

Gerard de Vries

HAZEL SHADE'S "PALE SPECTRES"  
AND "PURPLE FIRES"<sup>1</sup>

---

Strange Phantoms rising as the Mists arise;  
Dreadful, as Hermit's Dreams in haunted Shades,  
Or bright as Visions of Expiring Maids.  
Now glaring Fiends, and Snakes on rolling Spires,  
Pale Spectres, gaping Tombs, and Purple Fires  
– Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*<sup>2</sup>

INTRODUCTION

**Z**embla and ancient Greece seem to be the only places where homosexual and pederastic relationships were, in certain coteries, regarded as socially superior to heterosexual attachments. This contrasts sharply with the lot of homosexuals in the past but also in the present. The works and biographies of homosexual authors testify to their sufferings as shown by the examples of André Gide, Nikolai Gogol, Alfred Housman, Marcel Proust and Oscar Wilde.

Nabokov responded in various ways to their predicaments. When they tried to hide their orientation, as did Gogol, Housman, Henry James and Proust, he never used an abusive term or did not even call them homosexual at all. But Nabokov notably used contemptuous language for writers who were not willing to disguise their orientation for the public. André Gide is frequently derided in Nabokov's novels, Oscar Wilde's terrible fate is in Nabokov's

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the most useful suggestions I have received from Dana Dragunoiu who read earlier versions of this paper, as well as the very welcome advice I received from an anonymous reader. The remaining faults are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, IV, 40-44. *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 233.

*Strong Opinions* attributed to his “perversion” and Diaghilev is associated with the debauched degenerate in “Solux Rex.”

Nabokov’s works have an impressive number of homosexual characters. Nabokov’s preoccupation with homosexuality might be explained by the large number of homosexuals in his own family: his younger brother Sergey whose sexual identity in *Speak, Memory* is alluded to in heartbreaking memories; his Uncle Ruka, a frequent summer visitor of Nabokov’s family who doted on his nephew and left him a fortune; and Uncle Konstantin, a “confirmed bachelor” (60). Uncle Ruka may have inherited his homosexuality from his father, whom Nabokov describes as having sought out “the best-looking boys among the best scholars” for his private school he had established for his sons (166).<sup>3</sup>

Nabokov used a set of markers to delineate homosexual characters. They are frequently associated with the moon and are identified with uranism. For example, Archibald Moon, Martin’s tutor at Trinity College, is “addict[ed] to uranism” (*Glory* 95). The origin of these associations can probably be found in Plato’s *Symposium* that was translated by Shelley: “the Uranian [Goddess], whose nature is entirely masculine, is the love which inspires us with affection towards men”; “the male was produced from the Sun, the female from the Earth, and the sex which participated in both sexes, from the Moon, by reason of the androgynous nature of the Moon.”<sup>4</sup> Left-handedness, as in the case of Smurov and Kinbote, is another sign, as are all sorts of violet colors (purple, pink, scarlet, lavender, lilac, mauve, heliotrope and mixtures of red and blue), violet flowers, mincing gestures and an effeminate bearing (the latter two as applied exclusively to gay men).<sup>5</sup>

An altogether different category is what Nabokov referred to as the “delicate markers” (“whose very nature requires that they be not too conspicuous”) hidden in literary allusions and in cross-references (*Bend Sinister* xvii). These Nabokov often uses to indicate closet homosexuals. Before discussing this subject, attention will be given to the revolution in

---

<sup>3</sup> References to Nabokov’s novels and autobiography are made to the editions published by Vintage International.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Holmes, *Shelley on Love*. London: Flamingo, 1996, 109, and 118. Although Vasily Rozanov in his “People of the Moonlight” refers to Greek mythology and “the Uranian” as well, his lunar people are primarily celibatarians as he emphasizes their monastic and spiritual nature. *Four Faces of Rozanov: Christianity, Sex, Jews, and The Russian Revolution*, trans. Spencer E. Roberts (New York: Philosophical Library, 1978), 39-194.

<sup>5</sup> J. E. Rivers and Charles Nichol discuss a game of “cat’s cradle” in *Ada* that contains allusions to homosexuals. “Notes to Vivian Darkbloom’s Notes to *Ada*,” 286 in *Nabokov’s Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life’s Work*, eds. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982). See also Gerard de Vries, “Colors,” *Silent Love. The Annotation and Interpretation of Nabokov’s The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 115-120.

Zembla, as this imaginary country is the background against which the events in *New Wye* are presented, and, as I will argue, should be judged.

### ZEMBLA'S REVOLUTION

At the very end of his commentary, Kinbote writes that he “may turn up... as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile.” Such an event would transform him into his creator. He also expresses the illusory desire that “he may sail back to [his] recovered kingdom” which he had lost after the Zemblan revolution (301). Following the success of *Lolita*, Nabokov entertained ideas about a literary return to Russia and anticipated this by arranging the translation of his bestseller into Russian.<sup>6</sup>

In *Glory* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov evokes the horror of a revolt by referring to the French Revolution, and in his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, he compares the Russian Revolution with the French.<sup>7</sup> In *Pale Fire*, however, the Zemblan revolution is exclusively linked with the English Civil War. Why this shift? Charles II, the last king of Zembla, dethroned by revolutionaries, is not, as might be expected, associated with the ousted English King Charles I, but with his son, Charles II, the future king.<sup>8</sup> This Charles fled to France in 1646, stayed in Scotland from 1650 until 1651 and was invited to become Scotland's king. The coronation was solemnized at Scone, in 1651. Kinbote remembers that, when young, he used to make his confession standing beside the priest's seat “shaped almost exactly as the coronation chair of a Scottish king” (224). After Cromwell's death, Charles II was hailed as the new king of the United Kingdom and the coronation took place on St. George's Day, 23 April (1669), Nabokov's birthday. These correspondences seem obvious enough to explain the shift in allusion from the French to the English Revolution. There is, however, an important additional link: the parallel between the Puritan aspects of the Zemblan and English insurrections. The causes of the English Civil War were as much religious as political. The opposition to episcopal hierarchy and to sacramental

---

<sup>6</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 403; 424; 472, and 489. See also “Postscript to the Russian Edition of *Lolita*,” trans. Earl D. Sampson in Rivers and Nicol, eds., 188-194.

<sup>7</sup> *Glory*, Chapter 15; Alexander Dolinin, “Thriller Square and the Place de la Revolution.” *The Nabokovian* 38 (1997) 43-49; *Eugene Onegin, A Novel in Verse by Aleksandr Pushkin*. Trans. and with a commentary by Vladimir Nabokov. In 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), 3, 170.

<sup>8</sup> For various allusions and references to the Stuart Charles II, see Brian Boyd “Notes.” *Novels 1955-1962*. By Vladimir Nabokov (Library of America, 1996), 894-900.

embellishments regulating ecclesiastical services was a strong if not decisive drive of the Puritan resistance to the court of King Charles I. The revolutionary movement in Zembla also had a Puritan dimension. It was due to “Puritan prudence” that wine cellars were closed down and maidservants were banned from the castle wing where the king was imprisoned (119). The regicidal Gradus “might be termed a Puritan” (152). Perhaps the Zemblan Puritans shared the views of their brethren that homosexuality, on the Bible’s authority, could be put on a par with idolatry, thievery and robbery, and that sodomites should be killed.<sup>9</sup> John Milton, who was the official apologist of Cromwell’s dictatorship as well as the self-appointed advocate of the beheading of “erring” kings like Charles I (whose execution he called a “glorious... action”), is referred to in Gradus’s “Comusmask mouth” (273).<sup>10</sup> In *Comus, A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle 1634*, Milton advises young girls to embrace the Puritan way of life.<sup>11</sup>

### KINBOTE

Kinbote, the last king of Zembla (its capital dubbed as “Uranograd), the great-great-grandson of “Uran the Last” enjoyed the perks associated with his status (102, 246). Just before his coronation he received a “whole mountain of gift boys” “piled three or four deep” (111). He considers the Zemblan “choir boys” as the “sweetest in the world,” recalls with gusto “rowdy but colorful Kalixhaven” where the sailors could be found or the never-to-be-forgotten “copper-chested railway workers” (224, 151-2, 147). His intimate “dear playmates” were smaller in number, like the “rosy-cheeked goose-boy,” the one that left his “riding boot in [Charles] bed,” and Oleg “his dear bedfellow” (307, 211, 125). After his marriage to Disa he enjoyed not only the company of Harfar, but also “a phenomenally young brute,” “acrobats and bareback riders” and “a band of Eton-collared, sweet-voiced minions” (208-9). Surely, an elaborate account of all these romantic encounters would read as the homosexual pendant of Boswell’s *London Journal*.

---

<sup>9</sup> See the verses about Sodomy in the King James Bible, [kingjamesbibleonline.org](http://kingjamesbibleonline.org) .

<sup>10</sup> A. L. Rowse, *Milton, the Puritan* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 147.

<sup>11</sup> *Comus* was written to be performed for the audience of the Earl of Bridgewater’s family, who vigorously supported the Puritan cause. The *Maske*’s Puritan rectitude might have served to distance the family from the Earl’s wife’s brother-in-law, Lord Castlehaven, who was three years earlier executed after being convicted of “buggery” (C.W.R.D. Mosely, *Milton* (London: Penguin, 1992, 173). This conjunction, however, has been unravelled later than *Pale Fire*’s year of publication.

But this gourmandizing comes abruptly to an end by his imprisonment by the revolutionaries, and is not to be resumed as Kinbote reaches America. He is warned in all earnestness by Sylvia O'Donnell: "Your Majesty will have to be quite careful from now on" (248). And indeed Kinbote is soon thoroughly frightened. When asked why he had installed two ping-pong tables in his basement, he answers: "Is that a crime?" (22), knowing that his ultimate goal for inviting boys to play ping-pong is considered criminal. And although Kinbote presents his readers with lyrical descriptions of boys at whom he makes passes, the actual intimacies seem never to surpass the "much-needed rubdown" administered by his versatile gardener after Kinbote has taken a shower (159).

Kinbote's romantic adventures, so abundant in Zembla, dwindle in America to failures, fiascos and frustrations. He lacks the intuition to select lodgers who do not take advantage of his hospitality. "[B]ad Bob" (although his "crew cut" might have warned Kinbote<sup>12</sup>) as well as the "silly boy" who abuses his Kramler, turned out as bitter disappointments (27, 158). Nor is it likely that matinal Balthazar or the nocturnal "roomer" responded to his amorous advances as Kinbote would have hoped (98, 95). Less disillusioning (probably because less exploited) are his connections with the little "fisherman" and his (discouragingly "impotent") gardener (235, 291). Indeed, Kinbote might have learned to curb his carnal cravings<sup>13</sup> as the climate at Wordsmith College is so intolerant that Kinbote justly surmises an insinuation in the question about his ping-pong tables. He is also deeply upset by an innocent student's complaint, and he has to endure such gross debasements like "[q]uite the fancy pansy" (25, 268).

Despite these confrontations Kinbote's hardships border on the ludicrous. The plethora of young male lovers in Zembla is just too caricatural; the names of "bad Bob" and the "silly boy" combined with Kinbote's unfailing quality to select the wrong sort of youngsters, are too farcical to engage our compassion. This story of Kinbote's jocular mishaps cannot seriously contribute anything to learn from about Nabokov's true attitudes towards homosexuality. But Kinbote comes from Zembla, the "land of reflections," an indication that this comedy of errors has a counterpart in a tragedy of faults in Appalachia (265).

---

<sup>12</sup> Paul Allen Miller, "The Crewcut as Homoerotic Discourse in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," in David H. J. Larmour, ed., *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose* (London: Routledge Harwood Academic Publishers, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> See also Peter Welsen, "Charles Kinbote's Psychosis – a Key to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," in Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, ed. *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis. Linguistic Literary Studies in Eastern Europe*. 31 (1989), 390.

AUNT MAUD

After John Shade became an orphan at an early age, he was raised by his aunt, Aunt Maud (1869-1950), his father's sister. Aunt Maud kept a verse book in her room, which remained opened after her death, showing a number of words. "Moon" is the first of these words that Shade mentions in his poem, line 94. It is followed by "Moonrise, Moor, Moral," but that "Moon" seems to be the seminal one is suggested by the variant for line 93 (preceding the one with "Moon"): "A Luna's death and shriveled-up cocoon" (114).

Aunt Maud is called "bizarre" by Shade who also says that she, as a painter, had a taste for subjects of a "grotesque" nature (36). According to Kinbote she was "far from spinsterish" which suggests that, although unmarried, she did not live a celibate life (113). If so, it is interesting to speculate about the nature of Aunt Maud's lovers.

The paperclip "from the local *Star* / A curio: *Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4* / *On Chapman's Homer*" Shade sees on Maud's door might provide a clue (36). This refers to the homerun by Ben Chapman, a Red Sox outfielder, but Kinbote glosses this as a reference to Keats's famous sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." This annotation is traditionally dismissed as a funny mistake due to Kinbote's lack of familiarity with the American culture. But Kinbote's comment makes sense. The clipping is from the "local *Star*," and the paper's name is quite telling, as a star can only be observed by a "watcher of the skies," like Keats in his sonnet. Keats compares his discovery of Chapman's translation (until he was introduced to it he read Homer in Alexander Pope's version) to that of the discovery of a new planet in 1781 by the famous astronomer William Herschel: "When a new planet swims into his ken."<sup>14</sup> This espial soon became "one of the legends of Romantic science." The planet, writes Richard Holmes, "eventually became known to European astronomers as Uranus. 'Urania' was the goddess of astronomy, and the new planet was seen to mark a rebirth in her science."<sup>15</sup>

It is useful, however, to have a closer look at the reference to "Red Sox" as well, the nickname of the Bostonian baseball players. The name of Boston is mentioned more than once in *Pale Fire*: Prof. H.'s "blue-blooded" guest at the Faculty Club's lunch comes from Boston as does the "charming boy" who gave Shade's *Night Rote* to Kinbote in his student

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, (London: Oxford UP, 1931), 39. According to John Barnard this line echoes the discovery of the planet Uranus as described in John Bonnycastle's *Introduction to Astronomy* given to Keats as a school prize in 1811 (*The Complete Poems*. By John Keats [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977], 546).

<sup>15</sup> *The Age of Wonder* (London: Harper Press, 2009), 96-97.

days in Onhava (216, 284).<sup>16</sup> *The Bostonians* is a novel by Henry James and it is thanks to this novel that James has been called the “first modern writer... to open a space for a sympathetic reading of a lesbian character.”<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the “Red Sox” is another link between Zembla and Appalachia as it connects Aunt Maud with the homosexual Kinbote. When Kinbote begins with his escape from Onhava Palace he wears only his pajamas and is in need of another attire which he finds in a closet: “what felt like skiing trousers,” “something that smelled like an old sweater,” “a pair of sneakers and a woolen headgear with flaps” (132). Next, the King discovers that he is “hideously garbed in bright red” (133). Given Kinbote’s characteristic attentiveness to socks (he vividly remembers Oleg’s “white ankle socks” and Odon’s “striped stockings”), the reader seems to be invited to realize that the King is wearing no socks while the only socks that would match Kinbote’s outfit would be red (123, 134).

If this clipping from the local *Star* has connotations which point (by means of the Greek goddess Urania) to homosexuality, so do other clippings preserved by Aunt Maud. From a series of pieces she collected during 12 years (1937-1949) Kinbote is allowed “to memorandum the first and the last” (114). Both deal with advertisements for menswear: briefs and long pants with a zipper. In both advertisements only a very small section of the image is used to depict admiring young women: “several ecstatic lady-friends” and “a modern Eve worshipfully peeping from behind a potted tree.” It is most conspicuous that Kinbote, entirely against his nature, gives so much attention to females while they are surrounded and dominated by some splendid specimens of masculinity. Is not Kinbote telling the reader what he supposes might have interested Aunt Maud, and that he has perceived her lesbian leanings?<sup>18</sup>

Aunt Maud’s penchant for “grotesque” things suggests that she was “departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical” (36).<sup>19</sup> This applies as well to some degree to “the patroness of the arts who had sponsored Aunt Maud’s last exhibition,” who arrived for Shade’s birthday party “ensconced in their tiny Pulex, manned by her boy-handsome tousle-haired girlfriend” (160). The girl’s looks and hairdo, and the narrowness of their car exhibit the closeness of their relationship while the name of their car, Pulex, Latin for

---

<sup>16</sup> Blue mixes with red blood into a purple color, and the fact that the Boston boy was “charming” in unerring Zembla, might suggest that these Bostonians are both gay.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), 177.

<sup>18</sup> The advertisements are reproduced in John A. Barnstead, “Two Notes on *Pale Fire*,” in Yuri Leving, ed., *The Goalkeeper. The Nabokov Almanac* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> *Webster’s Second*.

“flea” emphasizes their intimacy. Many poets have employed a flea, most at home in bed, to display a familiarity with the female body, unattainable without the insect’s help. In Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* the flea behaves accordingly: “I am like Ovid’s flea; I can creep into every corner... I sit upon a wench’s brow... I kiss her lips.”<sup>20</sup> Such acquaintances might clarify Aunt Maud’s “far from spinsterish” attitude and one may wonder whether her grand-niece was familiar with the sexual nature of her aunt’s social circles. Of the few things the reader learns about Aunt Maud, her strangeness and her love for her dog (which she kept despite its being “half-paralyzed”) are recognizable in Hazel as well, while their interest in ghosts is called “a mysterious sign of equation” between Hazel and her Aunt Maud (165, 167).

### HAZEL

Hazel Shade lived from 1934 until 1957 so it was for fifteen years that she dwelled with her parents and Aunt Maud in the same house, as Aunt Maud moved to Pinedale in 1949 (183, 40). Soon after the death of Aunt Maud, the Shades got involved in the chaotic intrusions caused by a poltergeist who “meant to impregnate the disturbance with the identity of Aunt Maud” and of which Hazel was the “agent” (165-6). Shade, for whom the disturbances recalled his own dramatic fits, could not help wondering, “if this was not a new genetic variant of the same theme, presented through procreation.” Kinbote reports about this episode, as “a commentator’s obligations cannot be shirked.” It is clear, however, that he would have preferred to examine “certain other richer and rarer matters” ousted by Shade’s picture of his daughter in “Canto Two.” What are these richer and rarer matters which are omitted in this portrayal? And what does Kinbote mean when he writes “that Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects” as a comment on her ability to read words from right to left (193)?

In both quotations Kinbote uses the word “certain,” which means in its contexts “specific but unspecified.”<sup>21</sup> I have suggested above that Kinbote has sensed Aunt Maud’s sexual identity. Is Kinbote implying that Hazel’s reading of words right to left might contribute to the disclosure of the nature of these “richer and rarer matters”? And might the “genetic variant” that Hazel has inherited have something to do with Aunt Maud whose

---

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Faustus*, in *Faustus and Faust*. By Christopher Marlowe and J. Goethe (London: Oxford UP, 1959), 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Webster’s Second*.

parents were Hazel's great-grand-parents? Reading words from right to left might be compared to writing words from right to left. Leonardo da Vinci often resorted to mirror-writing. The reasons for doing this, writes his biographer Charles Nicholl, "have been much debated." One reason might be that Leonardo, being "on guard against the pilfering of his ideas and designs," repaired to this mode of writing to encode his work. But mirror-writing might be a tiresome way to protect one's ideas. Nicholl suggests this was not so for Leonardo: "Leonardo was left-handed. Writing from right to left comes naturally to the left-hander."<sup>22</sup> One is tempted to conclude that for this reason Hazel was probably left-handed as well. Just as the reference to "Red Sox" links Aunt Maud with Kinbote, the ability to read words from right to left forms a connection between Hazel and the left-handed Kinbote. Moreover they both single out for attention the same word "spider" (Hazel literally, Kinbote within a palindrome, 45,162).

Hazel is also associated with the color violet (or rather lavender and mauve) in Shade's verse. Brian Boyd has argued that Hazel's soul after her suicide returns as a butterfly, a *Vanessa atalanta*. He further observes that this butterfly and another one, a "white butterfly turning lavender," can be observed near the hickory that adorns the Shades' garden. This hickory is so closely associated with Hazel that Boyd calls it "Hazel's shagbark."<sup>23</sup> The next butterfly mentioned is a "heraldic butterfly," a *Vanessa atalanta*, just above the villa and garden of Mr Lavender, in a setting and scenery that forecasts in great detail its last appearance just before the dramatic death of John Shade.<sup>24</sup> The image of the crepuscular white butterfly turning lavender will soon be followed by that of the "[m]auve rings about the moon" (36). The moon's association will be revealed as belonging to the last phase of Hazel's life as will be discussed in the final section.

Apart from her mother, none of Hazel's female acquaintances have a lasting attachment to a man. Her "nice / Frail roommate" has become a nun, her generous girl-friend Jane, who had a fiancé in the beginning of 1957, is "still unmarried" in August 1959. Aunt Maud is, of course, unmarried and so is, as one surely may suppose, the patroness of the arts, whom Hazel might have met (45, 196).

Shade writes that she was "once or twice" accompanied by one of his former students, a Korean boy. This student was invited for the rather grand "buffet' dinner" to celebrate

---

<sup>22</sup> *Leonardo da Vinci* (London: Penguin, 2005), 57-8. In this paper's context it is relevant to mention that Leonardo was almost certainly a homosexual.

<sup>23</sup> *Nabokov's Pale Fire. The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 131.

<sup>24</sup> Gerard de Vries, "Pale Fire's 'The Land beyond the Veil' and *The Aeneid*'s 'The Land which Earth Conceals.'" *The Nabokovian* 72 (2014): 4-11.

Shade's birthday (for which Sybil was assisted by the maid, the cook and two "white-coated hired boys"). Everyone of the other thirteen guests (with the exception of the patroness' girl friend) had a far more respectable age and station in life, among them Senator Blank and the college president. This suggests that the Korean boy should be regarded as one of Shade's close acquaintances, and it might very well be that Hazel accepted him in this very quality (159-60). It is most unlikely that Hazel was interested in the boy for other reasons; she "flatly refused" the attendance of the "nice ... boys," the "White twins," for her second nocturnal visit to Hentzner's barn to decode Aunt Maud's ghost's refulgent reports. (In the typescript of *Pale Fire* that Nabokov had sent to his publisher, the phrase "But Hazel flatly refused this new arrangement" was absent, writes Matthew Roth, who has studied in detail the changes made before the novel's final text was printed. The penultimate phrase was "but Hazel was terrified of boys"<sup>25</sup>).

In Kinbote's comments on line 334, "Would never come for her," Shade's sad phrase is turned into an expression of self-pity that, characteristically, marginalizes Hazel and returns the focus to Kinbote himself: "Would he ever come for me? I used to wonder waiting and waiting in certain amber-and-rose crepuscules." The lyrical "amber-and-rose" and the exotic "crepuscules" have Latin roots and evoke the two crepuscular poems by Charles Baudelaire (to whom the reader is already introduced in the commentary to line 231 and will meet again when Kinbote explains that his young gardener wanted "to read in the original Baudelaire" [291]): "*Le Crépuscule du Matin*" and "*Le Crépuscule du Soir*." The first poem was a favorite of Nabokov and is alluded to in *Lolita*, *Bend Sinister* and *Ada*; the latter "Crépuscule" has ghosts who "knock against the shutters," like the noise the Shades hear coming from "the shutter"(57).<sup>26</sup>

If one continues reading Kinbote's commentary after the "crepuscules," one comes (after only one more sentence) across another rarity, the phrase "curious Germans," a seemingly gratuitous way to lay stress on the naturalistic interests of Hentzner, "an eccentric farmer of German extraction" (185). This phrase is borrowed from Alexander Pope's poem "Phryne."

Phryne is the name of a famous Athenian courtesan and became the nickname of several hetaerae. Phryne's beauty inspired the painter Apelles and the sculptor Praxiteles to

---

<sup>25</sup> "The Composition of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*." *Nabokov Online Journal IX* (2015): 1-34, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya. The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 186. Pekka Tammi, *Russian Subtexts in Nabokov's Fiction* (Tampere: TUP, 1999), 45-6. *The Penguin Book of French Verse 3* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 147.

model their respective *Aphrodite* after her. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century scenes from Phryne's life were frequently painted with the heroine often undressed. Phryne was also extremely wealthy, and Shakespeare's "Phrynia" in *Timon of Athens* excels in greed (4.3.65 – 5.1.6); Kinbote, however, restyled her as a male transvestite (210). Nabokov mentions Phryne in *The Defence* (38), *Bend Sinister* (182) and *The Gift* (223). Because of her humble origin, Pope compares her social change with that of a butterfly, emerging from a "Worm." It is because of this lepidopterous connotation that Nabokov refers to Pope's poem in *Speak, Memory* (278). Why then this reference in *Pale Fire* as Hentzner, who is interested in "taxidermy" and "herborizing," is not a lepidopterist? The reason for quoting the phrase from Pope's poem is most certainly its title, "Phryne."<sup>27</sup> In *Epistle to Bathurst*, Pope refers once more to Phryne, by way of an allusion to a lady who is the butt of Pope's lines, and to her close friend, "Sappho."<sup>28</sup> Baudelaire mentions the name of Phryne in a similar context in his encomiastic lyric "Lesbos." Its first stanzas sing of the island of Lesbos replete with young girls whose beautiful budding bodies long to be caressed by each other:

Lesbos, où les Phrynés l'une l'autre s'attirent,

....

Les filles aux yeux creux, de leurs corps amoureuses,

Caressent les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité; (line 11 and lines 18-19)<sup>29</sup>

This poem was one of the six poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* that were banned, for almost a century, until 1949, because they were considered as offensive to public morals. Another of these condemned poems is titled "*Femmes Damnées, Delphine et Hyppolyte*," which describes the endless sufferings of lesbians.

Hazel's left-handedness, her circle of friends (and aversion of boys), the association with the moon and the color violet, and the links between Hazel and Aunt Maud and Kinbote, all together strongly suggest that Hazel has homosexual leanings. Baudelaire's poems, dwelling as they do on the grievous and ominous position of lesbians, similarly gesture towards Hazel as a closet lesbian. Her mother might have aired her incapacity to appreciate Aunt Maud's "far from spinsterish" way of life. Hazel might have realized that her lesbian nature would be met with some measure of lack of appreciation that would perhaps not even

---

<sup>27</sup> See Roth, "The Composition," 14.

<sup>28</sup> *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 14 ; 577.

<sup>29</sup> *Les fleurs du mal* (Paris: Librairie Mireille Ceni, 1965), 186.

reach the level of resignation. Unfortunately, the situation in Hazel's family proves to be worse than that.

### HAZEL'S PARENTS

Hazel's physical unattractiveness is her misfortune, ultimately leading to her suicide. This is, at least, what Shade is claiming to be the case in his poem "Pale Fire." His rendering of Hazel's fate is done so sweepingly that most critics (the present critic included) took the story for granted and addressed other parts of the novel, as it provides so many appetizing riddles and titillating puzzles.<sup>30</sup> Quite a number of discussions of the novel do not mention Hazel at all. Michael Wood's 1994 *The Magician's Doubts*, however, dedicates five pages to a discussion of Hazel's parents' narrowness of mind.<sup>31</sup> Wood's chapter on *Pale Fire* is titled "The Demons of Our Pity," a phrase that comes from Shade's poem and suggests, in Wood's view, that "even Shade understands that pity is a demonic, a destructive, unwelcome emotion" (195). Dana Dragunoiu, following—in Wood's steps, arrives at the disconcerting but most revealing conclusion that Shade sees Hazel in the same light as Pete Dean sees her when he abandons her on their blind date: that is, neither Shade nor Pete can see beyond Hazel's physical unattractiveness.<sup>32</sup> That Shade devotes less than a half of his four cantos to his daughter's death, suggests, according to Barbara Wyllie, that she "figured in his life as an awkward, confusing disruption."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, within a year of her death Hazel is already "absent from [her parents'] thoughts" for "whole days" (58).

Most devastating is the comparison between Hazel and Alexander Pope's Belinda, the heroine of *The Rape of the Lock*. This comparison is forced upon the reader by Shade's borrowing of Pope's "nymph," "altar" and "toilet" for his own poem; these words belong to the most celebrated passage of Alexander Pope's oeuvre.<sup>34</sup> Belinda suffers because her extraordinary beauty attracted the wrong sort of male attention. But there are so many circumstances and preoccupations to divert Belinda: her dog (exactly the same breed as

---

<sup>30</sup> Not so David Rampton who emphasizes the "intrusions of the ironical and the farcical in Hazel Shade's life and death" (*Vladimir Nabokov* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984], 151).

<sup>31</sup> London: Chatto and Windus, 1994.

<sup>32</sup> "On Pity and Courtesy in Nabokov's Ethics," in *Nabokov Upside Down*, Brian Boyd and Marijeta Bozovic, eds. (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2017) 143-155.

<sup>33</sup> *Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010) 153.

<sup>34</sup> Gerard de Vries, "Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Alexander Pope" in *The Goalkeeper*, 102-23.

Hazel's pet whose destruction by Sybil left Hazel inconsolable), her pastimes, and the advice she receives that one's physical appearance is of no importance. As Clarissa, Belinda's friend, reminds her, "Merit wins the Soul".<sup>35</sup> Hazel's life could have been brightened by nurturing one of her many interests: French, history, English literature, psychology, knitting, Mah-jongg and supernatural phenomena, but one only learns that she is sent to a château in France from which she returns in tears. Although Hazel's parents have witnessed the havoc caused by the frenetic activities of Aunt Maud's poltergeist, they refuse to acknowledge the recurrence of Aunt Maud's posthumous and much more subdued manifestations six years later. Although they consent to stay with Hazel in the barn, they (especially Sybil) harbor so much skepticism, that Hazel explodes and cries "Why must you *spoil* everything? Why must you *always* spoil everything?" (192) Would Hazel (22 years old in October 1956) have been an adolescent, her outcry could easily be passed over, but now it seems to indicate a permanent friction between her and her mother. And how to explain that Shade wrote within two years "The Nature of Electricity" in which he attaches a supernatural meaning to the inexplicability of electric lights that he denied Hazel?

Prejudices might go a long way to explain the Shades' unresponsiveness to Hazel's concerns. Of course, John and Sybil must have been aware of Aunt Maud's lesbianism, so well perceivable that even Kinbote could reconstruct her story. Shade in his poem cherishes a homoerotic whim in lines 912-4, where his "left hand helps," as "a discreet ephebe in tights assists / A female in acrobatic dance." The "ephebe," from the Greek "*ephebos*," an adolescent, now thinly-hosed, hints at Greek love, as does the left-handedness of the hand that represents the boy. Despite this capricious allusion, homosexuality seems a forbidden area, too difficult to talk about. That the Shades suffered from an "addiction to conventions," can be exemplified by the discussion between Shade and Kinbote about prejudices (see Kinbote's comment on line 470).<sup>36</sup> Kinbote says that his gardener invariably uses the adjective "colored," but Shade still prefers the word "Negro" because he finds "colored man" "artistically misleading" even when considered "ethically inoffensive" by colored people (thus admitting that "Negro" might not be "ethically inoffensive"). Shade is here doubly mistaken; first because he thinks that artistic considerations can outweigh ethical ones, second because it is obvious that an adjective is a qualifier, while the noun reduces a human being to its pigmentation. (Nabokov had a different opinion from Shade. In his letter to Véra, 11

---

<sup>35</sup> *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 238.

<sup>36</sup> Wood, 195.

October 1942, he uses the word “Negro” five times, and “black” once, but always as an adjective only.<sup>37</sup> One can admire Kinbote for insisting that he does not understand Shade at all.)

Another example of the Shades’ “addiction to conventions” is related to their religious commitments. The Shades’ endorsement of biblical doctrines might serve as an obstacle to their notice, let alone accept, Hazel’s sexual orientation and to attribute the absence of young men to her ugliness. Although Nabokov has presented only a few clues, they might help to elucidate the Shades’ possible religious position. Least succinct is the information given about the Zemblan branch of Protestantism, which gestures towards the schisms in the Church of Rome and in Protestantism. Kinbote’s religion is “closely related to the ‘higher’ churches of the Anglican Community, but has some magnificent peculiarities of its own,” of which its rich musical culture is mentioned often (224). In his comments to line 957 Kinbote even calls the Zemblan Church “very ‘high’.” The adjectives “high” and “low” for Anglican Churches are used to indicate whether its ministers favor sobriety or ceremoniousness during service. It is this difference that caused the rift in England during the Civil War. The Puritans wished to purify their churches from all sorts of liturgical customs and artistic expressions as pictorial or floral adornments and music, even those recommended by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The presence of organs in churches was decidedly unacceptable for Puritans. Strict Puritans adhere to the principle of *Sola scriptura*; nothing is allowed to stand between the sinner and the Saviour except the Bible.

Shade comes from a liberal family; there was even a maid whose niece, Adèle, who had seen the Pope (regarded by genuine Puritans as worse than the devil itself). His family belongs to the Episcopal Church, a progressive Church that appointed in 1885 a black bishop (Samuel Ferguson). The relation between episcopacy and homosexuality is marked by the Zemblan “Bishop of Yeslove” (!) who did not oppose King Charles’ “pagan habits” morally (173). Sybil, although coming from a Catholic family, “had weaned her husband not only from the Episcopal Church, but from all forms of sacramental worship.” This seems to fit well with Sybil’s telling Kinbote that she had developed “‘a religion of her own’,” a kind of individual belief incompatible with rituals and ceremonies belonging to traditional religions (although it seems remarkable that one wishes a religion according to one’s preferences, but finds it hard to allow the same freedom to someone else). Possibly, Sybil’s aversion to the interferences by the various Churches might indicate that she had puritan leanings, which

---

<sup>37</sup> *Letters to Vera*, trans. Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd (London: Penguin, 2014), 470-2.

means that the prescriptions in the Bible, including those with respect to racism and sodomy, should be observed to some extent. This possibility deserves attention, because in the “Index” the ultimate article of the entry “Religion” is the word “suicide” (312). Moreover, when Aunt Maud’s ghost turns Shade’s Webster outside it is “open at M,” just as Aunt Maud’s open verse book shows entries beginning with this letter, one of them the word “Moral” (166, 36). As Shade’s Webster resembles a “Bible” it seems clear that some of its doctrines may explain Aunt Maud’s indictment that Hazel’s death has a moral side (166).

It is doubtful whether John Shade shared such religious rigor fully. He accepted an invitation to talk for the Crashaw Club. While Sybil came from a Catholic family and might have turned towards puritanism, Richard Crashaw came from a militant Puritan family and ultimately became a Catholic priest.<sup>38</sup> The role of puritanism in Hazel’s tragedy is not contradicted by what Stephen Blackwell has noted from Nabokov’s Papers in the Berg Collection in New York. During “the time of *Pale Fire*’s composition,” Blackwell writes, “Nabokov speculated about the extreme isolation of a homosexual college professor in a *puritanical* country, where a handshake would be the only possible erotic contact” (italics added).<sup>39</sup>

Once more it is the comparison with Zembla that amplifies the dramatic events resulting from the sentiments and convictions prevalent in Shade’s family, as the “very ‘high’” Zemblan Church and Sybil’s very ‘low’ religion, and the tolerance of homosexuality by the Zemblan episcopacy, appears to represent contrasts full of impact.

#### HAZEL’S BLIND DATE

Hazel’s blind date was arranged in a bar with her friend Jane and Jane’s fiancé. But Pete Dean (Jane’s cousin) defects from the double date, and, in the wake of his defection, Hazel commits suicide.

As Brian Boyd has argued, Kinbote refers to Pete Dean’s spurning of Hazel in his comment on line 270. Here Shade addresses his wife as “My dark Vanessa” which reminds Kinbote of two lines from Swift:

---

<sup>38</sup> Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams, eds., *The Four Major Metaphysical Poets* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969), 505-6.

<sup>39</sup> *The Quill and the Scalpel. Nabokov’s Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2009), 234.

“When, lo! *Vanessa* in her bloom  
Advanced like *Atalanta*’s star”

These lines come from Swift’s 1713 poem “Cadenus and Vanessa,” a witty *Non decet*, in which Cadenus tells Vanessa that he is not willing to respond to her amorous advances. “Cadenus” is an anagram of *Decanus*, Latin for “dean” as Swift was at that time Dean of Dublin’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Vanessa is composed from the name of his admiring pupil, *Esther Vanhomrigh*. Although, as is clear from the poem, Swift was highly embarrassed by her affection, he callously allowed her to cling to her hopes, until he finally, after ten years more, broke with her.

Brian Boyd has argued further that Hazel returns, by virtue of metempsychosis, as the *Vanessa atalanta* on the eve of her father’s death. He has concisely summarized the correspondences between Hazel’s and Esther’s cases:

“Shade names the person who spurned Hazel on the night of her death ‘Pete Dean.’ Now that she is a *Vanessa atalanta*, Hazel seems to find another ‘Dean,’ who spurns all women equally, who identifies with Dean Swift, who twists words as both she and Swift do (spider-redips, decanus-Cadenus, Ester Vanhomrigh-Vanessa).”<sup>40</sup>

The incompatibility of the pair’s sexual interests is another analogy that might connect the two Deans. Swift confesses in his poem his complete inability to reciprocate her feelings; his “Want of Passion” and that love “Ne’er held Possession of his Heart.” The explanation for this emotional and sensual vacuum has been the subject of many speculations. One of Swift’s earliest biographers, Walter Scott, has concluded his investigations of Swift’s aloofness in rather clear formulations: “In short, he praises in his female friends those attributes chiefly which are most frequently met with in the other sex.” Scott quotes as evidence also this passage from Swift’s poem:

His conduct might have made him styled  
A father, and a nymph his child.  
That innocent delight he took

---

<sup>40</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, 171.

To see the virgin mind her book,  
Was but the master's secret joy  
In school to hear the finest boy.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, it is surprising to read that it is quite “innocent” for an older man to delight in observing a girl, but that the same pleasure should be kept a secret when the object is a boy. (Nabokov might have been struck by the lines quoted by Scott because his maternal grandfather also had a preference for the most handsome boys for his private school.) If one should transpose this peculiarity from the Dublin Dean to Pete Dean, then the question for his spurning Hazel might be answered in an unexpected way.

The circumventions employed in Kinbote's brief comments on lines 385-386 for his lofty dream about Pete Dean's attractiveness are no less veiled than the reference to Jonathan Swift's homophile penchant. His report of his visit to Jane and their discussion about Pete Dean's retreat, contains several poetical allusions. During their talk Jane shows Kinbote some photos of Pete Dean and his friends which make him so euphoric, that he starts talking about “one of [Pete's] dearest fraternity friends, a glorious young athlete.” The phrase “dearest fraternity friends” consists of three words that appear in or refer to Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. The phrase “young athlete” comes from Alfred Housman's “To an Athlete Dying Young.”<sup>42</sup> In his comments on line 920 Kinbote ventures the opinion that *In Memoriam* and Housman's *The Shropshire Lad* represent “the highest achievement[s] of English poetry in a hundred years.”

Like Kinbote, Nabokov found Tennyson's *In Memoriam* “by far his best work.”<sup>43</sup> In it, Tennyson mourns the death of his friend Arthur Hallam. Their friendship started in 1828 when Hallam came to Cambridge to study at Trinity College. Tennyson was 18 years old, Hallam a year younger, and they became very close. In 1833 Hallam died suddenly and in 1850, after sixteen years of preparation, *In Memoriam* was published. Tennyson's feelings for Hallam were of a homoerotic nature. When Hallam sent Leigh Hunt a copy of a book with juvenile poetry written by Tennyson, he wrote that Tennyson addressed “the elect church of Urania.”<sup>44</sup> The degree of intimacy is noticeable in many lines as for example in the four

---

<sup>41</sup> *Life of Swift. Miscellaneous Prose Works*. Vol. II (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1848) 218-19.

<sup>42</sup> Because of this “more longingly homoerotic” poem by Housman, Justin Condren writes that Kinbote “supplies an alternative reason for [Pete Dean's] escape from the heterosexual courting of Hazel,” “John Shade Shaving: Inspiration and Composition in a Selection from *Pale Fire*,” *Nabokov Studies*, 10 (2006), 129-46, 134.

<sup>43</sup> *Eugene Onegin by Aleksandr Pushkin*, 4, 460.

<sup>44</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson* (London: Arrow Books, 1960), 73.

stanzas of section LX in which Tennyson compares his love for Hallam with that of a jealous, despairing and weeping girl.

The word “fraternity” denotes an “organization whose membership is drawn primarily from college or university students.”<sup>45</sup> As the main origin of the Bloomsbury group, the Cambridge circle of the “Apostles,” formed in 1820, is perhaps the most legendary example of such a society. Tennyson and Hallam were the best-known members of its earlier generations. The epithet “dearest” is suggestive of *In Memoriam* as well. Its section CXXI begins with the line “Oh, wast thou with me, dearest, then.”<sup>46</sup> This tender form of address has received an attention that Tennyson did not appreciate, whose riposte was that if “anybody thinks I ever called him ‘dearest’ in his life, they are much mistaken, for I never even called him ‘dear’.”<sup>47</sup>

The allusions to Tennyson’s and Housman’s poetry show how lyrical Kinbote becomes when seeing some photos of the two young men, ignoring the sober facts he acknowledges about these boys. Pete is “selling automobiles,” and the main concern of his friend, “a chum,” is to avoid landing “in jail” (196; 47). Neither pursuit can be considered as compatible with an academic career following a membership of an intellectual society of aspiring upper class youngsters, as the encomium “dearest fraternity friends” suggest. Undeterred by these particulars Kinbote, stirred by the “powerful temptations” the photos incite, becomes so elated, that he compares their friendship to those celebrated by Tennyson and Housman (208). Kinbote is acting true to his Zemblan origin, where heterosexual attraction is considered as “ignoble,” thus contrasting the Appalachian attitude to homosexuality most diametrically with that prevailing in Zembla (228).

### HAZEL’S DEATH

Hazel died the night she was expected to spend in a Hawaiian bar. The special ambiance of such a bar might – in the cold March climate of Appalachia – consist of live music played by guitarists, as the guitar (the slack-key and the steel one) is the most important instrument of Hawaiian music. But Hazel never entered the bar, it was at the “azure entrance” that she said

---

<sup>45</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1964), 9, 813.

<sup>46</sup> *Poems* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1923), 394.

<sup>47</sup> Qtd. in Ralph Wilson Rader, *Tennyson’s Maud, The Biographical Genesis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 145.

she was “*de trop*.” She took the bus, got off at Lochanhead, stepped into the lake at Lochan Neck, and sank into the “swamp” near the lake’s bank. The words “Neck” and “-head” indicate that Hazel disappeared in the smaller part of a lake that beyond the narrow part of its neck expands in a larger reservoir of water. This aligns it with *Webster’s* definition of a lagoon: “a shallow lake... especially one connected with a larger body of water.” Because “moor” has the same root as “marsh” and because one of the meanings of “swamp” is “marsh,” one can conclude that the objects left in Aunt Maud’s room (“lagoon,” “forlorn guitar,” and “human skull”), together with her rhapsodomancy (“Moon, Moonrise, Moor, Moral”), prophesize Hazel’s death.

The “forlorn guitar” connotes the guitars in the Hawaiian bar, never heard by Hazel; the lagoon, the lake; the moor, its marsh; the skull, her demise; and the moonrise, her afterlife. What cannot be recognized from Shade’s poem is the “Moon,” an allusion to Hazel’s lesbian leanings, but this will no longer come as a surprise. The “moral” is also part of Aunt Maud’s rhapsodomancy, apparently of so much importance that she posthumously reiterated her message by having her poltergeist Shade’s *Webster* opened at “M,” placed “Bible-like” outdoors on the snow (166).

After Hazel’s death Sybil resumed her translation of Marvell into French. Marvell, an aggressive Puritan satirist, and a hard-drinking bachelor, wrote a number of ethereal georgic poems that reveal an unsurpassed gift of attaching, by sheer imaginative force, magnificent meanings and coherence to indifferent and seemingly insignificant phenomena. Kinbote assesses in his commentary Sybil’s French translation of “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn.”

While the interior of Aunt Maud’s room predicts Hazel’s death, so Marvell’s poem offers a synopsis in some detail Hazel’s life. Marvell’s poem opens with the lines “The wanton Troopers riding by / Have shot my Faun, and it will dye.”<sup>48</sup> “Troopers” is the name given to the cavalry of the Covenanters, the Scottish Puritans. The nymph’s fawn was a present of her suitor, Silvio, who rejected her after a short while. This, however, seems to be of no real importance for the nymph mistrusts the love of men. It is the fawn that makes her happy “and very well content.” The love for her fawn is intense and sensual as well. In her reminiscences of her life with the fawn, the nymph tells how she used to feed it milk and sugar with her fingers. And she says how she liked its sweet breath and kissed its lips. She

---

<sup>48</sup> *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*. Vol. I, *Poems* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 23-26.

blushes when she compares the fawn to females. The loss of her fawn is so fatal to her that she expects to die soon.

The correspondences with Hazel's life are several in number: they are both victimized by Puritanism, their pets are killed, they prefer their own sex, and they die when their preferred love is denied to them.

Kinbote criticizes Sybil's translation. He censures her translation of "quite regardless" as "*se moquant bien*" instead of, for example, "*sans le moindre égard pour,*" and berates her "*trompeur*" for the English "false." Indeed, both deviations from the original tend to diminish the lover's mischief.

But there is one particular point Kinbote does not comment upon. Marvell refers to the fawn always (31 times) with the pronoun "it." But Sybil renders "his fawn" as "*son faon,*" and "Had it lived long it would have been" as "*Il aurait été, s'il eut longtemps / Vécu.*" (The gender of the possessive pronoun in French follows that of the noun, and not, as in English, that of the possessor. So "his fawn" can be translated as "*son faon*" or "*sa faonne*" depending on one's choice to see the fawn as a young male or a young female.) Evidently, Sybil prefers a male fawn for her nymph, while the nymph fancies a female one. (Kinbote, who translated the latter line into "*Id wodo bin, war id lev lan,*" leaves phonetically Marvell's "it" intact.) That the gender issue is the crux of this commentary seems very likely because Kinbote's next note contains a spurious digression on the lexical use of the "feminine gender" (243).

Nabokov's preoccupation with homosexuals probably has its origin in his family that counted several gay men. Uncle Ruka died alone in a foreign country.<sup>49</sup> In 1939, Nabokov wrote *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, devoted to his brother, who died in 1945 in the concentration camp of Neuengamme. Nabokov was aware of Uncle Ruka "torments" and Sergey's desolate sufferings.<sup>50</sup> Their fate found expression in his art, and this might explain why the suicide of a despairing young homophile such as Yasha, pictured so poignantly in *The Gift*, might have haunted Nabokov for three decades as he replicated many of its details for Hazel's death. Yasha's suicide took place the day after his discovery of the intimacy between his friends Olya and Rudolf, which turned him into a third wheel just as Hazel who, in the company of Jane and her fiancé felt herself *de trop*. Like Hazel's, Yasha's last ride was on a bus, she "gripping the stang" like Yasha's "gripping the black stang," their last support to hold. Then they walked through a dark wood, Yasha to a ravine near a "dove-grey lake,"

---

<sup>49</sup> Boyd, *VN. The Russian Years*, 121.

<sup>50</sup> *Speak, Memory*, 17; *Letters to Véra*, 77.

Hazel to a “lake [that] lay in the mist.” They missed a passer-by with a dog who could have prevented the accident, but Ferdinand Stockschmeisser went away too early to see Yasha, while “Father Time” came too late for Hazel (*The Gift*, 46-8). They both died on a day when its orbit gave the moon its full extent.<sup>51</sup>

Hazel Shade lived on as a *Vanessa atalanta*, or maybe as a soul capable of incandescence, a quality attributed to Shelley in Shade’s poem “The Nature of Electricity.” From an early age onwards, Shelley was interested in electricity; the new fire that Prometheus brings in his *Prometheus Unbound* is electricity.<sup>52</sup> And in the last three stanzas of *Adonais*, Shelley compares Keats’ soul to a light, a light that burns and beckons like a star.<sup>53</sup>

Kinbote, as has been discussed, refers to Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, and to Milton’s *Comus*. Milton’s composition of his first major poem preceded with a few years the writing of *Lycidas* in which Milton mourns the drowning of a fellow-student from Cambridge. In his comments on John Shade’s death, Kinbote refers to Matthew Arnold’s *The Gypsy Scholar*. This poem shares its pastoral setting, the Oxford countryside, and its floral splendors with *Thyrsis*, its companion-piece, a lament for Arnold’s friend Arthur Clough.<sup>54</sup>

In this way Nabokov seems to have anthologized the four major elegies of English literature: *Adonais*, *In Memoriam*, *Lycidas* and *Thyrsis*. In these elegies men lament the death of other men: they illustrate the articulation of feelings that can be inspired by the (artistic or emotional) affinity between men, a depth unlikely to dwindle were they the expression of love instead of mere affection.

The discussion of the circumstances leading to the tragedy of Hazel’s death has frequently involved a comparison with their correspondences in (pre-revolutionary) Zembla. This juxtaposition reveals the importance of the role prejudices, religion, society, culture and, last but not least, empathy, in this tragedy. Zembla as the “land of reflections” provides the necessary mirror-images which enable this reconsideration (265). The ostensibly complacent and pedantic Kinbote seems to have more sensitivity for the understanding of Hazel’s plight

---

<sup>51</sup> Yasha died on April 18, 1924, as appears from Nabokov’s private notes which have been found by Yuri Leving (*Keys to The Gift* [Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011], 149-150). Hazel most likely died in March 1957, see Jerry Friedman, “A *Pale Fire* Timeline,” *Zembla* (libraries.psu.edu). A date somewhere in the middle of that month might in this case be the safest guess. As a Saturday might be a plausible evening for young people to visit a bar outside the place where they live, Saturday, the 16th of March, seems the best candidate. A full moon could be seen on the night of 19-4-1924 and at the night of 16-3-57. See also Eric S. Petrie, “Moonrise over the Moor: Hazel’s Death in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” *Nabokov Online Journal* 7 (2013): 1-24. For Luzhin’s suicide (the protagonist of *The Defence*) see Alexander Etkind, “Left Side of the Moon,” *Comparative Studies in Modernism* 7 (2015): 55-66; 60-61.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Holmes, *Shelley. The Pursuit* (London: Penguin, 1987), 17; 506.

<sup>53</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works* (London: Oxford UP, 1927), 438-39.

<sup>54</sup> *The Poems* (London: Oxford UP, 1920), 386-92.

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.

In *Pale Fire* the homophile characters are the more winning ones. Kinbote, who registers so many of *Pale Fire's* “delicate markers.” Hazel, who, poorly served by nature, could not live on without support or responsiveness from her parents, and prefers “to cease upon the midnight.”<sup>55</sup> Aunt Maud who, with her sturdy cane, braves the prejudices and condescension of the bourgeois of New Wye. Shade suggests that Hazel’s misfortune is due to nature (“Nature chose me”), but according to the solid information, subtle allusions and candid innuendoes contained in Kinbote’s commentary, it appears that not nature but culture caused the course of Hazel’s calamitous life. This is a rather disastrous conclusion, because one has to live with nature’s conditions, but cultural considerations need not and should not be marked by heedlessness and indifference, especially not when nature has been unmerciful as in Hazel’s case.

Aunt Maud’s rhapsodomancy yields an assortment of words which forecasted Hazel’s death, but one of them, “Moonrise,” has been interpreted above as suggestive of Hazel’s afterlife. The rise of the emblematic moon might as well evoke the soaring of the moon’s associates. One hopes that her ascent brings Hazel, as Pope might say, to “the Lunar Sphere, / Since all things lost on Earth, are treasur’d there.”<sup>56</sup>



---

<sup>55</sup> John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale,” *The Poetical Works*, 232. Kinbote refers, when discussing Hazel’s death, to this Ode, “to the sweet urge to close one’s eyes” (221).

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Locke*, V, 113-14 (*The Poems*, 240).