Dislocation in Nabokov's Black (Hole) Humor: Lolita and Pale Fire

The novel in motion, then, begins with the urge to see; it causes us to see even the most static scene more vividly than the traditional novel, through a series of visual dislocations. As the novel in motion develops, the dislocations become more disorienting. The narrator changes his point of view more swiftly and radically. Then he changes his stance: he no longer stands between us and what happened but enters the frame of the novel. He relinquishes his privileged position and becomes one of the fictional elements, like the characters. The act of narration becomes part of the subject, part of what has happened—or, since it is no longer intermediate, part of what is happening. When the narrator relinquishes his intermediate position and stable vantage, we no longer have a frame to contain what we see. We do not encounter an experience held within the frame of the narrator's purview, but rather a field of elements whose relations are constantly changing. We experience continual displacement and dislocation; we are constantly dislodged and disrupted. What we see in our visual imagination, though vivid, is impossible to grasp or contain.

Disruption is a break in continuity. Displacement results in the absence of place, dislocation the absence of location. As the novel in motion develops, the break becomes more prominent and the absence is encountered as a dramatic presence—or, as Eisenstein calls it, a caesura. Indeed, our experience of motion is the result of narrative gaps, missing links, and empty spaces in the text. Of course, movement requires space, as we know by recalling Zeno's ingenious but unpersuasive argument. Playing with Parmenides' conceptual view as if it were reality, Zeno argued that because there was an infinite number of points—and therefore no empty
spaces between them—there could be no movement. The arrow could never reach its destination because it always had to pass through one more point. It could move no distance at all because a point could always be postulated before the next one. That is, there could be no movement because all of space was full. But the arrow does move. There is space for it to travel through. And, we might conclude from Zeno's failure, the more space, the more room for movement.

The classical view of physical reality that developed in the Renaissance and eighteenth century and held sway until modern times certainly included the fact that things moved through space. But space was not literally empty, and movement obeyed regular laws. Laplace's ideal intellect would behold no real gaps, no quantum jumps, no uncertainty. And it is interesting that the traditional narrator, like Laplace's ideal intellect, both frames his picture and implicitly fills up all the space. Of course, he does not describe every detail of Allworthy's vista or Gervaise's room, nor does he account for every moment in a character's life. But he fills in enough of his narrative picture to imply that it is full. And as the novelist becomes more concerned with verisimilitude, the narrator provides a greater quantity of details—hence the effect of Joyce's parody in the "Ithaca" chapter of Ulysses. Indeed, we criticize the traditional novel if it fails to account for an item that should be there, if the story has a missing link, if it omits a crucial scene, if a character who has engaged our interest suddenly disappears.

In Portrait of the Artist, Joyce cuts sharply from Stephen's childhood, when he hides under the table in fear of the eagle pulling out his eyes, to his youth in the Clongowes playing field, and then from the sterile infirmary to the warm fire banked high and red beneath the ivy branches. But he fills in the space between each section with a series of asterisks—which imply continuity and stand for the moments he left out. In Ulysses he disrupts the continuity and dislocates the reader by omitting the asterisks. We feel the jolt when, having just settled into the world of the Martello tower, we suddenly find ourselves in a schoolroom, hearing a teacher we do not yet know is Stephen question his students. And we are startled when, having just read a meticulous account of what Bloom says and does not say to Molly before going to sleep, we suddenly discover that we missed his request for breakfast in bed. Joyce shares with Eisenstein an instinct for the jump-cut.

The narrative gaps and empty spaces in Joyce, Faulkner, and
Beckett are dynamic elements in the medium that the reader directly encounters and that directly cause palpable disruptions. In Joyce they enhance the effect of the medium as a gratuitous force. In Faulkner they prevent the narrator and reader from grasping a senseless experience. In Beckett they intrude to undermine the possibility of knowing even what is most elemental and necessary. To Vladimir Nabokov they are the source of creative destruction—which, on the one hand, looks back to the ancient tradition of diabolic comedy and, on the other, looks forward to breakthroughs in modern physics and modern fiction.

In a filmed interview Nabokov describes “the first thrill of diabolical pleasure you have in discovering that you have somehow cheated creation by creating something yourself.” The thrill is diabolical, first, because his creation is independent of prior creation, defiant of ultimate “reality,” and in its own blasphemous way ex nihilo, or “out of nothing.” The thrill is also diabolical because the cheating entails an annihilation of prior creation—a canny dismantling or gleeful decimation of the everyday world, everyday fantasies, and everyday literary conventions. Nabokov’s “thrill of diabolical pleasure” is like the thrill that animated the Roman Saturnalia and that found its medieval expression in the Feast of Fools, the miracle plays, and the sotie drama. By reflecting on three points in the medieval development of diabolic comedy, we may gain a perspective on Nabokov’s achievement.

The Feast of Fools was an English New Year’s revel that loosened traditional restraints, allowing the release of a joyful demonic energy. To use a medieval trope, “the world was turned upside down”: priests and clerks wore monstrous masks, ate blood puddings during mass, played dice on the altar, leaped through the church, drove through town in shabby carts regaling everyone with “infamous performances . . . indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste.”

In the English miracle plays, the diabolic comic impulse became more formalized; and as the energy became more controlled and more comic, it became more threatening. Pilate amused the spectators by toying with his wife before calling Jesus before him; devilish tormentors would blindfold Christ and make Him guess who scourged Him last, or make a farce out of fitting His body onto a cross that had been carelessly made the wrong size. The devils and tormentors were energetic, inventive, comic, skillful, and successful. By “turning their work into sport,” they presented “Hell to their victims as an unending, varied game.” In their malicious
play they achieved an experience of evil—the destruction of divine order. And yet they also succeeded in bringing the biblical drama to life.5

In France, which did not tolerate fools in its church or clowning with its liturgy, the diabolic comic impulse was secularized in year-round fool societies and formalized in their sotie drama. The fools in these plays were as skillful in their acrobatics as they were with their verbal wit. Turning handsprings in the midst of their satiric banter, they would gleefully defy the laws of gravity and grammar as well as social convention. In the end a comic free-for-all would bring a “jerry-built new world tumbling about their ears.”6 The sotie fools, that is, realized their vitality and exercised their mental and physical skills in the total destruction of the ordinary world.

In the Feast of Fools, the miracle plays, and the sotie drama, creative vitality is achieved through the playful release of destructive energy, the diabolic thrill of turning life into a game, the comic urge toward disorder and nihilistic destruction. In the end order gives way to a senseless motion, the world is turned upside down, stable reality is undermined by a comic force that is at once threatening and enlivening. And, as the force becomes more threatening and enlivening, its manipulators become more skillful and daring. The diabolic thrill, then, comes from the exercise of skills that demolish social and psychological orders, leaving only the game or the act—the arbitrary and precarious movement that evinces skillful control and creative daring, and that destroys our security while awakening our senses, our feelings, and our intellects.

One of the most vivid modern realizations of the impulse I have been trying to define is in Nabokov’s Ada—in the extraordinary act that Van Veen performed in the guise of Mascodagama. It began with an empty stage, when, “after five heartbeats of theatrical suspense, something swept out of the wings, enormous and black . . . a shapeless nastiness,” which precipitated in the audience “something similar to the ‘primordial qualm’ ”:

Into the harsh light of its gaudily carpeted space a masked giant, fully eight feet tall, erupted, running strongly in the kind of soft boots worn by Cossack dancers. A voluminous, black shaggy cloak of the burka type enveloped his silhouette inquiétante . . . from neck to knee or what appeared to be those sections of his body. A Karakul cap surmounted his top. A black mask covered the upper part of his heavily bearded face. The unpleasant colossus kept strutting up and down the stage for a while, then the strut changed to the restless walk of a caged
madman, then he whirled, and to a clash of cymbals in the orchestra and a cry of terror (perhaps faked) in the gallery, Mascodagama turned over in the air and stood on his head.

In this weird position, with his cap acting as a pseudopodal pad, he jumped up and down, pogo-stick fashion—and suddenly came apart. Van's face, shining with sweat, grinned between the legs of the boots that still shod his rigidly raised arms. Simultaneously his real feet kicked off and away the false head with its crumpled cap and bearded mask. The magic reversal "made the house gasp."

The "magic reversal" is more than the discovery of Van right-side up when we thought him upside down. It is a reversal that destroys our equilibrium, our sense of which way is up, our normal frame of reference, our stable sense of "reality." Mascodagama upright—ugly, massive, erratic, masking upside down Van—is threatening. Van upside down—bouncing on his hands like a pogo stick, playing the upright giant—is comic. Mascodagama coming apart is frightening. Van kicking away Mascodagama's fake head is comic—but he is also frightening because at this point we recognize the union of the strange colossus and the familiar Van, of the erratic and the controlled, of the menacing and the impish. When the mask and costume and performance have been recognized for what they are, all our links with "reality" have been destroyed: all that remains is a flat stage and Van's shining face and diabolic grin, and even this reality is undermined by the narrator's ironic style. The narrator, who has no place within the world of the novel, has told us that only "the work of a poet" could describe Van's extraordinary act (especially a poet of the "Black Belfry group" [183]). The ultimate diabolic act, then, is the work of the narrator-poet: the work itself, the verbal surface—which is like a stage whose wings do not open to an outside world. Or a mask that only masks another mask worn by an actor cavorting over a black hole, fully aware of the danger but taking joy in the fact that he has made the hole and his precarious act.

Nabokov's strategy is to create a recognizable world and then through a series of dislocations undermine, deconstruct, annihiliate every possible vantage from which we might form judgments. In the end he leaves us with a rich, engaging, and continually shifting verbal surface suspended, as it were, above a black hole. His singular achievement, then, might be called black-hole humor. This critical metaphor leads from the diabolic tradition to the tradition of modernism, which develops the potential of discontinuity, dislocation, and displacement, as well as the imaginative defiance of modern astronomers who first postulated and
then discovered a "black hole" in space. I will apply it to two of Nabokov's important and interestingly related novels: *Lolita*, where we are cunningly led along the shifting surface, continually dislocated and trapped in its discontinuities by a narrator who is always beyond our grasp; and *Pale Fire*, where we encounter a black hole that is not figurative but literal and physical—and that may have led Robbe-Grillet, another master of discontinuity and physical space in the text, to say that this book "comes very close to expressing my feelings."8

*Lolita* (1955) was Nabokov's twelfth novel, the third written in English after his departure from Europe in 1940. "It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe," he tells us in his epilogue, "now I was faced by the task of inventing America." What Nabokov invented was the drive—and aimless driving or movement—toward some evanescent goal, which had obsessed American novelists from Fitzgerald to Kerouac; the speech and manners of an adolescent girl, which few American writers had even looked at; the American motelscape, just before it gave way to the superhighways; the drugstore, before its soda fountain was replaced by the dirty-book rack (which the paperback industry created for the likes of *Lolita*); the department store, with its "touch of the mythical and the enchanted" (100); the bohemian suburban housewife; the progressive girls' school. Much of *Lolita* is like *Sister Carrie* or *An American Tragedy*, where Dreiser deliberately recorded details of those American institutions he knew would become historical. Thus, the Haze house is a "white-frame horror . . . looking dingy and old, more gray than white—the kind of place you know will have a rubber tube affixable to the tub faucet in lieu of shower" (36). And Humbert jots down his early recollections "on the leaves of what is commercially known as a 'typewriter tablet' " (40). But the realistic details in *Lolita* are magnified and at times singularly distorted by the lens of Humbert Humbert's language, which is the product of a foreign consciousness. A row of parked cars are "like pigs at a trough" (108). A fire hydrant is seen as "a hideous thing, really, painted a thick silver and red, extending the red stumps of its arms to be varnished by the rain which like stylized blood dripped upon its argent chains. No wonder that stopping beside those nightmare cripples is taboo" (98–99). The reader of *Lolita*, then, is constantly dislocated by the shifts and gaps between the familiar and the strange.

Humbert Humbert's foreign consciousness is due to more than
his European upbringing and his perverse sensibilities. He is made foreign, and removed from our reach, by the "bizarre cognomen... his own invention... this mask—through which two hypnotic eyes seem to glow" (6). He is removed, that is, by the persona, created by a narrator whose real identity and ultimate purpose are slyly kept beyond our reach. And he is doubly removed, from the outset of the novel, by being such a persona in a memoir edited by the improbable John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., who has been awarded the Poling Prize for a "modest" work, "Do the Senses make Sense?" (5). Indeed, the foreword, being a parody of that device used to establish verisimilitude ever since The Scarlet Letter, destroys any bridge between the world of the novel and the world where the daily papers are supposed to have carried references to Humbert's crime.

The novel proper is cast as a memoir, a form usually written in a style of sincerity if not modesty, and usually designed to reveal the personality of its author and the tenor of his time through a coherent sequence of selected events and ponderings. It is also cast in the form of another traditional sequence and pattern of purposeful motion: the quest. Humbert's singular quest has two models, which are also kinds of memoirs. The first is Dante's: from the inspiration of his nymphet Beatrice to the beatific vision, which Humbert encounters as "the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon" (280). The second quest model is Melville's Moby-Dick. If on first thought Humbert's nymphet (especially as she is likened to a butterfly) makes an improbable white whale, and the Humbert-Quilty double is a far cry from Ishmael-Ahab, ponder a layer lower, reader—at least upon Humbert's historical, anthropological, and scientific digressions, which realistically ground and epically magnify the proportions of his nymphet and his quest. These forms are not copied, though, but parodied—turning purposeful into purposeless movement, destroying the protagonist's coherence, and undermining our normal expectations, perceptions, and conclusions.

The novel's underlying metaphor also contributes to the pattern of the quest, and, as it is handled, to the dynamic of annihilation. Diana Butler has pointed out the relationship between Humbert's passion for nymphets and Nabokov's own passion for butter-
flies; indeed, Lolita’s peculiar attraction, Humbert’s thrills of discovery, and his pangs of horror and guilt are all evoked through the implicit and pervasive metaphor of Lolita as prize butterfly. Moreover, Alfred Appel, Jr., has described how metamorphosis, which characterizes both the butterfly and the nymphet, also characterizes the form of the novel: the development of Lolita from a girl into a woman, Humbert’s lust into love, and a crime into a redeeming work of art, so that in the end, “the reader has watched the chrysalis come to life.”

But to see the beautiful butterfly at the end of the multiple transformations should not obscure the stages of destruction, or the dislocations, in the process. Humbert Humbert acknowledges: “I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita. She would be thirteen on January 1. In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn into a ‘young girl,’ and then, into a ‘college girl’—that horror of horrors” (62). Lolita is as changeable and transient as a butterfly, and the narrator’s accomplishment is not in capturing but evoking her in an equally changeable and transitory form—a form composed of perspectives that are successively and gleefully destroyed. The kinetic pattern of destruction may be analyzed into two contradictory planes, which we might call endless multiplication and continual forward movement.

In *Lolita’s* opening paragraphs we are given a fine example of Nabokov’s style:


> She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. (11)

The style is perhaps best characterized by its repetitive variation, its ability—through rhythm, sound patterns, puns, precision—to cause us to see an image in multiple flashes. The multiplicity is increased by relating Lolita to Humbert’s first love, Annabel, and to the innumerable nymphets in literary history. It is increased even more by the innumerable variations of the same scene of love-struck Humbert courting the tough-minded and tough-hearted Lolita. The four-page catalog of “Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Pine View Courts, Mountain View Courts, Skyline Courts, Park Plaza Courts, Green Acres, Mac’s Courts” (134) is one of the most incisive evocations of the American landscape.
in the 1950s. It is also a dramatic means to convey the multiple and identical scenes that took place during the period of a year and over the expanse of three thousand miles.

Still another way that Nabokov effects an experience of multiplication is through the device of the double. Nabokov may be indebted to Stevenson, Poe, Gogol, and Dostoevsky; but he does not follow them in using the double to explore psychic dimensions of a main character's personality. Claire Quilty, the writer, the man of the stage, the debauchee, the driver of an Aztec-red convertible, is not a projection of the hero: there is no need for a projection in Humbert's full confession. Clare Quilty is a parody and a comic repetition of Humbert Humbert. He mocks the hero, he arouses fresh sympathy for the hero—and he also conveys the impression that Humbert is not unique but one of many. The world is full of nymphets, and nympholepts as well.

The result of Nabokov's tricks of style, structure, and characterization is that we are led through a series of freshly evoked and quickly shattered experiences, which are nearly identical and which take place in a world of nearly identical backdrops. Nabokov destroys our preconceptions of time and space. As we think back, we almost feel as if time were composed of the same moment being repeated over and over, and as if space were pieced together from identical motelscapes.

This is not a complete description of our response though, for the novel also depends on its continuing forward movement through both time and space. We are fascinated by Nabokov's "verbal diddle,"

we are affected by the multiplicity, we become lost in the intricate labyrinths, we are led on by the style, which, as Nabokov says of Gogol, follows "the dream road of his superhuman imagination"—but our most immediate concern is what happens next to Humbert Humbert. Will Humbert make contact with Lolita? How will he take care of Charlotte? What will happen when he arrives at Lolita's camp? When will he seduce his nymphet? Will he get caught by the police? Will the red convertible catch up? Will he find his runaway love? Will he get Quilty? If the first main dimension of the novel's structure is endless multiplication, the second is continual forward movement. The multiplication works at cross-purposes to the forward movement but does not impede it. Rather, it creates an eccentric rhythm very much like that which Nabokov attributes to Gogol's "Overcoat": "a combination of two movements: a jerk and a glide. Imagine a trapdoor that opens under your feet with absurd suddenness, and
a lyrical gust that sweeps you up and then lets you fall with a bump into the next trap hole.”

Nabokov’s eccentric rhythm achieves its climax in the meeting of the doubles. This obligatory scene is demanded by the novel’s continuing forward movement, and yet, after the scene with Dolly Schiller that eliminates Humbert’s motivation, it is wholly gratuitous. Humbert fires into the thick pink rug. Quilty continues his banter until, in the midst of a banal question, he throws himself on the avenging gunman. “We rolled all over the floor, in each other’s arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us.” Humbert’s second shot sends Quilty into the music room, his fingers wiggling in the air, his rump heaving rapidly, where after a struggle over the door he sits down at the piano and plays “several atrociously vigorous fundamentally hysterical, plangent chords, his jowls quivering, his spread hands tensely plunging, and his nostrils emitting the soundtrack snorts which had been absent from our fight.” Struck in the side by Humbert’s third bullet, Quilty rises from his chair “higher and higher, like old, gray, mad Nijinski, like Old Faithful . . . head thrown back in a howl, hand pressed to his brow, and with his other hand clutching his armpit as if stung by a hornet.” Humbert chases him down the hall “with a kind of double, triple, kangaroo jump . . . bouncing up twice in his wake, and then bouncing between him and the front door in a ballet-like bounce.” “Suddenly dignified, and somewhat morose,” Clare begins to ascend the broad stairs:

I fired three or four times in quick succession, wounding him at every blaze; and every time I did it to him, that horrible thing to him, his face would twitch in an absurd clownish manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain . . . [and] he would say under his breath, with a phoney British accent—all the while dreadfully twitching, shivering, smirking, but withal talking in a curiously detached and even amiable manner: “Ah, that hurts, sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist!”

But the chase continues from room to room until Humbert corners the “blood-spattered but still buoyant” Quilty in his bed and shoots him through the blanket at close range: “a big pink bubble with juvenile connotations formed on his lips, grew to the size of a toy balloon, and vanished” (271-78).

We have been swept up and let fall with a bump into the final trap hole. This scene, which is the climax of the novel, coming just
The violent shift in perspective completely destroys the already shifting foundations of the novel; it causes us to doubt the confusing impressions of the narrator that we have built up, as it were, from scratch. What are we to make of a world where perversity is the only form that love can take, where the grotesque is the only form of beauty, where madness is the only form of sanity, where obsession is the only form of freedom, where destruction is the only form of living? What are we to make of Humbert Humbert, the hero, the victim, the creator of this world? Is he the comic-pathetic romantic, forever in search of the unattainable? Is he the true and tender lover of Lolita and Dolly Schiller? Is he the mad sadist, the avenger-killer of Clare Quilty?

The final diabolic shift in perspective forces us to question not Humbert Humbert’s grasp of reality but our own. Quilty dies, Dolly dies, Humbert dies. But the narrator, who has gleefully destroyed everything in sight—like the medieval devils and fools, Dostoyevsky’s double, and Melville’s confidence man—continues to haunt us.

Shifting perspectives are common in modern literature. What distinguishes *Lolita* is the narrator’s diabolically comic strategy and stance—or his black-hole humor. The narrator’s strategy is black in its ontological defiance and gratuitous but creative annihilation that evoke the “thrill of diabolical pleasure.” It is comic in its satiric range and sheer playfulness. And it is marked by the trap holes in its narrative continuum that trip us and cause us to shift perspectives, that take us by surprise and destroy our equilibrium, that undermine our bases for psychological and moral judgment.

The narrator’s stance—how and where the narrator stands in relation to his story—also effects a kind of diabolic comedy marked by what we might call a black hole. This is not the trap into which the reader is swept, but the encounter of absence. Indeed, that encounter of absence—or the dramatic presence of absence—is like the encounter of a “black hole” in space, which is caused by a star so massive that its field of gravity has collapsed it to virtually nothing. The narrator of *Lolita* is continually present in the
novel. He engages us with his verbal wit, comic destructiveness, and diabolic control. He leads us through an evanescent, undermined, but nonetheless positive experience of longing and love. He is all the while before us—but has cunningly kept himself beyond our reach by his “bizarre cognomen,” his subjugation to the improbable John Ray, Jr., and his creation of a persona who changes continually and discontinuously.

In *Pale Fire* we encounter a hole that is not metaphoric but literal and physical. This is the empty space—the blank pages—between the poem “Pale Fire,” presumably written by John Shade, and the commentary, presumably written by Charles Kinbote. On one side of the hole are 999 lines of heroic couplets that focus on the poet’s love for his wife, the catastrophe of his daughter’s possible suicide, and his experience of death and rebirth. On the other side of the hole is a set of notes six times as long as the poem, illuminating those allusions that Shade’s wife (“the domestic censor”) convinced the poet to suppress or disguise: the “glorious friendship” between Shade and Kinbote and the story of Charles the Beloved, king of Zembla, who was forced to escape his homeland and take up a post incognito at Wordsmith College, where he lived in constant fear of the assassin who started from Zembla on the day when Shade’s poem was begun.

The hole in the text opens the question of relationships while, at the same time, obviating any answer. It precludes any certainty about the relationship between the poem and the story that was supposed to inspire it, between Shade and Kinbote, between Charles Kinbote and Charles the Beloved, between Wordsmith College in America and the kingdom of Zembla, between Kinbote (whose name in Zemblan means “regicide”) and Gradus (the would-be regicide), between Jakob Gradus and Jack Gray (whom Kinbote confuses with Gradus and who accidentally kills Shade while aiming at Kinbote, whom he has mistaken for the judge who sentenced him to the Institute for the Criminal Insane).

Let us begin with the empty space as a simple physical presence—intrusion. The hole between the poem and commentary opens a rudimentary physical problem: which way does the book go? Should we, with customary respect for the poetic text and our linear habit of mind, read the poem first and then the commentary? Should we follow the editor’s advice to read the commentary first and then the poem—along with the notes? Or should we start with the poem and turn to the notes as the spirit moves
us? Whichever choice we make, we will continually return to an experience of the book as a physical object divided in two parts, and we will inevitably find ourselves reading in two directions. The empty space divides the poem absolutely from the commentary and compels us to turn back and forth between them. Moreover, as each note grows longer—let’s be frank about it—we forget the word or line being annotated, not to mention the stanza or context. We may find ourselves reading the poem backward, or up the page, until we discover where the unit of meaning begins. Certainly, though, we begin to wonder about the actual subject or center: is it Shade the poet, or Kinbote the commentator? We discover that the book is designed to frustrate our sense of center—or that the only center we can know is the empty space that secures our forefinger as we flip between poem and commentary.

Actually, there are three holes in *Pale Fire*: the first between the foreword (which, in the scholarly tradition, describes the manuscript) and the book’s editorial apparatus; the second between the poem and the commentary; and the third between the commentary and the index, which refers us back far less to the poem than it does to the notes. On first reading, of course, we hardly see the blank pages; we expect these clear demarcations in such a text. But by the time we finish *Pale Fire*, we discover that they mark not rational divisions but complete separations, the central separation governing the other two. If we now think about the text as a whole, we may describe these separations, empty spaces, holes, as presences in our reading experiences—to be encountered just as we usually encounter characters, action, description, dialogue, discourse, rhythm, or diction.

I am focusing on *Pale Fire* as a physical object not only to illuminate an important dimension of our reading experience but also to suggest a relationship between the choices of physical directions and the sets of psychological, epistemological, and ontological judgments that we will implicitly make—or between the direction in which we read the book and what the book means. For example, suppose, as a kind of thought experiment, we try to design an ideal reading of *Pale Fire*. How should we proceed? The first choice confronts us at the end of the foreword, when we turn into the empty pages that precede the poem. The editor has advised us to suspend our customary priorities and begin with the commentary. But what gives the editor the authority to advise us? He starts his foreword with the cool objectivity of an authoritative
scholar (pedant), but soon his enthusiasm begins to intrude. We begin to wonder about the judgments of a man who has been compelled to leave an improbable New Wye and assume an incognito, who recalls a “glorious friendship” not mentioned in the poet’s obituary (73), who treasures his first glimpse (from his second-story window) of “the poet’s slippered foot” (15), who records the first words spoken to him by the poet—the laconic suggestion that he “try the pork” (13)—and the poet’s spontaneous utterance when a snowflake fell upon his watch—“crystal to crystal” (14).

When, in our thought experiment, we pause in the empty space between the foreword and the poem, we discover that nothing we have read so far guarantees the right way to go on. The foreword has destroyed our sense of direction, or normal procedure; it has compelled us to make a decision and, at the same time, denied us any way of telling right from wrong. The decision we make at this conscious moment in our thought experiment, about which way to go through the novel, will imply at least a tentative judgment about Kinbote as a critical authority and, hence, about the judgments he makes within his commentary.

One of the judgments we may pause to consider, even before we get to the poem, is aesthetic. Is the poet’s spontaneous utterance “crystal to crystal,” when the snowflake lands upon his watch, poetry or posturing? And, we should ask as we read Shade’s poem, is “Pale Fire” an elegant display of wit that fuses mundane reality with poetic fancy, as many readers contend? Or is it a preposterous display of egoism that puffs up stupid perceptions with poetic rhetoric, as may be suggested by such a mundane metaphor as “TV’s huge paper clip” (24); by the fingernail clippings in which he discovers “flinching likenesses” of his grocer’s son, the college astronomer, a tall priest, and an old flirt (28); by the details that would be overlooked by his “staid biographer”—the apparatus he designed for shaving in the bath, a

Hinge-and-screw affair, a steel support
Running across the tub to hold in place
The shaving mirror right before his face
And with his toe renewing tap-warmth, he’d
Sit like a king there and like Marat bleed

and by the discovery that his affinity with the woman who, like
him had died and been reborn, was based on a misprint in the newspaper account of her vision:

*Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch.
Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!
I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint.

The aesthetic judgment—whether “Pale Fire” is a good or bad poem—determines how we read the book. It determines the ultimate narrator, controlling intelligence, arranger, who—though felt as a dramatic presence—is kept beyond our grasp, or within the empty spaces. The question of the ultimate narrator is opened in the lacuna of the poem’s putative last line; indeed, we might see the hole between the poem and commentary opening not in the pages between them but in the space after line 999, which the heroic couplet form obliges to be filled in. Kinbote insists that line 999—“Trundling an empty barrow up the lane”—was to be followed by a repetition of line 1—“I was the shadow of a waxwing slain”—thus completing a perfect circle—and, we might add, completing the juncture between the mundane and the poetic. But there is another choice open to us by the lacuna. The commentary ends with Shade, who has become a shadow of Kinbote, being slain, if not “by the false azure in the windowpane” (line 2), then by the false reflection in the mind of the (imagined?) assassin. We may, therefore, see a bridge between the commentary and the poem, or a joining of the poem and the commentary into a perfect circle and, as a result, a unity of the poet and commentator.

But who is the primary narrator, guiding intelligence, arranger? The answer depends upon an aesthetic judgment. Readers who judge the poem to be an elegant work of art see Shade as the primary narrator, a poet capable of imagining the fantastic Kinbote and adding what his character Kinbote tells us is the human counterpart to the poem. Readers who assume the poem to be ridiculous see the primary narrator as Kinbote, a poet *manqué* or a paranoid, who has appropriated Shade’s text and/or fantasized an ideal or two ideal selves.

But the aesthetic judgment is not so simple, and neither, therefore, is the locus of the primary narrator. The poem is neither elegant nor stupid. It is wildly comic but capable of constraining the most ornate diction and the most mundane perceptions, the most sophisticated allusions and the most slapstick descriptions, with-
in its tightly controlled meter. The effect is most striking when the poem is read aloud.

Once we have developed a taste, like Aunt Maude’s, “For realistic objects interlaced / With grotesque growths and images of doom” (25), once we laugh at the images and admire the interlacing, a signal question arises. Where in the world of Pale Fire do we find a character capable of such wit, such wild flights and mixtures, such control? Not in the dull gray poet characterized by Kinbote. Not in the persona of Kinbote as he exists in the commentary or in the foreword, who is so limited by his zeal and paranoia. And not in the persona of the poem, who takes his dull life so seriously and who enjoys his posturing as much as Kinbote admires it. We do not find the controlling intelligence in the foreword, the poem, the commentary, or the index.

Indeed, in the last paragraph of the commentary the narrator distinguishes himself from his fictional personae. He has just told us that his “work is finished”: his “poet is dead,” and he wonders (or postulates the inquiry of a “gentle young voice”), “What will you be doing with yourself, poor King, poor Kinbote?” Now he invokes God’s help “to rid myself of any desire to follow the example of two other characters in this work. . . . I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist.” Perhaps more important, he will remain inseparable from the counterpart, who “has already set out . . . and presently . . . will ring at my door—a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus” (212-13).

We may discover a clue to the controlling intelligence when the poet describes the major catastrophe of his life, his daughter’s death or suicide. He refers to the improbable geography of his region:

People have thought she tried to cross the lake
At Lochan Neck where zesty skaters crossed
From Exe to Wye on days of special frost.

(36)

Further, when called to lecture at the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter, he notes his temporary move from “New Wye / To Yewshade” (36).

Here not the poet but the poem calls attention to itself as a product of language, indeed, of letters. Here the poem moves from the highest flights of poesy to the lowest ground of reality: the physi-
cal units that compose it. Here the book calls attention to itself as a physical object composed of discrete parts and empty spaces, composed primarily of a poem and a commentary and a hole between them. The hole in the center not only keeps the poem and commentary apart and the various doubles from ever merging. It also obscures the guiding intelligence who has engaged us by his comic powers, changing reflections, and diabolical control.

A "black hole" is the result of a gravitational field so intense that no light can escape. It is what astronomers call the absence they encounter in empty space. It is also an imaginative concept arrived at through the daring and skill of human intelligence able to destroy traditional forms and expectations and play with the possibility (indeed, necessity) of a star so massive as to collapse in on itself—before such a phenomenon could be searched for, let alone confirmed.

The black holes in Lolita and Pale Fire are similar, except that they implode not in outer space but in the realm of human experience. As a result, they threaten the bases of both rational explanation and humane judgment. In Lolita the narrator, laughing diabolically in the narrative black holes, leads us through an experience of longing and love while undermining our ability to measure it against traditional norms. In Pale Fire the narrator, laughing diabolically within the hole separating the poem from the commentary, denies us—indeed, forces us to continually question—all physical, psychological, epistemological, and aesthetic guidelines. The hidden narrators of Lolita and Pale Fire have cheated creation by creating a new life in each fiction—and by generating a new life in the readers, who, denied the security of habit, must see and decide for ourselves. The black holes in Lolita continually disrupt the narrative continuity and displace us from whatever vantage we establish. The black holes in Pale Fire continually compel us to choose a direction—that is, to become our own source of motive power. The novel in motion, having first engaged us along with the narrator in the act of excited perception and then confronted us with an unpicturable and unmanageable experience, now draws us in and makes us responsible for an experience that changes with each choice we make.