

Ilya Vinitsky

*YELLOW BLUE VASE*  
*OR I LOVE YOU:*  
VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S INTERLINGUAL MANIFESTO

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“Do you know Nabokov's pun? *Yellow Blue Vase*,” my colleague Yu.L. asked me when he found out that I was writing a book on Russian writers' interlingual play with declarations of love and hatred. “The one that he wrote on the chalkboard for American students? I think it was also an inside joke in his family, because I found it in his son Dmitri's letters to his parents.”

He was referring to the memoirs of one of Nabokov's students concerning a Russian language class that Nabokov taught at Wellesley College in 1947:

On the first day of class, we came into the room. There were only three of us. On his desk there was a yellow vase with blue flowers. He asked us what it was, and we said, 'Yellow blue vase,' of course. He said to us, “That is almost ‘I love you’ in Russian, and that is probably the most important phrase that I will teach you.”<sup>1</sup>

Brian Boyd relays this story in his book about Nabokov's American years.<sup>2</sup> Nabokov's pun is also reflected in his novel *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), in which the young girl Percy de Prey wears

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Breasted and Jordan Noëlle. “Vladimir Nabokov at Wellesley.” *Wellesley Magazine*, Summer 1971, p. 25. This is the memoir of Nabokov's student Jean Handke Proctor.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton, 1991, p. 122.

“yellow-blue Vass frocks.” Later, in the novel *Transparent Things* (1978), Nabokov offers an additional lyric-orthopedic homophone, “ya lyublyu tebya” — “yellow blue tibia.”

Maria Kager has shown that Nabokov’s bilingual joke first appears in a September 18, 1941 letter to Edmund Wilson, along with another homophonic wordplay that also finds a place in Nabokov’s work: “This reminds me of: ‘поваръ вашъ Илья на боку’ = ‘pauvres vaches, il y en beaucoup’ [poor cows, there are too many], or the one I invented myself: я люблю вас = yellow-blue vase.”<sup>3</sup> As Kager notes, the Russian half of the adage was included in *Ultima Thule* (1939).<sup>4</sup> For his part, Andrew Field observes that, in Nabokov’s view, grammar “could be driven in with a hammer of whimsy.”<sup>5</sup> Field refers to a letter addressed to George Gessen from 1943, in which Nabokov describes how he is preparing to teach Russian to Wellesley students on the basis of the “interlingual association” principle. Field comments:

Thus the phrase *ya lyublyu vas* (I love you) is made to stand with yellow-blue vase, and *thank you (blagodaryu)* is paired with *blackguard you*. Whatever this creative method may have done for retention, it must have added something interesting to the pronunciation of his students.<sup>6</sup>

In studying the history of successful witticisms, wordplays, and memes it is extremely difficult to determine who first lit the figurative fuse. These popular jokes were ubiquitous, and identifying their authors is much like grabbing the devil by the tail. (On this point, one of my graduate students began his dissertation about Gogol’s demonology with the sentence, “The goal of this work is to find all of Gogol’s devils;” he didn’t find them all, but he did defend the dissertation). As is evident in Nabokov’s letters, he himself was proud of this propaedeutic pun. But did he actually coin it? And if so, when?

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Karlinsky, ed. *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters...* Los Angeles, 2001, p. 54. “This brings to mind: ‘povar vash Il’ia na bogu’ — ‘pauvres vashes, il y en a beaucoup,’ or my coinage: *ia liubliu vas* — ‘yellow-blue vase’” (*Zvezda*. 1996. №11, p. 115).

<sup>4</sup> Maria Kager. “A Search for the Viscous and Sawdust: (Mis)pronunciation in Nabokov’s American Novels.” *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 37, No. 1 (Fall 2013), p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Field. *Nabokov, His Life in Part*. New York, 1978, p. 248.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Field. *Nabokov, His Life in Part*. New York: Viking Press, 1978, p. 248.

## 2.

As far as I know, scholars have overlooked the fact that this joke first appeared, albeit in a slightly different version, in a letter that Nabokov wrote to his wife from London, dated April 13, 1939. He congratulated her on their upcoming wedding anniversary (“My love! My Angel! Congratulations to you: 14 years!”). He signed this letter: “Yellow blue bus, Ia liubliu vas. Ia obozhaiu vas” [“I love you. I adore you.”] (He even managed a rhyme here). This punny love declaration was closely linked to the writer’s lyric biography, and it seems to have entered into the couple’s “domestic lexicon.”

But again, did Nabokov definitely coin this wordplay in 1939, and then revise it later, substituting the clunky “bus” for the more felicitous “vase” (pronounced with a British accent)? No, he did not. Nabokov’s joke is quite old; in fact, by the 1930s, it had already been circulating in published fiction.

We can find the pun in the sketch “The First Meeting (from a Diary)” (“*Pervyi miting. (Iz zapisnoi knizhki)*”) authored by a certain pseudonymous “Sh.” The sketch was published in the March 1907 issue of the journal *Russian Wealth (Russkoe bogatstvo)*. The mysterious “Sh.” discusses English schoolboys and how their knowledge of life is drawn from humor magazines, pulp novels, and childhood ditties.<sup>7</sup> One of the schoolboys, the Irish lad Mackey (Мэкки), distinguishes himself by his “ability to quickly find [linguistic] similarities;” “he insists that Russian is very similar to English, but the words simply have a different meaning:”

- <...> как сказать по-русски: «I love you»? <...>

- Я люблю вас.

- Иелло блу басс (*Yellow blue bass, т. е. желто-синий омнибус*). Это совсем по-английски.

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<sup>7</sup> Sh. “Pervyi miting. (Iz zapisnoi knizhki), *Russkoe bogatstvo*, 1907, No. 3, pp. 110-126). The sketch’s author cites a translation of a famous “Mother Goose” ditty. Mother Goose asks: “What are little boys made of? Snips, snails / And puppy-dogs’ tails.” Almost half a century later, Samuil Marshak would translate this ditty in his poem “On Boys and Girls.” The children’s poet substituted green frogs in place of dogs’ tails: “...Iz ulitok, rakushek / I zelenykh liagushek.” (“...From snails, shells. And from green frogs.”)

- А как будет: «How are you?» Как ваше здоровье?
- Уош из драй (Wash is dray, т.е. белье высохло) (p. 114).

There is an obvious error in the English translation of the Russian “equivalent” love declaration: assuming there is no typo in the third line of the excerpt, the author was not referring to an omnibus vehicle, but rather to a yellow and blue bass fish, a type of perch.<sup>8</sup> Nabokov’s “school bus” joke must have come from precisely this tradition of schoolboy humor.<sup>9</sup> Echoes of this joke also appear in contemporary Russian language teaching manuals, employed in both the Anglo-American and Russian contexts. A resonance is even present in the title of an English children’s book with a Russian character: *Yellow Blue Bus Means I Love You* by Morse Hamilton (1994).

We can in fact identify the direct source of Nabokov’s borrowing. The pseudonymous “Sh” (Ш) was a popular writer, a correspondent for *Russian News* (*Russkie vedomosti*) and *Russian Wealth* (*Russkoe bogatstvo*), and a former populist (*narodnik*): Isaak Vladimirovich Shklovsky (1865–1935). Isaak Shklovsky was the uncle of the famous Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, and he was also a close acquaintance of the Nabokov family. Shklovsky (also known by the pseudonym Dioneo, borrowed from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*) was one of the progenitors of the “English theme” in Russian literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He lived in London for many years and was the leader of a literary-political salon comprised of repatriates. (The young poets Kornei Chukovskii and Samuil Marshak participated in some of these salon gatherings).<sup>10</sup> Nabokov, apparently, knew Shklovsky. Nabokov published his first poems composed abroad in *The Future Russia* (*Griadushchaia Rossiia*), where Shklovsky also published. In the same letter from April 13, 1939, in which the yellow blue bus is mentioned, Nabokov refers to a meeting with Shklovsky’s

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<sup>8</sup> “Bass” qua voice part simply does not fit here as a possible meaning.

<sup>9</sup> In my Soviet school days, students enjoyed reworking a line from Sting’s song “Russians,” sung to a theme from Sergei Prokofiev’s *Lieutenant Kijé* (Tynianov’s title here is also a pun). “Mister Khrushchev said, we shall bury you...” We compassionately crooned, singing, “Mister KhrUshchev sed, vyshib BeriU” («Мистер ХрУщев сед, вышиб Берию» — “Mister Khrushchev said, we shall bury you”). Sting, in this none-too-clever song, sang in a marked American way, “We WILL bury you.” But we unconsciously corrected the lyrics following more formal British English conventions and for the sake of the pun (“we shall” — «вышиб»).

<sup>10</sup> Concerning I.V. Shklovsky’s activities, see: Anna Vaninskaya. “Fact or Fiction? Isaak Shklovsky, Semyon Rapoport and the English Letter” in *London Through Russian Eyes, 1896-1914: An Anthology of Foreign Correspondence*, edited by Anna Vaninskaya. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK, 2022, pp. 6-15. Also, on Shklovsky-Dioneo, see: N. A. Gromova, T. S. Pozdniakova. *Shklovskie. Semeinye khroniki*. Moscow, 2025.

widow, Zinaida Davydovna, who was an admirer of Nabokov's work. Many years later, Gleb Struve would forward a letter to Nabokov from the seriously ill Shklovskaja in Paris; dated February 3, 1942, the letter bore the epigraph "Europe is so boring without Sirin!"<sup>11</sup> I should also mention that one of the main characters from the 1907 story is the simultaneously dreamy and serious Russian boy Yasha-Jimmy. Yasha-Jimmy, unfortunately, has a difficult to pronounce surname, so his classmates anoint him "Scotch Whisky." I suspect that this is a distortion of "Shklovsky," and it's possible that the prototype for this character was Isaak Shklovsky's son.<sup>12</sup> (As an aside, at a conference in Tallinn in the now ancient year of 1988, my colleague's surname was falsely rendered as "Vi Nizkij," an unintentional (?) mistake which greatly perturbed him).

Nabokov didn't invent the second pedagogical pun about Ilya the cook either. More precisely, he didn't *entirely* invent it. The joke, "Ilya na boku" ["Ilya on his side"] ("il y en à beaucoup") may be found in a review of Stepan Shevyrev's book published in *Library for Reading [Biblioteka dlia chteniia]* in 1846. This is the same joke that Mikhail Gnesin used in a comic piece entitled "Ob'iavlenie," where the joke was connected with the figure of Goncharov's Ilya Oblomov: "A Note in Honor of *Oblomov*. Il'y en a beaucoup d' *Ilya na boku*" (that is, "it's all just Ilya lying on his side"). I think that the even the first part of the pun could also derive from schoolboy humor. Of course, Nabokov's letter to Gessen includes the very funny pun, "blagodariu — blackguard you" (in Russian, "vy negodjai!", or, as Nabokov translated this English word, "kham"),<sup>13</sup> which was in use since the end of the nineteenth century. It's likely that David Ker (1842–1914), the English journalist, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The New York Herald* correspondent, as well as English language instructor in Russia, was the first to mention this pun in his story "How a Sailor Rode with the Czar: A Forecastle Yarn," printed in *The Sailors' Magazine and Seamen's*

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<sup>11</sup> "He's so witty, original, lively, smart, interesting; after him [Nabokov], it's nauseating to read anything else," Z.D. Shklovskaja wrote. "Do you know his address? I would love to write to him, it would be easier, seeing as there's no one to share [him] with, for everyone looks at him from an English point of view, and you know what that means. They translated his *Invitation to a Beheading* like [Gogol's] *Viy*, but it's impossible to explain, they won't understand. After all, you need to read and understand Sirin 'between the lines,' to feel, penetrate, and breathe in the atmosphere with which he surrounds his works, but the English don't immerse themselves in this atmosphere, they need something tangible and precise, not something almost imperceptible." (Struve, 103, 13). Vera Nabokov answered Struve on December 7, 1967: "V.V. is very touched by the excerpt from Z.D. Shklovskaja's letter and he very much thanks you." See *Russkaia literatura*, 2007, No. 1, p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Vaninskaia kindly informed me that the Shklovsky couple had a son, George Edward Shklovsky (1897–1951), who lived his entire life in Great Britain.

<sup>13</sup> In *Hill's Modern Pronouncing Dictionary of the English and Russian Languages from 1919*, the word "blackguard" is translated as "сорванец, головорез, отчаянный, негодяй" (p. 40) and "паршивец" (p. 387).

*Friend*<sup>14</sup> and *Harper's Young People* in 1881. The story's protagonist is the sailor Old Jack Hawkins, who found himself in a strange predicament during his visit to "Rooshia," owing to the phonetic overlap between Russian and English words:

When you want to say "Thank you" you've got to sing out "Blackguard are you" which don't sound purlite nohow. Then they call a speech a "wretch" and a visitor, a "ghost" (the last sort o' visitor I should like) and instead of "Indeed!" they say "Sam Daly"; and some o' their own names are things like 'Comb his hair off' and 'Blow my nose off.' Altogether it's a queer, twistified kind o' lingo, jist what you might expect from foreign lubbers. What riled me most when I fust went over was that everybody kep on callin' me a matrass, and I'd punched two or three fellers' heads for it afore I found out that 'matrass' [matross] is their word for a sailor. Jist think o' that now.<sup>15</sup>

A similar anecdote is recounted in Henry Harrison's humorous publication from 1894,<sup>16</sup> along with a witty review of *Hill's Modern Pronouncing Dictionary of the English and Russian Languages* (London, 1919), compiled by the professors A. P. Rozhdestvensky (B.Sc., Moscow) and A. M. Shapiro (B.-es-L., B.-es-Sc., Paris):

We recall what a witty linguist told us: Instead of trying to spell Russian words with numerous consonants on the plea that Russian is unpronounceable, English students could find the sounds required in their own familiar tongue if they only knew how to look for them. Some comical illustrations will explain our meaning:

(1) I thank: *благодарю* (blagaudaru) should be pronounced blackguard are you.

(2) Gloves: *перчатки* (percatke) should be pronounced pair chat key.

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<sup>14</sup> *The New York Herald*, 1881. Vol. LIII, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> *Harper's Young People*. 1881. Vol. 2, p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> "The Russian equivalent of 'I thank' sounds very suspiciously like 'Blackguard you!' and the word 'brat,' properly 'brother,' is also used as a minor term of endearment" (*Journal of Education*, 1894, p. 711).

(3) Excessively: *чрезвычайно* (crezvicajno) should be pronounced cherries with china.

A footnote is appended to this list: “the real words are ‘blagodareu,’ ‘retsch,’ ‘guest,’ ‘f’samomdalay,’ ‘Komisaroff,’ ‘Lomonosoff.’”<sup>17</sup>

Nabokov’s bilingual puns, including “yellow blue bus,” arise precisely out of this linguo-comic tradition, which represents a peculiar image of Russian speech as perceived by anglophone listeners. But is it possible that Nabokov’s individual contribution to this love pun is the “vase,” which replaced the “yellow blue bus”? (London buses were painted in those colors).<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, I think it’s highly unlikely, and for the following reasons...

### 3.

In July 1942, when American society was riveted by the U.S.S.R., local papers published an article by the Associated Press’ new Moscow correspondent, Eddie Gilmore (a future Pulitzer Prize winner): “You, Too, Can Speak Russian by Eddie Gilmore, Wide World Features.” Gilmore specified the article’s place of composition — the city of Kuybyshev (now, Samara), which was then the unofficial capital of the U.S.S.R. Gilmore describes how easy it is to learn Russian through immersion into the language’s essential nature and by using one’s linguistic imagination (“Just jump into the middle of a lot of Russians and speak or starve to death”). More specifically, Gilmore, a follower of another American linguistic *bon vivant*, Max Eastman (who thought that the best way to learn Russian was snuggling up to Russian beauties in the bedsheets), tells a joke about a yellow blue vase:

### LOVE IN BLOOM

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<sup>17</sup> *Proceedings of Anglo-Russian Literary Society* (October, November, and December). 1919. No. 86, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup> This color combination was canonized by Alexander Blok in relation to different classes of train coaches (see “On the Railway,” 1910).

“I love you” is the simplest thing to say in Russia. You just say “yellow blue vase,” pronouncing vase as the British do – “vasz.”

He supplements this example with additional comical cognates that appeared in comic strips published in the same issue.



The story of the yellow blue vase soon became a part of Gilmore’s biographical legend. The forty-year-old American fell in love with the “Bolshoi Theater ballerina” Tamara Chernysheva in Moscow. According to the memoirs of M. Ulanovskaia, Tamara was a pretty “Lolita-type” girl, not even 16 years old, who, according to slanderous rumors, “had been in all of the beds” of those foreign [male] guests in the Metropole Hotel as an agent of the Soviet security services (p. 106). After long tribulations, Gilmore obtained permission (ostensibly through the mediation of the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Gromyko) to marry Tamara and emigrate from the



U.S.S.R. In a later article, Gilmore wrote that exactly this bilingual phrase was key to his courtship of Tamara, and he advised other Americans to use it more often when conversing with Russian women.<sup>19</sup> In the article “Gilmore Learns Russian Without Books,” (1950), which describes his playful approach to language learning, Gilmore claims that:

[s]ince he mastered the “yellow blue vase” gambit of Russian grammar, Eddy Lanier Gilmore has been getting along in flowery with the thorny language of the Soviets. <...> “Learning Russian Can Be Fun” is the title of the article by Gilmore <...> Gilmore picked up the “yellow blue vase” expression in his early days in the USSR. His knowledge of the language, then was strictly from *Nichevo*. “I learned it very soon (and without the use of teacher or books),” he said, “I learned that if one said ‘yellow blue vase’ and pronounced the vase as the British do, giving it a *vahse* sound, you were getting very basic. PEOPLE UNDERSTAND. “Yellow blue vase, yellow blue vase. What could be easier?”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gilmore recounts how he fell in love with his wife in his book *Me and My Russian Wife* (Garden City, New York, 1954). He also describes in detail his interest in foreigners visiting the U.S.S.R. during the Great Patriotic War, as well as his relationships with women of the night (such as the darling Lolita in the Metropole Hotel, whose pronunciation of English words reminded him of Greta Garbo, the actress Valia, who wore wonderful Estonian lingerie unknown in the Soviet Union, and other women). An American officer working in Moscow introduced him to the young Tamara. Their first meeting produced an indelible impression on the middle-aged Gilmore: “She came walking towards us out of the cobalt-blue evening, an average-sized girl with the biggest, brownest eyes I’d ever seen. Her hair was brown two, and it hung long and thick over her trim shoulders. Her nose was turned up, her lips were full and her figure would make you throw rocks at the rest of the girls. Tamara’s ankles were extremely thin, but there were muscles in the calves of her legs, the muscles that ballet dancers develop. She had very long eyelashes over those wonderful eyes, and if you’ll pardon me for being a bit sloppy, she was the cutest thing I’d ever seen. And that still goes” (p. 105). Gilmore invited Tamara to the Aragvi restaurant, where they listened to passionate Caucasian songs, and their food was served by a waiter who they nicknamed “Dostoevsky” for his “Alesha Karamazov” eyes. This romantic legend is cited in shortened form in the Congressional Record from October 10, 1967: “Gilmore met Tamara on a blind date in Moscow. It was love at first sight. Years later he remembered every detail of that night, the dishes of the lavish dinner they ate and the haunting music of ‘Two Guitars.’ The Russian secret police harassed Tamara and her family and refused to permit the marriage until the late Wendell Wilkie, American unofficial good will ambassador to Moscow, interceded directly with Stalin in the midst of the war. Even after their marriage the secret police annoyed Tamara. Once they took her off the street and talked to her all day, urging her to divorce Gilmore. ‘I told them they could do with me what they wanted to,’ she sobbed to her husband, ‘but I’d never divorce the man I love and the father of my children.’” (*Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates...* Vol. 113, p. 21, p. 283-84). Tamara Gilmore received American citizenship in 1954, and in 1956, she played “Miss Kovalevsky” in the film *Anastasia* (directed by Anatole Litvak, with Ingrid Bergman in the starring role).

<sup>20</sup> *The Marshall News Messenger*. April 27, 1950, p. 11.

I should mention in passing that Gilmore introduced the characterful Russian word “zhopa” (a vulgarism for “ass”) into the English language in *Me and My Russian Wife*: “I’m a hero of the Soviet Union, — the vacationer yells to his wife in Gilmore’s translation — and who are you? You’re a *zhopa!*”<sup>21</sup> Isaak Shklovsky’s “Mackey” could propose the following mnemonic device in English: “Joe Pa.” Admittedly, this homophonic phrase would be very similar to the English-language moniker of the famous Soviet dictator.



Eddie and Tamara Gilmore in America



Tamara Gilmore in the film *Anastasia* (1956)

It is theoretically possible that Gilmore learned this English “formula” for expressing Russian love from Nabokov, or perhaps from one of his Wellesley students (although Nabokov began teaching Russian there later, after Gilmore’s trips to Soviet Russia). But more likely, Gilmore heard this “school joke” from either a fellow newspaperman, a Soviet translator, or perhaps he was already familiar with the phrase even before his trip to Russia. In the cited article, he alludes to his “old professor” who said: “that’s enough for one lesson.”<sup>22</sup>

The fact that this pun was fairly ubiquitous in the 1900s and 1910s is evidenced by the Wing-Commander Maurice Jenks, who served in the North Persia Force in Baku in August 1919.

<sup>21</sup> Eddy Gilmore. *Me and My Russian Wife*. Garden City, 1954, p. 253. Gilmore explains the word’s meaning a bit earlier in the book, in his account about a monstrous typo in a Soviet publication (p. 246; perhaps “zhopa” in place of the name “Zhora?”). Gilmore’s papers are archived in Syracuse University: “Eddy Lanier King Gilmore Papers An inventory of his papers at Syracuse University” <[https://library.syracuse.edu/digital/guides/g/gilmore\\_elk.htm](https://library.syracuse.edu/digital/guides/g/gilmore_elk.htm)>

<sup>22</sup> His teacher Madame Sophia Tchchova, as well as a translator called Sam, are both mentioned in *Me and My Russian Wife*.

The British scholar Anna Reid quotes his memoirs in her book about Western interventions in the Russian Civil War. British soldiers in that period were loving life, drinking wine, singing songs and conversing with local beauties using this “yellow blue vase:” “Soldiers used ‘Yellow-blue vase’ for *Ya lyublyu vas* – ‘I love you’ – and in anecdote at least turned down a caviar ration, complaining that the blackberry jam tastes salty.”<sup>23</sup> The same joke was also popular among English residents of Shanghai in the 1920s. In general, the history of such pun-based “cognates” is closely linked not only to the school environment but also to the military sphere.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.

To his credit, Nabokov managed to give this old joke, which played a special role in his life, a new synesthetic and symbolic meaning. According to the memoirs of a Wellesley alumna, Nabokov told a small group of female students to observe a yellow vase with blue flowers placed on his desk (a sort of realization or aesthetic materialization of the pun). He then said: “That is almost ‘I love you’ in Russian, and that is probably the most important phrase that I will teach you.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Nabokov claimed this bilingual pun as his own; it exemplified his signature style and linguistic worldview, and it even transformed into a lyrical manifesto. This was a punny manifesto that liberated, in accordance with Sigmund Freud’s theories, creative (erotic) energy and united through the lips two tongues, two languages, two cultures, and, at a minimum, two modes of perception (sonic and chromatic). To paraphrase the famous Polish motto, this was a *yellow-blue* banner of “our and your phonetic freedom.”

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<sup>23</sup> Anna Reid. *A Nasty Little War: The Western Intervention into the Russian Civil War*. Hachette, 2023 (cited in: [https://books.google.com/books?id=56jCEAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=A+Nasty+Little+War:+The+Western+Intervention&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks\\_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwit-d2GgsSMAxXcKfKfHXPWNfYQ6AF6BAGEEAM#v=onepage&q=A%20Nasty%20Little%20War%3A%20The%20Western%20Intervention&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=56jCEAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=A+Nasty+Little+War:+The+Western+Intervention&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwit-d2GgsSMAxXcKfKfHXPWNfYQ6AF6BAGEEAM#v=onepage&q=A%20Nasty%20Little%20War%3A%20The%20Western%20Intervention&f=false)). Jenks recalls: “A favourite expression was “yellow-blue vase” which turned out to be their version of ‘ya lubliu vas’ or ‘I love you.’” (I am grateful to Anna Reid for her valuable reference).

<sup>24</sup> A similar pun appeared in a recent episode of the television series *The White Lotus* on HBO. A muscular Russian man makes a toast: “За любовь!” (“To Love!”), which is immediately “translated” by an intoxicated American actress and her friend as “Shia LaBeouf”—the name of the controversial actor who famously portrayed the manly Jérôme Morris in Lars von Trier’s popular erotic film *Nymphomaniac*.

See: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2044666082711788> (accessed March 31, 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Breasted and Jordan Noëlle. “Vladimir Nabokov at Wellesley,” p. 25.



Vladimir Nabokov and wife, Vera, with Wellesley College students in 1942.

Photo credit: Wellesley College Archives

Additionally, the color combination of yellow and blue occupies a conspicuous position in Nabokov's writings and self-presentation, as noted in Nabokov scholarship.<sup>26</sup> Andrew Field has detailed how Nabokov brought to life these provocative "parakeet-esque" colors in the "birdlike" pseudonym *Sirin*. To quote Nabokov's self-description, "I saw *Sirin* with an "s" being a very brilliant blue, a light blue, the "i" golden, the "r" a wriggly black, and the "n" yellow. <...> I thought it was a glamorous, colorful word."<sup>27</sup> The novel *The Gift* famously begins with the appearance of a yellow "furgon" (a "van" in English translation) with blue lettering — this is the

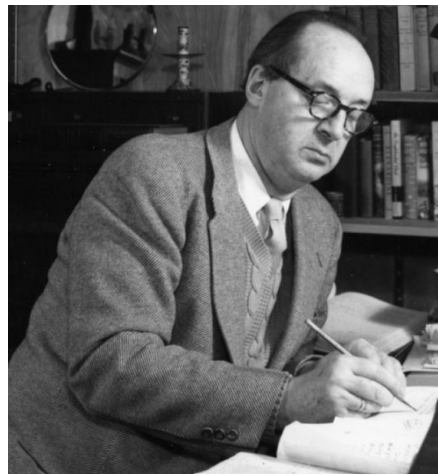
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<sup>26</sup> Leona Toker. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*. Ithaca, 2016. p. 170. Jay Edelnant connects the "yellow-blue matchbox" mentioned in *Ada*, along with the blue and yellow colors present at the lovers' breakfast in the Baugenaudier bower, to the "yellow blue vase." Jay Edelnant. "The Yellow Brick Road of Nabokov's *Ada*." *Russian Literature Triquarterly*. 1991. № 24. p. 146.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Field. Op. Cited. p. 149.

first intrusion of “I love you” into Nabokov’s lyric novel, and at the same time, it is Sirin’s colorful self-portrait.<sup>28</sup>

These colors reappear in the description of the wallpaper in the protagonist’s bedroom, and they are repeated multiple times throughout *Ada*. One of Nabokov’s students remembers how the writer would come into class at Cornell in a blue sweater and a yellow tie tucked into his V-necked shirt.<sup>29</sup> This vibrant, playful image of the artist not only contrasts with that of the gray, serious academic, but, as Stacy Schiff noted in her book *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)*,<sup>30</sup> it is also a sort of personification of the multicolored, sweet-voiced mythical bird of the “Ich-liebe-dich species” (from Boris Pasternak’s interlingual pun “of the breed, ‘I-love-you’: “люблю вас” – “liebe dich” – “lebedi,” which means “swans,” in Russian). Furthermore, it can be read as a coded visual declaration of the key Russian emotive phrase that hides in plain sight in English speech.<sup>31</sup>



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<sup>28</sup> Cf. the eroticized description of this method of travel: “[...] a moving van, very long and very yellow, hitched to a tractor that was also yellow, with hypertrophied rear wheels and a shamelessly exposed anatomy, pulled up in front of Number Seven Tannenberg Street, in the west part of Berlin. The van’s forehead bore a star-shaped ventilator. Running along its entire side was the name of the moving company in yard-high blue letters, each of which (including a square dot) was shaded laterally with black paint: a dishonest attempt to climb into the next dimension.” See, Vladimir Nabokov. *The Gift*. Trans. Michael Scammell and Vladimir Nabokov. New York, 1963, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> “[H]e typically layered a blue sweater over a salmon-colored shirt set off with a yellow necktie, its ends tucked recalcitrantly into the V-neck of the sweater.” (Peter Klem. *Vladimir Nabokov: Lecturers on Literature*. Ed. by Fredson Bowers. *The Bloomsbury Review*. Vol. 1. 1981, p. 9).

<sup>30</sup> “...he was almost the walking incarnation of the creative writer trying to break out of the professorial straitjacket.” Stacy Schiff. *Véra: Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov*. New York, 2011, p. 182. Jane Grayson. *Vladimir Nabokov: Overlook Illustrated Lives*. Woodstock, 2002, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> By way of association, I recall a Russian poet who was teaching a course in the U.S. on the Russian avantgarde: he endeared himself to his graduate students by consistently using the mysterious word combination “yellow blues” to refer to Mayakovsky’s yellow shirt; the students took this as a sign of their professor’s enthusiastic attitude toward the author of “About This” / “Pro eto.”

As my colleague Yu.L. has observed, the family pun “yellow blue vase” was passed on to Vladimir and Vera’s son, Dmitri, who also possessed synesthetic abilities, just like his parents. My colleague helpfully supplied a copy of the Dmitri Nabokov letter pictured below. Note both the code phrase and a drawing of a vase with flowers:



Courtesy: Houghton Library, Harvard University

...Ah, if I only I were someone other than the gray and morose university professor that I am. What if instead I were a daring director at the Metropolitan Opera? Then I would suggest to an American Lensky that, when performing his famous aria from Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* (“I love you Olga, / I looooooove you...”), he should present to Olga a yellow vase with blue romantic flowers, a secret Nabokovian commentary! But alas, I’m dull and lazy, just like Ilya lying on his side.

*Translated by Benjamin Musachio*

