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WE MUST LIVE, *BUT* WE MUST NOT REMEMBER...:  
THE VERTINSKY-BLOKH  
POLEMICAL CODE IN AND AROUND  
NABOKOV'S *PNIN*

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*Introduction*

In an article published in 2019, I investigated several literary, historical, and emotional sources for the characters and themes of *Pnin* (1957), Vladimir Nabokov's third American novel and one of the first American novels about both the texture of exile and the memory of the Shoah.<sup>1</sup> I argued for the centrality of the life and literary legacy of the poet and medievalist Raisa Blokh (1898-1943)<sup>2</sup> in the composition of *Pnin*.

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Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are my own literal translations.

<sup>1</sup> Maxim D. Shrayer, "Raisa Blokh as an Historical, Literary and Emotional Source for Nabokov's *Pnin*," *Skreshcheniia sudeb. Literarische und kulturelle Beziehungen zwischen Russland und dem Westen. A Festschrift for Fedor B. Poljakov*, ed. Lazar Fleishman, Stefan Michael Newerkla, and Michael Wachtel, Stanford Slavic Studies Vol. 49 (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 619-656.

<sup>2</sup> A partial bibliography of Fedor Poljakov's foundational publications on Blokh: "Der steinerne Boden des Exils": Materialien zu Leben und Werk des Dichterpaars Michail Gorlin und Raisa Bloch," in *Slavistische Forschungen. In memoriam Reinhold Olesch*, ed. Angelika Lauhus and Bodo Zelinski (Köln-Weimar-Wien: Bohlau Verlag, 2005), 219-234; "Tragicheskaiia i neuskupimaia sud'ba": Svidetel'stva o gibeli Mikhaila Gorlina," in *Avoti. Trudy po balto-rossiiskim otosheniim i ruskoi kul'ture. V chest' 70-letiiia Borisa Ravdina*, ed. Irina Belobrov'tseva, Aurika Meimre, and Lazar Fleishman. Part II (Stanford: Stanford Slavic Studies, 2012), 212-233; "Kak uzhasno borot'sia odnoi so svoimi stikhami...": Nachalo literaturnoi deiatel'nosti Raisy Blokh v Berline," *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch/Vienna Slavic Yearbook* 2 (2014): 222-245. Other important studies of Blokh include: T.P. Voronova, "Raisa Blokh — russkaia poetessa i istorik zapadnogo srednevekov'ia (iz perepiski s O.A. Dobiash-Rozhdestvenskoi)," in *Problemy*

Specifically, I unearthed a number of connections between the historical Raisa Blokh, who was murdered in Auschwitz, and the fictional Mira Belochkin, whose in the novel dies in what Nabokov labeled as “Buchenwald,” but what in the context of the early American 1950s served as a “composite image of a Nazi concentration and death camp.” Finally, I demonstrated that the creator of *Pnin*, who in 1928 unfavorably reviewed Blokh’s first collection of poetry and deemed it to be “permeated with [Anna] Akhmatova’s coldish perfume,” reanimated the theme of imitative poetry by splitting the historical Raisa Blokh into two female émigré characters, Mira Belochkin and Liza Bogolepov. In giving Mira, Pnin’s dead beloved, “Blokh’s martyrdom but not her literary ambitions and giving Pnin’s ex-wife Liza, the [novel’s] occasional antisemite, an aura of Akhmatova’s émigré epigones,” Nabokov both memorialized Blokh and added his comments to the ever-growing body of works fixated—*pace* Adorno—on poetry “nach Auschwitz.”

In the judgment of Brian Boyd, Nabokov’s finest biographer, “[o]f all Nabokov’s novels, *Pnin* seems the most amusing, the most poignant, the most straightforward.”<sup>3</sup> While serving as a sequel to my previous investigations of the sources of Nabokov’s *Pnin*, the present paper also continues to interrogate—and challenge—the notion of the “straightforwardness” of the novel’s compositional structure and system of references. It is my hypothesis that the novel’s theme of memory and (un)remembrance polemically engages Raisa Blokh’s “Prinesla sluchainaia molva...” (“Chance speech was carried over on the air...,” 1932), a lyrical poem that was turned into a song, popularized and brought into the Russian—and Soviet—cultural mainstream by the famous Russian chansonnier Alexander Vertinsky.

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*istochnikovedcheskogo izucheniia istorii russkoi i sovetskoi literatury. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, ed. V.N. Sazhin (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennaia publichnaia biblioteka imeni M.E. Saltykova-Shchedrina, 1989), 54-85; Viktor Leonidov, “Predislovie,” in Raisa Blokh, *Zdes’ shumiat chuzhie goroda...*, ed. Viktor Leonidov (Moscow: Izograf; Dom-muzei Mariny Tsvetaevoi, 1996), 3-18; Viktor Kel’ner, “‘Zdes’ shumiat chuzhie goroda i chuzhaia pleshchetsia voda...’ (O poetesse Raisa Blokh),” in *Evrei v kul’ture russkogo zarubezh’ia*, ed. Mikhail Parkhomovskii, vol. 1, 1919-1939 (Jerusalem: n.p, 1992), 253-263; M.D. El’zon, “Blokh, Raisa Noevna,” in: *Russkaia literatura XX veka. Prozaiki, poety, dramaturgi*. Tom I. A – Zh. (Moscow: Olma-Press Invest, 2005), 231-232; Rina Lapidus “Raisa Bloch (1899-1943): A Genius Unaware of Her Talent,” in Lapidus, *Jewish Women Writers in the Soviet Union* (London: Routledge, 2016), 48-61; Graceffa, Agnès, *Une femme face à l’histoire. Itinéraire de Raïssa Bloch, Saint-Petersbourg-Auschwitz, 1898-1943* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 271.



### *Nabokov and Vertinsky: Intersections and Convergences*

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), who by the early 1930s had become the brightest star on the literary horizon of Russia Abroad, and Alexander Vertinsky (1889-1957), the most celebrated Russian émigré performing artist of the 1920s-1940s, occupied very different orbits of Russian Berlin in 1923-1925.<sup>4</sup> By the time Nabokov relocated to France in 1937—Vertinsky had already left Europe for a journey that took him, first, to New York and California, then to Harbin and Shanghai, and, in 1943, back to Russia. That Nabokov and Vertinsky would have known of each other's cultural contributions requires little proof. It is quite likely that Nabokov would have heard of Vertinsky's concerts and performances from his émigré literary friends and acquaintances.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it is unlikely that Vertinsky and Nabokov ever met in person, either in the 1920s in Berlin or in the 1930s in Paris, during Nabokov's visits. Some evidence, however, points to a number of salient possibilities, almost all of them overlooked by Nabokov and Vertinsky specialists.

Vertinsky left a memoiristic record of having been aware of Nabokov and his place in Russian émigré letters. His reminiscences were originally penned down in 1942-1943 for the Shanghai-based pro-Soviet newspaper *Novaia zhizn'* (*New Life*), as he pleaded with the Soviet authorities to be allowed to return. In 1962 the Moscow monthly *Moskva* (*Moscow*) published expurgated chapters from Vertinsky's memoir under the title

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<sup>4</sup> For biographical information about Nabokov, see Brian Boyd's two-volume biography (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*; *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*.) To this day, there is no authoritative biography of Vertinsky. Useful information is found in the volume Aleksandr Vertinskii, *Za kulisami*, ed. Iurii Tomashevskii (Moscow: Sovetskii Fond Kul'tury, 1991). On Vertinsky's fame and popularity see Olga Partan, "Aleksandr Vertinsky," in: *Twentieth-Century Russian Emigré Writers. Dictionary of Literary Biography* 317, ed. Maria Rubins (Detroit: Gale Research, 2005), 320-328; Boris Dralyuk, "Pierrot in Hollywood: Alexander Vertinsky and Anna Sten," *Boris Dralyuk. Essays, Translations, and Other Writings*, 10 January 2019, <https://bdralyuk.wordpress.com/2019/01/10/pierrot-in-hollywood-alexander-vertinsky-and-anna-sten/>, accessed 21 January 2022; David MacFadyen, "Exit Stage Left: Aleksandr Vertinskii and Cabaret," in *Songs for Fat People: Affect, Emotion, and Celebrity in the Russian Popular Song, 1900–1955* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), 87-113. See also "Vertinskii, Aleksandr Nikolaevich," *Wikipedia*, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Вертинский,\\_Александр\\_Николаевич](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Вертинский,_Александр_Николаевич), accessed 2 February 2022.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Antonin Ladinskii, whose work Nabokov favored, writes about a 9 January 1932 concert in Paris with the participation of both Vertinsky and Nadezhda Plevitskaya (of whom Nabokov would write an English-language story). See Antonin Ladinskii, *Dnevnik 1932-1939 godov. Moia zhizn' v Germanii. Parizhskie vospominaniia*, ed. M.L. Spivak et al., introduction O.A. Korostelev, commentary O.L. Korostelev, A.I. Serkov (M.: IMLI RAN; Izdatel'stvo Dmitrii Sechin, 2021), 29; 283.

*Chetvert' veka bez rodiny* (*A Quarter of a Century without Motherland*). A still redacted text appeared in book form in 1989 in Kiev and was reprinted in 1990 in Moscow. A complete text, edited by Vertinsky's widow Lidiia Vertinskaia (née Tsirgava) finally appeared in Moscow in the 2000s.<sup>6</sup> References to Nabokov were completely missing in the 1962 published excerpts but were subsequently restored.

In the chapter titled "Germany," Vertinsky tendentiously describes Berlin's principal Russian daily *The Rudder*:

Единственным печатным органом эмиграции была кадетская газетка «Руль», редактируемая и издаваемая бывшим членом Государственной думы Набоковым, в которой, конечно, утешали эмиграцию, ругали большевиков, предсказывая их скорый конец. В газетке [...] помещал стихи сын Набокова — известный ныне писатель В. Набоков. Кроме русских объявлений о борщах, пирожках и пельменях, ничего примечательного в ней не было. Газетка эта вскоре скончалась за отсутствием читателей и писателей.<sup>7</sup>

(The only print organ of the emigration was the little Constitutional-Democrat rag of a paper *Rudder*, edited and published by the former member of the State Duma Nabokov, in which, of course, they comforted the émigrés, cursed the Bolsheviks, predicting their soon-to-come demise. In the little paper [...] Nabokov's son—the now well-known writer V. Nabokov—placed his poems. Other than ads about borsh, pirozhki and pelmeni, there was nothing worthy of attention in it. The little paper soon tanked due to the absence of readers and writers.)

Vertinsky adds a brief, albeit less ideologically marked comment in the chapter "France":

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<sup>6</sup> I have consulted the following versions: Vertinskii, Aleksandr, *Chetvert' veka bez rodiny*, Moskva 3 (1962): 211-220; 4 (1962): 205-220; 5 (1962): 209-220; 5 (1962): 212-219; *Chetvert' veka bez rodiny. Stranitsy minuvshogo* (Kiev: Muzychna Ukraïna, 1989); "Dorogoi dlinnoi," ed. Iurii Tomashevskii (Moscow: Pravda, 1990); "Dorogoi dlinnoi..." ed. Lidiia Vertinskaia (Moscow: AST; Astrel', 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Vertinskii, *Dorogoi dlinnoi...*, 2012, 157; cf. the 1990 Moscow edition of the memoirs, in which a more negative view of Nabokov appears: "небезызвестный ныне беллетрист Сирин" ("the presently not unknown belletrist Sirin"; 177).

Где-то в Германии начал писать В. Сирин (Набоков), уже совершенно не связанный с Россией и почти чужой. Его романы были увлекательны, как фильмовые сценарии, и абсолютно вненациональны.<sup>8</sup>

(Somewhere in Germany V. Sirin (Nabokov) started writing, no longer connected to Russia and practically alien to her. His novels captivated, like film scripts, and were absolutely beyond national belonging.)

Let us turn to the Nabokov side of the evidence. Very few students of Nabokov's Russian years noted that twice in his habitually bellicose reviews of works by fellow émigrés Nabokov made passing references to Vertinsky.<sup>9</sup> On 28 January 1931, in a collective review "Molodye poety" ("Young Poets") printed in Berlin's *Rul'* (*The Rudder*), Nabokov wrote:

Много издается стихов, не отличишь одного стихотворца от другого, — Терапиано от Оцупа, Адамовича от Ю. Мандельштама (несколько отличен от других Поплавский, который часто напоминает мне Вертинского, — «Так весной, в бутафорском смешном экипаже, вы поехали к Богу на бал» [...]).<sup>10</sup>

(They publish lots of verses, but one has trouble telling one versemaker apart from another—Terapiano from Otsup, Adamovich from Iu. Mandelshtam (standing somewhat apart from the others is Poplavsky, who often reminds me of Vertinsky— "Thus in spring, in a prop-like and comical carriage, / off you rode to God's [own] ball" [...]).)

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<sup>8</sup> Vertinskii, *Dorogoi dlinnoi...*, 2012: 179; cf. Vertinskii, *Dorogoi dlinnoi...*, 1990, 205.

<sup>9</sup> Stanislav Shvabrin is the exception; he fleetingly mentions Nabokov's knowledge of Vertinsky in *Between Rhyme and Reason: Vladimir Nabokov, Translation, and Dialogue* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 350. Roman Timenchik, who prepared a commentary on Nabokov's critical essays of 1930-1932, did not comment on the two Vertinsky references; see Nabokov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, ed. N.I. Artemenko-Tolstaia, Vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 2000): 834-86.

<sup>10</sup> Nabokov [under pen name V. Sirin], "Molodye poety," *Rul'* 28 Jan. 193; rpt. in Nabokov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, ed. N.I. Artemenko-Tolstaia, Vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 2000), 689-691.

Conspicuous is the touch of grammatical ambiguity in the phrase “often reminds me of Vertinsky.” Also noteworthy is the fact that Nabokov slightly misquotes the lyrics of Vertinsky’s song “Bal Gospoden” (“God’s Ball,” 1917), in which the last two lines of the final quatrain read as: “Так весной, в бутафорском смешном экипажике / Вы поехали к Богу на бал” (italics added; “Thus in spring, in a prop-like, little comical carriage, / Off you rode to God’s [own] ball”). In the two verses Nabokov quotes, he brings the rhythm of the Vertinsky’s anapaestic tetrameter/trimeter closer to his own predilections (“I togda ia smeius’, i vnezapno s pera / Moi liubimyi sletaet anapest”; “Then I laugh, and at once from my pen nib a flight/of my favorite anapaests rises,”<sup>11</sup> as Nabokov would write in 1942 in the poem “Slava” [“Fame”]). Nabokov turns Vertinsky’s ternary rhyme, *ekipazhike* (a coquettish diminutive of *ekipazh*, which in Vertinsky’s text rhymes with *pliumazhike*, a diminutive of *pliumazh* [plumage]) into a feminine rhyme, *ekipazhe*. In doing so, Nabokov violates the slender rhythmic and melodic contour of Vertinsky’s song. Is Nabokov (mis)quoting from memory? Deliberately distorting the original? A collection of Vertinsky’s *Songs and Verses*, which included the text of “God’s [Own] Ball,” would not come out in Harbin for six more years, in 1937. The chances that Nabokov had seen the text of Vertinsky’s “Bal Gospoden” in print before 1931 were low as this would have had to be part of the editions of Vertinsky’s early songs (sheet music with lyrics of each song printed separately) printed in Moscow in the 1910s and subsequently reprinted, for instance, in Reval (Tallinn) in the early 1920s.<sup>12</sup> It also appears that recordings of the song, either by Vertinsky or by other performers, did not become commercially available until after 1932.<sup>13</sup> It would therefore be most prudent to surmise that Nabokov knew of Vertinsky’s song either from having heard Vertinsky perform live in the early 1920s Berlin (of which we have no biographical record) or that he had second-hand knowledge of the song (which does not really concord well with Nabokov’s formulation “[Poplavskii] often reminds me of Vertinsky.”

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<sup>11</sup> Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 110-111.

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandr Vertinskii. *Bal Gospoden*. [Sheet music and lyrics]. [Pechal’nye pesenki A.N. Vertinskago] (Moscow: B.L. Andzheevskii, ca. 1917).

<sup>13</sup> Alexandre Vertinsky. *Bal Gospoden*. [1.78s record]. Columbia (England), ca. 1933.  
[https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=25775](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=25775). Accessed 22 January 2022.

Five weeks later, on 11 March 1931, Nabokov returned to the subject of Boris Poplavsky's alleged debt to Vertinsky, this time savaging Poplavsky's only lifetime collection of verse *Flagi* (*Flags*, 1931): "Что тут скрывать — Поплавский дурной поэт, его стихи — нестерпимая смесь Северянина, Вертинского и Пастернака (худшего Пастернака)...»<sup>14</sup> ("What's to hide: Poplavsky is a poor poet, his poems are an intolerable mixture of Severianin, Vertinsky and Pasternak [the worst kind of Pasternak]...") One should note here that while in the first review Nabokov does not explicitly disparage Vertinsky but rather stresses Poplavsky's indebtedness to his lyrics, in the second review the judgment is altogether much more intolerant if not devoid of a certain accuracy ("an intolerable mix").

Poplavsky died in 1935 from heroin poisoning; some accounts deemed his death a suicide. In his American autobiographies, originally composed in the early 1950s and subsequently revisited in both Russian and English, and revised, Nabokov voiced regret over his prewar comments about Poplavsky. In Chapter 13 of the Russian version, *Drugie berega* (*Other Shores*, 1954), Nabokov wrote:

Кроме беллетристики и стихов, я писал одно время посредственные критические заметки, — кстати хочу тут покаяться, что слишком придрался к ученическим недостаткам Поплавского и недооценил его обаятельных достоинств.<sup>15</sup>

Besides the belle-lettres and verses, for a period of time I wrote pedestrian critical pieces, and I would like to repent here, that I was much too relentless when it came to Poplavsky's apprentice-like shortcomings while not sufficiently appreciative of his charming virtues.

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<sup>14</sup> Nabokov [under pen name V. Sirin], Rev. of *Flagi* by Boris Poplavskii, *Rul'* 11 March 1931.; rpt. in Nabokov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, ed. N.I. Artemenko-Tolstaia, Vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 2000), 695-697. See a brief commentary by Maurizia Calusio, *Il Paradiso degli Amici: Per un'analisi della poetica di Boris Poplavskij* (Milan: Studio Universiterio dell'Università Cattolica, 2009). [Nuova edizione aggiornata], 104.

<sup>15</sup> Nabokov, *Drugie berega*, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, ed. N.I. Artemenko-Tolstaia, Vol. 5 (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 2000), 317.

Nabokov finessed his previous comment in Chapter 14 of *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966):

I met many other émigré Russian authors. I did not meet Poplavski who died young, a far violin among near balalaikas.

‘Go to sleep, O Morella, how awful are aquiline lives’

His plangent tonalities I shall never forget, nor shall I ever forgive myself the ill-tempered review in which I attacked him for trivial faults in his unfledged verse.<sup>16</sup>

These changes of heart, while not insignificant for the larger émigré context that contributed to the making of *Pnin*, should not be taken entirely for their face value. They belong to a series of gestures of posthumous regret Nabokov would make in the 1950s-1970s regarding the émigré writers whose work he had massacred in the 1920s and 1930s, and who died under tragic circumstances, Raisa Blokh<sup>17</sup> foremost among them.

Nabokov’s resorting to musical imagery in connection with Poplavsky (“a far violin among near balalaikas”) might serve the purpose of resuscitating the ivory tower theme of high art versus low culture produced for mass consumption, and thus redirecting the émigré reader, if obliquely, to Vertinsky and to Nabokov’s reviews of 1931. However scant and occasional, Nabokov’s interwar judgments of Vertinsky reflect two sets of biases. The first is the refusal to regard Vertinsky’s verses, be they written as song lyrics or poems without music, as literature. In this Nabokov was hardly alone. Gleb Stuve (1898-1985), who had been Nabokov’s friend and key early herald, did not even mention Vertinsky in his groundbreaking study, *Russkaia literature v izgnanii* (*Russian Literature Abroad*, 1956). The second bias is a default placement of Vertinsky in the cultural realm of popular entertainment, a bias especially manifest in Nabokov’s fiction and post-*Lolita* interviews, to which we will turn in the page to follow. As regards Nabokov’s stated biases and “strong

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<sup>16</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1966), 287. Nabokov renders in English the line from Poplavskii’s poem “Morella I,” which he had quoted in his review of *Flagi* in 1931 as an example of the occasional, “ear-seducing” “fleeting intonation, such, for instance, as the beautiful sound of the following—actually, rather meaningless, line of verse: ‘O Morella, usni, kak uzhasny orlinye zhizni’ [...]”; see Nabokov, Rev. of *Flagi*.

<sup>17</sup> About Nabokov’s regret over his unflattering review of Blokh, see Shroyer, “Raisa Blokh as an Historical, Literary and Emotional Source for Nabokov’s *Pnin*,” 637-639,

opinions,” he was a product of his time and culture, and as a result his taste and discernment sometimes suffered.

Valery Blinov’s judgment is particularly refreshing in seeking an objective view of Vertinsky’s contribution: “Vertinsky’s art stands very far from the vulgarized world of the trivial cabaret [...] [I]n his best achievements, Vertinsky markedly surpasses the playful level; the game becomes serious and the status of the émigré, replete with miseries, acquires the dimension of tragedy.”<sup>18</sup> Nabokov’s apparent lack of appreciation of Vertinsky’s poetry reveals an anxiety that Nabokov not infrequently displayed vis-à-vis authors whom he on some level perceived as his literary relatives. The poetic works of Nabokov and Vertinsky indeed display a number of convergences and commonalities, a detailed examination of which goes beyond the scope of this article but should certainly be undertaken.

Suffice it to say here, that from the point of view of their literary origins, both of them were first cousins once removed of Aleksandr Blok, Konstantin Balmont, and Nikolay Gumilev. At the same time, some of their Russian fin de siècle influences differ, Nabokov being Ivan Bunin’s literary nephew, and Vertinsky, Igor Severianin poetic first cousin. Be it as it may, even apart from their musical setting, Vertinsky’s lyrics possess a distinct voice and intonation while Nabokov’s Russian-language verses, even though at times crafted with higher versificational skills and endowed with a richer texture, lack a unique voice and sound mostly like a potpourri of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Russian poetry (especially Fet and Tiutchev) and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially Blok, Bunin, Balmont, Khodasevich, and young Pasternak). A number of parallels in Nabokov and Vertinsky call for deeper investigation. For instance, shades of the color purple, for Nabokov the synesthetic a stated mark of high artistry,<sup>19</sup> recur in Vertinsky: “Lilovyi negr” (1917); “lilovyi abbat” in “V sinem i dalekov okeane” (“In the Blue and Faraway Ocean,” 1927). And yet, Nabokov’s judgment of Vertinsky cannot be viewed entirely as a textual or literary issue and apart from Vertinsky’s practices as a performer, composer and

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<sup>18</sup> Valery Blinov, “Vertinsky, Alexander Nikolaevich (1890-1957),” *Handbook of Russian Literature*, ed. Victor Terras (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 508.

<sup>19</sup> About the color purple in Nabokov, see Shraer, *Bunin i Nabokov. Istorii sopernichestva*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Moscow: Al’pina non-fikshn, 2019), 61-62; 112.

chansonnier. Nabokov's own, complicated relationship with music and musical performance must also be considered.

Nabokov's stated indifference to music did not prevent him from writing about symphonic, opera, or popular music and about musicians in both shorter and longer fiction (e.g. short stories "Music"; "Bachmann"; "The Admiralty Spire"; "Spring in Fialta"; novels *King, Queen, Knave*; *The Gift*). Nabokov's references to singing form a full spectrum, from Russian folk songs to Nazi marching songs. During the American period, Nabokov devoted an English-language story, "The Assistant Producer," to the abduction of the White Army general Evgeny Miller in Paris in 1937. In this story, incidentally, one of Nabokov's worst, he fictionalized the singer and performer Nadezhda Plevitskaya (1884-1940), who—along with Vertinsky and Yuri Morfessi arguably belonged to the interwar triad of the most famous Russian émigré performers. (Plevitskaya and her husband Nikolay Skoblin, also formerly a White Army general, were agents of the Soviet secret police.)

In the January 1964 *Playboy* interview with Alvin Toffler, Nabokov both revealed valuable insights and misled the public:

I have no ear for music, a shortcoming I deplore bitterly. When I attend a concert—which happens about once in five years—I endeavor gamely to follow the sequence and relationship of sounds but cannot keep it up for more than a few minutes. [...] My knowledge of music is very slight; and I have a special reason for finding my ignorance and inability so sad, so unjust: There is a wonderful singer in my family—my own son. His great gifts, the rare beauty of his bass, and the promise of a splendid career—all this affects me deeply, and I feel a fool during a technical conversation among musicians. [...] <sup>20</sup>

Nabokov might have also pointed out that he had composers among his German paternal ancestors (Carl Heinrich Graun) and that his first cousin Nicolas Nabokov (1903-1978), with whom he collaborated, was an important composer in his own right.

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<sup>20</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 35.



But what is perhaps more revealing of Nabokov's relationship with songs and singing—and with his son's career as a voice artist—were the liner notes Nabokov wrote for *Russische Lieder*, an album consisting of eleven Russian classical and folk songs and one Soviet song that Dmitri Nabokov recorded. The two-side record was released in Germany in 1974. Notably included on the record as No. 6 on Side 1 was “Podmoskovnye vechera” (literally “Evenings in the Environs of Moscow”; known as “Moscow Nights”). In 1955 from the composer Vasily Solovyov-Sedoy and the poet Mikhail Matusovski received an official commission to create this song, and it became a world-famous emblem of Soviet popular song taste. This is what Nabokov had to say: “*Evenings in the Moscow Countryside (Podmoskovnye vechera)*. Words by Matusovski, Music by Solovyov-Sedoy. A pleasant *romance* evoking the atmosphere of dachas and evening tea on the outskirts of present-day Moscow.”<sup>21</sup> Whether spoken with a tongue-in-cheekness or coming off as a double parody from the man who repudiated any measure of collaboration with or endorsement of the Soviet regime, this particular liner note also lends evidentiary teeth to the idea of Nabokov's guarded curiosity about both popular songs and postwar Soviet culture—the latter especially important in the case of Professor Pnin's quandries, to which we shall soon turn.<sup>22</sup>

Nabokov recreated *romans* aspects of his first poem in his English-language autobiography. Maria Malikova has investigated Nabokov's fictional and autobiographical reflections on the Russian *romansy* (love songs) and other forms of Russian songs for voice performance. She proposed that Nabokov “liked musical genres with verbal and/or visual elements—opera and *romansy*.”<sup>23</sup> In her perceptive analysis of musical elements in Nabokov's autobiographical writings about the birth of the first poem out of the chaos of

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<sup>21</sup> Dmitri Nabokov, Bass, *Russische Lieder*, Texterläuterungen von Vladimir Nabokov [33s record], MPS/BASF, 1974, Germany.

<https://www.discogs.com/release/10227791-Dmitri-Nabokov-Russische-Lieder>, accessed 22 January 2022. Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin included Nabokov's liner notes in *Verses and Versions: Three Centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2008), 366-380; notes 422-423.

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the greatest oddity of all was Nabokov's translation into English, in 1966, of the lyrics of Bulat Okudzhava's song “Sentimental'nyi marsh” (“Sentimental March,” 1957), heard in Okudzhava's own performance in Marlen Khutsiev's film *I Am Twenty* (1957). For the text of Nabokov's translation, see Boyd's and Shvabrin's commentary in Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 359-365; 421-422.

<sup>23</sup> Malikova, Mariia. “K poetike memuarnogo pis'ma u Nabokova (apostrof),” *Studia Russica Helsinkiensia et Tartuensia*. VII. *Perelomnye periody v russkoi literature i kul'ture*, ed. Pekko Pesonen and Jussi Heinonen (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2000), 337. See also *ibid* 43.

Russian culture, Malikova observed that in “[t]hus advancing the notion of the secondary, banal, imitative quality of the first poem, Nabokov marks them as elegy and *romans*—poetic genres, in which banality is canonized and compensated for through a special intonation, music.”<sup>24</sup>

All of the above brings us back, finally, to the chronic dearth of studies of Nabokov and the culture or Russian *romans* and *chanson*, and, specifically, of comparative investigations of Nabokov’s poetry and Vertinsky’s song lyrics and verses. To date, I am aware of only one study that identified a Vertinsky subtext in Nabokov’s writings. In his pioneering article “Nabokov’s (Shishkov’s) Leap from the Springboard of *Romans*” (2005), Boris Kats has convincingly demonstrated that Nabokov’s valedictory Russian poem “Rossii” (“To Russia,” 1939) originally published in Paris under the title “Obrashchenie” (“The Appeal”) and signed “Vassily Shishkov” (also the title of Nabokov’s final Russian short story, in which the mystification of the heteronym was revealed), had a major subtext in Vertinsky’s poem “Liubovnitse” (“To the [My] Mistress,” 1934).<sup>25</sup> Nabokov included the poem “To Russia” and the other poems from what I have previously identified as the “Vassily Shishkov cycle” in his postwar collection *Stikhotvoreniia, 1929-1951* (*Poems, 1929-1951*, 1952) and also, both in Russian and in English, in his *Poems and Problems* (1970).<sup>26</sup> On several occasions, Nabokov included ample commentary on the genesis of the poem and of his valedictory short story “Vasilii Shishkov,”<sup>27</sup> and yet he never once disclosed the Vertinsky source, which is quite ponderous.

Kats closely compared Vertinsky’s “Liubovnitse” (“To [My] Lover,” 1934) and Nabokov’s “Rossii” (“To Russia,” 1939) and identified a number of parallels. Both poems are composed in quatrains of anapestic trimeter with alternating feminine and masculine

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<sup>24</sup> Maria Malikova, *V. Nabokov, Avto-bio-graftiia* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002), 167-168.

<sup>25</sup> Boris Kats, “Pryzhok Nabokov (Shishkova) s trampolina romansa,” *Shipovnik. Istoriko-filologicheskii sbornik. K 60-letiiu Romana Davidovicha Timenchika*, ed. Iurii Leving, Aleksandr Ospovat, Iurii Tsiv’ian (Moscow: Vodolei Publishers, 2005), 123-131.

<sup>26</sup> On the “Vasilii Shishkov” cycle, see Shrayner, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories* (University of Texas Press, 1998), 161-189; notes 343-345; see also Malikova’s commentary in Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. M.E. Malikova (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002) [Novaia biblioteka poeta], 565-568. See Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia, 1929-1951* (Paris: Rifma, 1952), 1952, 19-23; Nabokov, Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 2002, 205-208.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 652-653; these comments originally appeared in Nabokov’s collection *Tyrants Destroyed* (1975).

rhymes. Both, rhetorically, are acts of addressing and pleading with a feminine entity, which can be deciphered to be a woman and a Russia of exile's nostalgically painful dreams and reveries. Both contain "umoliaiu," the first person singular imperfective form Russian verb "umoliat'" ("to implore") placed in the privileged, rhyming position.

Consider the opening of Vertinsky "Liubovnitse":

Замолчи, замолчи, умоляю,  
Я от слов твоих горьких устал.  
Никакого я счастья не знаю,  
Никакой я любви не встречал.<sup>28</sup>

(Stop talking, stop talking, I implore you, / I am tired of your bitter words, / I  
know of no happiness, / I have encountered no love.)

And this is the opening of Nabokov's "To Russia":

Отвяжись — я тебя умоляю!  
Вечер страшен, гул жизни затих.  
Я беспомощен. Я умираю  
от слепых наплываний твоих.

(Will you leave me alone? I implore you!  
Dusk is ghastly. Life's noises subside.  
I am helpless. And I am dying  
Of the blind touch of your whelming tide.)<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Vertinskii, *Pesni i stikhi*. 1916-1937 (Harbin: Globus, 1937), 32; *Pesni i Stikhi* (Washington, DC.: Izd. knizhnogo magazina Victor Kamkin Inc., 1962), 74. Some sources indicate that another collection of Vertinskii's, *Pesni i stikhi* (Songs and Poems), was published in Paris in 1938. However, I have not been able to locate a single copy in American or European libraries, and I therefore have not been able to examine the collection *de visu*.

<sup>29</sup> Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 2002, 207; Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 96-97.

Vertinsky wrote his poem in Paris in 1934, prior to sailing off for the USA, a journey that would eventually take him to the USSR. The text, which can also be considered an émigré's farewell to interwar Europe, was included in the 1937 Harbin editions of his *Songs and Verses*, and also in the 1962 and 1972 American, posthumously modified reprints of the collection. In these editions, "To the Mistress" appears in the longer section "Songs," rather than in the shorter section "Poems," both of which featured Vertinsky's lyrics along with selected texts by a diverse panel of Russian poets (some of which Vertinsky revised and adapted for performance and set to music). Vertinsky never recorded a song based on the verses of "To the Mistress," and I do not know whether he ever performed it as a song during his concerts.<sup>30</sup>

All the above raises the inevitable questions about Nabokov's access to and familiarity with Vertinsky's verses and songs. In the case of "To the Mistress," one would have to surmise that, prior to the creation of "To Russia" in 1939 in Paris, Nabokov had had access to the printed text of Vertinsky's poem—of which, of course, we have no hard evidence. Leaning in part on Malikova's research, Kats links the genesis of Nabokov's poem with the culture of Russian *romansy*:

However, one can firmly state that *romansy*, which during the first half of the century sounded both in the gramophone wheezes and in the hum of the Berlin and Paris émigré joints, were also well known to [Nabokov] and may have added fuel to his nostalgia for his youth. And there could be no doubt that Nabokov was familiar with the writings of the "king" of the genre of the émigré *romans* of everyday living—Alexander Vertinsky.<sup>31</sup>

Kats further suggests that Nabokov "engages in a double game: the subtext is now concealed from the reader, now revealed to him. In this case the similarity of the openings of both poems could, through a superficial reading, appear as a pure coincidence. However,

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<sup>30</sup> Note also Vertinskii's "Dancing Girl" ("Eto bred. Eto son. Eto snitsia..."), which concludes the 1937 Harbin-published volume *Songs and Poems*. A text of six quatrains, it shares its versification and some of its rhetorical structure with Vertinskii's "To the Missstress," and thus could also be considered a subtext for Nabokov's "To Russia." See Vertinskii, "Dancing Girl," *Pesni i stikhi*, 1937, 85.

<sup>31</sup> Kats, 128.

the same similarity is capable of casually reminding the reader about Vertinsky.”<sup>32</sup> Kats believes that the later, more straightforward title “To Russia,” “would have served as a parallel, revealing a genetic connection with the subtext, which Nabokov was probably not prepared to publicize. Thirty years later Vertinsky’s ‘little song’ [*pesenka*] was completely forgotten.”<sup>33</sup>

Kats thus regards Vertinsky’s text as both Nabokov’s subtext and Nabokov’s polemical target. In a particularly sensitive reading of Nabokov’s poem, Kats palpates the object of Nabokov’s polemic in last stanza of Vertinsky’s “To the Mistress,” in which the poem’s addressee shall one day hear a recording of a song about parting and longing:

А потом, как-нибудь, за стеною  
Ты услышишь мой голос сквозь сон  
И про нашу разлуку с тобою  
Равнодушно споет грамофон.<sup>34</sup>

(And later, one day, through the wall / will hear my voice as if through a dream, /  
And of our separation [yours and mine], / A gramophone will sing indifferently.)

“In the worst case scenario,” Kats muses, “to Nabokov Vertinsky embodied the very same *poshost*’ for which Nabokov even refused to find a lexical equivalent in the English language”<sup>35</sup> In Kats’s reading, “for Nabokov (and not for him alone, obviously) Vertinsky was not the author of poems, but of the very same *pesenki*, which the hero of “The Admiralty Spire” mentions with derision.”<sup>36</sup> This, however, is both true and not quite true. In the story “The Admiralty Spire” (1933), fashioned as a letter that Nabokov’s pseudoautobiographical émigré protagonist dashes off to his former Russian flame (presumed to be publishing under a male pseudonym), a merciless judgment appears: “Well do I know that this was no longer authentic Gypsy art such as that which enchanted Pushkin

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<sup>32</sup> Kats, 128.

<sup>33</sup> Kats, 125.

<sup>34</sup> Vertinskii, *Pesni i stikhi*, 1937, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Kats, 124.

<sup>36</sup> Kats, 124.

and, later, Apollon Grigoriev, but a barely breathing, jaded, and doomed muse; everything contributed to her ruin: the gramophone, the war, and various so-called *tzigane* songs.”<sup>37</sup>

The judgment Nabokov makes—revisited in the 1970s, authorized in translation, and therefore particularly reliable—is based on a distinction between artistic quality and authenticity, indeed the hardest distinction both to make and to evaluate. With this slippery distinction in mind, we shall return to the question of Nabokov’s knowledge and appreciation of Vertinsky.

### “Rue Vert-Vert”

In chapter 2, part 5 of *Pnin*, Nabokov’s émigré narrator, Vladimir Vladimirovich, introduces some background on Professor Timofey Pnin’s émigré years at the time of his marriage to Liza Bogolepov:

Pnin, then a rising young scholar and she, a more limpid mermaid than now but practically the same person, had met around 1925, in Paris. He wore a sparse auburn beard (today only white bristles would sprout if he did not shave—poor Pnin, poor albino porcupine!), and this divided monastic growth, topped by a fat glossy nose and innocent eyes, nicely epitomized the physique of old-fashioned intellectual Russia. A small job at the Aksakov Institute, rue Vert-Vert, combined with another at Saul Bagrov’s Russian book shop, rue Gresset, supplied him with a livelihood.<sup>38</sup>

The existing commentary on the references embedded in this passage is sparse, and the analytical scholarship—nonexistent.<sup>39</sup> Students of the novel point out the double

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<sup>37</sup> Translated by Dmitri Nabokov, in Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 348-340.

<sup>38</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 44.

<sup>39</sup> See Gennadi Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov’s Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 98, with a reference to Pushkin’s commentary on *Eugene Onegin*, and, a suggestion of “another, probably coincidental, literary connection” to Arthur Schnitzler’s play *Der grüne Kakadu* (*The Green Cockatoo*, 1898), in which one of the characters is a philosopher by the name of “Grasset” (cf. Gresset); Il’in and Liuksemburg, commentary on Il’in’s Russian translation of the novel, 626. Another book-length study, Galya Diment’s *Pniniad* (1997), makes no mention of Vertinsky or the references to rue Vert-Vert/Gresset.

reference to Sergei Aksakov's autobiographical dilogy, planted by Nabokov (perhaps as distraction or camouflage) in the fictional Aksakov Institute and the equally fictional last name of the émigré book shop owner. In his 1989 book-length guide to *Pnin*, Gennadi Barabtarlo briefly touches on the names of two streets, rue Vert-Vert and rue Grasset, by pointing out their obvious source, Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset and his *Vert-Vert*. Only Simon Karlinsky, in a footnote illuminating Nabokov's use, in letters to Edmund Wilson and elsewhere, of literary codes and puzzles buried in compound and composite names with a clue (Ondemann from the French *onde* "wave" and German *Mann* to be understood as "Merman"), points to the complexity of Nabokov's design:

Here, allusions to Sergei Aksakov's two books about the Bagrov family (*The Family Chronicle* and *The Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson*, which are also featured in *Ada* and provide that novel's subtitle) are mingled with a popular eighteenth-century novella about the adventures of an escaped parrot, "Vert-Vert" by Gresset, to suggest the Franco-Russian ambience of *Pnin*'s émigré existence.<sup>40</sup>

Slightly mistaken in calling Vert-Vert a "novella," Karlinsky—simultaneously a product and a student of Russian émigré culture—might have left untouched the most meaningful aspects of the rue Vert-Vert/rue Grasset connection. To fill in the gaps before we proceed further, *Vert-Vert, histoire d'un perroquet de Nevers* (1734), a popular tale in verse by Jean-Baptiste-Louis Grisset (1709-1777), subsequently inspired three comic operas (*opéra comique*), among them one by Jacques Offenbach.<sup>41</sup> In Gresset's work Vert-Vert is a beloved parrot who lives in a convent, is sent to another convent, falls with bad company, and swears profusely in front of the nuns when he arrives at the second convent. Vert-Vert is sent back and kept in solitude; he eventually repents, changes his ways, and dies of kindness—if such a thing is indeed possible.<sup>42</sup>

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Knowing Nabokov's penchant for games of phonetic association, we should not rule out a possible allusion to the name of Nabokov's French publisher, Grasset; for details of Nabokov's visit to Grasset's editorial offices in Paris in 1932, see Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 393.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Karlinsky, ed. *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya. The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, revised and expanded edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 162, n. 7.

<sup>41</sup> See "Vert-Vert," *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vert-Vert>. Accessed 22 January 2022.

<sup>42</sup> "Gresset, Jean-Baptiste-Louis," *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Baptiste-Louis\\_Gresset](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Baptiste-Louis_Gresset). Accessed 22 January 2022.

Nabokov, in the commentary on line 8, stanza XXXII of Chapter 1 of *Eugene Onegin*, provides a detailed note on Gresset:

J.B.L. Gresset, *Vert-vert* (1734; a poem—greatly admired by Pushkin—in four small cantos, about a renegade parrot which had been the pet of a nunnery) [...]. Gresset was a gifted poet, but his idiom was the same as that of the whole *essaim* of the *folâtres* poets of his time. Yuriy Tynyanov [...] suggests that Pushkin first read Gresset in 1815 [...]. Incidentally, the variations in the spelling of the name of Gresset's parrot are amusing. My copy has the following title: *Les Oeuvres du Gresset, Enrichies de la Critique de Vairvert | Comédie en 1 acte* (Amsterdam, 1748). In the table of contents the title is *Vert-Vert*. In the half title (p. 9) and in the poem itself it is “Ver-Vert,” and in the critique in comedy form appended in the volume, “Vairvert.”<sup>43</sup>

Rue Vert-Vert and rue Gresset, the names of the Parisian streets of Pnin's youth, do not only communicate a prominent connection to the treasure-trove of Russian literary culture that Professor Pnin collects and interprets—with numerous translingual puns—for his American students. In fact, the hybrid Jewish-Russian name Saul Bagrov, by virtue of the implied Saul-Paul conversion, signals transition, transformation, turnabout, and clamors for a deeper inquiry.

There is indeed a rue Gresset in Paris's 19<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, although without apparent Russian émigré historic connections. And there is no rue Vert-Vert, of course. The closest to Vert-Vert are rue du Vertbois in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, allée Verte in the 11<sup>th</sup> and rue des Vertus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Arrondissement.<sup>44</sup> The fictional rue Vert-Vert carries a number of hermeneutic possibilities, and we shall approach them in a fashion not dissimilar to something Omry Ronen termed “ligatured” names in connection with Nabokov's creation of pun-infused Anglo-Russian literary last names in the novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974); Andrei Babikov subsequently elucidated the ligatured names in the novel he also

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<sup>43</sup> Nabokov, tr. and comment. *Eugene Onegin*, by Aleksandr Pushkin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Vol. 2: Commentary and Index, 119.

<sup>44</sup> See Raymond Denaès, *Guide Général de Paris. Répertoire de rues avec indications de la plus proche station du Métro* (Paris: Éditions L'indispensable, 1988), 56; 126.



translated into Russian.<sup>45</sup> Phonetically, graphically (note the silent *t* in the French), and/or anagrammatically, and also in keeping with the habitually incorrect Russian pronunciation of the silent *t* at the end of French words, Vert-Vert may suggest: “vret-vret” (in Russian, “he/she is lying/fabricating the truth”), *tvar’* (in Russian, scum, vile creature), the root *vert-* (to turn, to twist etc.), and, as a variant of the spelling, “vair,” which refers to squirrel fur and perhaps links this motif to Pnin’s beloved Mira Belochkin (Belochkin derived from *belochka* “little squirrel”).

Above all else, however, in several coded ways “Vert-Vert” points to and hints at the name, biography, and oeuvres of Alexander Vertinsky.<sup>46</sup> The name is the obvious prompt, but the prompt also serves as a clue by directing the reader to one of Vertinsky’s most famous prerevolutionary songs with his own lyrics, “Popugai Flober” (Jamais) (Parrot Flaubert [Jamais], 1916), dedicated to the actor Vladimir Maksimov, one of the stars of Russian silent cinema. A staple of Vertinsky’s concert repertoire, this song was published a number of times, both with music sheets and without it; Vertinsky recorded it during the émigré years and upon returning to the USSR, and the recordings widely circulated. It also intersects with another famous Vertinsky song of the pre-exile period “Lilovyi negr” (“Gde vy teper’...”) (“Purple Negro [“Where are you now...”] 1916). In Russian but also in French, Flaubert, the name of the parrot in Vertinsky’s song, rhymes with and can be substituted with Vert-Vert, the parrot of Gresset’s tale in verse. (There is no street named after Gustave Flaubert in Paris).

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<sup>45</sup> See Omri Ronen, “Podrazhatel’nost’, antiparodiia, intertekstual’nost’ i kommentarii.” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 2 (2000), <https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2000/2/podrazhatel'nost-antiparodiya-intertekstualnost-i-kommentarij.html>, accessed 22 January 2022; Ronen, “Istoricheskii modernism, khudozhestvennoe novatorstvo i mifotvorchestvo v sisteme otsenok Vladimir Nabokova,” *Philologica* 7 (2001-2002), <https://rvb.ru/philologica/07pdf/07ronen.pdf>, accessed 22 January 2022; Andrei Babikov, “Litsa i maski v romane Nabokov ‘Smotri na arlekinov!’” *Zvezda* 1 (2015): 208-218. See also Shraer, *Bunin i Nabokov*, 242-249.

<sup>46</sup> More could be said about other hints and clues, including Tverskaya Street, the historical name of Gorky Street (subsequently re-renamed), where Vertinsky lived in Moscow from 1943 until his death in 1957.



**Illustration 1.** Vertinsky's "Parrot Flaubert (Jamaïs)," music and lyrics. Moscow: B.L. Andzheevskii, ca. 1917.<sup>47</sup>

Consider the text of Vertinsky's "Parrot Flaubert (Jamaïs)":

Попугай Флобер (Jamaïs)

*Владимиру Васильевичу Максимову*

Я помню эту ночь. Вы плакали, малютка.  
Из Ваших синих, подведенных глаз  
В бокал вина скатился вдруг алмаз...  
И много, много раз  
Я вспоминал давным-давно, давным-давно  
Ушедшую минутку...

На креслах в комнате белеют Ваши блузки.  
Вот Вы ушли, и день так пуст и сер.

<sup>47</sup> Vertinskii, *Jamaïs (Popugai Flober)*, [Sheet music and lyrics], [Pesenki A.N. Vertinskago. Arietki P'ero] (Moscow: B.L. Andzheevskii, ca. 1917).

Грустит в углу  
Ваш попугай Флобер,  
Он говорит «жамэ»,  
Он все твердит – «жамэ, жамэ, жамэ, жамэ»  
И плачет по-французски.<sup>48</sup>

(I remember that night. You cried, baby. / And out of your blue, touched up eyes, /  
A diamond suddenly rolled into the wine glass. / And many, many times / I have  
since remembered that long-ago, long-ago / Passed moment... || In the armchairs in  
the room your blouses show white. / Now you are gone, and the day is empty and  
grey. / Sad in the corner / Is your parrot Flaubert, / He says “jamais,” / He keeps  
repeating “jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais,” / And cries [weeps] in French.)

Vertinsky's poem may have a hidden connection to Boris Poplavsky's older sister Natal'ia Poplavskaia, a colorful figure on the Moscow bohemian scene of the 1910s, author of the collection *Stikhi zelenoi damy, 1914-1916* (*Poems of the Green Lady, 1914-1916*, 1917). Many poems in Poplavskaia's collection sound like lyrics of 1910s *romansy*, and one poem, “Dama v limuzine” (“Lady in a Limousine”) bears a dedication to “A.N. Vertinsky.”<sup>49</sup> The whole collection is suffused with the *fin de siècle* refractions of the *commedia dell'arte* and its stock characters (Pierrot, Harlequin, Columbine). The third poem in the collection is titled “Mon ami Pierrot” and possibly signals a Vertinsky connection.<sup>50</sup> Another poem in the volume, “V ‘Miniatiure’” (“At the [Theater] ‘Miniatura,’” which was also known as Mamonov's Theater]), speaks of a “moon Pierrot” who “sang without a voice” (“Pel bez golosa lunnyi P'ero”).<sup>51</sup> Vertinsky appeared on stage in the dress and make-up of Pierrot, while “Pierrot” was his literary heteronym in the late 1910s. Sheet music and lyrics of Vertinsky's early songs were published as “Arietki P'ero” (“Pierrot's Ariettas”). According to some sources, which I am inclined to regard as literary mythology contrary to Vertinsky's

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<sup>48</sup> Vertinskii, *Pesni i stikhi*, 1937, 53; *Pesni i Stikhi*, 1962, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Natal'ia Poplavskaia, *Stikhi zelenoi damy, 1914-1916* (Moscow: Tipografiia T-va Riabushinskikh, 1917), 71.

<sup>50</sup> Poplavskaia, 1917, 7-9.

<sup>51</sup> Poplavskaia, 1917, 35. The commentator of a recent reprint, A. Sherman, links this reference with Vertinsky; see Poplavskaia, 2017, 113.

practices of attributing and crediting the sources of his song lyrics, the lyrics of Vertinsky's "Parrot Flaubert" ("Jamais") actually belong to Natal'ia Poplavskaia.<sup>52</sup>

While steeped in the atmosphere of cabaret culture of the Russian Silver Age, the title of Vertinsky's song recalls Gustave Flaubert's tale "Un coeur simple" (A Simple Heart) from *Trois contes* (*Three Tales*, 1877). Flaubert's Felicité is a simple, loyal, pious servant with a big heart, who has nothing. She looks after a parrot, Loulou, whom others try to call "Jacquot," a common French nickname for a large parrot, often specifically for the Kongo (African) gray parrot. Felicité loves her parrot like a son, and after the parrot's death venerates his stuffed effigy and associates him with the Holy Ghost. In her death she imagines a giant parrot hovering in the sky over her head "dans les cieux entrouverts, un perroquet gigantesque, planant au-dessus de sa tête."<sup>53</sup> (This tale inspired Julian Barnes to write his 1984 novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, and the connection between Barnes's novel and Vertinsky's song "Parrot Flaubert" is yet to be investigated).

What further points to Vertinsky in the code Nabokov employs in *Pnin* is that in the very next paragraph, where Liza and Pnin are already married, Zhorzhik Uranskii (a homophobic parody of Georgii Adamovich), in exchange for a "champagne dinner at the Ougolok cabaret," praises Liza's poetry (which is a composite image of Akhmatova's epigones with an admixture of Raisa Blokh's own poetry):

<sup>52</sup> See Natal'ia Poplavskaia, *Stikhi zelenoi damy, 1914-1916*, ed. and comment. A. Sherman (Moscow: Salamandra P.V.V., 2017 [Biblioteka avangarda XXVIII], 89 (text of "Popugai Flober" ["version of A.N. Vertinskii"], comment. 102, 105, 113, 114; Maurizia Calusio, *Il Paradiso degli Amici: Per un'analisi della poetica di Boris Poplavskij* (Milan: Studio Universiterio dell'Università Cattolica, 2009. [Nuova edizione aggiornata]), 16; Fortunato, "'Ty edesh' p'ianaia i ochen' blednaia', ili o 'belom iade' i marsianakh," 9 May 2016, <https://fantlab.ru/blogarticle42982>, accessed 4 February 2022; Polina Proskurina-Ianovich, "Natasha Poplavskaia: Koroleva narkomanov," *Nezamechennoe pokolenie: Kontekst*, <https://nezamechennoe.com/poplavskaya/>, accessed 4 February 2022; Konstantin Speranskii, "'Zhizn' piatitsia neostorozhno v smert'," *Nozh*, 12 August 2020, <https://knife.media/poplavsky/>, accessed 4 February 2022; Olga Petukhova, Georgii Sukhno, "Glaza iantarnye, vseгда ustalye...": Romans 'ty edesh' p'ianaia'. Nakhodki i oktrytiia. Domysly i pravda," May 2014, <https://petrleschenko.ucoz.ru/forum/40-753-1>, accessed 1 September 2022; Ani Lagina, *Sergei Esenin: Podrugi i znakomye* (N.p.: WP IPGEB, 2017), 27-28.

<sup>53</sup> Gustave Flaubert. *Un coeur simple* (Oeuvre ouvertes, 2011), [https://www.oeuvresouvertes.net/IMG/pdf/FLAUBERT\\_UN\\_COEUR\\_SIMPLE.pdf](https://www.oeuvresouvertes.net/IMG/pdf/FLAUBERT_UN_COEUR_SIMPLE.pdf), accessed 22 January 2022. In Russian poetry, Vertinsky's "Parrot Flaubert" has its most prominent subtext in Nikolai Gumilev's sonnet "Popugai" ("Parrot," 1909): "Я — попугай с Антильских островов, / Но я живу в квадратной келье мага. / Вокруг — реторты, глобусы, бумага, / И кашель старика, и бой часов" (I am a parrot from the Antilles, / But I live in a magician's square cell, / All around—alembics, globes, paper, / And an old man's cough, and the beating of the clock"); see Nikolai Gumilev, "Popugai," *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. G.P. Struve and B.A. Filippov (Washington, DC: Izd. knizhnogo magazina Victor Kamkin Inc., 1962), Vol. 1, 130-131.

Marriage hardly changed their manner of life except that she moved into Pnin's dingy apartment. He went on with his Slavic studies, she with her psychodramatics and her lyrical ovipositing, laying all over the place like an Easter rabbit, and in those green and mauve poems—about the child she wanted to bear, and the lovers she wanted to have, and St. Petersburg (courtesy Anna Akhmatov)—every intonation, every image, every simile had been used before by other rhyming rabbits. One of her admirers, a banker, and straightforward patron of the arts, selected among the Parisian Russians an influential literary critic, Zhorzhik Uranski, and for a champagne dinner at the Ougolok had the old boy devote his next feuilleton in one of the Russian—language newspapers to an appreciation of Liza's muse on whose chestnut curls Zhorzhik calmly placed Anna Akhmatov's coronet, whereupon Liza burst into happy tears—for all the world like little Miss Michigan or the Oregon Rose Queen.<sup>54</sup>

In fact, as is not infrequently the case with Nabokov's strategies of multiply-coded references, a reference in Chapter Two, Part 2 of the novel preempts the placement of the Ougolok in connection with Liza Bogolepov. First Professor Entwistle, speaking to Pnin at a party, does an imitation of Russian speech:

“Zdrastvuyte kak pozhivaete horosho spasibo,” Entwistle rattled off in excellent imitation of Russian speech—and indeed he rather resembled a genial Tsarist colonel in mufti. “One night in Paris,” he went on, his eyes twinkling, “at the Ougolok cabaret, this demonstration convinced a group of Russian revelers that I was a compatriot of theirs—posing as an American, don't you know.”<sup>55</sup>

Among other effects, within the universe of Nabokov's novel this adumbration defictionalizes and historicizes the name of the cabaret, which, to a student of Russian popular entertainment, evokes the Ugolok (Little Corner) Cabaret that Yuri Morfessi

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<sup>54</sup> *Pnin*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> *Pnin*, 36.

opened in Moscow in 1915. Morfessi's cabaret augments a prominent connection to Vertinsky, who performed in Morfessi's *Dom artista* (House of the Artist) in Odessa in 1918.<sup>56</sup>

But there is more to the rue Vert-Vert connection with Vertinsky. The parrot motif performs a number of referential, intertextual, and intratextual functions. Parrots appear five times in the corpus of Vertinsky's *Songs and Verses*, four of them with lyrics by Vertinsky. We have already quoted the text of "Popugai Flober (Jamais)" ("Parrot Flaubert [Jamais]," 1916). Below are the other four instances.

In "Ballada o sedoi gospozhe" ("Ballad of the Grey-Haired Lady," 1922):

Чей это голос: «Встречай...»  
Спит Ваш седой попугай.  
Кто же Вас позвал  
Из глуби зеркал?  
Кто же Вам сказал:  
«Я приду... на бал»?

(Whose voice says "Greet me"... / Your grey-haired parrot is sleeping. / Who has summoned you / From the depths of the mirrors? / Who was it that said to you: / "I shall come... to the ball"?)

In "Matrosy" ("Sailors," 1922; lyrics by Boris Daev with emendations by Vertinsky), one of Vertinsky's greatest hits:

Гитара уплыла вдаль.  
Матросы запели про птицу,

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<sup>56</sup> On Morfessi, see David MacFadyen, "The Romance in Exile: Iurii Morfessi and Petr Leshchenko," in *Songs for Fat People: Affect, Emotion, and Celebrity in the Russian Popular Song, 1900–1955* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), 38–63; "Morfessi, Iurii Spiridonovich." *Wikipedia*, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Морфесси,\\_Юрий\\_Спиридонович](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Морфесси,_Юрий_Спиридонович), accessed 21 January 2022. See also Vertinskii, *Za kulisami*, 72.

Которой несчастных жаль.  
У неё стеклянные перья  
И слуга — седой попугай,  
Она открывает двери  
Матросам, попавшим в рай!

(The guitar sailed off and away, / The sailors started singing of a bird, / Which feels sorry for the unfortunate ones, / She has glass feathers, / And her servant is a gray-haired parrot, / She opens the doors / To sailors, who ended up in paradise.)

In “Tango ‘Magnoliia’” (“Tango ‘Magnolia’,” 1931):

И, сладко замирая от криков попугая,  
Как дикая магнолия в цвету,  
Вы плачете, Иветта,  
Что песня недопета,  
Что это  
Лето  
Где-то  
Унеслось в мечту!

(And heart sweetly stopping from the parrot’s screams, / Like a wild magnolia in bloom, / You cry, Ivetta, / That the song has been unfinished, / That this / Summer / Somewhere / Flew off and became a dream!)

Finally, in “Marlene” (1935), born out of Vertinsky’s friendship with Marlene Dietrich:

Попугая не дразнить,  
С камеристкой в дружбе жить  
(«Здрасьте, Марья Семеновна!»),

Чистить щеточкой «бизу»  
И водить гулять Жужу  
(«Пойдем, собачечка!»).

(Not to tease the parrot, / To live on friendly terms with the maid, / (“Howdy, Marya Semenovna!”), / To clean the ‘bijou’ with a little brush, / And to take Joujou for walks, / (“Let’s go, dear doggie!”)).

In all the five instances, Vertinsky’s parrots are associated or directly linked with love and longing, with memory, with beauty and fragility, and with otherworldly realms. And in Nabokov’s works?

Parrots in Nabokov’s works mark and highlight several key motifs, of which four are especially relevant to the context of our investigation: popular and/or cheap taste; parrotry (imitative or repetitive quality) as opposed to signing in one’s own voice; artifice; memory of trauma and/or traumatic remembrance.

Nabokov’s lectures, targeting an American university audience in the 1940s and 1950s, help us understand the writer’s use of the parrot motif in connection with his view of the philistine sensibility. In the lecture on Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* within *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov observed that “[j]ust as the agricultural subjects (the hogs and the manure) at the fair foreshadowed the mud that the boy Justin cleans off Emma’s shoes after her walks to the house of her lover Rodolphe, so the last gust of the beadle’s parrotlike eloquence foreshadows the hell flames which Emma might still have escaped had she not stepped into that cab with Leon.”<sup>57</sup> In “Philistines and Philistinism,” a lecture occupying an orbit of *Lectures on Russian Literature*, the parrot is again linked to Flaubert and philistinism:

A philistine is a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group and time. I have said "full-grown person"

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<sup>57</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 164.



because the child or the adolescent who may look like a small philistine is only a small parrot mimicking the ways of confirmed vulgarians, and it is easier to be a parrot than to be a white heron. “Vulgarian” is more or less synonymous with “philistine”: the stress in a vulgarian is not so much on the conventionalism of a philistine as on the vulgarity of some of his conventional notions. I may also use the terms genteel and bourgeois. Genteel implies the lace-curtain refined vulgarity which is worse than simple coarseness. To burp in company may be rude, but to say “excuse me” after a burp is genteel and thus worse than vulgar. The term bourgeois I use following Flaubert, not Marx. Bourgeois in Flaubert’s sense is a state of mind, not a state of pocket. A bourgeois is a smug philistine, a dignified vulgarian.<sup>58</sup>

In the same lecture, however, Nabokov adds an important clarification: “On a hot day every other person will ask you, ‘Is it warm enough for you?’ but that does not necessarily mean that the speaker is a philistine. He may be merely a parrot or a bright foreigner.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, in his lectures on Dostoevsky Nabokov includes another parrot reference, this one partially informed by Flaubert, and partially by his view of Dostoevskian (in Nabokov’s presentation, often hysterical and/or melodramatic) contradictions in human nature: “A sentimental old maid may pamper her parrot and poison her niece.”<sup>60</sup>

As regards the question of parrotry, which in poetry can hardly be taken apart from the question of originality (the émigré critic and poet Michael B. Kreps spoke of two poles, that of *popugaistvo* [parrotry] and that of *soloveistvo* [nightingaleship]<sup>61</sup>), Nabokov’s poetic parrots are both the doubles and the anti-doubles of the lyrical hero. In Nabokov’s Russian-language poem “Pustiak — nazvan’e machty...” (“A trifle—the name of the mast...,” 1926), which dialogues with Vertinsky’s song lyrics, a parrot appears in stanza three:

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<sup>58</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1981), 309.

<sup>59</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 310.

<sup>60</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 103.

<sup>61</sup> Mikhail Kreps, *O poezii Iosifa Brodskogo* (St. Petersburg: Zhurnal “Zvezda”, 2007.).

И в этот миг я с криком покажу вам  
себя, себя — но в городе другом:  
как попугай пощелкивает клювом,  
так тереблю с открытками альбом.<sup>62</sup>

(And in this moment I will show you / myself, myself—but in another city, / the way a parrot clicks his beak, / I fumble through an album of postcards.)

In Part 1 of Nabokov's English-language poem "On Translating 'Eugene Onegin'" (1955), originally published in *The New Yorker*, "a parrot's screech" partially stands for what is lost and gained in translation:

What is translation? On a platter  
A poet's pale and glaring head,  
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,  
And profanation of the dead.<sup>63</sup>

Incidentally, this stanza, and specifically the image of the screeching parrot, has its antecedent in the essay "The Art of Translation," which Nabokov contributed to *The New Republic* in 1942: "What is to be done with this bird you have shot down only to find that it is not a bird of paradise, but an escaped parrot, still screeching its idiotic message as it flaps on the ground?"<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to the artless noise of the parrot's repetition, one of the best-known instances of Nabokov's metaphorical emphasis on art's self-conscious qualities is the parrot (parakeet) in Chapter One of *The Gift* (1937), as observed by Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev on the asphalt of a Berlin street:

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<sup>62</sup> Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 2002, 307.

<sup>63</sup> Nabokov, *Poets and Problems*, 175; *Stikhotvoreniia*, 2002, 406.

<sup>64</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Translation," *The New Republic*, 4 August 1941, <https://newrepublic.com/article/62610/the-art-translation>, accessed 1 February 2022.

Когда же Федор Константинович вышел на улицу, его обдало (хорошо, что надел) влажным холодком: пока он мечтал над своими стихами, шел повидимому дождь, выложив улицу до самого ее конца. Фургон уже не было, а на том месте, где недавно стоял его трактор, у самой панели осталось радужное, с приматом пурпура и перистообразным поворотом, пятно масла: попугай асфальта.<sup>65</sup>

When Fyodor went outside he felt immersed in a damp chill (it's a good thing I put that on). While he had been musing over his poems, rain had lacquered the street from end to end. The van had gone and in the spot where its tractor had recently stood, there remained next to the sidewalk a rainbow of oil, with the purple predominant and a plumelike twist. Asphalt's parakeet.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, parrots in Nabokov's postwar American fiction acquire more somber, traumatic, and disturbing associations. In Chapter 2 of Nabokov's first American novel *Bend Sinister* (1947), set in a Communazi totalitarian society of a fictitious eastern or central European country, the Jewish philosopher Adam Krug steps outside the omniscient narrative plain of his present self to recall himself as a child via a surrealist interior monologue:

A familiar figure, albeit anonymous and aloof. He saw me crying when I was ten and led me to a looking glass in an unused room (with an empty parrot cage in the corner) so that I might study my dissolving face. He has listened to me with raised eyebrows when I said things which I had no business to say. In every mask I tried on, there were slits for his eyes. Even at the very moment when I was rocked by the convulsion men value most. My saviour. My witness.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Nabokov, *Dar, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, ed. N.I. Artemenko-Tolstaia, Vol. 4 (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 2000), 215.

<sup>66</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, translated from the Russian by Michael Scammell with the collaboration of the author (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 34.

<sup>67</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 7.

The parrot reference recurs in Chapter 11, during a scene involving Krug and his former classmate Paduk (nicknamed “the Toad” and tinged with homophobic associations in line with Nabokov’s presentation of gay men), now the country’s dictator:

The door opened slightly and a fat grey parrot with a note in its beak walked in. It waddled towards the desk on clumsy hoary legs and its claws made the kind of sound that unmanicured dogs make on varnished floors. Paduk jumped out of his chair, walked rapidly towards the old bird and kicked it like a football out of the room.<sup>68</sup>

As Michael H. Bengal observed in the essay “Adam Krug’s Parrot,” “the parrot football is an amalgam of Krug’s memories and dreams, recalling the unused parrot cage mentioned earlier when he acknowledged his alter ego, the observer, and his memories of schooldays with the Toad.”<sup>69</sup> Simultaneously, the empty cage and the displaced parrot also serve to signal, oneirically and even absurdly, the impending death of Krug’s son David, who is murdered by Paduk’s henchmen.

Refracted through the text of *Pnin*, echoes of Vertinsky’s “Parrot Flaubert” (“Jamais”) and the parrot motif also resound in the inner chambers of *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), the longest, most translingually perverse, and also the most Russian among Nabokov’s American novels.

In Part 1, Chapter 14 of *Ada*, Ada says of her younger sister Lucette:

“She also knows my revised monologue of his mad king,” said Ada:

Ce beau jardin fleurit en mai,  
Mais en hiver  
Jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais  
N’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 145-146.

<sup>69</sup> Michael H. Bengal, “Adam Krug’s Parrot,” *Zembla* 1997, <https://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/beg21.htm>, accessed 30 January 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 98.

At the end of Chapter 41, Van Veen recalls the poem Ada recites earlier in the novel: “N’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert.”<sup>71</sup> The novel’s interpreters and annotators, Brian Boyd most fully, have catalogued the ways Ada’s “mock translation” (Boyd’s expression) engages King Lear’s “Never, never, never, never, never!” from Act 5, Scene 3. Nabokov had a special admiration for the whole scene, for King Lear’s monologue to Cordelia (“No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison,” which he quoted in a well-known letter to Edmund Wilson about Chekhov’s art<sup>72</sup>), and for this specific line of Shakespeare.<sup>73</sup> The burden of Shakesperean/Learean references—and the hum of the “*n’erst ver/never*” translingual pun—may have obscured what lies on the very surface of Ada’s “translation”: Vertinsky’s parodied and truncated song “Parrot Flaubert” (“Jamais”) (“Ce beau jardin fleurit en mai [...] / Jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais [...]”), Vertinsky’s incarnations in Nabokov’s American novels, and the parrot motif itself.<sup>74</sup> This, in turn, brings us to *Look at the Harlequins!*, in the pages of which the parrot motif gains a further distillation.

This last of Nabokov’s completed novels, both a rueful self-parody and a melancholy parody of the disappearing Russian émigré world, merits a closer examination in connection with Nabokov’s polemical dialogue with Vertinsky in *Pnin*, where Columbine, a principal character of the commedia dell’arte is mentioned in Chapter 6, and where another commedia dell’arte character, Pulchinella, is alluded to in Chapter 3, through a reference to “the tongue, that Punchinello in the troupe).<sup>75</sup> As Olga Partan argued in her book on Russian culture and the Italian commedia dell’arte, *LATH!* is studded with references to the commedia. For instance, Partan writes of Ivor Black, the brother or Vadim Vadimych’s first wife Iris: “During V.V.’s last year at Cambridge, he consults Iris’s brother Ivor Black about the production of the famous satirical comedy [Gogol’s *The Inspector General*, which in Partan’s reading exhibits numerous aspects of the commedia], and that initiates their relationship. Ivor Black has obvious affinities with the modern image of Pierrot—his name is reminiscent of Pierrot’s black and white colors, and Ivor shares many

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<sup>71</sup> Nabokov, *Ada*, 317.

<sup>72</sup> See Shrayner, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*, 192, 236-237.

<sup>73</sup> See Boyd’s annotations to Chapter 14, <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada141ann.htm>, and Chapter 41, <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada114ann.htm> Viewed 4 April 2022, accessed 4 April 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Incidentally, a passing reference to Pierrot appears in Part 1, Chapter 39 of *Ada* (Nabokov, *Ada*, 298).

<sup>75</sup> *Pnin*, 66; 158.

character trains with the traditional role of the commedia's Pierrot.<sup>76</sup> Of course Pierrot, a naïve, trusting, and lovesick stock figure of the commedia reincarnated by the modernists, was Vertinsky's most iconic 1910s-1920s appearance (see Ill. 2). And for Nabokov ever the punster and anagrammist, Pierrot and parrot (and thus Vertinsky) may have been inexorably interlinked.



**Illustration 2.** *Vertinsky as Pierrot. Photographer Unknown. Circa early 1920s. (Wikimedia).*

References to parrots are introduced early on in *LATH!* In Part 1, Chapter 3 Vadim Vadimych recalls an old parrot in Ivor Black's house in Carnavaux, a fictional place on the French Riviera:

It was a large, lemon-breasted, indigo-blue ara with striped white cheeks squawking intermittently on its bleak back-porch perch. Ivor had dubbed it Mata Hari partly because of its accent but chiefly by reason of its political past. His late

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<sup>76</sup> Olga Partan, *Vagabonding Masks: The Italian Commedia dell'Arte in the Russian Artistic Imagination* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 231. Siggie Frank also attributes significance to the status of the *commedia dell'arte* in Nabokov's art, including his Russian novels. See Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 20-21, 130-133, 143-146. See also Stephanie L. Merkel's study of the *commedia dell'arte* in early Nabokov: "Vladimir Nabokov's *King, Queen, Knave* and the *Commedia dell'Arte*," *Nabokov Studies* 1 (1994): 83-102. Finally, no discussion of the commedia and the modernist period should fail to mention Martin Green and John Swan's *The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination* (State College: Pennsylvania State University, 2010), in which Nabokov makes a number of appearance, and which makes no mention of Vertinsky.

aunt, Lady Wimberg, when already a little gaga, around Nineteen Fourteen or Fifteen, had been kind to that tragic old bird, said to have been abandoned by a shady stranger with a scarred face and a monocle. It could say all, Otto, and papa, a modest vocabulary, somehow suggestive of a small anxious family in a hot country far from home.

Sometimes when I work too late and the spies of thought cease to relay messages, a wrong word in motion feels somehow like the dry biscuit that a parrot holds in its great slow hand.<sup>77</sup>

In Chapter 9, as the rapprochement between Iris and the narrator grows, the readers witness the following scene:

The door key would not work, that I knew; still I tried, and was rewarded by the silly semblance of recurrent clicks that did not lock anything. Whose step, whose sick young cough came from the stairs? Yes of course that was Jacquot, the gardener's boy who rubbed and dusted things every morning. He might butt in, I said, already speaking with difficulty.

To polish, for instance, that candlestick. Oh, what does it matter, she whispered, he's only a conscientious child, a poor foundling, as all our dogs and parrots are. Your tum, she said, is still as pink as your shirt.

And please do not forget, darling, to clear out before it's too late.<sup>78</sup>

Jacquot, the boy's name commonly given in French to large parrots, hints at Flaubert's "A Simple Heart,"<sup>79</sup> and possibly induces a chain of associations linking the parrot in Flaubert's tale with Vertinsky's "Parrot Flaubert" (and, once again, recalling rue Vert-Vert in *Pnin*).

In Chapter 10 of *LATH!*, the narrator answers Count Starov about his "wife": "I said she had a house, a parrot, a car, and a small income—I didn't know exactly how

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<sup>77</sup> Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 13.

<sup>78</sup> Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*, 47.

<sup>79</sup> See Andrei Babikov's commentary Nabokov, *Vzgliani na arlekinov!*, tr. and comment. Andrei Babikov, 4 ed. (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2015), 300.

much.”<sup>80</sup> A little later in Chapter 10, the parrot surfaces again, this time almost although Vadim Vadimych is mocking the story of loss told in Vertinsky’s song “Parrot Flaubert” and recycled in Vertinsky’s other songs and verses:

I remember spring trips to Malta and Andalusia, but every summer, around the first of July, we drove to Carnavaux and stayed there for a month or two. The parrot died in 1925, the footboy vanished in 1927. Ivor visited us twice in Paris, and I think she saw him also in London where she went at least once a year to spend a few days with “friends,” whom I did not know, but who sounded harmless—at least to a certain point.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, the parrot motif receives its fullest pseudoautobiographical significance in Part 2, Chapter 5 of *LATH!*, where Vadim Vadimych describes his Russian works:

The reader must have noticed that I speak only in a very general way about my Russian fictions of the Nineteen-Twenties and Thirties, for I assume that he is familiar with them or can easily obtain them in their English versions. At this point, however, I must say a few words about *The Dare* (*Podarok Otchizne* was its original title, which can be translated as “a gift to the fatherland”). [...] The novel begins with a nostalgic account of a Russian childhood (much happier, though not less opulent than mine). After that comes adolescence in England (not unlike my own Cambridge years); then life in émigré Paris, the writing of a first novel (*Memoirs of a Parrot Fancier*) and the tying of amusing knots in various literary intrigues. Inset in the middle part is a complete version of the book my Victor wrote “on a dare”: this is a concise biography and critical appraisal of Fyodor Dostoyevski [...]; and in the last pages my young hero accepts a flirt’s challenge and accomplishes a final gratuitous feat by walking through a perilous forest into Soviet territory and as casually strolling back.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*, 50.

<sup>81</sup> Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*, 99-100.



Readers of Nabokov's Russian novels will immediately recognize *Dar* (*The Gift*) in Vadim Vadimych's description. More to the point is the title of the first novel Vadim Vadimych's émigré protagonist, *Memoirs of a Parrot Fancier*, which could be interpreted to mean "memoirs of a parrot connoisseur" or, perhaps, "memoirs of a parrot breeder." Both possibilities could be envisaged in literary and metaliterary terms and applied to the notion of parrotry as imitative art or as poetry of epigones. Lastly, the description of the young émigré hero's "gratuitous feat" of crossing illegally into the Soviet Union unmistakably echoes the ending of Nabokov's novel *Podvig* (*Glory*, 1932), except that *Glory* ends not with Martin's return but indeterminately, with Martin's having crossed into the Soviet territory and/or the territory of pure art.<sup>83</sup> The references to *Glory* also remind the keen Nabokov reader of two figurations of the parrot motif. In the Cambridge chapters of the novel *Darwin*, Martin's English friend, mentor and amorous rival, lets Martin read a book of his composition (this is in Chapter 15 of the Russian original and Chapter 14 of the translation):

The book proved to be remarkable. The pieces were not really short stories—no, they were rather more like tractates, twenty tractates of equal length. The first was called "Corkscrews," and contained a thousand interesting things about corkscrews, their history, beauty, and virtues. Another was on parrots ["vtoroi byl o popugaiakh"], a third on playing cards, a fourth on infernal machines, a fifth on reflections in water.<sup>84</sup>

Here, it seems, the parrot story augments the notions of genuine art, literary freedom, artistic discovery—as it does in *The Gift*. However, the second instance of the parrot motif in *Glory* highlights the opposite of self-conscious art—bourgeois taste (in the Flaubertian sense, as Nabokov would note parenthetically) with shades of philistine ugliness. After

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<sup>83</sup> About the ending of *Glory*, see Maxim D. Shrayder, "The Perfect Glory of Nabokov's Exploit," *Russian Studies in Literature*, 35.4 (Fall 2000): 29-41.

<sup>84</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory*, translated from the Russian by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage International 1991), 60.

Martin follows Sonia Zilanov to Berlin, he rents a room from a “major’s widow” (this is in Chapter 32 in the original and Chapter 31 in the Englished version):

The lady was six feet tall, with a ruddy complexion, used cologne on Sundays and kept a parrot and a tortoise [“derzhala u sebia v komnate popugaia i cherepakhu”] in her room. She considered Martin an ideal roomer: he was seldom at home, did not receive guests, and never used the bath (the latter was amply replaced by the shower at the tennis club and the lake in Grunewald). The bath was plastered with the landlady’s hair on the inside, anonymous rags dried on the clothesline overhead, and a dusty old bicycle leaned against the opposite wall.<sup>85</sup>

As we think of the possible traces of—and allusions to—Vertinsky in Nabokov’s texts, *LATH!* with its themes of genuine, true art versus falseness and deception, its lampoonish world of Russian expatriates, and its bicontinental map of the characters’ literary travels offers a remarkably fertile ground and should be further investigated by Nabokov’s students. Such investigations, however, would inevitably resort to both deep contextualization and to the imperfect art of conjecture. As we think of Nabokov’s strategies of fictional obfuscation of his émigré and Anglo-American literary contemporaries in *LATH!*, we are reminded of a starkly negative review that the book critic Anatole Broyard (1920-1990), at the height of his influence when the novel published, published in *The New York Times*:

Far more convincing is the impression that he is condescending to indulge in a few pleasantries on the subject of our short-sightedness. This is your paltry three-dimensional Nabokov, he implies: now I will give you a few hints, a clue or two, a fascinating *trompe l’oeil* tease of a glimpse at the true Nabokov as only I can know him.

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<sup>85</sup> Nabokov, *Glory*, 137.

In his final verdict, Broyard characterized *LATH!* as “the production of an imagination paralyzed by vanity.”<sup>86</sup> A more charitable judgment might have been to speak of a translingual imagination overburdened by many literary squabbles if not depleted by literary feuds. *LATH!* strikes this re-reader as a work of bored and lonely master who still enjoys skewering two generations of his Russian and Anglo-American literary contemporaries, many of them dead by the time of the novel’s composition—among them Ivan Bunin, Georgii Adamovich, W.H. Auden, and Robert Frost.<sup>87</sup> And the Nabokov of *LATH!* still has some unfinished business with Alexander Vertinsky, whom he would outlive by almost exactly twenty years.

The conflation of Pierrot, parrots, and Paris (dubbed in *LATH!* “the center of émigré culture and destitution”), as well as the Vadim Vadimych’s own “dash to Leningrad,” throws into sharper relief a political context for Nabokov’s polemical engagement with Vertinsky. Given what we know about Nabokov’s principled, staunchly anti-Soviet position, his prewar, mixed reactions to Vertinsky would have most likely been transformed into resentment following Vertinsky’s return to the USSR in 1943<sup>88</sup>—this despite Nabokov’s own, continued literary fantasies of return as given shape in the poetry and fiction of the American and Swiss years. As we turn to the heart of literary, ideological, and emotional presence of Alexander Vertinsky in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin*, we should note that allegorically, the invented Parisian street, “rue Vert-Vert,” where in the 1920s the young Pnin works at a bookstore, could be understood to mean both “rue of parrotry” and “rue Vertinsky,” and by the time of *Pnin*’s composition in the early 1950s this was a road that, in Nabokov’s eyes, led to political and aesthetic surrender.

### **“Alien Cities”**

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<sup>86</sup> Anatole Broyard, “Snag in a Strip Tease,” (A Review of *Look at the Harlequins!* By Vladimir Nabokov), *The New York Times*, 10 October 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/10/10/archives/snag-in-a-strip-tease-books-of-the-times-he-passeth-understanding-a.html>, accessed 30 January 2022.

<sup>87</sup> About this, see Shraer, *Bunin and Nabokov*, 242-249.

<sup>88</sup> There were also rumors (to the best of my knowledge, still unsubstantiated) that Vertinsky was an agent of the Soviet secret police. For a recent, revisionist discussion, see Vladimir Armeev, “Kto vy, artist Vertinsky?” *Neva* 4 (2007), <http://magazines.russ.ru/neva/2007/4/art9.html>, accessed 22 January 2022.

Nabokov's *Pnin* came out in the USA in March 1957. Prior to its book publication, the novel had been partially serialized in *The New Yorker* in 1953-1955, although not the chapter with the description of Mira Belochkin's death in a Nazi death camp. On 21 May 1957 Alexander Vertinsky gave his last concert in Leningrad (St. Petersburg). On the same day he died in the Astoria Hotel near St. Isaac's Cathedral—next door to the Angleterre Hotel where Sergey Esenin was found dead on 28 December 1925, and just two blocks from Vladimir Nabokov's childhood home on Bol'shaya Morskaya Street.

*Pnin* is set in 1950-1954 in an American college town on the Eastern Seaboard, and in the course of the novel Stalin dies and de-Stalinization begins in the USSR. *Pnin* also takes the readers on memory expeditions, mainly to the prerevolutionary St. Petersburg of Timofey Pnin, Mira Belochkina, and Vladimir Vladimirovich [Nabokov]'s shared youth, to émigré Paris and Berlin of the 1920s, and also on a reconstructed path of Mira's death during the Shoah. *Pnin* is simultaneously a novel about the memory of the Shoah, an immigrant novel, and a satirical campus novel. Professor Pnin suffers from seizures of memory of two kinds: 1. nostalgia for Russia, colored by first love—and these memories he has an easier time living with; 2. survivor's guilt—and those are the memories and visions that Pnin manages to suppress, although not always and not totally. The first type of seizures of memory is more benign, more tolerable; the second, particularly excruciating and unbearable.

In Chapter 3 of *Pnin*, Professor Pnin visit the college library:

As usual he marched to the Periodicals Room and there glanced at the news in the latest (Saturday, February 12—and this was Tuesday, O Careless Reader!) issue of the Russian language daily published, since 1918, by an émigré group in Chicago. As usual, he carefully scanned the advertisements. Dr. Popov, photographed in his new white smock, promised elderly people new vigor and joy. A music corporation listed Russian phonograph records for sale, such as “Broken Life, a Waltz” and “The Song of a Front-Line Chauffeur.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, 75.

The ad for Russian records alludes both to music for popular consumption (of the sort émigré teachers of Russian used to teach their American students) and to Vertinsky's repertoire following his return to the USSR. Regarding the former, Nabokov's narrator supplies us with at least two clarifications of the way Russian language and culture were taught by Pnin's colleague at Waindell College. In Chapter 1 of the novel, we read that

As a teacher, Pnin was far from being able to compete with those stupendous Russian ladies, scattered all over academic America, who, without having had any formal training at all, manage somehow, by dint of intuition, loquacity, and a kind of maternal bounce, to infuse a magic knowledge of their difficult and beautiful tongue into a group of innocent-eyed students in an atmosphere of Mother Volga songs, red caviar, and tea [...].<sup>90</sup>

And just a little earlier the episode with the Russian émigré newspaper, Nabokov plants a reference to one Oleg Komarov of Fine Arts:

This Komarov, a Cossack's son, was a very short man with a crew cut and a death's-head's nostrils. He and Serafima, his large, cheerful, Moscow-born wife, who wore a Tibetan charm on a long silver chain that hung down to her ample, soft belly, would throw Russki parties every now and then, with Russki hors d'oeuvres and guitar music and more or less phony folk-songs—occasions at which shy graduate students would be taught vodka-drinking rites and other stale Russianisms [...].<sup>91</sup>

Taking stock of the “Mother Volga songs,” “guitar music,” and “more or less phony folk-songs,” we shall now comment on the actual songs advertised in the novel's émigré newspaper. The waltz “Broken Life” was originally composed by the Odessa-born Maks Kyuss (Max Küss, 1874-1942), known for a number of popular waltzes, most famously “Amurskie volny” (Waves of Amur). It was recorded many times in Russia, USSR, and

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<sup>90</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, 10.

<sup>91</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, 71

abroad, including the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>92</sup> It is quite possible that “Broken Life, A Waltz” also hints at “Razbitoe serdtse” (“Broken Heart”), which was a popular sentimental waltz.<sup>93</sup> The second, “Pesnia frontovogo shofera” (“Song of a Frontline Driver”), was a song performed by the superstar of Soviet popular music Mark Bernes (1911-1966). It was recorded on numerous occasions, and, specifically, a recording was made commercially available in the USA in the late 1940s.<sup>94</sup> However, it is more than likely that a detail as specific as Bernes’s “Song of a Frontline Driver” serves to allude to two songs by Vertinsky. The first, “Ee pis’mo na front” (“Her Letter to the Front”), lyrics by the Jewish-Soviet poet Iosif Utkin (1903-1944), belongs to the not so extensive number of songs Vertinsky composed after his return to the USSR.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, the “letter” also hints at one of Vertinsky’s most popular songs of all times, based on a substantially revised text of Sergey Esenin’s last poem (sometimes mythologized as his suicide note), “Do svidan’ia, drug moi, do svidaniia...” (“Farewell, my friend, farewell...,” 1925). Vertinsky recorded the song, known as “Pis’mo k dame” (“Letter to a Lady”) or “Poslednee pis’mo” (“Last Letter”), twice in 1930-1933, and records circulated in Russian émigré world.<sup>96</sup> The revised text also appeared in the 1930s editions of Vertinsky’s *Songs and Verses*.

The text of *Pnin* knows of—and points to—Vertinsky in a number of ways, including the puzzle of “rue Vert-Vert.” “Chuzhie goroda” (“Alien Cities”), one of Vertinsky’s most famous and popular songs, a staple of his émigré repertoire that he was

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<sup>92</sup> Barabtarlo cites an ad in the 7 March 1953 issue of the New York-based *Novoe Ruskoye Slovo* for a postwar Stinson Records single of “Broken Life, Waltz” (Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 134). See [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=46157](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=46157), viewed 6 June 2022.

<sup>93</sup> See, specially, a record issued around 1925 in Berlin: “Razbitoe serdtse, val’s,” [Music by Gr. Shmaev; Beka Orchestra], [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=31265&l=russian](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=31265&l=russian), accessed 2 February 2022.

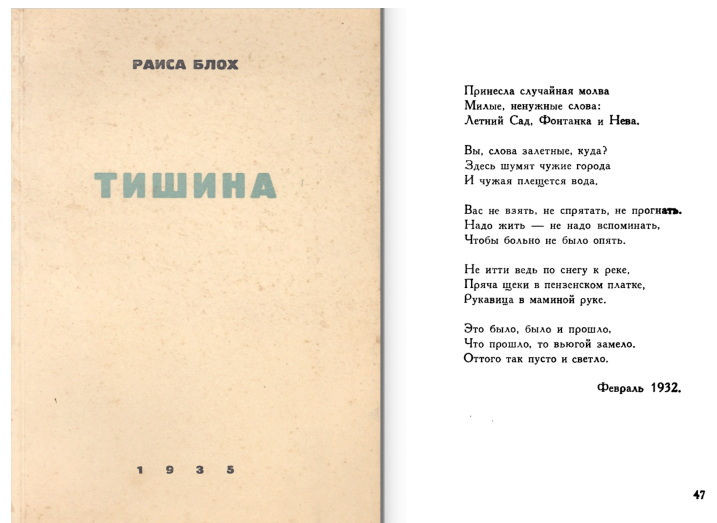
<sup>94</sup> Bernes, Mark [Mark Berness], *Pesnya Frontovovo* ([sic] *Song of the Front Line Driver*). [1.78 record]. Argee Records, 1948, [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=47783](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=47783), accessed 22 January 2022; see also Bernes’s recording released in the USSR in 1948: *Pesenka frontovogo shofera* [1.78 record], muz. Boris Mokrousov, sl. Naum Labkovskii, Boris Laskin, orkestr pod ruk. V.N. Knushevitskoho, Aprelevskii zavod, 1948, [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=47806](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=47806), accessed 22 January 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Aleksandr Vertinskii, *Ee pis’mo na front* [1.78 record]. [Mikhail Brokhes at the Piano]. [Lyr. Iosif Utkin, music Aleksandr Vertinskii, Aprelevskii zavod, 1944, [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=9229](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=9229), accessed 22 January 2022.

<sup>96</sup> Vertinskii, “Pis’mo k dame,” (Berlin: Parlophon, ca. 1932), [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=4068](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=4068), accessed February 2022; Vertinskii [S. Esenin], “Poslednee pis’mo,” *Pesni i stikhi*, 1962, 47. See also “Diskografiia Vertinskogo,” *Wikipedia*, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Дискография\\_Александра\\_Вертинского](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Дискография_Александра_Вертинского), accessed 4 February 2022.

allowed to perform and record in the USSR after his return in 1943, functions as a tuning fork for the entire novel. This song, in turn, owes its origins to a poem by Raisa Blokh.

A brief reconstruction and history is therefore in order. Raisa Blokh's poem, untitled and known after its first line "Prinesla sluchainaia molva..." ("Chance speech was carried over on the air...", 1932), was published a number of times in the 1930s, most notably in Blokh's second collection, *Tishina* (*Quietude*, 1935). It was reprinted posthumously in 1959 in Paris by Rifma, the same émigré publisher that in 1952 had published a volume of Nabokov's selected poems.<sup>97</sup> I will follow the text in *Quietude* as Nabokov was most likely familiar with this collection. In the text I will boldface a few key words:



**Illustration 3.** Cover of Raisa Blokh's *Tishina* (1935) and her poem "Chance speech was carried over on the air..." as printed in the collection.

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<sup>97</sup> Blokh, "Prinesla sluchainaia molva...", [Gorlin, ed.], *Roshcha. Vtoroi sbornik berlinskii poetov* (Berlin: Slovo, 1932), 14; "Prinesla sluchainaia molva...", Blokh, *Tishina* (Berlin: Petropolis, 1935), 47; Georgii Adamovich and Mikhail Kantor, eds., *Iakor'. Antologiiia zarubezhnoi poezii* (Berlin: Petropolis, 1936), 184-185; Blokh and Gorlin, *Izbrannye stikhotvoreniia* (Paris: Rifma, 1959), 39.

Принесла случайная молва  
Милые, ненужные слова:  
Летний Сад, Фонтанка и **Нева**.

Вы, слова залетные, куда?  
Здесь шумят **чужие** города  
И **чужая** плещется вода.

Вас не взять, не спрятать, не прогнать.  
Надо жить — не надо **вспоминать**.  
Чтобы **больно** не было опять.

Не идти ведь по **снегу** к реке,  
Пряча щеки в пензенском платке,  
Рукавица в маминой руке.

Это было, было и прошло,  
Что прошло — то вьюгой замело.  
Оттого так пусто и светло.

A literal translation: “Chance speech was carried over on the air / Those dear, unneeded words: Summer **Garden**, Fontanka and **Neva**. || You, floating words, where are you going? Here **alien** cities hum, / And **alien** water laps [at the shores]. || We cannot pick you up, hide you, or chase you away. / We must live, we must not **remember**, / So it wouldn’t **hurt** [**be painful**] again. || We won’t walk [again] on the snow to the river, / Hiding the cheeks in a Penza [woolen] shawl, / A mitten in mama’s hand. || This once was, was and passed, / What passed—was covered over with blizzard snow. / This is why it’s so empty and bright.”

Vertinsky left France in 1933 and traveled to the British Mandate of Palestine and to Lebanon. He performed to large audiences in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and Beirut. In the Fall of 1934 he sailed to America, and in 1935 traveled from San Francisco to Harbin and subsequently settled in Shanghai.





**Illustration 4.** *The former Lyceum Theater in Shanghai, where Vertinsky performed in the 1930s. Photo 2018 by Maxim D. Shrayner*

It is unclear when Vertinsky read Blokh's poem, before leaving Europe or already in America or the Far East. Taken with Blokh's poem, in 1936 he created a song based on it and titled "Chuzhie goroda" ("Alien Cities"). At that point, once again, he was beginning to contemplate repatriation to the USSR. Following a direct appeal to Viacheslav Molotov in March 1943, Vertinsky was permitted to return to the USSR; he settled in Moscow in November 1943. Circumstances surrounding the composition of the song remain to be investigated and go beyond the scope of this inquiry. Vertinsky always disclosed Blokh's authorship, even after his return to the USSR, and her name was listed on the recordings of the song released in the USSR. (This was, incidentally, a remarkable source of the Soviet audiences' knowledge about émigré authors in the climate of an almost total official taboo).

From Blokh's fifteen lines (five tercets, each tercet using a feminine grammatical rhyme of its own), Vertinsky made a text of eighteen lines with an opening tercet, followed by two quatrains, a tercet, and a closing quatrain, more advantageous for the melody and rhythm of his slow plaintive tango (boldface added):

Чужие города (Alien Cities)

Lyrics by R. Blokh and A. Vertinsky; music by A. Vertinsky

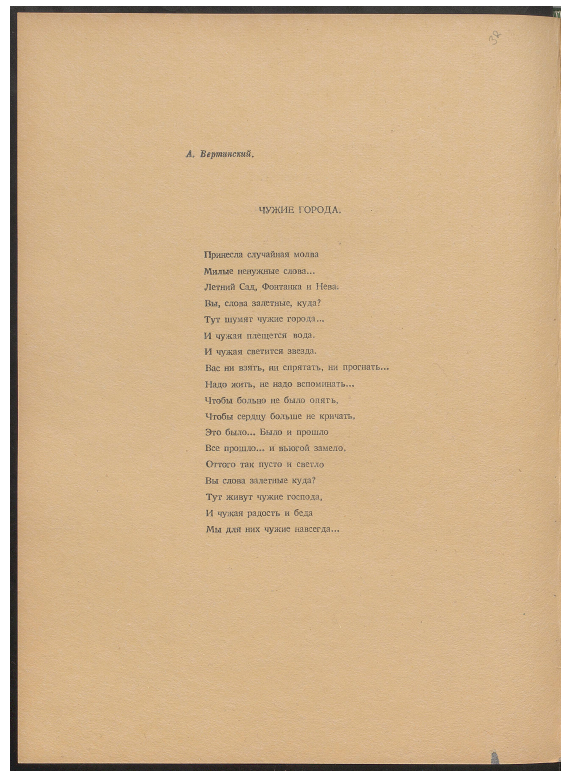
Принесла случайная молва  
Милые, ненужные слова...  
Летний **сад**, Фонтанка и **Нева**.  
Вы, слова залетные, куда?  
Тут шумят чужие города,  
И **чужая** плещется вода,  
И **чужая** светится звезда.  
Вас ни взять, ни спрятать ни прогнать.  
Надо жить – не надо **вспоминать**...  
Чтобы **больно** не было опять  
И чтоб **сердцу** больше не кричать...  
Это было... Было и прошло.  
Все прошло и вьюгой замело,  
Оттого так пусто и светло.  
Вы, слова залетные, куда?  
Тут живут **чужие** господа  
И **чужая** радость и беда.  
И мы для них **чужие** навсегда...<sup>98</sup>

(Chance speech was carried over on the air / Those dear, unneeded words... /  
Summer **Garden**, Fontanka and **Neva**. / You, floating words, where are you going?

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<sup>98</sup> Vertinskii, "Chuzhie goroda," *Pesni i stikhi*, 1937, 32; cf. *Pesni i stikhi*, 1962, 33; cf. Vertinskii, *Za kulisami*, 78.

/ Here **alien** cities hum... / And **alien** water laps [at the shores], And an **alien** star shines. || We cannot pick you up, hide you, or chase you away... / We must live, we must not **remember**... / So it wouldn't **hurt** [be painful] again, / So the **heart** won't have to scream again. || This once was, was and passed, / All passed—was covered over with blizzard snow. / This is why it's so empty and bright. / You, floating words, where are you going? / Here **alien** people [ladies and gentlemen] live, And **alien** joy and misfortune. / And we to them are **alien** forever...)



**Illustration 5.** *Vertinsky's "Alien Cities" as published in Songs and Verses. 1916-1937 (Harbin, 1937).*

Vertinsky added the lines “I chuzhaia svetitsia zvezda” (And an alien star shines) and “I chtob serdtsu bol’she ne krichat” (“So the **heart** won’t have to scream again”). He removed Blokh’s fourth tercet completely, made small modifications in the fifth, and added the last quatrain based on the second tercet, but with an addition of three lines: “Zdes’ zhivut chuzhie gospoda / I chuzhaia radost’ I beda. / I my dlia nikh — chuzhie navsegda” (Here **alien** people [ladies and gentlemen] live, / And **alien** joy and misfortune. / And we

to them are **alien** forever...). Very importantly, the line “Nado zhit’ — ne nado vspominat’” (“We must live, we must not remember”) belonged to Blokh and traveled, unchanged, to Vertinsky song lyrics. Note also that among the song’s very advantageous performative aspects was the modification and enfacement of the “Here alien cities hum...” and the other lines about alien aspects of living in exile. In the Soviet Union, the performance of these lines gave the audience a true *frisson* as it could also be contextually understood as referring not to life in exile but to life in the USSR.



**Illustration 6.** *Alexandre Vertinsky. Chuzhie goroda. Tango. Strange Cities [1.78s record]. [Vladimir Padwa at the Piano]. Tour de Foux, ca. 1930s. (Russian-records.com)*

The song was recorded several times by Vertinsky himself and by other performers. The releases included the 1930s record by Tour de Foux (France), with Vertinsky singing and Vladimir Padwa accompanying him on the piano. Konstantin Sokolsky (1904-1991) made a recording for Bellacord in the 1930s.<sup>99</sup> In January 1944 in Moscow Vertinsky and his new accompanist, Mikhail Brokhes (1909-1996), recorded fifteen songs, among them

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<sup>99</sup> [Alexandre Vertinsky], *Chuzhie goroda. Tango. Strange Cities* [1.78s record], [Vladimir Padwa at the Piano], Tour de Foux, ca. 1930s, [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=39704](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=39704), 10 September 2018; Konstantin Sokol'skii, *Chuzhie goroda* [1.78s record], Bellacord, ca. 1930s, [https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=13204](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=13204), 10 September 2018.

“Alien Cities,” for the Aprelevka Recording Factory. They were released by a number of Soviet record labels as singles/doubles and were exported and sold abroad. Eventually (Alien Cities) was included in the 1969 LP of Vertinsky’s songs under Melodia label, where it is Track 2 on Side 1.<sup>100</sup>



**Illustration 7:** Aleksandr Vertinskii. *Chuzhie goroda* [1.78s record]. Mikhail Brokhes at the Piano. Gramplasttrest; Aprelevskii zavod, 1944 (*Russian-records.com*)

How had Nabokov come to know “Alien Cities” by the time of *Pnin*’s composition? We probably will not know for sure, but the path is circuitous—through Raisa Blokh and her poem, through memory of the Shoah, through thinking of his own Jewish wife and son, the escape to America in 1940 and their survival, and through guilt by default of the sort that Pnin himself experiences in the novel. Or was it simply by listening to a recording of Vertinsky’s song and waxing nostalgic despite its message (much like Pnin watching a Soviet documentary at the end of Chapter 3), and then reacting vehemently to his own bout of nostalgia: “I must not, I must not, oh it is idiotical,” said Pnin to himself as he

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<sup>100</sup> Aleksandr Vertinskii, *Chuzhie goroda* [1.78s record], Mikhail Brokhes at the Piano, Gramplasttrest; Aprelevskii zavod, 1944 ([https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image\\_id=48405&l=russian](https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=48405&l=russian), 10 September 2018); Vertinskii. *Alenushka* [33s Record], Mikhail Brokhes at the Piano, Melodiia; Aprelevskii zavod, 1969. [Chuzhie goroda is Track 2 on Side 1.](<http://apatrid.ru/ru/record/535#.W5b-Ii2ZOMI>, accessed 10 September 2018).



felt—unaccountably, ridiculously, humiliatingly—his tear glands discharge their hot, infantine, uncontrollable fluid.”<sup>101</sup> This occurs when, in the Soviet documentary made in the late 1940s, the camera eye turns onto a Russian rural landscapes, in which Pnin sees—imagines—himself as a youth outside Soviet time. This spontaneous “I must not” haunts Pnin and the text of the novel.

A comparative lexical analysis of the text of the Blokh-Vertinsky song and the text of Nabokov’s *Pnin* reveals the presence of the following key words, previously boldfaced in the text:

**Нева** (Neva, the Neva): In *Pnin* the word “Neva” occurs 2 times, 1 time directly in connection with Mira.

**Летний сад** (*Letnii sad*, Summer Garden): forms of the word “garden” occur 13 times, 3 times directly in connection with Mira Belochkin.

**Чужие** (*chuzhie*, alien; strange; foreign): forms of the word “strange” occur 19 times; forms of the word “foreign” occur 6 times in the novel.

**Звезда** (*zvezda*, star): forms of the word “star” occurs 6 times, 1 time specifically in connection with Mira.

**Сердце** (*serdtse*, heart): forms of the word “heart” occurs 36 times, 5 times directly in connection with Mira.

**Снег** (*sneg*, snow): forms of the word “snow” occurs 15 times, 1 time directly in connection with Mira.

**Больно** (*bol’no*, painful, hurtful, aching): forms of the word “pain/ache” occur 11 times, 1 time directly in connection with Mira; “headache” 3 times; heartache 1 time.

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<sup>101</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, 81-82.

**Жить** (*zhit'*, to live: forms of the verb “to live” occurs 7 times in the novel; the word “alive” occurs 7 times in the novel.

**Вспоминать** (*vspominat'*, to remember/to recall/to recollect/to reminisce: forms of the verb “remember” occurs 21 times, 3 times directly in connection with Mira; forms of the verb “recall” 14 times, 1 time directly in connection with Mira; forms of the verb “recollect” occur 8 times in the novel, 2 times directly in connection with Mira; form of the verb “reminisce” occurs 1 time in the novel. Forms of the word “memory” occur 10. In addition, forms of “forget,” antonym of “remember,” occurs 5 times, 1 time directly in connection with Mira.

While in and of themselves these Russian proper names, nouns, adjectives, and verbs are common, in the text of *Pnin* their combination, adjacency, and contrapuntal interaction signal Nabokov’s deployment of the Blokh-Vertinsky code. The most poignant recollections of Mira and Timofey’s shared Russian youth recalls Nabokov’s familiar evocations of popular culture and popular songs (*romansy* etc.):

Timofey Pnin was again the clumsy, shy, obstinate, eighteen-year-old boy, waiting in the dark for Mira—and despite the fact that logical thought put electric bulbs into the kerosene lamps and reshuffled the people, turning them into ageing émigrés and securely, hopelessly, forever wire-netting the lighted porch, my poor Pnin, with hallucinatory sharpness, imagined Mira slipping out of there into the garden and coming toward him among tall tobacco flowers whose dull white mingled in the dark with that of her frock. This feeling coincided somehow with the sense of diffusion and dilation within his chest. Gently he laid his mallet aside and, to dissipate the anguish, started walking away from the house, through the silent pine grove. From a car which was parked near the garden tool house and which contained presumably at least two of his fellow guests' children, there issued a steady trickle of radio music.

“Jazz, jazz, they always must have their jazz, those youngsters,” muttered Pnin to himself, and turned into the path that led to the forest and river. He remembered the fads of his and Mira’s youth, the amateur theatricals, the gypsy ballads, the passion she had for photography. Where were they now, those artistic snapshots she used to take—pets, clouds, flowers, an April glade with shadows of birches on wet-sugar snow, soldiers posturing on the of a box-car, a sunset skyline, a hand holding a book? He remembered the last day they had met, on the Neva embankment in Petrograd, and the tears, and the stars, and the warm rose-red silk lining of her karakul muff. The Civil War of 1918-22 separated them: history broke their engagement. Timofey wandered southward, to join briefly the ranks of Denikin’s army, while Mira’s family escaped from the Bolsheviks to Sweden and then settled down in Germany, where eventually she married a fur dealer of Russian extraction.<sup>102</sup>

The cadence and imagery of the Blokh-Verttinsky song is felt in a number of scenes in the novel. One such example is the particularly evocative, nostalgic recollection of a spring 1911 day in the St. Petersburg of Vladimir Vladimirovich’s, Timofey Pnin’s, and Mira Belochkin’s youth in the atmospheric opening of Chapter Seven, when Vladimir Vladimirovich is taken to see Dr. Pavel Pnin and first meets his son. Here even Nabokov’s metricized English prose signals a kinship to the iambic pentameter of the song’s Russian-language lyrics:

It was one of those rough, gusty, and lustrous mornings in St. Petersburg, when the last transparent piece of Ladoga ice has been carried away to the gulf by the Neva, and her indigo waves heave and lap the granite of the embankment, and the tugboats and huge barges, moored along the quay, creak and scrape rhythmically, and the mahogany and brass of anchored steam yachts shine in the skittish sun.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, 133-134.

<sup>103</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin* 174-175.



And the same time, the lyrics of the Blokh-Vertinsky song “Alien Cities” yield their most intimate connection within the pinnacle of the novel, in the scene of Chapter 5 where Pnin remembers Mira and imagines many scenarios Mira’s martyrdom and death in the Shoah:

In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin —not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind (alas, recollections of his marriage to Liza were imperious enough to crowd out any former romance), but because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. *One had to forget—because one could not live* with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood [*italics added*].<sup>104</sup>

Consider the literary testimony of the writer David Shrayer-Petrov (b. 1936) about Vertinsky’s concert in Leningrad in 1947:

Я еще тогда плакал обо мне теперешнем... Как странно, что я тогда все пережил заранее. Я смахивал слезы на пиджак отца. Он стыдился и уговаривал меня уйти. Я схватился за край ложи и плакал в бархат. А Вертинский, надменный, как лорд, и порочный, как игрок, пророчествовал, повернув ко мне профиль грифа: «Принесла случайная молва милые

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<sup>104</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, 134-135.

ненужные слова: Летний сад, Фонтанка и Нева. Вы слова залетные, куда? Там шумят чужие города, и чужая плещется вода... Вас не взять, ни спрятать, ни прогнать. Надо жить, не надо вспоминать...»<sup>105</sup>

(Still then I cried for my present self... How strange, that back then I had lived through everything in advance. I brushed off tears onto my father's coat. He was embarrassed and implored me to leave. Clinging to the edge of the box, I cried into its velvet. And Vertinsky, arrogant like an English aristocrat, and depraved like a gambler, prophesied, turning his vulture's profile to me: "Chance speech was carried over on the air those dear, unneeded words: Summer Garden, Fontanka and Neva. You, floating words, where are you going? There alien cities hum, and alien water laps... We cannot pick you up, hide you, or chase you away... We must live, we must not remember....")<sup>106</sup>

To the postwar Soviet audience, composed of people who had lived through the Great Terror and Gulag, the Nazi invasion and the Shoah, and were still living through the postwar years of late Stalinism, this song had particular significance, and the words "We must live, we must not remember" sounded as a survivor's incantation. But what about the émigré audience of the novel? What of Pnin's seizures of (un)remembrance?

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<sup>105</sup> David Shraer-Petrov, David, "Emigrant. Aleksandr Vertinskii," *Vodka s pirozhnymi. Roman s pisateliami*, ed. Maksim D. Shraer (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2007), 21.

<sup>106</sup> David Shraer-Petrov, David], "Emigrant: Alexander Vertinsky in 1947," translated from the Russian by Maxim D. Shraer, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 January 2021. <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/emigrant-alexander-vertinsky-1947>, accessed 22 January 2022.



**Illustration 8.** Aleksandr Vertinsky. Playbill for concerts at the Actor' Studio Mosfilm, 16-17 April 1957. Mikhail Brokhes at the Piano. (*Russian-records.com*)

I would propose that, while mourning the death of Raisa Blokh and other émigrés Nabokov once knew and later lost, the novel *Pnin* offered a revision/reversion of Blokh-Vertinsky's existential formula of survivalism by turning it into both an émigré's political credo and an artist's paean of remembrance—which in the original Russian still worked as an altered line of Vertinsky's song:

Надо жить, ~~не~~ *но* надо вспоминать...

We must live, *but* we must ~~not~~ remember...

Just as Vertinsky's path, that of returning to the USSR, was for Nabokov unacceptable in both ethical and aesthetic terms, "hav[ing] to forget" was untenable for the creator of *Pnin*. However, *Pnin* himself is not always able to live by—through—memory and remembrance, which brings us to the novel's heartbreaking finale.

*Coda: Nabokov, Pnin, and the Burden of Memory*

In 1956, when *Pnin* was already in production, Doubleday, the publisher of the fourth English-language (and third American) novel by the not-yet-world-famous Nabokov, hired the would-be distinguished book artist Milton Glaser (b. 1929) to design the cover.<sup>107</sup> After Nabokov saw the first sketches of the cover, he wrote a long and detailed letter to Jason Epstein, his editor at Doubleday. With the letter, Nabokov enclosed a number of clippings with the portraits of various Russians notables:

October 1, 1956, Ithaca

Dear Mr. Epstein,

I have just received the sketches. They are executed with talent, the picture as art goes is first-rate, but in regard to my *Pnin* it is wrong: The sketch looks like the portrait of an underpaid instructor in the English department or like a Republican's notion of a defeated Adlai, when actually he should look like a Russian muzhik clean-shaven. I am sending you some photographs of *Pnin*-like Russians, with and without hair, for a visual appreciation of the items I am going to discuss.

1. The head should look quite bald, without any dark margin, and must be ampler, rounder, smoother, more dome-like. Note Zhavoronkov and Yegorov for the type of head, which however should be bigger in *Pnin*'s case, not egg-shaped. Maslov would be perfect, minus hair.

2. The glasses should be definitely tortoise-shell ones, with heavier, somewhat squarish frames.

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<sup>107</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Doubleday, 1957) [cover by Milton Glaser]. See Paul Maliszewski, *Paperback Nabokov* (Brooklyn, NY: McSweeney's, 2000); Jeremy Hatch, "Milton Glaser Remembers Nabokov," *The Daily Rumpus* 21 July 2009, <https://therumpus.net/2009/07/milton-glaser-remembers-nabokov/>, accessed 22 January 2022; see also: "Portraits of *Pnin*," 10 December 2014, <https://archives.sva.edu/blog/post/portraits-of-pnin>, accessed 22 January 2022.

3. The nose is very important. It should be the Russian potato nose, fat and broad, with prominent nostril curves. See Zhukovski for nostrils, and Obrastsov for a replica of Pnin's fat glossy organ; but Pavlov and Maslov are also good.

4. The terribly important space between nose and upper lip. This must be simian, large, long, and a central hollow and lateral furrows. See Zhavoronkov, Baykov, Yegorov, Zhukovski. The latter's lips are very Pninian. Pnin's bad teeth should not show.

5. The cheeks and jowls. Jowls and jaw should be large, broad, massive. See Baykov, Zhavoronkov, Yegorov.

6. The shoulders should be very broad, square, padded. Pnin wears a ready-made American suit of four years age.

7. The tie should be a flamboyant one.

Now, instead of all this, the sketches show a puny professor Milksop, with an egg-shaped face, flat nose, short upper lip, non-descript chin, sloping shoulders, and the necktie of a comedy bookkeeper. I have noticed long ago that for some reason illustrators do not read the books they illustrate. In my book, all the details listed above are mentioned in the first chapter, and repeated further on.

Splendid idea to have Pnin hold a book. The title on the book he holds should read

ПНИН

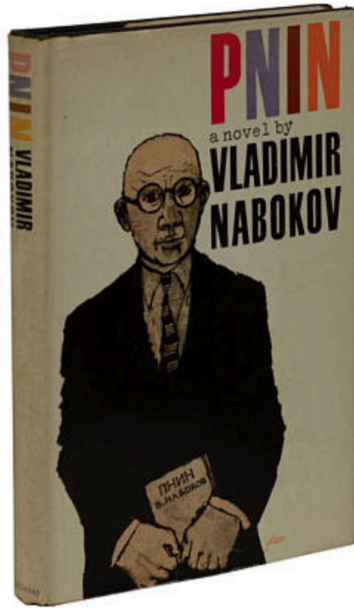
В. НАБОКОВ [...].<sup>108</sup>

Jason forwarded Nabokov's letter to Glaser. According to Paul Maliszewski, who investigated the history of Nabokov's paperback designs, "Glaser later recalled that it was an extraordinary experience for him, chiefly because Nabokov had such a precise idea of what his character looked like." Glaser also specified that Nabokov included "clippings from Russian newspapers and periodicals and that Cyrillic characters were visible." The pictures included those of the great physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936), prominent

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<sup>108</sup> Nabokov, Letter to Jason Epstein, 1 October 1956, *Selected Letters 1940-77*, edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Mathew J. Bruccoli (New York: Vintage, 1989), 190-191; reprinted in Paul Maliczewski, *Paperback Nabokov* (Brooklyn, NY: McSweeney's, 2000), 22-23. See also Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 298-299.

chemist and metal scientist Aleksandr Baikov (1870-1946), visionary puppeteer Sergei Obraztsov (1901-1992) and others. Glaser apparently told Maliczewski that he had not retained the clippings: “They weren’t something you’d keep,” he said. Later he wrote, adding, “I fear the photographs themselves have vanished into the dark pool of history.”<sup>109</sup>



**Illustration 9.** *Milson Glaser's front cover of the 1957 Doubleday edition of Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin.*

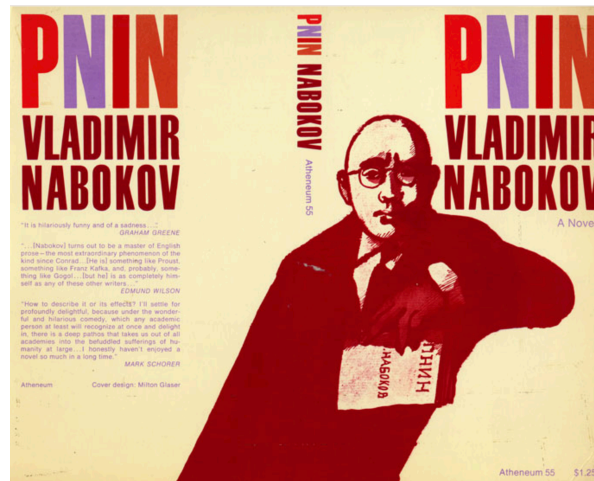
The portrait of Pnin on Glaser's 1957 cover was indeed a composite image of a generic Russian expatriate intellectual, someone whom Nabokov described in the 1958 Voice of America interview conducted by Nathalie Nabokov, ex-wife of his cousin Nicolas Nabokov, as “an émigré with a copper bald spot and a touching, tender soul—all of it suffused with the best Russian culture has to offer; lost on a shaved lawn in an alien environment amid the ‘three pines’ of American daily living.”<sup>110</sup> On the cover, a slightly spectral middle-aged man, clad in a dark suit in a striped tie, holds a book with a plain cover and the Russian words “Пнин В. Набоков” (“Pnin. V. Nabokov”) on it.

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<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Maliczewski, 17-18; cf. Hatch, “Milton Glaser Remembers Nabokov.”

<sup>110</sup> Maxim D. Shrayar, “Vladimir Nabokov's Unpublished Interview, 1958,” *Agni* 54 (2001): 113.

Ten years later, in what was a truly remarkable plot twist, Atheneum hired Glaser to do a new cover, this time for the paperback of *Pnin*.<sup>111</sup> This time, apparently, the Nabokov of *Lolita* fame and stardom was not consulted. Glaser's second cover, while still featuring an intellectual in round glasses holding the Russian book *Pnin* by "V. Nabokov," bears a striking resemblance to Nabokov himself, and specifically as he is portrayed in one of the photographs that the American photographer Carl Mydans (1907-2004) took in Ithaca, New York in 1958 while on assignment for a photo essay published in *Life* magazine.<sup>112</sup> In the photograph in question, Nabokov is sitting in the passenger seat of a car, his head and torso turned toward the camera's eye. In his left hand he holds a pad and index cards with notes, and in his right, a pencil pointing down to the ground. The resemblance should not be overplayed, but nor should we miss Glaser's emphasis on the connections between *Pnin* and his creator.



**Illustration 10.** Jacket of Milton Glaser's cover for the 1967 Atheneum edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*.

<sup>111</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) [cover by Milton Glaser].

<sup>112</sup> Mydans, Carl, ["Author Vladimir Nabokov Looking out of Car Window, Likes to Work in the Car," Ithaca, 1958.], [https://www.allposters.com/-sp/Author-Vladimir-Nabokov-Writing-in-His-Car-He-Likes-to-Work-in-the-Car-Writing-on-Index-Cards-Posters\\_i3841273\\_.htm](https://www.allposters.com/-sp/Author-Vladimir-Nabokov-Writing-in-His-Car-He-Likes-to-Work-in-the-Car-Writing-on-Index-Cards-Posters_i3841273_.htm), accessed 22 January 2022; [Photos of Vladimir and Véra Nabokov. Ithaca, 1958, with Essay by Ben Cosgrove], *Life*. Carl Mydans, <https://www.life.com/animals/vladimir-nabokov-and-his-butterflies-photos/>, accessed 26 January 2022.



**Illustration 11.** Carl Mydans's 1958 photograph of Nabokov in the passenger seat of a car (*Allposters.com*)

In the beginning of Chapter 7 “Vladimir Vladimirovich,” a preeminent figure of Russian émigré letters, arrives in Waindell to assume a senior professorship. Vladimir Vladimirovich briefly recalls meeting young Pnin in 1911 in St. Petersburg, and the recollection harkens back to Pnin’s own earlier memories of his Russian youth and of Mira Belochkin, and also to the language and imagery of Blokh-Vertinsky’s “Alien Cities,” with its nostalgic evocation of the Neva and its condemnation of the Lethean waters of the Spree, the Seine, or the Huangpu lapping at their “alien” shores. Vladimir Vladimirovich then recalls seeing Pnin as well as Mira Belochkina and her brother Grisha outside St. Petersburg in 1916, as they put on an amateur performance of Arthur Schnitzler’s *Liebelei* (in which Mira plays Mizi Schlager, and in which young Nabokov apparently appeared in a Yalta production of 1918-1919; we should not overlook the connection between Mizi’s last name and the German term for a popular catchy tune with a vocal component).<sup>113</sup> After that Vladimir Vladimirovich goes on to reconstruct his Parisian acquaintance with Pnin’s

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<sup>113</sup> See also Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact*, 98; 270-271. About Nabokov’s acting in Schnitzler’s *Liebelei*, see Barabtarlo 271; Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (New York: Viking, 1977), 131.



wife Liza Bogolepova and her Akhmatovian poetic parrottries—which, as we come to recognize, also display Nabokov’s residual lack of appreciation for Raisa Blokh’s own poetry.<sup>114</sup>

In the novel’s final two pages, Vladimir Vladimirovich observes a “small pale blue sedan,” which is driving, in a tango-like rhythm—leaving behind Waindell and the confines of novel that is not really possible yet plausible without him in it. We shall recall that Vladimir Vladimirovich had offered to employ Pnin in the academic program he was starting at Waindell College, but Pnin categorically refused: “I will never work under him.” This refusal could be understood in a number of literary and metaliterary ways familiar to the readers of both the Russian and the American Nabokov. And yet the refusal offers a corrective to Nabokov’s previous relationships with his “representatives,” notably with Vasilii Ivanovich, whom his creator releases at the end of “Cloud, Castle, Lake.” Pnin’s refusal to work for—under—Vladimir Nabokov also speaks to his discomfort at not being free *not* to remember. In order to live, Pnin must let go of at least some of his memories. Pnin is released, at least from *Pnin* (he resurfaces in *Pale Fire*, but that is another story for another occasion). Pnin is granted the option of relief-release that Vertinsky sings about in “Alien Cities.” Vladimir Vladimirovich, however, must remember everything, and so ultimately the Vertinsky-Blokh polemical code in and around the novel focuses on Nabokov’s peerless gift for crafting the horrors of history into the art of memory.

Born emotionally out of a mix of Nabokov’s residual regret over his review of Raisa Blokh’s poetry, the deeply personal connection Nabokov felt, as a husband of a Jewish woman and a father of a Jewish son, to victims of the Shoah, and Nabokov’s contempt for those *apatrides* who returned to the USSR, the novel *Pnin* never quite resolved the problem of memory and remembrance. Or should we put it differently? And thus: The novel’s protagonist, Professor Timofey Pnin, never quite learned to live and resist unremembrance.

Students of *Pnin* note Nabokov’s changing—evolving—attitude toward his protagonist. Brian Boyd, who has chronicled the history of the novel’s composition, writes of Nabokov’s letter to Katharine White, then the fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, which accompanied Nabokov’s submission of what became the first installment: “Sending it to

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<sup>114</sup> About this, see Shroyer, “Raisa Blokh as an Historical, Literary and Emotional Source for Nabokov’s *Pnin*,” 650-655.

Katharine White at the end of July [1953], he added a curious comment, decidedly out of keeping with his later admiration for the man: “He is not a very nice person but he is fun.”<sup>115</sup> On 8 December 1955, in a letter accompanying the submission of *Pnin* to Harper & Brothers, which would reject it, Nabokov wrote: “In *Pnin*, I created an entirely new character, the line of which has never appeared in any book. A man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and a staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love, he never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity.”<sup>116</sup>

At the end of the novel, Vladimir Vladimirovich [Nabokov?] frees Timofey Pavlovich Pnin—his contemporary and confrère, his privileged representative, and even his potential employee. If Pnin is not released not from the burden of memory, then at least Vladimir Vladimirovich frees Timofey Pavlovich from the burden of moral responsibility to remember and memorialize. Pnin leaves the physical space of the novel; that is the paradoxical freedom he is given. Vladimir Vladimirovich himself does not have such a freedom. He does not face the dilemma of choice: to remember or not to remember. For him to live means to remember (or, in the Blokh-Vertinsky context, not to *unremember*), to remember, transform and immortalize through art and in art. Only in his finest moments is Pnin his creator’s reflection and true “tvin.”

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<sup>115</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 225.

<sup>116</sup> Nabokov, Letter to Cass Canfield, 8 December 1955, *Selected Letters 1940-77*, 180.

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