In Canto Three of his poem John Shade (the poet in VN’s novel *Pale Fire*, 1962) describes his heart attack and quotes his doctor’s words, “just half a shade:”

And presently I saw it melt away:  
Though still unconscious, I was back on earth.  
The tale I told provoked my doctor's mirth.  
He doubted very much that in the state  
He found me in "one could hallucinate  
Or dream in any sense. Later, perhaps,  
but not during the actual collapse.  
No, Mr. Shade."  
                   "But, Doctor, I was dead!  
He smiled. "Not quite: just half a shade," he said. (ll. 720-728)

In his Commentary Kinbote writes:

Another fine example of our poet's special brand of combinational magic. The subtle pun here turns on two additional meanings of "shade" besides the obvious synonym of "nuance." The doctor is made to suggest that not only did Shade retain in his trance half of his identity but that he was also half a ghost. Knowing the particular medical man who treated my friend at the time, I venture to add that he is far too stodgy to have displayed any such wit. (note to Lines 727-728)

Shade’s mad commentator, Kinbote imagines that he is Charles the Beloved, the last self-exiled king of Zembla. In the first stanza of his last poem, *On this Day I Complete my Thirty-Sixth Year* (1824), Byron says that he cannot be beloved:

Tis time the heart should be unmoved,  
Since others it hath ceased to move:  
Yet, though I cannot be beloved,  
Still let me love!

In lines 7 and 8 of his poem *She Walks in Beauty* (1813) Byron uses the words “shade,” “ray” and “half:”

One shade the more, one ray the less,

Had half impaired the nameless grace

Which waves in every raven tress,

Or softly lightens o’er her face;

Where thoughts serenely sweet express,

How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

“One ray the less” brings to mind John Ray, Jr., in VN’s novel *Lolita* (1955) the author of the Foreword to Humbert Humbert’s manuscript. At its beginning HH calls Lolita “light of my life, fire of my loins” and mentions a trip of three steps that the tongue takes down the palate:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. (1.1)

One of the three main characters in *Pale Fire* is the killer Gradus, Shade’s murderer whose name means in Latin “step” and in Russian “degree.” At the beginning of VN’s novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) the narrator, Sebastian’s half-brother V., says that the temperature on the morning of Sebastian’s birth was twelve degrees below zero:

Sebastian Knight was born on the thirty-first of December 1899, in the former capital of my country. An old Russian lady who has for some obscure reason begged me not to divulge her name, happened to show me in Paris the diary she had kept in the past. So uneventful had those years been (apparently) that the collecting of daily details (which is always a poor method of self-preservation) barely surpassed a short description of the day's weather; and it is curious to note in this respect that the personal diaries of sovereigns – no matter what troubles beset their realms – are mainly concerned with the same subject. Luck being what it is when left alone, here I was offered something which I might never have hunted down had it been a chosen quarry. Therefore I am able to state that the morning of Sebastian's birth was a fine windless one, with twelve degrees (Reaumur) below zero… this is all, however, that the good lady found worth setting down. On second thought I cannot see any real necessity of complying with her anonymity. That she will ever read this book seems wildly improbable. Her name was and is Olga Olegovna Orlova – an egg-like alliteration which it would have been a pity to withhold. (Chapter One)

The characters of VN’s novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) include Oleg Orlov, a Soviet spy who secretly accompanies Vadim Vadimovich in his trip to Leningrad. St. Petersburg’s name in 1924-91, Leningrad brings to mind “Leningradus” (as Kinbote mockingly calls Gradus). A friend of Vadim’s daughter Bel (who was taken by her husband, Charlie Everett, to the Soviet Russia), Dora (a lame lady whom Vadim meets in Leningrad) tells Vadim that as a girl she dreamt of becoming a female clown, ‘Madame Byron’ or ‘Trek-Trek.” (5.2)

In *Lolita* John Ray’s Foreword is dated August 5, 1955. The name of Humbert Humbert’s first love, Annabel Leigh, seems to hint not only at E. A. Poe’s poem *Annabel Lee* (1849), but also at Byron’s half-sister (and mistress) Augusta Leigh and at Lady Byron (the poet’s wife who was nicknamed Annabella).

In the last stanza of his poem *Kak v Gretsiyu Bayron, o, bez sozhalen’ya…* (“Like Byron to Greece, oh, without regret…” 1928) G. Ivanov (the poet who attacked VN in the Paris émigré review *Numbers* #1, 1930) mentions *blednyi ogon’* (pale fire):

Как в Грецию Байрон, о, без сожаленья,  
Сквозь звёзды и розы, и тьму,  
На голос бессмысленно-сладкого пенья…  
— И ты не поможешь ему.

Сквозь звёзды, которые снятся влюблённым,  
И небо, где нет ничего,  
В холодную полночь — платком надушённым.  
— И ты не удержишь его.

На голос бессмысленно-сладкого пенья,  
Как Байрон за бледным огнём,  
Сквозь полночь и розы, о, без сожаленья…  
— И ты позабудешь о нём.

Byron died in Greece at the age of thirty-six. The philosopher Lev Shestov (1866-1938), whose penname comes from *shest’* (six), was twice Byron’s age when he died in Paris on Nov. 19, 1938. VN began writing his first English novel, TRLSK, in December of 1938, soon after Shestov’s death. The characters of TRLSK include Clare Bishop (Sebastian’s girlfriend). In his Commentary Kinbote several times mentions the Bishop of Yeslove (a fine town north of Onhava). The name of Zemblan capital, Onhava seems to hint at heaven. In his poem *The* *Giaour* (1813) Byron says:

Yes, Love indeed is light from heaven;  
      A spark of that immortal fire  
With angels shared, by Alla given,  
      To lift from earth our low desire. (ll. 1132-1135)

The list of Vadim’s books in LATH includes *Dr. Olga Repnin* (1946), a novel that corresponds to VN’s *Pnin* (1957). Professor Pnin also appears in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote mentions Prof. Pnin and Prof. Botkin in the same note of his Commentary:

Speaking of the Head of the bloated Russian Department, Prof. Pnin, a regular martinet in regard to his underlings (happily, Prof. Botkin, who taught in another department, was not subordinated to that grotesque "perfectionist"): "How odd that Russian intellectuals should lack all sense of humor when they have such marvelous humorists as Gogol, Dostoevski, Chekhov, Zoshchenko, and those joint authors of genius Ilf and Petrov." (note to Line 172)

Shade’s, Kinbote’s and Gradus’ “real” name seems to be Botkin. An American scholar of Russian descent, Professor Vsevolod Botkin went mad and became Shade, Kinbote and Gradus after the tragic death of his daughter Nadezhda (Hazel Shade of Kinbote’s Commentary). *Nadezhda* is Russian for “hope.” In his essay on Chekhov, *Tvorchestvo iz nichego* (“Creation from Nothing,” 1905), Shestov calls Chekhov *pevets beznadezhnosti* (a poet of hopelessness).

In *O Chekhove* (“On Chekhov”), the first memoir essay in his book *Na kladbishchakh* (“At Cemeteries,” 1921), Vasiliy Nemirovich-Danchenko compares Chekhov’s laughter to *luch v potyomkakh* (a ray in the dark):

Смеялся он редко, но когда смеялся, всем становилось весело, точно луч в потёмках.

In his Foreword John Ray mentions the caretakers of the various cemeteries:

For the benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the "real" people beyond the "true" story, a few details may be given as received from Mr. "Windmuller," of "Ramsdale," who desires his identity suppressed so that "the long shadow of this sorry and sordid business" should not reach the community to which he is proud to belong. His daughter "Louise," is by now a college sophomore, "Mona Dahl" is a student in Paris. "Rita" has recently married the proprietor of a hotel in Florida. Mrs. "Richard F. Schiller" died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest. "Vivian Darkbloom" has written a biography, "My Cue," to be published shortly, and critics who have perused the manuscript call it her best book. The caretakers of the various cemeteries involved report that no ghosts walk.

According to Kinbote, during his heart attack Shade was “half a ghost.” Gradus is also known as de Grey (Index to PF). May Gray was Byron’s nurse. “Mona Dahl” brings to mind Queen Disa, Duchess of Great Payn and Moan (the wife of Charles the Beloved). It seems that Queen Disa and Sybil Shade (the poet’s wife) are one and the same person (Sofia Botkin, born Lastochkin). In *Lolita* Humbert Humbert mentions his aunt Sybil:

My mother's elder sister, Sybil, whom a cousin of my father's had married and then neglected, served in my immediate family as a kind of unpaid governess and housekeeper. Somebody told me later that she had been in love with my father, and that he had lightheartedly taken advantage of it one rainy day and forgotten it by the time the weather cleared. I was extremely fond of her, despite the rigidity - the fatal rigidity - of some of her rules. Perhaps she wanted to make of me, in the fullness of time, a better widower than my father. Aunt Sybil had pink-rimmed azure eyes and a waxen complexion. She wrote poetry. She was poetically superstitious. She said she knew she would die soon after my sixteenth birthday, and did. Her husband, a great traveler in perfumes, spent most of his time in America, where eventually he founded a firm and acquired a bit of real estate. (1.2)

According to Shade, he was brought up by his aunt:

I was brought up by dear bizarre Aunt Maud,  
A poet and a painter with a taste  
For realistic objects interlaced  
With grotesque growths and images of doom.

She lived to hear the next babe cry. Her room  
We've kept intact. Its trivia create  
A still life in her style: the paperweight  
Of convex glass enclosing a lagoon,  
The verse book open at the Index (Moon,  
Moonrise, Moor, Moral), the forlorn guitar  
The human skull; and from the local *Star*  
A curio: *Red Sox Beat Yanks 5-4*  
*On Chapman's Homer*, thumbtacked to the door. (ll. 86-98)

*On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer* (1816) is a sonnet by Keats. The characters of Keats’ *King Stephen* (a fragment of a tragedy) include Queen Maud. 5 + 4 = 9. In its unfinished form Shade’s poem has 999 lines. It seems that, to be completed, Shade’s poem needs not only Line 1000 (identical to Line 1: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain”), but also a coda (Line 1001: “By its own double in the windowpane”). *Dvoynik* (“The Double”) is a short novel (1846) by Dostoevski and a poem (1909) by Alexander Blok. In Blok’s poem *Vozmezdie* (“Retribution,” 1910-21) Dostoevski appears as a character and says that the hero’s father resembles Byron. According to Kinbote, Zembla is a corruption of Semberland (a land of reflections, of “resemblers”). According to G. Ivanov, to his question “does a sonnet need a coda” Blok (the author of “The Twelve,” 1918) replied that he did not know what a coda is.

Alexey Sklyarenko