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Nabokov Society News

The VN Society and *The Nabokovian* are about to make significant changes. As stated before, the basis for this is because I am now retired from the University of Kansas and therefore will no longer be working for the VN Society and continuing to publish *The Nabokovian*, something that I have been doing for 34 years. The President of the Nabokov Society will now take over the publication of *The Nabokovian*, and will establish all the new membership details. His name is Stephen Blackwell. His address is given at the bottom of the inside front cover of this issue.

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And once again, as I have done for the past 34 years, I wish to express my greatest appreciation and gratitude to Ms. Paula Courtney for her remarkable on-going, essential assistance in the production of this publication.

NOTES AND BRIEF COMMENTARIES

By Priscilla Meyer

Submissions, in English, should be forwarded to Priscilla Meyer at pmeyer@wesleyan.edu. E-mail submission preferred. If using a PC, please send attachments in .doc format. All contributors must be current members of the Nabokov Society. Deadlines are April 1 and October 1 respectively for the Spring and Fall issues. Notes may be sent, anonymously, to a reader for review. If accepted for publication, some slight editorial alterations may be made. References to Nabokov's English or Englished works should be made either to the first American (or British) edition or to the Vintage collected series. All Russian quotations must be transliterated and translated. Please observe the style (footnotes incorporated within the text, American punctuation, single space after periods, signature: name, place, etc.) used in this section.

WINE'S SKELETON AND ANACREON'S DEATH

In Chapter 8 of *Transparent Things* Hugh Person, the protagonist of the novel, is said to have written a letter to the editor of the London *Times*. The narrator then adds that the letter was later anthologized and cites the following passage from it:

> Anacreon died at eighty-five choked by "wine's skeleton" (as another Ionian put it), and a gypsy predicted to the chess player Alyokhin that he would be killed in Spain by a dead bull. [V. Nabokov, *Transparent Things*. New York: Vintage International, 1989, p. 23.]

Neither the commentators of Nabokov's collected works in Russian, nor Brian Boyd's notes to the Library of America edition identifies the Ionian to whom the words "wine's skeleton"

are attributed. Both of these editions, however, point out that Anacreon was said to have died by choking on a grape seed in his wine (S. Ilyin, Kommentarii. In: V. Nabokov, *Sobr. soch. amer. perioda*. St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2004, vol. 5, p. 620; and B. Boyd, Notes. In: V. Nabokov, *Novels 1969-1974*. New York: Library of America, 1996, p. 812). In 2004, the then editor of the listserv NABOKV-L Donald Barton Johnson, during a collective re-reading of *Transparent Things*, posted a query where he asked the subscribers to identify the Ionian (postings of July 31 and August 1, 2004). No one, however, came up with an answer. Evgeny Soshkin, a literary scholar from the University of Jerusalem, in a short note on this passage (the July 8, 2008, posting in the blog http://simon-mag.livejournal.com/40061.html) suggested that Anacreon and Alekhin are connected through a multilayered allusion to Pushkin: on the one hand, in Pushkin's "The Song of the Wise Oleg" (1825), Oleg's death was a snake lurking in the skull of his dead horse, and "wine's skeleton" could refer to the Anacreontic motif of a cup made out of a skull, popular in Pushkin's times; on the other, the name Alekhin could via alliteration be linked with Oleg and the gypsy Aleko from Pushkin's *The Gypsies* (1824, publ. 1827).

In this note I argue that the allusion to "another Ionian" is a pseudo-reference (for a similar use of Greek to camouflage a pseudo-reference see S. Karpukhin, "Nabokov's *Tropotos*" in: *The Nabokovian* 65).

Anacreon was a 6th-5th-century BCE lyric poet from the city of Teos in Ionia (the Greek colonies in Asia Minor). Little is known about his life and death, but from early on tradition associated his name with wine and drinking songs. Consequently, as the Oxford Classical Dictionary suggests (*s.v.* "Anacreon"), the notion that he died by choking on a grape (sic) can be construed as displaying "the mythopoeia typical of ancient biography." It is important, however, that the only two sources that mention the manner of Anacreon's death are not

Greek but Roman. First, there is a collection of anecdotes by Valerius Maximus (1st century CE), where in book 9 he writes:

> sicut Anacreonti quoque, quem usitatum humanae uitae modum supergressum [dum] passae uuae suco tenues et exiles uirium reliquias fouentem unius grani pertinacior in aridis faucibus mora absumpsit. (9.12. ext. 8)

> Just as for Anacreon also, who was killed by the obstinate delay of a single pip in his arid throat, when he, exceeding the usual term of a human life, was nourishing with raisin-wine the poor and weakening remainder of his strength. (my trans.)

Secondly, Pliny the Elder (1st century CE) in *Natural History* says that *Anacreon poeta acino uuae passae ... strangulatus* (7.44), "the poet Anacreon [was] choked with a raisin-pip." The words *granum* (Val. Maximus) and *acinum* (Pliny) are both attested in the sense "a berry of the grape" and "a grape seed," but scholars agree that both Pliny and Valerius Maximus meant a raisin-pip (Oxford Latin Dict., *s.v.* "acinum" and "granum" 1.b; cf. D.W.T. Vessey, "Grana: Ovid, *Tristia*, IV, 6.9-10" in: *Glotta* 64 [1986], p. 103). According to one relatively recent suggestion, the original Greek account of Anacreon's death may have referred to a throat disease called *staphyle* or *rhax* (literally, "grapes" or "grape"), but the Latin translation of it (Pliny and Val. Maximus's immediate source) ignored the homonymy and thus created a poetic biographical legend (P. Cauderlier, "Comment Anacréon mourut-il?" in: *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 97 (1984), pp. 531-533). This was not, however, how the story has been received since antiquity; and besides, undercutting this interpretation is the fact that similar stories existed in Greek literature and were told before Anacreon about the 7th-century BCE poet Terpander, who choked on a fig (*Suda*, Gamma, 315), and Sophocles, who choked on a grape

(Sotades fr. 15-16 in Stobaeus 4.34.8; Ps.-Lucian, *Macrobii*. 24, *Vita Soph.*. 14).

The poet Simonides (6th-5th century BCE) from the Ionian island of Ceos was believed to have written epitaphs for Anacreon (*Anthologia Graeca*, 7.24 and 25) and one of them was included, in an English translation by H.H. Milman, in *Poems of Places* edited by H. W. Longfellow (1878), but there was no mention of grape seeds or death by choking in it (there are no references to it in any of the eleven epitaphs for Anacreon in the *Greek Anthology*). We may conclude that there are no extant sources from Greek Ionia that tell the story of Anacreon's choking to death; in other words, no Ionian Greek referred to the death of Anacreon by a grape seed, as far as we know.

It is possible that the phrase "wine's skeleton" could refer to grape seeds outside the context of the story of Anacreon's death. On the one hand, it is true that the innermost hard part of fruits could be called *osteon* in Greek or *os* in Latin (both literally mean "bone"). On the other hand, there was no word for "skeleton" in Greek or Latin, both of which would have to use the word "bones" instead. All this would make the metaphor almost unavoidable. And yet the classical Greek word for "grape seed" was *pyren* (from *pyros*, "wheat") and the Latin words used by Valerius Maximus and Pliny were, as has been pointed out above, *granum* ("grain," "small kernel") and *acinum* ("berry," "pip"). There is no expression similar to "wine's skeleton" in the works of the most famous Ionian, Homer. And "wine's skeleton" for "grape seed" is a remarkably bold metaphor and as such it is perhaps too bold for an ancient poet.

Furthermore, Nabokov seems to animate the two instruments of death by choking: the passage can be read as if a dead bull attacked Alekhin (in bullfighting, hence, as Evgeny Soshkin argued, the change from Portugal, where Alekhin really died, to Spain) and that wine's skeleton strangled Anacreon. In Roman art skeletons were often associated with drinking and simultaneously served as *memento mori*. The so-called *larua*

conuiuialis (lit. "convivial ghost") in the shape of a skeleton is mentioned in Petronius (*Sat.*, 34) where it serves wine, and, among many other similar artifacts, there is a famous Pompeian mosaic of a skeleton holding wine jars in both hands. Of the latter Nabokov was most likely aware: he stayed in Pompeii for two days and visited the Museo Nazionale in Naples, where he looked at ancient frescoes, in 1966 (B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, p. 512). But the connection between skeletons and drinking as well as the popular representations of skeletons as reminders of mortality are "thoroughly Roman" and are usually dated to the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE (Faya Causey Frel, "A Larva Convivialis in the Getty Museum" in: *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 8 (1980), pp. 171-172), that is, these representations have nothing to do with Ionia and are considerably later than Anacreon.

In English, the polysemy of "stone" or "pip" or "seed" does not seem to warrant the expression "wine's bones" or "wine's skeleton." By contrast, the Russian word for "grape seed" is *kostochka*, literally "little bone." Thus, whereas in English and, I suspect, in Greek and Latin, the metaphor "wine's skeleton" is strikingly unusual, if not catachrestic, in modern Russian it is a readily recognizable pun and is indeed unavoidable. The mention of a Russian chess player in the next sentence in the passage could also be taken as hinting at the Russian origin of the expression.

It is noteworthy that Google Books finds the mention of Anacreon's death in William Hone's *The Table Book* (1827-1828), a book similar in genre to *The Round Table* (1817) by William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, *Table-Talk* (1821-22) by William Hazlitt and *Table Talk* (1851) by Leigh Hunt, each of which Nabokov read while preparing his commentary on *Eugene Onegin* and which are mentioned in it. Most curiously, in Hone's collection Anacreon's death is described in a letter to the editor, which opens thus:

Casualties of the Ancients
To the Editor

> Your having, sir, inserted certain "Antipathies" which I have communicated to your work, encouraged me to hope you will find some "Casualties" not unacceptable.
> Anacreon, according to Pliny and Valerius Maximus, was choked with the kernel of a raisin… (William Hone, *The Table Book*. London: William Tegg, 1827, p. 701.)

In general, Nabokov must have been familiar with the 18th- and 19th-century reception of the story of Anacreon's death in English and French literature, exemplified among other works by Thomas Moore's translations or Sainte-Beuve's critical comments.

In conclusion, we can identify various sources from which Nabokov could learn about Anacreon's death (for instance, Hone's *The Table Book* where it is described in a letter to the editor); it also seems plausible that the metaphor "wine's skeleton" was inspired by the Russian word for "grape seed"; and finally the resultant image of an animated skeleton strangling a drunkard reminds the reader of the images of a wine-serving skeleton in 1st-century Roman art, which Nabokov had seen first-hand. The "another Ionian," however, with its anonymity and vagueness, appears to be a pseudo-reference whose purpose is to authorize and contextualize the bold metaphor by making it sound ancient.

--Sergei Karpukhin, Madison, WI

A CHANCE LITTLE APE OF TRUTH: HUMOR IN "ULTIMA THULE"

"Ultima Thule"—a story in the guise of an undeliverable love letter—was conceived of as the first chapter of a novel depicting a widower's disappearance into grief and subsequent reemergence in a world of his own invention. Writing at length to his dead wife, Sineusov, the widower, introduces us to the central figure in "Ultima Thule," Adam Falter, a businessman whose flourishing career was cut short by a flash of enlightenment, a cognitive explosion whose detonation transformed him into one of two things, either a "kvak" (as Sineusov's wife would Russianize an English synonym for charlatan [*The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Vintage, 1997, 500]) or a visionary with access to otherworldly information. Although Sineusov cannot commit to either of these views, close reading of "Ultima Thule" shows that Falter does possess knowledge of paranormal origin. Making the case for Falter's seerhood, Andrew Field highlights moments when Falter repeats or alludes to words spoken in private by Sineusov's wife (*Nabokov: His Life in Art*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967, 308). Falter's insightfulness, his access to "Truth with a capital T" (515), expresses Nabokov's belief in humor's power and profundity. Nabokov, by linking Falter to laughter (one link is phonetic: "Lafter" is an anagram of "Falter"), presents humor as having three key qualities: incompatibility with orthodox thought, an affinity with truth, and a profound seriousness.

Midway through his letter to his wife, Sineusov, surmising how human existence might appear to the dead, entertains the idea that it resembles a "pun":

> My angel, oh my angel, perhaps our whole earthly existence is now but a pun to you, or a grotesque rhyme, something like "dental" and "transcendental" (remember?), and the true meaning of reality, of that piercing term, purged of all our strange, dreamy, masquerade interpretations, now sounds so pure and sweet that you, angel, find it amusing that we could have taken the dream seriously (although you and I did have an inkling of why everything disintegrated at one furtive touch—words, conventions of everyday life, systems, persons—so, you know, I think laughter is some chance little ape astray in our world). (503)

This passage—specifically its peculiar characterization of laughter—is a reverberative call to which Falter, in his personal qualities and message, will be a response.

A number of details link Falter to the laughter of Sineusov's description. A first detail appears as Falter arrives for his interview. "They seated him in an armchair, and he spread his limbs strangely, as a chimpanzee might do when his keeper makes him parody a Sybarite in a recumbent position" (512). In Sineusov's view, then, Falter, like laughter, is a "little ape." And even Falter likens himself to a clever ape: explaining how he came to be singled out for enlightenment, Falter compares himself to a trained monkey: "[In] Indochina, at the lottery drawings, the numbers are extracted by a monkey. I happen to be that monkey" (514). Significantly, Falter, in mentioning lotteries, evokes the idea of randomness, i.e. of "chance." What is a lottery monkey if not a "chance little ape"? And Falter soon emphasizes the role of chance in his acquisition of absolute insight: "It was by chance that it did not kill me, just as it was by chance that it struck me" [515]. The concept of "Truth," too, links Falter and Sineusov's characterization of laughter. For instance, while Sineusov describes laughter as an "ape of truth," Falter sees himself as privy to a "Truth with a capital T" (515). Moreover, Sineusov characterizes Falter as "a person who [. . .] because he survived the bomb of truth that exploded in him. . . became a god!" (500).

Falter and laughter (as described by Sineusov) are also linked by an antipathy to orthodox ideas and behavior. While

laughter, in Sineusov's words, disintegrates the "conventions of everyday life" (503), Falter ignores societal norms about acceptable behavior. Describing a transformed Falter, Sineusov remarks: "He was like a man who had lost everything: respect for life, all interest in money and business, all customary and traditional feelings, everyday habits, manners" (508). Sineusov emphasizes Falter's lack of inhibitions: "It was unsafe to let him go anywhere alone, for, with a curiosity quite superficial and quickly forgotten but offensive to others, he would address chance passerby, to discuss the origin of a scar on someone's face or a statement, not addressed to him, that he had overheard in a conversation between strangers" (508). As presented by Sineusov, both laughter and Falter are without respect for the commonalities of social life.

Nabokov clearly intends readers to associate Adam Falter with Sineusov's ape-like laughter. Yet at first glance the association is oddly banal. Only by reversing the equation, by realizing that laughter, not Falter, is the protagonist of "Ultima Thule," can we make sense of the link. While Falter's prominence within Sineusov's narrative leads us to believe that laughter is like him (in the sense that he is the original and laughter the copy), it is in fact Falter who is like laughter. In brief, rather than reading Sineusov's parenthetical characterization of laughter as a gloss on Falter, we should see Falter as a lucid exegesis on Sineusov's chance little ape.

What does Falter—his person and his message—reveal of Nabokov's theory of humor? First, given Falter's lack of interest in propriety, one implication is that Nabokov sees humor as outside of, or opposed to, the social world. Falter, recall, has absolutely no interest in decorum. He "would take an orange from a fruit stand as he passed, and eat it unpeeled, responding with an indifferent half-smile to the jabber of the fruit-woman who had run after him. When he grew tired or bored he would squat on the sidewalk Turkish fashion and, for something to

do, try to catch girls' heels in his fist like flies" (508). As these examples show, Falter, unconcerned with social norms, favors impulse over self-restraint. Falter's impulsiveness suggests that humor, in Nabokov's view, is spontaneous and heterodox, being a medium without respect for such forces as etiquette and tradition. A second implication is that Nabokov sees "truth" as necessarily amusing. While much about Falter is laughable (his taking oranges; his sitting on sidewalks; his grabbing heels), he is in everything he does merely being "himself," indicating that Falter's inner self—that self cognizant of "Truth with a capital T"—is inherently amusing. To be sure, the implication is not that everything funny is true, but rather that everything truthful is, for the average person, tinctured with humor. For the most part, Sineusov dismisses Falter as clownish, suggesting that aspects of "Ultima Thule" are meant to highlight our inability to appreciate—that is, take seriously—"truth." Other aspects of "Ultima Thule" present humor as deeply serious. Although amusing, indeed ridiculous, from a commmonsensical perspective, Falter, as his knowledge of otherworldly events reveals (Field, 308), *is* possessed of "absolute insight." This implies that, for Nabokov, humor is infused with insight. To be clear, the suggestion is not that *all* humor is insightful, but rather that any given instance of humor could be so—meaning no instance should be summarily seen as trivial. While Falter on occasion acts in a truly silly way, at other times his actions arise from an unprecedented awareness of truth. To belittle humor, this suggests, may be to disregard truth.

"Ultima Thule" expresses key aspects of Nabokov's view of humor. As the story reveals, Nabokov associates humor with knowledge—knowledge not just of this world, but of other possible worlds. Humor, in Nabokov's opinion, is a thoughtful medium, one at odds with conformity, a medium reflecting a willingness to see the world from a range of viewpoints. "[The] difference between the comic side of things, and their cosmic

side," Nabokov writes in his book on Gogol, "depends upon one sibilant" (*Nikolai Gogol*. New York: New Directions, 1961, 142).

--Matthew Brillinger, Ottawa, Ontario

"I could never resist the temptation to scribble on sheets of hotel paper": WHERE DID NABOKOV SPEND THE NIGHT ON 19TH SEPTEMBER 1952?

In mid-September of 1952, before the new academic year at Harvard, Vladimir Nabokov and Véra drove his son Dmitri to Cambridge. Apparently, the Nabokovs stopped for a night around Cambridge before driving the three hundred miles back to Cornell for Vladimir's new semester (AY 220). However, Brian Boyd's comprehensive biography and Dieter Zimmer's exhaustive list of Nabokov's Whereabouts do not tell us where Vladimir and Véra passed the night. In this note, I shall try to find a tiny missing piece in the biography of Nabokov.

The Ernst Mayr Library in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University preserves a collection of Frank H. Chermock letters. Franklin Hugo Chermock (1906–1967) was a serious amateur lepidopterist, and mainly devoted his scholastic life to taxonomic work on Lepidoptera. According to one obituary, he had "one of the most extensive private collections of Nearctic Lepidoptera" (John H. Masters, *Bulletin of the Association of Minnesota Entomologists,* vol. 2, 1968, 22). His daughter Linda Chermock Hassinger donated his letters to the MCZ in February 2000.

In 1944, Nabokov, a *de facto* curator of Lepidoptera at the MCZ, began to contact Chermock and discuss his ideas about lepidopterological taxonomy. There are six letters from VN to Chermock in the reading room of the library at the MCZ

which increase our understanding of Nabokov's activities as a lepidopterist. *Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings* does not include these correspondences.

Nabokov eventually borrowed some specimens from Chermock for his research project. In 1950, just before leaving Cambridge for Ithaca, VN asked his colleague Joseph Bequaert at MCZ to preserve "the Frank Chermock batch" until Chermock gave him the address to send it back (SL 103).

In the fifth letter written on 15th September 1952, he wrote: "I shall be at Cambridge at the end of this week and shall try to settle matters as satisfactorily as possible." The sixth, last letter in the archive written by hand on the19th and in an envelope postmarked 20th September, Boston, Mass. was: "I am here for the day [. . .] before returning to Ithaca." In this letter, Nabokov asked Chermock if his material in the MCZ should be returned or not.

Apparently, "here" means the "Continental Hotel Apartments" printed in the letterhead and the envelope. The residential hotel designed by architect R. M. Blackall and constructed in 1929 was located at 16 Chauncy Street, which was not far either from the MCZ or from the apartment at 8 Craigie Circle where they had lived four years earlier.

Nabokov had a fondness for writing his letters on hotel stationery. On 8th June 1950, he confessed to Edmund Wilson, using the stationery of Hotel The Vendome in Boston: "When I was a little child and traveled to various European resorts, I could never resist the temptation to scribble on sheets of hotel paper" (*Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya* 279). We Nabokovians need to appreciate his inveterate habit which makes it easy for us to pinpoint his place of stay.

Most certainly, the Nabokovs must have enjoyed their stay that Sunday night at the Continental Hotel Apartments. It is already known that later, in February of 1956, the Nabokovs lodged in Room No. 10 of the same hotel for his final trip to research the translation of and commentary on *Eugene Onegin*.

Though now the red brick building at 16 Chauncy Street is used not as a hotel but is an apartment building, the plate on the façade publicly avows, "Vladimir Nabokov resided in apartment #10 in 1956." We should add his prior stay in 1952 not only to the plate but also to the biography.

--Shun'ichiro Akikusa, Cambridge, MA

Annotations to *Ada*, 38: Part 1 Chapter 38

Brian Boyd

Fore-forenote

On the occasion of Emeritus Professor Stephen Jan Parker's final issue as editor of *The Nabokovian*, I must pay tribute to his vision and energy in founding the journal in 1978 and to his regularity of publication in the 35 years since. He published five contributions from me in the inaugural issue of *The Vladimir Nabokov Research Newsletter*, an important break for a young graduate student, and he has been an understanding and accommodating host and prompter of these "Annotations to *Ada*" ever since I began compiling them twenty years ago. Begun the year after Vladimir Nabokov himself died, *The Nabokovian* has outlived Véra and Dmitri Nabokov. May Nabokovians still alive live long, and *The Nabokovian* even longer.

Forenote

Part 1 Chapter 38, the longest chapter in *Ada*, is the first (and, as it will prove, the only) chapter with hero and heroine and their parents more or less together on stage. It makes the most of the resulting ironies. Marina and Demon think they harbor secrets from their children, for they cannot imagine Van and Ada know that they *are* their children, rather than Van's being the son of Demon and Aqua, and Ada's being the daughter of Dan and Marina. Nor can they imagine the secret that Van and Ada harbor—that they are lovers—or suspect or imagine that they *could* be so if they knew the "secret" of their siblinghood.

The ostensible conviviality of a family dinner, linking two officially distinct sets of parents and children, related both by cousinage (Marina is Demon's cousin, and Van Ada's) and by marriage (Marina's is Demon's sister-in-law), masks the tensions between them: between Marina and Demon, because their once passionate romance has forever died; and between Van and Ada, on the one hand, because their passionate romance