

## KOBALTANA: BLUE ZEMBLA'S MYSTERY SPOT

There is an unsolved mystery in *Pale Fire*—the hiding place of Zembla's crown jewels. A closed loop in the index goes from "*Crown Jewels*," which takes one to "*Hiding place*," which refers to "*Potaynik*," which in turn refers to "*Taynik*, Russ., secret place; see Crown Jewels." Nabokov, when asked by the critic Alfred Appel Jr. for the location of the crown jewels, offered an equally mystifying circumlocution: "In the ruins, sir, of some old barracks near Kobaltana (q.v.); but do not tell it to the Russians" (*SO*, 92). Kobaltana is indeed listed in *Pale Fire*'s index as "a once fashionable mountain resort near the ruins of some old barracks now a cold and desolate spot of difficult access and no importance but still remembered in military families and forest castles, not in the text." This set-up makes clear that Nabokov wants us to play this game of hide-and-seek. I propose to seek out the hidden meaning of "Kobaltana" with the help of elemental spirits and some alchemy; that is, how the motif of spirits behind the "machinery" of *Pale Fire* dovetails with the motif of Jungian archetypes and alchemy as indications of the major theme of psychological, spiritual and artistic *transcendence*.

What then does the name "Kobaltana" mean? How does it fit in with the Crown Jewels? The word "treasure" is mentioned 14 times in *Pale Fire*, 9 of which are associated with the Crown Jewels, so that the terms are basically synonymous. First, if we take apart the name, the suffix, "-ana," seems to pick up on Nabokov's geographical word-play conflation of the western US, "Utana." This may have some association to the treasures that Nabokov found in the West—butterflies. Nabokov devoted his Lepidoptera studies to the "Blues." "Kobalt" is the Germanic source of the word for the mineral "cobalt," known for its intense blue hue. However, unless we are looking at this as autobiography (a distinct possibility), "blue" (occurring 50 times in *PF*) is also used for "Blue Zembla." This combination of part romantic imaginary America and part romantic imaginary Zembla is a good place to start, suggesting Botkin's (and Nabokov's) dual citizenship.

The Random House dictionary gives the word origin of cobalt as "1675-85 < German *Kobalt*, variant of *Kobold*." The dates here are relevant, because alchemists, particularly active in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, first discovered cobalt. Alchemy is a pervasive motif in *Pale Fire* (Abraham, Lyndy. *Nabokov's Alchemical Pale Fire*, *DQR*, 20(2), 102-119). Earlier, the alchemist and physician Paracelsus (1493-1541) was the first to describe cobalt ores (*The Alchemist*, Issue 31, July 2017, 2). He believed their deleterious health effects on miners and alchemists were caused by mischievous mine spirits, called "kobolds." Eventually the ores were called "kobalt," but it was not until 1735 that the Swedish chemist Georg Brandt isolated the element and named it *cobalt rex*, after these mine spirits. Carl Jung, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's major exponent of alchemy as a psychological process, speculates on belief in kobolds as antecedent to alchemy:

"It seems that nature is out to prod man's consciousness towards greater expansion and greater clarity, and for this reason continually exploits his greed for metals, especially the precious ones, and makes him seek them out and investigate their properties. While so engaged it may perhaps dawn on him that not only veins of ore are to be found in the mines, but also kobolds and little metal men, and that there may be hidden in lead either a deadly demon or the dove of the Holy ghost" (Jung, V.13, 119)

Alchemists were instrumental in glass-making—for their alembics, but also mirrors and stained glass, colored with various colors of cobalt ores. Zembla, the land of semblances,

reflections, mirrors and glassmaking, including stained glass is also metaphoric of alchemy's process of *coniunctio*, the combining of opposites. Alchemists also developed "disappearing ink" from cobalt. When the cobalt was prepared and turned into a solution it was red, after the ink dried it was transparent, and it produced a fabulous blue-green color when heated. The writing disappeared again when cooled. Kinbote's pact with Sybil was signed in some "peculiar red ink," possibly of the same kind.

Nabokov mentions kobolds a number of times, to wit:

"Oh, how awful was the dry tap of the phantasmal fingernail inside the tabletop, and how little it resembled, of course, the intonation of your soul, of your life. A vulgar ghost with the tricks of a woodpecker, a disincarnate humorist, a corny cobold taking advantage of my stark-naked grief!" (*Short Stories*, "Ultima Thule," 498)

"In the woods," said Franz, picturing to himself a dark grove of pines and oaks and that old dungeon on its wooded hill where kobolds had haunted his childhood." (*KQK*, 179)

"Incidentally in one compact sentence he had referred to several religions (not forgetting 'that wonderful Jewish sect whose dream of the gentle young rabbi dying on the Roman crux had spread over all Northern lands'), and had dismissed them together with ghosts and kobolds. (*BS*, 321)

Elemental spirits are featured as forces moving the plot in Alexander Pope's satirical poem, *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope has a prominent place in *Pale Fire*; John Shade is a Popeian scholar and the poem is written in Popeian heroic couplets. Addressing the woman upon whom the true story of the snipped and snatched lock of hair the poem is based, Pope writes in his foreword:

"The Machinery, Madam, is a term invented by the Criticks, to signify that Part which the Deities, Angels, or Daemons, are made to act in a Poem: For the ancient Poets are in one Respect like many modern Ladies: Let an Action be never so trivial in itself, they always make it appear of the utmost Importance. These Machines I determin'd to raise on a very new and odd Foundation, the Rosicrucian Doctrine of Spirits."

Pope is satirizing the grandiloquent hermeneutics of literary critics, likely a source for Kinbote's character as parody of literary pomposity. Pope is also ridiculing Rosicrucianism, which was on the rise in the 17<sup>th</sup> century along with its progenitor, alchemy. The elemental spirits he mocks were first categorized and given names by the alchemist Paracelsus. These were Air=Sylphs, Earth=Gnomes, Fire=Salamanders and Water=Undines. These four categories include all the folkloric elves, fairies, imps, nymphs, sprites, kobolds, etc. Kobolds were actually of three types: mineral, water, and household spirits, and thus presumably fall into several of these categories. Kobolds and other elementals are what Carl Jung called "trickster" archetypes. *Tricksters* can be playfully mischievous or wickedly malevolent, but all are capable of magic and enchantment. They frequently guard treasure or bestow boons.

*Pale Fire's* "machinery" is likewise abetted by elemental spirits, likely as part of the Popeian parody. The novel is rife with the supernatural, manifest on the textual level and buried in hypertextual themes. Priscilla Meyer covers many of these elemental allusions in her chapter

on “Flora, Fauna and Faery” (*Find What the Sailor has Hidden*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988). Elementals in the text most obviously are the two poltergeists associated with Hazel, but also in characters such as Gordon Krummholz whose last name means “elfin wood” and who is referred to as a “faunlet” and “Narcissus,” and Fleur and Odon as “mermaid” and “merman.” Others, like Gerald Emerald the practical joker in his green jacket, suggest by looks and actions a trickster type like the leprechaun. Even the main characters have supernatural associations: “Shade” is another word for “ghost;” King Charles’ pet name “Karlik” is the second definition of the Russian for “gnome;” Sybil is homonymic for Sibyl, plus her maiden name “Iron dell” suggests the Elder Edda’s Witch of Iron Wood; “Hazel” suggests the wood used for divining and the herb “witch Hazel” used in medicinal alchemy. Some fey folk are alluded to in famous works like Goethe’s *Erlkonig* or Scott’s *Lord Ronald’s Coronach*. Still others are suggested *hors texte* through allusions and allusions to allusions such as with the Vanessa *atalanta* butterfly: muse, member of the Nymphalidae family, associated with Swift’s mock myth *Vanessa and Cadenus*, based on the Greek myth of the nymph Atalanta.

*The Rape of the Lock* features a helpful spirit, “Ariel,” who guides and protects the heroine Belinda, and a malicious spirit, “Umbriel,” who creates havoc. “Umbriel” means “shadow.” In *Pale Fire* all the Shadows of imaginary, fabulous Zembla may be likened to dark spirits, while the “Karlists” and “men of fashion” are helpful spirits. This is evident in the mirror opposites, the Mandevil barons whose demonic name suggests spirits, and in King Charles’ loyal pal Odon and his half-brother, card-sharp trickster Nodo, but most particularly in dark, diabolic Gradus.

Compare the following lines of Pope’s to descriptions of Gradus (my emphases):

*Umbriel, a dusky, melancholy Sprite,  
As ever sully’d the fair Face of Light, (IV, 13-14)*

“He was still groaning and grinding his dentures when he and his briefcase **re-offended the sun.**” (PF, p.214)

“Gradus is now much nearer to us in space and time than he was in the preceding cantos. He has short upright black hair. We can fill in the bleak oblong of his face with most of its **elements** such as thick eyebrows and a wart on the chin. He has a ruddy but unhealthy complexion. We see, fairly in focus, the structure of his somewhat mesmeric organs of vision. We see his **melancholy** nose with its crooked ridge and grooved tip. We see the **mineral** blue of his jaw and the gravelly pointillé of his suppressed mustache.” (PF, p.211)

Gradus, like Umbriel, is dark and melancholy, grotesque, and bent on disruption and destruction. The words “elements” and “mineral” link him to the earth realm of the gnomes and kobolds. The Shadows have their contrapuntal opposites: helpful spirits of the Karlist Zemblan patriots, some quite literal opposites like Odon and Nodo and the Mandevil cousins, or Sudarg of Bokay, genius associated with cobalt stained glass. “Sudarg,” besides being the mirror reversal of Gradus, is a near anagram of the Russian word “gosudar,” (“sovereign”), suggesting the greatest spirit, the creator of the reflected world, the Gnostic Demiurge.

Belinda’s guiding spirit, Ariel, aware of the soon-ensuing travesty of the “dire offence”—the amorous Baron is seeking to snatch a lock of her hair—warns her:

*But Heav'n reveals not what, or how, or where:  
Warn'd by the Sylph, oh pious Maid, beware!  
This is to disclose is all thy Guardian can.  
Beware of all, but most beware of Man! (11-114)*

In *Pale Fire* Hazel receives a cryptic, warning message from a spirit, apparently a warning of her father's doom. Umbriel's spirit warning to Belinda would be an apt warning for Hazel, who commits suicide over a disastrous blind date. Hazel and Belinda are mirror opposites; as topsy-turvy referent allusion in *Pale Fire*, *The Rape of the Lock's* frivolous but desired and lovely Belinda (meaning "beautiful beautiful") becomes morose, rejected and homely Hazel. The thieving Baron in *The Rape of the Lock* is based on the real personage of Lord Petre. In the mirror of *Pale Fire*, the ardent Lord Petre becomes repelled Peter Dean.

Hazel's predicament seems to mirror other lines from of *The Rape of the Lock* involving the spirits:

Strange Phantoms rising as the Mists arise;  
Dreadful, as Hermit's Dreams in haunted Shades,  
Or bright as Visions of Expiring Maids. (40-42)

Hazel's household spirit and barn spirit are each likely her recently deceased bizarre Great-Aunt Maud. The Vanessa *atalanta* butterfly attendant at the time of John Shade's doom, is proposed by Brian Boyd to be Hazel's ghost (*NABOKOV'S Pale Fire*, Princeton: P.U.P, 1999). However the butterfly's epithet, "Butterfly of Doom," suggests Aunt Maud who was obsessed with artistic images of doom. As I detail in a previous note, the two eponymous names of the butterfly come from two literary mythic nymphs: "Vanessa" from Swift's mock myth *Vanessa and Cadenus* and the Greek myth it is based on, *Atalanta and Hippomenes* (also known as the "Marriage of Art and Nature"). Both the myth and the mock myth feature young women who are unmarriageable due to their over-masculine nature, what Carl Jung would term "*animus* possessed." In fact, as I have suggested in "Vanessa atalanta: Butterfly of Doom" (*The Nabokovian*, Notes 75, Spring 2018) all of the characters associated with the Vanessa in *Pale Fire*, Sybil, Hazel, Maud, Kinbote, Disa, and even Gradus) seem to have Jungian *anima/animus* gender issues.

Gerard de Vries makes a good case for both Maud and Hazel as homosexual (*Hazel Shade's "Pale Spectres" and "Purple Fires," NOJ*, V.XII, 2018). Gender identification issues are a theme through *Pale Fire*, above all with Charles Kinbote (who is said to "resemble" Hazel). Stephen Blackwell's book about how Nabokov's scientific work informed his art (*The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science*, Columbus: Ohio State U.P., 2009) argues that Nabokov writes of homosexuality from the scientist's point of view of the necessity of procreation.

This brings us back to alchemy. The myth of Atalanta was alchemy's presiding emblematic illustration, representing the *coniunctio*, or "sacred marriage," the combining of the opposing elements in the alchemic process. It is the alchemist's art affecting the natural elements for a new creation. The *coniunctio* was said to produce the "philosopher's stone," known by many names such as *filius philosophorum*, *homo alta*, *aqua permanence*, *elixir*, *divine spark* and others, including "TREASURE." Mirror images and counterpoint—the union of opposites—is one

of *Pale Fire*'s major themes. The raw material of source allusions and parodies combine with their opposites in the alembic of Nabokov's genius for the creation of *Pale Fire*.

In Carl Jung's psychological interpretation of the alchemic process, the treasure represents the alchemist's achievement of the true *self* through confronting in the alembic the projected dark elements within. According to Jung, until recognized and assimilated, the archetypes behave as independent personalities or projections and tend to have a "numinous" quality; in other words, as "spirits." Being "possessed" by one's unconscious archetypes is akin to being in its thrall. Just as tricksters need to be outsmarted at their own game before granting the boon or treasure, the archetypes are depotentiated when recognized, confronted and assimilated into the true *self*. If we look at *Pale Fire* this way, the elemental spirits are the Jungian archetypes of Botkin's mind. The deepest inner spirit, the divine spark, Jung called the true *self*. The *self* is immaterial and ineffable, but presents to the mind via the symbols of the *self*-archetype which resides with the other archetypes in the unconscious. The *self* itself is transcendent. It could be argued that the main theme of *Pale Fire* is "transcendence"—of ego and of death, but also the transcendent nature of true Art. The waxwing of Shade's poem dies as it seeks transcendence in the "false azure of the window pane" rather than the true blue (cobalt?) of the limitless open sky. Kobaltana is the locus of transcendence, the hidden realm of spirit and enchantment.

Enchantment is a theme throughout Nabokov's work, beginning with his first short story, *The Wood Sprite*. He often mentions conjurers and magicians in reference to himself and the creation of Art. The ultimate *trickster* in this most recondite novel is its author, Botkin as stand-in for Nabokov. I suggest that Nabokov's description of Kobaltana, "a once fashionable mountain resort near the ruins of some old barracks now a cold and desolate spot of difficult access and no importance but still remembered in military families and forest castles, not in the text," is a droll description of himself, his own ageing body wherein the treasure, the divine spark, lies. A "barracks" is a place where many persons are lodged. The psyche is a place inhabited by numerous sub-personalities, the *archetypes*. Nabokov, quite foppish when young but over 60 at this time, jocosely describes himself as "once fashionable," now in "ruins." He lampoons his retreat from fame into isolation in the Alpine resort Montreux as "cold and desolate spot of difficult access and no importance." Descended from a long line of military men and nobility, he indicates the importance only of family and memory: "still remembered in military families and forest castles." "[N]ot in the text" is important, because Nabokov is not in the text: Kobaltana is an immaterial, transcendent "spiritual" geography within the author himself, suggesting a "[m]an's life as commentary to abstruse unfinished poem" (L939-40, 55).

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