In the “Flavita” chapter of VN’s novel *Ada* (1969) Van Veen (the narrator and main character) mentions Lalla Rookh chessmen, which not even cretins would want to play with:

Van, a first-rate chess player — he was to win in 1887 a match at Chose when he beat the Minsk-born Pat Rishin (champion of Underhill and Wilson, N.C.) — had been puzzled by Ada’s inability of raising the standard of her, so to speak, damsel-errant game above that of a young lady in an old novel or in one of those anti-dandruff color-photo ads that show a beautiful model (made for other games than chess) staring at the shoulder of her otherwise impeccably groomed antagonist across a preposterous traffic jam of white and scarlet, elaborately and unrecognizably carved, Lalla Rookh chessmen, which not even cretins would want to play with — even if royally paid for the degradation of the simplest thought under the itchiest scalp. (1.36)

Darkbloom (‘Notes to *Ada*’): Pat Rishin: a play on ‘patrician’. One may recall Podgoretz (Russ. ‘underhill’) applying that epithet to a popular critic, would-be expert in Russian as spoken in Minsk and elsewhere. Minsk and Chess also figure in Chapter Six of *Speak, Memory* (p. 133, N.Y. ed. 1966).

In Chapter Six of his autobiography *Speak, Memory* VN writes:

I had long wanted that particular species, and, when near enough, I struck. You have heard champion tennis players moan after muffing an easy shot. You may have seen the face of the world-famous grandmaster Wilhelm Edmundson when, during a simultaneous display in a Minsk café, he lost his rook, by an absurd oversight, to the local amateur and pediatrician, Dr. Schach, who eventually won. But that day nobody (except my older self) could see me shake out a piece of twig from an otherwise empty net and stare at a hole in the tarlatan. (4)

The grandmaster’s name hints at Edmund Wilson, VN’s former friend whom Podhoretz called “the last Patrician” and who attacked VN’s translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* in his article “The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov” (1965). The title of EW’s article hints at R. L. Stevenson’s novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In his Cornell lecture VN says that in Stevenson’s novella “there are really three personalities: Jekyll, Hyde, and a third, the Jekyll residue when Hyde takes over.” The three main characters in VN’s novel *Pale Fire* (1962), Shade, Kinbote and Gradus seem to represent three different aspects of Professor Botkin’s personality. According to Kinbote (the author of a book on surnames), Botkin is one who makes bottekins (fancy footwear). In *Ada* Van several times mentions old Paar of Chose (a play on “old pair of shoes”):

As Van Veen himself was to find out, at the time of his passionate research in terrology (then a branch of psychiatry) even the deepest thinkers, the purest philosophers, Paar of Chose and Zapater of Aardvark, were emotionally divided in their attitude toward the possibility that there existed’ a distortive glass of our distorted glebe’ as a scholar who desires to remain unnamed has put it with such euphonic wit. (Hm! Kveree-kveree, as poor Mlle L. used to say to Gavronsky. In Ada’s hand.)

There were those who maintained that the discrepancies and ‘false overlappings’ between the two worlds were too numerous, and too deeply woven into the skein of successive events, not to taint with trite fancy the theory of essential sameness; and there were those who retorted that the dissimilarities only confirmed the live organic reality pertaining to the other world; that a perfect likeness would rather suggest a specular, and hence speculatory, phenomenon; and that two chess games with identical openings and identical end moves might ramify in an infinite number of variations, on *one* board and in *two* brains, at any middle stage of their irrevocably converging development. (1.3)

In his memoir essay *Muni* (1926) Hodasevich says that he and Muni lived in *two* worlds and that the second, invisible, world seemed to them more real than the first:

Мы с Муни жили в трудном и сложном мире, который мне сейчас уже нелегко описать таким, каким он воспринимался тогда. В горячем, предгрозовом воздухе тех лет было трудно дышать, нам все представлялось двусмысленным и двузначащим, очертания предметов казались шаткими. Действительность, распыляясь в сознании, становилась сквозной. Мы жили в реальном мире - и в то же время в каком-то особом, туманном и сложном его отражении, где было "то, да не то". Каждая вещь, каждый шаг, каждый жест как бы отражался условно, проектировался в иной плоскости, на близком, но неосязаемом экране. Явления становились видениями. Каждое событие, сверх своего явного смысла, еще обретало второй, который надобно было расшифровать. Он нелегко нам давался, но мы знали, что именно он и есть настоящий.

Таким образом, жили мы в двух мирах. Но, не умея раскрыть законы, по которым совершаются события во втором, представлявшемся нам более реальным, нежели просто реальный, - мы только томились в тёмных и смутных предчувствиях. Всё совершающееся мы ощущали как *предвестия*. Чего?

In March of 1916 Muni committed suicide (shot himself dead) in Minsk:

Под конец и приезды его стали тяжелы. В последний раз, уезжая из Москвы 25 марта 1916 года, он ещё с дороги прислал открытку с просьбой известить об исходе одного дела, касавшегося меня. Но не только он не дождался ответа, а и открытка пришла, когда его уже не было в живых. По приезде в Минск, на рассвете 28 марта Муни покончил с собой. Сохранился набросок песенки, сочиненной им, вероятно, в вагоне. Она называется "Самострельная".

In Chapter One of EO Pushkin says that to shoot himself, thank God, Onegin did not care to try (XXXVIII: 6-7). In Chapter Four of Pushkin’s novel in verse Lenski plays chess with Olga and with a pawn takes in abstraction his own rook (XXVI: 13-14). At the end of his *Zametki perevodchika II* (“Translator’s Notes. Part Two,” 1957) VN quotes an omitted stanza in Chapter Eight of EO in which Pushkin mentions Lalla Rookh:

И в зале яркой и богатой,
Когда в умолкший, тесный круг,
Подобна лилии крылатой,
Колеблясь, входит Лалла-Рук…:

[And in a ballroom bright and rich,

when into the hushed close circle,

akin to a winged lily,

balancing, enters Lalla Rookh…]

Так начинается строфа, которая, по-видимому, должна была следовать за XXX в гл. восьмой. Историк скажет, что Пушкину была известна приторная и бесконечно скучная поэма Мура (“Lalla Rookh”, 1817 г.) по серому французскому переводу в прозе Амедея Пишо (“Lalla Roukh ou la Princesse Mogole”, 1820 г.), что Жуковский воспел под этим именем свою ученицу, когда в январе 1821 г. в Берлине Александра и “Алирис” (будущий Николай I) участвовали в фестивалях, описанных в особом альбоме (“Lallah Roukh, divertissement mélé de chants et de dances”, Berlin, 1822); и что, помимо цензурных соображений (Онегин русской государыне предпочитает Татьяну), Пушкина остановил анахронизм (он думает о впечатлениях 1827–1829 гг., а время действия главы восьмой, до строфы XXXIV, не позже начала ноября 1824 г.). Словесник скажет, что эти божественные стихи превосходят по образности и музыке всё в “Онегине”, кроме разве некоторых других пропущенных или недописанных строф; что это дыхание, это равновесие, это воздушное колебание медлительной лилии и её газовых крыл отмечены в смысле стиля тем сочетанием сложности и лёгкости, к которому только восемьдесят лет спустя приблизился Блок на поприще четырехстопного ямба; что восхитительно соединяются и смысл и смычок посредством красочных аллитераций: “в зале яркой”, “круг”, “лилии крылатой”, и наконец “Лалла Рук” — этим заключительным ударом музыкальной фразы собираются и разрешаются предшествующие созвучия.
Так скажут историк и словесник; но что может сказать бедный переводчик? “Симилар ту э уингед лили, балансинг энтерс Лалла Рух”? Всё потеряно, всё сорвано, все цветы и сережки лежат в лужах — и я бы никогда не пустился в этот тусклый путь, если бы не был уверен, что внимательному чужеземцу всю солнечную сторону текста можно подробно объяснить в тысяча и одном примечании.

According to VN, he would have never attempted to translate EO into English, had he not been sure that to the attentive foreigner the entire sunny side of the text can be in detail explained in a thousand and one notes. In *Pale Fire* Kinbote’s Commentary ends with his note to (the unwritten) Line 1000 (which, according to Kinbote, is identical to Line 1: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain”). But it seems that Shade’s poem also needs a coda (Line 1001: “By its own double in the windowpane”).

*Smysl i smychok* (the meaning and the bow) mentioned by VN in the penultimate paragraph of *Zametki perevodchika II* bring to mind *nich’ya mezh smyslom i smychkom* (a draw between the meaning and the bow) in VN’s poem *Vsyo, ot chego ono szhimaetsya…* (“Everything that makes it contract…” 1953):

Всё, от чего оно сжимается,

миры в тумане, сны, тоска,

и то, что мною принимается

как должное - твоя рука;

всё это под одною крышею

в плену моём живёт, поёт,

но сводится к четверостишию,

как только ямб ко дну идёт.

И оттого, что - как мне помнится -

жильцы родного словаря

такие бедняки и скромницы:

холм, папоротник, ель, заря,

читателя мне не разжалобить,

а с музыкой я незнаком,

и удовлетворяюсь, стало быть,

ничьей меж смыслом и смычком.

\_\_\_

"Но вместо всех изобразительных

приёмов и причуд, нельзя ль

одной опушкой существительных

и воздух передать, и даль?"

Я бы добавил это новое,

но наподобие кольца

сомкнуло строй уже готовое

и не впустило пришлеца.

In his Commentary Kinbote mentions a game of chess with Shade that ended in a draw:

Here indeed is the Gist of the matter. And this, I think, not only the institute (see [line 517](http://www.shannonrchamberlain.com/palefirepoem.html#line517)) but our poet himself missed. For a Christian, no Beyond is accepted or imaginable without the participation of God in our eternal destiny, and this in turn implies a condign punishments for every sin, great and small. My little diary happens to contain a few jottings referring a conversation the poet and I had on June 23 "on my terrace after a game of chess, a draw." I transcribe them here only because they cast a fascinating light on his attitude toward the subject.

I had mentioned--I do not recall in what connection--certain differences between my Church and his. It should be noted that our Zemblan brand of Protestantism is rather closely related to the "higher" churches of the Anglican Communion, but has some magnificent peculiarities of its own. The Reformation with us had been headed by a composer of genius; our liturgy is penetrated with rich music; our boy choirs are the sweetest in the world. Sybil Shade came from a Catholic family but since early girlhood developed, as she told me herself, "a religion of her own"--which is generally synonymous, at the best, with a half-hearted attachment to some half-heathen sect or, at the worst, with tepid atheism. She had weaned her husband not only from the Episcopal Church of his fathers, but from all forms of sacramental worship. (note to Line 549)

In VN’s novel *Lolita* (1955) Humbert Humbert (the narrator and main character) describes a game of chess that he played with Gaston Godin (a Beardsley Professor who shares with Kinbote his sexual tastes) and that also ended in a draw:

Because it supposedly tied up with her interest in dance and dramatics, I had permitted Lo to take piano lessons with a Miss Emperor (as we French scholars may conveniently call her) to whose blue-shuttered little white house a mile or so beyond Beardsley Lo would spin off twice a week. One Friday night toward the end of May (and a week or so after the very special rehearsal Lo had not had me attend) the telephone in my study, where I was in the act of mopping up Gustave’s - I mean Gaston’s - king’s side, rang and Miss Emperor asked if Lo was coming next Tuesday because she had missed last Tuesday’s and today’s lessons. I said she would by all means and went on with the game. As the reader may well imagine, my faculties were now impaired, and a move or two later, with Gaston to play, I noticed through the film of my general distress that he could collect my queen; he noticed it too, but thinking it might be a trap on the part of his tricky opponent, he demurred for quite a minute, and puffed and wheezed, and shook his jowls, and even shot furtive glances at me, and made hesitating half-thrusts with his pudgily bunched fingers - dying to take that juicy queen and not daring - and all of a sudden he swooped down upon it (who knows if it did not teach him certain later audacities?), and I spent a dreary hour in achieving a draw. (2.14)

In her essay *Nabokov i ego Lolita* (“Nabokov and his *Lolita*,” 1959) Nina Berberova mentions *preuvelichenno spokoynaya “koda”* (an excessively serene “coda”) that appears at the end of VN’s novel:

Временами сквозь иронический, патетический, мелодраматический тон начинает сквозить нечто уродливое, звериное, страшное, а иногда (как у Белого) и идиотическое. Все эти элементы слиты, и в конце появляется несколько даже преувеличенно спокойная «кода». Через весь роман проходит струя поэзии, к которой Набоков приучил нас в прежних своих романах, эта поэзия не привносится извне, она присутствует всё время, как подземный ключ, временами выходящий наружу. И всё это существует слитно и сложно, образуя единство музыкальное и живописное.

Nina Berberova uses the term “coda” in a musical sense. In VN’s novel *Zashchita Luzhina* (“The Luzhin Defense,” 1930) the violinist compares chess combinations to melodies and says that he can simply hear the moves:

- Какая игра, какая игра, - сказал скрипач, бережно закрывая ящик. - Комбинации, как мелодии. Я, понимаете ли, просто слышу ходы.

‘What a game, what a game,' said the violinist, tenderly closing the box. 'Combinations like melodies. You know, I can simply hear the moves.' (Chapter 3)

The characters of *Pale Fire* include Oswin Bretwit, the former Zemblan consul in Paris whose surname means “chess intelligence.” Describing Gradus’ visit to Oswin Bretwit, Kinbote mentions Ferz Bretwit, Mayor of Aros:

Chance, in one of its anti-Karlist moods, helped. One of the lesser Shadows whom we shall call Baron A. had a father-in-law called Baron B., a harmless old codger long retired from the civil service and quite incapable of understanding certain Renaissance aspects of the new regime. He had been, or thought he had been (retrospective distance magnifies things), a close friend of the late Minister of Foreign Affairs, Oswin Bretwit's father, and therefore was looking forward to the day when he would be able to transmit to "young" Oswin (who, he understood, was not exactly *persona grata* with the new regime) a bundle of precious family papers that the dusty baron had come across by chance in the files of a governmental office. All at once he was informed that now the day had come: the documents would be immediately forwarded to Paris. He was also allowed to prefix a brief note to them which read:

Here are some precious papers belonging to your family. I cannot do better than place them in the hands of the son of the great man who was my fellow student in Heidelburg and my teacher in the diplomatic service. *Verba volant, scripta manent.*

The *scripta* in question were two hundred and thirteen long letters which had passed some seventy years ago between Zule Bretwit, Oswin's grand-uncle, Mayor of Odevalla, and a cousin of his Ferz Bretwit, Mayor of Aros. (note to Line 286)

*Ferz’* is Russian for “chess queen.” In the Russian version of his autobiography, *Drugie berega* (“Other Shores,” 1954), VN replaces “rook” with *ferz’* (queen):

Наконец, с размаху, я свистнул по ней рампеткой. Мы все слыхали стон теннисиста, когда, на краю победы промазав легкий мяч, он в ужасной муке вытягивается на цыпочках, откинув голову и приложив ладонь ко лбу. Мы все видали лицо знаменитого гроссмейстера, вдруг подставившего ферзя местному любителю, Борису Исидоровичу Шаху. Но никто не присутствовал при том, как я вытряхивал веточку из сетки и глядел на дырку в кисее. (Chapter Six, 4)

According to Van, Ada could conjure up a combinational sacrifice, offering her queen:

Ada did manage, now and then, to conjure up a combinational sacrifice, offering, say, her queen — with a subtle win after two or three moves if the piece were taken; but she saw only one side of the question, preferring to ignore, in the queer lassitude of clogged cogitation, the obvious counter combination that would lead inevitably to her defeat if the grand sacrifice were *not* accepted. On the Scrabble board, however, this same wild and weak Ada was transformed into a sort of graceful computing machine, endowed, moreover, with phenomenal luck, and would greatly surpass baffled Van in acumen, foresight and exploitation of chance, when shaping appetizing long words from the most unpromising scraps and collops. (1.36)

A set of Flavita (the Russian Scrabble) was given to Marina’s children by Baron Klim Avidov (anagram of Vladimir Nabokov). The Baron’s first name brings to mind Gorky’s novel *Zhizn’ Klima Samgina* (“The Life of Klim Samgin,” 1925-36). Samgin is an anagram of Smagin, a friend of Chekhov whom the writer nicknamed *shakh persidskiy* (the Persian Shah). In Russian *shakh* means “Shah” and “check” (in chess).

In a letter of October 17, 1889, to Suvorin Chekhov quotes the verses about 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-а-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.

And the Persian Shah, the usual eccentric,

went to Paris in order to compare… with the Eiffel tower.

In Ada’s philosophy “tower” is an important category. After the dinner in ‘Ursus’ (the best Franco-Estotian restaurant in Manhattan Major) and the debauche à trois with Lucette (Van’s and Ada’s half-sister) in Van’s Manhattan flat Ada, in reply to Van’s questioning glance, murmurs “tower:”

‘We shall now go for a ride in the park,’ said Van firmly, and rang, first of all, for a Sunday messenger to take the letter to Lucette’s hotel — or to the Verma resort, if she had already left.

‘I suppose you know what you’re doing?’ observed Ada.

‘Yes,’ he answered.

‘You are breaking her heart,’ said Ada.

‘Ada girl, adored girl,’ cried Van, ‘I’m a radiant void. I’m convalescing after a long and dreadful illness. You cried over my unseemly scar, but now life is going to be nothing but love and laughter, and corn in cans. I cannot brood over broken hearts, mine is too recently mended. You shall wear a blue veil, and I the false mustache that makes me look like Pierre Legrand, my fencing master.’

‘*Au fond*,’ said Ada, ‘first cousins have a perfect right to ride together. And even dance or skate, if they want. After all, first cousins are almost brother and sister. It’s a blue, icy, breathless day,’

She was soon ready, and they kissed tenderly in their hallway, between lift and stairs, before separating for a few minutes.

‘Tower,’ she murmured in reply to his questioning glance, just as she used to do on those honeyed mornings in the past, when checking up on happiness: ‘And you?’

‘A regular ziggurat.’ (2.8)

In *Tayna Tryokh. Egipet i Vavilon* (“The Secret of Three: Egypt and Babylon,” 1925) Merezhkovski mentions the Babylonian seven-storey ziggurat tower:

Не эту ли игру божественных чисел кристаллизируют и египтяне в пирамиде, соединяя в одной точке неба четыре исходящих из земли треугольника, и вавилоняне – в башне Zikkurat, семиярусной: 3+4=7? (“The Divine Trefoil,” XI)

On his way to Dan’s lawyer Demon Veen (Van’s and Ada’s father who finds out that his children are lovers thanks to Dan’s Boschean death) goes out of the way of Mrs. R4:

Next day, February 5, around nine p.m., Manhattan (winter) time, on the way to Dan’s lawyer, Demon noted — just as he was about to cross Alexis Avenue, an ancient but insignificant acquaintance, Mrs Arfour, advancing toward him, with her toy terrier, along his side of the street. Unhesitatingly, Demon stepped off the curb, and having no hat to raise (hats were not worn with raincloaks and besides he had just taken a very exotic and potent pill to face the day’s ordeal on top of a sleepless journey), contented himself — quite properly — with a wave of his slim umbrella; recalled with a paint dab of delight one of the gargle girls of her late husband; and smoothly passed in front of a slow-clopping horse-drawn vegetable cart, well out of the way of Mrs R4. (2.10)

Darkbloom (‘Notes to *Ada*’): R4: ‘rook four’, a chess indication of position (pun on the woman’s name).

Alexey Sklyarenko