

## **Diversions and Deceit: Eliot, Nabokov, and the Art of Misdirection in a Speed-Reading Society**

Rose Burt, San Diego State University

*I*n the preface to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the character Charles Kinbote urges the reader to refer to his annotations to a poem and to "study the poem with their help, rereading them of course."<sup>1</sup> Critics who followed this advice soon published labyrinthine notes with annotations of the annotations of the poem, "Pale Fire."<sup>2</sup> In his review of such criticism, Charles Ross writes of academics: "We are a busy people. Not many can wile away the hours in graduate school trying to construct a grammar of Zemblan. Give the public the solution it wants; then let us reread...a great short essay might have been a better choice than a spiraling critical study."<sup>3</sup> While at first Ross's statement seems merely like the late-night grumblings of an overloaded student, in a society increasingly concerned with industrial efficiency and measuring success in terms of output (as the pressures of promotion on the tenure-track would suggest), Ross's outlook on the ideal forms of reading and criticism echoes the sentiments of many academics. Ross's comment is indicative of two prevalent attitudes of academic scholars that

have prevailed even into this century: first, the desire for linear arguments and graspable solutions, and second, the preference for packaged critical inquiry with portable, concrete analyses. When we read a poem or novel, we often want to end our first reading with a sense of satisfaction and comprehension. When we read criticism, we seek clear, structured, theory-based studies that give us answers to questions of relevance and literary significance. At the very least, thinking about “re-reading” and “spiraling critical study” strikes us with some trepidation.

In this sense, we are not so far off from the speed-readers we criticize outside of academia. When faced with challenging texts, the first inclination for many is to turn to other sources to do the deciphering on our behalf, and to spend our time in traditional forms of criticism aimed to identify cohesive taxonomies and formulaic approaches to the keys of a text. Although we often wax poetic to our friends, colleagues and students on the virtues of close reading, library research and reading in isolation, many of us are not beyond using sources that will do the work of summarizing the text on our behalf. We explain to ourselves (and sometimes, to others) that we are merely trying to understand the discourse that has already been written on the text so that we can add something fresh rather than reiterating previous arguments or following a cold trail. However, we might as well just use Ross’s excuse: “We are a busy people.” We, too, calculate the line of best fit that will help us reach our “solution” as quickly as possible.

The task of writing to keep a reader’s interest and to challenge methods of reading is not a new one, and many entertainers and artists alike have undertaken diverse strategies to pull the reader back into the text. So, too, might we identify a variety of writers like Spenser, Pope, Byron, and Beckett who annotated their own texts in order to comment on forms of literary criticism.<sup>4</sup> Few texts, however, have managed to actively engage the reader and parody inconsequential criticism to the extent that T.S. Eliot and Vladimir Nabokov have. Both Eliot and Nabokov take on the task of devising new methods of interacting with the reader to supplant the speed-reading process and to re-engage the reader in the joys of textual manipulation. To do so, Eliot and Nabokov integrate their own summaries, end-notes, and annotations that reiterate the theme or refer the reader back to

the text at hand. Famously, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire* extend their arguments through the inclusion of diversions, extended annotations, and mock authorial explanations in published endnotes accompanying poems of the same name. In effect, these diversions misdirect the reader into trusting sources which complicate and extend the arguments presented.

Eliot's inclusion of the endnotes in the second publication of *The Waste Land* has long been a matter of controversy, if not reproach. Eliot himself has fueled the fire by intimating that the notes were composed along with the poem and embellished later, and included in the new edition both to "ward off possible accusations of plagiarism"<sup>5</sup> and to produce the material needed for the poem to meet the 32-page length printing requirement to be sold as a book. As Eliot remarks, the notes "'became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship that is still on view to-day...I regret having sent so many inquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.'"<sup>6</sup> Eliot's metacommentary serves to confirm the use of endnotes as a significant source of misdirection in the text. *The Waste Land*, when it was published as a poem without the notes, was noted as an "'ample test of the reader's ability and maturity in the skills of reading poems.'"<sup>7</sup> To call the reading a test is an understatement, as Eliot's network of complex allusions and fragments is meant to instill in the reader some sense of dislocation and insecurity.

*The Waste Land* is characterized by a mixture of memory of things past and present desires for unity, related in "a heap of broken images."<sup>8</sup> The use of multiple languages, narrators, and fragments serves to engage the reader in an attempt to find unity in a world that has been shattered. Eliot writes, "these fragments I have shored against my ruins,"<sup>9</sup> futilely attempting to put back together the pieces. The poem is accompanied by Eliot's somewhat candid endnotes which often seem to explain the origins of an allusion but divert the reader from ascertaining the connection. In his note on "The Fire Sermon," Eliot writes, "The complete text of the Buddha's Fire Sermon...will be found translated in the late Henry Clarke Warren's *Buddhism in Translation* (Harvard Oriental Series). Mr. Warren was one of the great pioneers of Buddhist studies in the Occident."<sup>10</sup> Other notes refer the reader to passages of "anthropological interest,"<sup>11</sup> admirations of the inte-

rior of a church,<sup>12</sup> to conversations in Australia,<sup>13</sup> and, most notably, to passages of texts in foreign languages without translations.<sup>14</sup>

The deceitful lack of clarity present in the endnotes has been documented by many other authors (most notably, in Kaiser's "Disciplining *The Waste Land*"), so I won't dwell on it here. Most importantly, although the endnotes seem inconsequential, they replicate the effect of the poem itself in diverting the reader from finding a satisfying, coherent truth. If another editor had added endnotes, it is almost certain that we would have had English translations of all verses of the poem. Critics and publishers are noted for their meticulous desire to make texts accessible and easy-to-read, feeding the closet inclinations of scholars who would much prefer to have all the notes in one edition. However, if such endnotes had been provided, it would have required less participation on the part of the reader and would have undermined the poem's representation of the impossibility of collecting fragments into a unified whole. To re-engage the reader into the task and to reinforce his message, Eliot provided his own notes on the text, which tempted the reader into new forms of critical inquiry and imposed a critical lens for which to view the text.

Like those following *The Waste Land*, the annotations in *Pale Fire* also serve to divert the reader into new methods of reading and to mock traditional forms of critical approaches to a text, though they do so in even more pronounced ways. Unlike *The Waste Land*, where the endnotes provide referential information to support the poem, for *Pale Fire* "the commentary is the novel," as Nabokov wrote in a 1961 letter.<sup>15</sup> In the prologue to the novel, we understand that it is the voice of Kinbote who will narrate the poem and the reflections for us, and that it will be "the commentator who has the last word."<sup>16</sup> Whether the reader decides to read the novel from beginning to end or to follow the narrator's directions for jumping from annotation to annotation, it is revealed fairly quickly that Charles Kinbote is not who he initially made himself out to be, and that the notes have very little to do with the realistic life or intentions of a Mr. John Shade, if such a character exists.

More often than not, the choice of anecdotes to go along with the lines of verse seems purely coincidental. For example, when the poem reads "I never bounced a ball or swung a bat" (line 130), the narrator's explanation

reads: "Frankly I too never excelled in soccer and cricket,"<sup>17</sup> and continues to detail the accomplishments and proclivities of the narrator, rather than focus on a close reading of the poem. Even in glossing the annotations we get a sense that reality and fiction are blurred. In the notes on line 149, the narrator mentions "illusion," "ripple-warped reflection," "doubleganger," "deceived," and "counterfeit" within five sentences.<sup>18</sup> Other diversions include the narrator's occasional misdirection, as when the reader is referred to a "nice response to line 312,"<sup>19</sup> when no notes were included for that line. The structure of the annotations force the reader to choose what information to deem as relevant, and the undertones of deceit cause the reader to reassess both the content of the poem and the annotations.

In addition to subverting the reader's intentions of quickly finishing the novel with a solid understanding of its message, the annotations to *Pale Fire* frequently mimic, comment on, and exaggerate traditions of literary criticism so as to parody the ridiculousness of analyses that make themselves out to be wholly comprehensive or capable of understanding the author's full intentions. The usurping of traditional standards of criticism takes a number of forms in the text, but most often includes either direct disapproval or exaggerated representation. As an example of the former, John Shade is related as saying, "when I hear a critic speaking of an author's sincerity I know that either the critic or the author is a fool."<sup>20</sup> This directly contradicts Kinbote's preface to the poem, where he asserts the seriousness of the poem as he believes it was intended to be written.

Other examples of satirical mimicry of literary critics abound in the text. The structure of the novel itself, with over two hundred pages of commentary for a one thousand line poem – "smothering the poem with its notes"<sup>21</sup> – is an absurd relation of how critics can dig for clarifications and connections that far exceed the intention of the author. To this extent, some of Kinbote's methods of explaining Shade's supposed intentions also amplify some of the less reasonable approaches of critics to a text. Kinbote relates that the name "Vanessa" (line 270) must be "an allusion to *Vanhomrigh, Esther!*"<sup>22</sup> At times, Kinbote relies on many pages of analysis to annotate a single word from the poem. Nabokov uses the annotations to suggest that a more appropriate critical analysis of *Pale Fire* would be one that leaves off trying to distinguish reality from illusion, using theoretical terms

from foreign languages, and trying to figure out the “sincerity” of the novel, and instead to acknowledge that a single text may have many layers and narratives that intermingle. As Véra Nabokov wrote in a letter to friends just after *Pale Fire* was published, the novel “is indeed a very funny book, and only a few reviewers realized what it was really about.”<sup>23</sup>

In *The Death of Literature*, Alvin Kernan describes *Pale Fire* as a novel “grappling with a growing narcissism and solipsism in modern life that are making any kind of communication, including the privileged literary kind between authors and readers, increasingly difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible.”<sup>24</sup> Nabokov often represents his narrator as speaking directly to the reader, with comments like “I trust the reader has enjoyed this note,”<sup>25</sup> and “I trust the reader appreciates the strangeness of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the narrator is afraid that he will lose connection with the reader, with the understanding that if the reader is unable to accept the same emotional responses and judgments as the storyteller, all reading and writing become irrelevant. Even more significantly, the novel comments on the beauty of a text’s ability to affect our reactions – a sentiment that we are beginning to lose. When the narrator describes the moment where he will read the finished version of the poem, he writes: “We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing...I can do what only a true artist can do—pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web.”<sup>27</sup> This is what fiction provides us with, and what we are in danger of losing by getting swept up into the world of seeking concrete solutions and efficient ways of analyzing a text rather than interacting with it. Eliot and Nabokov urge us to acknowledge that we will never simply grasp a fragmented or multi-layered reality. Rather, they encourage us to re-immense ourselves in the text and to revel in the truths it can show us.

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**ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage International, 1989): 28.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the more famous works documenting such criticism is Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton University Press, 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> Ross, Charles, Rev. of *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, by Brian Boyd. *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.2 (2003): 374.
- <sup>4</sup> Kaiser, Jo Ellen Green, "Disciplining *The Waste Land*, or How to Lead Critics into Temptation." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 44 (Spring 1998): 86.
- <sup>5</sup> "At The End of the Book." Editorial. *New York Times* 7 Dec 2006 late ed. (East Coast): A38.
- <sup>6</sup> Woodward, Daniel H., "Notes on the Publishing History and Text of *The Waste Land*." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 58.3 (July-Sept 1964): 260.
- <sup>7</sup> Golding, Alan, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995): 108.
- <sup>8</sup> Eliot, T.S., "*The Waste Land*." *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (Eds. David Lehman and John Brehm. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 351-365): line 22.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, line 431.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, endnote on line 308.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, endnote on line 218.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, endnote on line 264.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, endnote on line 199.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, endnotes on lines 60, 63, 64, 92, 218, 293, 367-77, 412, and 428.
- <sup>15</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, *Selected Letters (1940-1977)* (Eds. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. San Diego: Harcourt Publishing, 1989): 332.
- <sup>16</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 29.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 117.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 143.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 218.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 156.
- <sup>21</sup> Grabes, H., "The Combination of Autobiographies as 'correlated pattern in the game': *Pale Fire*," In *Fictitious Biographies: Vladimir Nabokov's English Novels* (The Hague: Mouton & Co. B.V., Publishers, 1977): 65.
- <sup>22</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 172.

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokov, *Selected Letters* 339.

<sup>24</sup> Kernan, Alvin, *The Death of Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 199): 206.

<sup>25</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 147.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 289.