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Vladimir Nabokov et la France

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Vladimir Nabokov and Alain Robbe-Grillet

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Is Nabokov [the] precursor of the French New Novel?

—Alfred Appel Jr.

I. Introduction

Few literary contemporaries of Nabokov ever gained his respect. Those lucky to garner Nabokov's praise were often writers composing in French such as Raymond Queneau whose *Exercices de style* (1947) was, according to Nabokov, "a thrilling masterpiece" and Franz Hellens, a Belgian writer whose novel *La Femme partagée* (1929) appealed to Nabokov's taste (*Strong Opinions*, 173-175). In their turn, French writers and critics have long welcomed Nabokov as an author whose oeuvre echoed the themes and stylistic techniques for which twentieth-century French literature and theory would achieve fame and notoriety through such movements as post-structuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, and the *nouveau roman*. The most attentive of French critics continue to draw intriguing parallels between Nabokov's work and French intellectual thought. Jacqueline Hamrit, for example, shows how Nabokov's aesthetics share many of Jacques Derrida's philosophical preoccupations such as "the *play* of structure" that allows for a "proliferation in meaning," undecidability, and the materiality of language (Hamrit, 160, 164, 166).¹ In a similar vein, Yannicke Chupin persuasively argues that Kinbote's method of reading in *Pale Fire* (1962) foreshadows the new reading that Barthes would promote in *S/Z* in 1970: reading that treats the text as a "galaxy of signifiers," where the

1. In July of 2002, Derrida told Hamrit that among all of Nabokov's works, he had only read *Lolita* (Hamrit, 173).

“reader [is] no longer a consumer but a producer” (Barthes quoted in Chupin, 2003, 4).² Given these strange ripples and reverberations of Nabokov’s oeuvre across the landscape of French literature and theory, it is not surprising that Nabokov’s former student and literary critic Alfred Appel Jr. once proposed the following “theory” to Nabokov:

I have a “theory” that the French translation of *Despair* (1939)—not to mention the books she could have read in Russian—exerted a great influence on the so-called New Novel. In his Preface to Mme. Sarraute’s *Portrait d’un inconnu* (1947), Sartre includes you among the antinovelists, a rather more intelligent remark—don’t you think?—than his comments of eight years before when, reviewing *Despair*, he said that as an émigré writer—landless—you had no subject matter. “But what is the question?” you might ask at this point. Is Nabokov [the] precursor of the French New Novel?

(*Strong Opinions*, 173)

Indeed, in the special 1964 issue of *L’Arc* dedicated to Nabokov, editor René Micha also characterized Nabokov as a New Novelist (Micha, introduction). To this tempting theory, Nabokov tersely responded: “The French New Novel does not really exist apart from a little heap of dust and fluff in a fouled pigeonhole” (*Strong Opinions*, 173). As for Sartre’s “anti-novel” rubric, Nabokov insisted that “every original novel is ‘anti-’ because it does not resemble the genre or kind of its predecessor” (*Strong Opinions*, 173). Yet, while dismissing the rubric of the French *nouveau roman*, Nabokov paradoxically reserved perhaps his most glowing admiration of a literary contemporary for no one other than the *nouveau roman*’s founder and theorist—Alain Robbe-Grillet.

In a letter to Morris Bishop, Nabokov described Robbe-Grillet as “the greatest French writer of the day” (*Selected Letters*, 303) and mentioned to Edmund Wilson that Robbe-Grillet was “the best French writer” who was “being incomprehensibly lumped together with all sorts of Butors and Sarrautes by many French critics” (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, 364). The admiration was reciprocal. In a 1967 interview for *Le Monde*, Robbe-Grillet admitted that he felt like a kindred spirit to the “author of *Lolita*, but also more significantly of *Pale Fire*, that extraordinary novel” (Robbe-Grillet, 2001, 342-43).³ And although Robbe-Grillet insisted that *Pale Fire* did not directly influence his film *Trans-Europ-Express* (1966), he acknowledged that it “had a bit of the same structure: a pyramid of imaginings” (Robbe-Grillet, 2001, 343). Moreover, in a letter exchange of 1967, the two offered homages to each other’s works. Writing to Nabokov in the midst of reading his *Pale Fire*, Robbe-Grillet described his experience of the novel in the following radiant terms: “It is even more astonishing than cyclone *Lolita* which I had so loved. I have spent the celebrations of the New Year illuminated by the hazy sun of

2. For an excellent analysis of the figures of writers and the representation of writing in Nabokov’s work, see Yannicke Chupin, 2009.

3. Unless otherwise noted all translations from French are my own.

distant Zembla that sets on the green hills of Appalachia.”⁴ And Nabokov responded with: “A child makes a tour of all the lampposts in my personal labyrinth each time I think of you.” In the holograph draft of the letter, the word “esprit” is crossed out and “labyrinth” (“labyrinthe personnel”) is chosen instead, no doubt meant to allude to Robbe-Grillet’s novel *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959).⁵ Both literary giants were preoccupied with similar aesthetic questions of the narrative voice, the form of the novel, and the role of the reader. Hence, it is not surprising that they must have felt like kindred spirits. They had followed each other’s work before meeting in 1959. And yet, both denied not only the possibility of having influenced one another, but also the concept of artistic influence in general. Their 1959 interview, however, offers a rare glimpse into a literary exchange between two luminaries. The question is not simply whether one author influenced the other. Rather, the artistic works of Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet that soon followed their meeting—in particular, Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) and Robbe-Grillet’s screenplay for Alain Resnais’ film *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961)—are texts that explore the nebulous and elusive concept of artistic influence. In a strange forecast of their Zeitgeist, both foreshadowed and dramatized in their fiction the debates that would animate critical discourse over the concepts of “intertextuality” (Kristeva, 1966) and “the anxiety of influence” (Bloom, 1973).

II. A Meeting of Minds

Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet met in Paris in the fall of 1959. Nabokov, who affirmed that “isolation mean[t] liberty and discovery,” often eschewed giving away details about his interactions with literary contemporaries (*Strong Opinions*, 139). In the case of Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet, however, we have a rare written account of their conversation, recorded before the era when Nabokov began to insist on receiving interview questions in advance and on carefully editing his responses. At the request of Nabokov, *Arts, spectacles*, a French weekly, invited Robbe-Grillet to help conduct an interview with the author of *Lolita*, which was published under the title “While *Lolita* Tours the World Entomologist Nabokov and Agronomist Robbe-Grillet Exchange Their Pawns on the Literary Chessboard” (Boyd, 1991, 398).⁶

Although Robbe-Grillet was twenty-three years younger than Nabokov, they had much in common. Science—lepidopterology in the case of Nabokov and agronomy in the case of Robbe-Grillet—played an important role in their lives and art. In fact, Robbe-Grillet was himself an amateur hunter of butterflies. In *Topologie d’une cité fantôme* (1975), for

4. “C’est encore plus étonnant que le cyclone *Lolita* que j’avais tant aimé. J’ai passé des fêtes de nouvel an illuminées par le soleil brumeux de la lointaine Zembla, se couchant sur les vertes collines d’Appalachie” (Alain Robbe-Grillet in an unpublished letter to Vladimir Nabokov, 3 January 1967).

5. “Un enfant fait le tour de tous les réverbères dans mon labyrinthe personnel chaque fois que je pense à vous” (Nabokov in an unpublished letter to Robbe-Grillet, 26 March 1967). Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet corresponded in French. The translation is my own.

6. See J.F. Bergery, “Tandis que *Lolita* fait le tour du monde l’entomologiste Nabokov, l’agronome Robbe-Grillet échangeant leurs pions sur l’échiquier littéraire.”

example, the narrator, a collector of Vanessa butterflies, describes the act of impaling a specimen's "virgin belly alive on an erect needle" (Smith, 101). The Vanessa butterfly might be an allusion to Nabokov and specifically to the "dark Vanessa, crimson-barred" of *Pale Fire*; yet Robbe-Grillet's sadistic and sexualized image of the butterfly could not be any more different from Nabokov's reverent metaphor that links John Shade's wife Sybil to the "admirable butterfly" (*Pale Fire*, 42-43). In the fictional worlds of both authors we find captivating portraits of criminals. Yet, whereas Nabokov always made sure to differentiate himself from his creatures, Robbe-Grillet cultivated a mischievous ambiguity concerning his potential resemblance to his characters. When critic Roch Smith remarked to Robbe-Grillet that he was struck by "the unusual orderliness" that the latter "displayed in his packing," Robbe-Grillet quipped that "sexual criminals are always fanatics of order" (Smith, 138).

Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet were already familiar with each other's oeuvre before meeting in person. In a letter to Harry Levin, written from Sedona, Arizona and dated 10 July 1959 (thus, before Nabokov's departure for France that same year), Nabokov already asks his former Harvard colleague: "Have you read two really great novels, gems of our time, Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie*?" (*Selected Letters*, 294) Such curiosity about the fiction of Robbe-Grillet is not surprising given Nabokov's insistence that a writer "must study carefully the works of his rivals" (*Strong Opinions*, 32).

Besides *Lolita*, Robbe-Grillet must have been familiar at least with *The Luzhin Defense*, translated into French in 1934 as *La Course du fou*, for, during the 1959 interview in Paris, Robbe-Grillet complimented Nabokov on the astonishing game of chess depicted in his novel. Robbe-Grillet may have read *Despair* as well. At the very least, he was familiar with Sartre's review of Nabokov's early fiction.⁷ It is not difficult to see why *The Luzhin Defense*, a novel about a chess player crushed by his genius, appealed to Robbe-Grillet. Geometric descriptions and repetitions proliferate in this novel as grandmaster Luzhin withdraws further into the mad world of chess and begins to see his everyday reality patterned by the rules and structures of chess. Luzhin even begins to see various chess combinations form right beneath his feet on the squares of the floor. Similarly, a typical sentence by Robbe-Grillet often includes minute geometric descriptions such "cubical," "rectangular," "perpendicular," and so on. In Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* (1955), Mathias, a travelling salesman, who the reader suspects has committed rape and murder, becomes more paranoid as he notices checkered black-and-white tiles everywhere. According to Roland Barthes, Robbe-Grillet generates "descriptions of objects sufficiently geometric to discourage any inductive derivation of poetic meaning residing in the thing" (Barthes, 1975, 11). In *The Luzhin Defense*, Nabokov, on the contrary, associates the world of chess with poetry and love.⁸ And, in the *Foreword*

7. In his 1964 essay on *Lolita*, Robbe-Grillet challenges Sartre's early remark made in a 1939 review of Nabokov's *Despair* in the journal *Europe* that as a "landless" émigré writer Nabokov has no subject matter. Robbe-Grillet corrects the philosopher by noting that everyone is an émigré of sorts. (Robbe-Grillet, 1986, 35-36). For Sartre's review see Jean-Paul Sartre, 1947, 58-61.

8. "There were combinations, pure and harmonious, where thought ascended marble stairs to victory; there were tender stirrings in one corner of the board, and a passionate explosion, and the fanfare of

to his novel, Nabokov makes sure to note that “of all [his] Russian books, *The Luzhin Defense* contains and diffuses the greatest ‘warmth,’ which may seem odd seeing how supremely abstract chess is supposed to be” (*The Luzhin Defense*, 10).

The two authors did not always agree on questions relating to psychology or to the *nouveau roman*. Nabokov dismissed Robbe-Grillet’s claims that his novels were “exempt from psychology” as “preposterous,” insisting that Robbe-Grillet’s fiction was “magnificently poetical and original, and the shifts of levels, the interpretation of successive impressions and so forth belong of course to psychology—psychology at its best” (*Strong Opinions*, 80). And, despite Nabokov’s rejection of the label of the *nouveau roman*, in a 1986 interview, Robbe-Grillet called Nabokov “a great New Novelist” (Robbe-Grillet, 1986). Because the two authors admired each other’s work they creatively misread each other, as strong poets are prone to do in order to establish their own artistic independence, according to Harold Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence.” In their respective misreadings, however, each author not only announced his original voice, but also sought to shed light on the blind spots of his fellow writer’s early critics. As Robbe-Grillet remarked to Nabokov during their interview, the early critics of *Lolita* (1955) discussed at great length its taboo content but said very little about how the novel was written, whereas the opposite thing had happened to him: the critics belabored how *La Jalousie* (1957) was written but failed to grasp the central story. Robbe-Grillet then offered a perceptive comment about the style of *Lolita* and its relationship to the novel’s theme: “[...] the main character speaks at once in the third and first person, often in the same phrase, which always creates a curious effect of division. It is even a fundamental theme: the split of the character.”⁹

In his turn, Nabokov told Robbe-Grillet that his novel *La Jalousie* was the finest novel about love since Proust and that it shared with *Lolita* a sense of romanticism. Thus, Nabokov’s reading of Robbe-Grillet’s oeuvre is more aligned with Bruce Morrisette’s analysis than the view held by Robbe-Grillet’s early critics who predominantly focused on the allegedly “flat” design and the difficult formalism of his novels (Barthes, 1975, 15). As Morrisette has shown through his careful readings, Robbe-Grillet’s novels involve “a coherent psychological system (usually implicit, not expressed)” and “a quite analyzable plot” (83). Furthermore, Raylene Ramsay has argued that the “slidings of signifieds” in Robbe-Grillet’s fiction are not a “gratuitous game,” but rather reveal, according to Robbe-Grillet himself, a “‘consciousness’ whose stereotyped nature is the ‘constructed, insipid, everyday world’” (Ramsay, 203).¹⁰ According to Ramsay, far from being a sterile description of objects purged of their signification, Robbe-Grillet’s work should

the Queen going to its sacrificial doom.... Everything was wonderful, all the shades of love, all the convolutions and mysterious paths it had chosen. And this love was fatal” (*The Luzhin Defense*, 246).

9. “[...] le personnage parle à la fois au ‘il’ et au ‘je’, et souvent dans la même phrase, ce qui donne toujours un effet très curieux de division. C’est quand même un thème fondamental : la scission en deux du personnage” (J.F. Bergery, “Tandis que *Lolita* fait le tour du monde l’entomologiste Nabokov, l’agronome Robbe-Grillet échangent leurs pions sur l’échiquier littéraire,” 4).

10. Ramsay quotes Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Angélique ou l’Enchantement* (1988, 182).

be considered “a new realism” where “both the text and the ‘I’ reflect self-consciously (metalinguistically) on the processes and conditions of their own existence and their relations with other texts and with the world” (51).

III. Heirs to Flaubert

During their meeting, neither writer mentioned that their narrative strategies in *Lolita* and in *La Jalousie* are, in a sense, poles apart. The first-person narrative of *Lolita* presents itself as a long confession of a fictive author, Humbert Humbert, who is perhaps one of the most seductive narrative voices in twentieth-century literature. Events and characters are largely filtered through the consciousness of Humbert Humbert and therein lies the novel’s ethical problem. By contrast, as Maurice Blanchot notes, the radical feature of *La Jalousie* is the absent I, i.e. its anonymous narrative voice: “How could there still be a name and an identity there? It is nameless, faceless; it is pure anonymous presence” (Blanchot, 216, n. 1). This absence of the narrator of *La Jalousie* is, however, perpetually palpable in all of the scenes. His eye is situated in and moves in space. He even has a designated chair. Because of these narrative details, Morrisette prefers to refer to the “je-néant” as the jealous husband who surveils his wife, arguing that the central aim of the novel is to create the “mental content of a jealous narrator” (Morrisette, 115). In a way, the all pervasive I in *Lolita* and the absent I in *La Jalousie* offer two different interpretations of Flaubert’s famous remark: “An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere” (Flaubert, 113).

The shared literary heritage of Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet lies in their mutual respect for Flaubert. As Maurice Couturier has shown, Nabokov “was acutely aware of the writing problems Flaubert had had to solve to compose his masterpiece [*Madame Bovary*]” (Couturier, 1995, 406). It is thus significant that Robbe-Grillet made the following remark about Flaubert right before admitting his affinity with Nabokov:

It is a realism, in any case, marked by the impossibility to narrate in an innocent manner, an impossibility that began a hundred years ago and that separates Flaubert from Balzac. Flaubert was one of the first to raise the question of the narrator: Who says this? Who sees that? Who is talking? In the name of what?”

(Robbe-Grillet, 2001, 342)

When one reflects on the fact that the opening of Nabokov’s *Despair* begins precisely with the issue of narration, Alfred Appel’s hypothetical claim that its French edition inspired the movement of the *nouveau roman* becomes not so far-fetched. Hermann launches his narrative by musing on the relationship between events and the manner in which they are told:

If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness... So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale. Further, I should have drawn the reader’s attention to the fact that had I lacked that power, that ability, et cetera, not only should I have refrained from describing

certain recent events, but there would have been nothing to describe, for, gentle reader, nothing at all would have happened.

(*Despair*, 3)

Reading this opening today one is struck by how groundbreaking *Despair*, first published in 1934, was. While Russian formalists were making a distinction between *fabula* (the raw material of the story in its chronological order) and *syuzhet* (the way the story is organized) and arguing that *fabula* precedes *syuzhet*, Nabokov already deconstructed the relationship between the two in *Despair*, showing how *syuzhet* could generate *fabula*.¹¹ While it is difficult to speculate how influential the French publication of Nabokov's *Despair* was, it is evident that the issues of narration raised in this early novel by Nabokov became important to the new novelists in their search for new forms.

Although Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet, two disciples of Flaubert, inherit from him the problem of narration, their novelistic solutions are different, especially in how they approach the issue of authorial influence on the reader. Consider Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* and Nabokov's *Lolita*, both published in France in 1955. There are strange telepathic echoes between the two: the subject of pedophilia, refurbished elements of the detective novel, and the feat of narration that renders the reader at once the criminal's accomplice and judge. As several critics have pointed out, Humbert Humbert describes his crime in a strategic manner, inviting his reader to become complicit in his solipsistic treatment of Dolly Schiller (Rampton, 101-122; Durantaye, 175-197). By contrast, the acts of murder and rape are never directly described in *Le Voyeur*. Instead, between the first and second parts of the novel, there is a gap in the narrative in the time period where the crime must have taken place. Mathias, through whose consciousness the third-person narration is often (but not exclusively) filtered, keeps trying to explain to himself, to other characters, and to the reader this unaccounted for interval in the narrative. Yet he never succeeds in solidifying an alibi and becomes hysterical. Mathias begins to see everywhere the figure of a horizontal eight, the sign for infinity, which also characterizes his bicycle itinerary, the shape of the island where the main action takes place, and the spiraling form of the novel itself. A blank, unnumbered page 88 divides the book into two parts. On the one hand, his paranoia seems to confirm his guilt. On the other hand, it is up to the reader to fill in the gaps, to read between the lines, and to pronounce the final judgment. It is the very process of such hermeneutic reading—the reader's desire to uncover the secrets beneath the surface of the novel's descriptions—that creates the crime. Put simply, Robbe-Grillet teases and influences the reader into searching for a deeper meaning, thereby recreating in the reader the sense of his main character's paranoia. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, the process of reading takes a different path. The reader must pay careful attention to uncover the glimpses and fragments of Dolly Schiller's consciousness that are suppressed by the seductive veneer of Humbert Humbert's prose. In other words, the reader has to resist being influenced

11. For more on *fabula* and *syuzhet*, see Jonathan Culler, 170-172.

by Humbert's control of the narrative. While deep reading in Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* paranoically reproduces the crime, in Nabokov's *Lolita* deep reading has the power to uncover the crime and recover (to some degree) the victim's voice.

IV. Seducing the Spectator

Like Nabokov, who frequently alluded in his fiction to the tales of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Robbe-Grillet was interested in the form of the detective novel. Both authors enjoyed writing what Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney call "the metaphysical detective story," which they define as "a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader—with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (Merivale et al., 2). In an interview, Robbe-Grillet once noted that he endeavored to write a kind of detective novel where instead of solving the mystery concocted by the author, the reader would instead become a coauthor of the work (Dumayet). This is precisely the strategy that Robbe-Grillet employs in the 1961 film *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, which resulted from his collaboration with director Alain Resnais. According to Brian Boyd, this was one of the few films that Nabokov went to see in March of 1962 and one that "delighted him not so much by its labyrinthine compulsiveness as by its originality and its romanticism" (Boyd, 1991, 464). On the surface, the story of *Marienbad* is simple. In a luxury hotel, a man tries to convince a woman that they had had a liaison a year ago and have now met for another encounter. The woman insists that she has never met him and that he is a madman. The film's trailer invites the spectator to come play the "real game of truth," offering the following hints:

The man, is he a banal seducer? A madman? Or has he just confused two faces? What really happened last year? These are the questions that you, the spectator, will have to figure out. Pay attention—a mere object, a gesture, an element of the decor, an attitude—the minutest detail has its importance. For the first time in cinema you will be the coauthor of a film. From the images that you will see you will create yourself the story from your sensibility, your character, your disposition, your past life.

(Robbe-Grillet, 2009)

Like Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, released around the same time, *Marienbad* spurred public debate. Some readers maintained that it was the woman who was lying, others—the man. Likewise, since its publication, *Pale Fire* has launched a series of debates that continue till this day. The novel is structured as the posthumous publication of a poem by John Shade, accompanied by an introduction, a commentary, and an index, edited by Charles Kinbote. In an intriguing manner, as in Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, the figure eight, symbol of infinity, haunts the text that reveals echoes and coincidences between the poem and commentary. In *Pale Fire*, we find mentions of a "lemniscate" (∞) left on

wet sand by bicycle tires and “two writers and two critics” debating “the Cause of Poetry on Channel 8” (37, 47). Yet the stakes of the debates surrounding the nature of truth in *Marienbad* and those concerning the nature of authorship in *Pale Fire* are different. *Marienbad*, as its trailer promises, celebrates the free play of interpretations and the Barthesian “galaxy of signifiers.”¹² Even the two co-creators of the film offered varying interpretations of the work. Resnais suggested that the man and the woman were former lovers, even publishing a graph that divided the scenes “into one week of past time and one week of present time, plus an indefinite or imaginary time zone” (Morrisette, 194).¹³ Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, maintained that the central story of the film is the archetypal tale of seduction, “the story of a persuasion” (quoted in Armes, 157). As Barthes notes, “everyone has explained *Marienbad*, but each explanation was a meaning immediately denied by a neighboring meaning; if meaning is no longer abolished, it nevertheless remains in suspense” (Barthes, 1975, 17). Robbe-Grillet may have a trick up his sleeve, however. Paradoxically, while seemingly encouraging the spectator to revel in the inexhaustibility of potential scenarios, the story that Robbe-Grillet tells in his film is that of *influence* and Freudian suggestion, a kind of subliminal seduction, where the man keeps telling the woman a different story each time he sees her, hoping to finally come up with a story that she can live with and thereby surrender to him. In a way, the man’s prolific storytelling within the film mimics the sly manner in which Robbe-Grillet is influencing his spectator. The label of “coauthor” is deceptive. The author Robbe-Grillet anticipates and encourages the proliferation of possible interpretations of his oeuvre, creating texts where the free play of signifiers and the very sense of incertitude is the aim of the narrative meant to evoke the mental landscape of jealousy, to render the state of paranoia, or to recreate the motions of seduction. Although the reader may certainly “play the real game of truth,” the author is a bit like the putative husband of *Marienbad* who says at one point: “I know a game where I always win.”¹⁴

At first blush, one may note certain Nabokovian echoes in Robbe-Grillet’s film, particularly in the visual details of the setting: the prevalence of mirrors, reflections, doublings, the black-and-white checkered tiles, and chess motifs. Yet, although Nabokov himself took an interest in detective fiction, the role that Nabokov wanted his reader to play was not exactly that of a free coauthor. As Maurice Couturier notes, “few authors have, as much as Nabokov, sought to orient the deciphering of their own works” (1993, 382). We can discern the different designs that Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet had on the reader by looking at their divergent views of chess.

12. Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes shared mutual respect. See Robbe-Grillet, 2011; and Barthes, 1975.

13. Resnais mentioned that his schema was merely helpful to him for filming purposes and was in no way meant as an authoritative interpretation.

14. The game that the husband plays with his wife’s would-be lover is a variant of Nim, a mathematical game of strategy in which two players take turns removing objects from designated stacks. By placing sixteen matches in four rows (7-5-3-1) and by making the first move, the husband ensures that the lover is always the one to pick up the last match and thus lose.

V. Wrestling with the Author

During their interview in Paris, Robbe-Grillet asked Nabokov if the latter played chess and Nabokov responded: "I compose chess problems, which is not the same thing as the chess game."¹⁵ Nabokov then noted that he composed his novels like chess problems. The reader may be construed as a kind of solver of his elegant chess problems. Nabokov's interest in chess has had a strong influence on the authorship theories of *Pale Fire* that attempt to find a solution to Nabokov's novel by gathering textual clues that may answer which character (Shade, Kinbote, Botkin, etc.) or paranormal activity is doing the writing in the novel and whether he/she/it/they are acting alone or assisted by others such as Nabokov's own helping hand.¹⁶ By contrast, other scholars resist treating the novel as a solvable puzzle, highlighting instead the text's indeterminacies and approaching the novel as "a hypertext" where, as Simon Rowberry points out, "Nabokov's authority dissolves with the novel's structural openness" (Rowberry, 2). Perhaps, what the debate over *Pale Fire* signals is that, in contrast to the French post-structuralist theories of Barthes and Derrida, that embrace the text's "galaxy of signifiers," indeterminacy, and "writerly" nature in the wake of the "death of the author," Nabokov's fiction maintains a tension between a desire for strong authorial control and an open invitation for the reader to get involved, an electrified bridge between Michel Foucault's "author function" and Derrida's "infinite play."¹⁷ The stakes of the critical debate between those treating Nabokov's novels as solution-oriented chess problems and those embracing a more open-ended approach of "doubts and irresolutions" are seen perhaps nowhere clearer than in the productive disagreement over *Pale Fire* between two luminaries of Nabokovian scholarship: Brian Boyd and Michael Wood.¹⁸

A chess problem has but one solution; yet it is not the singularity of the solution that Nabokov stresses but rather the process of composition and the patterning of the chess problem that the solver is meant to appreciate. In *Speak, Memory* (1967), Nabokov emphasizes that "a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of 'tries'—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray" (*Speak, Memory*, 290). And, in the preface to the English edition of his early Russian novel *The Eye*, which also reimagines the detective novel, Nabokov remarks that "the stress is not on the mystery but on the pattern" (*The Eye*, iv).

15. "Je fais des problèmes d'échecs, ce qui n'est pas la même chose que le jeu" (J.F. Bergery, "Tandis que *Lolita* fait le tour du monde l'entomologiste Nabokov, l'agronome Robbe-Grillet échangent leurs pions sur l'échiquier littéraire," 4).

16. For more recent examples and for a helpful survey of the authorship debate see Brian Boyd, 1999; and René Alladaye, *The Darker Shades of Pale Fire. An Investigation into a Literary Mystery*.

17. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 1977, 142-149; Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 1978, 278-294; Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," 1977, 124-127. In recent years, the critical pendulum of Nabokov studies has perhaps swayed more toward Derrida's infinite play as evinced by the 2014 MLA panel "Nabokov and Indeterminacy," arranged by the International Vladimir Nabokov Society.

18. See in particular Boyd's response to Wood in "Wood: Discovery, Death, and Doubt" (1999, 255-260).

Indeed, Nabokov often envisioned the relationship between the author and the reader as a good-spirited fight. "A good reader is bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author," Nabokov once said in an interview (*Strong Opinions*, 183). Accordingly, the pleasures of arduous reading are akin to the author's pleasures of composition. By exploring the patterns and structures of a Nabokovian text with the utmost attention the reader too becomes a kind of artist: "Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever" ("Good Readers and Good Writers," *Lectures on Literature*, 2). What differentiates the experience of reading Nabokov from reading Robbe-Grillet is that even when navigating a seemingly open-ended text like *Pale Fire*, the reader may often feel that, although he or she is free to roam in the many twists and bends of the labyrinth, there are nonetheless "false scents," traps, and camouflage lovingly prepared by an author who revels in artistic deception.

VI. Nothing New Under the Sun: Influence in *Pale Fire*

Like Robbe-Grillet's *Marienbad*, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* explores the process of influence: not so much the subliminal power of storytelling, but rather what Harold Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence." Whoever is writing the text of *Pale Fire* within the fictional world of the novel gathers and fuels inspiration by wrestling with other texts, other voices, and other authors. According to Bloom's byzantine theory of six revisionary ratios, the "anxiety of influence" of a strong poet "comes out of a complex act of strong misreading [of a predecessor-poet], a creative interpretation," which he dubs "poetic misprision" (Bloom, xxiii and 13). Kinbote can be said to creatively misread Shade's poem in order to create his own original work, the commentary, which itself is not devoid of the poetic touch. Kinbote "swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it" (Bloom, 14). In fact, Kinbote's manner of writing his commentary by creatively wrestling with Shade's influence foreshadows all six of Bloom's revisionary ratios (*clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonization*, *askesis*, and *apophrades*). For example, in *apophrades*, "or the return of the dead," the poet "holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work" that "the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work" (Bloom, 16). Indeed, this uncanny effect of Kinbote's commentary may lead some readers to the conclusion that he has written Shade's poem as well. The theory of the anxiety of influence works in the other direction as well: Shade might be the one creatively misreading and "swerve[ing] away" from Kinbote's material. Bloom's theory of influence is helpful not so much for crowning the exact author of *Pale Fire* as it is for highlighting the exploration of authorship at the heart of the novel and for offering another perspective on looking at *Pale Fire* besides that of intertextuality. In 1966, Julia Kristeva would define "intertextuality" as "a mosaic of quotations" where

“any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” As Kristeva writes in the now well-rehearsed sentence, “the notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (Kristeva, 34-62). *Pale Fire* has been read through such a lens of intertextuality where authorial control dissipates in favor of the reader-producer and where the entire text can be seen as a contrapuntal creation of two or more artistic voices.

The question of influence, however, may help us recognize the tension in Nabokov’s work between the strong figure of the author and the equally strong role of the creative reader. As Mary Orr notes “as intertextuality, [influence] engages with relations, but as forces and force fields, and how and why they are channeled in certain ways”; “it connotes power(s) and empowerment, or their denial” (Orr, 66).¹⁹ After all, the very title of *Pale Fire* is “a poetic misprision,” to borrow Bloom’s turn of phrase, from one of the most influential writers in English no less—William Shakespeare. As pointed out by many critics, the wording comes from Act IV, Scene III of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*:

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 [...].

(Shakespeare, 304)

T.S. Eliot famously claimed that “immature poets imitate; mature poets steal, bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (Eliot). With his novel’s title, Nabokov steals from Shakespeare and transforms Timon’s cynical remark about the prevalence of thievery into an enlightened commentary on artistic influence. Etymologically influence was an astrological term before it came to connote poetic influence. To be influenced used to mean “to receive an ethereal fluid flowing in upon from the stars, a fluid that affected one’s character and destiny, and that altered all sublunary things” (Bloom, 26). How appropriate and clever then that Nabokov plays with this astral association of influence to explore the nature of poetic influence. In the case of *Pale Fire*, influence figures not as a hierarchical force that directly controls human destiny or sways the poet’s pen, but rather as a creative energy that moves laterally between various luminaries, who creatively transform it into something different.

19. My thinking about *Pale Fire* owes much to Orr’s fascinating discussion of “positive influence”: “Beyond man-made canal (Bloom) or complex irrigation system (intertextuality), we have in influence a force to describe cultural change, erosion, watering, silting up, destruction, increased or decreased pressures due to the ‘geology’ and geographies of its channels” (Orr, 93).

VII. Conclusion

In December of 1966, seven years after their first meeting, Robbe-Grillet wrote to Nabokov who was by then living in Montreux, Switzerland. The committee of Prix Médicis, of which Robbe-Grillet was a member, had unanimously elected Nabokov to join their ranks. Robbe-Grillet knew, of course, that Nabokov detested literary clubs and would get a good laugh from the whole thing, but he also expressed hope that after Nabokov had laughed to his heart's content, he would accept. There were no obligations apart from meeting once a month for lunch at Gala Barbisan's, a Russian émigré who along with Jean-Pierre Giraudoux had founded the Prix Médicis in 1958. Although both Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet had a healthy mistrust of literary societies, Robbe-Grillet, who was elected member of the Académie française in 2004, was more open to joining them, albeit keeping an ironic distance. Robbe-Grillet attempted to persuade Nabokov to accept membership if only that the two of them could meet on a regular basis in Paris: "Accept! The lunches are good and lots of fun. One talks very little here about literature. And one has the chance, sometimes, to be able to help a talented novelist who has not yet found a public."²⁰ Nabokov passed on the offer. Despite the high esteem in which Nabokov held Robbe-Grillet's work and despite the joy that his company brought to him, Nabokov remained firm in his belief in the artist's "lone performance," just like he preferred to compose his chess problems "in glacial solitude" (*Strong Opinions*, 117). Still, as Nabokov's friendship with Robbe-Grillet attests, even Nabokov was not immune to artistic exchanges. Although, being a strong poet, Nabokov professed differently in public, his texts explore the question of artistic influence, of the ways in which intellectual and literary ideas travel through space and time and between different beings. Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet's treatment of each other's oeuvre might have been a creative *misreading*, but it was one that inspired and generated a constellation of unforgettable works from both authors.

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20. "Acceptez ! Les déjeuners sont bons et très gais. On y parle très peu de littérature. Et on a la chance, quelquefois, de pouvoir aider un romancier de talent qui n'a pas encore trouvé un public" (Robbe-Grillet in an unpublished letter to Vladimir Nabokov, 10 December 1966).

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