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THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS –  
*PALE FIRE* AS ANAMORPHOSIS:  
AN ALTERNATIVE THEORY OF INTERNAL AUTHORSHIP

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*INTRODUCTION: REIGNITING AN OLD DEBATE*

**T**he question of internal authorship in *Pale Fire* is a key to the novel's interpretation and has been debated for years now. It resurfaces on the Internet discussion group, NABOKV-L,<sup>1</sup> quite regularly and was extensively discussed by Brian Boyd who contributed a few posts, a long article entitled "Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*,"<sup>2</sup> and a very stimulating monograph, *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (hereafter *MAD*),<sup>3</sup> which constitutes a synthesis of his previous contributions and puts forward a number of new ideas. Who invents whom and who writes what in *Pale Fire*? As Maurice Couturier has it in "Which is to be master in *Pale Fire*?" the text will always burden its reader with one question: "where do I stand as regards Shade, Kinbote, and eventually the author?"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NABOKV-L@LISTSERV.UCSB.EDU.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Boyd, "Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Studies*, 4, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Boyd, *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Couturier, "Which is to be master in *Pale Fire*?" Zembla, [www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/zembla.htm](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/zembla.htm).

Over the years, this interrogation has prompted four varieties of critical responses. The first stance was that of “undecidability.” A number of critics, including Julia Bader<sup>5</sup> and Robert Alter<sup>6</sup> have contended that the reader does not have to choose between Shade and Kinbote and that the novel rests on the tension between two texts and two voices. A variant of this was Ellen Pifer’s suggestion that this question should not be our prime focus and that treating Nabokov’s novels as sophisticated puzzles might prevent the reader from considering their humanistic dimension.<sup>7</sup> The second response was the Shadean line. Let me start by mentioning briefly that the sole authorship idea stems from an attempt to account for the numerous coincidences, some of them eerie, between the poem and the notes. The Shadeans (amongst whom Andrew Field and, at one stage, B. Boyd) argued that John Shade is the author of both the poem and the Commentary. He therefore invented Kinbote, Zembla and his own death. This group was opposed somehow “symmetrically” by the Kinboteans who, for a number of reasons, regarded the Shadean hypothesis as an impossibility and considered Kinbote a more likely alternative. The latest attempt to solve the puzzle appears to have been B. Boyd’s *MAD* and I will call it the “ghost theory” because it draws supernatural forces into the game.<sup>8</sup> According to B. Boyd’s fascinating analysis, one way of explaining the connections between poetry and prose in *Pale Fire* is to imagine that Hazel’s spirit has influenced both the composition of the poem by her father and its commentary by Kinbote, and that Shade’s spirit also intervenes, after his death, to affect the writing of the Commentary.

I will not embark on a lengthy discussion of these theories, but reading through them, one will be struck by two simple facts: 1) more often than not, the emergence of a new theory implies the refutation of one or several existing interpretations; 2) these refutations sometimes appear as debatable. One of the arguments used by B. Boyd (and other critics) to repudiate the Kinbotean hypothesis, for instance, is that Kinbote does not have sufficient skill to compose a poem like “Pale Fire.” He therefore encouraged Shade to write about Zembla because he himself was not capable of doing it (80)<sup>9</sup>. What supports this claim – and seemingly validates

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<sup>5</sup> Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov’s English Novels*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> I am not forgetting T. DeRewal’s and M. Roth’s recent article (“John Shade’s duplicate selves: an alternative Shadean theory of *Pale Fire*,” *Nabokov Online Journal*, vol. III/2009) but, as its title indicates, it is a variation on the Shadean line.

<sup>9</sup> “I pressed upon him, with a drunkard’s wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse” (*Pale Fire* [1962], New York: Vintage International, 1989).

the argument – is the poor quality of the variants Kinbote invents. I do not find this entirely convincing, because it seems to me that critics here trust Kinbote rather more than objectivity warrants. If we agree that *Pale Fire*'s commentator is a master in the art of manipulation and the epitome of the unreliable narrator (and most critics concur with this), then why should we suddenly start believing him when he claims that he cannot write verse? It might easily be a feint. As for the poor quality of his variants, someone with such talent for deceit is certainly capable of fabricating bad verse on purpose (which, incidentally, would recall another of Nabokov's characters, Vasiliy Shishkov<sup>10</sup>). And surely, if Kinbote had written the poem but wanted us to believe otherwise, he would know better than "blowing his cover," as they say in spy novels, by producing high-quality variants. Therefore, Kinbote's claim that he is a poor rhymester and the bad variants do not prove that he did not write the poem. At best, these two elements taken together prove that he wants us *to believe that he could not write it*. B. Boyd puts forward three other arguments to refute the Kinbotean hypothesis, regarding "interest in others," "discipline" and "motive." Although I will not go into a specific discussion of these arguments here, they seem to me equally debatable, essentially because they rest on the sort of reading of the Foreword and the Commentary that Kinbote *wants* us to adopt. In other words, they play by his rules, and into his hands. The refutations of the Shadean line, and the postulates of the "ghost theory" would also be interesting to examine: although brilliant at times, they are questionable here and there as well, but I will leave it at that for now.

My aim in this study is to suggest that, although a great deal has been said, all avenues have not been explored on the question of authorship in *Pale Fire*. It seems that so far, critics trying to account for the web of coincidences between Shade's world and Kinbote's Zembla, and going for a sole authorship approach, have only considered either Shade or Kinbote as possible alternatives.<sup>11</sup> I would like to put forward a reading of the novel that departs from previous interpretations in that it posits that the author of the poem and the Commentary is neither of these two characters. I will start with the examination of what appears as an important theme in the novel although it has, I think, seldom been delved into. I will then try to show that this theme leads us to uncover what appears as a major pictorial subtext of *Pale Fire*: Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. This subtext, closely connected to the use of one

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<sup>10</sup> V. Nabokov, "Vasiliy Shishkov," *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, New York: Knopf, 1995, 490-495.

<sup>11</sup> In all fairness, Don Barton Johnson did suggest that the real author of *Pale Fire* might be V. Botkin (*Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985, 60-77) and B. Boyd calls him a "semi-Botkinian" ("Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*," note 5). Yet the admission that Botkin and Kinbote are probably the same person makes this interpretation "semi-Kinbotean" as well.

device, anamorphosis, will take me to an “anamorphic” reading of the text which, in turn, will lead to a new perception of the question of internal authorship.

### I. “AT LAST PRESENTED CREDENTIALS:” *AMBASSADORS IN PALE FIRE*

My analysis originates in a passage that marks a beginning: the first real meeting between Kinbote and Shade. Kinbote describes it as follows in the Foreword:

A few days later, however, namely on Monday, February 16, I was introduced to the old poet at lunch time in the faculty club. “At last presented credentials,” as noted, a little ironically, in my agenda. (20)

What is striking here is the note in the agenda. Kinbote uses a very formal turn of phrase usually associated with diplomatic life. “Presenting credentials” is the first act a foreign emissary will accomplish when setting foot in the country where he is to operate. Although I call this phrase “striking,” it probably isn’t at first reading: the narrator’s rather affected use of English, with which the reader is already well acquainted at this early stage of the book, seems to provide ample justification for the bombast. It is only when we have read more of the text, or of course when rereading the novel, that we realize that this expression is significant as regards the composition of *Pale Fire*.

The first function of Kinbote’s ironic note is to introduce a theme which is omnipresent in the novel: the figure of the ambassador. *Pale Fire* is teeming with ambassadors. According to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, an ambassador is: 1. An official envoy, especially a diplomatic agent of the highest rank accredited to a foreign government or sovereign as the resident representative of his or her own government or sovereign, or appointed for a special and often temporary diplomatic assignment. 2. An authorized representative or messenger. 3. An unofficial representative.

Considering this definition, it is clear that many characters in *Pale Fire* can be regarded as ambassadors. It is true of the three central figures. Charles Kinbote, a/k/a Charles the Beloved, the exiled king of Zembla, although he adopts the strictest incognito, does appear as his country’s representative on American soil; Gradus is also an ambassador (albeit unofficial) of Zembla’s anti-Karlist regime sent to accomplish a secret mission. Lastly, on a more figurative plane, John Shade’s two fainting fits, resulting in near-death experiences, turn him into an emissary of the living paying two brief visits to Hades (“I can’t tell you how/I knew – but I did know that I had crossed/The border.” 59, 698-700).

A few secondary characters are also directly connected to the diplomatic world. In his note to line 286, Kinbote, relating Gradus's short stay in Paris, narrates his visit to Oswin Bretwit, Zembla's "former consul in Paris" (174). Earlier (note to line 130), the text shows us Charles II a few days after the outbreak of the rebellion, refusing to abdicate and "caged in his rose-stone palace from a corner turret of which one could make out with the help of field glasses lithe youths diving into the swimming pool of a fairy tale sport club, and the English ambassador in old-fashioned flannels playing tennis with the Basque coach on a clay court as remote as paradise" (119). This allusion to the English ambassador comes as confirmation of a more oblique hint. In the note to line 80, Kinbote briefly mentions (between brackets so as to make the whole thing look suitably insignificant) "two baffled tourists from Denmark" mistakenly lynched by the mob (112). Besides the fact that a tourist might indeed be regarded as an "ambassador" of sorts, the episode is reminiscent of *Hamlet*: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, dispatched to England on a mission that takes a wrong turn, are also executed and the news of their death is broken in the final scene by the English ambassador in Elsinore.

Gradus's secret mission leads the reader to the realization that the novel is also replete with allusions to a more covert variety of ambassadors, totally unofficial representatives: spies. In Canto Three of his poem (58, 681), Shade risks a rapid allusion to the Cold War ("Gloomy Russians spied") and he opens Canto Four on the firm resolution to turn into a spy himself, albeit figuratively:

Now I shall spy on beauty as none has  
Spied on it yet. (64, 835-836)

Kinbote takes up the theme of spying in the Commentary. He tells his reader how Odon, Charles II's best friend, acted as an infiltrated royalist agent among the rebels (120), fleetingly mentions "two secret agents" (177), and finally depicts the adventures of Andronnikov and Niagarin, the two "experts" – presumably KGB operatives – sent by Moscow to locate the crown jewels' hiding place (244-245). But the greatest spy of all is Kinbote. As early as the Foreword, he depicts himself spying on his illustrious neighbour:

The view from one of my windows kept providing me with first-rate entertainment, especially when I was on the wait for some tardy guest. From the second story of my house the Shades' living-room window remained clearly visible so long as the branches of the deciduous trees between us were still bare, and almost every evening I could see the poet's slippered foot gently rocking. One inferred from it that he was sitting with a book in a low

chair but one never managed to glimpse more than that foot and its shadow moving up and down to the secret rhythm of mental absorption, in the concentrated lamplight. (23)

This theme reappears in numerous passages of the Commentary as Kinbote records Shade's progress in painstaking detail:

Nevertheless the urge to find out what he was doing with all the live, glamorous, palpitating, shimmering material I had lavished upon him, the itching desire to see him at work (even if the fruit of his work was denied me), proved to be utterly agonizing and uncontrollable and led me to indulge in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop. (87, my emphasis)

Secret agents abound and, taken globally, they are mostly figures of fun. Gradus is notably incompetent and Andronnikov and Niagarin fail to discover the jewels' cache. As for Kinbote, he is mistaken when he thinks that his "surveillance" goes unnoticed by the Shades.<sup>12</sup>

## II. THE AMBASSADORS AS PICTORIAL SUBTEXT

The omnipresence of the figure of the ambassador in the text may evoke Hans Holbein's famous painting entitled *The Ambassadors*.<sup>13</sup> This double portrait was painted in London in 1533 and depicts French ambassadors Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selves, then on a delicate mission in England to find an agreement between Henry VIII and Rome regarding his divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his marriage to Ann Boleyn. The painting, now exhibited at the National Gallery in London, is universally known mostly for the enigmatic scholarly still life which plays an important part in its composition and for the anamorphic skull wrenching the center of the painting agape. This reference might first appear as random and arbitrary: although the novel does refer to a number of painters and pictures,<sup>14</sup> Holbein is never mentioned. Allusions to this painting are nevertheless frequent in *Pale Fire*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 82-86.

<sup>13</sup> *The Ambassadors*, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543), oil on oak, 207 x 209.5 cm, 1533. <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors>.

<sup>14</sup> Hogarth, Picasso and Teniers, appear, amongst others, as well as fictional Eystein (whose name only rhymes with Holbein).

<sup>15</sup> Emmy Waldman also analyzes connections between *Pale Fire* and painting in a recent study ("Who's speaking in Arcady? The voices of Death, Dementia, and Art in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Online Journal*, Vol. IV/2010). Her article carefully explores the *Et in Arcadia ego* motif and focuses on questions of assignation. She examines more specifically the consequences of Kinbote's introduction of Dementia as the "ego" of the quote. Although our respective angles are different, our studies do share similarities, notably the important role of death.



*The Ambassadors*, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543), oil on oak, 207 x 209.5 cm, 1533

The first type of connection is thematic and takes us into two specific directions. As a number of art historians have shown, the skull in the center, as well as the numerous objects related to science and time, indicate that *The Ambassadors* is a vanity.<sup>16</sup> The *memento mori* motif also plays a crucial role in the novel where death is omnipresent, and more specifically in the poem, where the meditation on death and the hereafter is central. And supreme irony lies in the fact that it is precisely when he declares himself “reasonably sure that [he] shall

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<sup>16</sup> A vanity is a painting whose allegorical composition emphasizes the transience and ultimate vanity of human existence. The term originates in *Ecclesiastes* (I, 2): “Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas.” Vanities are usually still lifes, although *The Ambassadors* is a notable exception. They commonly feature books and scientific instruments (conveying the vanity of knowledge), jewels and arms (vanity of riches and earthly power), musical instruments (vanity of earthly pleasures), as well as skulls and instruments measuring time (ephemeral nature of life).

wake up at six [...] on July the twenty-second, nineteen fifty-nine,” in the final lines of Canto Four (69, 979-981), Shade is actually closest to his death.

Another theme present in both painting and novel is the representation of the world. On Holbein’s portrait, the celestial and terrestrial globes sitting on the upper and lower shelves suggest, according to John North, that *The Ambassadors* may be about “cosmography, the representation of the entire universe.”<sup>17</sup> This is reminiscent of the “game of worlds” evoked in Canto Three of “Pale Fire” (63, 819). The poet, furthering his meditation on the three interrelated and fundamental notions of counterpoint (“the contrapuntal theme,” 62, 807), coincidence (“topsy-turvical coincidence,” 63, 809) and web of sense (“some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind/Of correlated pattern in the game,” 63, 811-813) in order to understand the complex relation between life and the hereafter, seems to evoke the existence of two related but distinct planes on which the “game” of life is played (like Holbein’s two worlds on two distinct shelves). He seems to contend that a tricky contrapuntal theme both unites and distinguishes them. This cosmographic line is also present in the Commentary, which may be envisaged as a game of worlds as well, both literally – Zembla evokes the Russian *zemlya*, meaning “the earth” – and structurally: Kinbote’s notes are constantly pitting one world (his beloved but maybe non-existent Zembla) against another (the equally fictional America of New Wye and Wordsmith College).

Allusions to Holbein’s painting are also textual. A few passages of both the poem and the Commentary can be read as definite references to the picture. In Canto One, Aunt Maud is introduced as a poet and a painter “with a taste/For realistic objects interlaced/With grotesque growths and images doom” (36, 87-89), which reads very much like an oblique description of *The Ambassadors* with its “realistic objects” (the scholarly still life at the center of the picture) and its “grotesque growths and images of doom” (the distorted features of the anamorphic skull). The connection is confirmed by the depiction of the character’s room:

...Her room  
We’ve kept intact. Its trivia create  
A still life in her style: the paperweight  
Of convex glass enclosing a lagoon,  
The verse book open at the Index (Moon,  
Moonrise, Moor, Moral), the forlorn guitar,  
The human skull; and from the local *Star*  
A curio: *Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4*  
*On Chapman’s Homer*, thumbtacked to the door. (36, 90-98)

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<sup>17</sup> John North, *The Ambassadors’ Secret* [2002], London: Phoenix paperback, 2004, 102.

The phrase “still life” is significant here as each item refers to the scholarly still life in Holbein’s picture. The “paperweight of convex glass enclosing a lagoon” is evocative of the terrestrial globe on the lower shelf because of its convex shape and the vast sea that appears on Holbein’s globe. The “verse book open at the Index (Moon, Moonrise, Moor, Moral)” seemingly alludes both to the Lutheran hymnal (the word “verse” evokes the Bible, hence the religious context of the painting)<sup>18</sup> and the celestial globe (“Moon, Moonrise”). The “forlorn guitar” is a transposition of Holbein’s lute which may be “forlorn” since one of its strings is broken.<sup>19</sup> As for the “human skull,” it is a transparent allusion to the central anamorphic skull. This very clear hint may be buttressed by another, more oblique one, in “Moor,” involving a multilingual pun. The French for “Moor” is “Maure,” and the game the reader may be expected to play here is one in which the phrase “tête de mort” (common French for “skull”) echoes “tête de Maure.” The Moor’s head will also be familiar to a French audience as it happens to be the emblem of Corsica, which appears on Holbein’s terrestrial globe. Finally, the newspaper curio hints both at the arithmetic primer (with its mention of the score, 5-4) and at the celestial globe again (it was taken from the local *Star*). Another direct reference to the celestial globe appears later, in Canto One and at the beginning of Canto Two, with the mentions of the Great Bear (37, 119) and college astronomer Starover Blue (39, 189; see also in the Commentary note to line 189) as this is precisely what Holbein’s globe shows: a few constellations distributed on a blue sphere, *stars over blue*. Still looking at geographical matters, and maybe more striking yet, there seems to exist a connection between one detail in the depiction of John Shade’s first fainting fit and Holbein’s terrestrial globe:

I felt distributed through space and time:  
One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand  
Under the pebbles of a panting strand,  
One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain (38, 148-151)

Let us start by mentioning rapidly that the evocation of “space and time” is very close to Holbein since the still life on the portrait brings together a number of objects relating to space (the globes) and time (the quadrant, the polyhedral dial and the torquetum), more specifically time *related to* space since these instruments can be read only if placed in a position coherent with their user’s geographical location on the globe.<sup>20</sup> The key to this

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<sup>18</sup> The “hymnal item” of Canto Three (line 754) may also be read as a transparent allusion to the same hymnbook.

<sup>19</sup> The lute may also be hinted at in the Commentary when Fleur de Fyler tries “to mend a broken viola d’amore” (110).

<sup>20</sup> See J. North, *op. cit.*, Chapter six, “Instruments for the Heavens,” 118-152.

passage, however, is the evocation of Italy and Spain. Holbein's terrestrial globe shows mountains and shores ("mountaintops," "strand"), but, more specifically, its approximate center is Rome, and another part of Europe that the viewer can perceive clearly is Spain. The "tall clock with the hoarse Westminster chimes" of Canto Two (43, 278) also constitutes an interesting notation as Holbein's pavement was directly inspired by the pavement of Westminster abbey. Moreover, the small portion of pavement appearing on the painting is somewhat evocative of an  $\infty$ , which takes us back to the poem's "lemniscate" (Canto One, 37, 136) and "ampersand" (Canto Three, 53, 534). The tall clock could also be associated to the *clockwork* toy that Shade sees just before his first fit, and which Kinbote interprets as "a kind of *memento mori*" (137), which takes us back to the idea that Holbein's double portrait is a vanity. Lastly, the "wrench," or "rift," of Canto Three and its suggestion of "*le grand néant*" (56, 617-618) does recall the painting's most striking feature: the central crack spectacularly representing death.

This central fissure, the anamorphic skull, is what makes the painting so uncanny and technically so remarkable, leading us now to a discussion of the notion of anamorphosis and its relevance to *Pale Fire*.

### III. AN ANAMORPHIC READING OF PALE FIRE (I)

*Anamorphosis* is derived from the Greek prefix *ana-*, meaning "back" or "again," and *morphe*, meaning "shape" or "form." An anamorphosis is a deformed image which appears in its true shape when viewed in some "unconventional" way. Jurgis Baltrusaitis calls it: "un subterfuge optique où l'apparent éclipse le réel."<sup>21</sup> There are two varieties of anamorphosis. The first one, usually termed "oblique" or "perspectival," arises when the picture must be viewed not from the usual frontal and straight-ahead position (from which we normally expect an image to be contemplated) but from an utterly different perspective. *The Ambassadors* is a fine example of this: the viewer must adopt one specific vantage point to see the anamorphic skull for what it is. Contemplating Holbein's painting, therefore, is "a drama in two acts,"<sup>22</sup> in which the viewer first fails to understand the distortion only to find out that all is revealed when the correct viewpoint is enforced. In the second variety, termed "catoptric" or "mirror" anamorphosis, a conical or cylindrical mirror is placed on the drawing

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<sup>21</sup> Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Les Perspectives dépravées, Tome 2, Anamorphoses* (1984), Paris: Flammarion, coll. Champs arts, 2008, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 146 (my translation).

or painting to transform a flat distorted image into a three-dimensional picture that can be viewed from many angles. The deformed image is painted on a plane surface surrounding the mirror. Only by looking into the mirror does the image appear without distortion.

The notion of anamorphosis induces reflections whose nature is very close to Nabokov's aesthetic concerns. B. Boyd writes that Nabokov envisages the relationship between author and reader as equivalent to that between the problem-composer and the problem-solver at chess.<sup>23</sup> Anamorphosis does resemble chess in that it sets a problem which is both geometrical and aesthetic, in the same way that a chess problem goes beyond mere chess theory to reach an aesthetic dimension. Both anamorphoses and chess problems require patience and acumen on the viewer/solver's part to select the correct angle (the hidden or improbable move), the "secret perspective," to use Dürer's words,<sup>24</sup> the key to the whole composition. B. Boyd claims that "[t]o solve problems in Nabokov, as in chess or life, it often takes a swerve of thought, a knight move of imagination."<sup>25</sup> The notion of anamorphosis might be the "swerve of thought" we need to enrich our perception of *Pale Fire* but also, maybe, to solve some of its ever-enduring enigmas.

There are many examples of visual distortions in *Pale Fire*, and the numerous references to mirrors throughout are strongly evocative of catoptric anamorphosis. The beginning of the poem launches this line in spectacular fashion and opens onto a host of images related to mirrors in the poem. In the Commentary, Kinbote evokes "The Royal Mirror" (76) and later, when he describes Thurgus's room in the palace, "a full-length multiple mirror" (121). The theme of mirrors is closely linked to a number of structures involving reflections combined with slight distortions, recalling anamorphic images. A distorted reflection of the "tin wheelbarrow pushed by a tin boy" which Shade associates with his first fit in Canto One (38, 144) appears in Canto Four when the poet sees through the window of his study "some neighbor's gardener [...] trundling an empty barrow up the lane" (69, 998-999) – the last words he commits to paper before walking to his death in Kinbote's garden. The construction of the poem rests on a variation on the same motif at the end of Canto Two when the poet relates Hazel's last evening and puts side by side the agonizing narrative of the young girl's final moments (in italics in the text) and her parents' tranquil vigil. On a more anecdotic note, the mention of the Beverland Hotel where Jacques d'Argus stays in New York (276) echoes, but again with a slight distortion, Kinbote's nickname on

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<sup>23</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *op. cit.*, 51 (my translation).

<sup>25</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 129.

campus (“the Great Beaver”) supplied in the Foreword (24). Last but not least, Botkin is a reflection (and again a slight distortion) of Kinbote. These distorted reflections often lead to plain reversal and a series of topsy-turvical features. Kinbote thus appears as Shade’s polar opposite (an exile when Shade never left New England, a lonely homosexual when Shade is happily married, a vegetarian when Shade consumes meat, bearded when Shade is clean-shaven, left-handed when Shade is right-handed, and so on), just as Zembla is the reversed image of America.<sup>26</sup>

These distortions and mirror effects lead the reader to a more acute perception of the importance of perspective. In the same way that the complete intelligence of Holbein’s masterpiece is possible only if the viewer selects the right angle, there are quite a few moments in the novel when a lot depends on the perspective adopted by the characters, and ultimately by the reader. Taken globally, the novel – this arresting ensemble consisting of a foreword, a poem, a commentary and an index – will make sense only if the reader finds the “secret perspective” and reads the interplay between Shade’s work and Kinbote’s Commentary as it wants to be read, which demands that he perform a series of complex interpretive moves. But the detail of the text also frequently hinges on the importance of perspective. In Canto Three of the poem, Shade evokes man’s ability to recognize natural shams:

...and then before his eyes  
The reed becomes a bird, the knobby twig  
An inchworm, and the cobra head, a big  
Wickedly folded moth.  
(59, 712-715)

But he insists that the significance of the white fountain seen beyond the veil “Could be grasped only by whoever dwelt/In the strange world where [he] was a mere stray” (59, 718-719). The understanding of the vision takes some adjustment which he cannot achieve, being just an occasional visitor, a “baffled tourist.” The change of perspective occurs after he

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<sup>26</sup> A number of articles stress the polar opposition between Shade and Kinbote. I will only mention Priscilla Meyer and Jeff Hoffman’s study (“Infinite Reflections in *Pale Fire*: The Danish Connection (Hans Andersen and Isak Dinesen)”, *Russian Literature* XLI, 1997: 197-221) because it uses this particular aspect of characterization as a springboard to discuss the question of authorship. After briefly delineating the contours of Shadean and Kinbotean approaches, the article seems to suggest that the quest for sole authorship may not be the best choice: attributing both poem and commentary to either Shade or Kinbote deprives the novel of the tension engendered by their opposition, and since the text is “predicated on [this] tension” (201), relinquishing it appears as a major drawback. Although this position (evoked in my introduction as “undecidability”) is perfectly tenable, my perspective here differs as the connection I see between *Pale Fire* and *The Ambassadors* leads me to another perception of the question of authorship in the novel (see Part 4 of this paper).

discovers the misprint (fountain/mountain) and decides that there lies the contrapuntal web of sense he was after:

But all at once it dawned on me that *this*  
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;  
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream  
But topsy-turvical coincidence,  
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.  
(62-63, 806-810)

In the Foreword, Kinbote draws a physical portrait of Shade – with reference to another *H-* master: Hogarth – but opens it by stating that the poet’s “whole being constituted a mask” (25). This introduces, right from the beginning, the idea that although he is going to rely on vision (at least temporarily) to describe Shade, appearances should not be trusted and some sort of decipherment is necessary if one is to comprehend the poet’s true nature. The same notion resurfaces at the end of the description:

His misshapen body, that gray mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers, the bags under his lusterless eyes, were only intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and chiseled his verse. (26)

Kinbote insists here that a correct perception of Shade demands an adjustment that will make the poet’s features *intelligible*, in the same way that Holbein’s double portrait will be intelligible only if the viewer positions himself as the painting requires.

These frequent allusions to anamorphic devices conveyed by references to distortion and mirrors echo two eye-catching textual details confirming the importance of the anamorphic motif in the novel. The first detail is the name of a character who appears very briefly in the Commentary (all the more briefly as Kinbote does not want to acknowledge, or even simply see, his very real influence on Shade): Paul Hentzner. In the novel, Paul Hentzner is a farmer with whom Shade used to take walks before he sold his farm in 1950. And although Kinbote feels nothing but disdain for him, an astute reader, as B. Boyd demonstrates, will understand that he was, in his discreet, unassuming way, a source of inspiration to Shade.<sup>27</sup>

Reading J. Baltrusaitis confirms that Hentzner’s presence should be noted for another reason: a Paul Hentzner (1558-1623) authored a volume entitled *Itinerarium Germaniae, Galliae, Angliae, Italiae*, originally published in Breslau in 1617 – the date that Kinbote

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<sup>27</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 86-88.

mentions in his note about Sybil's translations of poems into French – and later republished by Horace Walpole as *A Journey into England in the Year MDXCVIII* in 1757. The book contains a description of the anamorphic portrait of Edward VI by Willem Scrots which, although executed after *The Ambassadors* (in 1546), is often mentioned in connection to Holbein's work. Unobtrusive Paul Hentzner therefore provides yet another link between *Pale Fire* and anamorphosis.

The second detail deserving notice is “the red King pattern.” Mary McCarthy mentions Charles II of England (1630-1685) as one possible source for Charles II of Zembla.<sup>28</sup> This remark is brought out in bold relief when one learns that an anamorphic portrait of Charles II was painted some time after 1660 (the exact date has not been established) on which the monarch appears clad in a bright red robe lined with ermine. This further strengthens the connections between *Pale Fire* and anamorphosis notably because Charles II's red robe will recall the episode of Charles the Beloved's escape from Zembla:

Then, in secure darkness, the King rummaged for some clothes on the floor of the closet and pulled on, over his pajamas, what felt like skiing trousers and something that smelled like an old sweater. Further gropings yielded a pair of sneakers and a woollen headgear with flaps. [...] He experienced a blend of anguish and exultation, a kind of amorous joy, the like of which he had last known on the day of his coronation, when, as he walked to his throne, a few bars of incredibly rich, deep, plenteous music [...] struck his ear, and he inhaled the hair oil of the pretty page who had bent to brush a rose petal off the footstool, and by the light of his torch the King now saw that he was hideously garbed in bright red. (132-133)

Yet another link between *Pale Fire* and anamorphosis lies in the fact that the novel, like an anamorphic image, induces a mode of reception based on the perception, and control, of distortion. As early as the Foreword, Kinbote disturbs the reader's habits by introducing a measure of distortion into the reading process just like an anamorphic representation will disturb our habits as viewers by distorting its object. The first aspect of these distorting tactics is the singularly circuitous reading expected from the reader. As B. Boyd shows in great detail in *MAD*,<sup>29</sup> Kinbote invites us early in the Foreword, to interrupt our reading and turn to the Commentary to look at his note to line 991. If we follow this advice, we are rapidly encouraged to move on to another cross-reference: “he sat in his Nest (as he called it), the arborlike porch or veranda I have mentioned in my notes to lines 47-48” (287). If we keep complying with the text's guidance, we find out that this note suggests that we embark on yet

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<sup>28</sup> Mary McCarthy, “A Bolt from the Blue,” *New Republic* (June 1962), 21-27.

<sup>29</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 19-21.

another errand: “(see note to line 691)” (82). Is this going to end at some point, and where is the text taking us?

If we have followed this far, we now know to trust Nabokov. Or so we think. We finish note 691, return to note 47-48, with its hilarious description of Kinbote as tenant in the Goldsworth house, and yet another cross-reference – uh-oh! – to the note to line 62. Can we keep track of where we are? OK: one more try. Note 62 begins: “Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring of 1959, I had feared for my life. Solitude is the playfield of Satan. I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress... Everybody knows how given to regicide Zemblans are: two Queens, three Kings, and fourteen Pretenders died violent deaths, strangled, stabbed, poisoned and drowned, in the course of only one century (1700-1800).” So our commentator is the king of *Zembla*!<sup>30</sup>

The commentator’s identity is gradually disclosed through calculated distortion applied to the reading process. The narrator (and, beyond, Nabokov himself) suggests that reading need not be exclusively linear but can adopt a more complex geometry.

Unveiling Kinbote’s second type of distorting tactics demands less effort. In the final paragraph of the Foreword the commentator tells the reader *how* he should read his book:

Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture. (28)

Again Kinbote subjects the reading process to distortion, this time by suggesting that the order usually adopted to read an annotated edition be reversed, and with it the received notion that the work of art takes precedence over its commentary. But then *what exactly* are we reading? Once more, distortion is looming, showing through the cracks of Kinbote’s very denial when he reflects on the nature of his work and tries to define it:

I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel. (86, my emphasis)

But these disturbances, far from being a hindrance, are in fact very useful. Indeed, they are necessary for us to make sense of the bizarre literary object that is *Pale Fire*. It is because Kinbote puts us slightly (or completely) off balance in the Foreword that we are prepared to deal with a form, which departs from the norm, and can start making the mental moves required to read the novel as it must be read. The same observation applies to Kinbote’s presentation of his material:

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

The manuscript, mostly a Fair Copy, from which the present text has been faithfully printed, consists of eighty medium-sized index cards, on each of which Shade reserved the pink upper line for headings (canto, number, date) and used the fourteen light-blue lines for writing out with a fine nib in a minute, tidy, remarkably clear hand, the text of his poem, skipping a line to indicate double space, and always using a fresh card to begin a new canto. (13)

This batch of eighty cards was held by a rubber band which I now religiously put back after examining for the last time their precious contents. Another, much thinner, set of a dozen cards, clipped together and enclosed in the same manila envelope as the main batch, bears some additional couplets running their brief and sometimes smudgy course among a chaos of first drafts. (15)

The poem consists of eighty cards, but, if we follow Kinbote's reasoning, the second "thinner set of a dozen cards" (the variants finally rejected by Shade) offers the most valuable perspective on the eighty cards of the definitive manuscript: seeing what the poet contemplated and ultimately rejected will give the reader a chance to understand and appreciate the poem better. In fact, as we know, this is distortion as well: some variants were forged by Kinbote and will allow no closer perception of Shade's poetic genius. Yet true to the spirit of anamorphosis, this manipulation, which informs the whole Commentary (before Kinbote tells us in the Index which variants he forged), provides the reader with the angle he needs to comprehend its intricate workings. Kinbote's notes are typically anamorphic in that they subject Shade's poem to controlled distortion in order to lead the (good) reader to a more profound understanding of the novel. The Commentary may even be regarded as an emblem of literary criticism. According to Roland Barthes in *Criticism and Truth*, a critical study is an anamorphic image of the work it explores:

The relationship of criticism to the work is that of a meaning to a form. [...] The critic separates meanings, he causes a second language – that is to say, a coherence of signs – to float above the first language of the work. In brief, we are concerned with a sort of anamorphosis, given of course that on the one hand the work never lends itself to a pure reflection (it is not a specular object like an apple or a box), and on the other hand that the anamorphosis itself is a *guided* transformation, subject to optical constraints: out of what it reflects, it must transform *everything*; transform only according to certain laws; transform always in the same direction. Those are the three constraints which limit criticism.<sup>31</sup>

But the reader who has gone this far is expected to realize that although he respects Barthes's rules – transforming everything, always using the same prism, and always to serve the same story – deranged Kinbote is not so much an emblem of the good critic as an image of the biased one. Contrary to what the conscientious critic is expected to do, Kinbote's

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<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth* [1966], Translated and edited by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman, London: Continuum, "Classic Criticism Series," 2007, 32.

controlled distortion of Shade's poem does not serve the piece he is studying, but only his mad fantasies.

Anamorphosis may even appear as a linguistic key to *Pale Fire* in that Nabokov's language can be viewed as anamorphic. I shall start by briefly drawing the reader's attention to a curious grammatical distortion at the very beginning of the Foreword which I have found in all the editions of *Pale Fire* I have consulted (Vintage, Penguin and Library of America) but have seen no critic address:

This fact would be sufficient to show that the imputations made (on July 24, 1959) in a newspaper interview with one of the Shadeans – who affirmed *without having seen the manuscript of the poem* that it 'consists of disjointed drafts none of which yields a definite text' – is a malicious invention on the part of those who would wish not so much to deplore the state in which a great poet's work was interrupted by death as to asperse the competence, and perhaps honesty, of its present editor and commentator. (14, my emphasis)

This could (and maybe should) be discarded as a simple typo of course: just suppress the "s" in "imputations" and everything is fine. But this distortion, voluntary or not, in a sentence whose long central parenthetical clause may yet again evoke the composition of *The Ambassadors* and its central anamorphic skull, appears to me as an emblem of the novel's frequent attempts at destabilizing its reader's linguistic perceptions.

Probably more notable is the poem's insistence on "mirror words." Word twisting is introduced in Canto Two as Hazel's habit:

She twisted words: pot, top,  
Spider, redips. And "powder" was "red wop."  
(45, 347-348)

These lines induce a short note by Kinbote:

One of the examples her father gives is odd. I am quite sure it was I who one day, when we were discussing "mirror words", observed [...] that "spider" in reverse is "redips," and "T. S. Eliot," "toilest". But then it is also true that Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects. (193)

Hazel's habit is foreshadowed in the description of Aunt Maud's room in Canto One where "Moor" (36, 95) mirrors "room" (36, 90), and somehow spreads in the Commentary where mirror-words also abound in Kinbote's Zemblan tale. Sudarg of Bokay, the "mirror maker of genius" (314), is a reflection of sinister Jakob Gradus. Similarly, if Odon is the king's most faithful friend, his half-brother Nodo has to be "a cardsharp and a traitor" (311) in Zembla's mirror-world. Lastly, but my list of course is not exhaustive, when Kinbote contemplates suicide, he mentions as the likeliest weapon a "bodkin," alluding to *Hamlet's*

“to be or not to be” soliloquy and to his mysterious colleague of the Russian department, V. Botkin.

Word golf is yet another of these games with language:

My illustrious friend showed a childish predilection for all sorts of word games and especially for so-called word golf. He would interrupt the flow of a prismatic conversation to indulge in this particular pastime, and naturally it would have been boorish of me to refuse playing with him. Some of my records are: hate-love in three, lass-male in four, and live-dead in five (with "lend" in the middle). (262)

The game, also known as “word ladder,” “doublets” or “word-links,” was invented by Lewis Carroll in 1877. Its rules are simple: the player is given a start word and an end word. In order to win the game, he must change the start word into the end word progressively, creating an existing word at each step by replacing a single letter. Again, everything rests here on calculated distortion (Barthes’s “*guided* transformation”) – changing one letter at a time – and the expectation that the reader will uncover the winning combination. And my choice of the word “combination” is by no means random here as Kinbote’s formulation, mentioning the number of “moves” allowed to reach the end word, echoes that of a chess problem.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, another reason why anamorphosis is intricately related to language in *Pale Fire* is the importance of translation. The theme is extensively present throughout. *Pale Fire* tells a story which stages the encounter between two languages, English and considerably more exotic Zemblan, “the tongue of the mirror” (242), and the question of languages is obviously a matter of concern to Kinbote. So much so that he devotes one entire note to it:

Line 615: two tongues

English and Zemblan, English and Russian, English and Lettish, English and Estonian, English and Lithuanian, English and Russian, English and Ukrainian, English and Polish, English and Czech, English and Russian, English and Hungarian, English and Rumanian, English and Albanian, English and Bulgarian, English and Serbo-Croatian, English and Russian, American and European. (235)

Translation is not merely an interesting conceit: it plays an important role in the plot. It is because Kinbote reads *Timon of Athens* not in the original English but in the Zemblan translation, which he translates back into English in the Commentary, that he misses the quote that gives the poem its title:

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<sup>32</sup> If we go back to the quote and Kinbote’s “records” we are a bit surprised by his “lass-male in four,” when the trick can be done in a mere two moves (lass/slam/male). Interestingly, he does not suggest that we play with pale-fire (which, incidentally, is an easy three-mover: pale/pare/fare/fire or pale/pile/file/fire).

One cannot help recalling a passage in *Timon of Athens* (Act IV, Scene 3) where the misanthrope talks to the three marauders. Having no library in the desolate log cabin where I live like Timon in his cave, I am compelled for the purpose of quick citation to retranslate this passage into English prose from a Zemblan poetical version of *Timon* which, I hope, sufficiently approximates the text, or is at least faithful to its spirit:

The sun is a thief: she lures the sea  
and robs it. The moon is a thief:  
he steals his silvery light from the sun.  
The sea is a thief: it dissolves the moon.  
(79-80)

Had he consulted the original text, Kinbote would have instantly understood where Shade had found his title:

I'll example you with thievery:  
The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;  
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears.  
(*Timon of Athens*, IV, 3, 435-440)

Nabokov clearly expects the reader to do what Kinbote does not: go back to Shakespeare, thus adopting the angle that effaces the distortion and permits the unadulterated perception of the image. For translation is often seen – explicitly or implicitly – as linguistic distortion in *Pale Fire*. Sybil Shade's French translation of Donne's Holy Sonnet X is severely criticized by Kinbote in his note to line 678:

Two of these translations appeared in the August number of the *Nouvelle Revue Canadienne* which reached College Town bookshops in the last week of July, that is at a time of sadness and mental confusion when good taste forbade me to show Sybil Shade some of the critical notes I made in my pocket diary.

In her version of Donne's famous Holy Sonnet X composed in his widowery:  
Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so  
one deplores the superfluous ejaculation in the second line introduced there only to coagulate the caesura:

*Ne sois pas fière, Mort! Quoique certains te disent  
Et puissante et terrible, ah, Mort, tu ne l'es pas*

and while the enclosed rhyme "so-overthrow" (lines 2-3) is fortunate in finding an easy counterpart in *pas-bas*, one objects to the enclosing *disent-prise* rhymes (1-4) which in a French sonnet circa 1617 would be an impossible infringement on the visual rule.

I have no space here to list a number of other blurrings and blunders of this Canadian version of the Dean of St. Paul's denouncement of Death, that slave – not only to "fate" and "chance" – but also to *us* ("kings and desperate men"). (240-241)

Note in passing the reference to the “Canadian version” as a distortion of the “real” *French* version. It is only when he reaches the end of the note that the reader understands that Kinbote’s point is really to prove that the language best suited to accommodate these poems in translation was Zemblan:

How magnificently those two lines can be mimed and rhymed in our magic Zemblan (“the tongue of the mirror,” as the great Conmal has termed it!)  
*Id wodo bin, war id lev lan,*  
*Indran iz lil ut roz nitran.* (242)

This meditation on the perils of translation – which is probably not alien to the fact that Nabokov was also engaged at the time in his translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* into English<sup>33</sup> – is also humorous when Kinbote translates *shootka* as “little chute” (175), an obvious joke of course (“shootka” means “joke” in Russian) or when Shade derides the odd howler in Canto Two:

That Englishman in Nice,  
A proud and happy linguist: *je nourris*  
*Les pauvres cigales* – meaning that he  
Fed the poor sea gulls!  
(41, 241-244)

Distortions connected to translation have far-reaching consequences because translation means more than the mere passage from one language to another. For one thing, it affects identity. Zemblan Repburg, “the landscaper of genius” (93) is a transparent allusion to, and translation of, English Humphry Repton,<sup>34</sup> and Harfar Baron of Shalksbore derives his name from Shakespeare (208). But the most telling example is Jakob Gradus who becomes in turn Jack Degree, Jacques de Grey, James de Gray, Jacques d’Argus or Ravus and Ravenstone (77) for purposes of cover, as befits your competent agent on a secret mission, but also as dictated by the changes of language connected to border crossing: in Rome, your name should sound Roman.

This influence on identity is connected to the fact that translation also goes hand in hand with the passage from one world to another, namely from Kinbote’s America to Charles the Beloved’s Zembla. As B. Boyd demonstrates in *MAD*, this is illustrated by the

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<sup>33</sup> *Eugene Onegin, a Novel in Verse*, Translated from the Russian, with a Commentary by Vladimir Nabokov, Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, 4 vol., 1975.

<sup>34</sup> Humphry Repton (1752-1818) was the last great English landscape designer of the eighteenth century, often regarded as the successor to Capability Brown.

way in which Kinbote transposes the name of Judge Goldsworth's daughters (Alphina, Betty, Candida and Dee) into his Zemblan epic to give substance to its central characters:

“Alphina” and “Betty” all but embody the first two letters of the Greek alphabet [...]. But the girls' names also oddly prefigure the names of the four principals of the Zemblan royal family, in descending order of age, King Alfin, Queen Blenda, their son Charles and his queen Disa. The unique “Alphina” especially seems to have inspired the equally unprecedented “Alfin,” to serve as a starting point, as her name implies, for the whole Zemblan saga, and the first character Kinbote introduces in his first long Zemblan note is indeed Alfin the Vague.<sup>35</sup>

The names are “translated,” as it were, from the American context into Zemblan, from one world to the next. This idea of geographical passage is very interesting in a number of ways. First, it creates one more link with the figure of the ambassador who is, by definition, a traveller. But it also leads us to the notion of *physical* translation, the uniform motion of a body in a straight line. This might be reminiscent of the secret corridor through which characters can be translated from the castle to Iris Acht's dressing-room. It could also evoke Charles the Beloved's exile from Zembla to America, and of course the climactic scene of Kinbote's note to line 1000 in which Shade is translated from his garden to his neighbour's and from life to death.<sup>36</sup>

Lastly, it is also possible to consider physical translation in relation to chess. Translation in chess terms could be seen as the movement of the pawn from its original square to the eighth rank (and “acht” incidentally means eight in German) where it is promoted. B. Boyd underlines that “[n]one of Nabokov's other novels seems closer to the chess problem model than *Pale Fire*.”<sup>37</sup> I will try to show in the final section of this study that chess actually plays an even more important part in the novel than has hitherto been suspected.

#### IV. AN ANAMORPHIC READING OF PALE FIRE (II):

##### LOOKING FOR THE NOVEL'S DEAD CENTER

The notion of anamorphosis, and more specifically Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, can be viewed as strong structural features of *Pale Fire*. It is also clear, if we return for a moment to Holbein's masterpiece, that its key lies in the dramatic skull, its *dead center*. It is tempting

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<sup>35</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 97.

<sup>36</sup> P. Meyer discusses the notion of translation in *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Nabokov's Pale Fire* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), and focuses specifically on the role of French and Danish cultures in relation to the Russian and Anglo-American traditions.

<sup>37</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 13.

to take this as an invitation to consider the novel's dead center and see what it may reveal. It seems that two options can be envisaged, depending on our understanding of the phrase "dead center"<sup>38</sup> in connection to *Pale Fire*, each leading to a distinct interpretive line connected to anamorphosis in that it implies a drastic change of perspective.

#### A. IPH

"Dead center" may first be understood as the center of "Pale Fire," the poem. If we follow this lead, we are going to focus on what happens around line 500, and how the text negotiates the passage from Canto Two to Canto Three. If we draw a rapid summary of action at this point, two things stand out. Hazel Shade, the poet's daughter, has just died. The narrative of her last evening covers the end of Canto Two (46-51, 384-500). The opening of Canto Three takes us back to the days when Hazel was "a mere tot" (52, 508)<sup>39</sup> and recounts the Shades' move from New Wye to Yewshade where John Shade had been hired to lecture for one term at the I. P. H. This is the moment I would like to examine.

The I. P. H., the poet explains, is "a lay Institute (I) of Preparation (P) for the Hereafter (H) (52, 502-504). The hereafter is what comes after death, of course, but also, if we adopt a merely *textual* perspective, *after Canto Two*. And if we keep this perspective for a moment, we realize that the seemingly transparent acronym might be a code and have a somewhat unexpected meaning. I. P. H. might first come in direct reference to Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. When one observes the painting carefully, one notices that the master's signature appears in the bottom left hand corner: Ioannes Holbein Pingebat. IHP. Using the same three letters, albeit in a slightly different order, might be a way of reasserting the importance of this painting in the composition – and therefore in the reception – of *Pale Fire*. But this acronym could also be someone else's signature. What if IPH meant "Invented Pale (Fire) Hazel"? What if Hazel, after dying at the end of Canto Two, went through the looking-glass (an image that the lake where she drowns, reminiscent maybe of Hourglass lake, may suggest), were resurrected in Canto Three as the author of the book, and revealed this crucial fact to the reader, but in the most oblique way, through a coded message?

This might appear as an improbable interpretation, but a number of clues seem to support it. Hazel's knack at twisting words might be discreetly hinting at her capacity to write and indulge in complex verbal games. In the same way, the note in which Kinbote stresses

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<sup>38</sup> This phrase, which applies nicely to Holbein's painting, is also used by B. Boyd in connection to *Pale Fire*. He calls Hazel's demise "the dead center" of the poem (*MAD*, 129).

<sup>39</sup> The pun on the German *tot*, meaning "dead," is not innocent of course.

their resemblance (“But then it is true that Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects,” 193) might be a clue planted in the Commentary to invite the reader to see the correlation between the two characters and reach a simple conclusion: the reason why Hazel resembles Kinbote is simply that she *is* Kinbote, or rather *impersonates* him, in the novel. This might be corroborated by a number of passages of both the poem and the Commentary where the return of the words “haze” (42, 92, 144, 210, 219) or “hazy” (61) might also be read as a signature in disguise. Last but not least, the “plot” of Canto Three tells us how the poet crosses the border to the netherworld and, after a short stay, comes back from the dead. This might be a way for Hazel (as the author) to give the reader the key to the novel, even if he missed the coded acronym, by telling the story of someone who returns from Hades, thus confirming – if we read between the lines – that she only *pretended* to die.

Going back to the IPH code, it is interesting to note that this reading may indeed have been prepared a few pages earlier, in Canto Two:

*Life is a message scribbled in the dark.*  
Anonymous. (41, 235-236)

This anonymous message may foreshadow the opening of Canto Three. If one pronounces the word “life” the way a Frenchman with no notion of English would (which would recall the cigale/seagull game), one gets a very close equivalent of the initial word of Canto Three, “l’if,” the poet’s pun on IPH (“IPH [...], or If, as we called it – big if!” 52, 505).<sup>40</sup> Now if we reverse things, playing the mirror game once more, and combine our three elements (life, l’if and IPH), it does not seem absurd to subject the message to a slight distortion and read it as: *l’IPH* is a message scribbled in the dark. This would mean that the acronym, which we do not know yet, but will discover at the beginning of the next canto, delivers an obscure message (hence “the dark”), a riddle to be deciphered. If we endorse this hypothesis, it appears that the internal author might be warning the reader here, telling him in advance that a coded message is shortly to appear which he will have to crack to elucidate one enigma (and maybe *the* enigma) of the text. Hazel might be telling us where to look to find proof that her death is faked and that she is the author of the text we are reading. All in all, the text might perform precisely the trick evoked in Canto One: “the fellow whose/Tracks pointed back when he reversed his shoes” (34, 27-28). When we read the acronym of Canto Three, the textual tracks point back to a previous message in Canto Two and ultimately to a character

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<sup>40</sup> The pun is multilingual. “If” is the French for “yew tree” as note to line 501 indicates. This tree is commonly found in churchyards, hence associated with death, which explains the game on “yewshade.”

who had supposedly disappeared but is actually omnipresent since she wrote the text we are reading.

Designating Hazel Shade as *Pale Fire*'s internal author also agrees with a chess-oriented interpretation of the novel. Hazel's "resurrection" might be viewed as a literary transposition of the rule of promotion at chess: when a pawn reaches the final rank of the chessboard, it transforms itself into the piece that the player chooses (except the King), usually a new Queen, the most powerful piece on the board. Here Hazel, reaching the final square of her personal board (the lake) is also promoted to a Queen (the queen of the book). This idea of promotion is evocative of the passage where the poet depicts himself "playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns/To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns" (63, 819-820). If we go back to what appears as the central issue of the poem (can we envisage some sort of life after death?), promotion does indeed deliver a possible answer: in certain conditions a pawn can become a Queen and enjoy another, more powerful, existence. When Hazel dies, she surprisingly promotes, albeit through a coded message, to grand author of the novel.

This reading could be connected to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* (the latter being itself a story of promotion), as Beatrix Hesse has shown.<sup>41</sup> Nabokov, who translated *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into Russian in 1923, obviously knew both novels inside out, and the possible links between them and *Pale Fire* are numerous. The narrative of Hazel's final day, marked by a series of encounters which inexorably take her to the lake where she comes to grief, evokes the narrative structure of both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. And more specifically, her death by drowning might evoke – although the outcome differs – Alice's crossing of "the Pool of tears." Similarly, Chapter 4 of *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which Alice is caught in the exchange between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, might be subtly transposed in *Pale Fire* where Hazel's status as the real author of both the poem and the Commentary is masked by the rivalry between Shade and Kinbote, the novel's Tweedledum and Tweedledee. One final clue may also lie in the fact that the question of internal authorship already appears in L. Carroll's novel. Tweedledum and Tweedledee question Alice's reality and suggest that she is just an element of the Red King's dream, prompting a reflexion on who is real or invented. The question resurfaces in the final chapter, "Which dreamed it?"

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<sup>41</sup> Beatrix Hesse. "The Moon's an arrant thief" – Self-reflexivity in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Self-Reflexivity in literature*, Werner Huber, Martin Middeke and Hubert Zapf eds., Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005, 113-124.

“Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all. [...] You see, Kitty, it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of his dream, too!” [...] Which do *you* think it was?<sup>42</sup>

The text closes on a direct address to the reader and apparent stalemate, but the connection with *Through the Looking-Glass* might be meant to suggest, albeit obliquely, that the same question applies to *Pale Fire* and that Hazel may be a more valid option than Shade and Kinbote as internal author of the whole book. This interpretation of *Pale Fire* may raise a few eyebrows, but it would account for a large number of echoes between the poem and the Commentary, and notably for the Vanessa connection that B. Boyd demonstrates in *MAD*.<sup>43</sup> But where he justifies the connection by Hazel’s ghostly presence, the interpretation of the novel that I am putting forward here attributes it simply to Hazel’s direct control over the text. While spirits undeniably play a crucial part in Nabokov’s fiction, they may not be absolutely necessary to make sense of the novel’s narrative structure. Nothing supernatural here: Hazel, as the author of the novel, can create all sorts of echoes between various parts of the book.

Besides, it would not be the first time that Nabokov has played this “resurrection trick” on his reader. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Sebastian’s first novel, *The Prismatic Bezel*, is a mock-detective novel in which the alleged victim, an art dealer by the name of G. Abeson, is not dead and makes a dramatic reappearance as his mirror double “old Nosebag” to deliver the parting shot: “You see, one dislikes being murdered.”<sup>44</sup> The dead man of the tale turns out to have engineered the whole thing: the “topsy-turvical coincidence” *par excellence*. Well, one may also dislike committing suicide: Hazel may be only the shadow of a shade.

But then who is Hazel? What are we to make of a character who fakes her own death and writes a poem and its commentary under two different aliases, impersonating both an ageing poet and a madman posing as an exiled king? Envisaging Hazel as the author of *Pale Fire* implies that we reconstruct a context that is plausible enough to accommodate this major change in the book’s narrative structure. This leads me to formulate four hypotheses.

The first hypothesis is quite simple. Hazel Shade is the daughter of John Shade, a renowned American poet, and *Pale Fire* is essentially a schoolgirl prank, the reunion of a poem *à la manière de* John Shade and a commentary of that poem which pretends to respect the academic canon but is a farce based on a blatant misreading composed by a madman.

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<sup>42</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* [1872], London: Penguin Classics, 1998, 239-240.

<sup>43</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 129-141.

<sup>44</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* [1941], London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2011, 82.

Both Hazel's and her father's deaths would then be totally fictitious and Kinbote, as the Commentary and the Index suggest, could be Hazel's farcical transposition of one of her father's real colleagues, V. Botkin, on a campus closely resembling fictional Wordsmith. This hypothesis seems to run into a major objection, though: how can we account for the fact that such a young girl should have the vast knowledge required to write such a complex text as *Pale Fire*? The teenager's joke is turning into the hardly plausible achievement of a child prodigy.

Hypothesis number two is a variant of hypothesis one. Hazel Shade, the daughter of the famous poet John Shade, may herself be an aspiring writer, tired of standing in her father's shadow. Writing a poem *à la manière de* Shade and its commentary, thus showing that she is as proficient in verse as in prose, and has the makings both of a poet and a novelist, would be a way of eclipsing her father. The poem, however obliquely, depicts Hazel as someone who might be involved in literary exchanges. She is, first of all, an avid reader, even if this proves detrimental to her development as a young girl: she is lonely, and spends her time reading on the library steps (45, 338-340) or in her bedroom (46, 364) instead of socializing. And the scene involving Hazel and her parents in Canto Two is one in which reading is central (46, 363-382). Therefore, although it is the only text we see her reading, it is likely that Hazel's literary culture extends beyond the "phony modern poem" which is part of her English literature course. Extraordinary as it may seem, all these hours spent with books for company may have provided her with the huge literary and linguistic arsenal that writing *Pale Fire* demands. This might respond to the objection formulated above. A few textual elements also lead the reader to see Hazel as a budding writer. Her penchant for word-twisting and naming (45, 347-349) might be interpreted as an allusion to literary composition, and line 368 where she reads the word "grimpen" and turns it into "Grim Pen" seems to demonstrate a capacity for creative wordplay. An explicit hint at literary (or pictorial) composition appears in the final lines of the scene:

the point is that the three  
Chambers, *then* bound by you and her and me,  
Now form a tryptich or a three-act play  
In which portrayed events for ever stay.  
(46, 379-382)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This evocation of drama in relation to Hazel is echoed in the Commentary when Kinbote turns the episode of the haunted barn into a short theatrical act.

If we pursue this argument, the final Canto and its long meditation about poetic composition might be Hazel's way of demonstrating that her understanding of poetry is deep enough to make her possibly an even better poet than her father. Shade's death in the end would still be invented, but would assume a symbolic, Freudian dimension: Hazel kills the father to make a name for herself.

P. Meyer and J. Hoffman write that "*Pale Fire* is structured on the idea that reality has an infinite succession of false bottoms."<sup>46</sup> Hazel may indeed be one of these false bottoms, or may create them. A critical reader might argue that in the family scene mentioned above, she is shown struggling with words ("Mother, what's *grimpen*?" "Mother, what's *chtonic*?" "And what does *sempiternal* mean?") rather than mastering them, which a writer would be expected to do. This is true, but if we agree to consider her for a moment as the potential author of both the poem and the Commentary, but an author who will not be identified as such and hides behind two masks, we must admit that depicting herself as plain and intellectually mediocre – anything but remarkable – before spiriting herself away by means of a false suicide is astute. Hazel's portrait in Canto Two is unlikely to prompt the reader to see her as the author of *Pale Fire*, which is her intention. She wants to make a name for herself, but in a very oblique and cunning way: only the IPH code is meant to designate her as the novel's *Deus ex machina*.

My third hypothesis departs radically from the previous schemes. Neither Shade nor Kinbote ever existed. Everything is an invention. This vision of things seems to be encouraged by a simple fact: Shade, Kinbote and Gradus share the same birthday. This is either the most amazing coincidence or a clue which is supposed to take us to the idea that all three may be the invention not merely of Nabokov (which of course they are) but of another character as well. But if everything is invented, then Hazel's identity is also an invention. This is by far the most complex hypothesis because it posits that nothing in *Pale Fire* is what it seems to be,<sup>47</sup> and leaves us with a difficult question: "who" then is the voice posing as Hazel Shade (and does it still make sense to call her Hazel Shade at all)?

This tricky question takes me to my fourth and final hypothesis. M. McCarthy showed in her brilliant essay that Hazel Shade is an allusion to Walter Scott's "Lady of the Lake."<sup>48</sup> The intertextual link is undeniable, but "Hazel" can also be read as HAZE+L. Haze, the family name, and L, the initial letter of the nickname of Nabokov's most famous character:

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<sup>46</sup> P. Meyer and J. Hoffman, art. cit., 197.

<sup>47</sup> This hypothesis wrong-foots the reader in much the same way that the realization that Shade has invented his own death (and is therefore very different from what the poem had led the reader to believe) may wrong-foot a dedicated Shadean.

<sup>48</sup> M. McCarthy, art. cit.

Lolita.<sup>49</sup> Hazel might therefore be a code, although not a terribly intricate one, for “Lolita Haze,” which the note entitled *Lolita* (243) might also suggest. If we follow this line of analysis, the name of the (fictional) author of *Pale Fire* might be alluding to the central character of Nabokov’s most famous novel. If Hazel Shade’s name alludes to *Lolita Haze*, then “(a) Shade” could be read as an allusion to the fact that in the novel entitled *Lolita*, the eponymous character dies in the end (becomes a shade). It could also be a tongue-in-cheek hint at *Lolita*’s most famous prop in Stanley Kubrick’s cinematographic adaptation (released in 1962): her *shades*. Be it as it may, whoever writes *Pale Fire* has read *Lolita*, as well as another of its author’s previous books, *Pnin* (since a “Prof. Pnin” appears as the Head of the Russian Department in Kinbote’s note to line 172), and borrows his/her identity from Nabokov’s previous fiction.

B. “*Sybil, it is*”

Another, more figurative, reading of the phrase “dead center” is also possible. The dead center of *Pale Fire* might be a *character* who, like Death, incarnated by Holbein’s skull, is omnipresent in the novel, yet difficult to identify (unless we adopt the right angle), hiding in plain sight. This induces my second interpretation. Kinbote, in the Foreword, Commentary and Index, tries hard to convince the reader that his story has three central characters, all male: John Shade, Jakob Gradus, and himself. But closer reading suggests that he bypasses one element of the *Pale Fire* equation: Sybil Shade. Although the reader, understandably taken in by Kinbote’s manipulative tactics, may not realize it, Shade’s wife occupies a lot of space in the narrative.

Sybil Shade is one of the three main characters of the poem (the other two being Hazel and John Shade). She is extensively present in Canto Two where the poet recalls the beginning of their love and celebrates his “dark Vanessa,” his “Admirable butterfly” (42-43, 270-271), thus preparing the conclusion of Canto Four, a description of Sybil in the garden, watched by Shade through the window of his study in which, again, she is compared to the dark Vanessa:

Where are you? In the garden. I can see  
Part of your shadow near the shagbark tree.  
Somewhere horseshoes are being tossed. Clink. Clunk.

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<sup>49</sup> The links between Hazel Shade and Dolores Haze are extensively discussed in Priscilla Meyer’s article entitled “Nabokov and the Spirits: Dolorous Haze-Hazel Shade” (*Nabokov’s World*, Ed. Jane Grayson, Priscilla Meyer and Arnold Mc Millin. London: Macmillan, 2001, 88-103).

(Leaning against its lamppost like a drunk.)  
A dark Vanessa with a crimson band  
Wheels in the low sun, settles on the sand  
And shows its ink-blue wingtips flecked with white,  
And through the flowing shade and ebbing light  
A man, unheeded of the butterfly –  
(69, 989-997)

Sybil's presence here is conveyed by the numerous words beginning with an s (see, shadow, shagbark, somewhere, sun, settles, sand, shows, shade) and the richness of the s-alliteration throughout (see, somewhere, horseshoes, tossed, Vanessa, sun, settles, sand, its, wingtips).

Sybil is also a discreet but crucial actress of Kinbote's annotations where he systematically describes her as an enemy. As early as the Foreword, she lets him down, first by leaving New Wye, where she could have been most useful to supply the commentator with "abundant biographical data" (18), and then by demanding that he "accept Prof. H. [...] and Prof. C. [...] as co-editors of her husband's poem" (18). In the Commentary, Sybil is also depicted negatively. Although she is the one breaking the good news that her husband has started working on a new poem on July 3 (86), she prevents Kinbote from gaining direct and unlimited access to the poet in order to follow the poem's progress:

She said not to bother him with those ads and added the information about his having "begun a really big poem." I felt the blood rush to my face and mumbled something about his not having shown any of it to me yet, and she straightened herself, and swept the black and gray hair off her forehead, and stared at me, and said: "What do you mean – shown any of it? He never shows anything unfinished. Never, never. He will not even discuss it with you until it is quite, quite finished." I could not believe it, but soon discovered on talking to my strangely reticent friend that he had been well coached by his lady. When I endeavored to draw him out by means of good-natured sallies such as: "People who live in glass houses should not write poems," he would only yawn and shake his head, and retort that "foreigners ought to keep away from old saws." (86-87)

The real problem with Sybil, though, is that, according to Kinbote, she acts as a censor and encourages her husband to prune the Zemblan theme, thus intervening in the composition of the poem:

Not only did I understand *then* that Shade regularly read to Sybil cumulative parts of his poem but it dawns upon me *now* that, just as regularly, she made him tone down or remove from his Fair Copy everything connected with the magnificent Zemblan theme with which I kept furnishing him and which, without knowing much about the growing work, I fondly believed would become the main thread in its weave! (91)

In fact, if the novel were to be viewed for a moment according to Greimas's actantial model, Sybil would be the archetypal opponent. The only exception is one episode to which I will come back later: the moment, just after Shade's death, when she agrees to part with the manuscript of the poem and let Kinbote take care of it.

The novel also contains a number of oblique clues suggesting that Sybil plays a more important role in its narrative structure than first meets the eye. In the first place, Sybil is also introduced as a potential writer. Kinbote, as already mentioned, devotes one entire note to a discussion of her translation of Donne and Marvell into French. And although the comments are mostly scathing, the lucid reader will have to agree that Sybil's efforts are not so bad, and that she can write. The fact that she should be introduced as a translator of poetry becomes very interesting when we remember that one part of the novel is a long poem and that the Commentary, with its Zemblan theme, is often concerned with translation. These remarks suggest that Sybil, although easy to overlook, is omnipresent in *Pale Fire*. This discrete omnipresence of a character well-versed in poetry and interested in matters of translation might be an invitation to go one step further and wonder whether Shade's wife might not be the grand puppeteer of the novel.

Two passages can be summoned to defend the idea that Sybil authors *Pale Fire* and, however obliquely, signs it. The first one is the note to line 830: "Sybil, it is."

*Line 830: Sybil, it is*

This elaborate rhyme comes as an apotheosis crowning the entire canto and synthesizing the contrapuntal aspects of its "accidents and possibilities." (262)

This note is very brief, but it focuses on one crucial aspect of the poem: the emphasis it lays on counterpoint. Counterpoint, which comes from the Latin *contrapunctus* (*punctus* meaning "musical note" or "melody"), is the combination of two or more voices that are independent in contour and rhythm and harmonically interdependent. The use of the word "contrapuntal" (which echoes Canto Three, 62, 807) could therefore be viewed as the suggestion that we should hear not one but several voices in the text.<sup>50</sup> If we follow this advice, it becomes clear that we must perceive more than Kinbote's voice here – and more

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<sup>50</sup> B. Boyd devotes one entire chapter to the contrapuntal theme in *MAD*, and envisages the polyphonic nature of *Pale Fire*'s narrative. Gerard de Vries also focuses on the use of counterpoint in "Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, its structure and the last works of J. S. Bach" (*Cycnos*, Vol. 24, n°1, 2008) where he shows that *Pale Fire* can be seen as a fugue with three voices: Shade's, Kinbote's and Gradus's. My reading here follows their reflections (and specifically de Vries's definition of counterpoint) but envisages another possible voice.

than (John) Shade's in the poem – and the title of the note may provide us with a simple answer: Sybil ('s voice) it is.

The notion that Sybil's voice should be heard by the reader is also suggested by the Index. It is surprising at first reading to observe that Sybil Shade occupies so little space there, especially compared to her husband, Gradus, or Kinbote. Her very concise entry reads: "Shade, Sybil, S's wife, *passim*" (313). One might see this as Kinbote's petty revenge against someone whom he saw as a permanent obstacle, but another interpretation suggests itself in connection with the reading I am trying to put forward. Where the names of other characters, major or minor, are followed by a rapid introduction and one or several page references, Sybil is graced only with the shortest of introductions, and one word: *passim*. This might seem terribly dismissive, but if we remember that *Pale Fire* is very much about mirrors, reversals, and anamorphic images involving the choice of surprising perspectives, we can see it differently. *Passim*, is borrowed from the Latin and means "here and there." The adverb might therefore be telling the reader that despite her apparent discretion, Sybil is present literally "here and there," virtually on every single page. And one reason why she may indeed be everywhere, although her name does *not* appear on every page, could be that she *wrote* every page.

This deduction is also consistent with a chess reading of the novel. When recounting the Paris leg of Gradus's journey, Kinbote evokes the correspondence between Oswin Bretwit's grand uncle and a cousin of his, Ferz Bretwit. That the family name "Bretwit" is connected to chess, is made plain to the reader ("the name means Chess Intelligence," 180). What is not revealed, is that the first name, "Ferz" means "chess Queen" in Russian. So that Ferz Bretwit means literally "Queen Chess Intelligence" and is evocative of the status of the Queen as the most powerful piece on the board ("Brett" in German). This veiled allusion to the Queen might be a way of signalling to the reader that the solution to the chess problem which is *Pale Fire* lies with the Queen, *the* piece to consider to discover the innermost workings of the narrative. And if one is looking for the true Queen of *Pale Fire*, Sybil (reflected by Queen Disa in Kinbote's Zembla – see note to lines 433-434, 206-207) has to be the only possibility. She has to be the "bretwit," able to impersonate both Shade and Kinbote and, like a true magician, distract us enough to efface herself behind the puppets she created, and make us forget who did it.

Yet another argument – ornithological – might support this interpretation. Where Nabokov is concerned, critics, understandably, tend to focus on butterflies, and *Pale Fire* does not disappoint in that respect. But birds may also be an interesting structural element and

the novel invites us to turn into ornithologists (like Shade's parents). In the note that introduces her, Sybil is presented as "John Shade's wife, née Irondell (which comes not from a little valley yielding iron ore but from the French for 'swallow')" (171). This explicit clue might be an invitation to remember the waxwing of the opening lines of the poem, if only because the swallow and the waxwing are two passerine birds. If Sybil is the swallow, then it may be tempting to see John as the waxwing. That the reader is expected to draw connections between humans and birds seems to be borne out by Kinbote's mention of *Ravenstone* as one of Gradus's aliases and by the passage in which Professor Pnin is called "a regular martinet" (155), although this example demands that the reader see the multilingual pun referring to the French where "martinet" is a bird ("swift" in English). This could generate a new reading of the beginning of the poem:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure in the windowpane;  
I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I  
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.  
(33, 1-4)

This reading rests on a combination of the ornithological comparison and a slight grammatical change of perspective, which again recalls our anamorphic theme. Let us imagine for a moment that "I" on lines 1 and 3 does not refer to John Shade – or not *exclusively* to him – but, in the contrapuntal (hence polyphonic) structure of the poem, to Sybil as well. Sybil (the swallow) would then be the shadow of the waxwing (John Shade) slain by the false azure in the windowpane. This could first be understood as a description of her social position: she is the poet's wife, standing in the shadow of the great man, invisible by nature. But these two lines could also be read as a foreshadowing of the murder scene at the end of the novel. Shade (the waxwing) is slain by Gradus (who worked in a glass factory – hence the *windowpane*). But Jakob Gradus is but the imaginary reflection of Jack Grey (hence the *false azure*: grey as opposed to blue). If we adopt this interpretation of the first two lines, then lines 3 and 4 mean that although the waxwing (Shade) dies, its shadow (Sybil, the swallow) lives on ("and I lived on, flew on"), and, presumably, *writes on*, suggesting that the authorial voice of the poem could be Sybil's, and John Shade a mere mask. This would force us to reconsider the status of "Pale Fire" and see it not as an autobiographical poem by John Shade, but as mock-autobiographical poem by his wife. If we follow this interpretation, the "reflected sky" of line 4 could be Kinbote's Zembla, the land of mirrors, suggesting that Sybil is also the author of the Commentary. The opening lines of the poem could therefore show us

Sybil (the swallow) both posing as the shadow of the waxwing (Shade the poet) and stepping into the limelight as the real author of the poem and the Commentary by allowing us an early glimpse of the poet's death and Kinbote's Zembla.

Lastly, considering Sybil as the keystone of this elaborate structure seems to be the only way to account for the episode where she agrees to part with the poem whose composition she so jealously followed only a few hours after her husband's death, and gives it to Kinbote whom she obviously dislikes. Why would she give up the poem, a gesture that she quickly comes to regret?<sup>51</sup> I would submit that the episode is made up (as is the whole story). The poem is not her husband's and she does not part with it since Kinbote is also an invention. But this episode is needed to give credence to the *trompe-l'oeil* on which the whole novel rests: one character writing a commentary about another character's poem. If this scene did not exist, it would be very difficult to explain how Kinbote can be in possession of "Pale Fire" and therefore write his Commentary.

Against all odds, the author of *Pale Fire*, this vastly enigmatic text, might therefore be the poet's wife, Sybil. But then maybe everything is already inscribed in her name. To many a reader Sybil will evoke the *sibyl*, the prophetess of Latin and Greek mythology who delivered cryptic oracles demanding sophisticated interpretation (Sybil-Sibyl: only two vowels need to go through the looking-glass of the central b and switch places).<sup>52</sup> Iris Acht's name might also deserve more attention. "Acht" is eight in German, as mentioned above, a figure evoking the lemniscate and ampersand of the poem – ∞. But if we pursue the Sybil line, 8 might also be two Ss (Sybil Shade's initials) mirroring each other and fusing. Iris Acht might then be yet another indirect reference to Sybil. That this cryptic novel should be the work of a woman with a name alluding to enigmas may not be such a surprise, but it still forces the reader to confront interrogations similar to those raised by the Hazel hypothesis examined earlier. What context can be envisaged to accommodate the idea that Sybil wrote *Pale Fire*? How is the reader supposed to view John Shade, Charles Kinbote and Hazel? Are they elements of her "real" world that she uses to build a fiction? But then how much about this world is "real" or "invented"? Do Hazel and John really die? If nothing is real and Sybil invented everyone and everything, what about the true status of the voice posing as Sybil Shade? All these questions remain open and are extremely complex.

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<sup>51</sup> "That moment of grateful grief you soon forgot, dear girl" (298).

<sup>52</sup> P. Meyer also establishes a link between Sybil and the figure of the sibyl in "Nabokov and the Spirits: Dolorous Haze-Hazel Shade". She mentions the sibyl as a "go between from this world to the next" but acknowledges that it does not really correspond to her image in Kinbote's commentary. My idea here is to envisage the sibyl along hermeneutic lines, as a figure who sets riddles that involve a complex process of decipherment.

Another question must be raised: why should Nabokov decide to write a novel in which two male voices are superseded by a female voice, supposedly the poet's wife? A few critics have used Nabokov's life to interpret the novel, contending, for instance, that the murder scene and the fact that Shade dies by mistake might be the author's attempt to come to terms with the equally "accidental" death of his father in Berlin, in 1922. It is tempting at this stage to resort to biography. Exposing Sybil as the real poet might be one way for Nabokov to pay homage to Véra, his wife and most faithful support, by acknowledging in his fiction the decisive role she played in his literary career. "Without my wife, he said to Mark Aldanov some time in 1932, I would never have written a single novel."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Véra shares a number of characteristics with Sybil. For one thing, she also worked as a translator. A few of her translations were published in the émigré magazine *Rul'* in 1923, notably a piece by Edgar Allan Poe entitled "The Shadow," and her biographer, Stacy Schiff, mentions that she also translated poems by John Donne, a clear link with the novel. But her career as a translator did not end there. Years later, after her husband's death, Véra Nabokov translated *Pale Fire* into Russian (*Blednii Ogon'*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982). This translation is preceded by an introduction entitled "From the translator," "Ot perevodchitsy" (a title which, in Russian, clearly indicates that the translator is female, thus stressing – although maybe not intentionally – a possible connection with Sybil).<sup>54</sup> The second thing Sybil and Véra have in common is their self-effacement. Schiff writes that Véra may have entertained literary aspirations but renounced them when she met her future husband and somehow decided to become his shadow: "She was neither the first nor the last woman to renounce her literary aspirations on falling in love with a writer. Boyd feels she could have been a writer of talent had she chosen to be, but believed so fervently in Nabokov's gift that she felt she could accomplish more by assisting him than she might have on her own."<sup>55</sup> The novel never describes Sybil as an aspiring writer, but, as mentioned above, her literary skills are undeniable, and the attention she bestows on her husband's composition evinces the same quiet determination to be the shadow of the poet and renounce all personal ambition to assist him. What S. Schiff writes about Véra seems to apply to Sybil as well (and not only because a brief allusion to *Pale Fire* can be detected): "She was most comfortable as a mask, most

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted by Stacy Schiff (*Véra (Mrs Nabokov)* [1999], New York: Modern Library Paperback Edition, 2000, 66).

<sup>54</sup> I would like to thank Yuri Leving for drawing my attention to this important detail of Véra Nabokov's biography.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

herself when reflecting light elsewhere. This moon was no thief.”<sup>56</sup> Another link in the biographical chain prompting the reader to see Sybil as Véra’s fictional counterpart is the *Vanessa incognita* that Nabokov drew for his wife on a copy of the novel the week it was published.<sup>57</sup> The connection that this drawing of a non-existent butterfly suggests between Véra, by essence a *Vanessa incognita*, and Sybil (whom Shade calls his “dark Vanessa”) seems too obvious to be overlooked. Maybe it was meant to thank Véra for her collaboration on *Pale Fire*:

September was devoted to *Pale Fire*, for which Véra undertook various arcane research assignments: She compiled a catalogue of tree descriptions [...]. She set the “word golf” records of which Kinbote brags [...] – working out the solutions on index cards.<sup>58</sup>

One more textual detail supporting this biographical reading is the reference to “the pale fire of the incinerator” (15), possibly alluding to the day when the *Lolita* draft was saved from the flames, an episode that Nabokov (who was to admit later that Véra prevented him from burning the manuscript) recalls in his afterword to *Lolita*:

Once or twice I was on the point of burning the unfinished draft and had carried my Juanita Dark as far as the shadow of the leaning incinerator on the innocent lawn, when I was stopped by the thought that the ghost of the destroyed book would haunt my files for the rest of my life.<sup>59</sup>

The oblique homage in *Pale Fire* echoes the discreet homage in the afterword where Vera becomes a “thought,” but the connections between both texts are visible. The incinerator, or rather its “shadow,” and the mention of the lawn foreshadowing Shade’s or Kinbote’s garden are telling. Both texts seem to mirror each other to unveil, anamorphically as it were, Véra’s figure, evoking Nabokov’s own words: “Most of my works have been dedicated to my wife and her picture has often been reproduced by some mysterious means of reflected color in the inner mirrors of my books.”<sup>60</sup>

### CONCLUSION: TWO QUEENS ON THE BOARD

Establishing Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* as a pictorial subtext of *Pale Fire*, and anamorphosis as a key device to understand its intricate workings leads us, therefore, to a

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>57</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> S. Schiff, *op. cit.*, 269-270.

<sup>59</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” *Lolita* [1955], London: Penguin Red Classics, 2006, 355.

<sup>60</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* [1973], New York: Vintage International, 1990, 191.

renewed perception of the question of internal authorship. Yet as all solvers know, a chess problem allows only one solution. This study, so far, offers two and suggests that the poet's daughter or the poet's wife could have authored *Pale Fire*. Which solution should we favor? To conclude, while fully aware that some of my arguments in this paper are debatable, I will briefly suggest two answers combining both lines to produce *one* solution.

The first option is that *Pale Fire* might be the result of a *collaboration* between Hazel and Sybil. Hazel might have written what is supposedly John Shade's text (and the I. P. H. acronym could mean "Invented *Poem* Hazel") and Sybil the Foreword, Commentary and Index (supposedly Kinbote's text). This would leave us with two female – instead of male – authors, possibly recalling the Red and Black Queens of *Through the Looking-Glass*.

The second option preserves the sole author idea. The Hazel and Sybil lines can also be combined if we envisage the novel as a Russian doll narrative, involving two distinct levels of narration and therefore two narrators who would also be two fictional authors of *Pale Fire*. The narrative voice posing as Hazel, the daughter of the Shade couple, would be the author of a novel entitled *Pale Fire* telling a story where a character named Sybil would be the concealed author of a poem and a commentary supposedly written by a famous poet (her husband, John Shade) and a slightly unhinged academic (Charles Kinbote). The narrative structure of *Pale Fire* would appear as follows:

**Vladimir Nabokov – real author of *Pale Fire***

*creates*

A voice posing as “Hazel Shade” – Narrator 1 (fictional author I of a book entitled *Pale Fire*)

*invents*

Sybil Shade – Narrator 2 (fictional author II of both the poem and the Commentary)

The embedding, with its two levels – three if we take the real author into account – would illustrate the poem’s “game of worlds” as well as the novel’s “contrapuntal theme:” in three distinct worlds, three distinct voices, fugue-like, “play” *Pale Fire*.<sup>61</sup>

This takes us back to B. Boyd’s idea that solving the problem in *Pale Fire* demands that two Queens be on the board:

Sybil as the *Vanessa* is in a sense the White Queen blocking the solution of Shade’s and the reader’s problem. We have to realize she is not herself a force in the solution, but that if Hazel is as it were promoted to Queen (a legitimate step in chess, of course, if a pawn reaches the opposing end), she can now take after her mother in death as she could not in life, she now can play the part of the *Vanessa*. There can be two White Queens, two *Vanessas* on the board at the same time, and it is the second, not the first, that makes possible the key move that leads to the solution.<sup>62</sup>

The idea I am putting forward here is clearly related to B. Boyd’s in that it also involves an approach in which the reference to chess plays an important part, with the allusion to promotion, and, eventually, these two Queens on the board.<sup>63</sup> We are reaching the same conclusion: what Kinbote presents as a *solus rex* puzzle seems to be calling for a double Queen solution. But my idea comes with a nuance. The passage I have just quoted is one of the crowning moves of B. Boyd’s “ghost theory.” My reading diverges in that, to me, the two Queens need not be part of a *metaphysical* interpretation of the novel, but can be envisaged on

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<sup>61</sup> Although I reach a different result, my evocation of the fugue is clearly connected to G. de Vries’s study of the contrapuntal structure of *Pale Fire* in which he envisages the novel as a fugal structure. But this point can also be read in relation to the article by P. Meyer and J. Hoffman mentioned above, and more specifically to their argument that *Pale Fire* “is an exploration of the possibility of an otherworld from three vantage points: Shade’s, Kinbote’s and Nabokov’s” (art. cit., 202). But my approach here is narratological whereas theirs is metaphysical, which leads to the selection of different “vantage points.”

<sup>62</sup> B. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 141.

<sup>63</sup> The notion also recalls Chapter 2 of *Through the Looking-Glass*, where the Red Queen tells Alice: “in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together” (L. Carroll, *op. cit.*, 144).

a purely *textual* plane, as a possible narratological response to the problem of the novel's structure. I submit that *Pale Fire* might be a particularly sophisticated example of embedded narrative.

When Kinbote writes about the Zemblans' taste for regicide (note to line 62), he mentions that *two Queens and three Kings* died violent deaths in the course of one century. Two Queens? Could this be an allusion to Sybil Shade and her Zemblan shadow, Disa? Or, if we go back to the scheme I have just unveiled, to Hazel Shade and her narrative shadow Sybil? Or, more obliquely still, to the Red Queen's promise to Alice that they "shall be Queens together?" And what about the three Kings? Do they symbolise John Shade, Charles Kinbote and Jakob Gradus? Should we go back to chess and imagine that the pawn, reaching the eighth rank, has become a *King* – something that the rules of chess preclude – leaving *three* kings on the board? Or should one insert Nabokov and Holbein into the equation and argue that the third King is the reader managing to find the "secret perspective" and draw them together in this hall of mirrors to make the crooked (anamorphic skull, complex narrative) straight? For better or worse, at this point I will not try to have the last word.

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## **Keywords**

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