

Fugue No. 4

C-Sharp minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book II

Johann Sebastian Bach

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need seek no other sense. The animation implies as much, and this study has good things to say about Lepidoptera in their literal sense.

But to those who may be hungry for another sense, there's food for thought. That morsel is prepared in the fugal meaning of subject--a melody of such latent energy as to form a thought suitable for contrapuntal development. To say that our subject is the butterfly is then to have made a metaphor. The economy and surprise of its revelation is the metaphor's power, as much as the particularity and universality of its meaning. Continuing then with its universality.

A fuge's subject, like a butterfly, is full of life. It is dynamic, capable of responding to its environment and shaping it as well. Like the butterfly, the fugal subject can interact with others, following the rules of the group, or going it alone. Finally, both subject and butterfly can represent themselves in processes like renewal, regeneration, reincarnation, and resurrection.

Globally, our metaphor implies that all fugues and butterflies have much in common, and that the essence of one can reveal the other as a class. Contrapuntal development is, to the fuge, as metamorphosis to the butterfly. The morphological power of counterpoint is as dramatic, and mysterious, as the chrysalis that transforms the creeping larva first into a soup, and then into the adult reborn.

If our metaphor is not generic to every fuge and butterfly, it certainly applies to this particular one. This subject is a butterfly because it is frolicsome and gay. It has that self-satisfaction with the power of self to reveal itself as the reflection of itself. Like the butterfly, the joy of this particular subject is recognizable even after it has been morphed into its mirror. But its melodic inversion, being antithetical to itself only in directionality, this particular transformation is the Narcissism not of mood, but motion--not of attitude, but will. Either way, right side up or upside down, this fugal butterfly is determined to be joyful.

Or is it? Midway through the fuge, the composer has introduced a second subject--a lament. This thought is so counterintuitive, so unlike our butterfly of a subject, as to confound all but metaphorical sense. The lament descends, by half steps. It cannot leap or fly. It is mortal and morose, incapable of transcending the leaves of that particular toothwort, milkweed, or thistle upon which it feeds. In time, the wooly caterpillar that makes of it a meal will transform even this second subject. In time, the chrysalis of counterpoint will prove the worm and glorious butterfly to be the same creature.

To say, then, that "Our subject is the butterfly," is to universalize the particularity of this fuge. Its truth remains true in extenuating circumstance. The fuge is a dance of particulars, and its butterflies dancers of its universality. As serious and purposeful as George Balanchine choreographing a Brandenburg Concerto, they dance the structure of a particular fuge, and their life cycle mirrors that fuge's own metamorphosis of joy to sadness and return.

In their independence of flight, the butterflies represent the universe of contrapuntal motions, from parallel to contrary, and similar to oblique. Visually, the butterflies are seen--like the fuge's voices are heard--as independent beings that coexist for the delight of the whole. Sometimes one flutters, while others rest. At the right moment, every butterfly exits, making way for the entrance of

new characters. Toward fugue's end, counterpoint reveals antithesis to be not quite so opposite as we had thought.

In the end, the fugue suggests, as does the butterfly, that one can indeed hold difficult truths in careful tension with each other. In the crypto-metaphorical language of Bach's day, perhaps best expressed by the American Colonial, William Penn: "No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown." To which the chrysalis responds, no squishy worm, no butterfly.

Is the Butterfly?

But is the butterfly a fugue, or the fugue a butterfly? In linguistics, every metaphor is said to stem from a root. The root metaphor comprises the basis for mythopoetic meanings that have attached themselves, transculturally, to familiar objects and situations. The Argentine poet, Jorge Luiz Borges, suggests that all metaphors are descended from but a handful of archetypes. Among these are fire and war, flowers and women, stars and eyes, sleep and death, time and the river.³

Of the root metaphor that he called "life and the dream," Borges retells the story of Zhuangzi, the Taoist philosopher who dreamt that he was a butterfly. In his dream he shared no human worry. He was free. Then he woke up. Awakening, Zhuangzi wondered of his dream, "Was I before a man who dreamed of being a butterfly, or am I now a butterfly who dreams about being a man?"

Zhuangzi's dream reminds us that the ancient Greek word for butterfly is ψυχη (*psyche*). In the western tradition, the mythopoetic meaning of butterfly is the non-material essence of the human person. The butterfly is the soul, mind, or spirit. "Our subject is the butterfly" prompts awareness, then, of Bach's mind. The metaphor would have us think about *his* thought as much as our own. The thought of which we think is what it means to be sentient and purposeful. The metaphor is of logic, design, and *telos*. It is the expression of the composer's particular joy, his particular contradiction, and his particular doubt, as they mirror the universal doubts, contradictions, and joys of every human being.

In a fascinating commentary on Bach's compositional process, Laurence Dreyfus writes that, "This twofold approach to musical invention--metaphysical interpretation and temporal enactment--might even be understood as the ultimate

³ In the first two stanzas of his short poem, "The Art of Poetry," Borges employs two root metaphors.

To gaze at a river made of time and water
And remember Time is another river.
To know we stray like a river
and our faces vanish like water.

To feel that waking is another dream
that dreams of not dreaming and that the death
we fear in our bones is the death
that every night we call a dream.

ambition of the Bachian project itself."⁴ Let us try an experiment. Imagine the dancing butterflies as a metaphysical interpretation, with the sound of the fugue being its temporal enactment. The dance is the poetic expression of that part of a physical fugue that is not physical, but spiritual.

But the enactment of what? Dreyfus suggests the enactment of "something that is both novel and true." In a timely echo of Lewis Thomas's observation that we listen to Bach transfixed because this is listening to the human mind, Dreyfus continues: "One can see that mechanisms of Bachian invention have nothing to do with soulless and dry artifices opposed to musical expression, but rather reflect an attempt to make music think about itself."

Recalling the metaphor, if our subject is the butterfly, and the butterfly the psyche, and the psyche the soul, and the soul is mind, and the mind thought, then listening to a fugue is thinking about thought. Only in thinking about thought does the psyche influence and direct that thought, with the sad alternative being "thoughtless" thought. In this manner we advance the goal of metacognition, a worthy goal, and one that the fugue might help us to attain [see fn. 2].

Some might assume that we refer here to transcendental meditation. But I suspect that we are drifting, rather, toward its opposite. In meditation, the thought is to have no thought. Since worry, negativity, and war come of thoughts, what better way to usher in the millennium of peace and tranquility than to rid the world of thought altogether. But to rid the world of thought is to rid the world of Bach. And to jettison the thinking about thought is to jettison the fugue. While there is surely a place for the undeniable benefits of meditation, listening to a Bach fugue is not the conducive atmosphere. It is, rather, the exercise of the opposite--what I shall call self-reflexive thought. Let me explain.

Have you ever been aware of being aware that you were aware of something? If so, then you've experienced the strange-loopiness of the self-reflexive stance. Self-reflexiveness is not the same as self-reflection. If the latter involves weighing one's actions (a commendable exercise), the former steps outside of the self in order to weigh the act of weighing one's actions as if they were those of another. Two analogies come to mind--the first involving a mirror.

Looking at yourself in a mirror, you are reflecting upon yourself. However, were you to see yourself as if modeling a new suit before the triangulated mirrors in a department store, you would be reflecting upon the reflection of yourself. This type of reflection produces an infinite regress of images and suggestibility. Because it is in a state of perpetual creation, the self-reflexive thought is incapable of propositional capture.⁵ Instead, every idea is continually forging links to every other and in thematic trajectories impossible to predict. Since each thought is connected to every other, it is (in a strange way) both itself and opposite. Apropos then, John Butt's observation that "...for Bach the composer,

⁴ Laurence Dreyfus, "Bachian Inventions and its mechanisms," from *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, ed. John Butt (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 191.

⁵ This is the predicate of the Mosaic prohibition against making graven images. Any visual representation of God is an imperfect reflection of perfection, therefore its "pale fire." Underlying the Second Commandment is the ontological argument for God, first articulated by St. Anselm, reaffirmed by Spinoza and Hegel (quoting Butt)—"Were God not to exist, he would be less than perfect."

God might be conceived as a 'verb' rather than a fixed, transcendent subject: the act of creation is a continuous process."⁶

The second analogy involves the musician's performance versus an actor who is acting as if he is a performing musician. As a matter of fact, acting is thoroughly devoted to the attainment of self-reflexive technique. As every actor will confirm, the watching of one's self doing a thing adds a layer of incalculable complexity to the doing of the thing itself. This is because every otherwise autonomic gesture cannot happen without forethought and purpose.

To perform a fugue, and to listen to a fugue, is to provide a space where music is allowed to become self-reflexive. Not to demean other styles, listening to a chorale is to experience the thought. But listening to a fugue is to have the experience of thinking about the thought.

What is that thought? I mean the ultimate thought, the one immutable and inevitable thought? Might it have something to do with our mortality? I do not want to be morbid here, but very serious, and very true. I suspect that to think about one's own death is to adopt the ultimate self-reflexive stance. The reason for this is that the psyche is such that we find it difficult to think of death as belonging to us. It belongs always to someone else. So, our reflections on death inevitably lapse into thinking about the thoughts of others and not about our own.

In the faith culture of Bach's day, there was a word for this--thinking about one's own death I mean. It was called *ars moriendi*--the art of dying. *Ars moriendi* was practiced as a discipline, a seed that promised to flower in a peaceful death for one's self. May I suggest, however tentatively, that this fugue reflects, in all of its frolic and joy, Bach's awareness of mortality? What better proof of this than the presence of his mannered lament, and the words of John Butt.

This is particularly evident in Bach's very Lutheran tendency to provide cheerful, dance-like music for the believer's acceptance of death; quite often he employs the most patently secular music at this juncture as if to suggest that the impulse for worldly joy can be redirected towards heavenly joy. In a real sense, then, both the rhetorical texted works and the most abstract polyphony of the late works demonstrate a distillation of the one eternal emotion, "the intellectual love of God."⁷

Back then to ultimate meaning. "Our subject is the butterfly," which we had earlier seen as the metaphor of life, is simultaneously of death. It is a package deal--one can't have one without the other. "Our subject" is the soul and its birth from the death of our bodies. In Bach's practice of fugal composition (this fugue

⁶ John Butt, "'A Mind unconscious that it is calculating'? Bach and the rationalist philosophy of Wolff, Leibniz and Spinoza," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, ed. John Butt (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 66.

⁷ Butt (Ibid, 69 ff.) quotes Spinoza, "knowledge of God is the mind's greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God." For Spinoza, he writes: "The direct consequence of the third type of knowledge is 'the intellectual love of God', which is 'joy, accompanied by the idea of God as its cause', the only love (and emotion) that is eternal."

being an excellent example), it is this writer's opinion that he practiced the art of *moriendi*. Counterpoint was his material expression, perhaps even the nearly sacramental expression, of the non-material reality behind death. Namely, while the material body dies, the non-material spirit does not.

Counterpoint was Bach's discipline of working out the place of the human person in a material cosmos. What does it mean to be a human being? One meaning, perhaps the most important, is found in confronting questions like: Is matter the only thing that matters, or are we more than matter? If the answers are no and yes, respectively, then what happens to our "remains" when our matter goes away? Here, of course, the word implies the opposite of "bodily remains."

Although not universally accepted, yet expressed in particular cultures of every time and place, our mythopoetic butterfly suggests that after the body dies the soul is everlastingly born. For that "butterfly" is the soul, the essence of us. Hearing the fugue this way, our subject is the butterfly, the human soul. The butterfly's "shade" (shadow) is its material form, its body that cannot exist without a soul. The soul's mirror is its body, a mere shadow, both archetypes of mortality. The worm is death, its chrysalis the grave (a lamentable place), and the emerging adult the resurrection. Death is the process of being born from one world to another, even as birth is the process of dying to one world for the sake of another. Life and death coexist in double counterpoint of metaphysical proportions.

Now the disclaimer. While it might be objected that I've turned the fugue into an allegory, my interpretation is tentative and heuristic. I am well aware that we are not talking about a tone poem. It is rather hoped that a metaphysical interpretation (following Dreyfus's lead) will permit the hearing of the fugue in tones of universal archetypes, root and conceptual metaphors, and mythopoetic meanings. My claim is that this is psychologically inevitable, and that all art, to one degree or another, mimes the riches of metalanguage and narrative. I shall attempt, next, to establish this claim by comparing the fugue to a modern novel that battles the same enemy--mortality--with similar tools and tactics.

That Played Upon

But first let us ask ourselves, has the fugue played upon the imagination, or the imagination upon the fugue? Perhaps a little bit of both? In asking these questions are we not "uniting the viewer and the view?"⁸ In all that our narrative has told to this point, I've had one purpose--to introduce you to Vladimir Nabokov.⁹ More importantly, I'm eager that we should experience together his *Pale Fire*. This 1962 novel is significant for its self-reflexive form, what some have identified as metafiction, and a novel conception in hypertext.¹⁰

⁸ A quotation from John Shade's poem, *Pale Fire*, in Nabokov's novel by the same title.

⁹ Most readers will remember Nabokov (1899-1977) as that author of a scandalous novel about a middle-aged man's obsession with a twelve-year old girl--*Lolita* (1955). Three decades earlier, Nabokov had written a short story, *Sounds*, which began with the narrator's description of his married lover playing a Bach fugue.

¹⁰ In the metanovel, stories are nested within other stories, each layer introducing symbolic and psychological meanings that interpret the opposite story.

Most relevant to this study, *Pale Fire* contains four assertions that the writing style of its first principal, John Shade, is "contrapuntal," a promising lead for any study like this. Its puns, mirrored inversions, retrogrades, palindromes, and other wordplay raise the possibility of *Pale Fire* having been modeled on fugue, the most highly developed of contrapuntal forms.¹¹ Structurally, *Pale Fire* is Nabokov's most novel work; some say his best.¹² What then follows is devoted to understanding Nabokov's contrapuntal architecture, and the butterflies in tribute to him.

In tribute because, in addition to being one of the 20th century's most influential writers, Nabokov's many published papers on butterflies qualified him, in the 1940's, as a research fellow at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. His specialty was the South American gossamer-winged butterfly, popularly known as "the blues." From 1961 to 1975 he collected more than four thousand specimens representing 195 species, from which he identified and named twenty new genera, species, and subspecies.¹³ Nabokov's avocation is mirrored in *Pale Fire's* nearly two-dozen references to butterflies. For obvious reasons, the mention of butterflies in Nabokov's fiction represents the authorial presence.¹⁴

The Pale Fires

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov associates mimicry in butterflies with creative deception in art, and credits the idea with having influenced his writing: "The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things."

Not surprisingly, reflection and mimicry constitute *Pale Fire's* theme, beginning with its borrowed title words from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. As the moon borrows its "Pale Fire" from the sun, Nabokov has borrowed his

¹¹ In "Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, its structure and the last works of J. S. Bach," Gerard de Vries compares the novel to contrapuntal procedures employed in Bach's *Musical Offering*. De Vries also offers a plausible circumstantial argument for influence, namely, that *Pale Fire* may have represented Nabokov's conscious effort to emulate Bach's canonic and fugal technique. Please see <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/document.html?id=1052>.

¹² Brian Boyd distinguishes *Pale Fire* as "Nabokov's most perfect novel." See "Nabokov: A Centennial Toast" in Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin, and Priscilla Meyer (eds.): *Nabokov's World*. Volume 2: Reading Nabokov. Palgrave, p. 11.

¹³ In addition to the twenty butterflies that Nabokov discovered, subsequent researchers have named six in his honor. As of 1995, an additional twenty-two had been named after characters and places in his novels, including *Madeleinea vokoban* (Nabokov in retrograde), *Madeleinea cobaltana* for Kobalt, the Zemblan mountain resort of *Pale Fire*, and *Madeleinea nodo* after Odon's half brother (also of *Pale Fire*). *Vokoban*, *Cobaltana* and *Nodo* were discovered in the high Andes of Peru and Ecuador. In the '60's, when the novelist was assembling his massive collection of South American butterflies, he was admired by the expatriate Zemblan entomologist and music theorist, Hty Ms. Myth, who was living in Limoncocha, Sucumbios Province of Ecuador at the tyme.

¹⁴ The technique of authorial inclusion, though not employed in this particular fugue, was a favorite of Bach's as well. "Nabokov on Kafka" is a television dramatization of Nabokov's famous lectures on Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Christopher Plummer plays Nabokov, with the author making three cameo appearances.

inspiration from Shakespeare, and his work develops new meanings out of old.

The novel begins with a 999-line poem by the fictional John Shade of New Wye, Appalachia. With its rhyming pairs of iambic pentameters, Shade's work mimics the heroic couplet of Shade's (and Nabokov's) favorite poet, Alexander Pope. The poem, titled *Pale Fire*, is divided into four cantos, with the first devoted to the author's near-death experience as a child, and early intuition of a non-material dimension that mimics the material. Canto 2 addresses the death of his daughter, Hazel. Canto 3 satirizes modernity's failure to comprehend the spiritual essence of death, continuing with Shade's heart attack and second near-death experience, concluding with his intuition that life's "coincidences" are contrapuntal by design. These pseudo-coincidences comprise, then, the basis for Shade's "faint hope" of the hereafter. Canto 4 concludes with the power of art to reveal how life is "fantastically planned."

Shade's poem then receives commentary by Charles Kinbote, his neighbor and self-appointed editor. Kinbote informs the reader that Shade has been murdered and that the 1000th and last line of his poem would have been the same as its first: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain."

Kinbote the editor is cunningly inept, using Shade's work to mime a zany story of himself as the deposed King Charles Xavier Vseslav "The Beloved" of Zembla. As self-exiled and paranoiac "king," Kinbote imagines his life threatened by a bloody band of revolutionaries bent on regicide. Chief among "the Shadows" is the malevolent Gradus who, having been dispatched to assassinate Kinbote, murders Shade by mistake.

Critics are divided over *Pale Fire's* authorship. The "Shadeans" contend that Shade authored not only the poem, but also Kinbote's commentary. The less-favored "Kinboteans" argue that Kinbote is the alter ego of the suicidal Charles Vseslav Botkin who wrote the poem as the pseudonymous Shade and invented Kinbote to redirect Shade's glory. A third possibility, represented in Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Pale Fire: the Magic of Artistic Discovery*, intimates that the departed Hazel Shade is the author via the medium of Botkin (who has also invented Kinbote). Still others believe that Zembla is the "reflection" of Nabokov's childhood and that Shade's murder memorializes the execution of Nabokov's father by Russian Royalists in the pre-Soviet era.

Metathetic Shade

Metathesis is the substitution of atoms that turn one compound into another--say, a metal into a salt. In language it is the transposition of letters in a word, like the child's "pasghetti" for spaghetti. With metathesis one can turn *Shade* into *Hades*--the abode of the dead.

But why might one do this--make of John Shade some kind of holding tank for the hereafter? The conjecture would be laughable, were it not for the non-stop word games that have made of *Pale Fire* a sensation. Witty words aside, the hereafter is the novel's moral focus. Shade strikes the dilemma, toward the beginning of Canto Two.

There was the day when I began to doubt
Man's sanity: How could he live without
Knowing for sure what dawn, what death, what doom
Awaited consciousness beyond the tomb?

In Biblical language, *Pale Fire* is about walking through the valley of the "shadow of death" (*tsalmaveth*). Edgar Allen Poe borrowed the Hebrew root, *Tsalal*, to name the dark dark island of his arcane *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Can this be the adventure that Nabokov is known to have read and admired? Is Nabokov the *Pale Fire* of Poe, and Shade's POEm the reflection of *Tsalal*? Shade addresses these questions in the first couplet of his poem.

I was the *shadow* of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;

Here Shade has projected himself as the image of himself beyond the experience of his death--the decisive imponderable. In saying "I was," Shade has affirmed, "I am." His self-reflexive "I" continues to exist in the past tense of "I was." The fictional John Shade is then both a person and concept. As person he embodies that concept of Everyman's mortality. Shade is the shadow of Everyman, and *Pale Fire* a morality play.

Shade dies as the songbird that thinks it sees the azure in a window's mirrored reflection of the sky. In the first two lines of his poem it is a "false azure." False because it is reflected in the material windowpane. Kinbote's terminal account of Shade's demise concludes with, "The poor poet had now been turned over and lay with open dead eyes directed up at the sunny evening azure." The chiasitic "azure" is Shade's *Alpha* and *Omega*, his poem's beginning and end. In both instances the azure is Nabokov's intuition of the hereafter.

If the azure that slew Shade was false in its reflection of the real, the azure not seen by Shade's dead eyes is not false. It is true because it is not a reflection, but the real thing. This sunny evening azure is real, because it is the inevitable and real death of Everyman. The azure of the novel's beginning is, in consequence, the Bard's "arrant moon" whose "pale fire" has been snatched from the sun. The azure of Shade's end is the sun itself, not seen by the poet's dead eyes.

Here is the point. Whereas the azure of Shade's first couplet was false, *its untruth held within it the kernel of blazing Truth*. Thinking self-reflexively, there exists no truth without, of necessity, its opposite. The azure of the windowpane is therefore false only insofar as it is a reflection of what is not false. However, the *thing reflected* is not *itself* false. That which is reflected is true. Herein lies *Pale Fire's* glory and moral. That "thing," that non-material reality, that spiritual essence so difficult to apprehend in a materialist ontology, is capable of being reflected. *But the reflection requires artistic form*. The non-material reality can be glimpsed in the material world (says Shade) in the medium of art. For this we return to Shade's second couplet.

A Personal 'Reflection'

For many people, Nabokov is an acquired taste. I suspect, however, that most readers who have found themselves drawn to the logic of fugue would appreciate *Pale Fire* of instinct. The two are alike, mainly, in their self-reflexive point of view. Neither exists to entertain, but to project the image of itself as the reflection of itself thinking about itself. Kinbote's commentary makes us rethink our first reading of Shade's poem. Each new entry of the fugue's subject likewise reinterprets our hearing of the prior, foretelling the new to come. Not to torture the analogy, but the butterfly demands a fresh account of the caterpillar.

To understand why, let us now summon every ounce of courage and imagination to which the mind inheres. The truth of which I write is *otherness*. Without the "other," there can exist no self, no selfishness, no selflessness, and no self-reflection. In this fugue, the subject's inversion is its other, and the lament is otherness of yet "another" kind. In the novel, Kinbote is Shade's *other*. For both fugue and novel, it is from the perspective of the *other* that we come to understand the *one*.

Kinbote captures this remarkable insight when he declares, "Resemblances are the shadows of differences." Finding similarities is easy. Not so easy is to know the difference without which there could be no similarity. Minus that difference, there's only mind-numbing sameness.

Although I've little regard for the typical way that deconstruction is parroted in academe today, the philosopher Derrida had an intriguing vision of *the implicitness of possibility within the very idea of the impossible*. Says Derrida, the instant we proclaim something to be impossible, we've confessed (linguistically at least) the possibility of its possibility. This self-reflexive prospect--the conceptualization of a thing in consequence of its opposite--I have called the "metamorphosis of idea."

The metamorphosis of idea underlies all that I've attempted in this analysis. It lends meaning to Kinbote's insanity, intimating sanity of another sort. The metamorphosis of idea motivates the inversion of Bach's subject and his imagination of a lament so contrary as to have been thought (by lesser minds) impossible in the same fugue, much less in counterpoint with his lively subject. It is the metamorphosis of idea that inspires the possibility that his subject is a metaphorical "reflection," at the same time, both of life and death. More fundamentally, it is the metamorphosis of idea that conceives, in death, the very idea of life.