On the dust of its husk: Evidence for an alternative Shadean theory in Pale Fire

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**Igniting the flame**

*Pale Fire* is composed of the poem “Pale Fire” by fictional poet John Shade, accompanied by notes on the work by fictional commentator Charles Kinbote. Kinbote’s commentary takes the form of a Foreword, Commentary, and Index—none of which, it becomes increasingly evident, have much to do with Shade’s poem. A scholar of Alexander Pope, Shade composed “Pale Fire” in 999 lines of heroic couplets, divided into four cantos, on eighty index cards, from July 2 until July 21, 1959—when his untimely death prevented the poem’s thousandth line completion. Shade and Kinbote were both professors at Wordsmith College in the small Appalachian town of New Wye, and after Shade was shot in his garden by a madman, Kinbote obtained the Fair Copy of “Pale Fire.” He composes his commentary from a secluded motor park in Cedarn, Utana, where he hides from the other scholars and family members who would attempt to regain the manuscript. Although he does provide some background on his relationship with John Shade, the primary subject of Kinbote’s Commentary is Charles II, the king of the distant northern kingdom of Zembla, who flees his country during its Revolution in a daring escape through the mountains. Throughout the Commentary Kinbote alludes to and finally conclusively reveals that he is in fact Charles II, and that he has been evading would-be assassins as a professor of literature in New Wye. One of those assassins, Jakob Gradus, makes his way from Zembla to New Wye as Shade composes his poem, and upon discovering Kinbote
and Shade in a backyard garden he fires the shots which miss the Zemblan king and kill the old poet.

Such are the facts as Kinbote presents them, but as his abduction of the poem from the dying Shade’s arms makes clear, he lacks any sense of moral scruples. Moreover, his completely narcissistic motives in analyzing Shade’s work and his lack of actual analysis suggest that he has no understanding of critical commentary. Furthermore, and perhaps most distressingly, his almost complete detachment from reality suggests that he may be insane. This evidence of Kinbote’s unreliability as narrator underscores a distinct feeling that grows while reading, that somehow Kinbote’s presentation of events is not actually what has happened in either Zembla or New Wye. The entire work is rife with perplexing passages, cryptic allusions, and word puzzles that further advance a suspicion that Kinbote is not telling the truth. Those familiar with Nabokov’s works also know that the author is notorious for playing narrative tricks on his readers, infusing his stories with word games and other clues that can create mazes of meaning for astute readers to discover.¹ Nabokov biographer and Pale Fire theorist Brian Boyd aptly explains, “As so often when Nabokov poses problems, he has already placed pointers to the solution, although he requires we use our memory and imagination to see them as pointers” (Magic 109).

In the months following Pale Fire’s original publication, this initial suspicion fueled the discovery of a latent reality: an understanding of the text that could be discovered by reading between the lines. Nabokov would not reward any understanding of Pale Fire as the “correct” solution. Coupled with the immense number of allusions and clues in the text, none of which yield a flawless resolution of the story’s inconsistencies, Nabokov’s silence inspired the

¹ Nabokov’s 1961 short story “The Vane Sisters,” for example, features such a solution in its final paragraph: when read acrostically, the paragraph reveals the story’s real authors, unbeknownst to the narrator. Failing to discover the story’s trick ending, The New Yorker initially rejected the story until Nabokov wrote in and explained the solution.
development of more original theories, and what results is a dense web of hypothesizing that grows with every new reader of the novel: Who is Charles Kinbote? What is his actual relationship with John Shade? How “real” is Zembla? In the years since *Pale Fire’s* publication, the theorizing has developed on a distinct course, a current branch of which yields this work, my submission to the canon of *Pale Fire* hypotheses.

The theorizing begins with Mary McCarthy’s essay-review “A Bolt from the Blue,” which sets forth a considerably extensive investigation of the allusions and hidden realities of *Pale Fire*. In what is widely recognized as the earliest notable published theory defining Kinbote’s identity and what actually happens in New Wye, McCarthy outlines the most straightforward interpretation of *Pale Fire’s* events: that Charles Kinbote is actually deranged Russian professor V. Botkin, that he invented the romanticized Zembla and imagined himself as its exiled king, and that Shade is killed in a case of mistaken identity, as escaped convict Jack Grey confuses him for the judge who convicted him. She provides analysis of word and name origins, citing various roots and connections that are literary, historical, religious, scientific, and philosophical. Identifying some of the text’s primary literary allusions, she identifies the origin of Zembla in Pope’s *Essay on Man*, the “alderking” in Goethe, and “hazel shade” in *The Lady of the Lake*, along with various Shakespearean references. McCarthy’s work also identifies many of the key themes that later theorists have expounded upon in great detail, both to support her theory and to establish new ones. McCarthy’s theory, according to the foremost published *Pale Fire* material in the years following its publication, generally garnered wide acceptance until Andrew Field proposed, however tentatively, the first incarnation of a Shadean theory.

Field first suggested that Shade may be the single author of all parts of *Pale Fire* in his 1967 *Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*, and he developed his argument in the 1986 biography

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2 “A Bolt from the Blue” first printed in the *New Republic* in June 1962.
The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov. Field’s portion devoted to Pale Fire remains rooted in Nabokov’s potential biographical sources of information, connecting, for example, Kinbote to an eccentric professor—and one of Nabokov’s boarders—at Cornell. He also calls into question Nabokov’s authorial reliability, citing Nabokov’s claims that he was unfamiliar with Robert Frost and alleging that Nabokov was actually in contact with Frost on multiple occasions (336).

Getting to the root of the authorship question, Field alleges that the narrative courses of “Pale Fire” and Kinbote’s commentary are too inextricably linked to have been devised by separate individuals. Gradus, Shade, and Kinbote were all born on July 5 (C.181, 157-61, C.949, 275). Kinbote and Shade were married on the same date, thirty years apart, and Kinbote observes a marked resemblance between their wives. In Zembla, Gradus is determined to be the assassin on the day that Shade begins his poem, and Gradus’ path from Zembla to New Wye is carefully crafted in tune with the progress of the work (136). The names Gradus and Shade are both synonyms for degree, and Kinbote continually refers to Shade as “gray.” The name Zembla comes from the Alexander Pope’s Essay on Man, where it “signifies the fabulous extreme north” (McCarthy 22). The Pope scholar Shade includes a passage from Essay on Man in his poem, and his book on Pope is called Supremely Blest, another line from the work. The title “Pale Fire” comes from Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens, and the Zemblan capital features streets called Timon Alley and Coriolanus Lane (Boyd 112). The congruencies between Kinbote, Shade, and Gradus lead him to a sole-authorship interpretation, in which John Shade has authored all parts of the novel and has created Charles Kinbote and Jakob Gradus. Field maintains that Shade’s death must have been a planned event, for it provides the essential catalyst for return to the beginning of the poem, and he asserts that Shade would have been the conscious artist behind the

Field identifies Nabokov’s unfinished Russian novel Solus Rex as a primary source of inspiration for Zembla, but he also brings to light an obscure news piece from 1939 in which Italian diplomats concocted a fictional country called “the Republic of Zemblia” in order to gain more Italian representatives in the League of Nations.
entire course of events. The foundation of his logic for a Shadean conclusion is that Shade is logically capable of creating a madman, but someone insane like Kinbote is not capable of composing the “glacially serene” poem (336).

Five years after Field’s first published proposal, Julie Bader echoes his Shadean sentiments and reaffirms that Shade is the knowing agent who concocts a “death” for the sake of his art. Bader labels the McCarthy interpretation as viable yet “inexpert:” as with complex chess problems, inexpert players can be satisfied with the straightforward solution, but skilled players can go a step further and seek more complex, equally-workable solutions. She goes on to more explicitly challenge what she sees as the flaws of the McCarthy hypothesis: of McCarthy’s theory she asserts, “Such a course of events would render Shade’s assertion that he can create a ‘web of sense’ completely absurd and ill-founded, and the poet’s striving for understanding and pity would appear similarly futile” (34). She continues that the “subliminal’ connections between the poem and the commentary, between Shade’s personal life and Kinbote’s fictional existence, seem to me to invalidate the surface impression that the novel is abut a mad critic’s irrelevant comments on a lovely poem” (37). Like Field, she sees the creation of Kinbote as a measure of Shade’s artistic deliberation, asserting that Shade first “perpetrated his own ‘stylistic’ death within the novel, and he has then given us a new aspect of himself in the guise of another soul and another artwork (Kinbote and the commentary)” (31).

Although she sees Kinbote’s creation as a deliberate artistic effort, she believes that it was triggered by Shade’s attempts to cope with death and Hazel’s suicide. Noting the similarities between Kinbote and Hazel, as well as story parallels between Pale Fire and

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4 In a footnote Bader communicates her problems with the McCarthy hypothesis more explicitly: “While I acknowledge the value of many of her findings and speculations, I think that her view of the novel as a ‘shadow box’ with false bottoms makes the pattern of the relationship between the ‘real’ Shade and the ‘fictional’ Kinbote unintelligible. She translates her explications into a series of successive planes of meaning, and thereby makes the novel into a depressing semblance of coy clues for their own sake, an arch regression leading nowhere” (40)
Nabokov’s 1941 novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Bader alleges, “It is possible that Shade’s grief at the suicide of his daughter may have translated itself into the absurd yet suffering Kinbote” (36). Reaffirming the Shadean tract in his chapter on *Pale Fire* in his 1991 *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, author and Nabokov biographer Brian Boyd takes up some of Bader’s insinuations about Shade’s and Kinbote’s psychological state. Kinbote, he explains, exhibits the symptoms of all three main forms of paranoid delusions: grandiose, persecutory, and erotic (433). Boyd echoes Bader’s sentiment that the text contains too many “coincidences,” that the parallels between the poem and commentary suggest a deeper connection than those acknowledged by McCarthy (435).

After establishing his reasoning for sole authorship, Boyd describes his logic for a Shadean theory. Like Field, he alleges that Nabakov “rules out” Kinbote as sole narrator because Kinbote is not organized—or sane—enough to compose the poem. Moreover, he notes that in his original draft for his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabakov credits Shade with *Pale Fire’s Index*. Shade, therefore, must have survived through the composition of the Commentary, which occurs after his alleged death. Instead of seeing Kinbote’s creation as a coping mechanism after Hazel’s suicide, Boyd interprets it as Shade’s method of evading death himself:

> Because of Shade’s childhood seizures and his heart attack, because he has slipped on the floor of life’s house and peeked through the crack under the door before scrambling to his feet again, Shade knows there is something outside those windows that can only reflect life back at him. (445)

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5 Boyd explains, “One last piece of evidence proves conclusively that Nabokov had Shade in mind as the author of foreword, poem, commentary, and index. Four years after *Pale Fire*, when he drafted the foreword to the revised *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov concluded with a comment on the new index to his autobiography. He added as an envoi: ‘As John Shade says somewhere: / Nobody will heed my index, / I suppose, / But through it a gentle wind ex / ponto blows.’ In the final version of his foreword . . . Nabokov decided not to divulge *Pale Fire’s* secret . . . but this draft leaves no doubt as to the compiler of the index” (445).

6 Perhaps because it contains elements of the conclusively factual, this observation has been the keynote starting point for Shadean theorizing by Boyd and many other theorists.
Having walked the tenuous line of near death on numerous occasions, Shade sees its immense artistic potential. Shade's death, Boyd maintains, is what makes the poem "Pale Fire" come to life, and Shade, "only too aware of the limits to what can be known by each mind," knows that he must simultaneously die and continue on as someone else in order for an immortal artistic creation to be realized (446). Boyd concludes his analysis by identifying what he recognizes as a primary problem of the Shadean hypothesis: the more Shade is seen as the controlling author, the less readers can trust how he is presented as a person in the story (455). If Shade is calculating, and in some ways deliberately misleading, enough to orchestrate the creation of *Pale Fire*, is he really the humble gray poet whose sentiments invoke the most poignant reactions to the novel?

In the years following his initial theorizing, Boyd continued to wrestle with this question, and it sparked his formulation of an entirely new theory, published eight years after his original theory in a monumental 300 page analysis. In the introduction to *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, Boyd explains, "[A]s I reread *Pale Fire*, a few niggles in the novel itself and in the critical debate around it forced me to reconsider my position and drove me to a radical new reading that no one has yet glimpsed" (5). Boyd explains that while those who oppose Shadean theories fail to adequately account for all of the parallels between the work's parts, Shadeans themselves so fervently seek to connect the parts that they overlook the fairly obvious anti-Shadean objections, which Boyd concludes are "indeed decisive" (115-16). Of these objections Boyd lists the lack of any evidence that Shade is capable of "sustained fictional invention" and that Shade knows Russian; he adds that "if he had invented his own death—and this explains the outrage the Shadean idea provokes—how much would the novel lose!" (123-25). If applied to the actual events set forth in the novel, he alleges, the Shadean theory loses
credence: “Had he invented Kinbote as a way of passing beyond the ‘solitary confinement of self,’ he would now find himself on publication day, far from transcending the self, subjected to local and national attention, to the gaze of a thousand invasive Kinbotes” (125). In other words, despite any artistic intentions, Shade would still have to face the logical ramifications of an invented commentator and a faked death. Boyd then embarks on his theory, which attempts to reconcile the Shadean objections and the irrefutable parallels between “Pale Fire” and Commentary.

According to Boyd’s extensively crafted hypothesis, Hazel inspired Shade’s composition of “Pale Fire” and Kinbote’s rendering of Zembla from beyond the grave; likewise Shade inspires Kinbote’s composition of the Commentary to his poem. Boyd founds his theory in the elements of the supernatural that pervade the work, and a key facet of his interpretation is Hazel’s encounter with the barn ghost. Shade describes Hazel’s strange force

Of character—as when she spent three nights

Investigating certain sounds and lights

In an old barn. (344-47)

Kinbote explains in the Commentary that Hazel spent three nights in an allegedly haunted old barn, where she claimed she was in contact with a paranormal being, a “roundlet of pale light” that responded to her queries (C.347, 188). She manages to derive a message from the “barn ghost,” whom Boyd asserts is Shade’s Aunt Maud communicating from beyond death, warning Shade’s daughter of the nature of his demise.7 The barn episode links Hazel to the Vanessa

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7 In his earlier work on *Pale Fire*, Boyd cites an unpublished correspondence between Andrew Field and Nabokov, in which Nabokov translates the barn message as “Padre should not go to the lane to be mistaken forolf Goldswart (worth) after finishing his tale (pale) feur (fire) [which in Shakespeare is accompanied by] the wort ‘arrant (farant)
Atalanta butterfly, into which she transforms after her earthly demise. Connecting various facets of Kinbote's illustration of Zembla to happenings in New Wye, Boyd suggests that the Zembla account is inspired by "Hazel's shade":

Zembla becomes more clearly than ever an escape . . . as we see Hazel acknowledge her past, bravely facing it, playfully transforming it, allowing Kinbote an escape within life that she never had, but at the same time reflecting her own past predicament and her present delight in her new freedom from the solitary confinement of her own self. (154)

Boyd believes that Hazel inspires Kinbote both for these more personal and redemptive reasons and also to communicate with her father, whose poem becomes infused with her reflections as well. He observes that almost as much of Kinbote's writings concern Gradus and the assassination as they do Zembla and the king's escape, and he concludes that after his own death, Shade performs the same supernatural intervention on Kinbote's Commentary, inspiring the Gradus accounts just as Hazel inspired Zembla.

While Boyd's research and analysis provides invaluable insight into the myriad of allusive potential offered by the text, and his conclusion does resolve his conflict between Shadean objections and the textual parallels between parts, his connection of Hazel and the Vanessa atalanta seems tenuous. The general logic that compels his theory is coherent, but the lengths to which he extends it are not necessarily the only conclusions to be made from the

[and this] with 'lant' makes up the Atalanta butterfly in Shade's last scene. It is 'told' by the spirit in the barn" (454).

Boyd writes, "The evidence Nabokov conceals within Pale Fire suggests that Hazel's spirit somehow inspires Kinbote with the idea of Zembla, because she senses an affinity with him, because she wants to offer him an imaginative consolation for his anguish and loneliness, and because she can turn Zembla into a chance both to express and to ironize her own experience as a woman spurned" (173).

Boyd calculates the 40 percent of the Matter of Zembla is about the assassination brewing after the king's escape: "All that, all the Gradus material, all the Shadows, the Niagarin and Andronikv and Izumrudov scenes—must be new, must have been added to the escape story since Shade's death" (208).
evidence at hand. Moreover, his conclusions and the similar conclusions of other non-Shadeans fail to adequately take into account the logical aftermath of Kinbote’s actual existence. Boyd asks, “If we imagine a Shade in New Wye who arranges his own fictive death in order to probe the beyond . . . what happens on publication day?” (125). A similar question, however, could be posed of a McCarthy or Boyd theory: if Kinbote or Botkin—or both, for that matter—actually exist, how are they allowed to teach in a university classroom, let alone publish such an outlandish text under the guise of a literary commentary? Kinbote’s existence in New Wye is one of a selection of matters in the text that as of yet has not been adequately resolved. Likewise, none of the internal authorship theories adequately address Shade’s childhood fits, which occupy a significant portion of his poem and which seem to connect in a significant way to the fainting fit he experiences on October 17th, 1958.

Opposition to Shadean theorizing, it seems, rests heavily on the character inconsistency that Shade-as-conscious-artist provokes: the characteristics of John Shade do not seem to correspond with an artist who would create alternate identities for creative purposes. But not many theorists have considered the possibility that Shade may remain the sole author while not deliberately creating either Kinbote or Gradus. A key element of this line of theorizing is the power of Shade’s subconscious, which, when piqued by trauma,10 could trigger an instance—or instances—of dissociated identity. By investigating Shade’s October 17th attack, its connection to the fits of his childhood, and a selection of the text’s allusory references that have not yet been thoroughly unpacked, a web can be constructed to both support Shade as sole author and resolve the major anti-Shadean objections. The case for Kinbote and Gradus as expressions of dissociated identity provides a portrait of John Shade that corresponds with reader expectations.

10 Either organic (physical, cerebral damage as proposed in this paper) or psychological trauma, both of which have been linked and studied in cases of dissociative identities.
yet does not negate his artistic vision; moreover, it accommodates key passages of poem and Commentary that have thus far been unresolved elements of the text as a whole.

"And one night I died."

A connective theme of Shade’s poem is his exploration of death and the afterlife, and each canto includes a significant existential experience or reflection from Shade’s life. He concludes his first canto with a description of “a strange fainting fit” that afflicted him in his eleventh year (C.143, 137). A “thread of subtle pain” in his head, “always present,” on one afternoon triggers a sudden loss of consciousness (140-46). While in this “momentary swoon,” he seems to have an out-of-body experience, feeling “distributed through space and time” (154, 148). The episode prompts more such experiences: the black outs occur every winter for a year but then cease, and, pronounced well by a doctor who attributed the spells to growing pains, the child Shade begins to forget about them. As the man reminiscing, however, Shade notes that “[s]he wonder lingers and the shame remains” (166). In Canto Three, as part of his discourse on death, Shade describes the night of October 17th, 1958, when he experienced as an adult another fainting fit (691-92). The evidence suggesting that this episode is of the same kind as those he experienced as a child is in the similarity of descriptions: as a child he describes, “There was a sudden sunburst in my head. / And then black night. That blackness was sublime,” and within the 1958 swoon, “A sun of rubber was convulsed and set; / and blood-black nothingness began to spin” (146-47, 702-703).

He introduces the event abruptly as “[a]nd then one night I died,” both further advancing the supposition that he associates the idea of death with something other than physical
termination of life and highlighting the psychological significance of the event (682). When he comes to, he protests the doctor’s insistence that he could not have mentally departed his body:

But Doctor, I was dead!

He smiled. “Not quite: just half a shade,” he said. (727-28)

The doctor discredits Shade’s sense that he had in some way died when he passed out at the Crashaw Club, but his selection of words, as Shade depicts them, implies that Shade underwent something more acute than a mere fainting fit. In context, “half a shade” suggests that not all but half of Shade may have died: half a Shade has been severed from his consciousness.

Kinbote remarks in the beginning of his commentary on line 691 that “John Shade’s heart attack (Oct. 17, 1958) practically coincided with the disguised king’s arrival in America . . .” and that “[i]t had all been perfectly timed” (C.691, 246). Kinbote begins to exist in John Shade’s reality, outside the arguably mythical world of Zembla and thus for the first time within the real world, on the date of Shade’s fainting fit. Moreover, on the day that Shade composes this segment of the poem, the assassin Gradus, who is crossing Europe in his pursuit of Kinbote, receives the conclusive information that leads him to New Wye (C.741, 256). The synchronization of Shade’s fit and Kinbote’s arrival in New Wye, as well as Shade’s composition of the event and Gradus’ direction to go to New Wye, reinforces the notion that all three events—and all three characters—are linked. Despite the compelling correspondences, however, no published theory has adequately addressed the significance of Shade’s October 17th attack. Along with neglecting to interpret the seemingly significant event and its connection to

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11 I will discuss Shade’s fainting fits and October 17th attack in greater depth in later segments.
12 A Shadow named Izumrudov, “a merry, perhaps overmerry, fellow, in a green velvet jacket,” delivers Gradus a letter that contains King Charles’ address in New Wye. As Boyd points out, Kinbote makes clear that the Shadow Izumrudov and his despised colleague Gerald Emerald are one in the same (Magic 100).
13 The “coincidence” of their same birthday on July 5th most clearly points to a latent link between Gradus, Shade, and Kinbote.
Shade’s childhood disorder, most theorists have neglected a selection of the work’s allusions, which when explored provide further hints pointing to a Shadean hypothesis.

“Elementary, my dear Watson”

In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov acknowledges his childhood appreciation for the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, citing Sherlock Holmes as a hero (43). Noting that Nabokov “transmuted the properties” of the detective genre, Alfred Appel, Jr. asks the author why the detective novel is of particular interest—to which Nabokov responds, “My boyhood passion for the Sherlock Holmes . . . stories may yield some twisted clue” (174). While he explains that the stories are best enjoyed by children, he nonetheless uses Holmes lore as a source of inspiration when populating the world of Zembla and includes a Sherlock Holmes reference in Shade’s “Pale Fire.”

Through Shade’s seemingly perfunctory allusion to Sherlock Holmes in the first canto, Nabokov directs his readers to a Shadean clue. Gazing at the fresh tracks of a pheasant in the snow, Shade asks

Torquated beauty, sublimated grouse,
Finding your China right behind my house.
Was he in *Sherlock Holmes*, the fellow whose
Tracks pointed back when he reversed his shoes? (25-28)

Brian Boyd rightly identifies the allusion to Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Final Problem” (1893), which Doyle intended to be the final Holmes story (“Shade” 6). In the tale’s conclusion, the detective and his nemesis Moriarty appear to have tumbled off Reichenbach Falls, as Watson surmises from the two sets of footprints that lead off the steep cliff. In the next story, “The
Adventure of the Empty House” (1903), Holmes returns, explaining to Watson that the faked suicide was all a part of his plan to finally take down his most dangerous opponents, who would lay open their designs if they thought he was dead. To Watson’s objection about the two pairs of footprints leading over the falls, Holmes explains, “I might, it is true, have reversed my boots, as I have done on similar occasions, but the sight of three sets of tracks in one direction would certainly have suggested a deception.” Instead, he discovered a few footholds leading to a ledge on the cliff wall, which he climbed and hid upon until the murder investigation concluded.

Though it is cemented in the English lexicon as the detective’s stock phrase, Holmes never utters the phrase “Elementary, my dear Watson,” in any of Conan Doyle’s stories—and although it would have been more Holmesian, in a sense, to create such a diversion, Holmes did not actually reverse his shoes on Reichenbach Falls; rather, he chooses an alternate, unexpected route—a route which was not visible to and remained undetected by all who examined the evidence. Holmes explains that in Watson’s account of the matter, he had asserted “that the wall was sheer. That was not literally true. A few small footholds presented themselves, and there was some indication of a ledge.” Holmes manages to scale the wall and hide on the ledge while “Watson, and all [his] following were investigating in the most sympathetic and inefficient manner the circumstances of [Holmes’] death” (“Empty House”). By climbing to the undetected ledge, Holmes finds a previously-unseen solution; his discovery parallels Shade’s third canto revelation:

Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game. (512-14)
Shade’s epiphany comes after his disappointment with Mrs. Z, when he realizes that his existential pursuit of meaning has been misled by a misprint. Mrs. Z did not see his fountain in the realm of near-death, yet the alternate route he discovers through the error leads him to his contrapuntal theme. It is not the immediate connection that gives him hope; rather, it is something underlying, something not readily visible. In his commentary to Shade’s phrase, “a domestic ghost,” Kinbote observes, “how curious that our rationality feels satisfied when we plump for the first explanation...” (C.230, 167). The resolution to Shade’s existential pursuit comes from the unexpected explanation, “Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!”, just as Holmes’ resurrection, the return of a “domestic ghost,” stems from the alternate, unexpected solution (803). To support his own unexpected solution, Boyd connects the Holmes allusion to “another trail of reversed tracks, that intimate a sublimated Hazel's survival beyond the apparent inexorability of her death by drowning” (“[Fwd: RE: VN & SHERLOCK]”). In his connection of Holmes’ resurrection to Hazel’s survival beyond death, however, he fails to acknowledge his research from “Shade and Shape,” that there are in fact no reversed tracks in Holmes stories. The connection between the fates of Holmes and Shade, therefore, provides both a simpler and more accurate link than the parallels between Holmes’ escape and Hazel’s suicide.

While the Holmes allusion in “Pale Fire” itself provides a connection to Shade’s cosmology, the nature of Holmes’ return in “The Adventure of the Empty House” offers a clue to how we might view Shade’s alleged death at the conclusion of Pale Fire. In Conan Doyle’s sequel, Sherlock Holmes returns to London disguised as “an elderly, deformed man,” with a camouflage so complete that Watson bumps into him on the street and observes him to be “some poor bibliophile” with a “curved back and white side-whiskers” (“Empty House”). Revealing himself to Watson, Holmes explains his feigned death and his subsequent adventures in foreign
lands. It may seem by all appearances that Shade has been killed in his garden by a madman, be it the lunatic Jack Grey or some existential Gradus. But just as Holmes escaped what seemed to be a conclusive demise, evading authorities by an alternate route and returning in disguise, the crooked old bibliophile of New Wye may have evaded death by selecting an alternate path, surrendering his guise to an adventurous foreigner. In the Foreword, Kinbote equates “John Shade perceiving and transforming the world” with the work of a magician, and he refers to Shade as “my beloved old conjurer” (27-28). Shade himself evokes such imagery in his description of “the exile, the old man / Dying in a motel”:

He suffocates and conjures in two tongues
The nebulae dilating in his lungs. (609-610, 615-16)

Shade, as Kinbote’s “beloved old conjurer,” does not actually die at the hand of Gradus, but his personage becomes the embodiment of the exotic king he has conjured in his mind.

The insinuated connections between the world of Sherlock Holmes and Pale Fire may seem gratuitous, but the link between Conan Doyle’s stories and Iris Acht, a key figure in Kinbote’s Zembla, suggests that Pale Fire’s Holmes allusion is of greater significance than many theorists have previously allowed. Kinbote’s description of his trip through the Palace secret passage with Count Oleg, as well as his later escape from imprisonment during the Zemblan Revolution, begins and ends with Iris Acht, Zemblan actress and mistress of Kinbote’s

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14 Holmes had been “travelling through Tibet and other distant countries. He spent some days in Lhasa with the head Lama, then went through Persia, paid a brief visit to Mecca, and secured some useful information for the Foreign Office, probably at Mycroft’s request, as the result of his interview with the Khalifa at Khartoum. Finally, he was engaged for some months in research into coal-tar derivatives in the laboratory at Montpellier. The dramatic ‘Return’ to Baker Street occurred in 1894, and the years that followed were busy ones indeed” (Roberts xviii).
15 In Brian Boyd’s 1997 essay “Shade and Shape in Pale Fire,” an introduction to his developing hypothesis of paranormal inspiration, he relates significantly germane research on the Holmes reference in Shade’s first canto. In answer to the question Shade poses (“Was he in Sherlock Holmes, the fellow whose / Tracks pointed back when he reversed his shoes?”), Boyd notes that in the relevant story, “Holmes he could have reversed his boots as he had done on previous occasions, but instead had tried to evade later pursuit by Moriarty’s henchmen by climbing up the cliff from the track to leave no trail” (6). Instead of pursuing this allusion and the implications of Shade’s error, Boyd abandons the Holmes reference, also neglecting to pursue it in The Magic of Artistic Discovery.
grandfather, Thurgus the Third. Kinbote discovers the passage in the closet of “a dismal lumber room” which had once been Thurgus’ dressing room (C.130, 121). Above the closet hangs a velvet-framed photograph, “the romantic profile and broad bare shoulders of the forgotten actress Iris Acht” (122). Kinbote explains that Acht was Thurgus’ mistress until her sudden death, which according to the Index was “officially by her own hand; unofficially, strangled in her dressing room by a fellow actor, a jealous young Gothlander, now, at ninety, the oldest, and least important, member of the Shadows group” (305). While “a burst of strange sounds” from “two terrible voices” at the end of the passage—1,888 yards from their start—compels Oleg and Kinbote to run back to the Palace, Kinbote learns on his second underground journey that the end of the passage is “the dimly lit, dimly cluttered lumbarkamer which had once been Iris Acht’s dressing room in the Royal Theater” (C.130, 133-34). Boyd explains the double-edged significance of the late actress, establishing a link between the king’s escape and concepts of ultimate escape:

Then as an adult and a king he had found a solution to his solus rex problem, an escape from the prison his Zemblan castle had become, when he passed through Iris Acht’s door into freedom, only to find himself still surrounded by his fears. Now, he might find a still better solution, a more permanent escape . . . if he can step again, as it were, into the door of the room where Iris Acht took her own life. Officially, perhaps, Kinbote might seem to die by his own hand, but unofficially, he wanted us to know, he, like Iris, will turn out to have been the victim of another Gradus, another Shadow. (105)
Iris Acht significantly figures in the key events of Kinbote’s Zembla account, providing a bridge between escape and suicide. The particulars of her dossier, however, provide yet another bridge, as revealed through exploration of Conan Doyle’s world of Sherlock Holmes.

The character who comes closest to being Sherlock Holmes’ love interest throughout Doyle’s series is Irene Adler. Adler’s first—and only—physical appearance in the Holmes canon is in “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), although she appears nominally in “A Case of Identity,” “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” and “His Last Bow.” “A Scandal in Bohemia” begins, “To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex.” Watson then proceeds to explain that Holmes could not express any sentiment of love to any woman, “And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory” (“Scandal”). The story begins on March 20, 1888, when Holmes and Watson are visited by a disguised man who Holmes quickly deduces to be the King of Bohemia. Now betrothed to a Scandinavian noble, the King has engaged in an affair with Irene Adler, an opera singer and prima donna in Italy and Poland. Adler possesses an incriminating photograph that she threatens to send to the family, and the king seeks Holmes’ help in recovering the evidence.

The king asks of Holmes his familiarity with Irene Adler, to which Holmes responds, to Watson, “Kindly look her up in my index, Doctor.” Watson explains, “For many years he had adopted a system of docketing all paragraphs concerning men and things, so that it was difficult to name a subject or a person on which he could not at once furnish information.” After some digging, Watson produces Adler’s dossier, which was “sandwiched in between that of a Hebrew rabbi and that of a staff-commander who had written a monograph upon the deep-sea fishes.” In
another Index, the entry for another female I.A. reads “celebrated actress, d. 1888, a passionate and powerful woman, favorite of Thurgus the Third” (Index, 305). Iris Acht and Irene Adler, both theatre performers, both clandestine lovers of foreign kings in 1888, both dead by the time they appear in their respective stories, are also both described as powerful women: Acht is “passionate and powerful,” and Adler is “has a soul of steel. She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men” (“A Scandal”). Moreover, Adler’s connection to the King of Bohemia also points to Zembla: Kinbote’s commentary to the waxwing slain includes a comment on “a crested bird called in Zemblan sample (“silktailed”), closely resembling a waxwing in shape and shade” (C.1-4, 73). In Europe, the silktailed is another name for the Bohemian waxwing, the sub-Arctic counterpart to Shade’s cedar waxwing. Through her Holmesian significance, Acht also confirms the suffusion of Sherlock Holmes throughout the text and enables a further exploration of Holmes in other allusions.

Lending credence to the notion that Nabokov’s Holmesian allusion transcends the literal, physical implication of the reversed shoes is Arthur Conan Doyle’s notorious interest in spiritualism during his composition of “The Final Problem.” As the title suggests, Conan Doyle intended to conclude the Sherlock Holmes series with the death of his protagonist in “The Final Problem.” While biographical sources suggest a variety of reasons for Conan Doyle’s resolution, Kyle Freeman suggests that in 1893 the author “intends for this to be the last Holmes

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16 Although Watson describes from Holmes’ notes that Adler is an opera singer, in her own letter to Holmes she notes, “But, you know, I have been trained as an actress myself.”
17 In his essay, “The Fledgling Fictionalist: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,” Michael H. Begnal also underscores Nabokov’s Holmesian influence, suggesting a connection between Irene Adler and Knight’s Lidya Bohemska (2).
18 In The Magic of Artistic Discovery Brian Boyd highlights the connection between Hazel’s quote of Eliot (Grim Pen) and the “treacherous Grimen Mire” of The Hound of the Baskervilles (193-94), and in a February 2001 post to NABOKV- L he cites other instances of Nabokov’s interest in The Hound and adds to his connection of Hazel and Holmes: “In ‘grimen,’ too, Nabokov alludes to an Eliot allusion precisely in order to suggest he can outdo Eliot in compounding allusions, and at the same time points to another series of clues, another trail of reversed tracks, that intimate a sublimated Hazel’s survival beyond the apparent inexorability of her death by drowning” (#97).
story so that he can turn to literary work he considers more important. He joins the British Society for Psychical Research, which will provide the basis for his belief in spiritualism” (xii). According to biographer Daniel Stashower, “Conan Doyle once declared that he would gladly sacrifice whatever literary reputation he enjoyed if it would bring about a greater acceptance of his spiritualist message” (xiii). Founded by Cambridge scholars Edmund Gurney, Frederic William Henry Myers, Henry Sidgwick, and Edmund Rogers in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research’s purpose was and is to investigate “examine allegedly paranormal phenomena in a scientific and unbiased way,” and Conan Doyle became notorious in literary circles for his involvement with the group, though at the time “its leading lights were prominent in the world of science” (Society, Stashower 161). Conan Doyle studied the eighteenth century works of Franz Anton Mesmer, which preceded the research of his spiritualist contemporaries and which provided a source of inspiration for his fiction:

In a story called “John Barrington Cowles,” published in 1884, a character called “Dr. Messinger” sounded a cautionary note: “A strong will can, simply by virtue of its strength, take possession of a weaker one, even at a distance, and can regulate the impulses and the actions of the owner of it. If there was one man in the world who had a very much more highly developed will than any of the rest of the human family, there is no reason why he should not be able to rule over them all, and to reduce his fellow-creatures to the condition of automatons.” (Stashower 88)

19 Stashower cites critic Sherman Yellen’s assertion that “Conan Doyle had made his greatest sacrifice to his Spiritualist beliefs; he had relinquished his literary power to it,” adding, “As John Dickson Carr wrote in 1949, echoing the popular attitude of Conan Doyle’s contemporaries, ‘For a quarter of a century he had loomed thick-shouldered as the sturdy Briton, with no damned nonsense about him. What was wrong? What ailed the man?” (xiii, xiv).
Conan Doyle’s experimentation with the power of the human mind parallels the Society for Psychical Research’s concerns. In the years preceding his formal induction into the Society, Conan Doyle “had corresponded with several of the Society’s founding members, including F.W.H. Myers, whose study entitled *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* was to become a cornerstone of psychic research” (Stashower 161). As he was formulating *Pale Fire*, Nabokov himself explored the works of F.W.H. Myers, making note of his *Human Personality* in his notes on psychical research and paranormal activity.

"half a shade": Subconscious Dissociation

Evidence of Nabokov’s particular interest in subconscious identity dissociation can be found in an index card, in a collection of his note cards gathered as “Notes on Various Subjects,” labeled “Psychical Research Today, DJ West, London 1954.” Gleaned from his notes on Donald J. West’s parapsychological text *Psychical Research Today*, Nabokov’s references suggest that his exploration of the subconscious is rooted in late nineteenth century psychical research, which developed with the establishment of the Society for Psychical Research in London in 1882. The passages he notes come from the “The Psychology of Mediumship” chapter of West’s book, in which West details the historical development of the connection between allegedly psychic phenomena and abnormal mental states, summarizing the work of S.P.R founder F.W.H. Myers. Nabokov’s first citation is “F.W.H. Myers . . . put forward the theory of the subconscious mind” and further down on the card he notes, “human survival after bodily death,” a likely reference to the Myers’ text from which West obtains most of his information in the chapter.²⁰

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²⁰ On NABOKV-L, Mary Bellino identifies a passage from *Bend, Sinister* as a direct quote from Myer’s *Human Personality* (“THOUGHTS: Stillicide and F. W. H. Myers,” 18 April 2007).
“It is not easy to realize that anything which deserves the name of consciousness can be going on within us, apart from that central stream of thought and feeling with which identify ourselves in common life,” observes Frederic William Henry Myers in his 1903 Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death. Despite the initial difficulties such a notion of consciousness would present to his nineteenth century reader, Myers asserts that “[t]he ‘conscious Self’ of each of use, as we call it — the empirical, the supraliminal Self, as I should prefer to say, — does not comprise the whole of the consciousness or of the faculty within us” (13). Identifying the “subliminal Self” as “all that takes place beneath the ordinary threshold, or say, if preferred, outside the ordinary margin of consciousness,” he hypothesizes that “there may be, — not only co-operations between these quasi-independent trains of thought, — but also upheavals and alterations of personality of many kinds, so that what was once below the surface may for a time, or permanently, rise above it” (14-15). Since Human Personality’s publication, Myers’ advancement of the subconscious and his testament to its power has piqued the interest of many thinkers both literary and scientific—including Vladimir Nabokov. Like Nabokov, Myers’ interests were both literary and scientific; before delving into psychical research, he published volumes of poetry and literary criticism, and scholars have noted Nabokov’s appropriation of his concepts in some of his other works (Maixner 212). Moreover, like Nabokov’s naturalist poet Shade, Myers did not live to see his crowning, unfinished work published (Flournoy and Carrington 55).

Nabokov’s first citation, “F.W.H Myers put forward the theory of the subconscious mind,” comes from West’s description of Myers’ case studies of “persons carrying on purposeful activities without conscious deliberation”:

21 Myers’ familiarity to literary students, Paul Maixner alleges, is primarily through his often-cited description of a walk with Georg Eliot at Cambridge, in which Myers describes, “I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic turned toward me like a sybil’s in the gloom” (qtd. in Maixner 212).
Myers was one of the earliest to realize the importance of all these observations, and to see that, in order to produce the phenomena of automatism, a lot of creative mental activity must go on of which the individual is unaware. This led Myers to put forward the theory of the subconscious mind. (56)

West continues, “Myers thought that in the same way as a subject may perform some action automatically in response to a subconscious impulse, so he might conjure up a mental image or vision automatically without conscious deliberation” (56). When applied to the perplexing correspondences between Kinbote and Shade, Myers’ development of the notion of the subconscious mind resolves some of the primary Shadean issues. If John Shade created the character of Charles Kinbote, and the act was initiated in Shade’s subconscious, then Shade is no longer the calculating artist that defies his character portrait. Thus Shade’s ability to “conjure up a mental image” like Zembla is not necessarily something that needs to be reconciled with his given personality traits.

Nabokov’s next note on the Psychical Research Today card, “a shot of pentothal/the drug pentothal,” is from West’s reflection on automatic writing as a venue to voice one’s subconscious:

We don't accept responsibility for our dreams, so desires that we should hate to admit when awake can find fulfillment in dream fantasy. Similarly, after being hypnotized, or being given the “truth drug” pentothal, or in automatic writing, in all of which situations the subject can disclaim responsibility, personal revelations frequently come forth. This is the reason why automatic writing is so often taken up with sexual topics and obscenities, for these are the very ideas that in the
ordinary way the civilized person would be careful not to express too crudely.

(57)

That the release of the subconscious thought through automatic writing or a “truth drug” often takes unexpected forms makes Nabokov’s citation of this passage particularly compelling, as Shadeans often struggle to find a source in the poet for Kinbote’s highly sexualized and often outrageous voice. Shade, the respected scholar and professor in a small, sleepy New England town, “would be careful not to express too crudely” any opinion or observation. As a form of “automatic writing” on the part of Shade, Kinbote’s commentary can express all of the things Shade as a “civilized person” cannot. While the potential sources for Shade’s homosexual subconscious expression is a matter for another study, Kinbote’s indulgently homoerotic renderings of Zembla certainly seem to fit West’s description of responsibility-free dream fulfillment of subconscious desires.

Nabokov continues with West’s automatic writing thread, making note of “automatic writing/sometimes – like blotting paper impressions,” from West’s description of the process:

Automatic writings, like dreams, are not always easy to interpret. Sometimes the writing is back to front, like blotting-paper impressions, and has to be held up to a mirror in order to be deciphered. The letters may be scrawled, and words and sentences may run into each other without breaks or punctuations. Ideas, instead of being set down fully and coherently, may be compressed into cryptic sequences of words and phrases. These difficulties are probably signs of the subject’s resistance to the clear expression of the forbidden thoughts and feelings that strive to find an outlet in the script. (57)
The mirror-renderings of automatic writing reflect the slightly skewed reflections of New Wye present in Kinbote’s Zembla, as explicated by various theorists. The facets of Shade’s world detectable in Kinbote’s account may not be clear metaphors for specific elements of Shade’s experience but may be instances and reflections from Shade’s conscious that have been blotted and absorbed by his subconscious: “signs of the subject’s resistance to the clear expression of the forbidden thoughts and feelings that strive to find an outlet in the script.” Additionally, West’s description of “words and sentences running into each other without breaks or punctuation” resembles Hazel’s barn communication with the “roundlet of pale light” (57). Boyd perceives the “automatic writing” nature of this communication and attributes it to Shade’s deceased Aunt Maud. However, Nabokov’s research into the subconscious reveals that his concern is less with actual paranormal encounters and more with the capacity of the subconscious to render something that could be interpreted as paranormal.

**Ansel Bourne’s shade**

On his *Psychical Research* note card Nabokov notes, “a victim of mental dissociation, he developed a secondary personality.” This sort of mental dissociation is taken up by West as he explains the development of a subconscious entity through the practice of automatic writing:

Automatic writing done by persons interested in Spiritualism sometimes purports to be dictated by an outside personality or spirit. The writing may be signed by some strange name and develop a style and character of its own, a sort of secondary personality. Myers took an intense interest in these secondary personalities. He quoted cases in which the secondary phase was not restricted to writing, but for periods banished the primary personality altogether . . . (58)
Besides distinct correlations with the nature of Kinbote as an expression of Shade’s subconscious—the “strange name” with “a style and character of its own, a sort of secondary personality” that “for periods banished the primary personality altogether”—the passage also directly precedes a specific example of such a secondary personality:

A case of this kind was Ansel Bourne, an American preacher. He was a rather unhealthy man who had since childhood suffered from depressed moods. When he was sixty-one, he lost his sense of identity, wandered off into a distant town, and set up as a store-keeper under another name. After six weeks he suddenly reverted to his old self and came back home. (58)

Myers explains the implications of Ansel Bourne’s case in greater detail in Human Personality. When he regained his ordinary consciousness, Bourne had no recollection of his experience as Pennsylvania shopkeeper A.J. Brown, but a hypnotism experience enabled him to relay information from that time while in a trance-like state (46). “The ‘Brown’ personality,” Myers continues, “showed the narrowness of interests and the uninquiring indifference which is common in such states” (46).

Since original documentation by psychologist William James, practically every prominent study on dissociative identity cites the case of Ansel Bourne. William James was responsible for preliminary psychological study of Bourne, performing the hypnotism that enabled Bourne to recover his knowledge of the Brown personality (Rieber 17). 22 James detailed Bourne’s case in 1890 in The Principles of Psychology, a classic text in the history of psychological research that was familiar to Nabokov from an early age. Nabokov was an acquaintance of James’ son, and in a letter to Edmund Wilson, he relates, “My father considered his [Billy James’] father’s works as

22 Richard Hodgson provides the first full report of James’ work with Bourne in the Proceedings of the S.P.R. for 1891, which Myers excerpts in the Appendix of Human Personality.
one of the greatest and most brilliant contributions to psychology and had me read him when I was twelve or thirteen” (Nabokov, Letter 344). In his description of Bourne, James explains, “The peculiarity of it is that nothing else like it ever occurred in the man’s life, and that no eccentricity of character came out” (393). Bourne remains a fascinating case in psychological research both because he was a prominent subject of early dissociative study and because the nature of his dissociation was severely delineating and abrupt.

In his The Bifurcation of the Self: The History and Theory of Dissociation and its Disorders (2006), Robert W. Rieber provides a more recent survey of the history of dissociative identity research. He cites Ansel Bourne in his discussion of fugue states, which he defines as not “a ‘state’ at all but a developmental process which is characterized by the loss of memory of self. This loss can last for an hour or a day or even for months” (15). Ansel Bourne, Rieber maintains, is “the classic case” of a dissociative fugue. John Nemiah provides another definition of a dissociative fugue in his work on dissociative disorders: “Dissociative fugue is characterized by a sudden loss of personal identity and of the memory of one's entire past life, by the assumption of a new identity, and by a tendency to wander far from home to take up a new residence, occupation, and life.”

Ansel Bourne provides the most compelling argument for the connection between Nabokov’s interest in the subconscious as related to the paranormal and a Shadean hypothesis. While the McCarthy hypothesis, the most straightforward interpretation of the text, advances a theory of dissociated identities, the immediate parallels between John Shade and Ansel Bourne oppose any insinuation that Nabokov may have used this section of West’s text as an inspiration for Botkin-Kinbote. Kinbote makes the distinct effort to point out that American scholar

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Shade—whose grandfather was a preacher and who was a generally unhealthy man that suffered a curious malady as a child—was sixty one years old when he composed his poem: the same age as Bourne when he suffered his dissociative attack (C.143, 137). Kinbote’s unwavering preoccupation with Zembla and his homoerotic pursuits indeed seem to illustrate a distinct “narrowness of interests,” and his almost complete lack of interest in the subject of his poetical Commentary reflects “the uninquiring indifference” of a dissociated identity.

Rieber observes, “Most of the nineteenth century literature regarding dissociative phenomena of both mind and brain shows a peculiar preoccupation with the possible connection between dissociative phenomena of various kinds . . . and various forms of hysteria—particularly hysterical fits as they relate to organically caused epileptic fits” (12). Accordingly, Myers cites the case of Ansel Bourne as an example of the association between epileptic episodes and dissociation. Bourne, Myers explains, was “[s]ubject from childhood to fits of deep depression, and presenting in later life symptoms suggestive of epilepsy” (46). When he is 31, he experiences “what was supposed to be a severe sunstroke” but is interpreted by those around him as an act of God (46). Bourne’s symptoms seem to go into remission until his 61st year, when his dissociation into A.J. Brown occurs. Similarly, Shade suffered from reoccurring fits described by Kinbote as “a mild form of epilepsy,” which cease for approximately fifty years until a related fit overtakes him on October 17th, 1959 (C.162, 147; 692).

**What, has my face changed?**

In his lecture on “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” delivered to his Cornell students from 1948 to 1958 and later published in *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov concluded his discussion with a description of Robert Louis Stevenson’s death. He cites Stevenson’s last
words, which, to his wife before he collapsed on the floor, were, “What’s the matter with me, what is this strangeness, has my face changed?” and then the author who notoriously scorns biographical criticism continues, “What, has my face changed? There is a curious thematic link between this last episode in Stevenson’s life and the fateful transformations in his most wonderful book” (“The Strange” 34). Unraveling Stevenson’s personal narrative reveals not only the threads of inspiration for his most famous dissociative identity tale but also connective strands to F.W.H. Myers and the Society for Psychical Research, as well as to the dissociative elements of “Pale Fire.”

The Society for Psychical Research counted a selection of prominent nineteenth and early twentieth century figures among its members and participants. Along with Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and William James were some of the dominant voices in literature, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson. Myers includes a letter from Stevenson\(^\text{24}\) in the appendix to *Human Personality* (356). The two members of the S.P.R corresponded frequently,\(^\text{25}\) and in light of Myers’ interest in Stevenson’s explanation of dreams,\(^\text{26}\) the author sent Myers a detailed explanation of his dissociative experiences.

Stevenson’s affliction—“infamous bad health” in childhood that seems to be overcome in adolescence but is strangely re-manifested in adulthood—curiously parallels that described by John Shade: “Asthmatic, lame and fat” as a child, Shade suffers strange fits when he is eleven, which cease for most of his adult life but seem to reappear in an unusual instance in his sixtieth year (129, 691-92). Myers includes Stevenson’s correspondence, with its description of his renewed malady, as an example of “a transient perturbation of personality of the most violent kind” (356):

\(^{24}\) originally published in *Proceedings S.P.R.* vol. Ix, pg 9
\(^{25}\) See Maixner 211-222
\(^{26}\) See Myers 72-73, 97
From the beginning of the evening one part of my mind became possessed of a notion so grotesque and shapeless that it may best be described as a form of words. I thought the pain was, or was connected with, a wisp or coil of some sort; I knew not of what it consisted nor yet where it was, and cared not; only I thought, if the two ends were brought together, the pain would cease. (Stevenson qtd. in Myers 356-57)

Stevenson’s subliminal fixation on “a wisp or coil” whose ends he wishes to join together draws another parallel to Shade, who at IPH learned “[h]ow to keep sane in spiral types of space,” who describes the afterlife as it “spirals from the tuber’s eye,” and who, during his own trance state, sees a spinning “system of cells interlinked within / Cells interlinked within cells interlinked / Within one stem” (559, 619, 704-06).

Myers explains how Stevenson’s mind has been rent into “a kind of supraliminal duality, the perception at the same time of two personalities” as Stevenson’s correspondence continues:

Now all the time, with another part of my mind, which I venture to think was myself, I was fully alive to the absurdity of this idea, knew it to be a mark of impaired sanity, and was engaged with my other self in a perpetual conflict. (357)

His awareness of two distinct and opposed components of his consciousness is redolent of an experience related in Shade’s fourth canto, when Shade “overheard / Myself awakening while half of me / Still slept in bed” (874-76). In this dream state Shade recognizes both components of his consciousness, and when he realizes “that this half too / Was fast asleep; both laughed and I awoke” (880-81). Shade knows that the experience itself was not a mere dream when he discovers one of his shoes upon the lawn the next morning, “the mystery inborn” (885).
Shade proclaims his wonder at the occurrence with his next line, “Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn,” but he also provides an allusion to his Aunt Maud, who kept her verse book open to the “M” page of the Index, and to Hazel, who assumedly displaced Shade’s “Bible-like Webster open at M” onto the lawn in an attempt to mimic a poltergeist (94-95; C.230, 166). The connection of Shade’s dissociative experience to Maud, who had “a taste/For realistic objects interlaced/With grotesque growths and images of doom,” is allusive of Stevenson’s dissociative experience; Stevenson describes one part of his dissociated self as “possessed of a notion so grotesque and shapeless” and the other as “fully alive to the absurdity” of the first—a conscious that is divided between its “realistic objects” and its “grotesque growths” (87-89, Stevenson qtd. in Myers 357). Likewise, “difficult, morose” Hazel’s “strange fears, strange fantasies, strange force/Of character” are reminiscent of Stevenson’s manifestations (357, 344-45). The parallels between Stevenson’s description of his psyche and the descriptions of Hazel and Maud in Pale Fire substantiate a connection between Shade’s psyche and the two deceased women, as perceived by Brian Boyd, but they also suggest that Hazel and Maud are not reaching out from beyond death. Rather, it seems these two figures in Shade’s life exhibited the signs of subconscious dissociation that Shade may have recognized in himself.

Stevenson refers to his other self as “the other fellow,” explaining, “It was myself who spoke and acted; the other fellow seemed to have no control of the body or the tongue. . . Yet I am tempted to think that I know the other fellow; I am tempted to think he is the dreamer. . .” (qtd. in Myers 357). The “dreamer,” as he explains in “A Chapter on Dreams” in his 1892 novel Across the Plains, is his name for his dream-self, the unconscious figure who acts as himself in

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27 The connection is made even more explicit by the parallel four M’s: Maud’s “Moon, Moonrise, Moor, Moral” and Shade’s “Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn” (94-95, 886).

28 Of Shade’s dictionary on the lawn Kinbote notes that “subliminally this may have participated in the making of lines 5-12” but fails to establish the connection to Shade’s shoe on the lawn and the “Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn” (C.230, 166).
his dreams. Myers particularly admired Stevenson’s mastery of his dreamer and his ability to channel dreams as a primary well of creativity, devoting a segment of his chapter on genius to Stevenson. Not surprisingly, Myers particularly admired *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, and he wrote Stevenson numerous letters of praise and critical suggestions for the story (Maixner 212). Most of his criticism, also not surprisingly, centers on the psychical information surrounding Jekyll’s dissociation. He challenges Stevenson’s notion that the two personalities would have the same handwriting, citing research on the nature of automatic writing:

> Here I think you miss a point for want of familiarity with recent psycho-physical discussions. Handwriting in cases of double personality (spontaneous . . . or induced, as in hypnotic cases) *is not* and *cannot be* the same in two personalities. Hyde’s writing might look like Jekyll’s done *with the left hand*, or done when partly drunk, or ill: that is the kind of resemblance there might be. (qtd. in Maixner 215)

He also questions the inconsistent depiction of Hyde’s similarity to Jekyll, noting a “slight uncertainty in the psychical relationship of the two personalities” (qtd. in Maixner 219). Myers’ fascination with the novel likely incited his admiration for Stevenson’s “dreamer” and his dissociative creativity, and he no doubt had Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in mind when he described Stevenson’s “supraliminal duality, the perception at the same time of two personalities” as “one rational and moral, the other belonging to the stratum of dreams and nightmare” (Myers 356).

Nabokov’s fascination with *Jekyll & Hyde* takes a similar form; the focus of his lecture on the novel is the nature of Jekyll’s transformation and his relationship to his dissociated self. Carolyn Kunin presents a detailed argument for the thematic connections between *Pale Fire* and
Jekyll & Hyde on the NABOKV-L listserv, observing that Nabokov’s descriptions of what occurs between Jekyll and Hyde parallel his descriptions of the relationship between Kinbote and Shade. The link between Nabokov’s lecture on Stevenson and his novel gains a new significance through the lens of psychical research. Nabokov points out that Jekyll equated Hyde’s period of dominance in his body to death: in his final note Jekyll proclaims, “[T]his is my true hour of death, and what is to follow concerns another than myself” (33, Stevenson 124). John Shade describes his October attack as death as well, which can be similarly understood as the moment “another than himself” appeared within him. Nabokov suggests that the popular perception of Jekyll & Hyde, i.e. the understanding of the story by those who have not read it, is that Dr. Jekyll actually transforms himself into a monstrous other being. He asserts that in such an understanding, “[t]hree important notions are completely obliterated” (“The Strange” 10). One of these notions is that “Jekyll is not really transformed into Hyde but projects a concentrate of pure evil that becomes Hyde” (10). Though Stevenson represents Jekyll and Hyde as two different characters, Jekyll’s transformation is not utter; rather, a thread of his psyche that had been suppressed is chemically induced, and it develops into an almost-distinct personality. As

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29 Kunin introduces her Shadean hypothesis on August 29, 2002 on NABOKV-L, with the subject, “Fw: Alternate Interpretation of Pale Fire,” in which she also identifies Shade’s October 17th “heart attack” as the moment that brought Kinbote into existence. Kunin sees the escape from Zembla passage as an allegory for Shade’s “cerebral stroke,” and she views the entire work as a refiguring of Jekyll & Hyde, with Kinbote and Gradus’ battle for dominance in Shade’s psyche eventually leading to Shade’s institutionalization. She supplements her original argument with a clearer delineation of the Jekyll & Hyde connection on August 27, 2006, in a message “FW: Why hide?”, and continues to defend her argument against the listserv’s detractors. Kunin and I have sensed the significance of the same facets of the novel—and the relative lack of attention these instances have garnered in most criticism—and have set forth to explore them through different paths.

30 On October 3, 2006 on NABOKV-L, Carolyn Kunin observes that in his lecture on J&H Nabokov calls Hyde a tape-worm on Jekyll, just as Kinbote is described as a bot-fly on Shade. In the lecture published in Lectures on Literature, Nabokov explains that “hydatid” is a zoological term for a larval sac of tapeworms in a host’s body and observers, “Thus, in a sense, Mr. Hyde is Dr. Jekyll’s parasite—but I must warn that Stevenson knew nothing of this when he chose the name” (“The Strange” 10).

31 To return to Nabokov’s notes on Psychical Research Today, he makes note of “a shot of pentothal/the drug pentothal,” from West’s “Similarly, after being hypnotized, or being given the “truth drug” pentothal, or in automatic writing, in all of which situations the subject can disclaim responsibility, personal revelations frequently come forth” (57). West’s note of a drug that induces personal revelations by eradicating an individual’s sense of responsibility is in a sense similar to Jekyll’s drug that enables the expression of Hyde.
this personality gains complete dominance. This is what could be happening to Shade: a projected “concentrate” of part of his subconscious, fully unleashed by a cerebral malfunction on October 17th, develops into the almost-distinct personality Charles Kinbote. Moreover, Shade’s “death” by Gradus could be communicating the eradication of the Shade personality.

Gradus, as another type of being or level of consciousness within Shade, seems to have a partial foundation in Nabokov’s understanding of *Jekyll & Hyde*, as he maintains that the personalities of Jekyll and Hyde are not completely distinct and duel:

> There are really three personalities—Jekyll, Hyde, and a third, the Jekyll residue when Hyde takes over. . . . Still, if you look closely at Hyde, you will notice that above him floats aghast, but dominating, a residue of Jekyll, a kind of smoke ring, or halo, as if this black concentrated evil had fallen out of the remaining ring of good, but this ring of good still remains. Hyde still wants to change back to Jekyll. (11-12)

To apply Nabokov’s understanding of the “Jekyll residue” to *Pale Fire*, the parallels between Kinbote’s passages and elements from John Shade’s life could be understood as a “Shade residue” that lingers in Kinbote, the “half a shade” that Shade still maintains when Kinbote appears. The third personality could also be represented by Gradus, who, like the “Jekyll residue,” seeks to eradicate the secondary personality but ultimately fails. Just as Shade and Kinbote exhibit numerous connective traits, Shade and Gradus seem to have prominent similarities as well, as Brian Boyd notes.32 Gradus, The Shadow, could be “a residue . . . , a kind of smoke ring” that results from the fracturing of Shade’s psyche.

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32 Boyd asks, “Why too, for that matter, is Shade so pointedly gray? . . . Why does Shade not only have the same birthday as Gradus or de Grey, but also a name that can mean the same as Gradus’s other alias, Degree? Why all this on top of the identification of the man who kills Shade as a Shadow, when Shade has written ‘I was the shadow of the waxwing slain,’ or on top of Jakob Gradus’s trade as a glass-maker, and his mirror-reversed image as a
Nabokov’s final reflection on *Jekyll & Hyde* concerns Stevenson’s crafting of the tale, and it lends insight into Nabokov’s own creative process in his dissociative novel. Stevenson’s “artistic problem” is that Jekyll and Hyde are not really separate people, but the audience must be made to believe that they are, without resorting to direct deception (21-22). The characters through whom the story is relayed, Enfield and Utterson, must convey that Hyde is grotesque and terrible without noting the specific details and peculiarities that might align him with Jekyll. Although Kinbote is not a reliable narrator as Enfield and Utterson are, he gives immediate clues as to his unreliability, thereby equipping the reader to hunt out the facts from his spin.\(^3\)

Therefore even though Kinbote is not “reliable,” the reader trusts that he will not totally mislead; like Enfield and Utterson, his descriptions are oblique enough to prevent any conclusive interpretation. As the crafting of numerous, widely divergent theories from the same passages indicates, Nabokov offers no conclusive evidence that will substantiate one interpretation. Likewise, he creates a world in which any interpretation is possible, even if upon first reading it may not seem logical, just as Stevenson creates a Dickensian world in which men can change form:

> Stevenson musters all possible devices, images, intonation, word patterns, and also false scents, to build up gradually a world in which the strange transformation to be described in Jekyll’s own words will have the impact of satisfactory and artistic reality upon the reader or rather will lead to such a state of mind in which the reader will not ask himself whether this transformation is possible or not. (14)

\(^3\) For example, outside of any pointed theorizing, Kinbote’s paranoia and obliviousness allows the reader to deduce that the anonymous note Kinbote finds in his coat that reads “You have hal . . . . s real bad, chum,” which Kinbote interprets as “hallucinations,” actually means “halitosis” (C.62, 98).
Nabokov accomplishes this suspension of disbelief in Kinbote’s presence in New Wye: an insane professor—who, even from the McCarthy perspective, prefers to assume a fictional identity and clearly exhibits problematic social habits—permitted to teach and entertain students and a respected university is rarely questioned or deemed impossible by readers of *Pale Fire*. Moreover, Nabokov also employs more than a fair share of “false scents” in the games, riddles, and allusions that that permeate the work. A great deal of the novel’s endurance stems from its seemingly endless web of allusions; sorting out which may be narrative clues and which may just be neutral references and homages enables countless readings and re-readings.

When applied to *Pale Fire*, Nabokov’s interpretation of how Stevenson solves his “artistic problem” suggests a possible connection between Shade’s psychological state and his art. “[G]iven the situation and the characters,” Nabokov explains, “I suggest that the shock of Hyde’s presence brings out the hidden artist in Enfield and the hidden artist in Utterson” (22). Hyde is physically Jekyll, but Enfield and Utterson see and describe him as disfigured and physically distinguishable from the doctor; thus, he in some way “inspires” their creativity. “Otherwise,” Nabokov continues, “the bright perceptions that illumine Enfield’s story of his journey . . . and the colorful imaginings of Utterson’s dreams . . . could only be explained by the abrupt intrusion of the author with his own set of artistic values and his own diction and intonation. A curious problem indeed” (22). Despite his employment of allusions, such as the Sherlock Holmes reference, which seem more Nabokovian than Shadean or otherwise, Nabokov makes it clear that Shade and Kinbote are not mere vehicles for his expression. Regardless of how physically tangible they and the other characters may be, they exist and are expressed in ways consistent with their personalities. Thus, though Kinbote in some ways corrupts Shade’s art with his irrelevant Commentary, his additions create the new work of art that is *Pale Fire*, a
work that transcends the bounds of any mere poem. In addition, like Hyde, Kinbote brings out the artists in non-artists: the sleuthing of *Pale Fire* readers continues to yield narrative hypotheses that Nabokov may not have even intended, but that are none the less artful. In his creation of Shade, Kinbote, and Gradus, characters inexplicably connected yet seemingly distinct, Nabokov imagines the artistic potential of the subconscious, exploring the way the human mind may transcend its conscious capabilities to create art both inadvertent and exceptional.

In Nabokov’s notes to *Psychical Research Today*, he copies from West the phrase “a victim of mental dissociation, he developed a secondary personality,” which comes from West’s reflection on automatic writing:

> The writing may be signed by some strange name and develop a style and character of its own, a sort of secondary personality. Myers took an intense interest in these secondary personalities. He quoted cases in which the secondary phase was not restricted to writing, but for periods banished the primary personality altogether, so that the individual lived a sort of Jekyll and Hyde existence, now with one character, now with another. (58)

In the Jekyll and Hyde reference, West may have perceived Myers’ fascination with Stevenson’s novel and its correspondence to his line of research—and, moreover, the line may have caught Nabokov’s eye because of his meticulous experience with the novel. In *Human Survival*, F.W.H. Myers cites Robert Louis Stevenson in his chapter on “Genius,” noting Stevenson’s mastering of “that integrating faculty—that increased power over all strata of the personality— which I have ascribed to genius” (73). He asserts, however, that Stevenson “was in no way more markedly gifted” in his negotiation of dissociating identities than he was “in his relation to his dreams”
(73). Stevenson's vivid and dissociated dreaming introduces Myers' segment on somnambulism, and he explains, "Bearing these associations in mind, we shall see that the development of somnambulism out of ordinary dream is no isolated oddity. It is parallel to the development of a secondary state from idées fixes when these have passed a certain pitch of intensity" (44). Investigation reveals an extensive correlated pattern in the connection between dissociation and somnambulism, and the case for Shade—not Botkin—as the subject of dissociation becomes more complete through exploration of his role as Pale Fire’s somnambulist.

"I ambulate—and by some mute command"

Shade begins Canto Four with a reflection on his creative process, describing two methods of composition: the first "goes on solely in the poet’s mind" (842) while the body performs its daily tasks, and the second is the deliberate time when both mind and body are committed to writing. The first method "is agony!" to Shade, for at that time the mind is uncontrollable, "while the automaton / Is taking off what he just put on / Or walking briskly to the corner store" (853, 857-59). Labeling the body when detached from the mind as "the automaton" calls to mind not only the immediate reference to a self-operating machine but also a latent reference to psychical research: all of Nabokov's notes from West's Psychical Research Today come from the chapter pertaining to automatism, a term West gleans from Myers to mean "persons carrying on purposeful activities without conscious deliberation" (55). Shade continues with a description of an automatic-sort of poetic inspiration:

For there are those mysterious moments when
Too weary to delete, I drop my pen;
I ambulate—and by some mute command

\[34 \text{ In Webster's, "an idea that dominates one's mind especially for a prolonged period: obsession"} \]
The right word flutes and perches on my hand. (869-72)

Scholars of psychical research categorize somnambulism as a form of automatism, and Shade suitably progresses from the automaton to a musing on ambulatory revelation, to a description of a somnambulist experience:

I once overheard
Myself awakening while half of me
Still slept in bed. I tore my spirit free,
And caught up with myself—upon the lawn
Where clover leaves cupped the topaz of dawn,
And where Shade stood in nightshirt and one shoe.
And then I realized that this half too
Was fast asleep; both laughed and I awoke
Safe in my bed as day its eggshell broke,
And robins walked and stopped, and on the damp
Gemmed turf a brown shoe lay! My secret stamp,
The Shade impress, the mystery inborn. (874-85)

Again—with the October 17th “half a shade”—Shade experiences a fracture of himself, as he perceives half of his consciousness awakening while the other sleeps. The features of his somnambulist experience display notable parallels to psychical research on somnambulism. Somnambulism is a primary focus of Myers’ work—and practically all studies of dissociative identity from the time period—because such cases “seem to occupy a kind of midway position among the various phenomena through which our inquiry has thus far carried us” (156).

Following Myers’ definition of a ghost in his chapter “Phantasms of the Dead,” he explains that
what had previously been interpreted as communication with the spirit world would be better understood as communication “from a mind in one state of existence to a mind in a very different state of existence” (217). Such communication is not only restricted to seances and ghost hunts; rather, it occurs in various forms, the first of which is “spontaneous somnambulism, or colloquy between a person asleep and a person awake” (217). Myers proceeds to investigate somnambulism specifically as a source of divided personality.

In his exploration of dissociated identities in which the fracture of personality is seemingly inexplicable, Myers asserts that “the commonest mode of origin for such secondary personalities is from some access of sleep-waking, which, instead of merging into sleep again, repeats and consolidates itself, until it acquires a chain of memories of its own, alternating with the primary chain” (60). The secondary phase so developed “may to all outward semblance closely resemble normality” and “may resemble a suddenly developed idées fixe triumphing over all restraint” (60). Following this statement, one of his first case studies is that of Ansel Bourne. William James also perceived a connection between Bourne and the unconscious wandering of somnambulists, calling Bourne “the subject of a case of alternate personality of the ‘ambulatory’ sort” (319). In Pierre Janet’s\textsuperscript{35} \textit{The Major Symptoms of Hysteria}, he groups “polydeic somnambulisms” and fugue states in the same discussion, their primary link being “ambulatory automatisms, flights, or better, fugues, if we may keep the French word” (45). Prominent thinkers in psychical research, therefore, perceived a distinct connection between Bourne’s “ambulatory” fugue and the personality dissociations developed from somnambulism.

\textsuperscript{35} Janet is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in psychological study of dissociation and was a primary influence on F.W.H. Myers (Rieber 13, 19). Myers calls him “the most ingenious and indefatigable of workers in this field” (Myers 62).
The similarities between John Shade and Ansel Bourne extend beyond their physical and medical dossiers through both their shared tendency to wander and their shared connection to somnambulism and “ambulatory automatism.” In “Pale Fire” Shade not only selects the particular term “ambulate” to describe his proclivity to wander but also includes a somnambulist occurrence in which he manages to separate himself from his consciousness, if only by “half a shade.” Somnambulism contributes another layer to the evidence pointing to Shade as the subject of dissociative identity, and further investigation into Shade’s medical history further buttresses the foundation for his peculiar mental activity.

The case for cerebral sclerosis

While Shade refers to the occurrence of October 17th as “the attack, the trance, / Or one of my old fits,” the episode, in spite of being witnessed by a doctor, goes officially undiagnosed. Although Kinbote labels what has alternately been called a heart attack, trance, or stroke by various sources, “John Shade’s heart attack,” he then adds that there was nothing “organically wrong with his heart” (C.691, 246, 249). He concludes his commentary on the occurrence with a curious note about the doctor on hand:

Incidentally, the reader should not take too seriously or too literally the passage about the alert doctor (an alert doctor who as I well know once confused neuralgia with cerebral sclerosis). (250)

Although it has rarely been particularly investigated in Pale Fire research, the observation is noteworthy on several accounts: First, the “Incidentally” is an immediate trigger of importance, for as Brian Boyd has so intricately explicated, items that Kinbote deems

36 C.347, 185
37 “Because of Shade’s childhood seizures and heart attack” (Boyd “Pale” 445); “Shade’s . . . death-like trance” and “the later attack after his lecture” (Bader 46); “Shade dies and comes to life again. It is a stroke . . .” (Field 338);
incidental or barely worth note are usually of considerable latent significance. Secondly, nowhere in the poem does Shade refer to an "alert doctor"; he mentions the presence of a doctor at the Crashaw Club and the doctor to whom he explains his experience but describes neither as alert. The reference points most strongly thus to a pun on Dr. Ahlert, the doctor who incites Kinbote's quickened pulse—Kinbote takes valerian from the pharmacy "to prevent an accelerated pulse from misleading credulous science"—and whom both Kinbote and Shade see (C.287, 181-182). Dr. Ahlert informs Kinbote of the Shades' summer vacation location, prompting Kinbote to rent an adjoining cabin in Cedarn (182). Finally, this "incidental" note contains the only specific medical terms in the entire account of a mysterious medical occurrence. Cerebral sclerosis and neuralgia must immediately pique the interest of any reader curious as to what really happened to Shade that he would describe as death.

The most immediate, and probably most common, interpretation of Kinbote's suggestion regarding the negligent doctor is that it functions merely as another illustration of his character: Kinbote is oblivious to his mental derangement, and he is chagrined by a doctor's diagnosis of a highly serious mental disorder. He illustrates the doctor's lack of medical acumen by citing the less serious condition he believes he has. While some readers may be familiar with both of the medical terms, even the less medically-inclined can fairly easily find that neuralgia, as defined by numerous turn of the century medical textbooks as well as recent medical sources, is a general term for "Pain, without inflammation or other disorder, except that of the nerve or nerve-centre involved; literally, nerve-pain" (Hartshorne 318). Cerebral sclerosis is obviously a more serious condition, but exactly what it entails—and perhaps more importantly, what it would have represented for Nabokov—is more difficult to confirm. Nabokov's selection of such a particular

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38 In his explication of the connection between farmer Paul Hentzner and Robert Browning's Pippa Passes, Boyd observes that Kinbote calls the allusion "pointless" and then asserts, "Whenever we hear something called 'pointless' in Nabokov, we should look for the hidden point" (87).
and obscure term seems to beg for further investigation, and what it yields contributes significantly to a developing web of sense.

Given the medical ambiguity of Shade’s October 17th fit, the first interpretive objection to common theories about Kinbote’s cerebral sclerosis-neuralgia must be the necessary attribution to Kinbote. Although he tacks an “as I well know” to his note about the doctor’s confusion, he never directly declares that the misdiagnosis applies to himself. Kinbote does not mention the medical terms or the doctor again; in fact, nothing in the text necessitates that the mistaken diagnosis was given to Kinbote. Moreover, it is John Shade whose given medical history most strongly echoes the symptoms of both disorders.

Nearly all current medical sources that mention cerebral sclerosis refer to diffuse cerebral sclerosis, a profoundly debilitating degenerative nerve condition affecting children, but technological and scientific advances have refined the definition into a much more specific form than its origins. For Nabokov the term “cerebral sclerosis” would likely have markedly differed from its current incarnation, for in his time it was a broad classification that encompassed a variety of maladies, many of which have now been redefined.

One early comprehensive definition is provided in a 1908 medical textbook by Austrian physician Julius Zappert:

The term cerebral sclerosis is used to describe a number of pathologic conditions characterized macroscopically by thickening, contraction and brownish discoloration of the brain substance, microscopically by proliferation of the connective tissue, particularly in the septa of the brain, and in the perivascular tissue, and by thickening of the vessel walls. (205)
Cerebral sclerosis takes many forms, which “merely represent terminal conditions of some severe cerebral process and may accordingly be due to a variety of causes” (205). Most commonly regarded as a disease of children, cerebral sclerosis was linked to degenerative mental symptoms. In the 1906 *Textbook of Psychiatry for Physicians and Students*, renowned Italian psychiatrist Leonardo Bianchi notes that a selection of doctors “found in epileptics a variety of cerebral sclerosis” (527). In one incarnation of cerebral sclerosis, called tuberous sclerosis, the scleroses “may affect only certain portions of the brain, forming hard knotty tumors,” and in current medicine, the terms “tuberous sclerosis” and “cerebral sclerosis” are considered interchangeable (Zappert 205).

Tuberous sclerosis was so named for “the characteristic tuber or potato-like nodules in the brain, which calcify with age and become hard or sclerotic” (“Tuberous”). In essence, tuberous growths spiral out of the cerebral cortex, and the malformed cells and neurons within the growth trigger the disorder’s symptoms, primary of which is the occurrence of seizure-like convulsions beginning at an early age. Prominent psychiatrist Alfred Tredgold devotes a section of his 1922 *Mental Deficiency (Amentia)*, to tuberous sclerosis and its connection to mental degeneration. The nature of these seizures accompanying tuberous sclerosis is “indistinguishable from ordinary idiopathic epilepsy,” and they “continue during the life of the patient with tolerable frequency, in some cases occurring daily, in others at intervals of a few days” (Tredgold 285-86). The tuberous sclerosis connection is germane to the *Pale Fire* investigation for several reasons: first, the connection verifies that, for Nabokov, cerebral sclerosis was not necessarily diffuse cerebral sclerosis.

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39 See also William Osler’s segment on “Sclerosis of the Brain” in *The Principles and Practice of Medicine: Designed for the Use of Practitioners and Students of Medicine* (1892), (911-914).
40 See “Tuberous Sclerosis” in the National Library of Health’s *Genetic Home Reference* online database.
41 Commonly credited, along with George Still, as the first person to devote critical study to the disorder now known as ADHD.
Moreover, the term “tuberous” should immediately trigger a connection to “Pale Fire”:

Shade opens the third canto with a tuber allusion:

_L’if, lifeless tree! Your great Maybe, Rabelais:_

_The grand potato. (501-502)_

The Rabelais reference, as Kinbote points out, is to the French Renaissance writer’s last words, _Je m’en vais chercher le grand peut-être:_ roughly, “I am going to see the great Perhaps.”

Kinbote calls Shade’s pun on _peut-être_ “execrable,” asserting that it was “deliberately placed in this epigraphic position to stress lack of respect for Death” (C.502, 222). On the contrary, Rabelais’ _grand peut-être_ has a profound significance for Shade, and he continues the motif later in the canto:

_Maybe one finds le grand néant; maybe_

_Again one spirals from the tuber’s eye. (618-19)_

Kinbote underscores the motif by cross-referencing the two tuber passages; in his note to “tuber’s eye” he says simply, “The pun sprouts (see line 502)” (C.619, 236). Shade suggests that the great Maybe will possibly be a great Nothing, but his alternative, that “one spirals from the tuber’s eye,” is perhaps even more thought-provoking.

The primary manifestation of tuberous sclerosis seems to strike a chord with the fainting fit that afflicts John Shade on October 17th, but all sources on the condition attest to its development in the early developmental years of its subjects—not when they are sixty years old.42 Turning back to Shade’s description of his fit, however, reveals a potential resolution: he calls the occurrence “the attack, the trance, / or one of my old fits” (691-92).

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42 The childhood diagnosis also detracts from the allegation that it was the adult Charles Kinbote who was misdiagnosed.
Moreover, just as he calls his later fainting fit a form of death, he similarly portrays the childhood occurrences as “A thread of subtle pain, / Tugged at by playful death” that manifests itself sporadically but is “always present” (139-141). In his depiction of the sensation of one of these spells, Shade presents imagery that further suggests a connection to some form of cerebral growth. Cerebral tumors were categorized in many forms, including glioma, a general term for the type of nerve-impacting growth that occurs in tuberous sclerosis. The primary indicator that a cerebral growth is glioma is “sudden loss of consciousness with exacerbation of all symptoms in the clinical history of cerebral tumor” (Hughes 582), a description that resounds with Shade’s “sudden sunburst” (146). Persons afflicted by a glioma may exhibit some or all of the following symptoms:

   Headache, persistent and increasing in intensity; defects of vision, even blindness, due to optic neuritis, a very consistent symptom; defects of hearing, taste, and of speech, the result of paresis of the vocal cords; vertigo, associated with nausea and vomiting and convulsions, epleptiform in character . . . Defects of sensibility such as sensations of numbness and coldness in the limbs and body may also occur . . . (Hughes 551)\textsuperscript{43}

Along with the direct association with epileptic convulsions, the persistent and increasingly severe headaches parallel Shade’s “dull throbs” and “sudden sunburst”; defects of hearing and space, his “One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain”; vertigo, feeling “distributed through space and time”; and the sensation of numbness and coldness in the body, “An icy shiver down my Age of Stone” (146-56). And perhaps the most compelling indication from this passage that in his childhood Shade may have suffered from the tuberous cell growth of cerebral sclerosis is his conclusion:
And though old doctor Colt pronounced me cured
Of what, he said, were mainly growing pains,
The wonder lingers and the shame remains. (164-66)

Shade’s spells occur daily for a period of his childhood but then cease altogether, prompting his doctor to label them as “growing pains”—“growing pains,” interestingly, a term employed by many doctors in the time period to describe one of a variety of forms of neuralgia (Chapman 2).44

The connections continue to spiral from the tuber’s eye. Most diagnoses of tuberous sclerosis followed a “well-marked neuropathic family history,” often believed to be primarily developed from paternal heredity (Tredgold 285). Shade’s “dear bizarre Aunt Maud,” his father’s sister, is characterized by “the extravagant and sardonic turn of her mind” (C.86-90, 113). Creativity is often coupled with insanity, and in her old age Maud Shade is paralyzed, then committed (195-99). Her paralysis, coupled with the difficulty she has speaking [NOTE to lines 204-208], again point to the “defects of...speech, the result of paresis of the vocal cords” and other symptoms of cerebral tumors. More specifically, besides epileptic convulsions, one of the characteristic symptoms of tuberous sclerosis is a distinct skin condition: “Virtually all affected people have skin abnormalities, including patches of unusually light-colored skin, areas of raised and thickened skin, and growths under the nails” (“Tuberos”). Shade opens Canto Two by describing himself standing before a window, paring his fingernails. The action is less commonplace as it may at first seem, for instead of actually trimming his nails, Shade is paring off “the thin / Strips of what Aunt Maud used to call ‘scarf-skin’” (193-94). It seems somewhat

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44 From Chapman’s describing the “various kinds of Neuralgia: “Character of the pain experienced differs exceedingly in different cases, and is, in fact of almost every conceivable kind and degree: in some remarkable cases the sufferer seems to concentrate within the range of his or her experiences all the various forms of neuroalgie torment. The pains incident to dentition, the so-called “growing pains” of childhood and youth; the pains often preluding or accompanying the catamenia ... are examples of the more common and least severe forms of neuralgia” (2).
unusual that Shade would be cutting off the skin around his fingernails—with scissors, no less—and especially to be including the operation in his magnum opus. Scarfskin is the outermost layer of skin, usually referring to the skin around the cuticle, and the fact that Maud Shade was familiar with the term for the excess skin suggests that it was a fairly common occurrence. Thus it seems that in the fairly brief description of his aunt that appears in his poem, Shade details two of her traits [paralysis, skin growths around the fingers] that happen to be primary symptoms of tuberous sclerosis.

One primary objection to the insinuation of cerebral tumors in Maud Shade, as well as in John Shade, may be the clear evidence that neither suffered from a debilitating mental illness for most of their lives. Here it is significant to point out that the presence of cerebral growths does not necessarily result in severe mental defects, and even if the tumors do eventually manifest themselves psychologically, they may remain latent for extended periods of time. If the tumors grow slowly or grow in an area of the brain far removed from the cortex, they may never exhibit any mental symptoms\(^45\), and tumors may exist with symptoms lacking in any range from incomplete to total latency.\(^46\) Moreover, “The mental symptoms of brain tumor are naturally quite varied,” and resultant mental effects may range from dementia and progressive mental deterioration to, in some cases, “productiveness, flight of ideas, and some increased activity” (343). Thus it is possible that a brain tumor could afflict Shade without preventing his daily functions, and it is also feasible that growth of tuberous sclerosis could manifest itself in his

\(^45\) Emil Kraepelin and Allen Ross Diefendorf’s *Clinical Psychiatry: A Textbook for Students and Physicians* (1907): “In cerebral tumor all cases do not develop mental symptoms. Of 318 cases Gianelli discovered but 299 that developed a psychosis. If the cortex is not much involved or if the tumor is of slow growth, mental symptoms may not appear” (341).

\(^46\) In Mary Putnam Jacobi’s *Essays on Hysteria, Brain-Tumor, and Some Other Cases of Nervous Disease* (1888): “PARTS OF THE BRAIN IN WHICH TUMORS ARE MOST FREQUENTLY LATENT.—Complete latency implies absence of all symptoms; incomplete latency implies absence of focal symptoms only. The localities in which the latter condition is characteristically observed are also those in which tumors may most often be completely latent. . . Finally it is possible that in any portion of the brain a tumor may remain latent, provided it grows slowly enough” (130).
developmental stages and then become dormant—but cause some form of permanent mental alteration that triggers a similar physical reaction in later years.

While every detail of a cerebral sclerosis quasi-diagnosis cannot possibly be substantiated in full and thereby must remain theoretical, the textual clues that make the cerebral sclerosis supposition viable continue into two crucial name allusions—a literary technique Nabokov has been proven to employ with practically every name in the entire text. Among the multiple character parallels between figures from the worlds of Zembla and New Wye, as discussed by various scholars and later in this work, are Kinbote’s Baron Bland and Shade’s Dr. Sutton. Kinbote mentions Bland in his commentary to line 681, which immediately precedes the October 17th attack. Bland is the former keeper of the Zemblan treasure, who successfully hid the jewels from Russian spies during the Zemblan Revolution “before he jumped or fell from the North Tower” (C.681, 243). Kinbote’s description of “the gentle white haired Bland” calls to mind a similarly depicted figure, Dr. Sutton, whose house light Shade sees when he gazes at the night sky in the first canto (119). Sutton appears again in the final canto, as the glow of the setting sun catches in his windowpanes (986). Upon first reading, Kinbote’s commentary about the first Dr. Sutton reference seems perplexing: Dr. Sutton, he alleges, “is a recombination of letters taken from two names” of “two distinguished medical men, long retired from practice” who live on the same hill as Shade.

Kinbote continues his first note on Dr. Sutton by specifying each other place Sutton appears in the Commentary,\(^\text{47}\) which is an immediate indication of the character’s potential significance, and in the next occurrence, Kinbote mentions “ancient Dr. Sutton, a snowy-headed, perfectly oval little gentleman” (C.181, 160). The connection between Bland and Sutton, the two

\(^{47}\) Dr. Sutton appears on one instance undocumented by Kinbote: In the commentary to the haunted barn passage, “the ever-sagacious Dr. Sutton affirmed—on what authority I cannot tell—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” (C.347, 187).
mild, white-haired old men, can be discovered by returning to Kinbote’s “recombination” of two names from the original Sutton passage. Sir John Bland-Sutton (1855-1936) was a prominent surgeon whose published works primarily concern cancer; widely regarded as an authority on tumors, he composed encyclopedic references on the subject for a variety of medical textbooks (Gillam). In his *Tumors, Innocent and Malignant: Their Clinical Characters and Appropriate Treatment*, he comments specifically on the nature of cerebral glioma (158). In a somewhat abrupt interjection in the fourth canto, Shade says of Dr. Sutton, “The man must be—what? Eighty? Eighty-two?” (987). Dr. Bland-Sutton died at the age of 81.

In his commentary about the lives and deaths of his parents, Kinbote interjects a brief description of his English tutor in Zembla, the “admirable Mr. Campbell,” into his description of his mother (C.71, 104). Campbell appears in the Index as Walter Campbell, “an amiable gentleman with a mellow and rich mind; dead shot and champion skater; now in Iran,” with a reference not to the aforementioned passage but to Campbell’s appearance in the king’s escape passage (306). Like Bland and Sutton, Campbell also has a real-life corollary.

Any detailed research into cerebral sclerosis will undoubtedly unearth the work of Alfred Walter Campbell, the neurologist most prominently recognized for analysis of the disorder in its early history, who according to at least one source, went by his middle name Walter, rather than Alfred, Campbell. Performing his research at Rainhill Asylum in England, Campbell published a seminal study on the patients he observed entitled “Cerebral Sclerosis,” which has been cited in practically every scholarly publication on the disorder since. Originally published in a 1905 volume of *Brain*, Oxford’s journal of neurology, Campbell’s “Cerebral Sclerosis” contains commentary on the general nature of scleroses in the brain as well as clinical study on particular forms. The first form of cerebral sclerosis he describes is “tuberose sclerosis,” “one of

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48 *Founders of Neurology* biography courtesy of University of Illinois Department of Neurology and Rehabilitation.
the most extraordinary diseases with which the neuro-pathologist has to deal” (382).

Underscores the peculiarity of the disorder, he explains, “Not only are the potato-like (hence the name tuberose) masses of sclerosis in the brain unique in kind, but the accompanying affections of parts related neither to the brain nor to one another are as singular as they are difficult to explain” (382). After highlighting three primary signs of tuberose sclerosis\(^49\) and providing the investigative results of his own study of subjects with the disorder, Campbell refutes earlier explanations for tuberose sclerosis’ origins but ultimately concludes that any definitive answer for what causes the disorder is not possible given the limits of current knowledge of cell development.

The importance of determining what happened to Shade on the night of his fainting spell at the Crashaw Club is not only important because of Shade’s own contextual clues but also because it the event is given a significant correlation by Kinbote: “John Shade’s heart attack (Oct. 17, 1958) practically coincided with the disguised king’s arrival in America where he descended by parachute,” and he continues, “It had all been perfectly timed” (C.691, 246). Regardless of the specifics of the theory to which one holds, if the assumption is to be made that Zembla is a fiction—developed in any of a variety of methods by any of a variety of potential madmen or artists—then the assumption must also be made that Kinbote only begins to exist in a verified reality at the moment he lands in Baltimore. Until then he exists in a dream world, but as soon as he enters the world of New Wye, he must be accounted for in relation to Shade and other figures whose existences are to be trusted. The correlation of Kinbote’s verifiable existence with the event of Shade’s fainting fit—which he describes as, “And one night I died”—thus substantiates the notion that Kinbote was created through the fainting fit. And if Kinbote’s

\(^{49}\) According to Campbell’s research, signs are the presence of any range of “congenital mental weaknesses,” “convulsions, identical with those of ordinary idiopathic epilepsy,” and the rare skin affection “adenoma sebaceum” (383).
existence was somehow spurred by Shade’s mental defect, it follows that Shade is an
unconscious—or subconscious—creator.

Theory in practice

While numerous theorists have practically applied their Shadean theories to the world of
the text, the particulars of the subconscious Shadean theory require a new delineation that
assesses the practical implications of Shade’s subliminal rendering of Kinbote and Gradus.

As a young child, John Shade suffers from tuberous sclerosis, a particular form of the
rare disease cerebral sclerosis, a malady also suffered by his aunt and guardian. The affliction
triggers epileptic convulsions, during which Shade undergoes strange out-of-body experiences.
In his commentary to the fits, Kinbote explains, “It must have been with him a mild form of
epilepsy, a derailment of the nerves at the same spot, on the same curve of tracks, every day, for
several weeks, until nature repaired the damage” (C.162, 147). Shade’s brain does not repair but
bypasses the damage, as his nerves reroute around the cerebral tumors and his life proceeds
without any more epileptic instances—that is until October 17th, 1958, when he is suddenly
seized with a hysterical spell that resembles those of his childhood.

Weakening his power over his subconscious, the fit triggers the dissociation of an
element of Shade’s subliminal mind, a persona perhaps developed through somnambulic
experiences and embodied in an identity that calls itself Charles Kinbote. Kinbote’s narrative,
his interests and fixations, are expressions of Shade’s psyche, including elements that Shade
might not even know he knows. Kinbote is aware of Shade, but as is the case with most
dissociative identities, Shade as the conscious subject does not directly perceive his dissociated
self. He manages, however, to suppress the dissociated identity’s ability to act until July 21,
1959. Kinbote is also aware of the conscious Shade’s control, the shadow of Shade’s perception on his existence, which he manifests into the assassin Jakob Gradus. Kinbote interprets his dominance of Shade’s psyche on July 21 as an assassination, in which the transient third being, Gradus, effectively eliminates Shade’s psyche. The Kinbote subconscious is now the conscious presence in John Shade’s body, and he escapes with the poem to a cabin near the Shade’s vacation spot in Cedarn, Utana, now vacant for winter months.

This point brings up the first contention with Shademan theorizing: How can Shade, presumed to be dead, effectively hide in Cedarn and compose the commentary to his own work? One primary notion of resolution to this alleged illogic lies in the Foreword, in the nature of “good old Frank, my present publisher” (18). First, it is irrational by any hypothesis that the editor of *Pale Fire* would be trustworthy. No editor with any integrity or from a reputable organization would allow Kinbote to publish his work as a legitimate literary commentary, nor would one endorse the critical work of a deranged scholar like V. Botkin, who claims to be a king from a non-existent kingdom disguised as a non-existent professor. Clearly, Frank is not a particularly ethical intercessor. But the evidence that points distinctly to Shade and not to Botkin or another individual as commentator can be found in the Foreword itself. Kinbote seems to add one of Frank’s required changes without removing the editorial markup:

Frank has acknowledged the safe return of the galleys I had been sent here and has asked me to mention in my Preface—and this I willingly do—that I alone am responsible for any mistakes in my commentary. Insert before a professional. A professional proofreader has carefully rechecked the printed text . . . (18)

The “Insert before a professional” indicates that Kinbote has been directed to include this disclaimer, which suggests that the disclaimer can be attributed to Frank. Also supporting this
assumption is the inserted “and this I willingly do,” which seems to be an addition that Kinbote has interjected into an already-composed sentence. Coming from Frank, the sentence “Frank has acknowledged the safe return of the galleys . . . and has asked me to mention in my Preface...” suggests that Frank sees Kinbote’s Foreword as a Preface. Traditionally, if an author writes his own introduction to a text, it is called a preface, and if written by someone else it is titled as a foreword. Therefore, Frank’s labeling indicates that he sees the composer of the introductory element as the same writer of the poem: John Shade. As already established, Frank is not a particularly ethical businessman, which makes his acceptance of whatever Shade would choose to write—as long as he is specifically not implicated in the “mistakes” in the commentary—more feasible.

“on the dust of its husk”

*With no Providence the soul must rely on the dust of its husk, on the experience gathered in the course of corporeal confinement, and cling childishly to small-town principles, local by-laws, and a personality consisting mainly in the shadows of one’s own prison bars.* (C.549, 226-27)

So asserts the devoutly spiritual Kinbote, as he defends his belief in God to Shade. The “shadows of one’s own prison bars” calls to mind an anecdote Nabokov related after the release of *Pale Fire* “about an ape in the Paris Zoo, who after months of coaxing by scientists produced finally the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal, and this sketch . . . showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (*SO* 16). Despite its new outlet of expression, the ape relays what it knows. Like the animal conditioned to draw, Shade’s subconscious is coaxed out of its natural latency into a new expressive capacity—but ultimately, its source of creative nourishment
remains unchanged. Kinbote is an expression of Shade, not an independent being but a lens through which Shade’s mind is projected. As Kinbote gains supremacy, thus, his only source of material is obliterated: he is a projector without a film reel. Secluded in Cedarn, he must survive solely on “the dust of Shade’s husk,” the reminiscences of Shade he manages to tenuously grasp in his Cedarn hideout: “the experience gathered in the course of corporeal confinement.” As he reaches the end of his Commentary, Kinbote assesses his fate:

Yes, better stop. My notes and self are petering out. Gentleman, I have suffered very much, and more than any of you can imagine. I pray for the Lord’s benediction to rest on my wretched countrymen. My work is finished. My poet is dead. (C.1000, 300)

As he reaches the end of his work, the final entries of the Index, Kinbote expends the final remnants of the husk of Shade’s personality, and it becomes clear that he will soon escape the confines of his corporeal confinement.
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