Nabokov did not mince words when it came to Augustan aesthetics. He called the eighteenth century the "most inartistic of centuries," the "pedestrian age" irrevocably tainted by "its pathological dislike for the specific unpoetic detail and its passion for the generic term" (*EO* 3: 505, 506). In his annotated translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, he regretted that "[for] years, Pushkin, not to speak of the minor poets of his day, could not get rid of these Wounds, Charms, and Arders, of these clusters of cupids coming from their porcelain beehives in the eighteenth-century West" (*EO* 2: 119). The phrase "Wounds, Charms, and Arders" has a felicitous ring to it. It brings to mind an effeminate fop in a powdered wig who professes his love with a pretentious lisp and is unceremoniously dismissed by a bored belle—and just as promptly is the whole unworthy and pretentious eighteenth century dismissed from the attention of Nabokov scholars.¹

The latter dismissal is problematic if only because the expression "Wounds, Charms, and Arders" is lifted directly from Alexander Pope's poem *The Rape of the Lock* (1714)—a fact that Nabokov chose to pass over in silence and for a good reason. Had he acknowledged it, his larger argument arising from wounds, charms, and arders—the argument about the tepid imagination and budding *poshlost* of the eighteenth-century aesthetics—would lose much of its power, because Pope himself had used the smooth-sounding trio to make fun of a generic love letter:
Twas then Belinda! if Report say true, 
Thy Eyes first open'd on a Billet-doux; 
Wounds, Charms, and Arords, were no sooner read, 
But all the Vision vanish'd from thy Head. 
(Rape of the Lock, Canto I: l. 117–20)

Nabokov's cavalier appropriation of Pope's line should alert the students of his American oeuvre to the complicated relationship he had with eighteenth-century British literature. In 1948, he embarked on his project of scouring "through masses of seventeenth-, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century Russian, French, and English literature in the libraries of Cornell, Harvard, and New York City, ready to seize on the smallest phrase that might recall or elucidate Pushkin" (Boyd, The American Years 337). He emerged from this quest a formidable authority on sophisticated mockery by Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift; on Samuel Richardson's incomparable Clarissa; and its tamed antithesis, The History of Sir Charles Grandison; and on the Gothic novels of the end of the century. At the same time, he spoke disparagingly of the eighteenth-century literature and punctuated his analysis of it with playful professions of scholarly negligence. So in the middle of his attempted synopsis of Charles Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer, he cuts himself short, lamenting the predictable insipidity of the story: "John discovers a moldering manuscript. What follows is a long tale full of tales within tales—shipwrecks, madhouses, Spanish cloisters—and here I began to nod" (EO 2: 253). The cozy landscape with Polyphemus-like Nabokov gently dozing off over the vague shipwrecks and castles is deceptive: Nabokov knew his Gothic references so well that, seeking to illustrate Pushkin's use of certain sentimental formulas of his time, he turned to a passage in Matthew Lewis' The Monk. Alas, that did not save The Monk from being characterized as "an inept concoction anonymously published in 1796" (EO 2: 356).

Nabokov's studied disregard for eighteenth-century aesthetics camouflaged both his thorough knowledge of the literature of the period and his propensity for suggestive conceptual and semantic borrowings from the very authors to whom he claimed to be indifferent. The latter realization calls for a reassessment by contemporary Nabokov scholars of his engagement with eighteenth-century prose and poetry. Elsewhere, I demonstrate that the origins of Nabokov's short story, "Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster"

Pope's The Rape of the Lock and Nabokov's Pale Fire (1950), can be "traced to the Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus, a satire brought forth by the joint effort of John Arbuthnot, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, during their off-and-on activity in the so-called Scriblerus Club" (Zunshine 49). Here, I will show that Pale Fire contains multiple, previously unacknowledged allusions to Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock and suggest that by situating Nabokov's Pale Fire within the tradition of epic and its self-conscious sibling, mock-epic, we gain a unique vantage point for approaching one of the leading energies of the novel—its obsession with other world(s). When I say that Nabokov actively engaged the conventions of the eighteenth-century mock-epic in his novel, I do not claim a sterile triumph of nailing down the protean genre of Pale Fire. Instead, I acknowledge that Nabokov found this particular set of representational tools fit for articulating his characters' quests for alternative realities, and thus demonstrated once more the flexibility of a seemingly ossified genre and the richness of the literary tradition engendered by it.

POPE ENTERS A FAMILY FEUD

In 1711, Robert Lord Petre, an heir to a prominent Roman Catholic family, surreptitiously snipped a lock from the head of his attractive distant relative, Miss Arabella Ferrmor. This daring if puerile display of affection led to a prolonged quarrel between the two families, much talked about in the close-knit Catholic circle with which Pope associated. In 1712, Pope published the first two cantos of The Rape of the Lock; in 1714, he expanded it to five cantos. The poem was written with the ostensible purpose of bringing the estranged families together again as they would read it and laugh, seeing the unfortunate fetishist foray of Robert Lord Petre elevated to the level of a cosmic drama. The Rape of the Lock is a playful elaboration on the Rosicrucian Doctrine of Spirits (articulated by the Abbe de Montfaucon de Villars in his 1670 Le Comte de Gabalis), according to which invisible sylphs, gnomes, nymphs, and salamanders shape human emotions and behavior. Gentle sylphs strive to protect the beauteous Belinda from the advances of her scissors-brandishing suitor, the Baron (based on Robert Lord Petre), and, as they fail and the Baron clips the Lock, the malevolent gnome Umbriel breaks open the vial of sorrows over Belinda's head, seeking to intensify her anger over the loss of her hair. Pope shows the murky
phantoms manipulating the feelings of unsuspecting humans in order to
hint wittily at the irrationality of the Fermors' sustained rage over the
"insult" suffered by their Arabella. The Rosicrucian framework seemed
to offer the two families a graceful if somewhat affected way out of
their feud: past hard words, hurt feelings, and unappealing
psychological responses could be playfully explained away by the
momentary disorienting influence of unfriendly spirits. It also satisfied
an important genre requirement of the mock-epic: like Homer's Iliad
and Virgil's Aeneid, Pope's poem boasted the intrusion of the
supernatural into everyday human affairs.

We see Belinda in the two opening cantos of the poem protected by
a "thousand bright Inhabitants of Air" (I: 1. 28), headed by the sylph
Ariel. In the third canto, Belinda makes a fatal mistake of participating
in the card game of ombre with the adventurous Baron, poised to steal
one of her two precious Locks. The word ombre is made to shoulder a
three contextual weight here. It refers to the game of cards, played by
three persons with forty cards, and to the Baron himself. Earlier in the
poem, Ariel warns Belinda to be "most beware of Man" (I: 1. 114)
which turns out to be a play on the meaning of the word hombre in
Spanish—"man." Thus, by entering the game of ombre, Belinda leaves
herself vulnerable to a feared sexual initiation, here represented by the
Baron's (who is the feared Ombre—the "man" of the poem) assault on
her Lock. The game ombre comes to be directly associated with the
world of male sexuality where females may triumph initially (Belinda
does win the game) but soon are made to pay for their victories. Or, as
Brenan S. Hammond points out, Pope's poem implicitly sponsors an
"official" morality according to which proper female socialization
consists in learning the lesson that you can't play the sex game without
putting down a stake" (210).

A third meaning of the word ombre (from Latin umbrare, to shade)
becomes prominent as we realize that by joining the game Belinda
deprives herself of Ariel's protection and is plunged into a world of
emotional darkness. Seeking to warn his unsuspecting charge of
approaching scissor, Ariel perches close to Belinda's heart and
watches the ideas "rising in her Mind" (III: l. 142). Suddenly, he sees
"an Earthly Lover lurking in her Heart" (III: l. 144). This strips Ariel of
all his powers, and he departs, giving the way to his dark counterpart,
a malicious gnome fittingly named Umbriel (the same Latin root as in
ombre—umbrare, to shade), whose "proper scene" is the "haunted
Shades" (IV: l. 15, 41) of the Cave of Spleen (IV: l. 16). Umbriel,

Belinda's new guardian, ensures that she feels "Rage, Resentment, and
Despair" (IV: l. 9) and that her depression is intensified with each
passing moment. Distressed, Belinda wishes that she had remained
undismayed "in some lone Isle, or distant Northern Land... where none
learn Ombre" (IV: l. 154, 156). Formerly cheerful and indifferently
friendly, Belinda now develops a homicidal rage and draws "a deadly
Bodkin from her Side" (V: l. 88) to attack the impudent Baron.

The Fermor family's resentment of Robert Lord Petre's behavior
was fueled by an intuitively perceived but, nevertheless, feared
connection between Arabella's loss of her lock and her unwelcome
sexual initiation. In his poem, Pope sets out to ridicule such irrational
associations. Ironically, his suggestive imagery gives them poetic form
and substance, as the innocent game of cards—ombre—becomes a site
where Belinda is abandoned by her guardian spirits to the forces of
darkness (represented by Umbriel) and where her playful, safely
anonymous, vaguely erotic emotional charge ("Favors to none, to all
she Smiles extends") (II: l. 111) is transformed into a concentrated
sexual energy ("An Earthly Lover lurking in her Heart"). It does not
help that at the end of Canto Four, Belinda blurs out a bawdy pun,
wishing that the Baron had "been content to seize Hair less in sight, or
any Hair but these" (IV: l. 175–76)—an unintentional but eloquent
testimony to her newly-acquired debauchery. Perhaps Pope was not
altogether a success in his role as conciliator.

SHADE-OMBRE-UMBRIEL

I want to start my analysis of the contextual dialogue between The Rape of the Lock and Pale Fire by pointing out that the story of Zembla and
its King told by Kinbote to Shade is different from the one contained in
the Commentary. The former comprises the "earlier themes: the escape
from the palace, the adventures in the mountains" (PF 169), the history
of the King's relationship with Queen Dia; the latter is organized
around the advance of Gradus. The theme of Gradus and his fellow
Shadows was developed by Kinbote after Shade's death in yet another
desperate attempt to suture together Kinbote's and Shade's destinies.4

No matter what version of Pale Fire's reality we subscribe to (i.e.,
whether or not we believe that Zembla exists), "Shadows" should strike
us as a rather contrived cognomen. The first indication that it is but a
nom de guerre is Kinbote's refusal to divulge the real name of the
group's leader. Kinbote claims that the "leader's terrible name cannot
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be mentioned, even in the Index to the obscure work of a scholar” (313). The second is the conspicuous tautology surrounding the introduction of this group of “especially devout Extremists.” They are “the shadow twins of the Karlists,” “Karlism’s shadow group” (150). Kinbote may define and name Shadows solely in their relation to Karlists, but we cannot expect such a convenient self-abnegation from the group itself. To come up with a resonant alias for the nasty fellowship, Kinbote recruits the name of his slain neighbor, John Shade. One possible explanation for this strange borrowing is Kinbote’s hatred and distrust of Shadeans—the group of scholars seeking to deprive Kinbote of his treasure, the poem.

Another explanation harkens back to Alexander Pope. In The Rape of the Lock, the world of humans and the world of “heavenly militia” meet and interlock in a series of lightning wordplays and mirroring images such as “Shade”-“Ombre”-“Umbrieln.” Pope’s “Shades” and its verbal derivatives parody a set of staple sequences of ancient epics: Odysseus’s and Aeneas’s trips to the Shades. More than two centuries later, Nabokov echoes this imaginative and elegant network of fluid passwords as he invites his characters to play their “game of worlds” (l. 819). The game of words contained in Pale Fire—“Shade”-“Ombre”-“Ombrieln”—constitutes a gradual slide from a parodic celebration of John Shade’s masculinity (“I like my name, Shade, Ombre, almost man / In Spanish” (174)—note this “almost”) to the implied inadequacies of Joe Lavender’s “ombriels” (“the pictures of love-making in orchards” [199]).

A description of Lavender’s collection contains an embedded reference to Popean “charms and ardors,” already familiar to us (see above). The ombriels “Lavender collected ... combined exquisite beauty with highly indecent subject matter—nutities blending with fig trees, oversize ardos, softly shaded hindercheeks, and also a dapple of female charms” (PF 197; italics mine). To “inscribe” Pope into the collection of photographs whose subject matter is a play of shadows upon sexual organs, was a peculiar move on Nabokov’s part. At the first glance, it is a parody: the primly abstract “charms” and “ardors” from Belinda’s billet-doux come to designate female and male genitalia. On a deeper level, this inscription is an acknowledgment of Pope’s talent for uncovering networks of rich imagery through a suggestive display of verbal wit. Nabokov might have been aware of the latent wordplay possibilities of ombre: in the index to his annotated translation of Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, he lists in the same breath, so
to speak, Vasily Maykov’s The Omber Player (Igbro Lombera) and La Harpe’s L’Ombre de Ducas (EO 4: 66). Nevertheless, these possibilities would have remained dormant (after all, semantic connections between the card game ombre [or omber] and l’ombre [French, “the shadow”] are rather tenuous), had not Nabokov come across Pope’s brilliant unfolding of the ombre theme through the incorporation of the third meaning of the word ombre—“man” in Spanish.

Donald Barton Johnson comments upon Nabokov’s early fondness for the word ten’ (Russian word for “shade’): ten’ turns out to be the second commonest word in Nabokov’s Russian poetry. Nabokov must have perceived Pope’s triple wordplay with the Latin umbrare as strikingly congenial, and this accounts for his evoking Pope’s “Shade”-“Ombre”-“Umbrieln” to enunciate Kinbote’s complicated reworking of his reality. Kinbote (who turns out to be a Poesian scholar in his own right) appropriates the erotic undertones of Pope’s imagery of shadows to construct a world in which he is a Belinda-like victim of sexual appeal/threat of the Ombre (a.k.a. John Shade, who happens to “like” the Spanish version of his name). Thus, Belinda’s already mentioned exclamation that she should have remained unadmir’d in some “distant Northern Land . . . where none learn Ombre” is diligently echoed by Kinbote who defines Zembla (in the Index) as a “distant northern Land” (315) and whose emotional travails seem to intensify and acquire a tragic hue as he learns Ombre—gets acquainted with John Shade.

Canto Two of “Pale Fire” opens on Shade’s birthday, July 5, 1959. In the morning, the poet ponders his youthful obsession with life after death and anthropomorphizes his fingers—all the while “the little scissors [he is] holding . . . snip off the thin / Strips of what Aunt Maud used to call scarf-skin” (ll. 183, 194–95). Some conspicuous snipping of scissors goes on in the accompanying commentary as well. In a misguided search for fun and companionship, Kinbote spends the night and the morning of July 5, 1959 at a party on an anonymous estate where “after some indescribable parlor games . . . [his] beard [is] nearly snipped off” (158). Kinbote does have a penchant for organizing his narrative as a series of fanciful patterns (e.g., Gradus embarks upon his regidical march on the day Shade starts his poem), and this particular instance of synchronizing—Shade picks up his little scissors, Kinbote’s beard is about to be snipped off—looks like a coincidence without any deep meaning, until we turn to The Rape of the Lock. There, the Baron clips Belinda’s lock just after their parlor-
game—the game of ombre—and leaves Belinda distraught for the rest of the poem. Shade’s birthday party is a blow from which Kinbote cannot recover for a long time, and as he approaches the subject in his commentary, he chooses to preface it with a Pope-inspired allusion to the complex erotic undertones of his relationship with Shade. Kinbote derives certain bittersweet consolation from fantasizing that Shade’s snipping of scissors is directed at him in a quasi-romantic, quasi-violating way, recapitulating the ambiguous gesture of Pope’s Baron. Nabokov plays with the already mentioned obscene pun mouthed by the shorn Belinda. She wishes unwittingly that instead of her beloved Lock, the Baron had assailed her pubic hair—her beard—in timeless bawdy parlance. The self-styled Belinda of Pale Fire, Charles Kinbote, almost has that wish fulfilled as his beard becomes an object of Ombre’s (i.e., John Shade’s) projected desires.

Belinda herself makes an appearance in Shade’s poem, a fact that Kinbote is singularly coy about. As Shade flips TV channels on the fateful evening of Hazel’s suicide, he comes across what seems to be a scene from an obscure ballet. Seemingly unimpressed by the ballerina’s leaps, Shade goes back to his Pope manuscript and is struck anew by the “vulgar ring” of a particular line of Pope’s An Essay on Man:

A nymph came pirotetting, under white
Rotating petals, in a vernal rite
To kneel before an altar in a wood
Where various articles of toilet stood.
I went upstairs and read a galley proof,
And heard the wind roll marbles on the roof.
“See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing”
Has unmistakably the vulgar ring
Of its preposterous age. (PF II.413–21)†

The nymph under white petals, kneeling before an altar filled with the articles of toilet is a mirror-image of Pope’s nymph Belinda who starts her day dressed in white and bending by the altar of her toilet table:

And now, unveil’d, the Toilet stands display’d,
Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.
First, rob’d in White, the Nymph intent adores
With Head uncover’d, the Cosmetic Pow’rs.

A heavily Image in the Glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;
Th’ inferior Priestess, at her Altar’s side,
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride. (I: I.121–28)‡

As we compare the two “nymph by the Altar” passages, we have to modify our reading of Shade’s absented-minded channel surfing. Shade remodels what he sees on TV in accordance to what occupies his thoughts right now—his work on Pope—and hence the scene of the ballerina approaching her toilet table is couched in such terms as to evoke an image of the vainglorious Belinda’s kneeling by her “altar.” Kinbote is not the only character in the novel rewriting his reality through Pope’s imagery.

Returning to Kinbote’s commentary: The nymph episode prompts Kinbote to note dryly that its draft variant, “a nymphet pirouetted,” is lighter and more musical than the final version. Immediately after he turns to another discarded draft, which contains an extended quotation from Pope’s An Essay on Man, and wonders why Pope did not think of “replacing” the “hero” with the “man” in the line “the sot a hero, lunatic a king” (An Essay on Man, Epistle II: I. 268, quoted in PF 202–3). This is a quintessential Nabokovian pun, of course. A traditional hero of an epic is a man. In Pope’s mock-epic, The Rape of the Lock, the hero, fittingly, is a woman. As Kinbote recycles erotic energies pulsating behind Pope’s elegant wordplay, he does in his commentary what Pope did not do in his poem: he “replaces” the “hero” with the “man”—himself.

A DEADLY BODKIN AND A WEB OF SENSE

The word “Bodkin” is used five times in the course of Pope’s eight-hundred-line poem. In the second canto, Ariel warns his subordinate spirits that he who fails to guard Belinda properly will be “wedd’d whole Ages in a Bodkin’s Eye” (II: I. 128), the bodkin being a blunt needle or a hair ornament. After Belinda has already lost her lock to the Baron’s scissors, her confidante Thalestris fans her wrath by inquiring whether it was for “this” (meaning by “this” the disgrace of going lockless) that Belinda “took such constant care / The Bodkin, Comb, and Essence to prepare” (IV: II. 97–98). In the last canto of the poem, the bodkin’s glorious pedigree is detailed:
Now met the Fate, incens’d Belinda cry’d,
And drew a deadly Bodkin from her Side.
(The same, his ancient Personage to deck,
Her great great Grandson wore about his Neck
In three Seal-Rings; which after, melted down,
Formed a vast Buckle for his Widow’s Gown;
Her Infant Grandson’s Whistle next it grew,
The Bells she ginged; and the Whistle blew;
Then in a Bodkin grac’d her Mother’s Hairs,
Which long she wore, and now Belinda wears.) (V: II. 88–96)

The transformation of the precious family heirloom is a parody of the progress of Agamemnon’s scepter in Homer’s Iliad. Belinda, a glorious warrior-heroine of the mock-epic is equipped with a suitable weapon—the futile and pretty hairpin.

Kinbote lists three “Botkin” entries in the index to his commentary—and two of them have peculiar homicidal undertones. The first is the commentator’s helpful expatiation on Sybil’s purported backbiting. Sybil is known to call Kinbote “an elephantine tick; a king-sized bottle.” (171–72). Kinbote provides a curious zoological synthesis of those two insults as he reports that the king-bot is a “maggot of extinct fly that once bred in mammots and is thought to have hastened their phylogenetic end” (306). The second index entry leads us back to John Shade’s shaving ritual. The poet describes himself sitting in his bath “like a king” and bleeding “like Marat” (I. 894). Inspired by the Shade’s “king,” Kinbote remembers telling the inquisitive Professor Pardon that his name means “regicide” or “king’s destroyer” in Zembal. Kinbote’s prompt parenthesis remark—“a king who sinks his identity in the mirror of exile is in a sense [the king’s destroyer]” (267)—ensures that he is the only royal figure we think about in conjunction with the evoked regicide. The initial image of John Shade—the bleeding King—is obliterated.

“Botkin” entries thus provide a surprising take on Kinbote: in the first entry, he is a tick (a nonentity) capable of destroying an animal much larger than himself (a towering poetic authority, John Shade); in the second, he is a projected murderer of the kingly Shade. This is yet another example of Kinbote’s creative hindsight. Writing after Shade’s death, he insinuates that, all along, there were signs that he would become an agent of Shade’s untimely demise (as he indeed is, if we believe that Gradus was aiming at Kinbote), and that the cognomen

Botkin is used to highlight those signs. Nevertheless, just as the incensed Belinda cannot injure the Baron (the Ombre) with her deadly bodkin, storm and threaten all she wants, the dejected Kinbote is not the agent of his Ombre’s death, all the dark evocative imagery of Botkin/Bodkin notwithstanding. Nabokov’s Botkin is not Shakespeare’s “bare Bodkin” (though Kinbote would have it so); it is the Popean “deadly Bodkin”—the ambitious but harmless hair ornament.

The ironic deflation of the potentially tragic imagery of the bodkin brings to the fore questions already touched upon in several different parts of this essay. What representational tools can a writer use to demonstrate that his “private universe scans right” (PF I. 975)? At what point do those tools start working against him, making the whole enterprise of spinning a “web of sense” (PF I. 810) recognizably ridiculous? Classic epic narratives strove to show that random events did make sense; if not here and now, then in some different world: on Olympus; in the Shades; in Rome; thousands of years from now—the lovesick Dido’s fiery death was not a meaningless private tragedy, but a necessary stepping-stone for the future glory of Rome. Such narratives relied on the depiction of gods and spirits because one could easily attribute very human mental states to the supernatural beings, thus rendering the strange world inhabited by such creatures psychologically compelling and actually persuasive. In his Preface to the Iliad (1715), Pope explicitly praises Homer for bringing “Gods into a System of Machinery for [epic] Poetry” (42).

Shade’s “Pale Fire” is essentially an epic poem, set—and these distinctions are crucial—in a godless and post-Popean universe. On the one hand, it is a chronicle of the poet’s desperate struggle to make sense of his life and love, his poetry, and his daughter’s death—the struggle all the more brave and poignant because his great chain of being and nonbeing includes no divine agency. Shade’s attempts to access the World Where Things Make Sense—under the auspices of the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter; through Hazel’s brood of fickle poltergeists; by way of following his vision of the white fountain—yield nothing. The IPH episode is one of the most spectacular instances of his failure to use the antique building blocks to flesh out his vision of alternative reality. Like Homer and Virgil before him, Shade arranges for his readers a visit to the Hereafter. However, if the transparent (a telling detail, this) inhabitants of the Shades rush to prophesy Odysseus’ and Aeneas’ respective futures and explain away
earthly conundrums and irritatingly random events, those dwelling in John Shade’s Elysium are silent, opaque, and too engrossed by incomprehensible (to us) realities of their own world to pay any attention to ours.

On the other hand, the “hybridization of generic form that took place during the Augustan period, [with the] ascendency of ironic, parodic, and mock heroic forms” (McKeon 48), made it difficult for the future writers to follow the established epic convention in good faith. As Michael McKeon points out, “English Neoclassicism [here represented by canonical authors like Swift and Pope] was not a simple renewal of classical standards but ... their oblique modernization, a process that submerged the ancient past in a radically empirical and skeptical solution that [left] nothing unchanged” (46). Even before Pope and Swift took full advantage of the bathetic possibilities offered by generic miscenegation, there was Dryden who had discovered, in the process of translating Virgil’s Aeneid into English, that the epic world “incorporated more farcical potential than the theoretical blueprints would sanction. Writing to John Dennis in 1694, Dryden expresses his awareness that the composer of modern epic faces a formidable barrage of difficulties, none greater than the problem of creating plausible ‘machines’ in a Christian context” (Hammond 115). Thus, no modern author should hope to get away with writing an old-fashioned epic after Dryden, Swift, and Pope had transformed the genre. Faced with the representational challenge traditionally resolved in the form of an epic narrative, Shade, who is too aware of the revolutionary genre-bending efforts of Augustans, cannot have recourse to the traditional epic instrumentarium—supernatural machinery of any kind.

Denied the regular props available to his poetic predecessors, Shade takes a different path. By the end of Canto Two, he appears to rationalize his child’s suicide: Hazael’s death makes sense because of her irredeemable lack of sex appeal. Canto Three closes with Shade convinced that he can “grope” his way to some “faint hope” (ll. 833, 834) because he can discover “some kind of correlated pattern in the game... / Coordinating these / Events and objects with remote events / And vanished objects” (ll. 813, 826–28). At the end of his poem, Shade arrives at the conviction that he is able to “understand / ... at least a minute part / Of [his] existence” (ll. 971–73): it is through his art that he should manage to tap into the endlessly rich and delightfully patterned “verse of galaxies divine” (ll. 975).

There is an underlying affinity between Shade and Kinbote’s efforts to ensure that there is a meaning behind seemingly meaningless random events, “some kind of link-and-bobolink” (l. 812). Unlike Shade, Kinbote arrives at his “verse of galaxies divine” by employing very traditional conventions of epic, that is, by constructing an alternative reality (Zembla) inhabited by phantoms endowed with human psychology and appearance, and by orchestrating occasional intersections between our world and Zembla. The unexpected end product of his efforts is a mock epic very much in the style of sly Augustans.

It is important to recognize that Kinbote himself would not dream of producing a Popean mock-epic. It is not a mock-epic that he has in mind when he envisions “romance, remoteness, sealskin-lined scarlet skies, the darkening dunes of a fabulous kingdom” (PF 85). The tragedy of the Northern king has to be presented before the awed world in the form of a classic epic somewhat tempered by gentle neo-Ossianic inflections. (I am referring here to the Works of Ossian, a famous literary fraud perpetuated in the 1760s by James Macpherson.) Those skies, that fabulous kingdom would have provided somewhat of a counterbalance to Shade’s Popean poem, as Nabokov himself attests in his annotated translation of Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin:

The kings of Morven, their blue shields beneath the mountain mist upon a hallowed heath, the hypnotic repetition of vaguely meaningful epithets, the resounding crag-echoing names, the blurred outlines of fabulous events, all this permeated romantic minds with its nebulous magic so unlike the flat classical backdrop colonnades of the Age of Taste and Reason. (EO 2: 255)

Kinbote stresses the incompatibility of Augustan and Ossianic modes when he bewails the alleged transformation that has befallen his darling Theme in Shade’s poem: “Oh, but I cannot express the agony! Instead of a wild glorious romance—what did I have? An autobiographical, eminently Appalachian, rather old-fashioned narrative in a neo-Popean prosodic style...” (PF 296).

Nabokov thwarts Kinbote’s epic/Ossianic aspirations by aligning the latter’s narrative not with The Iliad, The Aeneid, Fingal, or Temora, but with The Rape of the Lock. He makes Kinbote embody, with an easy grace, the ideal whispered to the slumbering Belinda by the gentle Ariel:
Hear and believe! Thy own Importance know,  
Nor bound thy narrow View to things below.  
... Know then, unnumbered Spirits round thee fly,  
The light Militia of the lower Sky;  
... Think what an Equipage thou hast in Air,  
And view with scorn Two Pages and a Chair.  
(I: ll. 35-36; 41-42; 45-46)

Kinbote "hears" and "believes" and "knows" his importance. Numerous social disappointments that make his existence in New Wye all but impossible appear inconsequential and even amusing when juxtaposed with his larger-than-life social status in Zembla and his ability to inspire everlasting affection in his Zemblan friends and his Queen. His very isolation has a deeper meaning as it protects him from the unwelcome public attention and possible assassination and adds a noble luster to his tragic royal stature.

Kinbote closes his commentary with a violent showdown: Gradus—until now a phantom of Kinbote’s fantasy—finally materializes in New Wye with a gun and kills Shade. This is yet another staple sequence of a mock-epic: The Rape of the Lock concludes with a battle involving both mortals and inhabitants of the parallel spirit world: the dark gnome Umbriel comes fresh from the Cave of Spleen featuring "Pale Spectres, Gaping Tombs, and Purple Fires" (IV: l. 44)—note the "Pale Fires" framing the line—to "assist the fray" which involves real and mythical beaus and belles, and watches, triumphant, as Belinda assails the Baron/Ombre with her deadly Bodkin.8

Thus, the multiple allusions to Pope’s The Rape of the Lock, contained in Pale Fire, function on several levels. They implicitly undercut Kinbote’s project of remodeling his reality and fashioning himself a glorious epic hero whose deeds reverberate through the two parallel words, New Wye and Zembla. Kinbote is guilty of lacking literary taste and critical discernment; a passionate student of early modern European literary tradition, he should have realized that in the context of that very tradition, his attempts at representing his private existential tragedy through the traditional trappings of epic would appear hopelessly antiquated and comical; at a certain hour in 1714 (the year of the first publication of The Rape of the Lock) tragic bare bodkins turned pretty hairpins. On the other hand, the very prevalence of those allusions demonstrates that Pope’s imagery of “Shade”-

"Ombre"—"Umbriel," with its erotic undertones and parodic possibilities, proved irresistible both to Kinbote, longing to articulate his love and bitterness, and to his pun-loving creator.

VINDICATING THE PEDESTRIAN AGE

In conclusion, I want to address once more the passion with which Nabokov denied Pope his poetic due and to suggest one possible explanation for it. In his annotated translation of Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, Nabokov quotes six lines from The Rape of the Lock which immediately follow the “nymph by the altar” passage, already discussed:

This Casket India’s glowing Gems unlocks,  
And all Arabia breathes from yonder Box.  
The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,  
Transform’d to Combs, the speckled and the white.  
Here Flies of Pins extend their shining Rows,  
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.  
(Rape of the Lock I: ll. 133–38; quoted in EO 2: 101)

This is one of the most haunting (and most frequently quoted) sequences in the poem. Nabokov himself attests to its evocative power by having John Shade echo it at one point in a different context:

We’ll think of matters only known to us—  
Empires of rhyme, Indies of calculus. (PF I. 602)

In Eugene Onegin, however, Nabokov chooses to preface the description of Belinda’s table with the following faint praise:

Pope (also following French models but transcending them, thanks to English richness of imagery and originality of diction) describes (1714) a lady’s dressing-room in more sophisticated detail. (2:101)

17 It is not Pope whom we have to thank for the “richness of imagery and originality of diction”—it is the English language itself! This is a remarkable example of literary bias, and it appears even more puzzling as we realize how influenced Nabokov was by Pope’s imagery and diction, judging by his Pale Fire.
Much like his creator, John Shade has a predilection for echoing Pope's images and reviling his poetry. He notes that Pope's line "See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing / Has unmistakably the vulgar ring of its preposterous age" (ll. 419–20). Shade, a Popean scholar, the author of the book on Pope called *Supremely Bllest* (is the title a cruel parody, then?) thinks that Pope's poetry is vulgar? As Kinbote would say, "Strange, strange" (272).

Nabokov entered American academe in 1941. After a short stint at Stanford, he moved back to the East Coast to teach at Wellesley (where he stayed till 1948) and then at Cornell and Harvard, until the commercial success of *Lolita* allowed him to dispense with teaching altogether in 1959. Perhaps to understand Nabokov's contradictory attitude toward eighteenth-century British literature, we ought to reconstruct the specific take on eighteenth-century aesthetic prevalent in academe back in the 1940s and 1950s.

When it came to eighteenth-century literature, the Victorian legacy left to literary scholars was exemplified by Matthew Arnold's "Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose" (quoted in Lipking 11). Oliver Elton wrote in 1899: "The age of Anne . . . moves forward to its proper perfections with a complacency almost unaltered. The logical or rational movement conclusively invades expression . . . "(265). Leslie Stephen echoed in 1904: "The weak side of the Pope school had been the subordination of the imagination to the logical theory. Poetry tends to become rhymed prose because the poet like the preacher has to expound doctrines and to prove by argument" (176). In 1934, in his *English Poetry and the English Language*, F. W. Bateson noted that "the poetry of the early eighteenth century, a rationalistic period, is characterized by lucidity . . . " (63). In 1948, J. R. Sutherland, in the Preface to *Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, asserted that "the poetry of Dryden, Pope, Thomson, Johnson, Gray, Goldsmith is not merely a poetry of good sense, but good sense it is. The poetical structure is not held together by emotional stresses and strains, but a sort of steel framework of intellectual argument. Embedded in every normal eighteenth-century poem there is this reasoned statement, giving it a rigid quality we do not find or look for in Blake or Shelley" (161).

For a long time, such views prevailed "especially in the United States, whose sense of nationhood depended on rebellion against the eighteenth-century British establishment and all its repressive, aristocratic and anti-republican values. Earlier periods had less to answer for—to some extent Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton could be considered honorary American—and later periods, from the Romantics onward, were progressive and populist enough to suit American tastes. But the eighteenth century was not so easy to redeem" (Lipking 11). In 1952, Donald Greene felt compelled to remind his colleagues that "if the *imaginative* structure of the typical poem by Pope is analyzed, it will prove to be at least as complex as that of the typical poem by Keats; and if the *discursive* structure of the typical poem by Keats is analyzed, it will be seen to be, on the whole, neater, more 'logical,' than the typical poem by Pope" (336). Accordingly, the New Critical attention to the role of irony and ambiguity in Pope's poetry meant to "restore value to Pope's verse in the face of challenges to it that derive from Victorian attacks on his personal morality and Matthew Arnold's . . . view that, on a particular definition of the term, Pope was not a poet at all" (Hammond 240). On the heels of the New Critical project of rescuing Pope, the "poet of allusion" (in Reuben A. Brower's appropriate characterization), from the nearsighted Victorians, came Maynard Mack's and Isaac Kramnick's influential analyses of Pope's poetry as situated firmly within the contemporary historical milieu, particularly, the Bolingbrokean opposition to Walpole's Whig government. Finally, as Brean S. Hammond points out, "for many scholars working on Swift and Pope in the 1970s and . . . 1980s, the pressing imperative was to refine and sophisticate the literary judgements made in [the above discussed] seminal works, and to deepen their analysis of cultural politics" (242).

Even today, with groundbreaking work in the field, eighteenth-century scholars still feel the need to defend "their" century from the deadening implications of such broad labels like "Neoclassicism" or the "Age of Reason." Back in the 1940s, Nabokov must have been somewhat influenced by his colleagues (most of them not eighteenth-century scholars, with the notable exception of Charles Kerby-Miller) fixed attitudes toward Dryden, Pope, and other "unpoetic" poets of the period. This may account for a paradoxical discrepancy between his de facto appreciation of Pope's imagery and poetic acuity and his proliferating theoretical statements about vulgarity, flatness, pedestrianism, and lack of artistic imagination on the part of the luckless versifiers of the Age of Reason. Had Nabokov descended upon the American academy in 1990s instead of 1940s, he would have encountered a very different attitude toward the eighteenth-century aesthetics and might have been in fact endlessly fascinated by the age.
of carnivals; zany virtuosos; sly philosophers; poets and writers never tired of trying new forms of narrative; the age that craved for the ridiculous, the monstrous, the different and invented endless ways to laugh at its cravings. As Nabokov was exposed to the limited, Arnoldian take on the eighteenth century, the only explicit (that is, extratextual) compliment that he ever bestowed upon Pope had to do with “Pope’s genius for placing the best possible words in the best possible order” (EO 3: 30). This is a well-deserved and potentially dynamic compliment which yet contains a forked sting: implications of certain mechanistic aptness lurk behind that “placing in order”; and, even more strikingly, the phrase “the best possible words” is but a thinly veiled allusion to Voltaire’s Candide. Voltaire mounted his 1759 vision of a cruel and often meaningless world in an explicit attempt to undermine what he perceived as the craven, reality-ducking optimism of Pope and Leibniz. Thus, Nabokov’s incipient appreciation of Pope’s poetic virtuosity is compromised and subverted by his Voltaire-esque jab at the moral integrity of Pope’s stance.

With rare exceptions, contemporary Nabokov scholarship still seems to lend a sympathetic ear to the Arnoldian perspective on eighteenth-century aesthetics and take at face value Nabokov’s professions of indifference toward the poetic imagery of Augustans. D. L. Macdonald alludes to the “neat vacuity” of Pope’s lines and questions the ethical and artistic values of eighteenth-century “optimism” allegedly pervading Pope’s poetry. Macdonald makes an important distinction between the age of Pope and the age of Johnson—a distinction never clearly articulated by Nabokov himself, who seemed to regard the eighteenth century as a unified aesthetic entity—and ultimately aligns Johnson and Nabokov against Pope, Shade, and “another philosophical optimist, Soame Jenyns” (30). On other (very rare) occasions when Swift and Pope figure in Nabokov criticism, the stress is made on their function as translators, critics, and mock-critics, the imaginative power of their poetry and prose being off-limits. Jay Arnold Levine provides an insightful analysis of Nabokov’s involvement with Pope and Swift as critics, consummated parodists, and nemesis of pseudoscholarship. Yet, he points out that “Nabokov opposes the ‘[q]uiddity of individual artistic achievement’—precisely that eccentricity, idiosyncrasy, and even derangement that we are forced to ridicule in A Tale of A Tub and the Dunciad . . . to the abstract, dehumanizing generalities of the present time” (225–26). Alas, “the abstract dehumanizing generalities” appears to echo Nabokov’s insistence that the eighteenth century was characterized by the “pathological dislike for the specific unpoetic detail and its passion for the generic term” (EO 3: 505)—itself an indefensible generalization. In his monumental biography of Nabokov, Brian Boyd points out that “as a Pope scholar, Shade has before him the example of Pope’s Dunciad, a poem also in four books and in heroic couplets, with eccentric annotations by an invented critic and a comic index: a parody of egotistic scholarship. As an eighteenth-century specialist, he also knows Swift’s Battle of the Books, in which ‘a malignant deity, call’d Criticism dwelt on the top of a snowy mountain in Nova Zembla’” (Boyd, The American Years 443). Finally, in her detailed analysis of Nabokov’s historical and literary allusions, Priscilla Meyer argues that “it is because of their work as editors, scholars, commentators, and critics that Pope, Swift, Johnson, and Boswell figure prominently in Pale Fire” (156). Consequently, I want to stress the importance of Michael Wood’s recent observation that “the brilliant multiplying jokes [contained in a passage from Pope An Essay on Man, alluded to in Pale Fire] take the breath away” (187). Uncovering multiple layers of Pope’s imaginative geography of vice, Wood notes that “even Nabokov looks a very modest magician alongside this performance” (187). Wood further suggests that Kinbote’s oblique, pathetic, heart-rendering plea for compassion and understanding (pity him—“the person not the vice, the sinner not the sin”) achieves its exquisite artistic articulation through Pope’s imagery of a “deluded moral universe” (188). Wood’s analysis of Nabokov’s engagement with Pope’s imagery remains a notable exception pointing to a lacunae in contemporary Nabokov criticism. It is in response to this lacunae that I attempted to show that the received wisdom of Nabokov dismissive remarks about the “most inarticulate of centuries,” that “pedestrian age” was well counterbalanced by his actual aesthetic homage to the rich and unpredictable poetry of Alexander Pope. The full extent of this homage as well as the full extent of Nabokov’s engagement with Swift, Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, and Johnson remain to be explored.

NOTES

I am grateful to Daniel Albright, Brian Boyd, Donald Barton Johnson, Owen Lewis, Gabriel Shapiro, Victoria Vainer, and Everett Zimmerman for commenting upon earlier versions of this essay.
1. The encyclopedic *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (ed. Vladimir Alexandrov [New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995]) has exactly four index entries concerning eighteenth-century English literature. One of them refers to Samuel Richardson and the three others to Laurence Sterne. The corresponding textual entries are succinct, which allows me to quote them here in full:

   In his essay on *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Hugh McLean notes that “Dostoevsky is a sentimentalist, like Richardson and Rousseau . . .” (265). John Burt Foster Jr. reports that “when *Bend Sinister* appeared in England in 1960, the major critic Frank Kermode compared it with *Tristram Shandy* and stressed the ‘really overpowering intelligence’ of its author” (25). Harry Levin suggests, in his analysis of *Lectures on Don Quixote*, that Nabokov thought of the novel as “a late development, permeated with memories and unified by depth of consciousness—attitudes that mainly have evolved since the eighteenth century. By such criteria Sterne may have been a precursor, but Fielding [another eighteenth-century figure] was left by the picaresque wayside . . .” (233). Finally, Maurice Couturier concludes his essay on Nabokov and Flaubert by asserting that “Nabokov belongs to a much older tradition of great fiction-writers [older than the one represented by Flaubert] going back to Cervantes and Sterne, who always tried to make their style, their diction, their language games functional, and who, like Flaubert, strove ‘to make people dream’” (412).

   It should be noted that Sterne was the only eighteenth-century author unconditionally admired by Nabokov who relished “the great English prose poet’s rich, whimsical, and fantastic style” (*EO* 3:143). Apart from Sterne and Richardson (the latter was, incidentally, characterized by Nabokov as capable of “excellent Hogarthian” descriptions and “pleasant liquidity” of phrasing (*EO* 2: 347)), the omission of Swift and Pope from this comprehensive reference guide is sadly representative of the prevailing view about Nabokov engagement (or rather the lack of thereof) with the literature of the “Age of Reason.”

2. Nabokov characterizes Pushkin’s “I have learned the voice of other desires . . .” (1: 247) as “a commonplace formula of the time” and cites an analogous passage in Lewis: “Unable to bear this state of incertitude, [Ambrosio] endeavored to divert it by substituting the thoughts of other to his own” (2: 167).

3. See, for example, Gavriel Shapiro, “*Lolita’s Class List,*” *Chapiers du Monde Russe* 37, 3 (1996): 317–36. Shapiro demonstrates that several of Lolita’s classmates bear names peculiarly reminiscent of the names of characters in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century plays as well as of certain playwrights themselves.

4. Brian Boyd makes the same argument in his article “Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*” (*Nabokov Studies* 4 (1997): pp. 173–225) when he notes that the Gradus part of Kinbote’s fantasy could have arisen only after Shade’s death. Boyd and I have arrived at this argument at the same time but independently from each other.


6. The line “See the beggar dance, the crickle sing” (Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*) precedes the line that serves as a title to Shade’s book on Pope, *Supremely Blessed*:

   See the blind beggar dance, the crickle sing,
   The sot a hero, lunatic a king;
   The starving chemist in his golden views
   Supreme, blest, the poet in his muse. (Epistle II: ll. 267–70).

I suggest that by taking the image of a “singing” crickle at its face value—that is, as a sign of the eighteenth century’s “vulgar” readiness to laugh at cripples—Shade misreads this couplet. From what we know about Pope’s own physical deformity and his attitude toward it (see Maynard Mack’s *Alexander Pope: a Life* [New York: Norton in association with New Haven: Yale UP, 1985] and Helen Deutsch’s *Resemblance and Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996]), we may suggest that the phrase “see . . . the crickle sing” contains certain self-referential irony and adds to the overall ambiguity of these four lines. See the note number eleven, below for another example of Shade’s possible misprision of Pope’s richer meaning.

7. “Th’inferior Priestess” is Belinda’s maid, Betty.

8. See also the battle between the Ancients and the Moderns in Swift’s *The Battle of the Books*.

9. The title of Shade’s book—*Supremely Blessed*—is ironic, but this irony is something Nabokov borrows from Pope. According to Pope, the poet is as “supremely blest” (see the note number eight, above) “in his muse” as the “starving chemist [is] in his golden views.” Because of this juxtaposition, the “blessedness” of even the fulfilled poet is somewhat tarnished. We could infer thus that Shade’s book explores Pope’s ambivalent stand on this well-appointed world and, specifically, his thoughts on the ambiguous role of the poet who cannot take his reality seriously even as he emulates it. However, if Shade in
fact thinks that Pope's poetry is vulgar (as Nabokov hints he does), then his book should instead contain somewhat of an attack on Pope's presumptuousness: as a vulgar versifier, Pope has no moral right to view ironically the existential predicament in which the poet can find himself.

10. This need manifests itself most prominently in the undergraduate classroom. Most students majoring in English still enter eighteenth-century courses with a preconceived idea of the well-ordered, unimaginative, boring "Age of Reason."

11. At Wellesley (1943–48), Nabokov became friends with Wilma and Charles Kerby-Miller. At the time Charles Kerby-Miller was working on his monumental edition of The Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus (83 pages of The Memoirs proper, more than 300 pages worth of commentary) which he published in 1950. The famous "Double Mistress" chapter of The Memoirs (the one most likely written by Pope in this multi-authored—Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot, etc.—collection of parodies) served as an impetus for Nabokov's short story "Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster." This demonstrates that Nabokov was indeed fascinated by eighteenth-century literature—when he had a chance, that is, of accessing primary sources under the guidance of a sympathetic eighteenth-century scholar (here, Kerby-Miller) not in the lingering shadow of Matthew Arnold.

12. I thank Daniel Albright for bringing this "savage echo of Dr. Pangloss" (Albright, personal communication) to my attention.
