in my head.
 And then black night. That blackness was sublime.
 I felt distributed through space and time:
 One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand
 Under the pebbles of a panting strand,
 One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,
 In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.

(Canto One, lines 146-152)

Again we have the naming of distinct beings-in-the-world which we had at the beginning of the Canto: foot, mountain-top, hand, pebbles, strand, ear, eye, caves, blood, stars, brain. But now the poet, through a kind of mystic illumination, has experienced something far more deeply interfused. He has become *identified* with the universe. There is still the imagistic exactitude of the opening of the Canto, yet now Snade feels "Distributed through space and time." He is everywhere at once and at once everything. What is perhaps strange is that while his objectivity is blown apart into oneness of feeling, the reverence for the sanctity of each thing's privateness remains. He is at once a mystic and a "realist," a Dionysian and an Apollonian, a poet and a painter.

As Ernst Cassirer has remarked, "All mysticism is directed toward a world beyond language, a world of silence."³ It is certainly this world which Shade has experienced, and furthermore tries to re-create through the magic of poetry. Yet he tells us that his "God died young. Theolatriy I found/Degrading, and its premises, unsound" (Lines 99-100). The fact, of course, is that Shade wants to be God; God of the universe of his writing. It is perhaps no accident that Shade/Nabokov has unconsciously evoked James Joyce: "I stand before the window and I pare/ My fingernails" (Canto Two, lines 184-5). Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the proud (arrogant is perhaps better) writer who "remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."⁴ Nabokov himself has called this an "unpleasant coincidence,"⁵ this usage of Joyce's image, yet what is important is the insight it gives us concerning Shade's/Nabokov's vision of the artist and his function. His function is to create worlds, to have the poise and intense coolness of a Creator. It is understandable, then, why Shade's God "died young." He is more interested in absorbing the cosmos into himself and sending it out again as life-giving art than in swallowing pre-digested theological concepts.

Shade is not ultimately concerned with ideas or concepts at all. Rather, he is interested, like his creator, in "aesthetic bliss." The perception of beauty has nothing to do with ideology, with dogma, with the dialectics of philosophical investigation. In a very real sense, ideas befuddle the truth. Ideas mediate unnecessarily between an artist and his experience. It is, we have seen, in perception itself that Shade finds truth; not in ideas about perception. Yet there is a tension between the purely aesthetic surface of *Pale Fire* and the fact that it

3) Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer, (New York: Dover, 1953), p.74.

4) James Joyce, *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p.215.

5) *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*, interview with Alfred Appel, Jr. p.26.

is obviously trying to communicate something. The poem seems constantly to be pointing towards some profound epiphany, towards the ineffable. It is not until the end of Canto Three that the tension is released and we are told (after a long disquisition on Death and its implications) what the real point is:

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 topsy-turvy 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.

(Canto Three, lines 806~815)

It is in playing the "game of worlds/words" that Shade stills the sound of death which rings in his ears. The metaphor drawn from music, "the contrapuntal theme," echoes the polyphonic "distribution" of Shade's body through the universe described in Canto Two. Counterpoint is several independent musical lines flowing simultaneously, and Shade believes life a fugue, a "web of sense." "Plexed artistry" is both the complexity of great art and its braidedness, its wovenness.

The "game" is played differently by different people. Again Shade is saying that there is no single world; there are only different ways of being-in-the-world. There is no abstract Platonic divine "One;" there are only individual strategies, individual intellectual predispositions to find the "correlated pattern." It is the shape of reality, its "texture" that is celebrated; not "text" or what is "given." As Donald Morton has remarked: "Life is 'game of worlds' in which there is a multitude of created realities, some (like butterflies and sunsets) the direct products of nature, some (like poems and novels) indirect products of nature operating through the human mind. Each thing is a world unto itself, with its own pattern, color, consistency, texture."⁶¹

6) Donald E. Morton, *Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Frederic Ungar, 1974), p. 123.

It is easy to forget, however, among the seriousness of all these aesthetic theories, that the emphasis throughout is on "play." There is pleasure in the game; there is delight: "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" (Canto Four, lines 971-977). Because Shade has accepted his inner world as the true reality, he has achieved a great measure of liberation. Reality does not exist until it is recreated through the play of art. Reality is amorphous, meaningless, until it is filtered through the artistic consciousness and shaped into form. "Combinational delight" is the reward won by the poet Shade as he is engaged in the act of "poiesis," of *making*. In the order created within the poet's "private universe" is reflected a sense of divine order existing beyond in the universe as a whole. By making his art patterned, ordered, the poet creates a correspondence between his being and the cosmos. For Shade, the final validation of his existence comes from this continual joyful hard work of seeking correspondences; of perceiving, of combining, of writing.

Finally, for Shade, art is the highest metaphysical activity of man. Through the poetics of perception, through *seeing*, he becomes the lord of his land. If reality is a labyrinth, then the imagination is infinite free space. It is here that Shade (and Nabokov, too) would have us live our lives. It is here that delight is available to us, if we would but learn how to see. It is in the imagination that we may attain the weightlessness of joy. And if *Pale Fire* teaches us anything, it teaches us that to be weightless is to float—is to play. And as all games have their serious side, the game of worlds/words might bring us the deepest joy of all: the joy of self-knowledge.