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DO NOT BE ANGRY AT THE MOON:

PALE FIRE AND THE OLD ENGLISH BOETHIUS

In her study of *Pale Fire*'s medieval sources, Priscilla Meyer goes to great lengths to expound a complex maze of subtextual zones that cloud every consequent rereading of Nabokov's masterpiece. According to Meyer, Nabokov deploys a variety of obscure words and allusions from the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition to emphasize "King Alfred's role as the founder of English literature" (65). King Alfred the Great of England (c. 848–900) selected six key texts for translation from Latin into Anglo-Saxon to represent "the best compendia of knowledge of their day" (68): *The Universal History* of Paulus Orosius (375/85–420); *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* of the Venerable Bede (c. 673–735); *The Dialogues* and *The Pastoral Care* of Gregory the Great (c. 540–604); *The Soliloquies* of Augustine of Hippo (354–430); and *On the Consolation of Philosophy* of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 477–524).

Translated into Anglo-Saxon with further adaptations, amplifications, and additions by Alfred sometime between 887 and 899, *King Alfred's Boethius* (or, as it is more commonly known today, *The Old English Boethius*) is among the most important texts of early anglophone theology and of considerable significance to several thematic aspects of *Pale Fire*. Boethius' imprisonment for (false) charges of treason which in turn spurred him on to write the *Consolation* (c. 525) is matched in King Charles the Beloved's self-imposed Appalachian exile from Zembra to evade the stalking regicide Jakob Gradus. Alfred also resembles Kinbote in his tendency to adapt the texts he selected for translation by inserting his own amplifications.

Both [Alfred and Kinbote] are royal author-editors tendentiously molding their texts. Kinbote presents Shade's poem as a reflection of his imaginary kingdom, Zembla; Alfred selects and modifies his texts in order to lead his people toward a Christian faith in the immortality of the soul. (Meyer 68)

Just as Kinbote transforms Shade's personal poem into a meditation upon a lost kingdom, Boethius' text becomes under Alfred's pen a manual for kingship and a meditation on the nature of royal authority.

The character of the subtextual presence of *King Alfred's Boethius* in *Pale Fire* is decidedly theological. In the note to line 549, the novel's theological center, Kinbote rehearses his conversation with John Shade on the night of June 23, 1959. The dialogue between the two characters about chance and fate (and providence) neatly corresponds to Boethius' dialogue with Wisdom about the same topic. Comparing Homer to the sun, Wisdom says:

Yet she [the sun] cannot shine on all creatures, nor those creatures which she may shine upon, can she shine upon all equally, nor shine through them all within. But it is not so with the Almighty God who is the maker of all creatures. . . . Him we may call without falsehood the true sun. (Alfred 41.1; p. 531)

Meyer aptly derives from this statement the conviction that "mortal art then is but pale fire" to the Almighty (77). Yet Alfred's statement also recalls Kinbote's fiery gloss on "God's Presence — a

faint phosphorescence at first, a pale light in the dimness of bodily life, and a dazzling radiance after it” (C549).¹

This evocation by Kinbote of God’s presence owes as much to the Anglo-Saxon theological tradition as to the title of Shade’s poem, which Shade has taken from Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*:

I’ll example you with thievery.
 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. (14.435–38)

The lunar theft figured in Shakespeare’s “pale fire” and Kinbote’s fiery evocation of God’s presence to the soul as a “pale light” originates in a longstanding philosophical-theological tradition that stretches back far beyond Shakespeare and so challenges the purported originality of the Bard’s “pale fire” as well as the *only apparent* derivativeness of Kinbote’s “contribution” to the poem and the novel. Alfred, in his hymn to God for the beneficent outpouring of divine providence in creation, muses:

she [the sun] with her bright splendour dispels the darkness of the swarthy night. So
 does also the moon with his pale light, which obscures the bright stars in the heaven;
 and sometimes bereaves the sun of her light, when he is betwixt us and her. (1.4; p.

¹ All citations from *Pale Fire* (Nabokov 1989) are given in abbreviated form, where C=Commentary, F=Foreword, I=Index and P=Poem.

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While Meyer notes several thematic and textual correspondences between *Pale Fire* and *King Alfred's Boethius*, this particular one is absent. Indeed, it has been observed neither in Nabokov studies nor in Shakespeare studies that the cosmic mimesis figured in each work's "pale fire" first appears in Alfred's Anglo-Saxon translation of Boethius' *Consolation*. Commented upon by Robert Grosseteste (c. 1168–1253) and translated, either in whole or in part, by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400), Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), John Lesley, Bishop of Ross (1527–96), and Elizabeth I of England (1533–1603), the importance and influence of Boethius' *Consolation* in the history of anglophone literature is difficult to overstate. According to Robert Presson, "Shakespeare could have read Boethius in Chaucer's translation or in that by George Colville" (406n1). Since it is highly unlikely that Shakespeare knew Anglo-Saxon, Colville's 1556 translation seems the most likely *textual* source for his image of the lunar theft: "And lykewise though causist y^t the moon other whyles pale of lyght approchyng nere vnto the sonne, doo lose her lyght" (Colville 23). Nevertheless, by the time Shakespeare began *Timon of Athens*, the image of the moon as a "pale fire" seems to have become a commonplace in medieval and Renaissance thought and cosmology. In his commentary to the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (1100–1160), Italian Franciscan theologian St. Bonaventure (1221–1274) calls the mirror of the mind both a "moon" and a "weak" or "pale light" (1:89) of the divine light. And while it is also unlikely that Nabokov read Alfred's translation in the original Anglo-Saxon, Nabokov could have read a

² In their 2012 translation, Irvine and Godden (trans.) translate the Latin as "The moon with its pale light moderates / the bright stars through the workings of your powers; / at times it also robs the sun / of its bright light when it so falls out / that by necessity they come so very close together" (meter 4.8–12; p. 19). Boethius makes no suggestion that the moon steals its light from the sun; only that the surface of the moon at times reflects "all the sun her brother's fire" (1.meter 5.6; p. 159) and that, as during an eclipse, "Phoebus pales / And loses all her light" (1.meter 5.8–9; p. 159).

modern English translation of *The Old English Boethius* in the multivolume compendium *The Whole Works of King Alfred the Great* published in London in 1858 by Bosworth & Harrison. As Meyer demonstrates, Nabokov's knowledge of Anglo-Saxon as well as the texts Alfred selected to be translated was sufficient for him to trace "the development of the English language . . . from the primitive kennings of early Anglo-Saxon culture to the linguistic elegance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (8).

Commenting on Jacques Derrida's essay, "Violence and Metaphysics," John Milbank describes an "ontology of violence" as "a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confirmed by counter-force" (2006: 4). It is one that is "incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other" (Derrida 113) and which "knows" the other only through illegitimate possession by seizure. The ontology of *Timon of Athens* is unrelentingly violent:

Each thing's a thief.

The laws, your curb and whip, in their power
Has unchecked theft. Love not yourself. Away,
Rob one another. There's more gold. Cut throats;
All that you meet are thieves. To Athens go,
Break open shops; nothing can you steal
But thieves do lose it. (14.442–48)

In *Timon*, the theft of light from the sun by the moon fits into this view of the cosmos. The ontological violence Timon senses in the lunar theft disavows any possibility of mutual

participation in favor of intractable difference overcome — but always reinstated — only by force.

While Timon looks to the lunar theft as evidence of a fundamentally violent ontology, Alfred looks to the same mimetic movement as proof of God’s providence and of our participation, however marred or distant, in God. For Timon, “pale fire” names the moon’s place in but one of a dizzying array of hierarchies built on subordination and theft. The moon does not participate in the light of the sun, as it does in the neoplatonic system that Alfred receives and furthers in his translation of Boethius’ *Consolation*. Construing the lunar theft as evidence of the beneficent ruling of divine providence over all creation, Alfred’s “pale light” bespeaks an ontology of gift according to which the moon is the sun’s dark night, in which the sun knows itself in and as the otherness of the moon. This is a distinctly neoplatonic notion that the medievals from Boethius onward would recognize and endorse, as in St. Thomas Aquinas’ *modus* principle (“what is in another is in it according to the mode of the receiver” (1.43.5). Andrew Davison explains this phenomenon on a more mundane scale:

When I understand an apple, it comes to be in my mind in a *mental way* (according to the manner of the mind that understands it) rather than being present in the manner of the apple in its native state: that would have it in my brain *in a physical way*, much to my detriment. The *modus* approach to participation sees creation as something coming *from* the creator that comes to be present in the creature *as* something created. (151)

Adapted to the language of Alfred’s “pale light,” the *modus* principle states that my diurnal visibility is my (ascendant) participation in the sun and the sun’s (kenotic) “non-exact mimesis”

or “non-identical repetition” (Milbank 1995: 125) of itself in (as) my visibility. Insofar as I am, I am a pale fire.

To be sure, Boethius and Alfred share Timon’s lament that every human hierarchy abides in competing assertions of dubious power:

Truly on earth all created things
obey your command, they do likewise in heaven
with mind and might, except for humankind alone
who acts most often against your will.

Eternal and almighty
creator and ruler of all creation,
pity your wretched earthly offspring,
the human race, through the workings of your powers.

Why, eternal God, would you ever have wanted
fate to proceed quite so completely
according to the will of the wicked?

It very often harms the innocent.

Throughout earthly kingdoms the wicked sit
on high thrones, trample the holy
under their feet; people do not know

why fate must proceed so wrongly. (*Old English Boethius* 1.meter 4.25–42; p. 19–

21)

Unlike Timon, however, Alfred's and Boethius' lament that fate nevertheless seems to favor the wicked takes solace in the ontological beneficence they sense at the heart of reality. Whatever evils we might inflict upon one another, the lunar theft signified in Alfred's "pale light" is evidence that in everything *except* human affairs all is ordered towards greater participation in God — the cosmos is a funhouse hall of mirrors reflecting at varying grades and degrees the dazzling radiance that is God. And so, as Shakespeare transforms Alfred's "pale light" into his "pale fire," the participatory metaphysics of gift — by which a coordinated system of hierarchies allow the higher to give to the lower what belongs by nature to the higher (mediation) so that the lower may, to the extent its nature allows, participate in the higher "realities" in a chutes and ladders game of divine ascent — becomes the violent assertion of power at the cynical center of Timon's worldview.

The play of similarity and dissimilarity between Alfred's "pale light" and Shakespeare's "pale fire" — in terms of what they signify and of how they interpret the moon's theft — begs reconsideration of the novel's basic ontology or interpretative paradigm, especially since many scholars read *Pale Fire* according to the ontology of theft voiced by Timon. Shakespeare's "pale fire" belongs most properly to Shade's "contribution" (the poem), however, and is the obverse of its Boethian counterpart in Kinbote's "contribution" (the commentary). And while *Timon of Athens* and *King Alfred's Boethius* differ as to the moral value of the mimetic ontology implied in their respective phrases, each of these fiery metaphors bespeaks the "play of competing ontologies" (Alter 182) figured in the title of Shade's poem and Nabokov's novel: the dialectic of sameness and difference represented in the various ways that poem and commentary inhere in one another.

Shakespeare's use of "pale fire" in *Timon* has an ironic dimension, for even as Timon inverts the metaphysics of participation figured in Alfred's "pale light," transforming it into a slogan for his violent metaphysic, Shakespeare may be read as doubling the problem of the phrase

and ironizing Timon's opprobrium in the process. Not only the violence Timon ascribes to the lunar theft but the very notion of originality is called into question, for by appropriating Alfred's metaphor, Shakespeare plays the moon to Alfred's sun. Covertly gesturing towards the prior form of the lunar theft as gift, Shakespeare's non-identical repetition of Alfred's "pale light" problematizes the uncritical assumption that the metaphysics of violence implied in Timon's "pale fire" is the patent ontology of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and is not, in fact, challenged from within the novel's complex web of intertexts.

In view of Alfred's subtextual presence throughout Nabokov's novel, the fundamental ontology or interpretative paradigm of *Pale Fire* becomes more ambiguous and perhaps even undeterminable. For in a twist of irony, "pale fire" instead seems to name the impossible possibility of stealing a gift. In a letter to his sister Elena dated 13 October 1925, Nabokov writes:

I understand how God as he created the world found this a pure, thrilling joy. *We* are translators of God's creation, his little plagiarists and imitators, we dress up what he wrote, as a charmed commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius. (quoted in Boyd 245)

As one compares Nabokov's early belief concerning our identity as God's "little plagiarists" with Kinbote's theft of Shade's poem, it becomes less clear that Kinbote has stolen something; he may, in fact be the recipient of a divinely bestowed gift. Just as God directs the world in such a manner that the lunar theft is in accord with the divine will that all should find their place in a long hierarchy predicated on the mediation of the primordial gift — participation in God — Kinbote's theft of Shade's poem is also his participation or non-identical repetition of Shade's prior act of creation. The light that imbues Kinbote's commentary is simultaneously stolen, received, and

reflected back as Shade's poem which now has been made strange and *more* artistic in Kinbote's beloved Zembla.

It is no longer evident that Kinbote's poetic evocation of God's presence as a kind of "pale fire" represents a dubious attempt on his part to validate his "contribution" to Shade's poem, since Kinbote's "pale light," rather than being itself derivative, exposes the secondary status of Shakespeare's "pale fire" as itself a pale reflection of Boethius. Indeed, whereas the sun is masculine and the moon is feminine in *Timon of Athens*, in the Conmal translation of *Timon of Athens* Kinbote has at hand³ as well as in *King Alfred's Boethius* the sun is feminine and the moon is masculine, "as in all the northern dialects" (Alfred 429n7). The subtextual presence of *King Alfred's Boethius* and its location in Kinbote's "contribution" thus challenges the uncritical assumption that the violence at the heart of Timon's vilification of cosmic thievery is the hermeneutical center of the dialectic between poem and commentary. It rather seems that Kinbote may have bypassed Shade and Shakespeare in his distinctly theological retrieval of *King Alfred's Boethius*.

Presenting two distinct ontologies for the lunar theft, the dialectical pair that Shade and Kinbote form (each with their respective "contributions" and corresponding subtexts) expresses the translation *Pale Fire* effects of the philosophical-theological discourse figured in the Christian neoplatonic image of a "pale fire" into a metafictional meditation upon the nature of authorship, the dualism of originality and repetition, and transcendence. Whereas the Shadean contribution corresponds to *Timon of Athens* and is fundamentally violent, Kinbote's commentary, corresponding to Alfred's "pale light," conceives the non-identical repetition of the sun's light in the moon as gift, a sign of the mediated grace of God's providence. Holding these two disparate

³ "The sun is a thief: she lures the sea / and robs it. The moon is a thief: / he steals his silvery light from the sun. / The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon" (C39-40).

interpretations together, “pale fire” and its legion of variants throughout Nabokov’s novel — pale and dim lights, faint phosphorescences that flicker and fade and in the novel’s myriad mirrors, which, in their turn, expose themselves as pale fires of “pale fire” — signify the dialectic of identity and difference between Shade and Kinbote and between Shakespeare and Alfred. The correspondence between *Timon of Athens* and *King Alfred’s Boethius* thus calls for a radical reconfiguration not only of the novel’s fundamental ontology by which readers make sense of its complex maze of wandering traps but of the prevailing critical opinion that Kinbote’s Christianity is just a foil against which Nabokov plays Shade’s quieter and a-theological agnosticism. Rather, the theological sources permeating *Pale Fire*’s subtextual zone are substantial components of the novel’s metaphysical aspect.

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