In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1967) VN describes his first love and mentions the Hermitage, “St Petersburg’s Louvre:”

The Hermitage, St Petersburg's Louvre, offered nice nooks, especially in a certain hall on the ground floor, among cabinets with scarabs, behind the sarcophagus of Nana, high priest of Ptah. (Chapter Twelve, 2)

*Nana* (1880) is a novel by Émile Zola, the ninth installment in the 20-volume [*Les Rougon-Macquart*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Rougon-Macquart) series.

Zola + emblem + Sirin = Zembla + lemon + iris

In *Speak, Memory* VN mentions his Russian nom de plume:

But the author that interested me most was naturally Sirin. He belonged to my generation. Among the young writers produced in exile he was the loneliest and most arrogant one. Beginning with the appearance of his first novel in 1925 and throughout the next fifteen years, until he vanished as strangely as he had come, his work kept provoking an acute and rather morbid interest on the part of critics. Just as Marxist publicists of the eighties in old Russia would have denounced his' lack of concern with the economic structure of society, so the mystagogues of emigre letters deplored his lack of religious insight and of moral preoccupation. Everything about him was bound to offend Russian conventions and especially that Russian sense of decorum which, for example, an American shocks so dangerously today, when in the presence of Soviet military men of distinction he happens to lounge with both hands in his trouser pockets. Conversely, Sirin's admirers made much, perhaps too much, of his unusual style, brilliant precision, functional imagery and that sort of thing. Russian readers who had been raised on the sturdy straightforwardness of Russian realism and had called the bluff of decadent cheats, were impressed by the mirror-like angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences and by the fact that the real life of his books flowed, in his figures of speech, which one critic has compared to 'windows giving upon a contiguous world . . . a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train of thought.' Across the dark sky of exile, Sirin passed, to use a simile of a more conservative nature, like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness. His best works are those in which he condemns his people to the solitary confinement of their souls. (Chapter Fourteen, 2)

Ptah sounds like *ptakh*, an obsolete form of *ptitsa* (bird). The diminutive of *ptakh*, *ptashechka* (little bird), is still in use. In a letter of Oct. 17, 1889, to Suvorin Chekhov quotes the first part of the proverb *rano ptashechka zapela, kak by koshechka ne s’yela* (it is too early to rejoice, things may end up badly; literally: “the bird began to sing too early, it can be eaten by the cat”):

Не радуйтесь, что Вы попали в мою пьесу. Рано пташечка запела. Ваша очередь ещё впереди. Коли буду жив, опишу феодосийские ночи, которые мы вместе проводили в разговорах, и ту рыбную ловлю, когда Вы шагали по палям линтварёвской мельницы, — больше мне от Вас пока ничего не нужно. В пьесе же Вас нет да и не может быть, хотя Григорович со свойственною ему проницательностью и видит противное. В пьесе идет речь о человеке нудном, себялюбивом, деревянном, читавшем об искусстве 25 лет и ничего не понимавшем в нём; о человеке, наводящем на всех уныние и скуку, не допускающем смеха и музыки и проч. и проч. и при всём том необыкновенно счастливом. Не верьте Вы, бога ради, всем этим господам, ищущим во всём прежде всего худа, меряющим всех на свой аршин и приписывающим другим свои личные лисьи и барсучьи черты. Ах, как рад этот Григорович! И как бы все они обрадовались, если бы я подсыпал Вам в чай мышьяку или оказался шпионом, служащим в III отделении. Вы скажете, конечно, что всё это пустяки. Нет, не пустяки. Если бы моя пьеса шла, то вся публика с лёгкой руки изолгавшихся шалопаев говорила бы, глядя на сцену: «Так вот какой Суворин! Вот какая его жена! Гм... Скажите, а мы и не знали».

Chekhov asks Suvorin (who hoped that he would appear as a character in Chekhov’s new play “The Wood Demon”) not to rejoice too early. In VN’s novel *Pale Fire* (1962) Kinbote (Shade’s mad commentator who imagines that he is Charles the Beloved, the last self-exiled king of Zembla) hopes that Shade will portray him and his native Zembla in his new poem and is frustrated to find that Shade’s poem is completely void of him and his Zembla:

We know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem a kind of *romaunt*, about the King of Zembla. We have been prepared for the horrible disappointment in store for me. Oh, I did not expect him to devote himself completely to that theme! It might have been blended of course with some of his own life stuff and sundry Americana--but I was sure his poem would contain the wonderful incidents I had described to him, the characters I had made alive for him and all the unique atmosphere of my kingdom. I even suggested to him a good title--the title of the book in me whose pages he was to cut: *Solus Rex*; instead of which I saw *Pale Fire*, which meant to me nothing. I started to read the poem. I read faster and faster. I sped through it, snarling, as a furious young heir through an old deceiver's testament. Where were the battlements of my sunset castle? Where was Zembla the Fair? Where her spine of mountains? Where her long thrill through the mist? And my lovely flower boys, and the spectrum of the stained windows, and the Black Rose Paladins, and the whole marvelous tale? Nothing of it was there! The complex contribution I had been pressing upon him with a hypnotist's patience and a lover's urge was simply not there. Oh, but I cannot express the agony! Instead of the wild glorious romance--what did I have? An autobiographical, eminently Appalachian, rather old-fashioned narrative in a neo-Popian prosodic style--beautifully written of course--Shade could not write otherwise than beautifully---but void of my magic, of that special rich streak of magical madness which I was sure would run through it and make it transcend its time. (note to Line 1000)

“The Black Rose Paladins” bring to mind a black rose in a goblet of Ay (champagne) in Alexander Blok’s poem *V restorane* (“In a Restaurant,” 1910):

Я сидел у окна в переполненном зале.

Где-то пели смычки о любви.

Я послал тебе чёрную розу в бокале

Золотого, как нёбо, аи.

I sat by the window in a crowded room.

Distant bows were singing of love.

I sent you a black rose in a goblet

Of champagne, golden as the sky.

One of Blok’s poems begins *Ne zatem velichal ya sebya paladinom…* (“Not for that I called myself a paladin…” 1908):

Не затем величал я себя паладином,

Не затем ведь и ты приходила ко мне,

Чтобы только рыдать над потухшим камином,

Чтобы только плясать при умершем огне!

Или счастие вправду неверно и быстро?

Или вправду я слаб уже, болен и стар?

Нет! В золе ещё бродят последние искры,

Есть огонь, чтобы вспыхнул пожар!

Describing in *Speak, Memory* his last meeting with Tamara, VN mentions Alexander Blok:

I do remember, however, with heartbreaking vividness, a certain evening in the summer of 1917 when, after a winter of incomprehensible separation, I chanced to meet Tamara on a suburban train. For a few minutes between two stops, in the vestibule of a rocking and rasping car, we stood next to each other, I in a state of intense embarrassment, of crushing regret, she consuming a bar of chocolate, methodically breaking off small, hard bits of the stuff, and talking of the office where she worked. On one side of the tracks, above bluish bogs, the dark smoke of burning peat was mingling with the smoldering wreck of a huge, amber sunset. It can be proved, I think, by published records that Alexander Blok was even then noting in his diary the very peat smoke I saw, and the wrecked sky. There was later a period in my life when I might have found this relevant to my last glimpse of Tamara as she turned on the steps to look back at me before descending into the jasmin-scented, cricket-mad dusk of a small station; but today no alien marginalia can dim the purity of the pain. (Chapter Twelve, 2)

In the Foreword to *Vozmezdie* (“Retribution,” 1910-21) Blok calls his poem “my Rougon-Macquarts:”

Такую идею я хотел воплотить в моих "Rougon-Macquar'ах" в малом масштабе, в коротком обрывке рода русского, живущего в условиях русской жизни: "Два-три звена, и уж видны заветы тёмной старины"... Путём катастроф и падений мои "Rougon-Macquar'ы" постепенно освобождаются от русско-дворянского education sentimentale, "уголь превращается в алмаз", Россия - в новую Америку; в новую, а не в старую Америку.

Describing the theme of his poem, Blok mentions *luchshie almazy v chelovecheskoy korone* (the best diamonds in man’s crown), such as humanism, virtues, impeccable honesty, high morality, etc:

Тема заключается в том, как развиваются звенья единой цепи рода. Отдельные отпрыски всякого рода развиваются до положенного им предела и затем вновь поглощаются окружающей мировой средой; но в каждом отпрыске зреет и отлагается нечто новое и нечто более острое, ценою бесконечных потерь, личных трагедий, жизненных неудач, падений и т.д.; ценою, наконец, потери тех бесконечно высоких свойств, которые в своё время сияли, как лучшие алмазы в человеческой короне (как, например, свойства гуманные, добродетели, безупречная честность, высокая нравственность и проч.)

“The best diamonds in man’s crown” bring to mind the Zemblan crown jewels vainly looked for by Andronnikov and Niagarin (the two Soviet experts hired by the new Zemblan government):

However, not all Russians are gloomy, and the two young experts from Moscow whom our new government engaged to locate the Zemblan crown jewels turned out to be positively rollicking. The Extremists were right in believing that Baron Bland, the Keeper of the Treasure, had succeeded in hiding those jewels before he jumped or fell from the North Tower; but they did not know he had had a helper and were wrong in thinking the jewels must be looked for in the palace which the gentle white-haired Bland had never left except to die. I may add, with pardonable satisfaction, that they were, and still are, cached in a totally different--and quite unexpected--corner of Zembla.

In an earlier note ([to line 130](http://www.shannonrchamberlain.com/commentary.html#comline130)) the reader has already glimpsed those two treasure hunters at work. After the King's escape and the belated discovery of the secret passage, they continued their elaborate excavations until the palace was all honeycombed and partly demolished, an entire wall of one room collapsing one night, to yield, in a niche whose presence nobody had suspected, an ancient salt cellar of bronze and King Wigbert's drinking horn; but you will never find our crown, necklace and scepter.

All this is the rule of a supernal game, all this is the immutable fable of fate, and should not be construed as reflecting on the efficiency of the two Soviet experts--who, anyway, were to be marvelously successful on a later occasion with another job (see [note to line 747](http://www.shannonrchamberlain.com/commentary.html#comline747)). Their names (probably fictitious) were Andronnikov and Niagarin. One has seldom seen, at least among waxworks, a pair of more pleasant, presentable chaps. Everybody admired their clean-shaven jaws, elementary facial expressions, wavy hair, and perfect teeth. Tall handsome Andronnikov seldom smiled but the crinkly little ays of his orbital flesh bespoke infinite humor while the twin furrows descending from the sides of his shapely nostrils evoked glamorous associations with flying aces and sagebrush heroes. Niagarin, on the other hand, was of comparatively short stature, had somewhat more rounded, albeit quite manly features, and every now and then would flash a big boyish smile remindful of scoutmasters with something to hide, or those gentlemen who cheat in television quizzes. It was delightful to watch the two splendid Sovietchiks running about in the yard and kicking a chalk-dusty, thumping-tight soccer ball (looking so large and bald in such surroundings). Andronnikov could tap-play it on his toe up and down a dozen times before punting it pocket straight into the melancholy, surprised, bleached, harmless heavens; and Niagarin could imitate to perfection the mannerisms of a certain stupendous Dynamo goalkeeper. They used to hand out to the kitchen boys Russian caramels with plums or cherries depicted on the rich luscious six-cornered wrappers that enclosed a jacket of thinner paper with the mauve mummy inside; and lustful country girls were known to creep up along the *drungen* (bramble-choked footpaths) to the very foot of the bulwark when the two silhouetted against the now flushed sky sang beautiful sentimental military duets at eventide on the rampart. Niagarin had a soulful tenor voice, and Andronnikov a hearty baritone, and both wore elegant jackboots of a soft black leather, and the sky turned away showing its ethereal vertebrae. (note to Line 681)

At the end of Chekhov’s play *Dyadya Vanya* (“Uncle Vanya,” 1898) Sonya promises to uncle Vanya that they will see the sky swarming with diamonds. According to Chekhov, Professor Serebryakov (a character in “The Wood Demon,” 1890, a play later reworked into “Uncle Vanya”) is not a portrayal of Suvorin (the editor of *Novoe vremya*). In the same letter of Oct. 17, 1889, to Suvorin Chekhov mentions his portrait in a newspaper placed vis-à-vis with the Persian Shah:

Ваши сынки подают большие надежды. Цену за «Стоглав» повысили, а объём его убавили. Обещали мне за рассказы бочонок вина и надули, а чтоб я не сердился, поместили мой портрет vis-à-vis с шахом персидским. Кстати о шахе. Читал я недавно стихи «Политический концерт», где про шаха говорится приблизительно так: и шах персидский, чудак всегдашний, поехал в Париж, чтобы сравнить <...> с Эйфелевой башней.

In Canto Three of his poem Shade mentions Shahs, gloomy Russian spies and his wife’s portrait by Lang (a name that means “long” and brings to mind Jung, a name that means “young”):

Mars glowed. Shahs married. Gloomy Russians spied.   
Lang made your portrait. And one night I died. (ll. 681-682)

The “real” name of Sybil Shade (the poet’s wife) seems to be Sofia Botkin (born Lastochkin). Sonya is a diminutive of Sofia. *Lastochki* (“Swallows,” 1884) is a poem by Fet whose wife was née Botkin.

In the fall of 1826 Pushkin (whose ideal was now a housewife) proposed to his distant relative, Sofia Pushkin. In the “Fragments of *Onegin’s Journey*” ([XIX]: 3-4) Pushkin mentions *prozaicheskie bredni, flamandskoy shkoly pyostryi sor* (prosy divagations, the Flemish School’s variegated dross). In the Hermitage collection there is “The Alchemist,” a painting by Thomas Wijk:

<https://www.arthermitage.org/Thomas-Wyck/An-Alchemist.jpg>

A Dutch painter, Thomas Wijck (or Wyck, 1616–1677) lived in the 17th century (when alchemy reached its height). According to Carl Jung, in 1926 he dreamed of being trapped in the 17th century:

The crucial dream anticipating my encounter with alchemy came around 1926: I was in the South Tyrol. It was wartime. I was on the Italian front and driving back from the front line with a little man, a peasant, in his horse-drawn wagon. All around us shells were exploding, and I knew that we had to push on as quickly as possible, for it was very dangerous.

We had to cross a bridge and then go through a tunnel whose vaulting had been partially destroyed by the shells. Arriving at the end of the tunnel, we saw before us a sunny landscape, and I recognized it as the region around Verona. Below me lay the city, radiant in full sunlight. I felt relieved, and we drove on out into the green, thriving Lombard plain. The road led through lovely springtime countryside; we saw the rice fields, the olive trees, and the vineyards. Then, diagonally across the road, I caught sight of a large building, a manor house of grand proportions, rather like the palace of a North Italian duke. It was a typical manor house with many annexes and outbuildings. Just as at the Louvre, the road led through a large courtyard and past the palace. The little coachman and myself drove in through a gate, and from here we could see, through a second gate at the far end, the sunlit landscape again. I looked around: to my right was the façade of the manor house, to my left the servants' quarters and the stables, barns, and other outbuildings, which stretched on for a long way.

Just as we reached the middle of the courtyard, in front of the main entrance, something unexpected happened: with a dull clang, both gates flew shut. The peasant leaped down from his seat and exclaimed: "Now we are caught in the seventeenth century." Resignedly I thought, "Well, that's that! But what is there to do about it? Now we shall be caught for years." Then the consoling thought came to me: "Someday, years from now, I shall get out again." (“Memories, Dreams, Reflections”)

Carl Jung is the author of “Psychology and Alchemy” (1944). In a letter of May 7, 1889, to Suvorin Chekhov compares psychology to alchemy and uses the phrase *sdat’ v arkhiv* (leave out of the account):

Я прочёл «Ученика» Бурже в Вашем изложении и в русском переводе («Северный вестник»). Дело мне представляется в таком виде. Бурже талантливый, очень умный и образованный человек. Он так полно знаком с методом естественных наук и так его прочувствовал, как будто хорошо учился на естественном или медицинском факультете. Он не чужой в той области, где берется хозяйничать, — заслуга, которой не знают русские писатели, ни новые, ни старые. Что же касается книжной, учёной психологии, то он её так же плохо знает, как лучшие из психологов. Знать её всё равно, что не знать, так как она не наука, а фикция, нечто вроде алхимии, которую пора уже сдать в архив.

I have read Bourget’s “Disciple” in the Russian translation. This is how it strikes me. Bourget is a gifted, very intelligent and cultured man. He is as thoroughly acquainted with the method of the natural sciences, and as imbued with it as though he had taken a good degree in science or medicine. He is not a stranger in the domain he proposes to deal with — a merit absent in Russian writers both new and old. As to the bookish, scientific psychology, he knows it as badly as the best among the psychologists. To know it is the same as not to know, because it is not a science but a fiction, something like alchemy which it is time to leave out of account.

In the same letter Chekhov mentions *psikhologicheskie opyty* (the psychological experiments) and uses the word *utrirovano* (exaggerated) that comes from *tri* (three):

Что касается «психологических опытов», прививок детям пороков и самой фигуры Сикста, то всё это донельзя утрировано.

As to “the psychological experiments,” the vaccines of vices for children and the Sixte figure himself, all this is terribly exaggerated.

*Arkhiv* (the word used by Chekhov) is Russian for “archive.” In the last lines of his poem *O vy, kotorye lyubili…* (“O you, who loved…” 1821) Pushkin mentions *beshenoy lyubvi prokazy* (the pranks of frenzied love) that he discovered *v arkhivakh ada* (in the archives of hell):

О вы, которые любили  
Парнаса тайные цветы  
И своевольные мечты  
Вниманьем слабым наградили,  
Спасите труд небрежный мой   
Под сенью            покрова —  
От рук невежества слепого,  
От взоров зависти косой.  
Картины, думы и рассказы  
Для вас я вновь перемешал,  
Смешное с важным сочетал  
И бешеной любви проказы  
В архивах ада отыскал...

Pushkin alludes to his frivolous poem *Gavriiliada* (“The Gabrieliad,” 1821) written in Kishinev. In a letter of December 1, 1826, to Alekseev (Pushkin’s good friend in Kishinev) ending in a little poem Pushkin calls Alekseev *otshel’nik bessarabskiy* (“the Bessarabian hermit”):

Прощай, отшельник бессарабский,   
Лукавый друг души моей —   
Порадуй же меня не сказочкой арабской,  
Но русской правдою твоей.

Farewell, the Bessarabian hermit,

arch friend of my soul.

Make me glad not with an Arabian fairy tale,

but with your Russian truth.

In the same letter Pushkin makes an allusion to another frivolous poem, *Tsar’ Nikita i sorok ego docherey* (“Tsar Nikita and his Forty Daughters,” 1822), also written in Kishinev and known to Alekseev in manuscript:

Надежды нет иль очень мало.

There is no hope or very little.

As in his famous epigram on Vorontsov (the Governor of New Russia, “half-milord, half-merchant… etc.”), Pushkin uses the word *nadezhda* (hope). An American scholar of Russian descent, Professor Vsevolod Botkin went mad and became Shade, Kinbote and Gradus after the tragic death of his daughter Nadezhda (Hazel Shade of Kinbote’s Commentary). There is a hope that, when Kinbote completes his work on Shade’s poem and commits suicide (on Oct. 19, 1959, the anniversary of Pushkin’s Lyceum), Botkin, like Count Vorontsov, will be “full” again.

Pushkin began writing *Eugene Onegin* on May 9, 1823, in Bessarabia. In a letter of April 30, 1823, to Alexander Turgenev Vyazemski calls Pushkin *bes Arabskiy* (the Arabian devil), a pun on *Bessarabskiy* (the Bessarabian). In VN’s novel *Ada* (1969) Demon Veen (Van’s and Ada’s father) mentions his friend Bessborodko who is to be installed in Bessarabia:

‘Stocks,’ said Demon, ‘are on the zoom. Our territorial triumphs, et cetera. An American governor, my friend Bessborodko, is to be installed in Bessarabia, and a British one, Armborough, will rule Armenia. I saw you enlaced with your little Countess near the parking lot. If you marry her I will disinherit you. They’re quite a notch below our set.’

‘In a couple of years,’ said Van, ‘I’ll slide into my own little millions’ (meaning the fortune Aqua had left him). ‘But you needn’t worry, sir, we have interrupted our affair for the time being — till the next time I return to live in her *girlinière’* (Canady slang). (2.1)

Poor mad Aqua’s last note was signed “My sister’s sister who *teper’ iz ada* (now is out of hell)” (1.3). Chekhov’s story *Zhenshchina s tochki zreniya p’yanitsy* (“Woman as Seen by a Drunkard,” 1885), in which girls under sixteen are compared to *aqua* *distillatae*, was signed *Brat moego brata* (My Brother’s Brother). Aqua’s last doctor, Sig Heiler (“whom everybody venerated as a great guy and near-genius in the usual sense of near-beer”), seems to be the Antiterran counterpart of Carl Jung.

The (historical) name Besborodko means “beardless.” Unlike Shade (who describes shaving in Canto Four of his poem), Kinbote (the hermit who is nicknamed “the great beaver” because of his large brown beard) is bearded. In his Foreword Kinbote mentions his favorite photograph of Shade:

I have one favorite photograph of him. In this color snapshot taken by a onetime friend of mine, on a brilliant spring day, Shade is seen leaning on a sturdy cane that had belonged to his aunt Maud ([see line 86](http://www.shannonrchamberlain.com/palefirepoem.html#line86)). I am wearing a white windbreaker acquired in a local sports shop and a pair of lilac slacks hailing from Cannes. My left hand is half raised--not to pat Shade on the shoulder as seems to be the intention, but to remove my sunglasses which, however, it never reached in that life, the life of the picture; and the library book under my right arm is a treatise on certain Zemblan calisthenics in which I proposed to interest that young roomer of mine who snapped the picture.

At the end of his Commentary Kinbote mentions a million photographers:

God will help me, I trust, to rid myself of any desire to follow the example of the other two characters in this work. I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art. I may join forces with Odon in a new motion picture: *Escape from Zembla* (ball in the palace, bomb in the palace square). I may pander to the simple tastes of theatrical critics and cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire, and perishes in the clash between the two figments. Oh, I may do many things! History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom, and with a great sob greet the gray coastline and the gleam of a roof in the rain. I may huddle and groan in a madhouse. But whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere, will quietly set out--somebody has already set out, somebody still rather far away is buying a ticket, is boarding a bus, a ship, a plane, has landed, is walking toward a million photographers, and presently he will ring at my door--a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus. (note to Line 1000)

In his essay *Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable* (1937) VN points out that, had Pushkin lived a couple of years longer, we would have had his photograph. In Chapter Two (XIV) of EO Pushkin says that we all expect to be Napoleons, deem other people naughts and ourselves units and that the millions of two-legged creatures for us are *orudie odno* (only tools). The characters of *Ada* include Kim Beauharnais, the kitchen boy and photographer at Ardis who is blinded by Van for spying on him and Ada (2.11). Josephine Beauharnais (known on Antiterra as Queen Josephine, 1.5) was Napoleon’s first wife.

*odno* (neut. of *odin*, “one”) = Odon = Nodo (Odon’s half-brother, a cardsharp and despicable traitor)

*Arabian Nights* (a collection of fairy tales) are also known as *A Thousand and One Nights*. It seems that, in its finished form, Shade’s poem should have 1001 lines.

Alexey Sklyarenko