Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, its structure and the last works of J.S. Bach

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The evidence is solid enough to argue that *Pale Fire*'s structure can/should be seen in the light of a fugue by Bach: a theme repeated in variegated forms. For example, in the *Musical Offer* (an elaboration of the royal theme given by Frederick the Great to Bach, and as difficult to recognize as Kinbote's theme in Shade's poem) one single melody results in a fugue of which the different voices are allotted to a flute, a violin and a harpsichord. Likewise is the theme of *Pale Fire* given to three "voices", Shade, Kinbote and Gradus. The implication of this is that it doesn't make much sense to look for a hierarchy between these voices, in other words selecting Kinbote or Shade as the author of the whole is in vain.

"Lessing had got to know Mendelssohn over a chessboard"
The Gift
"What do you mean by your mountainous fugues?"
Robert Browning, "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha"

I

In the first monograph on Nabokov's oeuvre, Page Stegner writes that Shade's poem shows "*leitmotivs* and themes [that] weave in and out the stanzas and cantos like contrapuntal lines of Baroque music."[1] After thirty years of silence on this score, Brian Boyd calls our attention to Johann Fux's treatise on counterpoint, *Gradus ad Parnassum*.[2] It seems tempting to take further steps in the direction of Polyhymnia's abode. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is a novel with a most intricate composition: a poem by John Shade and a commentary on this poem by Charles Kinbote who wrote a preface and an index as

[1] *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1967), p. 123.
[2] "Shade and Shape in Pale Fire," Forum, *Nabokov Studies*, 4 (1997), p. 199.

well. Notwithstanding its discursive structure, the novel strikes the reader as a superb piece of art. This might be the reason why many critics think that behind the various parts hides one single author, who is responsible for the novel's unity and harmony. Some have selected Shade for this role, others Kinbote, while Botkin (whose identity is revealed in the Index) comes in a third favourite. I would like to suggest that the novel's harmony might be explained by its parallels with the modes Bach used for his compositions.

The contrapuntal art, which is the subject of Fux's work, is introduced in "Pale Fire," the poem, and is preceded by the 'mountain-fountain' misprint, which directs the reader to Mount Parnassus.[3] *Gradus ad Parnassum* means 'step to Parnassus' and dictates the various steps to be taken to master the art of musical composition. These are echoed in the "cautious steps" Kinbote takes to his cabin in the mountains above Cedarn where he will write his commentary.[4]

Although Nabokov declared distinctively that he was not able to appreciate music, he was equally positive about his comprehension of the similarities of the composing of music compared to literary art.[5] "I am perfectly aware of the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature," he says.[6] Before addressing this subject, we will briefly discuss how music was incidental to Nabokov's life and work.

Nabokov must have heard a great deal of music in his very early years. There were pianos in the house in St. Petersburg as well as in the summerhouse at Vyra.[7] Both his parents loved music and organised private concerts given by celebrated artists. His younger brother Sergey "had been passionately interested in music since the age of

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[3] *Pale Fire* (1962, New York: Vintage International, 1989) p. 62. See my "*Pale Fire* Zemblematically" in Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson with an Essay by Liana Ashenden, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), p. 74.

[4] p. 300.

[5] This inability has been questioned by Charles Nicol. See his "Music in the Theatre of the Mind: Opera and Vladimir Nabokov," in Lisa Zunshine (ed.), *Nabokov at the Limits, Redrawing Critical Boundaries* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 27.

[6] *Strong Opinions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), p. 35.

[7] *Speak, Memory, An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 88; p. 100.

ten" and played the piano "for hours on and on."[8] And he, like his cousin Nicolas, might have enjoyed the Pavlovsk concert programmes, as part of the summer outings in the country, with a repertoire "from Bach to Offenbach." Nicolas, the later composer, had, between 1920 and 1922, been adopted by Nabokov's parents as a member of their family. He often accompanied Nabokov's father to the Sunday morning concerts of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, which they discussed on their way back. Music was also the topic which bound Nicolas to Sergey. It seems inevitable that Nabokov somehow got involved in these discussions.[9] And this subject will have been resumed after Nabokov's son Dmitri began his studies to become a professional bass singer.

In 1923 Nabokov wrote "Sounds," a story which opens with a scene showing a lady playing a fugue by Bach. The dramatic turns of this story somehow become part of the harmony the protagonist experiences, resulting in several "vertical chords on musical staves." In the next year he wrote "Bachmann," a story about a pianist and composer, whose name echoes J.S. Bach's?[10] As will be shown, not only the protagonist's name, but also his works direct the reader to the German composer.

Some years later, in 1930, Nabokov published *The Defence* in which various chess moves and combinations are translated into musical counterparts.[11] In his *Lectures on Literature*, written in 1940, in the chapter on *Madame Bovary*, he discusses Flaubert's "special device which may be called the *counterpoint method*, or the method of parallel interlinings and interruptions of two or more conversations or trains of thought." To show the working of this device Nabokov discusses the conversation in the inn, and he singles out its "contrapuntal theme." Nabokov distinguishes three "movements": the first, a quartet; the second a long and dull recitative by Homais and the third movement, a duet by Emma and Léon. A second illustration of the "counterpoint method" concerns the country fair. Here again he

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[8] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov, The Russian Years* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), p. 40; p. 106.

[9] Nicolas Nabokov, *Bagázh, Memoirs of a Russian Cosmopolitan* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 77 and pp. 101-113.

[10] Julian W. Connolly, "The Quest for a Natural Melody in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov" in Lisa Zunshine, op. cit., p. 70.

[11] Chapter Eight. See also Connolly, loc. cit., pp. 73-8 and Boyd, op. cit., pp. 333-9.

divides the text into movements, and praises the "synthesis" thus gained: "[t]his is a wonderful chapter." And he cites Flaubert's letter on this chapter: '"If ever the values of a symphony have been transferred to literature, it will be in this chapter of my book."' A third illustration of "Flaubert's favourite contrapuntal structure" is related to Emma's visit to Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, again represented as a performance in three movements.

In the chapter on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Part two, Chapter 7) Flaubert's counterpoint themes return in "a monstrous development" as fifty characters "cross and recross each other's trails in a most intricate counterpoint."

A decade later Nabokov completed the first version of his autobiography *Speak, Memory*.[12] It contains a paragraph devoted to one of his ancestors, "Karl Heinrich Graun (1701-59), one of the most eminent composers of his time."[13] In preparing this section Nabokov must have come across Graun's much more famous contemporary, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). Both composers were members of the 'Corresponding Society of the Musical Sciences.' This society was founded by Lorenz Christoph Mizler who had translated Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* into German. (Curiously, the Latin edition of Fux's book is the only book from Bach's library that survives with an ownership mark in his hand.)[14] Another decade later, in his commentary to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, while tracing the origin of the opera *Kleopatra*, which is mentioned by Pushkin, he once more encountered Graun (who composed the opera *Cleopatra e Cesare*).[15] This research might have resulted in the much more intensive discussion of his ancestor in the revised edition of *Speak, Memory*.[16] It was after the completion of this commentary that Nabokov started writing *Pale Fire*.

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[12] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov, The American Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 169.

[13] *Speak, Memory* (London: Victor Gollanz Ltd, 1951), p. 38.

[14] Martin Geck, *Bach* (London: Haus Publishing, 2003), p. 125. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach. The Learned Musician* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 334.

[15] Vladimir Nabokov, *Aleksandr Pushkin*, Eugene Onegin, A novel in Verse, *Translated from the Russian with a Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, 2 Vols.), II p. 79.

[16] *Speak, Memory, An Autobiography Revisited*, pp. 54 - 55; p.65.

II

Pale Fire has many musical moments; more than fifty independent references to music can be distinguished. About ten different instruments are mentioned; a trumpet, a keyboard, mandolins, a virginal, a viola, flutes, a harp and pianos; the grand piano in Lex, the piano in Shade's house, and, I suppose, there will also be a piano in the Goldsworth's "music room." Hymns, which combine text with notes, literature with music, are noticed by Shade as well as Kinbote. And there is Kinbote's registration of "those ringing sounds" caused by the tossing of horseshoes, this "medley of metallic melodies" also heard by Shade as "Click. Clunk" and reverberated in the "clink and tinkle of distant masonry work" during Gradus's visit to Lex, coming from the trowels of the three masons finishing the house which is built on a lot between Lavender's villa and a downhill vineyard.[17] And three times a reference is made to contrapuntal artifices.[18] Contrapuntal comes from counterpoint, which has, via the French *contrepoint* its root, in the Medieval Latin *contrapunctus*, *punctus* meaning "musical note" or "melody."[19] Although the art of counterpoint – combining independent parts into a harmonious whole – can be applied to other areas, it is first and foremost a style used by composers. Counterpoint reached its highest peak in the Baroque period and among its composers it is J.S. Bach who developed this style in an unparalleled way. As "Bach stands undisputedly at the top of the contrapuntalist tree" this mode of composing music is ineradicably associated with his name.[20]

In still another way *Pale Fire* is indebted to Bach, as King Charles II of Zembla was not the first monarch who gave a much admired artist a theme to cultivate. During Bach's visit to Frederick the Great the king gave him a theme to improvise. In the next months Bach reshaped this royal theme into an ingenious and extended composition, *The Musical Offer*, which he sent to the king. (An agate snuffbox among Bach's effects at the time of his death may have been an expression of the king's gratitude, and this might as well be the origin of the "pretty snuffboxes" in the Graun family entail, which was distributed among

[17] p. 287; p. 69; p.202.
[18] p. 62; p. 254; p. 262.
[19] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition.
[20] Geck, op. cit., p. 136.

his descendants, Nabokov being one of them.[21]) Most incontrovertible is the reference to Bach in Kinbote's divagation that "[t]he Reformation with us had been headed by a composer of genius."[22] Any vademecum will confirm that the combination of 'Reformation' and 'composer of genius' leads to Bach. He composed twice as much religious music compared to secular. He is known as the 'fifth Evangelist' and "many German Lutherans saw 'Bach the Man' as their saviour from the crises then facing their church."[23] Other allusions to Bach are rather flimsy or even speculative. In 1936 Fleur is observed mending "a broken viola d'amore" and "comparing two ancient flutes." Twenty years later she is asked "if she still played the viola" which is not the case.[24] Why should someone, who is devoted to music, and who plays the viola, compare flutes? I suppose because she contemplates shifting from viola to flute. This shift may reflect the two versions of Bach's *Trio Sonata in G major*, one for viola da gamba and harpsichord, one for two flutes and basso continuo including a harpsichord.[25] Another instance shows Kinbote listening to a Wagner record, "in the middle of [his] insomnia."[26] Wagner's expressive and dramatic music seems to me the least suited to drowse its listener. This scene brings to mind Bach's *Goldberg Variations* which are so firmly linked with the story that they were written to entertain the Russian Ambassador, Keyserling, during his insomnia.

III

J.S. Bach is a most likely artist to have aroused Nabokov's interest. Referring to a "composer of genius" must have been a very exclusive distinction for Nabokov. In literature he restricted this qualification to "a very small number of writers, Shakespeare, Milton, Pushkin, Tolstoy."[27] Among painters it was Leonardo da Vinci whose art

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[21] Charles Sanford Terry, *The Music of Bach, An Introduction* (1933,New York: Dover Publications, 1963), p. 57; *Speak, Memory, An Autobiography Revisited*, p. 55.
[22] *Pale Fire*, p. 224.
[23] John Butt, "Introduction" in Geck, op. cit., p. VIII.
[24] *Pale Fire*, p. 110; p. 213.
[25] BWV (*Bachs Werken Verzeichnis*) 1027 and BWV 1039.
[26] *Pale Fire*, p. 97.
[27] *Strong Opinions*, p. 146.

fascinated Nabokov from an early age.[28] Bach who had "the eye of a painter and the soul of a poet," and who exhibited "a unique combination of constructional ingenuity and poetic expression," and who proved to be "an architect of contrapuntal form whose like had not and has not appeared," must have been somehow a subject of Nabokov's wide-ranging research.[29] It is hard to imagine that Nabokov, who was "perfectly aware of the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature" wouldn't have had Bach in mind, who investigated the same parallels.[30] Like Nabokov, Bach gave attention to the smallest of details. The number of bars, the number of notes and their distribution could be subjected to a most deliberate pattern.[31] Like the author of *Pale Fire*, Bach, through his intriguing compositions, "invites us to make discoveries of a fantastic and sensuous nature."[32]

IV

"Bachmann" is about a pianist and composer who, during the episode related in the story, scaled heights he had never attained before. "With incomparable artistry, Bachmann would summon and resolve the voices of counterpoint, cause dissonant chords to evoke an impression of marvellous harmonies, and, in his Triple Fugue, pursue the theme, gracefully, passionately toying with it, as a cat with a mouse…"[33] The Triple Fugue doubtless refers to the famous 'Fuga a 3 soggetti (Contrapunctus 14)' BWV 1080/19 whose triple fugue is the climax of Bach's *Art of Fugue*, the composer's last work. According to his son's–Carl Philipp Emanuel–report, this fugue remained unfinished as death interfered with its completion, as happened with the poem 'Pale Fire.'[34]

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[28] See my "Leonardo and 'Spring in Fialta'" in *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*.

[29] Charles Stanford Terry, op. cit. p. 22, p. 14 and p. 7.

[30] Martin Geck, op. cit., p. 125 and p. 79.

[31] Karl Geiringer, *The Bach Family* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), p. 203.

[32] Geck p. 69.

[33] *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov,* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) p. 119. See also the "cat-and-mouse game" in *Pale Fire*, p. 93.

[34] Geck, pp. 121-2; Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (1979 New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 80. I am indebted to Professor Couturier for drawing my attention to this study.

Let us try to explain what a fugue is. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* it is "a piece of music built out of fugal texture" and this texture "consists of a melodic phrase repeated in various keys and at various intervals." This method of composition is one of the best known styles to create polyphony or counterpoint and it is this method in which Bach excelled: "[f]or the average musician in the 20th century the word fugue is almost synonymous with the name of J.S. Bach."[35] "His name and the Fugue are inseparably associated," says Terry.[36] The repetition of the melody "in various keys at various intervals" can be diversified in many more ways, as will be discussed. This can make the composition of a fugue an incredibly complex exercise. A note must fit horizontally as it belongs to a melodic line and it must harmonise vertically, with the notes from other melodies played simultaneously. Hofstadter compares a six-part fugue to the "playing of sixty simultaneous blindfold games of chess, and winning them all."[37] This sinuosity features the compositions of Nabokov's protagonist as well: "in those days there was genius in his playing. To that period belongs his Symphony in D Minor and several complex fugues. No one saw him writing them. The most interesting is the so-called Golden Fugue. Have you heard it? Its thematic development is totally original."[38]

Nabokov's focus on fugues in "Bachmann," the allusions to Bach in *Pale Fire*, his claim that he was perfectly aware of the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature, and the etymology of "contrapuntal," signify that the texture mentioned in line 808 should be of a fugal quality. The contrapuntal art Nabokov discusses in *Lectures on Literature* is of a different kind; here it is synchronisation that matters, in Flaubert the confluence of the various trains of thought, in Joyce the crossing and recrossing of the trails of all the personages involved. In *Pale Fire* it is mentioned that "the synchronization device has been already worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce."[39] And indeed, Nabokov did not duplicate Flaubert's stratagem; the superbly orchestrated discussion in the Faculty Club, in which eight personages participate actively and true to their role, is

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35 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1964, vol. 9, pp. 990-991.
36 Terry, p.14.
37 Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 7.
38 *Stories*, p. 120.
39 *Pale Fire*, p. 196.

concentrated on one single topic.[40] And whereas Joyce synchronised people by knitting them into a common action, Nabokov did the opposite by showing the differences at the same point of time, thus deepening the dramatic impact of the scene concerned.[41]
Synchronisation is a way of bringing differences into harmony; a fugue, however, does the opposite since it creates differences out of unity as all the repeated themes stem from one melody. The ways in which a melody can be repeated, vary considerably. It can be rephrased more quickly (‘diminution’), or more slowly (‘augmentation’), or it can be inverted (rising tones become falling ones) into a so-called mirror fugue, or retrograded (beginning with the end of the melody to be repeated) which leads to a ‘crab’ canon or *cancrizans*.[42] Composing a ‘crab’ canon might be as difficult as finding palindromes of, say, ten letters, which, in combination, form a third one. By these means Bach managed to create in his *Musical Offering* “a musical universe… using a ‘royal’ theme that, by its nature, would dominate the writing.”[43] Each repetition of the melody (or its reshaped form) implies a new voice. Many of Bach’s fugues, even the most complicated ones, are composed for the harpsichord. In the *Musical Offer*, however, a sonata has to be performed by three different instruments for each voice: a flute, a violin and basso continuo. Thus an arrangement, three different sets of notes, stemming from one source, resembles the convolution described in ‘Pale Fire’:

> A system of cells interlinked within
> Cells interlinked within cells interlinked
> Within one stem … (l. 704-706)

V

Pale Fire tells three stories (Shade’s life, Kinbote’s adventures and the pursuit by Gradus, the revolutionary who must murder Kinbote) which have many motifs, themes and images in common. This composition resembles the structure of a fugue with three voices. Most conspicuous is the “thematic development” and the “correlated

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[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 265 – 69.
[41] See for example the “sharp contrast” Boyd notices (“Azure Afterimages. Reflections on Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” Forum, *Nabokov Studies*, 6, 2000-2001, p. 189).
[42] Geck, p. 125 and p. 133.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

pattern" which is so clearly noticeable in Nabokov's novel.[44] The mirror-like inversion is a characteristic of Zembla, Kinbote's country, "a land of reflections, of 'resemblers'" but the same goes for Kinbote "who is a mirror-inversion" of Shade.[45] In a great number of incidents images and themes are repeated, in either a direct or in an adapted way. Brian Boyd presents ten cases of "sustained harmony between part and ostensibly discordant part."[46]

It interesting to see how 'Pale Fire''s very first image, a waxwing, is developed in the three 'stories'. Kinbote, in his first annotations, visualises "the wax-red streaks ornamenting those gray-brown wings", points to its "feeding on chalk-blue berries of junipers" and its Zemblan name, meaning "silktail." The textile referred to, the colours and the berries return in Gradus's appearance before he flies to New Wye: his tie is of "imitation silk" and coloured "brown, barred with red" while the colour of his insides is compared with "mulberry." The brown-red combination returns in the last paragraph as a "red bandanna handkerchief [is] limply hanging out of one hip pocket" of Shade's "khaki pants."[47]

Most beautifully elaborate are the themes associated with the ace of spades. In his *Commentary* on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov explained in great detail the game of pharo, played in Pushkin's famous story "Queen of Spades." Pushkin tells how his protagonist loses his money and his mental health because he showed a queen instead of an ace of spades. The suit of cards called spade is named *pique* in French, meaning 'pike' because its icon resembles a spade as well as the top of a pike or lance.[48]

Both variants, the spade and the spearhead, are used in one of the correlated patterns in *Pale Fire*, somehow connected with forms of metallic music.

The development of this theme will be followed according to the three stories told in *Pale Fire*. In Shade's poem an arrow is presented in l. 24, which has of course a miniature spearhead, and in l. 991 the "Click-Clunk", sound of horseshoes being tossed is heard. In the

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[44] *Stories*, p. 120 and *Pale Fire*, p. 63.

[45] p. 265 and Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's* Pale Fire, *The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton, PUP, 1999), p. 123.

[46] Boyd, *ibid*., pp.112-13.

[47] *Pale Fire*, p. 73; pp. 277-78 and p. 292.

[48] Cf. the *Webster's Collegiate* under 'spade': "resembles a stylized spearhead."

comment on l. 275 Shade's name is compared with *Ombre* (French for 'shadow'), a card game of which the ace of spades (the *spadille*) is always the highest trump card.
Gradus was "designated to track down and murder the King, the choice […] decided by a show of cards," the ace of spades being the decisive one. During his visit to Lex the "clink and tinkle of distant masonry work" can be heard, doubtlessly coming from the trowels used by bricklayers to tap the bricks into place. The lozenge-shaped blades of the trowels resemble a stylised spearhead.[49]
In Kinbote's tale, during the King's imprisonment in his castle, the guards are playing lansquenet, a card game, whose name is derived from the German *Landsknecht*, which means soldiers typically armed with long pikes. Metallic sounds don't come from horseshoes this time, but from a "cowbell."[50] In the last episode of the novel, the image of the spade returns; however, this time it is a real one, carried by Kinbote's gardener, while once again the "metallic melodies" from the horseshoes are mentioned.[51]
These repeated images, cultivated in manner and matter, are beautifully harmonised vertically. They are also ingeniously swallow-tailed horizontally, as part of the story to which they belong. The designation of Gradus by means of a card, with Nodo cheating, suits the inferiority of Gradus's errand. The game of cards alluded to by 'ombre', is the subject of the third stanza of *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope, Shade's favourite poet. The playing of lansquenet suits the romantic setting of the king's high adventure.
This example might illustrate the "combinational delight", the "[m]aking ornaments of accidents and possibilities," and might explain why 'texture' is valued higher than "text."[52] The fugal composition of prose might help the author in the same way as prosody does the poet. That Shade begins his poem on 2 July, of which Kinbote was informed on 3 July, while Gradus (whose designation coincided with the very beginning of Shade's poem) started his pursuit on 5 July, follows a fugal structure in which the

[49] *Pale Fire*, p. 150 and p. 202. (See illustration in *Webster's Third.)*
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 122 and p. 140.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 294 and p. 287.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 69 and p. 63.

different voices join in after a distinct interval.[53] That the three of them were all born on 5 July stresses their common origin.

VI

One of the most outstanding variations Bach used in his fugues is the 'crab' canon, as is the case with the *Musical Offering*. At this point I wondered if, supposing that Nabokov's use of Bach's fugal composition is really as evident as I think it is, Nabokov tried such a 'crab' canon as well. As Gradus is associated with a "crab" it could be expected that Gradus's story ends with the beginning of Kinbote's tale.[54] The most important episode of Kinbote's journey is his escape from his castle, while the last part of Gradus's pursuit is his release from the New Wye University library at Wordsmith College. Gradus "promptly got lost" as soon as he entered this building.[55] Nabokov writes that Gradus is not "a fugitive king" which implies that the circumstances of the king during his flight are otherwise comparable to those of Gradus. The king's captivity has its first instalment in the "South West Tower" while Gradus starts in the third room of the "North West" wing, its inverted counterpart.[56] The king escapes through a tunnel and Gradus finds his way contrariwise "[a]long the open gallery that ran above the hall." Like the king who had to remove "a piece of black velvet" to find a secret door, Gradus is caught in a room with one hidden exit which is "draped." At the end of the tunnel the king is again confronted with "drapery." Gradus follows a "pipe-lined" passage, leading to a "water closet"; the king passes a "prolix gutter pipe" which makes the rain "audible." When they finally reach the open air, a car is waiting for each of them, to take Gradus and the king to their next destinations. And whoever would like to know whether Kinbote correctly supposes that Gradus's trilby will turn up in Mr. Emerald's car, can simply check what happens with the king's cap.[57] And curiously, both notes end with an appeal to the reader who is supposed to have enjoyed or appreciated the reports.

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[53] *Ibid.*, p. 13; p. 86; p. 151 and p. 74.
[54] *Ibid.*,p. 150.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 281.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 121 and p. 281.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 144 and p. 284.

The inversion extends to the behaviour of both characters: the king is acting with sangfroid, in a calculated and composed way, even enjoying "a kind of amorous joy," while Gradus is blundering, "cursing" and fretting from "stress."

VII

In musical notation the notes of an octave correspondent with the first seven letters of the alphabet, among them the letters of the name of Bach. The third theme of Bach's Triple Fugue is based upon these four notes: B–A–C–H.[58] In *Pale Fire* Nabokov is present as well through St. George, whose feast day is celebrated on his birthday.[59] One of the most tantalising characteristics of Nabokov's prose, "deceit, to the point of diabolism,"[60] distinguishes Bach's last compositions as well. "[H]e wants to make his results as cryptic and difficult to solve as possible," hiding the solution "so effectively that only an expert can unearth it."[61] With respect to all the mysteries *Pale Fire* embodies, much effort has been spent on the question of the internal authorship, while Brian Boyd has unfolded the affecting drama of Hazel, the poet's daughter. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the autobiographical intimations: Hazel's year of birth is the same as that of Nabokov's son, Dmitri, and the day Shade is killed coincides with the birthday of Nabokov's father.[62] And in his poem "An Evening of Russian Poetry" his love for Russian poetry and his nostalgia are exquisitely intermingled but at the same time contrasted, as the mellowness of the poetry (…"like a greyish rose…") differs from the haunting memories which stab him at moments he least expects. The images of certain stanzas are much like those presented in *Pale Fire*

> My back is Argus-eyed. I live in danger.
> False shadows turn to track me as I pass
> and, wearing beards, disguised as secret agents,
> creep in to blot the freshly written page
> and read the blotter in the looking glass.
> And in the dark, under my bedroom window,

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58 Terry, op. cit., p. 60.

59 "*Pale Fire* Zemblematically", loc. cit., p. 76. A lance is St. George's attribute, see George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 177.

60 *Speak, Memory, An Autobiography Revisited*, p. 289.

61 Geck, op. cit. p. 134.

62 Robert Alter, "Autobiography as Alchemy in *Pale Fire*", *Cycnos*, vol. 10, 1 (993)

> until, with a chill whirr and shiver, day
> presses its starter, warily they linger
> or silently approach the door and ring
> the bell of memory and run away.

This subject will be resumed in the following section.

VIII

Having shown how Bach's fugal mode of composition might have influenced the structure, or rather the texture, of *Pale Fire*, the question may arise whether the fugue analogue can also shed some light on the problems and riddles this novel contains. A fugue generates separate voices from one single source or, to put it differently, in a fugue one single theme is presented in several independent versions. (There is no limit to the number of voices in fugues - many of Bach's fugues have four voices - and the number of melodic themes may vary as well.) In analogy, the stories of the "three main characters" may be articulations of one single history.[63] In this way, the main events in Nabokov's life might have been exemplified by attributing them to the three characters: his exile to Kinbote, his ambition to become a writer to Shade, his being haunted by nostalgia to Gradus.[64] This might explain Nabokov's comment on *Pale Fire*: referring to the difficulty Flaubert had while "painting *couleur sur couleur*," he added that "[t]his in a way is what I tried to do in retwisting my own experience when inventing Kinbote."[65] Such a fugal approach in story-telling is not quite unprecedented. In the same year as "Bachmann" was published, Osbert Sitwell's collection of stories, *Triple Fugue*, appeared, and in the story with the same title, he writes "that this rarer, more unusual narrative of three separate bodies with but one animating force behind them, and each normally ignorant

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[63] *Pale Fire*, p. 303.

[64] See my "Fanning the Poet's Fire, Some Remarks on Nabokov's *Pale Fire*" in *Russian Literature Triquarterly* (1991), no. 24.

[65] *Strong Opinions*, p. 77. Nabokov refers to Flaubert's letter of 15 January 1853 to Louise Colet (see *Lectures on Literatur,e* p.152) in which he stresses the need to differentiate between Léon and Charles (the lover and the husband of Mme Bovary) as they have so much in common: their way of loving, their mediocrities, their environments. Painting colour upon colour, varying on an example by differentiating some of its painted features, is not unlike varying on a theme to compose a fugue.

of the intimate tie which bind him to the other two, may be found to possess a certain psychological interest."[66]

[66] *Triple Fugue* (1924, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), p. 143. With respect to Aldous Huxley's intense longing to write a novel like Bach's *Art of Fugue*, see Donald Watt, "The Fugal Construction of *Point Counter Point*" (*Studies in the Novel*, 1977, Winter, pp. 509-517). In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (Part II, Ch. 3) by André Gide, the protagonist discusses his ambition to write a novel that resembles Bach's *Art of Fugue.* Much has been written on the fugal structure of the Sirens chapter in *Ulysses*. For a recent study see Nadya Zimmerman, "Musical Form as Narrator: The Fugue of the Sirens in James Joyce's *Ulysses*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, XXVI, 1 (Fall 2002), pp. 108-118. Curiously, the resounding horseshoe's "rings" form a recurrent theme in this chapter, as they do in *Pale Fire* (*Ulysses*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 254-57; p.269). For the musical qualities of *Tristram Shandy* see William Freedman, *Laurence Sterne and the Origin of the Musical Novel* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978). These examples show how rich the analogies between music and prose might be. Exploring this subject with respect to *Pale Fire* beyond the preliminary observations presented here (or "the fugal theme" in *Glory*–see its "Foreword"), seems most rewarding.