

KINBOTE'S HERO'S JOURNEY: *Transcendent Path or Dead End?*

Nabokov's Parody of Campbell's "Monomyth" in PALE FIRE

If the theme of *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's most recondite and elaborately composed novel, could be summed up in a word, I would suggest "transcendence". The transcendent nature of art, of course has always been his goal, and achievement. Through the abundant use of parody in *Pale Fire*, he proves that he can transcend literary traditions and clichés. The main characters of *Pale Fire* are on transcendental paths. As his poem details, John Shade embarks on a quest for knowledge of life after death following his daughter's suicide. The assassin Jakob Gradus (that transcendental tramp [106]) is on a journey parallel to the poet - the "inexorable advance of fate". What tends to be overlooked is that Charles Kinbote, aka King Charles Xavier II of Zembla, is likewise on a parallel journey of transcendence, the path of ego-transcendence that the Jungian mythologist Joseph Campbell called the "Hero's Journey." This paper will explore how Kinbote's psycho-spiritual trajectory follows in parodic footsteps the well-worn path of the mythical "Hero's Journey."

The notion of "Hero's Journey" was popularized by Joseph Campbell's seminal 1949 work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell based his work on the mythic theories of the psychologist Carl Jung, the path of "individuation". The "Hero's Journey", or universal "monomyth" (a portmanteau term from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*), is ultimately a quest for transcendence and transformation. The same could be said of *Pale*

Fire as the three main characters, Kinbote, Shade and Gradus journey through landscapes, physical, psychological, and spiritual in search of resolution and meaning.

Had Nabokov read Campbell? Campbell published *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (with Henry Morton Robinson) two decades before *Pale Fire*. Given Nabokov's Joycean scholarship and his prodigious reading on a wide range of subjects, including looks askance at *bête noirs*, Nabokov was likely familiar with Campbell. Nabokov was a fan of Joyce's *Ulysses* (the *Hero's Journey* par excellence), but was not fond of what he called "*Punnegans Wake*." Of *Ulysses* Nabokov says in his *Lectures on Literature*, "The psychoanalytical interpretation I, of course, dismiss completely and absolutely, since I do not belong to the Freudian denomination with its borrowed myths, shabby umbrellas, and dark backstairs."¹ Although Campbell lectured on the mythological allusions of *Ulysses*, Nabokov made sure that his students knew that Joyce retracted his original title headings that referenced Homer's *Odyssey*. Clearly intimating Campbell's Joycean scholarship he told his students, "There is nothing more tedious than a protracted and sustained allegory based on a well-worn myth; and after the work had appeared in parts, Joyce promptly deleted the pseudo-Homeric titles of his chapters when he saw what scholarly and pseudoscholarly bores were up to."²

The fact that Nabokov never wrote or said anything directly about Joseph Campbell and was as good as mute as to Jung should not preclude their use as parody; it may in fact increase Nabokov's intended "*deceit to the point of diabolism*."³ Though it is hard to imagine, Nabokov may well have not known of Campbell's study of *The Hero*,

¹ LoL 350

² *ibid.* 288

³ SM 289

still there are striking parallels between the two texts, and the one illuminates the other. My study, therefore, will attempt to bring to bear components of “The Hero’s journey” on the fictive adventures of the exiled and self-proclaimed King. Whether or not there’s a conscious utilization of Campbell’s mythopoetic structure, the structure of *Pale Fire* reflects and refracts on the ideas of this adept of Carl Jung.

Despite Nabokov’s antipathy for the notion, and for myths, symbols and psychoanalysis, the universality of the *Hero’s Journey* would offer the author a convenient, ready-made plot. But this is not why Nabokov takes on the theme. *Pale Fire*’s pervasive theme of “stealing” from the source (like the Moon from the Sun) included writers both admired and abhorred. Nabokov appropriates the *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (and the underlying theories of Carl Jung and the works of Joyce) as parody, flying in the face of his public persona, while at the same time demonstrating his deft eclipsing of his source. To quote from Nabokov’s *Ada*, “Old storytelling devices,” said Van “may be parodied only by very great and inhuman artists...”⁴

Pale Fire, in fact has allusions to the great monomyths of the past. The Slavic tales of the North and the Scottish tales of James Macpherson, as pointed out by Priscilla Meyer’s *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden*⁵, are a major theme of the novel. I would add even Carroll’s *Alice* stories as being in this heroic vein. I suggest these tales support Nabokov’s intended use of Campbell’s “Hero”.

The term “Hero’s Journey” did not actually accrue to Campbell’s work until he first used it in a lecture in 1967, so Nabokov would not have been familiar with it as a common phrase. However, the notion of an individual’s life as a journey had been around

⁴ *Ada* 246

⁵ Meyer, Priscilla, 41

much longer as this quote from Nabokov's own *The Gift* (1938) indicates: "The unfortunate image of a 'road,' to which the human mind has become accustomed (life as a kind of journey) is a stupid illusion: we are not going anywhere, we are sitting at home."⁶

In actuality, as in Nabokov's above quote, the *monomyth* involves the hero finally becoming aware that he has always had what he sought and the return "home" is where he has always been. Nabokov is suggestive but never didactic about mystical, metaphysical or moral interpretations of his work, but the mystical conception of his quote above puts it squarely in line with the implications of the *Hero's Journey*. Exile, overcoming obstacles, returning transformed is the basic arc of the *Hero's Journey*. This is why John Shade's poem returns at the end to the beginning. Or does it? The poem remains unfinished and the end of the novel (as well as the end of the characters) purposefully ambiguous. To state the conundrum: If John Shade quits writing his poem at 999 lines, in the full anticipation of waking the next morning, but then is almost immediately "like the waxwing slain" (the supposed 1000th line), is the poem complete, or not? In the logic of the plot level the poem is incomplete; from the higher extra-textual level, the poem returns to the beginning. John Shade's poem is a quest for transcendence, and therefore is akin to a *Hero's Journey*. Likewise, we will see how the completion of Kinbote's parallel path of the *Hero's Journey* in the end remains ambiguous.

In the following pages I show how Kinbote's tales of his travels and travails from Zembla to Arcady map directly to the stages put forth in Campbell's book. I track the

⁶ TG 59

journey of the recalcitrant hero Charles Kinbote (aka King Charles Xavier II of Zembla) along his dubious way to what Carl Jung has termed the ego's path to *Individuation* (Oneness, transcendence). As we reach the end, some light will be cast on the parallel ambiguities of poem and commentary, and on the intimation of fictional autobiography.

Chapter headings from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, outlining the stages of the journey, are listed below. This is followed by brief quotes from each chapters' opening paragraphs in bold type, with descriptions below of Kinbote's passage through each stage.

DEPARTURE

- 1.) The Call to Adventure
- 2.) Refusal of the Call
- 3.) Supernatural Aid
- 4.) The Crossing of the First Threshold
- 5.) The Belly of the Whale

INITIATION

- 6.) The Road of Trials
- 7.) The Meeting with the Goddess
- 8.) Woman as the Temptress

9.) Atonement with the Father

10.) Apotheosis

11.) The Ultimate Boon

RETURN

12.) Refusal of the Return

13.) The Magic Flight

14.) Rescue from Without

15.) The Crossing of the Return Threshold

16.) Master of the Two Worlds

DEPARTURE:

1.) The Call to Adventure:

"...(the call of adventure is to) a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountain top, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, super human deeds, and impossible delight. The hero can go forth of his own volition to accomplish the adventure, as did Theseus when he arrived in his father's city, Athens, and heard the horrible history of the Minotaur; or he may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent as was Odysseus..."

“The call to adventure is an event that precipitates the awakening of the *Self*. Often this is the coming of adolescence. A “herald,” usually a magical being, initiates and aids the adventure who, *“if one could follow, the way would be opened through the walls of day into the dark, where the jewels glow.”* (53)

Nabokov signals his intent to use the *Hero's Journey* trope by having Kinbote's tutor “Mr. Campbell” initiate it. Young Prince Charles tries to find an old toy and Mr. Campbell “advised looking for it in an old lumber room.” The lumber room is a place for storage and contains an old black trunk, i.e. it symbolizes memory and psychological “baggage”. The lumber room also contains a key to a closet door, the threshold of adventure. The closet is filled with old clothes and cast-off toys - emblematic of the childhood Charles is about to go beyond. The Prince and his friend Oleg enter the tunnel as Mr. Campbell begins a game of chess with M. Beauchamp – a game that will end in a draw. The tunnel exploration is clearly the awakening of adolescent sexuality. The game is a draw because this initial adventure is cut short. At the end of the tunnel the boys turn away in fear at strange moans and noises from a man and woman on the other side of the exit door. The Oedipal shock of adult heterosexuality indicates the boys are not ready for the journey.

2.) Refusal of the Call:

“Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or 'culture,' the subject loses the power of significant affirmative

action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless—even though, like King Minos, he may through titanic effort succeed in building an empire or renown. Whatever house he builds, it will be a house of death: a labyrinth of cyclopean walls to hide from him his minotaur. All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration." (54)

“Hero” is really another word for “ego”; essentially all are called. Whether or not a hero ultimately accepts or rejects the call, all at first go through this stage of refusal. What we will notice from here on is that Kinbote is one of those “heroes” who continually evince negative responses to the quest, hence his increasing disintegration. An ego thinks of itself as “king”, i.e. the ruler of the psyche and most important person around. Now a dethroned king, Charles has not learned much from his adolescent call to adventure except to sensually and egotistically indulge himself. He has not faced his dark shadow side (minotaur). The Zemblan revolution, psychologically, is a revolution in consciousness - an explosion that unleashes what Carl Jung called the “shadow” aspects of the psyche. King Charles refuses to abdicate. He is no longer an adolescent when the revolution erupts, but his mooney and haughty attitude is much like a moody teen-ager. Caught and imprisoned, alone in his own tower, he attempts to send messages to the outside with a flashing mirror, rather like a superior genius ego, isolated and alienated, might write poetry to connect with the world.

Kinbote is actually about forty at this time. Although not expressly noted in Campbell, some statements from Carl Jung offer a reason for Kinbote’s second journey

into the tunnel: “Statistics show a rise in the frequency of mental depressions in men about forty.”⁷ And: “As formerly the neurotic could not escape from childhood, so now he cannot part with his youth...Just as the childish person shrinks back from the unknown in the world and in human existence, so the grown man shrinks back from the second half of life.”

3.) Supernatural Aid

"For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass. What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny." (63)

As we've seen, Kinbote has refused the call, so supernatural aid does appear right away. The King's loyalist friend, Odon, is the protective figure who shows up to aid in his escape. (Other protective figures, such as the Oleg's ghost, the old mountain couple, Sylvia, and Balthasar the gardener, he will meet at a later stage – Campbell states that there is fluidity in these stages.) When Charles tells his friend about the tunnel, Odon wonders about “that new avenue of escape, if it was that and not a dead end” (100). Here we might pause and also wonder about the subheading question of this paper: will this journey be a triumph or a nullity?

⁷ Jung, C.G. 395

4.) The Crossing of the First Threshold

"With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the 'threshold guardian' at the entrance to the zone of magnified power. Such custodians bound the world in four directions — also up and down — standing for the limits of the hero's present sphere, or life horizon. Beyond them is darkness, the unknown and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the members of the tribe... The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades." (71)

The King is guarded everywhere by Shadow thugs, but he slips out when his inept guard goes to play cards. The tunnel Kinbote is about to enter is a womb-like structure. He is recapitulating his past in "returning to the womb", and also his previous sexual awakening and call to adventure.

Curiously, Kinbote does not heed his loyal protector's advice to wait until he, Odon, has checked out the tunnel first and the King goes alone. At the threshold of the tunnel Kinbote finds a mysterious talisman to take with him. We know from its later appearance in the Cedarn "cave" that he has taken a copy of his Uncle Conmal's *Timon*.

However, Kinbote says that when he entered the closet it was “empty now, save for the tiny volume of Timon Afinsken still lying in one corner...” (103) How could the book “drop with a small thud” as he was removing the second shelf if it were already lying in a corner? Going back to the first tunnel adventure, it ends with Oleg saying “*Ouf*” as the last shelf had been replaced (99). I suggest that the mysterious talisman, hidden there thanks to Oleg, was actually the “sixty-five-carat blue diamond” from the “*situla*,” the toy pail – a family jewel and a happy memento of childhood (it shows up later as a pebble in his shoe (112). Nabokov’s reminiscences of his son’s seaside pebble collecting demonstrate how precious these treasures are (SM 308). Kinbote notes that his own father was a “conchologist,” that is, he remembers his father appreciating the shells and stones brought to him by the young prince. (This appears to be a motif in *Pale Fire*’s progenitor, *Ultima Thule* as well with Sinusov sifting pebbles on the beach.) The blue diamond would represent “Blue Zembla”; “*situla*” is actually a term alchemists used for their alembic, so there is a transformational magic connotation to the pail, which is why I believe the diamond rather than the book is the important talisman. It points to memory and innocence, in line with the true treasure of *individuation* and the Hero’s Journey - the *Self*. It also suggests that Oleg, his spiritual companion on the first adventure, was responsible for the jewel being wedged in shelf.

5.) Belly of the Whale

"The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero,

instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died...This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation. Instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again. The disappearance corresponds to the passing of a worshipper into a temple—where he is to be quickened by the recollection of who and what he is, namely dust and ashes unless immortal. The temple interior, the belly of the whale, and the heavenly land beyond, above, and below the confines of the world, are one and the same...The devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis. Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise. Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both denoting in picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act." (84-85)

The tunnel, of course, *is* literally a passage. More than a return to the womb, it is an inward turn into the psyche, a confrontation with unconscious images. Fortunately for King Charles, he is guided by another, supernatural, protector - the dim light of his torch "his dearest companion, Oleg's ghost, the phantom of freedom" (103). The tunnel is a descent into the bowels of the earth – like the belly of the whale. The dark, chthonic place indicates the unconscious. Underground, the tunnel is full of dark and creepy things, all of which are alchemical images of the *nigredo* stage of dissolution, e.g. the headless statue of Mercury (Mercury was a psychopomp and the major figure of alchemy. The *nigredo* was also called the "head of Mercurius," or the *caput corvi* "raven's head"),

the krater (the Greek alembic), the opalescent ditch water (the colorful part of the *nigredo* called the “peacock’s tail”). The process of alchemy—dissolution into darkness, the combining opposite elements into a whole (the “stone”)—is comparable to the path to wholeness of the *Hero’s Journey*.⁸ Carl Jung wrote extensively on the process of alchemy as correlated to his theory of the psychological and spiritual path of “individuation”, which Campbell based his *Hero’s Journey* work on.

INITIATION

6.) The Road of Trials:

"Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favorite phase of the myth-adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region." (89)

⁸ Allusions to alchemy (a particular interest and study of Carl Jung) are found throughout *Pale Fire* (cf. Abraham, Lindy)

“And so it happens that if anyone – in whatever society – undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his on spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures...In the vocabulary of the mystics, this is the second stage of the Way, that of the ‘purification of the self,’ when the senses are ‘cleansed and humbled,’ and the energies and interests ‘concentrated upon transcendental things.’” (92)

The young prince’s first trek through the tunnel is a sexual awakening where he recapitulates the Oedipal trauma. This second time, after passing through the symbolic figures in the tunnel, Kinbote emerges into the journey’s next stage and, like Shakespeare, discovers that “all the world’s a stage” as he tussles with the folds of a theater curtain like a nervous actor. Odon, his loyal pal, an actor, master of disguises and role-playing, is there to continue aiding him on his journey. Kinbote’s developmental stage still seems adolescent: his self-conscious need to disguise himself is rather like the need to hide oneself behind a persona. Like insecure teen-agers in a group, his peers, his red-capped loyalists, are impersonating him impersonating himself. He meets the rest of his trials (the hero’s usual mountains, forests, and sea journey) in disguise.

Along the way, climbing the mountain, he meets the “old fairy-tale couple,” who take him in and help him on his journey. The “fairy-tale” is actually from a myth, “*Baucis and Philomon*”. Baucis and Philomon were a wise and kindly old couple who took in the disguised gods Jupiter and Mercury, when all the other villagers refused. The gods destroyed the narrow-minded village while rewarding open-hearted Baucis and Philomon

by turning their cottage into a temple with the couple as guardians. When the old couple died they were turned into the temple's guardian trees, the oak and the linden. In Jungian psychology the *Wise Old Man* and the *Wise Old Woman* are archetypes of the higher consciousness in the psyche; Jung claimed that trees are symbols of the individuated soul.

It should be noted here that Carl Jung gave to his personal *Wise Old Man* the name "*Philomon*". The *Wise Old Man* frequently appears in the company of a young girl who is the positive guiding *anima* archetype. Kinbote, however, shuns the aid of the couples alluring young daughter, Garh.

7.) The Meeting with the Goddess:

"The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart. (100)

"She encompasses the encompassing, nourishes the nourishing, and is the life of everything that lives...She is also the death of everything that dies. The whole round of existence is accomplished within her sway, from birth, through adolescence, maturity and senescence, to the grave. She is the womb and the tomb." (105)

Although he doesn't use the term, Campbell's description of the goddess is what Jung called the *anima*, the unconscious image of woman within a man's psyche. Derived from images of the "good" and "bad" mother, she appears as either dangerously alluring or frighteningly repulsive, the nymph or the hag. Jung claimed that, as in the "*sacred marriage*" of opposites in alchemy, the task of *individuation* involves confronting and uniting with this most potent force of the *anima*. At that point the goddess/anima turns from either frustrating object of desire or frightful foe and becomes a helpful guide.

Garh is the first anima/goddess Kinbote encounters; she is of the alluring nymph type. Nabokov indicates that he is aware that she is an *anima* figure – he writes, "A sleepy and sullen expression blurred whatever appeal her snub-nosed round face might have had..." (110). Jung describes the alluring *anima* as appearing "blurry," "vague," or "indistinct".

The next goddess to appear is the much-married vague Sylvia O'Donnell. Nabokov describes her in *anima* terms: "She had in common with Fleur de Fyler (alluring *anima* par excellence) a vagueness of manner, a languor of demeanor" (189). Like Garh, she is a positive *anima* figure and offers help, but it is help to keep the fugitive fleeing. Her aid has academic and political associations, setting up Kinbote in New Wye. It is not a confrontation or union with the *anima* that is the necessary requisite of *individuation*.

8) Woman as Temptress:

"The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master. And

the testings of the hero, which were preliminary to his ultimate experience and deed, were symbolical of those crises of realization by means of which his consciousness came to be amplified and made capable of enduring the full possession of the mother-destroyer, his inevitable bride.” (111)

“The crux of the curious difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves, or within our friends, the fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell. Rather, we tend to perfume, whitewash, and reinterpret; meanwhile imagining that all the flies in the ointment, all the hairs in the soup, are the faults of some unpleasant someone else. But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul. The seeker of the life beyond life must press beyond (the woman), surpass the temptations of her call, and soar to the immaculate ether beyond.” (112)

The two most important *anima* figures of Kinbote’s journey, Disa and Sybil, are actually the same “goddess”—maiden and crone, nymph and witch. Nabokov, speaking through Kinbote writes of their likeness: “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.” (159) This is the most direct author-to-reader clue in *Pale Fire* and it could hardly be clearer. This is, in fact, the crux of the issue in *Pale Fire*—the role of the *anima*, the meeting with the goddess. If one does not recognize the importance of the union of opposites in the “*mystical marriage*” as in alchemy, a key to wholeness, the novel itself will never come together as a whole.

Kinbote has failed to consummate his marriage to Disa; she is his neglected and abandoned soul (*anima*). Kinbote realizes this but only in his dreams (nightmares - Jung claimed that dreams were “compensatory” to conscious attitudes). Although Kinbote becomes increasingly world-sick, he does not arrive at this ascetic stage of the journey through successfully dealing with his *anima*. His revulsion from women has been his problem all along and he has resisted the journey all along. Now in New Wye, he has to deal with the antagonistic *mother-witch-goddess-queen-anima*, Sybil. The monomyth makes it clear that the goddess/*anima* is crucially significant to the story. In *Pale Fire* this information can only be ascertained on the extra-textual mythic level. On the plot level Sybil seems more a tangential than central character.

9) Atonement with the Father/Abyss

"Atonement consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster—the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself, and that is what is difficult. One must have a faith that the father is merciful, and then a reliance on that mercy. Therewith, the center of belief is transferred outside of the

bedeviling god's tight scaly ring, and the dreadful ogres dissolve. It is in this ordeal that the hero may derive hope and assurance from the helpful female figure, by whose magic (pollen charms or power of intercession) he is protected through all the frightening experiences of the father's ego-shattering initiation. For if it is impossible to trust the terrifying father-face, then one's faith must be centered elsewhere (Spider Woman, Blessed Mother); and with that reliance for support, one endures the crisis—only to find, in the end, that the father and mother reflect each other, and are in essence the same. The problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being. The hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source. He beholds the face of the father, understands—and the two are atoned." (120)

The super-ego is a Freudian term; Jung would say "*persona*". The *persona*, the idealized self-image, tries to appropriate the perfection of God. Kinbote idolizes John Shade – so much that he wants to appropriate his glory (like the moon from the sun) and obtain the treasured cards of the manuscript for his own magnification. In Kinbote's mind, Shade is akin to God – Jesus Christ, to be exact. In his commentary to line 802 (197), Kinbote clearly conflates them: "I always feel in my bones that there is a chance yet of my not being excluded from Heaven, and that salvation may be granted to me despite the frozen mud and horror in my heart. As I was ascending with bowed head the gravel path to my poor rented house, I heard with absolute distinction, as if he were

standing at my shoulder and speaking loudly, as to a slightly deaf man, Shade's voice say: 'Come tonight, Charlie.'"

Note his desire for salvation and his contrite "ascending" a path (journey) towards his "poor rented house." The end of a hero's path is often described as "home." Kinbote is not quite on the right path yet. He still believes that a glorified ego can "save" him. If we see the two men, Kinbote and Shade, as aspects of the same individual, then we can say that the *Ego* wants to actually *be* the *persona* he hopes to project. Jung claimed that the *persona* and the *shadow* were usually the first archetypes for the individuating person to confront. The *shadow* is lethal to the *persona*, precisely because it destroys the idealized self-image; this is why Kinbote fears Gradus but Gradus kills Shade. Jung claimed that once these two archetypes are successfully dealt with, then the real work can begin with the *anima* (i.e., Sybil).

Kinbote is still not responding to the call of the journey, but the myth moves inexorably onward. The dragons of *God* (Shade/*persona*) and *Sin* (Gradus/*shadow*) have been slain. Since Kinbote is in resistance, he needs help from the goddess (Sybil)- that is, he needs Sybil's help to get the boon, the manuscript. It is an uneasy alliance, as our hero has not yet dealt properly with his primary adversary, the *anima* (Sybil).

10) Apotheosis:

"Those who know, not only that the Everlasting lies in them, but that what they, and all things, really are is the Everlasting, dwell in the groves of the wish fulfilling

trees, drink the brew of immortality, and listen everywhere to the unheard music of eternal concord." (154)

To achieve apotheosis is to be born again, in Christian terms. Campbell writes quite a bit in this section about the Christ image and the Hindu Bodhisattva, the incarnation of God-in-man achieved at this stage. Kinbote, however, is still in egoic pursuit of what he believes will give him his everlasting peace, bliss and true identity. With dead Shade on the ground, Kinbote wastes no time scooping up the manuscript – the boon he has received with the help of Sybil. There *is* an avatar present at this point, though – Balthasar, the gardener. The gardener is described in Christ-like terms: He is “awfully nice and pathetic” (222) (the original meaning of ‘pathos’ is ‘suffering’). The gardener is earthy, of the earth, chthonic. He is not dark, though, except for his skin. He seems a very positive character, caring for nature and people in need, and he has intellectual and spiritual aspirations, despite his lowly birth. He “lays a path” for Kinbote at Goldsworth’s house. He tends trees, Jungian symbols for the individuating self. In alchemy, the protean figure of Mercurius was often shown as a dark chthonic Christ, a *salvator mundi* who has all the saving graces of Nature and natural morality. Kinbote calls him, “Our savior.” (224)

“Balthasar” was the name of the Moorish magus of the nativity. Now he is present at Kinbote’s “rebirth.” He acknowledges Kinbote as a hero: “My good gardener, when enthusiastically relating to everybody...his exaggerated account of my ‘heroism’...” (227).

11) The Ultimate Boon:

"The gods and goddesses then are to be understood as embodiments and custodians of the elixir of Imperishable Being but not themselves the Ultimate in its primary state. What the hero seeks through his intercourse with them is therefore not finally themselves, but their grace, i.e., the power of their sustaining substance. This miraculous energy-substance and this alone is the Imperishable; the names and forms of the deities who everywhere embody, dispense, and represent it come and go...Its guardians dare release it only to the duly proven.

But the gods may be over severe, overcautious, in which case the hero must trick them of their treasure." (168)

Sybil is the "goddess" whose grace grants Kinbote the ultimate boon - the manuscript - for she is John Shade's muse. Since she is Kinbote's severest antagonist, our hapless hero has to trick her out of it, with perhaps some "peculiar kind of red ink". (F 12). (Alchemists, by the way, invented a red-hued 'disappearing ink.') After Shade's death, Kinbote has possession of his precious boon. Because he has not yet resolved his *anima* issues, having made only a shifty uneasy alliance with Sybil, he has not yet "proven" himself worthy of the boon, nor can he be saved by its grace. He is still desperately relying only on himself. Rather than knowing that his real protection, the real Imperishable Being, is within, he literally applies the manuscript to his exterior. With the cards sewn up in his coat, like an insecure ego covering up with a false front, "[he]

circulated, plated with poetry, armored with rhymes, stout with another man's song, stiff with cardboard, bullet-proof at last" (229). Like an insecure, over-protective, false self, Kinbote is a bit stiff, too.

RETURN

12) Refusal of the Return:

"When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet or the ten thousand worlds.

But the responsibility has been frequently refused. Even Gautama Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated, and saints are reported to have died while in the supernal ecstasy. Numerous indeed are the heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being." (179)

Kinbote at this point is in possession of the manuscript and he wants to bring it to the world, but he is still afraid of the world and still wants to make *Pale Fire* his *personal*

story and glory. In a sense he is not willing to release this boon to the world until he has finished his commentary, making it his. Although he exults in his treasure, he has not arrived yet on the shores of the “blessed isle.” The “supernal ecstasy” of possession of the coveted manuscript is not the same as true transformation and transcendence.

13) The Magic Flight:

"If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. On the other hand, if the trophy has been attained against the opposition of its guardian, or if the hero's wish to return to the world has been resented by the gods or demons, then the last stage of the mythological round becomes a lively, often comical, pursuit. This flight may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion." (182)

"Dr. Jung has very wisely observed: '... But if... he leaves home and family, lives too long alone, and gazes too deeply into the dark mirror, then the awful event of the meeting may befall him.'" (188)

Kinbote, the reluctant hero embarks with his ill-gotten boon on a comical flight from his pursuers: Professors H. and C., Sybil, reporters and, likely, the cops. He holes up in his “cave” in Cedarn, alone with his precious manuscript. Gazing “too deeply into the

dark mirror,” he is still determined to make the poem (i.e. a transcendent work of Art) *his* story. The cave is symbolic of his retreat into himself.

The “awful event” that Dr. Jung warns of is meeting the god-head face to face when not fully prepared - an event that can lead to psychosis rather than enlightenment. Kinbote is in hiding from more than characters of New Wye - he is in hiding from ultimate truth and suffering from solipsistic disintegration.

14) Rescue from Without:

"The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him. For the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favor of the self-scattering of the wakened state. 'Who having cast off the world,' we read, 'would desire to return again? He would be only there.' And yet, in so far as one is alive, life will call. Society is jealous of those who remain away from it, and will come knocking at the door. If the hero. . . is unwilling, the disturber suffers an ugly shock; but on the other hand, if the summoned one is only delayed—sealed in by the beatitude of the state of perfect being (which resembles death)—an apparent rescue is effected, and the adventurer returns."
(192)

"...in the final stages of the adventure the continued operation of the supernatural assisting force... has been attending the elect through the whole course of his ordeal. His consciousness having succumbed, the unconscious nevertheless

supplies its own balances, and he is born back into the world from which he came. Instead of holding and saving his ego, as in the pattern of the magic flight, he loses it, and yet, through grace, it is returned.” (201)

This is one stage of the journey that does not appear to have an exact parallel in *Pale Fire*. There is no rescue from without, although perhaps this looks back to the saving grace of the gardener/Christ figure. Kinbote clearly is hiding out from those who would come and get him, but he is still in resistance, still in flight. The unconscious process however is continuing within him; as he “unwinds” his story into the manuscript (psychologically, confronts his issues) he simultaneously unravels his ego. Kinbote is deteriorating, desperately holding to his ego, even perhaps dying. Mythically, it is an ego-death as he begins to succumb.

15) The Crossing of the Return Threshold:

“This brings us to the final crisis of the round, to which the whole miraculous excursion has been but a prelude- that namely, of the paradoxical, supremely difficult threshold-crossing of the hero’s return from the mystic realm into the land of common day. Whether rescued from without, driven from within or gently carried along by the guiding divinities, he has yet to re-enter with his boon the long-forgotten atmosphere where men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete. He has yet to confront society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir, and take the return blow

of reasonable queries, hard resentment and good people at a loss to comprehend.”
(201)

“The two words, the divine and the human, can be pictured only as distinct from each other – different as life and death, as day and night. The hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness; there he accomplishes his adventure, or against simply lost to us, imprisoned, or in anger; and his return is described as a coming back out of that yonder zone. Nevertheless – and here is a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol – the two kingdoms are actually one.” (201)

This is the point at which Kinbote turns to his ““Well, folks ... I may assume other disguises other forms but I shall try to exist...” (229-230)⁹.” He is finished. His idol, Shade, is dead and his enemy, Gradus, is also dead. Curiously his main adversary, Sybil, is not dead, but merely departed – to Canada. His *anima* is not yet a true ally. In his foreword Kinbote says of her duplicity “Naturally it precluded collaboration with my friend’s misguided widow” (F 16). Kinbote finds himself truly a “solus rex.” He is ready, because he has no choice, to die to ego-self. By admitting defeat he is beginning to let go of his assumed identity (*ego*). He is becoming “One,” the *Self*, the goal of *individuation*. The completion of his commentary indicates that he has, in fact, brought the two kingdoms, the supernal of poetry and the mundane of prose, together. As he remarks in the commentary, “Let me state that without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human

⁹ All quotations from the novel are cited by page number only. All quotations from John Shade’s poem “Pale Fire” will be cited with a “P” followed by the line number from the poem.

reality at all...a reality that only my notes can provide" (F 21). Note that he provides the "human reality". A true master walks in both worlds.

16) Master of Two Worlds:

"Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back—not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other—is the talent of the master. The Cosmic Dancer, declares Nietzsche, does not rest heavily in a single spot, but gaily, lightly, turns and leaps from one position to another. It is possible to speak from only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest. The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment. His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity." (213)

Now Kinbote's final rant makes sense. He, as Botkin, has realized that his *ego* truly is just a disguise, and that it can be discarded or changed while one is in the "*human reality*". The roles can change, but the actor (the *self*) goes on. Conversely, a realized *self*, like an author, can create the role he chooses.

Campbell acknowledges that the return to the world still has its tests and temptations, and the higher perspective may be lost or threatened at times. The journey is not necessarily a one-and-done event. Kinbote has still not effectively dealt with his *anima*, Sybil. Also there is more than one *shadow* in the unconscious. For Kinbote, (or shall we say now, “Botkin”, or perhaps “Nabokov”) Gradus was the dull, bestial, mechanical aspect of the *shadow*. The “bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus”, the one facing a “million photographers”, is the lure of the greatest and perhaps the most destructive ego fantasy - *FAME*.

The character Kinbote, even in his wildest delusion, was not in danger of becoming famous. Nabokov, at this time after the wild success of *Lolita*, was experiencing the yearned for dream of his younger near-avatar, Fyodor of *The Gift* - recognition of his genius. Before he had achieved it himself, Nabokov recognized the “despair” of the demon of fame with his character Hermann Karlovich¹⁰. The tragedy of Nabokov’s “*Mr. Morn*”¹¹ was that he wanted to die in front of an audience with “an immortal exclamation.” In “The Paris Poem”¹² Nabokov writes, “Shall I really die too? Sometimes/ the heart needs an ‘Author, Author!’” Nabokov dealt directly with this dangerous allure in a 1942 poem actually titled “*Fame*”¹³ that bears a compelling likeness to *Pale Fire*: a character clearly the progenitor of the clockwork toy/gardener, a robot on wheels taunts and oppresses a poet. It seems to the poet like “a sinister friend of childhood,” “a master spy,” and “executioner,” and a “parody of conscience” in a bad drama. This is a description of the super-ego. This is the connection that links the

¹⁰ *DSP*

¹¹ *TTMM*

¹² *Selected Poems* 111

¹³ *ibid.* 106

mechanical toy and the gardener. The toy is mechanical and the Super-ego is based on automatic unconscious societal accretions. The Super-ego poses as a savior god but really is there to bash you on the head. The Super-ego's role is to keep the *Shadow* in line: they are opposites in a dark symbiotic oppressive relationship. Balthasar, as akin to the alchemic "dark Christ", unlike the mechanical Super-ego, has a natural morality and though he subdues Gradus with a spade to the head, he then kindly attends to him. Balthasar and Gradus are mirror opposites; when the *Shadow* is confronted by the *Self*, it is depotentiated. We are informed of that earlier in the text when Kinbote says of Gradus, "He, too, is to meet, in his urgent and blind flight, a reflection that will shatter him"(105).

This awareness of the oppressiveness of the super-ego/*persona*, and its relation to all the other shadow aspects is, in fact the key to understanding *Pale Fire* - all of the characters are shadow aspects of one person: Botkin/Nabokov. Jung claimed that even the ego is an archetype, it is not the true *Self*. The mythic hero usually realizes at this point that he has always had the answer, the power, the key to self-knowledge. As Kinbote says of Shade's *memento mori*, "the rusty clockwork shall work again, for I have the key" (107). In other words, he can recapitulate John Shade's cosmic awareness once the truth of *consciousness* reveals and depotentiates what is merely "mechanical" subconscious programming.

17) Freedom to Live:

"The hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because he is. "Before Abraham was, I AM." He does not mistake apparent changelessness in

time for the permanence of Being, nor is he fearful of the next moment (or of the 'other thing'), as destroying the permanent with its change. 'Nothing retains its own form; but Nature, the greater renewer, ever makes up forms from forms. Be sure that nothing perishes in the whole universe; it does but vary and renew its form.' Thus the next moment is permitted to come to pass." (225)

The conscious change of form is not only an option in one's life, but also in eternity. This is the quest of *Pale Fire*. The "hereafter" we know from Nabokov's widow, Vera, was always her husband's main theme. His mystical bent is clear from the entire body of his work and summed up in his statement, "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more." (SO 45)

Did Kinbote kill himself extra-textually, as Nabokov indicated, "*he most certainly did*"¹⁴ ? Nabokov claimed that he was disappointed that readers missed that the last entry in *Pale Fire's* index, "Zembla," was left blank, indicating Kinbote committed suicide before finishing. Reincarnation is thus suggested if this is an ego death.

How does this square with possible autobiography? Nabokov once remarked, "Some of my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don't care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade – demons place there merely to show they have been booted out."¹⁵ The character Kinbote is not Nabokov, but possibly a parodic allegoric aspect of his psyche – the *ego* writ large. Having written about him, Nabokov perhaps had exorcised that noxious aspect, but it

¹⁴ *ibid.* 74

¹⁵ *ibid.* 19

could not be booted out without taking the demon of fame with it. Nabokov had probably had enough of fame by this time. (The *anima* would have to wait to be dealt with more thoroughly in *Ada*.)

CONCLUSION:

“How to teach again what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned a thousand thousand times...That is the hero’s ultimate difficult task...As dreams that were momentous by night may seem simply silly in the light of day, so the poet and the prophet can discover themselves playing the idiot before a jury of sober eyes.” (204)

It is clear throughout Nabokov’s writing that he was given to moments of transcendent awareness but remained fearful of permanent self-annihilation. His art is, in part, an attempt to come to terms with this not so unusual problem in a way that remains transcendent but avoids supercilious or bathetic cliché, what in the short story “A Forgotten Poet” he called “...the grotesque attempt at combining an authentic lyrical spasm with a metaphysical explanation of the Universe.”¹⁶ Or, as the philosopher Krug says in *Bend Sinister*: “death is either the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge or absolute nothingness, *nichto*. And this, snorted Krug, is what you call a brand-new class of thinking! Have some more fish.”¹⁷ Or, as John Shade wrote, “How ludicrous these efforts to translate/Into one’s private tongue a public fate!”¹⁸

¹⁶ *TSVN* 569

¹⁷ *BS* 175

¹⁸ P 231-232,

Nabokov eschewed cliché (except as parody) and preferred to subvert expectations, not necessarily by employing their opposites but by ambivalence. As with some of his other works, *Pale Fire* suggests dual-solutions, which he seems to leave up to the reader to ponder or decide. *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* particularly have ambiguous endings: Either Cincinnatus and Krug go insane as their world's crumble, or they transcend to a new order of awareness that "reality" has been a projection of their own psyches. This seems to be the same sort of ambiguity that surrounds the either mad or mystic character Falter in *Ultima Thule*. The conclusion depends on the reader's own level of consciousness and interpretation.

The ironic and parodic intent of using the world literature's greatest cliché, the monomyth, as plot substrate in *Pale Fire* seems to suggest on the one hand that myths are universal formulae to which particulars may not conform; nothing is certain, ultimate Truth remains elusive. In other words, Nabokov has intentionally subverted the monomyth. Despite having gone through a classic *Hero's Journey*, Kinbote has continually resisted any transformation or transcendence. His projected future lives promise nothing more than more of the same. John Shade on his parallel journey reaches an apotheosis, a sense of surety, but is then shot down. Even Gradus fails his mission. Transcendence would seem to be a transient and unreliable reality and perhaps even a bogus goal. As parody, this failed transcendence would appear to be a refutation of Jung's theories of *individuation*. This could be summed up in the line Kinbote gives to Hazel in his imagined haunted barn scenario, "Life is hopeless, afterlife heartless." (148). The game is a stalemate, the path a dead end.

Or otherwise, we might consider that despite his unremitting recalcitrance through the journey, we do not really know the fate of Kinbote after he suicides. He was still fully, desperately ego-driven in his final rant, but there was a dawning awareness of a new being coming through. Ellen Pifer¹⁹ notes that when Nabokov uses a shift in narrative tone, it is to reflect a change in the character's verbally rendered psychological state. Perhaps we can imagine that Kinbote actually surrendered, transcended and transformed once he killed himself. Assuming that he did, then he (Botkin/Nabokov/the individual undergoing the *Hero's Journey*) has effected the goal of the whole process: ego death. It is that rare chess solution – a *sui-mate*. He wins through losing. The king is dead; long live the King! Given that Nabokov made several attempts at developing a literary equivalent to the “solis rex” chess problem, the paradox of winning by losing is the solution that makes sense for chess, for ego-transcendence and for *Pale Fire*. As in *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Ultima Thule*, these are all stories that speak to ego-transcendence through confronting the multiple personalities (archetypes) in the unconscious.

However, either one of Kinbote's possible fates can be considered – depending on the readers' level of textual interpretation. In *Speak Memory*²⁰, Nabokov writes of composing a chess problem that could be solved by a novice with a fairly simple, “thetic” solution, or by an ultrasophisticated higher order of antithetic solution. It is therefore a “dual solution”. John Shade mentions, “There are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance (174).” This may be the chess problem Nabokov set for *Pale Fire* - how to actually create a plot with a

¹⁹ Pifer, Ellen 9-10

²⁰ SM 291

dual solution²¹. This ambiguous end applies to the three main characters as they converge in the denouement: Is John Shade's poem complete upon his death, or not? Also, does John Shade die needlessly and ironically, or does he transcend as a helpful shade, as Brian Boyd has suggested?²² Does Gradus bungle his job, or is it actually that fate is ineluctable and therefore always successful? Is Kinbote's *Hero's Journey* a transcendent path or a dead end?

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²¹ This would seem to be the same device in ITAB and BS: Do Cincinnatus and Krug die needlessly or do they in fact transcend illusive "reality"?

²² Boyd, Brian

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