In VN’s novel *Pale Fire* (1962) Shade’s poem begins as follows:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure in the windowpane;  
I was the smudge of ashen fluff--and I  
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky. (ll. 1-4)

In his Commentary Kinbote (who imagines that he is Charles the Beloved, the last self-exiled king of Zembla) mentions “garden Aves:”

My knowledge of garden Aves had been limited to those of northern Europe but a young New Wye gardener, in whom I was interested [(see note to line 998)](http://www.shannonrchamberlain.com/commentary.html#comline998), helped me to identify the profiles of quite a number of tropical-looking little strangers and their comical calls; and, naturally, every tree top plotted its dotted line towards the ornithological work on my desk to which I would gallop from the lawn in nomenclatorial agitation. How hard I found to fit the name "robin" to the suburban impostor, the gross fowl, with its untidy dull-red livery and the revolting gusto it showed when consuming long, sad, passive worms!

Incidentally, it is curious to note that a crested bird called in Zemblan *sampel* ("silktail"), closely resembling a waxwing in shape and shade, is the model of one of the three heraldic creatures (the other two being respectively a reindeer proper and a merman azure, crined or) in the armorial bearing of the Zemblan King, Charles the Beloved (born 1915), whose glorious misfortunes I discussed so often with my friend. (note to Lines 1-4)

*Aves* is plural of *avis* (Lat., “bird”). *Rara avis* (1886) is a story by Chekhov. In a letter of March 6, 1888, to Pleshcheev Chekhov mentions the poor birds that are already flying to Russia:

Теперь — как Ваше здоровье? Выходите ли Вы на воздух? Если судить по критике Буренина о Мережковском, то у Вас теперь 15—20° мороза... Холодно чертовски, а ведь бедные птицы уже летят в Россию! Их гонят тоска по родине и любовь к отечеству; если бы поэты знали, сколько миллионов птиц делаются жертвою тоски и любви к родным местам, сколько их мёрзнет на пути, сколько мук претерпевают они в марте и в начале апреля, прибыв на родину, то давно бы воспели их... Войдите Вы в положение коростеля, который всю дорогу не летит, а идёт пешком, или дикого гуся, отдающегося живьём в руки человека, чтобы только не замерзнуть... Тяжело жить на этом свете!

Now, how is your health? Do you go outside? Judging by Burenin’s criticism of Merezhkovski’s verses, the temperature in St. Petersburg is now 15-20 degrees below zero… It is devilishly cold, but the poor birds are already flying to Russia! They are driven by homesickness and love for their native land. If poets knew how many millions of birds fall victims to their longing and love for their homes, how many of them freeze on the way, what agonies they endure on getting home in March and at the beginning of April, they would have sung their praises long ago! Put yourself in the place of a corncrake who does not fly but walks all the way, or of a wild goose who gives himself up to man to escape being frozen… Life is hard in this world!

The Russian word for “degree” is *gradus*. In the same note to Lines 1-4 Kinbote mentions Gradus (Shade’s murderer) for the first time:

The poem was begun at the dead center of the year, a few minutes after midnight July 1, while I played chess with a young Iranian enrolled in our summer school; and I do not doubt that our poet would have understood his annotator's temptations to synchronize a certain fateful fact, the departure from Zembla of the would-be regicide Gradus, with that date. Actually, Gradus left Onhava on the Copenhagen plane on July 5.

July 5 is Shade’s, Kinbote’s and Gradus’ birthday (while Shade was born in 1898, Kinbote and Gradus were born in 1915). 1915 – 1898 = 17. In a letter of Oct. 31, 1838 (Dostoevski’s seventeenth birthday!), to his brother Dostoevski twice uses the word *gradus* and says that it is sad to live without *nadezhda* (hope):

Друг мой! Ты философствуешь как поэт. И как не ровно выдерживает душа градус вдохновенья, так не ровна, не верна и твоя философия. Чтоб больше знать, надо меньше чувствовать, и обратно, правило опрометчивое, бред сердца.

Заметь, что поэт в порыве вдохновенья разгадывает Бога, след<овательно>, исполняет назначенье философии. След<овательно>, поэтический восторг есть восторг философии... След<овательно>, философия есть та же поэзия, только высший градус её!..

Брат, грустно жить без надежды... Смотрю вперёд, и будущее меня ужасает...

In a letter of December 1, 1826, to Alekseev (the poet’s good friend in Kishinev) Pushkin also mentions *nadezhda*:

Был я в Москве и думал: авось, бог милостив, увижу где-нибудь чинно сидящего моего чёрного друга или в креслах театральных, или в ресторации за бутылкой. Нет — так и уехал во Псков — так и теперь опять еду в белокаменную. Надежды нет иль очень мало.

“There is no hope, or very little” (that Pushkin will see Alekseev in Moscow). Pushkin makes a reference to a line in his poem “Tsar Nikita and his Forty Daughters” (1822) written in Kishinev and well known to Alekseev:

*Nichego il’ ochen’ malo*

Nothing or very little.

In his essay on Chekhov, *Tvorchestvo iz nichego* (“Creation from Nothing,” 1905), Lev Shestov (the philosopher who was born 1866 and whose penname comes from *shest’*, “six”) calls Chekhov *pevets beznadezhnosti* (a poet of hopelessness). *Beznadezhnost’* (hopelessness) is the last word in Tyutchev’s poem *Poslednyaya lyubov’* (“Last Love,” 1851-54):

О, как на склоне наших лет  
Нежней мы любим и суеверней...  
Сияй, сияй, прощальный свет  
Любви последней, зари вечерней!

Полнеба обхватила тень,  
Лишь там, на западе, бродит сиянье, –  
Помедли, помедли, вечерний день,  
Продлись, продлись, очарованье.

Пускай скудеет в жилах кровь,  
Но в сердце не скудеет нежность...  
О ты, последняя любовь!  
Ты и блаженство, и безнадежность.

Tyutchev’s poem was translated into English by VN:

Love at the closing of our days  
is apprehensive and very tender.  
Glow brighter, brighter, farewell rays  
of one last love in its evening splendor.

Blue shade takes half the world away:  
through western clouds alone some light is slanted.  
O tarry, O tarry, declining day,  
enchantment, let me stay enchanted.

The blood runs thinner, yet the heart  
remains as ever deep and tender.  
O last belated love, thou art  
a blend of joy and of hopeless surrender.

“Blue shade” in the second stanza of VN’s English version brings to mind not only John Shade, but also “the great Starover Blue” (a Wordsmith Professor whom Shade mentions in Canto Three of his poem):

The great Starover Blue reviewed the role  
Planets had played as landfalls of the soul. (ll. 627-628)

In his Commentary Kinbote writes:

Presumably, permission from Prof. Blue was obtained but even so the plunging of a real person, no matter how sportive and willing, into an invented milieu where he is made to perform in accordance with the invention, strikes one as a singularly tasteless device, especially since other real-life characters, except members of the family, of course, are pseudonymized in the poem.

This name, no doubt, is most tempting. The star over the blue eminently suits an astronomer though actually neither his first nor second name bears any relation to the celestial vault: the first was given him in memory of his grandfather, a Russian starover (accented, incidentally, on the ultima), that is, Old Believer (member of a schismatic sect), named Sinyavin, from siniy, Russ. "blue." This Sinyavin migrated from Saratov to Seattle and begot a son who eventually changed his name to Blue and married Stella Lazurchik, an Americanized Kashube. So it goes. Honest Starover Blue will probably be surprised by the epithet bestowed upon him by a jesting Shade. The writer feels moved to pay here a small tribute to the amiable old freak, adored by everybody on the campus and nicknamed by the students Colonel Starbottle, evidently because of his exceptionally convivial habits. After all, there were other great men in our  poet's entourage--for example, that distinguished Zemblan scholar Oscar Nattochdag. (note to Line 627)

In his *Epigram* (“Deeply insulted by reviews…” 1829) patterned on a sonnet Pushkin mentions *gospodin parnasskiy starover* (Mister Parnassian Old Believer). *Stella* is Latin for “star,” *lazur’* is Russian for “azure.” In his poem *Pamyati V. A. Zhukovskogo* (“In Memory of V. A. Zhukovski,” 1852) Tyutchev mentions the first stars that were already visible in Zhukovski’s night. The name Nattochdag means in Swedish “night and day.” *Den’ i noch’* (“Day and Night,” 1839) is a poem by Tyutchev. Professor Nattochdag’s nickname, Netochka, hints at Dostoevski’s unfinished novel *Netochka Nezvanov* (1849). Dostoevski is the author of *Dvoynik* (“The Double,” 1846). On the other hand, *Dvoynik* (1909) is a poem by Alexander Blok, the author of *Solov’yinyi sad* (“The Nightingale Garden,” 1915) and *Dvenadtsat’* (“The Twelve,” 1918). According to G. Ivanov (a poet who attacked VN in the Paris émigré review *Numbers*), to his question “does a sonnet need a coda” Blok replied that he did not know what a coda is. In his fragment *Rim* (“Rome,” 1842) Gogol mentions the Italian *sonetto colla coda* and explains what *la coda* is. In his story *Strashnaya mest’* (“A Terrible Vengeance,” 1832) Gogol says that a rare bird can fly to the middle of the Dnieper. Gogol’s pupil, Dostoevski is the author of *Podrostok* (“The Adolescent,” 1875). *Ulichnyi podrostok* (“The Street Adolescent,” 1914) is a sonnet with the coda by G. Ivanov. It seems that, to be completed, Shade’s poem needs not only Line 1000 (identical to Line 1), but also a coda (Line 1001: “By its own double in the windowpane”).

According to Kinbote, in a conversation with him Shade listed Gogol, Dostoevski and Chekhov among Russian humorists:

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

Shade’s, Kinbote’s and Gradus’ “real” name seems to be Botkin. An American scholar of Russian descent, Professor Vsevolod Botkin went mad and became Shade, Kinbote and Gradus after the tragic death of his daughter Nadezhda (Hazel Shade of Kinbote’s Commentary). 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 (a target of Pushkin’s epigrams, “half-milord, half-merchant… etc.”), will be full again.

Alexey Sklyarenko