

The Joy of Recognition. Selected Essays of Omry Ronen, ed. by Barry P. Scherr and Michael Wachtel. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Publications, 2015. 468 pp. ISBN 9780936534176



Omry Ronen (born July 12, 1937, Odessa, died November 1, 2012, Ann Arbor).

Photograph from the Ronen family archive

Lovingly collected in close consultation with the widow, herself a noted scholar, well-edited by his friends and fans, and generously published by his colleagues at Michigan University, where he taught all sorts of things Slavic until his death in 2012, this hefty posthumous volume is a bulging bag of presents.

Of twenty-eight articles five and a half are devoted to Nabokov directly: “‘Diabolically Evocative’: An Inquiry into the Meaning of a Metaphor” (with Irena Ronen); “Viktor Shklovsky’s Tracks in ‘A Guide to Berlin’”; “Nabokov and Goethe”; “Nine Notes to *The Gift*”; “The Triple Anniversary of World Literature: Goethe, Pushkin,

Nabokov”, and a large part of “Trans-Sense As Signifier and Signified in Non-Futurist Texts”. Besides, Nabokov is discussed or mentioned in a dozen more places.

The rest show a tremendous range of topics, fresh angles, uncommon combinations of names and trends. The book, in short, is a lode of first-rate philology; mining it eggs — and satisfies — scholarly curiosity while giving the reader rare pleasure. A few of the articles were translated from Russian specially for this edition: translated well, I should add, but Ronen’s precise and always correct English affords one subtler joy.

Omry Ronen didn’t publish many books (a comprehensive list of his publications is appended at the end of the volume), only two of them in English: *An Approach to Mandelstam* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press of the Hebrew University, 1983) — an extensive (400 pp.), original presentation of Mandelstam’s poetics, and *The Fallacy of the Silver Age in 20th c. Russian Literature* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), but the number of articles from 1968 to 2013 is staggering.

He constantly reverted to Nabokov, whom he much admired and knew fundamentally well. His sharp observations and little bold findings, some of them published here for the first time and some still unpublished, have helped a number of scholars, myself including, to shed light on various dim spots in Nabokov’s books.

An Index of Names is one of the most fascinating sections of any of Ronen’s books, English or Russian, and this one is no exception. On average two *newly encountered names* appear on *every* page, for the astounding total of 750 names from Adamovich to Zolotonosov.

I could have rounded this by simply saying something trite, e.g. that it should be obvious from the above that I strongly recommend this collection to anyone seriously interested in Russian letters in general and in Nabokov in particular — had it not been for the fact that I knew Omry Ronen for a number of years, although our interaction was mostly by correspondence. I should like therefore to take this opportunity, as well as the advantage of the liberating notion that ‘online’ publications usually have no strict space

limitations, to share a few of my personal recollections of that singular man. I published a tribute to him in a Russian monthly, and what follows is loosely based on that short piece.

The word for “sudden” in Church Slavonic used to be “*naprasnyi*”, which later in Russian grew to mean “idle”, as in “idle hope”, “in vain”. The jump from the still very fresh, later almost daily correspondence with Ronen, his characteristic diction sounding in his emails almost like a familiar voiceover — to a telephone breaking the news of his death was so sudden that consciousness inadvertently laced the Slavonic adjective with the Russian meaning, and one had the sense that your friend had died in a car crash. In that Russian semi-obituary, I published a few of his letters to me choosing those that turned out to be “pre-mortal”, on those well-known grounds that in hindsight the last words, whether said or written, acquire a new, often mysterious, significance. ‘Leila’, ‘Laura’, ‘...My heart could well cool off by now’ (all Pushkin’s last), ‘The stream of Time’ (Derzhavin), ‘Alone I come upon the road’ (Lermontov), ‘The Sacrifice’ (Tarkovsky) can be viewed in a different psycho-semantic plane precisely because after them came nothing, just a mysterious silence and an ‘icy ripple on the waters of the canal’,” as Blok would have it.

Ronen was a philologist in the true, specialized, no-nonsense meaning of the term, which expands and flares as it tries to embrace the entire available humanities. It presupposes expertise in languages, classical and new; expertise in history; expertise in the theory of European literatures — expertise, in other words, in the cultural history of man. His erudition, and thus memory, on which erudition depends for maintenance, defied credulity. In his home university (Michigan) he lectured all over the repertory, from antiquity to recent, from “Great Russian” prose to “Lesser Russian” poetry. My old impracticable wish had been to sit on any one of his courses. He called himself a disciple of Roman Jakobson and Kirill Taranovsky, was proud of it without showing it off, as he never showed off his seemingly superhuman scope of knowledge and the ability to integrate bits and pieces of stored data into a coherent narrative. This distinguished him favorably from Shklovsky’s patchwork, even if he resembled Shklovsky in syntax and

perhaps style.¹ Moreover, those narratives could be forced but were never deliberately far-fetched and fictionalized, as often happens in the genre of “notes from memory”.

I already mentioned the incredible density of names found in Ronen’s writing, saying that in the book under review one comes upon two new names on every page. His Russian books are even denser in this respect. In one of the four collections of his Russian essays, originally serialized in the *Zvezda* monthly, I encountered three *new* names on average in each page! And those names were not simply dropped or scattered but connected by association. I am at a loss to find a term for this phenomenon. Polyanthropoantemionomy? Enough syllables for a hexametric line.

Often scholarly inklings look implausible even if happy; but Ronen’s propositions seemed probable even when hypertrophied. For example, in Pasternak’s poem “1917-1942” he found that the first lines, “*Zakoldovannoe chislo, / Ty so mnoi pri liuboi peremene*” (“A spellbound number, / You are with me at every turn [of life]”) hide the grumbling Russian saying “*opiat’ dvadtsat’ piat’*” (“25 again!”) which means, roughly, “Oh no, not again” — 25 years since October 25, 1917. “Silly, but true” he wrote me about his work on deciphering Pasternak’s puzzles, probably his last philological étude. Another of his very last little discoveries concerned the hazily mysterious “Green Lady,” in reference to Louise von Lenz (from “The Assistant Producer”): a long and labyrinthine research led him to believe that it had to do not with anything from the King Arthur cycle (my shallow supposition), and not directly with the famous *baumkuchen* that Louise Lenz made for the Prussian King in the 19th c. (Ronen’s initial idea, linked with the next sentence: “...she sweetened”), but with Boris Poplavski’s sister Nathalie, a bohemian who wrote a popular romance “*Ty edesh’ pianaia i ochen’ blednaia*” (“You’re riding drunk and very pale”), who emigrated to Paris and then clean disappeared, and who published in 1917 a collection titled *Verses of the Green Lady!*

By complexion and deportment he somewhat resembled Tynianov as the latter might have looked at Ronen’s age: a noble subtlety and terseness of features, a pianist’s

¹ Mrs Ronen points out that her late husband stressed his stylistic indebtedness to Vladimir (Zeev) Zhabotinsky.

head, small hands which Tolstoy liked to give to his favorite characters. One could see in him what they used to call *la race*. Indeed, he liked to go into great details of his genealogy on both sides, such as, for example, that his “paternal grandfather converted to Roman Catholicism and received the blessing of the Holy Father [i.e. Pope Leo XIII] after his pilgrimage to Rome in *anno santo* 1900.”

Nowadays it is almost assumed that the so-called sense of humor is a requisite, inalienable component of an “intelligent man” (in the Russian notion of the word), where humor is understood not as a gentle way to moisturize one’s speech but as a degree of irony, indulging effectively the innate habit of speaking indirectly, of separating the name and the meaning. Ronen, who certainly counted himself among the intelligentsia, exhibited surprisingly little of this sort of humor, and even though he smiled often, he very seldom joked, never slipped to irony, and it somehow struck his interlocutor as an attractive personal touch.

He was given to exaggerating the importance of some figures, was much too forgiving in regard to certain stained reputations if their carriers happened to be Jews (I remember quoting to him an appallingly vile pack of grotesquery that Ilya Ehrenburg published in a Soviet military daily in 1943, and Ronen said, well, one ought to take into consideration for whom and against what background that was written), and could, on the other hand, be excessively stern, even trenchant towards young scholars who had the misfortune of blurting out in his presence at a conference, or in print, something stupid, some silly mistake of fact or judgment. But with time his critical spondees leveled out, his touch softened, which became quite obvious to those who remembered how presenters used to turn pale on spotting Ronen in the audience: they realized full well that he knew about the topic of their paper more than they did, having witnessed on many occasions the high art of philological fencing as he elegantly and ruthlessly disarmed his opponents, sparing some total annihilation but making others writhe from his irrefutable, precise references and arguments.

In the fall of 2012 I invited him to come over to my university with a lecture. He wrote that he was to go to St. Petersburg in October and might come on his return: “I’d

like to come but there is a lot on my plate, and besides I'll have to see how I feel after the trip.”

He liked Latin inscriptions — in books, on pediments, on memorial stones, and I could easily imagine that he would devise something like this for his tombstone:

Viator, sta near:
Freed of earthly fetters
A studious man of letters
Is buried here.

I would say, overriding his modesty, “...a *brilliant* man of letters...”; but it turned out that there was no gravestone to inscribe, indeed no grave: his ashes were scattered on the flowerbed in his favorite park, and a chance passer-by will not halt there – only those who knew and loved him, those who know and love the place.

He died on November 1.

ADDENDUM

I translate below a few excerpts from Ronen's last letters to me that have to do with Nabokov.

“Disagree about “Conversation Piece” [I had said that it was one of VN's weakest stories]. It's a sketch of *eternal* evil rather than topical (“*zloba dnia*”). “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,” but that evil is not, and will not, pass.”

“Was reading Nabokov *en regard* [his stories alongside my translations] last night before bedtime. It seems to have been already observed that the “man — horse — cock” series [re. Tolstoy's spirit in the séance in “The Vane Sisters”] can be seen in the picture of the [the carved railing of] veranda in Yasnaya Poliana. Should it not be explained, however, that the chinchillas in “Lance” belong to the order of “porcupinish rodents”, *hystricomorpha*? Or let the reader get this for himself? A common dilemma for an editor.”

“Oh no, Nabokov has an actual namesake of that sort. By the way, Dmitri Nabokov once said in passing that a similar incident did take place. I think that “Conversation Piece” is a draft to Pnin's party, Hagen etc. This is why the Idelsons didn't come. This is how Nabokov was: he let the Jews to get away with their leftiness, just as he did the Negroes, W.E.B. Du Bois et al.”

“There are so many riddles in the very texture of “Assistant Producer”! Why so many “Fedya's” — Chaliapin, Fedchenko, Fr. Fedor. Could it really be that he was summoning the “feds” (as the narrator wants in “Conversation Piece”), having spotted

Skoblin with his old cigarette-case in the cinema? A silly thought, and yet the last passage was omitted in so many editions, and VN didn't object."

"Truth be told, I like "Scenes" [from the "Life of a Double Monster"]. He wrote [his wife] when Ilf died: it's like the Siamese twins have been separated. Yes, it's a disagreeable topic, but Nabokov has tried many disagreeable topics. He managed them well. I think V.E. [who disliked the story] saw in it something very personal, even intimate, of which we can't know."

"*Pnin*. Chapter 2 contains, it seems, a parody of Akhmatova epigones [rather than Akhmatova herself], who, on the other hand, were themselves parodies of their idol. Someone, as I remember, pointed out the poetry of Chervinskaya as a specific butt of the parody, "*skazal — glaza*", the truncated rhyme that VN couldn't stomach.

"The Russian *littérateurs* in *LATH* have Anglo-American counterparts: Demian Basilevski — Edmund Wilson, just as Prostakov-Skotinin is Orvill Prescott, while Ivan Alexeevich Shipogradov — Bunin + Thornton Wilder. I think I wrote about this somewhere. And, conversely, Alden Landover is Aldanov, Landau. I have deciphered all names in *LATH* except Lazarev (Kelberin?) and Fartuk.² Partly published in *Philologica*, partly in *Emulation* (in *Nabokov Studies*). The hardest was Suknovalov, which is likely Roy Fuller at whom Nabokov was angry (see his letter in *The New Statesman*). A hint at his social criticism articles, I think. Oxman, it seems, is not only Fondaminsky and characters from *The Island of Dr Moreau* but also the Pushkin scholar, who, too, was thrown in the [Soviet] concentration camp. VN must have forgotten that."

² Could this be Mark Vishniak or perhaps Orest Zeliuk? (*NOJ*'s editorial footnote).

“I, too, have pondered the strange affinity of *Brideshead Revisited* to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* [epigraph, Rider— Knight, ending etc.]. There could be no genetic link but perhaps some common segments in the authors’ respective reading. Or a common quest; it’s not for nothing that Nabokov was so apprehensive with regard to Catholicism — a mighty adversary.”

“I think he gave such names [Louise von Lenz, The Green Lady] just for the American reader who doesn’t know them, thus gong after the same effect as ‘Slavska’, an unknown name, even though the story is based on true facts. On the other hand, a Russian émigré reader — like Struve et al. — would sense something here. There are several castles the Green Lady roams but it does not fit at all the plot which requires an energetic and ambitious [here Ronen uses a slightly odd imperfective ‘пробивающаяся’, fighting one’s way through, instead of the expected slang ‘пробивная’, go-getting]. The American reader would be searching books about famous spies of both sexes — and would come up empty-handed. [VN's] little jokes. But Poplavski interested Nabokov, and they said that it was Poplavski's sister who got him into drugs. Besides, she authored songs that became popular. It would be interesting to know whether Plevitskaia sang them.”

“It has occurred to me (an hour ago, while sitting in the dentist's chair during regular cleaning) that there is indeed a kinship among Plevitskaia, Louise Lenz, and Natalia Poplavskaia. All three forced their way to the grand monde, in the vicinity of the royal family: Plevitskaia — to the Tsarskoe Selo [the summer palace of the Russian Royalty]; Lenz — to the King of Prussia, and after Poplavskaia’s disappearance a legend had it that she had charmed some exotic potentate and married him. It would be curious to read “The Poems of the Green Lady”. There is a copy online offered for 5,000 rubles [about \$80]. She clearly calls herself “the Green Lady”, else it would look too much like Blok[’s ‘Fair Lady’].”

“In the romance, the words are Natalia Poplavskaia’s, the music by an anonymous composer. There is no reason, of course, to mention the similarity of the three women in the commentaries, let the reader think for himself, but that the Green Lady, ‘perhaps’ is Natalia P., the author of the book ‘Verses of the Green Lady’, a rumor-churning personage of bohemian circles in Moscow and Paris — this, to my mind, is more likely and more interesting than the Scottish revenant...”

“The only real name in ‘Assistant Producer’ seems to be Fedor Chaliapin (unlike the rest of the Fedors). The Berlin sponsor is of course Max Eitingon, her psychiatrist, whom one Oxford fool later slandered. By the way, I saw *Dezhkin Karagod* and another Plevitskaia’s book in the Eitingon Foundation in Jerusalem, with a sweet inscription. Eitingon — who was Freud’s personal doctor — had, strange as it might sound, many patients among the whitest émigrés, including I think Prince Dm. Shakhovskoi — and on the opposite pole, Trotsky’s hapless daughter.”

“I fancy the name of ‘Fr. Fedor’ comes from *The Twelve Chairs* (where he is, in part, a parody of Dostoevsky’s letter to Anna Grigor’evna [his wife]: ‘As ever your husband Fedia’). Evidently he is the narrator, a former priest. As Fedchenko, I think it has to do with the surname of the Fergana explorer who perished in the Alps so mysteriously (he is mentioned in [VN’s short story] ‘The Circle’. Names came to Nabokov from unexpected sources. The late Karlinsky thought that Revshin [a character in *The Event*] was composed of REVizor [*Inspector General*] + SHINel’ [*The Oversoat*], and yet it turned out that it was the surname of an extinct Russian nobility.”

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