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CHILD OF SHADE:
HAZEL SHADE'S PERSPICACITY
IN *PALE FIRE*

“White butterflies turn lavender as they
Pass through its shade where gently seems to sway
The phantom of my little daughter's swing”
Vladimir Nabokov, “Pale Fire,” ll. 55-57

Introduction

The absent presence in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the axis about which the poem “Pale Fire” rotates is the poet John Shade's daughter Hazel Shade, evoked by the phantom of her swing in the epigraph. Despite her profound interests and evident perspicacity, which she inherited from her famous poet father John Shade, along with her appearance, Hazel Shade faces limitations she cannot surmount, including in her attempts to communicate with her parents, both in her life and from the hereafter. Hazel prematurely departs from the world into which she was born. Like her father just after the poem's end and before the book's beginning, Hazel too becomes the shadow of the waxwing “slain by false azure on the windowpane” when she disappears below the surface of a frozen lake. Yet, Hazel also “Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky” and in the world of the text, and, as I will argue, managed to duplicate herself “from the inside, too.” Commentary notwithstanding, the true mystery of the poem “Pale Fire” and the novel *Pale Fire* involves the investigations into the hereafter mounted by both father and daughter, as well as their tragic failure to communicate, since John Shade, like many a solipsistic Nabokovian

hero, fails to attend to the insights of his daughter or heed her guidance about or from an otherworldly realm.

Nabokov scholarship¹ largely neglected the significance of Hazel Shade in *Pale Fire*, although this has changed over time.² Notable and early exceptions include Shoshana Knapp, whose 1987 essay “Hazel Ablaze” offers important insights into Hazel’s significance and nuances as a character, as well as the limits of her parents. Likewise, Michael Wood treats Hazel Shade over several pages in *The Magician’s Doubts* (1994), where he also reflects on the shortcomings of her parents (Wood 1994: 193-198). Importantly, Brian Boyd argued in *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999) that Hazel’s soul returns as a butterfly after her death and that this butterfly is observed near the hickory in the Shades’ garden which Boyd calls “Hazel’s shagbark” (Boyd 1999: 131). Yet, looking back in 2018, Gerard de Vries observed that “Quite a number of discussions of the novel do not mention Hazel at all” (12). De Vries then addresses Hazel at length (2018), observing rightly that “[t]he ostensibly complacent and pedantic Kinbote seems to have more sensitivity for the understanding of Hazel’s plight than her father, who, with all his kindness and modesty, seems foremost in love with his wife and with the artistic potentials of his own brain” (2018: 21-22), thus moving in a similar direction as this study, although with a different emphasis since he focuses on questions of sexual orientation in the novel and around Hazel. Matthew Roth also focuses on Hazel, albeit from an Oedipal perspective also different from the focus here (2017). Eric S. Petrie’s consideration of Hazel’s death proves highly pertinent to this study in questioning the assumption that she willingly took her own life, since he points out the limited perspectives of those who tell her story and do not understand her or interest in the next world (2013).

Dana Dragunoiu also addresses Nabokov’s depiction of the tragedy of Hazel and finds fault with the superficiality of the Shades both in her earlier 2017 article and 2021 book *Vladimir Nabokov: The Art of Moral Acts* (133-142), in ways that resonate with this article. In her 2017

¹ Seminal studies of *Pale Fire*, termed “one of the most complex novels ever written” by Frank Kermode (1982) (qtd. in Tammi 1995: 1), include Andrew Field (1967), Ellen Pifer (1980), D. Barton Johnson (1985), Priscilla Meyer (1988), Pekka Tammi (1985), Gennady Barabtarlo (1989), Brian Boyd (1991), and Vladimir Alexandrov (1991).

² Important discussions of Hazel Shade up to recent times include Shoshana Knapp (1987), Michael Wood (1994), Brian Boyd (1999), Eric S. Petrie (2013), Dana Dragunoiu (2017, 2021), Matthew Roth (2017), and Gerard de Vries (2018).

article she notes that Shade, like Hazel's blind date, cannot see beyond her physical unattractiveness (2017: 148-154). In her book she also contextualizes scholarship on Hazel in this light, noting that "Beginning with Shoshanna Knapp in 1987, a number of scholars have argued that Nabokov wants his readers to see beyond Shade's sanctioned portrayal of Hazel" (Dragunoiu 2021: 140, cf. Petrie 2013: 15, as this article also maintains), as this article also maintains. Dragunoiu cites the puzzlement of Knapp, Wood, Petrie, and De Vries in the face of "the Shades' obsession with Hazel's looks" and notes how these "scholars argue that Hazel must have suffered deeply from her parents' inability to see beyond her physical unattractiveness" (Dragunoiu 2021: 142). This article builds on the work of these earlier scholars in terms of its critical view of the Shades as parents and in focusing on Hazel Shade. Dragunoiu rightly observes that "It is one of the novel's central ironies that Hazel gets a 'richly rhymed life' (PF line 970) — replete with poltergeists and messages from the beyond— in a madman's commentary rather than in her father's poem" (Dragunoiu 2021: 145). This study will expand upon this claim by Dragunoiu in discussing the richer life Hazel gets through the commentary in *Pale Fire* and, like Petrie, looking more closely at Hazel's interior life and aims.

Like many others among Nabokov's children, as I address in my forthcoming book *Miniature Revelations: Childhood in Nabokov's Writing*, Hazel dies prematurely; however, the possibility remains that she passes into an otherworld, that "Strange Other World where all our still-born dwell" (167). Perhaps from that "Strange Other World," she still takes wing as a spirit in the world of the poem, or text, trying to offer an unheeded warning to her father of his impending death, just as her Aunt Maud had done before her. In this sense, then, it is Hazel Shade who proves the real nexus of the book as a whole by being an absent presence who connects the rivalling voices of John Shade and Charles Kinbote, like a "still point of the turning world," to quote T. S. Eliot whom she admired ("Burnt Norton" l. 64). Hazel acts like a guide, although she is not heeded and, as a result, Hazel's life is rendered forfeit, while the life of the one who fails to recognize her true nature is left forever scarred.

As signaled by the opening lines, "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (33), Hazel Shade's premature death by apparent suicide lies at the heart of John Shade's poem in four cantos or 999 lines, which is sandwiched between the "Foreword," supposedly written by a "Charles Kinbote," and the Commentary and Index, supposedly by the

same. However, as critics have argued since D. Barton Johnson put forward this possibility (1985), these represent the construction of the implied author Botkin, for whom Charles Kinbote/Charles Xavier is an imagined alter ego of an alter ego, who also in some sense represents an alter ego for the actual author Vladimir Nabokov. This sense of false bottoms brings to mind Nabokov's observation to Bronowski on August 16, 1963, when he writes, "You get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality, but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perceptions, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (Bronowski 2000). Yet all this also serves to paper over the actual heart of the matter, situated squarely at the center of the poem (and novel) "Pale Fire," which is a father's immediate grief over the loss of his daughter and the contemplations on death and the afterlife it provokes.

This fact about the poem is studiously neglected, at first glance, by the commentator Botkin/Kinbote who parasitizes the poem, like a "king-sized botfly" or "monstrous parasite of a genius" (172). He instead seems to make of it what he wishes it to be, no matter the falsifications it entails, ending his "Foreword": "To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word" (29). Yet before this line, Kinbote may speak a kind of truth, as he asserts,

Let me state that without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work) [...] has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide (28-29).

Contrary to appearances, there proves to be a grain of truth in these remarks on the autobiographical significance of the poem, its reticence about subjects dear to the poet's heart, and the value of the commentator's notes in providing additional information, although perhaps different from those to which the commentator alludes.

Indeed, oddly enough, the commentator does evince a certain kinship or similarities with Hazel Shade, as he himself remarks – "But then it is also true that Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects" (193), as critics have noted. Yet, in the end, both John Shade and Charles Kinbote

fail to recognize Hazel's brilliance and insight, although each is able to offer the reader a key part of the picture necessary for understanding the central narrative of the book. In this light *Pale Fire* actually proves to be the story of a young girl, rather than that of two self-absorbed and solipsistic adult males, whose lives have inflated their sense of their greatness and made them blind to things. Yet Nabokov challenges the reader of *Pale Fire* to do better.

Who is Hazel Shade?

So who is Hazel Shade really? The daughter of John and Sybil Shade, Hazel Shade seems a precocious and prematurely adult mind in a young person's body. Her father fails to understand and value her interior gifts and, as aforementioned critics have noted, is hung up on her exterior unattractiveness, which she has inherited from him. Yet, without her father seeming to notice, she has a rich interior world, a rigorously investigative mind, an excellent and expanding vocabulary, and inclines in a literary direction herself, as shown by the fact that she reads poetry by T. S. Eliot. She also ponders the same questions about the hereafter that haunt her father in the poem "Pale Fire," had he troubled himself to understand his daughter better. Also like her father, she goes to great lengths to investigate these questions and receives an answer from the otherworld, although it remains unintelligible to her. The only reason the reader can learn all this about Hazel, however, is the fact that Kinbote provides this information, in full accordance with his claim to provide necessary information for interpreting the poem.

Hazel first appears in the poem in a reticent and skittish manner, as a phantom, just as Kinbote describes. Underneath a tree, which John Shade remembers as "a favorite young shagbark" from his youth, there is a swing his now deceased daughter used to use. "White butterflies turn lavender as they / Pass through its shade where gently seems to sway / The phantom of my little daughter's swing" (ll. 55-57, *Pale Fire*). All of these elements, the shagbark tree, the transformation of the butterflies, passing through a shade, a phantom, and the "little daughter" all return throughout the poem and at its significance-laden end. In the annotations, for example, Kinbote helpfully adds another poem entitled "The Swing" that ends with the stanza, "The empty little swing that swings / Under the tree: these are the things / That break my heart" (95), which

Kinbote dates to “soon after his daughter’s death” (95). At this early moment in the poem, however, the phantom swinging of Shade’s “little daughter’s swing” evokes her absent presence in a ghostly way, which proves fitting for the poem, its core themes, the novel, and this article.

The Poet’s Childhood

Despite this early allusion to the Shades’ profound loss, about which the poem revolves, the poet instead turns inward, solipsistically reflecting his own self and childhood instead. Moving from the waxwing in the opening lines, he describes a mockingbird imitating what she hears (thus resembling his imitating/counterfeiting neighbor Kinbote/Botkin). In the next stanza, these specific bird mentions begin to make even more sense, since Shade proves to be the son of bird experts:

I was an infant when my parents died. / They both were ornithologists. I’ve tried /
So often to evoke them that today / I have a thousand parents. Sadly they / Dissolve
in their own virtues and recede, / But certain words, chance words I hear or read, /
Such as ‘bad heart’ always to him refer, / And ‘cancer of the pancreas’ to her (35).

John Shade thus is the shadow of bird experts, just as his name literally trails the Latin name of the silky-tailed waxwing, *Bombycilla shadei*. Shade thus carries on his parents’ spirits, who he has tried so often to evoke, through his interest in birds and the natural world. For Nabokov, a shade also represents the dead, who may still be present in a ghostly manner, like the phantom swing or butterflies passing through the shade – of death. This seems to be a theme for those bearing the name Shade, as does the fact that their phantoms seem to return supernaturally through the natural world.

After his parents’ death, John Shade is brought up by his eccentric aunt. “I was brought up by dear bizarre Aunt Maud / A poet and a painter with a taste / For realistic objects interlaced / With grotesque growths and images of doom. / She lived to hear the next babe cry [...]” (ll. 86-90). His aunt’s tastes for the grotesque and images of doom later seem reflected in his own

daughter, as well as in his own symbolically encoded poetry. Even as a young child, John Shade tends toward profound thoughts. Like many Nabokovian adult male protagonists, John Shade seems another brilliant hero imprisoned by the limitations of existence. “My picture book was at an early age / The painted parchment papering our cage [...] For we are most artistically caged” (ll. 106-114). Yet he still fails to recognize the depths of his daughter’s thoughts, questions, and experiences. Shade contemplates death and nonexistence, like Nabokov does in the opening to *Speak, Memory*: “Outstare the stars. Infinite foretime and / Infinite aftertime: above your head / They close like giant wings, and you are dead” (ll. 123-125). But he does not recognize his daughter’s contemplations of the same.

In his poem “Pale Fire,” John Shade shares formative experiences from his own childhood, including a medical episode in childhood that presages his own later death:

A thread of subtle pain [...] One day, / When I’d just turned eleven, as I lay / Prone on the floor and watched a clockwork toy -- / A tin wheelbarrow pushed by a tin boy— [...] There was a sudden starburst in my head. / And then black night. That blackness was sublime. / I felt distributed through space and time [...]" (ll. 139-166)

Shade thus experiences the transition into the otherworld multiple times in his life. Shade later explains to Kinbote that he keeps this clockwork toy as a “*memento mori*—he had a strange fainting fit one day in his childhood while playing with that toy” (137). The toy acts also like a simulacrum in the sense that it visually prefigures his fateful last moment when Kinbote’s gardener pushes a wheelbarrow past him right before his death, as well as being a literary reference to Pushkin’s “Feast in the Time of a Plague.” Such experiences in turn inspire Shade’s interest, since his youth, in the border between life and death and the nature of existence in the hereafter. As a child, he even spent a “sleepless night / When I decided to explore and fight / the foul, the inadmissible abyss, / Devoting all my twisted life to this / One task” (39). Yet, despite these memories from his own “demented youth” (39), John Shade is so focused on himself that he fails to recognize his daughter’s deeper similarities to him, intellectually and spiritually, and the fact that Hazel is asking the same questions as he was, with the same determination.

Father and Daughter

John Shade fixates instead on their exterior resemblance, which he takes as an occasion for pity and shame. Even when he is mourning his daughter, who returns as a ghost to her grieving parents through objects that once were hers – “And I love you most / When with a pensive nod you greet her ghost / And hold her first toy on your palm, or look / At a postcard from her, found in a book” (ll. 290-292) – Shade’s train of thought proves telling. Immediately following this recollection of her absence, he sums up his deceased daughter through the shortcomings of her exterior appearance, which she inherits from him, “She might have been you, me, or some quaint blend: / Nature chose me so as to wrench and rend / Your heart and mine” (ll. 293-294). He also recalls a series of critical remarks between her parents, e.g. “All little girls are plump,” “will cure that slight squint in no time,” “She’ll be quite / Pretty, you know,” “That’s the awkward age,” “Less starch, more fruit,” and “She may not be a beauty, but she’s cute” (ll. 296-300), which underscore how persistent and judgmental his critical view of his daughter is. This objectifying fixation on the deceased daughter’s external appearance casts Shade’s character as a father in a distinctly negative light.

John Shade’s failure to praise and prioritize her gifts and lasting internal qualities leads to a sense of disappointment in his daughter, despite her academic accomplishments:

It was no use, no use. The prizes won / In French and history, no doubt, were fun;
/ At Christmas parties games were rough, no doubt, / And one shy little guest might
be left out; / But let’s be fair: while children of her age / Were cast as elves and
fairies on the stage / That *she’d* helped paint for the school pantomime, / My gentle
girl appeared as Mother Time, / A bent charwoman with slop pail and broom, / And
like a fool I sobbed in the men’s room. (ll. 306-314)

Shade takes her “flawed” appearance deeply and unreasonably personally, crying in the bathroom. No doubt his perspicacious daughter sensed this feeling of crushing disappointment on her father’s part. Similarly, John Shade fails to recognize the wisdom of his wife Sybil’s rejoinders

on the matter, which again draw attention to his prejudice and superficiality and distinguish it from her own view. “And again your voice: / ‘But this is prejudice! You should rejoice / That she is innocent. Why overstress / the physical? She *wants* to look a mess. / Virgins have written some *resplendent* books. / Lovemaking is not everything. Good looks / Are not *that* indispensable!” (44). Sybil reminds her poet husband of Hazel’s innocence, agency, writerly capacity, and interior qualities, but he clearly cannot absorb the message. John Shade never takes this wisdom to heart and fails to focus on his daughter’s considerable intelligence and *interior* resemblance to him. Instead, he sums up his deceased daughter as a “dingy cygnet” who fails to undergo the requisite metamorphosis into a swan or even a duck, failing to mature as hoped. He remarks, “Alas, the dingy cygnet never turned / Into a wood duck” (ll. 318-319). He thus fails, Humbert-like, to recognize that the tragedy lies in his daughter’s mistreatment, nonexistence, and death, rather than a failure *on her part* to metamorphose into something different than what she is. (Ironically, though, she *has* metamorphosed into something different, in an other world.)

Interestingly, Charles Kinbote sees the question of a child’s unbecoming appearance in a very different way. In his annotation Kinbote defies conventional expectations by noting the beauty of the wood duck, with its subtly colorful plumage, as compared to the much praised, but drab by comparison, swan. In his annotation to “Line 319: wood duck,” Kinbote remarks, “A pretty conceit. The wood duck, a richly colored bird, emerald, amethyst, carnelian, with black and white markings, is incomparably more beautiful than the much-over-rated swan, a serpentine goose with a dirty neck of yellowish plush and frogman’s black rubber flaps” (184). Kinbote thus rejects conventional notions of beauty in a way that John Shade fails to do, while such a revaluation of beauty would have allowed Shade to see Hazel’s gifts and beauty as a cygnet, if not a wood duck. Like an ugly duckling, Hazel seems to start life in the wrong nest, not in the sense that her parents are not her own, but in the sense that they fail to see her worth and beauty.

Similarly, in remarking on John Shade’s own unbecoming appearance as a child, Kinbote dismisses it immediately as insignificant and rapidly moves to emphasizing his far more valuable internal qualities. His second sentence in the commentary reads, “We can visualize John Shade in his early boyhood, a physically unattractive but otherwise beautifully developed lad,” after which Kinbote rapidly moves beyond Shade’s insignificant physical appearance to go deeper into his consciousness to imagine his “first eschatological shock” at a waxwing slain by a windowpane

(73.) Earlier in the book Kinbote likewise speaks first about friendship and then dismisses Shade's appearance: "His whole being constituted a mask. John Shade's physical appearance was so little in keeping with the harmonies hiving in the man, that one felt inclined to dismiss it as a coarse disguise" (25). He goes further when he remarks, "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. He was his own cancellation" (26). Kinbote thus easily moves beyond exterior appearances and focuses on the poet's interior qualities as a poet.

Focusing on interior qualities is something Hazel's tragically superficial and solipsistic father fails to do for his daughter. Perhaps this is why her sense of self is so wounded by the rudeness of a blind date before her apparent suicide. Being the daughter of a father so troubled by her homely appearance, this might wound more deeply, despite the fact that his own finer qualities transcend his ugliness. Regardless of her father's view, the tragedy is not that "No lips would share the lipstick of her smoke; / The telephone that rang before a ball [...] For her would never ring [...] a white-scarfed beau / Would never come for her; she'd never go, / A dream of gauze and jasmine, to that dance" (ll. 328-335). The tragedy is that she is dead and it is for that reason she will never do those – or any other things, for that matter – in this world. For a bereaved father to think of the loss of those inessential things, *after* facing the irreversible and actual loss of her life in its entirety, is to fixate on the wrong things.

By contrast, Charles Kinbote sums her up very differently. Of Hazel Shade he notes in the Index, as being of the greatest importance, that she is Shade's daughter and "deserves great respect, having preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life" (312). Kinbote does not speak critically of her appearance; the ugliness instead lodges in her life and surroundings. The Index entry for Hazel, though brief, also helpfully refers to lines in the poem referring to "the domestic ghost, 230" and the episode in "the Haunted Barn, 347" (312), which Kinbote in turn richly annotates in an unusually pertinent, informed, and informative way under the headings "Line 230: a domestic ghost" (164-167) and "Line 347: old barn" (185-193). Kinbote thus proves truly helpful in filling out the interior qualities of Hazel Shade in a far more multidimensional way than her father does and link Hazel with a domestic ghost, as she may have become. His annotations thus provide a more extensive sense of who she really was, a reality that seemed to escape her solipsistic and

surprisingly superficial father. As Kinbote notes, Shade's secretary "told me about Hazel considerably more than her father did; he affected not to speak of his dead daughter" (164).

Despite the way Hazel is portrayed in her father's poem and the focus it shows on her outward appearance – even after her death – when the poem is being written, "Pale Fire" also offers evidence of Hazel's precocious intelligence and prophetic insight. She is verbally inclined, like her father, and plays with words, twisting them (ll. 347-348). He remarks, "Sometimes I'd help her with a Latin text" (l. 363). A more developed memory is also included, capturing an exchange between daughter, mother, and father, as they are independently occupied at some remove and physical distance from one another:

Or she'd be reading in her bedroom, next / To my fluorescent lair, and you would
be / In your own study, twice removed from me, / And I would hear both voices
now and then: / 'Mother, what's *grimpen*?' 'What is what?' / 'Grim Pen.' / Pause,
and your guarded scholium. Then again: / 'Mother, what's *chthonic*?' That, too,
you'd explain, / Appending: 'Would you like a tangerine?' / 'No. Yes. And what
does *sempiternal* mean?' / You'd hesitate. And lustily I'd roar / The answer from
my desk through the closed door. (ll. 364-374)

This telling tricameral memory "In which portrayed events forever stay" (l. 382) also preserves the relations of mother, father, and child, physically distanced across the rooms as they are. Significantly, the father sits at his desk behind a closed door, offering only one contribution, roared through a door, to the conversation between mother and daughter, when Sybil hesitates.

The choice of words, meanwhile, despite Shade's dismissive remark that "It does not matter what it was she read / (some phony modern poet [...])" (ll. 375-376), underscores the significance of what she is reading: T. S. Eliot, which she elsewhere transposes palindromically as "toilest," summing up her experience reading him perhaps. Her father's complete disregard for her interests and reading notwithstanding, the words she needs help with prove highly indicative and even prophetic, as John Burt Foster (1991) notes, predicting the swamp or *grimpen*, where she would descend into the *chthonic* underworld, where she would remain *sempiternally*, or eternally. Stumbling only on these abstruse words, Hazel's vocabulary proves excellent, while her diligence

in learning words she does not know seems akin to Nabokov's own well-known devotion to dictionaries. Moreover, had John Shade taken the trouble to interest himself in her reading, he might have realized she was immersing herself in his *Four Quartets*, echoed by his own Four Cantos.³ Each vocabulary word on Hazel's part, now messages from a daughter from the hereafter, opens up Hazel's own contemplations into eternity and the otherworld, just as her father writes about the "Strange Other World where all our still-born dwell" (167), and to which his daughter is consigned.

Hazel's Investigations into the Supernatural

The estrangement and distance between father and daughter also emerges when he declares, "She had strange fears, strange fantasies, strange force / Of character – as when she spent three nights / Investigating certain sounds and lights / In an old barn" (45). He emphasizes her strangeness and dismisses her pastimes in "an old barn" without further description, just as "he never cared to refer to his dead child" (187). By contrast, Kinbote's extensive, eight-page annotation (185-193) reveals that this incident was hugely significant for Hazel and anyone able to decode its significance. Yet the incident in the barn is not Hazel's first kinship with ghosts. Earlier in her childhood, she had shown the keenest attention in her family to what her father dismisses in the phrase "domestic ghost" (l. 230). The extensive annotation Kinbote provides shows how significant this moment was as a supernatural phenomenon and how, characteristically, Hazel's parents failed to assess their daughter correctly.

It appears that in the beginning of 1950, long before the barn incident [...] sixteen-year-old Hazel was involved in some appalling 'psychokinetic' manifestations that lasted for nearly a month. Initially, one gathers, the poltergeist meant to impregnate the disturbance with the identity of Aunt Maud who had just died. (164-165)

³ The subject of Hazel's reading was first discovered by Peter Lubin (1970), as noted by Brian Boyd (Boyd 1991: 107, 273n4, 205n7). See also John Burt Foster (1991: 44-46) and Eric S. Petrie (2013: 14).

Kinbote, on the other hand, perceives the truth immediately and supports Hazel's version of events and connects the poltergeist to Aunt Maud's recent death. He details the supernatural occurrences surrounding Aunt Maud's dog's basket, whose flight John Shade himself witnessed (165); the turning of an oil painting by Aunt Maud, short flights by her scrapbook, and "all kinds of knockings, which would rouse Hazel from her, no doubt, peaceful sleep in the adjacent bedroom" (165). Hazel had been upset by the fact that "Sybil had the animal destroyed soon after its mistress's hospitalization, incurring the wrath of Hazel who was beside herself with distress" (165), showing her mother's disregard for her feelings or those of Aunt Maud, who was not yet in the grave.

Clearly, the domestic ghost of Aunt Maud recognized Hazel as the most sympathetic and perceptive family member and therefore plagued her particularly. "But soon the poltergeist ran out of ideas in connection with Aunt Maud and became, as it were, more eclectic" (165). The annotation lists at least seven types of general mischief by the poltergeist, including a plate sailing by, witnessed also by Sybil (165), before Aunt Maud's ghost's final tour de force: "one winter morning Shade, upon rising and taking a look at the weather, saw that the little table from his study upon which he kept a Bible-like Webster open at M was standing in a state of shock outdoors, on the snow" (166), an experience that Kinbote perceptively connects with the making of lines 5-12 in "Pale Fire."

Hazel's parents, however, do not register the truth of this supernatural occurrence and instead pin the blame on their innocent daughter. Shade connects these incidents to his own youth, but in the wrong way, once again reacting with critical judgment rather than perceptiveness or sympathy:

My poor friend could not help recalling the dramatic fits of his early boyhood and wondering if this was not a new genetic variant of the same theme, preserved through procreation. Trying to hide from neighbors these horrible and humiliating phenomena was the least of Shade's worries. He was terrified and he was lacerated with pity. Although never able to corner her, that flabby, feeble, clumsy and solemn girl, who seemed more interested than frightened, he and Sybil never doubted that in some extraordinary way she was the agent of the disturbance which they saw as

representing (I now quote Jane P.) ‘an outward extension or expulsion of insanity.’
(166)

The Shades feel they cannot do much about the situation, however, “because they were afraid of Hazel, and afraid to hurt her” (166). Instead of engaging her in dialogue or really hearing what she has to say, they consult with a doctor about her, then as later, showing the extent of their concern about Hazel’s mental state and assumption that her observations are divorced from reality.⁴ This supposition on their part is confirmed for them by the fact that when they are “contemplating moving into another house or, more exactly, loudly saying to each other, so as to be overhead by anyone who might be listening, that they were contemplating moving, when all at once the fiend was gone” (166). They therefore assume that Hazel was the guilty party, while all indications in the book point to a more supernatural explanation, namely that Aunt Maud’s capable and active ghost also does not want them to move away.

Kinbote too weighs in on this incident with a level-headedness that proves characteristic when Hazel is concerned. He writes:

The phenomena ceased completely and were, if not forgotten, at least never referred to; but how curious it is that we do not perceive a mysterious sign of equation between the Hercules springing forth from a neurotic child’s weak frame and the boisterous ghost of Aunt Maud; how curious that our rationality feels satisfied with we plump for the first explanation, though, actually, the scientific and the supernatural, the miracle of the muscle and the miracle of the mind, are *both* inexplicable as are all the ways of Our Lord. (166-167)

Kinbote, as commentator, thus offers the final word on the matter. In so doing, he reveals the parents’ flaws and exposes their unjust accusation toward their daughter, by admitting the possibility of the supernatural and revealing the limitations of her parents’ more closely circumscribed view on the matter, which actually proves unjust and false and prevents them from

⁴ It might be noted that insanity in Nabokov’s writing, as in his stories “Signs and Symbols” or “Ultima Thule,” often turns out to be brilliance instead.

seeing the truth. Kinbote also displays the historic link between Hazel and Aunt Maud. Significantly, this annotation earlier notes that Hazel seems more *interested* than afraid of these phenomena.

This curious attitude on Hazel's part also prevails in her approach to the ghost in the Haunted Barn, which seems likely to be a slightly relocated Aunt Maud, who had been driven out of their house six years before. In this incident too there are witnesses indicating that it is not all in Hazel's mind or her doing. First of all, the story of the haunted barn had been picked up by the *Wordsmith Gazette*, which "started to worry the stuffing out of it" and was visited by "Several self-styled psychic researchers" and "notorious college pranksters," so it clearly became a significant phenomenon for multiple audiences (186), thus being not only in Hazel's mind. Least sympathetic to its significance, however, is John Shade, who ultimately "complained to the authorities with the result that the useless barn was demolished as constituting a fire hazard" (186). This, another "pale fire" perhaps, also marks the father burning up the place of his daughter's serious investigations – and the erstwhile domicile of Aunt Maud.

Kinbote's annotation again reveals the immense significance of Shade's throwaway phrase about an "old barn" to his daughter Hazel. Hearing about the Haunted Barn (and perhaps due to having previous experiences with a domestic ghost), Hazel decides to investigate this phenomenon for herself. She makes a nocturnal visit to the barn with her reputable friend Jane P., from whom Kinbote had received first-hand information and who acts as a reliable witness to these events. As he relates, "Hardly had the girls settled down when an electric storm that was to last all night enveloped their refuge with such theatrical ululations and flashes as to make it impossible to attend to any indoor sounds or lights" (187). Hazel and her friend Jane, "deemed a pillar of reliability," who acts as a surviving and reputable corroborating witness, thus attest to the supernatural phenomenon actually occurring (187).

Jane also shares with Kinbote "Hazel's notes from a typescript based on jottings made on the spot" (187). These record the behavior of "A roundlet of pale light" or "luminous circlet," which answers yes or no questions, denying that it is a will-o-the-wisp" and agreeing that it is a ghost: "when it wanted to give a grave answer to a grave question ('Are you dead?') would slowly ascend with an air of gathering altitude for a weighty affirmative drop" (188). It also responded to the alphabet by indicating specific letters with "a small jump of approval" (189) so Hazel tirelessly

recited the alphabet (or began to recite it) eighty times (189). She dutifully recorded the message “pada ata lane pad not ogo old wart alan ther tale feur far rant lant tal told” (188). Hazel, Jane, and Kinbote struggle to make sense of it, though Kinbote cites John Shade’s poetic lines “Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind / Of correlated pattern in the game” (ll. 812-813, 189) as motivating one to “seek a secret design in the abracadabra (189). Kinbote fails, but even his failure is telling:

I abhor such games; they make my temples throb with abominable pain—but I have braved it and pored endlessly, with a commentator’s infinite patience and disgust, over the crippled syllables in Hazel’s report to find the least allusion to the poor girl’s fate. Not one hint did I find. Neither old Hentzner’s specter, nor an ambushed scamp’s toy flashlight, not her own imaginative hysteria, express anything here that might be construed, however remotely, as containing a warning, or having some bearing on the circumstance of her soon-coming death (189).

Although Kinbote fails to parse the message the perspicacious Hazel intercepts, he does signal precisely what one ought to look for in this message: a warning or message about imminent death. Yet, as scholars have highlighted, the warning message about imminent death applies, in fact, to John Shade rather than Hazel.

In a letter to scholar Andrew Field on September 26, 1966, Nabokov himself offered this “translation” of the message’s meaning: “Padre should not go to the lane to be mistaken for old Goldswart (worth) after finishing his tale (pale) feur (fire), [which in Shakespeare’s play is accompanied by] the word ‘arrant’ (farant) [and this] with ‘lant’ makes up the Atalanta butterfly in Shade’s last scene. It is told by the spirit in the barn” (Qtd. in Boyd, 1990: 454). In *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, meanwhile, Brian Boyd paraphrases the message this way: “. . . we can now see a message to Hazel to tell her ‘father (*pada*, pa, da, padre) he is not to go across the lane to old Goldsworth’s, as an *atalanta* butterfly dances by, after he finishes “Pale Fire” (*tale feur*), at the invitation of someone from a foreign land who has told and even ranted his tall tale to him” (Boyd 1999, 110).

This message thus can be reinterpreted to offer a warning that John Shade should not go to Judge Goldsworth's house, where he will meet his end. Despite the fact that the remarkably insightful, perspicacious, and persistent Hazel Shade thus proves to have profound and prophetic insight into the future, a true daughter of Sybil and Shade, she is soundly dismissed. Even Kinbote levels a misogynist accusation of "hysteria" above, although he treats Hazel and her investigations with considerably more respect and seriousness than her father, who clearly has the same opinion. So does the "ever-sagacious Dr. Sutton," who affirms to her parents that "cases in which the same person was again involved in the same type of outbreaks after a lapse of six years were practically unknown" (187). Everyone thus dismisses Hazel's remarkable insight and discovery, as typical with Nabokov's perspicacious children and the insights they offer, as I argue in my forthcoming book *Miniature Revelations*.

Hazel tries to share her discovery with her parents and "wanted her parents to witness the 'talking light' with her" on a third night in the haunted barn (190). Kinbote offers a theatrical reimagining, which he feels "cannot be too far removed from the truth" (190). The episode, as Kinbote renders it, tries Hazel's patience, at which point Kinbote's stage script remarks, "*That does it*" (191) before "DAUGHTER (*exploding*)" bursts out "Why must you *spoil* everything? Why must you *always* spoil everything? Why can't you leave people *alone*? Don't touch me!" (192). In rendering the scene in this way, Kinbote shows considerable sympathy for Hazel Shade and gives her a voice in the book, which she otherwise lacks. The scene from the third night in the barn, ends tragically: "*Two minutes pass. Life is hopeless, afterlife heartless. Hazel is heard quietly weeping in the dark. John Shade lights a lantern. Sybil lights a cigarette. Meeting adjourned*" (192). Here too Kinbote renders Hazel with feeling. He seems to be the only one who hears her "quietly weeping the dark" (like Dolores Haze), while her parents fail to understand or hear the sounds of her interior world, both before and after her death.

In fact, however, I would like to posit the possibility that Hazel Shade in some uncanny way revisits her parents via Charles Kinbote. I am arguing not that she inspires Kinbote's Zembla (Boyd 1999), but rather that she inhabits him, at least in certain moments. Some potential evidence of this appears in Kinbote's commentary to the poetic phrase "She twisted words" (ll. 347-348), which reads:

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 (and I recall the poet’s expression of stupefaction) 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)

This stunning coincidence – or the recognition of his daughter’s presence or words within Kinbote – explains Shade’s stupefaction, while Kinbote’s inexplicable remark about their resemblance underscores the link between Kinbote and Hazel and that Kinbote observes Shade’s apprehending of this. Should this be the case, then his attempt to render Hazel’s words and interior experience would have a kind of inner truth. This sheds a different perspective on many of Kinbote’s acts. For example, when Kinbote invades the privacy of the Shades by snooping around their house on July 11th, when they are mourning their dead daughter, after John has completed the Second Canto (89-90) – “Sybil was alternatively huddle-shaking and blowing her nose; John’s face was all blotchy and wet” (90) – he may also represent Hazel attempting to return to her parents as they suffer from her loss.

In the final stanzas of the Second Canto, Hazel’s last moments alive are detailed, from her parents’ limited perspective:

People have thought she tried to cross the lake / At Lochan Neck where zesty
skaters crossed / From Exe to Wye on days of special frost. / Others supposed she
might have lost her way / By turning left from Bridgeroad; and some say / She took
her poor young life. I know. You know. // It was a night of thaw, a night of blow, /
With great excitement in the air. Black spring / Stood just around the corner,
shivering / In the wet starlight and on the wet ground. / The lake lay in the mist, its
ice half drowned. / A blurry shape stepped off the reedy bank / Into a crackling,
gulping swamp, and sank (ll. 488-500)

Even here it seems that Hazel somehow mystically informs her father of the precise circumstances of her death, since the view of the lake is described in great detail. Clearly, the Shades believe that

Hazel “took her poor young life.” Yet, they fail to recognize the extent to which Hazel investigates the boundaries between this world and the otherworld. So a conscious exploration of that boundary, often marked in Nabokov’s work by the mirror-like surfaces of bodies of water, seems an even more likely or accompanying motivation guiding the perceptive, resolute, curious, and courageous Hazel, whom they misunderstand to the very end.

Likewise, when Kinbote tries to protect John Shade from being shot, perhaps he is in some sense possessed by the daughter protecting the father. Hazel’s uncanny and prophetic presence, for example, would explain why Kinbote, when facing Shade’s murderer, “felt such a tremor of recognition that had I been in bed dreaming I would have awoken with a groan” (294), if the recognition is actually Hazel’s of impending disaster. Also perhaps Hazel is the one who “instinctively backed, bellowing and spreading my great strong arms [...] in an effort to halt the advancing madman and shield John, whom I feared he might, quite accidentally, hit” (294). Even Kinbote’s attempt to repossess Shade’s poem and use it to offer his own story could be Hazel’s attempt to use the means at her disposal (like the illuminated circlet with Hazel’s alphabet) to tell her own story or shed light on what actually happened in the barn and to her father, which only she perceived, foresaw, and knows will come to pass. Kinbote thus also helpfully thematizes such methods of (re)possession of what is not you(rs).

Indeed, one might hear an echo of this scene in the barn and Hazel’s attempt to make sense of epi/phenomena when Kinbote writes, in his final annotation, “My commentary to this poem, now in the hands of my readers, represents an attempt to sort out those echoes and wavelets of *fire*, and *pale* phosphorescent hints, and all the many subliminal debts to me” (297, italics mine). Perhaps it is Hazel’s pale fire that blazes so brightly in “Pale Fire” and leaps into John Shade’s mind when he asks, “Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*” (l. 962). Just as it is perhaps Hazel’s voice we actually hear, when her existence is summed up in the Index as deserving of “great respect, having preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life” (312) and pointing in the index to two annotations of “the domestic ghost” and “the Haunted Barn,” which state the truth about what she has become and direct attention to the place where Hazel’s story is actually being told.

Hazel’s messages also find their way into the text as a whole. One might also reasonably attribute to Hazel the message her parents see in the forest on the day she dies. John Shade quotes his daughter, unwittingly, “*Life is a message scribbled in the dark*. Anonymous. Espied on a pine’s

bark, / As we were walking home the day she died” (ll. 235-237). The message scribbled in the dark refers to the difficult to decipher message Hazel intercepts from the ghost of Aunt Maude in the Haunted Barn. It also thematizes difficulty to communicate from the darkness after death, even as this poetic line by Hazel reaches her father after her death. Darkly significant too is the immediately subsequent naturalistic observation the poet records: “An empty emerald case, squat and frog-eyed, / Hugging the trunk” (ll. 238-239). This empty case, left behind by a butterfly that has flown away, after undergoing metamorphosis, also provokes comparison with the lepidopteral remains in Aunt Maud’s room. In Aunt Maud’s room – which is perfectly preserved but emptied of her physical presence (ll. 90-93), like the empty emerald case above – as related in a variant preserved by Kinbote, includes Shade’s observation of the remains of a Luna moth’s cocoon: “her room / We’ve kept intact. Her trivia for us / retrace her style: the leaf sarcophagus / (A Luna’s dead and shriveled up cocoon)” (p. 114). These empty cocoons, including the leafy sarcophagus built by the Luna moth, or the emerald case of an exoskeleton the insect had to molt in order to grow or assume a new form hint at the theme of metamorphosis.

They also stand as an absent presence representing the dearly departed who have, perhaps, taken the form of moths and butterflies in the afterlife, as typical in Nabokov’s cosmology and Aristotle’s giving the butterfly the name Psyche, the Greek word for soul. Although Shade’s final version removes this observation, what it does include, through the process of revision, can also be read as Aunt Maud’s ghost’s forecasting of Hazel’s fate, since it describes a “paperweight / Of convex glass enclosing a lagoon, / The verse book open at the Index (Moon, Moonrise, Moor, Moral)” (ll. 93-86), which forecasts or reflects on Hazel’s fate on the moor on a moonlit night – and the message it might offer.⁵ Even as Hazel departs from life, signs of her imminent doom reach her parents, like a phantom phone call, “Was that the phone?” (l. 443), and the turning off of the television, “Oh, switch it off! And as life snapped we saw / A pinhead light dwindle and die in black / Infinity” (ll. 472-474). After Hazel’s death, they notice the wind and hear it “rush and throw / Twigs at the windowpane” (ll. 479-480) before another phantom phone call, “Phone ringing? No” (l. 480). Thus, even the unbelieving, grieving, and traumatized John Shade has meticulously, if involuntarily and unconsciously, recorded the details of Hazel’s posthumous visitations to her

⁵ Eric S. Petrie makes this same observation in his eponymous article (2013), as also noted by Gerard de Vries (2018) (19).

parents as a “domestic ghost” and in this way seems very much his daughter’s father, although he fails to recognize her to the end – and beyond.

By the same token, in Canto Three, the bereaved poet father displays a serious lifelong interest in the hereafter, which he shared with his daughter, although he failed to ever acknowledge it. He details, for example, his visits to IPH, “a lay / Institute (I) of Preparation (P) / For the Hereafter (H), or If, as we / Called it – big if!” (ll. 502-506). Iph too, Shade describes as a “larvorum,” which resembles a “larvarium” (l. 515), or nest or shelter made by the larvae of some insects. Seemingly unwittingly, John Shade offers these reflections on IPH and “How not to panic when you’re made a ghost” (l. 553) or how to “let a person circulate through you” (l. 556), without recognizing the interventions in his life of his Aunt Maud and his daughter Hazel. In his solipsism, he has failed to recognize Hazel’s profound insights, although he remembers his own “childhood memories of strange / Nacreous gleams beyond the adults’ range” (ll. 633-634).

Shade makes his obtuse ignorance clear in Canto Three, when he notes that at IPH, “I learnt what to ignore in my survey / Of death’s abyss. And when we lost our child / I knew there would be nothing: no self-styled / Spirit would touch a keyboard of dry wood / To rap out her pet name; no phantom would / Rise gracefully to welcome you and me / In the dark garden, near the shagbark tree” (ll. 645-652). This refusal to believe veils Shade in ignorance and blindness to precisely what his daughter is attempting by way of communication from the hereafter, including the immediately subsequent attempts by Hazel’s ghost to reach her parents: a funny creaking, the wind, a shutter or tendril fingering the pane, a gliding on the roof that makes a thud (p. 57), or the play of shadows on butterflies underneath the very shagbark tree he mentions. Yet Shade denies these, “Who rides so late and in the wind? / It is the writer’s grief. It is the wild / March wind. It is the father with his child” (ll. 663-665). Despite his reference to Goethe’s “Erlkönig,” about a child who ultimately dies after his father repeatedly dismisses the supernatural danger vividly perceived by the child, Shade ensures that the father is not with his child and, like the flawed father in “Erlkönig,” seeks natural rather than supernatural explanations for what he perceives.

Nonetheless, by the end of the poem, in Canto Four, written just before the poet’s death, John Shade reaches a kind of clarity and inner truth, despite his solipsistic and rational musings, and ventures a new credo,

I feel I understand / Existence, or at least a minute part / Of my existence, only
through my art, / In terms of combinational delight; / And if my private universe
scans right, / So does the verse of galaxies divine / Which I suspect is an iambic
line. / I'm reasonably sure that we survive / and that my darling somewhere is alive,
/ As I am reasonably sure that I / Shall wake at six tomorrow (ll. 971-978).

He thus establishes, through his art, that his daughter somewhere is still alive, despite all his attempts in the course of the poem to deny the possibility of an afterlife to Aunt Maud and to his daughter Hazel. Although his confidence in his own continued existence the next day proves false, in a literal sense, since he is about to be killed, it may still be true in a figurative sense, just as other Shades before him have returned as “shades,” like the Vanessa butterfly he witnesses in one of his final moments, which “shows its ink-blue wingtips flecked with white” wheels in the low sun and flies “through the flowing shade and ebbing light” of the twilight of his last day (993-997). While Hazel dies at line 500 of “Pale Fire,” and John Shade dies at line “1000,” both Shades are reborn in and into the poem again with the opening line, “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane,” which reflects the azure sky above John Shade after his death – “The poor poet had now been turned over and lay with open dead eyes directed up at the sunny evening azure” (295), as retold by Kinbote at the end of *Pale Fire*.

The azure also represents the frozen lake into which Hazel Shade sank. In this way, the opening lines of “Pale Fire” resonate in a new light, with Hazel’s spirit. She may be seen as the speaker in the poem, who declares “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. / And from the inside, too, I’d duplicate / Myself” (ll. 1-6). These lines thus seem to reflect on how she, like John Shade at the poem’s end, lived on and flew on in the reflected sky, as well as how she duplicates herself from inside “Pale Fire” and in all of *Pale Fire*. Her father’s daughter, yet more insightful than he, she learned the lessons of IPH about “How not to panic when you’re made a ghost” (l. 553) and how to “let a person circulate through you” (l. 556) and employs these after death in an attempt to communicate with her loved ones.

John Shade’s daughter Hazel thus proves herself to be the most insightful and vivacious spirit in *Pale Fire*, whether or not her communications are detected, while attending to Hazel’s

perspective hidden away in the novel, like that of other children in Nabokov's writing (cf. Weld, forthcoming), proves key to illuminating her profound achievements, which even continue from the hereafter. So in this sense father and daughter, after his death, have perhaps found each other at last in the azure sky. In this way, despite appearances, Hazel proves to be a key to *Pale Fire* by being the absent presence and axis about which all of *Pale Fire* rotates.

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