Describing his dialogue over the dorophone (hydraulic telephone) with his secretary, Van Veen (the narrator and main character in VN’s novel *Ada*, 1969) mentions *la durée*:

At this point, as in a well-constructed play larded with comic relief, the brass campophone buzzed and not only did the radiators start to cluck but the uncapped soda water fizzed in sympathy.

Van (crossly): ‘I don’t understand the first word... What’s that? *L’adorée?* Wait a second’ (to Lucette). ‘Please, stay where you are.’ (Lucette whispers a French child-word with two ‘p’s.). ‘Okay’ (pointing toward the corridor). ‘Sorry, Polly. Well, is it *l’adorée?* No? Give me the context. Ah — *la durée. La durée* is not... sin on what? Synonymous with duration. Aha. Sorry again, I must stopper that orgiastic soda. Hold the line.’ (Yells down the ‘cory door,’ as they called the long second-floor passage at Ardis.) ‘Lucette, *let* it run over, who cares!’

He poured himself another glass of brandy and for a ridiculous moment could not remember what the hell he had been — yes, the polliphone.

It had died, but buzzed as soon as he recradled the receiver, and Lucette knocked discreetly at the same time.

*‘La durée...* For goodness sake, come in without knocking... No, Polly, knocking does not concern you — it’s my little cousin. All right. *La durée* is not synonymous with duration, being saturated — yes, as in Saturday — with that particular philosopher’s thought. What’s wrong now? You don’t know if it’s *dorée* or *durée?* D, U, R. I thought you knew French. Oh, I see. So long.

‘My typist, a trivial but always available blonde, could not make out *durée* in my quite legible hand because, she says, she knows French, but not scientific French.’

‘Actually,’ observed Lucette, wiping the long envelope which a drop of soda had stained, ‘Bergson is only for very young people or very unhappy people, such as this available *rousse.’*

‘Spotting Bergson,’ said the assistant lecher, ‘rates a B minus *dans ton petit cas,* hardly more. Or shall I reward you with a kiss on your *krestik —* whatever that is?’

Wincing and rearranging his legs, our young Vandemonian cursed under his breath the condition in which the image of the four embers of a vixen’s cross had now solidly put him. One of the synonyms of ‘condition’ is ‘state,’ and the adjective ‘human’ may be construed as ‘manly’ (since L’Humanité means ‘Mankind’!), and that’s how, my dears, Lowden recently translated the title of the *malheureux* Pompier’s cheap novel *La Condition Humaine,* wherein, incidentally, the term ‘Vandemonian’ is hilariously glossed as *‘Koulak tasmanien d’origine hollandaise.’* Kick her out before it is too late.

‘If you are serious,’ said Lucette, passing her tongue over her lips and slitting her darkening eyes, ‘then, my darling, you can do it now. But if you are making fun of me, then you’re an abominably cruel Vandemonian.’

‘Come, come, Lucette, it means "little cross" in Russian, that’s all, what else? Is it some amulet? You mentioned just now a little red stud or pawn. Is it something you wear, or used to wear, on a chainlet round your neck? a small acorn of coral, the *glandulella* of vestals in ancient Rome? What’s the matter, my dear?’ (2.5)

In *Opravdanie svobody* (“Justification of Freedom,” 1924), a review of Berdyaev’s book *Filosofiya neravenstva* (“The Philosophy of Inequality,” 1924), Zinaida Hippius mentions Bergson’s *la durée* and renders it as *dlenye*:

Революция не имеет *дленья* (la durée, по Бергсону), и когда мы говорим о «революции» – мы говорим, в сущности, о временах, окружающих этот миг; о времени «послереволюционном», о революционных «эпохах»… Отсюда и споры, когда именно, какая революция кончилась. Споры неразрешимые, ибо революция есть реальное, но неуследимое мгновенье.

According to Hippius, Revolution has no *dlenye*. Describing the difference between Terra and Antiterra (aka Demonia, Earth’s twin planet on which *Ada* is set), Van mentions Revolution:

Revelation can be more perilous than Revolution. Sick minds identified the notion of a Terra planet with that of another world and this ‘Other World’ got confused not only with the ‘Next World’ but with the Real World in us and beyond us. *Our* enchanters, *our* demons, are noble iridescent creatures with translucent talons and mightily beating wings; but in the eighteen-sixties the New Believers urged one to imagine a sphere where our splendid friends had been utterly degraded, had become nothing but vicious monsters, disgusting devils, with the black scrota of carnivora and the fangs of serpents, revilers and tormentors of female souls; while on the opposite side of the cosmic lane a rainbow mist of angelic spirits, inhabitants of sweet Terra, restored all the stalest but still potent myths of old creeds, with rearrangement for melodeon of all the cacophonies of all the divinities and divines ever spawned in the marshes of this our sufficient world.

Sufficient for your purpose, Van, *entendons-nous.* (Note in the margin.) (1.3)

The phenomenon of Terra appeared on Demonia after the L disaster in the middle of the 19th century:

The details of the L disaster (and I do not mean Elevated) in the *beau milieu* of last century, which had the singular effect of both causing and cursing the notion of ‘Terra,’ are too well-known historically, and too obscene spiritually, to be treated at length in a book addressed to young laymen and lemans — and not to grave men or gravemen.

Of course, today, after great anti-L years of reactionary delusion have gone by (more or less!) and our sleek little machines, Faragod bless them, hum again after a fashion, as they did in the first half of the nineteenth century, the mere geographic aspect of the affair possesses its redeeming comic side, like those patterns of brass marquetry, and bric-à-Braques, and the ormolu horrors that meant ‘art’ to our humorless forefathers. (ibid.)

Darkbloom (‘Notes to *Ada*’): Faragod: apparently, the god of electricity.

After the L disaster electricity (“the unmentionable magnetic power”) was banned on Antiterra. *Elektrichestvo* (“Electricity,” 1901) is a poem by Zinaida Hippius:

Две нити вместе свиты,

Концы обнажены.

То «да» и «нет», — не слиты,

Не слиты — сплетены.

Их тёмное сплетенье

И тесно, и мертво.

Но ждет их воскресенье,

И ждут они его.

Концов концы коснутся —

Другие «да» и «нет»,

И «да» и «нет» проснутся,

Сплетённые сольются,

И смерть их будет — Свет.

Two wires are wrapped together,

The loose ends naked, exposed

A yes and no, not united,

Not united, but juxtaposed.

A dark, dark juxtaposition --

So close together, dead.

But resurrection awaits them;

And they await what waits ahead.

End will meet end in touching

Yes -- no, left and right,

The yes and no awakening,

Inseparably uniting

And their death will be - Light.

Hippius’ poem is quoted by her husband, D. Merezhkovski, in his book “Tolstoy and Dostoevski” (1902). The Antiterran L disaster seems to correspond to the mock execution of Dostoevski and the Petrashevskians on Jan. 3, 1850 (NS), in our world. In her poem *Otdykh* (“Rest,” 1914) Zinaida Hippius compares words to *pena* (foam) and twice repeats the word *dlenye* (duration):

Слова — как пена,   
Невозвратимы и ничтожны.  
Слова — измена,   
Когда молитвы невозможны.  
  
Пусть длится дленье.   
Не я безмолвие нарушу.  
Но исцеленье   
Сойдёт ли в замкнутую душу?  
  
Я знаю, надо   
Сейчас молчанью покориться.  
Но в том отрада,   
Что дление не вечно длится.

Words are like foam,

irrevocable and insignificant.

Words are a treason,

When prayers are impossible.

Let the duration last.

Not I will break the silence.

But will the healing come

unto the locked soul?

I know I should now

submit to silence.

But there is a comfort in the fact

that the duration won’t last forever.

*Pen pan* (“Master of Foams,” 1912) is a poem by Velimir Khlebnikov. In VN’s novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) Sebastian’s half-brother V. (the narrator and main character) mentions the futurist poet Alexis Pan and his wife Larissa (whom young Sebastian accompanied in their tour to the East). In Manhattan (aka Man, the Antiterran name of New York) Van lives in Cordula’s former apartment on Alexis Avenue (2.6). According to Van, he was about to move to Manhattan when he received an unexpected dorophone call from his half-sister Lucette:

Van Veen [as also, in his small way, the editor of *Ada*] liked to change his abode at the end of a section or chapter or even paragraph, and he had almost finished a difficult bit dealing with the divorce between time and the contents of time (such as action on matter, in space, and the nature of space itself) and was contemplating moving to Manhattan (that kind of switch being a reflection of mental rubrication rather than a concession to some farcical ‘influence of environment’ endorsed by Marx *père,* the popular author of ‘historical’ plays), when he received an unexpected dorophone call which for a moment affected violently his entire pulmonary and systemic circulation.

Nobody, not even his father, knew that Van had recently bought Cordula’s penthouse apartment between Manhattan’s Library and Park. Besides its being the perfect place to work in, with that terrace of scholarly seclusion suspended in a celestial void, and that noisy but convenient city lapping below at the base of his mind’s invulnerable rock, it was, in fashionable parlance, a ‘bachelor’s folly’ where he could secretly entertain any girl or girls he pleased. (One of them dubbed it ‘your wing *à terre’).* But he was still in his rather dingy Chose-like rooms at Kingston when he consented to Lucette’s visiting him on that bright November afternoon. (2.5)

At the beginning of Tolstoy’s story *Posle bala* (“After the Ball,” 1903) the narrator mentions *sreda* (environment) and says that its influence is not as important as that of *sluchay* (chance):

— Вот вы говорите, что человек не может сам по себе понять, что хорошо, что дурно, что всё дело в среде, что среда заедает. А я думаю, что всё дело в случае. Я вот про себя скажу.

“And you say that a man cannot, of himself, understand what is good and evil; that it is all environment, that the environment swamps the man. But I believe it is all chance. Take my own case…”

In his poem *O skol’ko nam otkrytiy chudnykh…* (“O how many wondrous discoveries…” 1829) Pushkin mentions *Opyt, syn oshibok trudnykh* (Experience, the son of difficult errors), *Geniy, Paradoksov drug* (Genius, a friend of Paradox) and *Sluchay, bog* *izobretatel’* (Chance, the inventor god):

О сколько нам открытий чудных  
Готовят просвещенья дух  
И Опыт, [сын] ошибок трудных,  
И Гений, [Парадоксов] друг,  
[И Случай, бог изобретатель]

O how many wondrous discoveries

the spirit of Enlightenment prepares for us

and Experience, [the son] of difficult errors,

and Genius, a friend of [Paradox],

[and Chance, the inventor god]

Berdyaev is the author of *Opyt paradoksal’noy etiki* (“An Attempt of Paradoxical Ethics,” 1931) and *Opyt eskhatologicheskoy metafiziki* (“An Attempt of Eschatological Metaphysics,” 1947). In the epilogue of *Ada* Van mentions the crowning paradox of our boxed brain’s eschatologies:

I had a schoolmate called Vanda. And *I* knew a girl called Adora, little thing in my last floramor. What makes me see that bit as the purest *sanglot* in the book? What is the worst part of dying?

For you realize there are three facets to it (roughly corresponding to the popular tripartition of Time). There is, first, the wrench of relinquishing forever all one’s memories — that’s a commonplace, but what courage man must have had to go through that commonplace again and again and not give up the rigmarole of accumulating again and again the riches of consciousness that will be snatched away! Then we have the second facet — the hideous physical pain — for obvious reasons let us not dwell upon that. And finally, there is the featureless pseudo-future, blank and black, an everlasting nonlastingness, the crowning paradox of our boxed brain’s eschatologies! (5.6)

Van arrives at the site of his duel with Captain Tapper in Paradox, his second’s cheap ‘semi-racer:’

He shaved, disposed of two blood-stained safety blades by leaving them in a massive bronze ashtray, had a structurally perfect stool, took a quick bath, briskly dressed, left his bag with the concierge, paid his bill and at six punctually squeezed himself next to blue-chinned and malodorous Johnny into the latter’s Paradox, a cheap “semi-racer.” For two or three miles they skirted the dismal bank of the lake—coal piles, shacks, boat-houses, a long strip of black pebbly mud and, in the distance, over the curving bank of autumnally misted water, the tawny fumes of tremendous factories.

“Where are we now, Johnny dear?” asked Van as they swung out of the lake’s orbit and sped along a suburban avenue with clapboard cottages among laundry-linked pines.

“Dorofey Road,” cried the driver above the din of the motor. “It abuts at the forest.”

It abutted. Van felt a faint twinge in his knee where he had hit it against a stone when attacked from behind a week ago, in another wood. At the moment his foot touched the pine-needle strewn earth of the forest road, a transparent white butterfly floated past, and with utter certainty Van knew that he had only a few minutes to live. (1.42)

In the Kalugano hospital (where he recovers after his duel with Tapper) Van meets Tatiana, a remarkably pretty and proud young nurse, and Dorofey, a beefy-handed male nurse. At the beginning of his fable *Vorchun Dorofey* (“The Grumbler Dorofey,” 1860) Kurochkin mentions *kapital* (the capital):

Наживая грехом   
Капитал,   
Иногда я тайком   
Размышлял:   
«Всё бы ладно: житьё!   
Гладкий путь...   
Только совесть... её  
Как надуть?»

Making sinfully

Capital,

Sometimes secretly

I mused:

“Everything’s fine: my life

is a smooth way.

Only my conscience…

How can one dupe it?”

*Das Kapital* (“Capital,” 1867-83) is the main work of Karl Marx (cf. Marx *père*). In VN’s story *Soglyadatay* (“The Eye,” 1930) Smurov (the narrator and main character) says: “everything is vacillating, everything is due to chance, and vain have been the efforts of that ramshackle and grumbling bourgeois in Victorian check trousers, who wrote the obscure work called 'Capital' — a fruit of insomnia and megrim.”

In Kurochkin’s fable Dorofey is the name of the author’s conscience. In a letter of March 16, 1834, to Prince Odoevski Pushkin calls Pletnyov (to whom *Eugene Onegin* is dedicated) *voploshchyonnaya sovest’* (conscience personified) and mentions *vorovskaya shayka* (a gang of thieves):

Дело идёт о Конверсационс Лексиконе: я это пронюхал. Соглашаюсь с Вашим сиятельством, что нынешний вечер имеет свою гадкую и любопытную сторону. Я буду у Греча, ибо на то получил разрешение от Плетнёва, который есть воплощённая совесть. Поедем; что за беда? Ведь это будет мирская сходка всей республики. Всего насмотримся и наслышимся. А в воровскую шайку не вступим.

In Chapter Six (IV: 8) of EO Pushkin calls Zaretski (Lenski’s second in his duel with Onegin) *kartyozhnoy shayki ataman* (the hetman of a gaming gang):

Вперёд, вперёд, моя исторья!  
Лицо нас новое зовёт.  
В пяти верстах от Красногорья,  
Деревни Ленского, живёт  
И здравствует ещё доныне  
В философической пустыне  
Зарецкий, некогда буян,  
Картёжной шайки атаман,  
Глава повес, трибун трактирный,  
Теперь же добрый и простой  
Отец семейства холостой,  
Надёжный друг, помещик мирный  
И даже честный человек:  
Так исправляется наш век!

Forward, forward, my story!

A new persona claims us.

Five versts from Krasnogórie,

Lenski's estate, there lives

and thrives up to the present time

in philosophical reclusion

Zarétski, formerly a brawler,

the hetman of a gaming gang,

chieftain of rakehells, pothouse tribune,

but now a kind and simple

bachelor paterfamilias,

a steadfast friend, a peaceable landowner,

and even an honorable man:

thus does our age correct itself!

At Chose (Van’s English University) Van wrestles with his conscience before accepting a cardsharp’s offer:

Van fumed and fretted the rest of the morning, and after a long soak in a hot bath (the best adviser, and prompter and inspirer in the world, except, of course, the W.C. seat) decided to pen — pen is the word — a note of apology to the cheated cheater. As he was dressing, a messenger brought him a note from Lord C. (he was a cousin of one of Van’s Riverlane schoolmates), in which generous Dick proposed to substitute for his debt an introduction to the Venus Villa Club to which his whole clan belonged. Such a bounty no boy of eighteen could hope to obtain. It was a ticket to paradise. Van tussled with his slightly overweight conscience (both grinning like old pals in their old gymnasium) — and accepted Dick’s offer. (1.28)

“Pen is the word” brings to mind Byron’s pun at the end of *Beppo* (1818), “my pen is at the bottom of a page.” *Sovest’* (conscience)rhymes with *povest’* (tale). In a letter of March 7 (?), 1826, to Pletnyov Pushkin calls his poem *Graf Nulin* (“Count Null,” 1825) *povest’ v* *rode* Beppo (“a tale in the genre of *Beppo*”):

Знаешь ли? уж если печатать что, так возьмёмся за Цыганов. Надеюсь, что брат по крайней мере их перепишет — а ты пришли рукопись ко мне — я доставлю предисловие и м. б. примечания — и с рук долой. А то всякой раз, как я об них подумаю или прочту слово в журн., у меня кровь портится — в собрании же моих поэм для новинки поместим мы другую повесть в роде Верро, которая у меня в запасе.

According to Pushkin, he wrote “Count Nulin” in two mornings, on Dec. 13-14, 1825:

В конце 1825 года находился я в деревне. Перечитывая «Лукрецию», довольно слабую поэму Шекспира, я подумал: что если б Лукреции пришла в голову мысль дать пощечину Тарквинию? быть может, это охладило б его предприимчивость и он со стыдом принужден был отступить? Лукреция б не зарезалась. Публикола не взбесился бы, Брут не изгнал бы царей, и мир и история мира были бы не те.

Итак, республикою, консулами, диктаторами, Катонами, Кесарем мы обязаны соблазнительному происшествию, подобному тому, которое случилось недавно в моем соседстве, в Новоржевском уезде.

Мысль пародировать историю и Шекспира мне представилась. Я не мог воспротивиться двойному искушению и в два утра написал эту повесть.

Я имею привычку на моих бумагах выставлять год и число. «Граф Нулин» писан 13 и 14 декабря. Бывают странные сближения.

At the end of 1825 I was living in the country. Re-reading *Lucrece*, a rather weak poem of Shakespeare’s, I thought: what if it had occurred to Lucrece to slap Tarquin’s face? Maybe it would have cooled his boldness and he would have been obliged to withdraw, covered in confusion. Lucrece would not have stubbed herself, Publicola would not have been enraged, Brutus would not have driven out the kings, and the world and its history would have been different.

And so we owe the republic, the consuls, the dictators, the Catos, the Caesars to a seduction similar to one which took place recently in our neighborhood, in the Novorzhev district.

I was struck by the idea to parody both history and Shakespeare; I could not resist the double temptation and in two mornings had written this tale. I am accustomed to date my papers – *Count Nulin* was written on 13 and 14 December. History does repeat itself strangely.

The Decembrist insurrection took place on Dec. 14, 1825. One of the five hanged Decembrists was Mikhail Bestuzhev-Ryumin (1801-26). Zinaida Hippius’s cousin Vladimir (VN’s Russian literature teacher at the Tenishev school) wrote under the penname Bestuzhev. In the Russian version of his autobiography, *Drugie berega* (“Other Shores,” 1954), VN describes his romance with Tamara and mentions Vladimir Vasilievich Hippius who often rang up from school to learn the truth about his pupil’s failing health:

Мы пропускали школу: не помню, как устраивалась Тамара; я же подкупал нашего швейцара Устина, заведовавшего нижним телефоном (24--43), и Владимир Васильевич Гиппиус, часто звонивший из школы, чтобы справиться о моём пошатнувшемся здоровье, не видал меня в классе, скажем, с понедельника до пятницы, а во вторник я опять начинал болеть. (Chapter Eleven, 1)

We skipped school: I forget what Tamara’s procedure was; mine consisted of talking either of the two chauffeurs into dropping me at this or that corner on the way to school (both were good sports and actually refused to accept my gold—handy five-rouble pieces coming from the bank in appetizing, weighty sausages of ten or twenty shining pieces, in the aesthetic recollection of which I can freely indulge now that my proud émigré destitution is also a thing of the past). Nor had I any trouble with our wonderful, eminently bribable Ustin, who took the calls on our ground-floor telephone, the number of which was 24–43, *dvadtsat’ chetïre sorok tri;* he briskly replied I had a sore throat. I wonder, by the way, what would happen if I put in a long-distance call from my desk right now? No answer? No such number? No such country? Or the voice of Ustin saying “*moyo pochtenietse!”* (the ingratiating diminutive of “my respects”)? There exist, after all, well-publicized Slavs and Kurds who are well over one hundred and fifty. My father’s telephone in his study (584–51) was not listed, and my form master in his attempts to learn the truth about my failing health never got anywhere, though sometimes I missed three days in a row. (*Speak, Memory*, Chapter Twelve, 2)

According to VN, Vladimir Hippius surpassed in talent his much better-known cousin:

My Russian literature teacher at school, Vladimir Hippius, a first-rate though somewhat esoteric poet whom I greatly admired (he surpassed in talent, I think, his much better known cousin, Zinaïda Hippius, woman poet and critic) brought a copy [of VN’s first book of poetry] with him to class and provoked the delirious hilarity of the majority of my classmates by applying his fiery sarcasm (he was a fierce man with red hair) to my most romantic lines. His famous cousin at a session of the Literary Fund asked my father, its president, to tell me, please, that I would never, never be a writer. (ibid.)

The name Kurochkin comes from *kurochka* (little hen, pullet) and brings to mind *poule*, as Demon Veen (Van’s and Ada’s father) calls Cordula de Prey:

Demon, flaunting his flair, desired to be told if Van or his *poule* had got into trouble with the police (nodding toward Jim or John who having some other delivery to make sat glancing through Crime Copulate Bessarmenia).

*‘Poule,’* replied Van with the evasive taciturnity of the Roman rabbi shielding Barabbas.

‘Why gray?’ asked Demon, alluding to Van’s overcoat. ‘Why that military cut? It’s too late to enlist.’

‘I couldn’t — my draft board would turn me down anyway.’

‘How’s the wound?’

*‘Komsi-komsa.* It now appears that the Kalugano surgeon messed up his job. The rip seam has grown red and raw, without any reason, and there’s a lump in my armpit. I’m in for another spell of surgery — this time in London, where butchers carve so much better. Where’s the *mestechko* here? Oh, I see it. Cute (a gentian painted on one door, a lady fern on the other: have to go to the herbarium).’ (2.1)

When Van visits Philip Rack (Lucette’s music teacher who was poisoned by his jealous wife) in Ward Five of the Kalugano hospital, Dorofey reads the Russian-language newspaper *Golos (Logos)*:

That day came soon enough. After a long journey down corridors where pretty little things tripped by, shaking thermometers, and first an ascent and then a descent in two different lifts, the second of which was very capacious with a metal-handled black lid propped against its wall and bits of holly or laurel here and there on the soap-smelling floor, Dorofey, like Onegin’s coachman, said *priehali* (‘we have arrived’) and gently propelled Van, past two screened beds, toward a third one near the window. There he left Van, while he seated himself at a small table in the door corner and leisurely unfolded the Russian-language newspaper *Golos (Logos)…*

…Van drew in his useless weapon. Controlling himself, he thumped it against the footboard of his wheelchair. Dorofey glanced up from his paper, then went back to the article that engrossed him — ‘A Clever Piggy (from the memoirs of an animal trainer),’ or else ‘The Crimean War: Tartar Guerillas Help Chinese Troops.’ A diminutive nurse simultaneously stepped out from behind the farther screen and disappeared again. (1.42)

‘A Clever Piggy’ seems to hint at *Glupyi vor i umnyi porosyonok* (“A Stupid Thief and a Clever Piglet”), a story in Zoshchenko’s book for children *Umnye zhivotnye* (“Clever Animals”). Zoshcenko’s book begins with the following preface:

Говорят, что слоны и обезьяны очень умные животные. Но и другие животные тоже не дураки. Вот, посмотрите, каких умных животных я видел.

They say that elephants and apes are very clever animals. But other animals are not *duraki* (fools) either. Look what clever animals I have seen.

In his essay “On a Book entitled *Lolita*” (1956) VN mentions a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes:

The first little throb of *Lolita* went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940, in Paris, at a time when I was laid up with a severe attack of intercostal neuralgia. As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage.

The stories in Zoshchenko’s book include *Umnaya kura* (“A Clever Hen”). *Kurochka* (cf. Kurochkin) is a diminutive of *kura* (hen), a word that rhymes with *dura* (fem. of *durak*, “fool”). Describing his visit to Brownhill (Ada’s school for girls), Van mentions *dura* Cordula:

As Ada reached for the cream, he caught and inspected her dead-shamming hand. We remember the Camberwell Beauty that lay tightly closed for an instant upon our palm, and suddenly our hand was empty. He saw, with satisfaction, that her fingernails were now long and sharp.

‘Not too sharp, are they, my dear,’ he asked for the benefit of *dura* Cordula, who should have gone to the ‘powder room’ — a forlorn hope.

‘Why, no,’ said Ada.

‘You don’t,’ he went on, unable to stop, ‘you don’t scratch little people when you stroke little people? Look at your little girl friend’s hand’ (taking it), ‘look at those dainty short nails (cold innocent, docile little paw!). *She* could not catch them in the fanciest satin, oh, no, could you, Ardula — I mean, Cordula?’

Both girls giggled, and Cordula kissed Ada’s cheek. Van hardly knew what reaction he had expected, but found that simple kiss disarming and disappointing. The sound of the rain was lost in a growing rumble of wheels. He glanced at his watch; glanced up at the clock on the wall. He said he was sorry — that was his train.

‘Not at all,’ wrote Ada (paraphrased here) in reply to his abject apologies, ‘we just thought you were drunk; but I’ll never invite you to Brownhill again, my love.’ (1.27)

At the picnic on her sixteenth birthday Ada asks Van to stop playing the perfect idiot host because Percy de Prey came drunk as a welt:

‘Van!’ called Ada shrilly. ‘I want to say something to you, Van, come here.’

Dorn (flipping through a literary review, to Trigorin): ‘Here, a couple of months ago, a certain article was printed… a Letter from America, and I wanted to ask you, incidentally’ (taking Trigorin by the waist and leading him to the front of the stage), ‘because I’m very much interested in that question…’

Ada stood with her back against the trunk of a tree, like a beautiful spy who has just rejected the blindfold.

‘I wanted to ask you, incidentally, Van’ (continuing in a whisper, with an angry flick of the wrist) — ‘stop playing the perfect idiot host; he came drunk as a welt, can’t you see?’ (1.39)

Darkbloom (‘Notes to *Ada*’): Trigorin etc.: a reference to a scene in *The Seagull.* *Chayka* (“The Seagull,” 1896) is a play by Chekhov, the author of *Zhenshchina s tochki zreniya p’yanitsy* (“Woman as Seen by a Drunkard,” 1885). In Chekhov’s story (signed “My brother’s brother”) girls under sixteen are compared to *aqua distillatae*. The last note of Marina’s twin sister Aqua (Demon’s poor mad wife) was signed “My sister’s sister who *teper’ iz ada* (now is out of hell).” (1.3)

*Pesn’ Ada* (“A Song of Hell,” 1909) is a poem (written, in imitation of Dante’s *Inferno*, in terza rima) by Alexander Blok. In several poems Blok uses the phrase *shchemyashchiy zvuk* (a heart-rending sound). Aqua’s little letters from the homes of madness to Demon were sometimes signed: Madame Shchemyashchikh-Zvukov (1.3). In his poem *Neznakomka* (“Incognita,” 1906) Blok mentions *p’yanitsy s glazami krolikov* (the drunks with the eyes of rabbits) who cry out “*In vino veritas!*” The characters of *Ada* include Dr Krolik, the local entomologist and Ada’s beloved teacher of natural history whose grave Van refused to visit:

He could swear he did not look back, could not — by any optical chance, or in any prism — have seen her physically as he walked away; and yet, with dreadful distinction, he retained forever a composite picture of her standing where he left her. The picture — which penetrated him, through an eye in the back of his head, through his vitreous spinal canal, and could never be lived down, never — consisted of a selection and blend of such random images and expressions of hers that had affected him with a pang of intolerable remorse at various moments in the past. Tiffs between them had been very rare, very brief, but there had been enough of them to make up the enduring mosaic. There was the time she stood with her back against a tree trunk, facing a traitor’s doom; the time he had refused to show her some silly Chose snapshots of punt girls and had torn them up in fury and she had looked away knitting her brows and slitting her eyes at an invisible view in the window. Or that time she had hesitated, blinking, shaping a soundless word, suspecting him of a sudden revolt against her odd prudishness of speech, when he challenged her brusquely to find a rhyme to ‘patio’ and she was not quite sure if he had in mind a certain foul word and if so what was its correct pronunciation. And perhaps, worst of all, that time when she stood fiddling with a bunch of wild flowers, a gentle half-smile hanging back quite neutrally in her eyes, her lips pursed, her head making imprecise little movements as if punctuating with self-directed nods secret decisions and silent clauses in some sort of contract with herself, with him, with unknown parties hereinafter called Comfortless, Inutile, Unjust — while he indulged in a brutal outburst triggered by her suggesting — quite sweetly and casually (as she might suggest walking a little way on the edge of a bog to see if a certain orchid was out) — that they visit the late Krolik’s grave in a churchyard by which they were passing — and he had suddenly started to shout (‘You know I abhor churchyards, I despise, I denounce death, dead bodies are burlesque, I refuse to stare at a stone under which a roly-poly old Pole is rotting, let him feed his maggots in peace, the entomologies of death leave me cold, I detest, I despise —’); he went on ranting that way for a couple of minutes and then literally fell at her feet, kissing her feet, imploring her pardon, and for a little while longer she kept gazing at him pensively. (1.41).

In the first poem of his cycle *Plyaski smerti* (“Dances of Death,” 1912-14) Blok mentions *khosyayka dura i suprug durak* (the idiot hostess and her husband, a fool) who smile to a dead man:

В зал многолюдный и многоколонный

Спешит мертвец. На нём — изящный фрак.

Его дарят улыбкой благосклонной

Хозяйка — дура и супруг — дурак.

In his essay *V zashchitu A. Bloka* (“In Defense of A. Blok,” 1931) Berdyaev points out that poetry’s greatest and most painful problem is that it is only in a very small degree connected with Logos:

Это есть самая большая и мучи­тельная проблема поэзии: она лишь в очень малой степени причастна Логосу, она причастна Космосу.

According to Berdyaev, poetry is connected with Cosmos. To Dick’s question “what on earth is an artist” Van replies “an underground observatory:”

‘I say, Dick, ever met a gambler in the States called Plunkett? Bald gray chap when I knew him.’

‘Plunkett? Plunkett? Must have been before my time. Was he the one who turned priest or something? Why?’

‘One of my father’s pals. Great artist.’

‘Artist?’

‘Yes, artist. I’m an artist. I suppose *you* think you’re an artist. Many people do.’

‘What on earth is an artist?’

‘An underground observatory,’ replied Van promptly.

‘That’s out of some modem novel,’ said Dick, discarding his cigarette after a few avid inhales.

‘That’s out of Van Veen,’ said Van Veen. (1.28)

When Andrey Vinelander (Ada’s husband) falls ill, his sister Dorothy reads to him old issues of *Golos Feniksa* (“The Phoenix Voice,” a Russian-language newspaper in Arizona, 3.8). In her essay *Nabokov i ego Lolita* (“Nabokov and his *Lolita*,” 1959) Nina Berberova compares VN to *Feniks* (Phoenix, a fairy tale bird) and twice repeats the word “paradox:”

Робкая интуиция разъятого мира сквозит в первых попытках дать непрерывную текучесть сознания, одновременно с приоткрытыми неопытной, но сильной молодой рукой «шлюзами»; в то же время творческая основа уже начинает отсвечивать новой поэтикой в ритме, звуке, тоне произведения и ещё не совсем оперившийся Феникс пытается забить крылами. (1)

Все это происходит в мире, не имеющем никакого смысла, и вместе с тем — Набоков есть оправдание целого поколения. Быть может, это звучит как парадокс, но это не парадокс. (3)

Nina Berberova’s book *Alexandre Blok et son* *temps* (“Alexander Blok and his Time,” 1947) has the epigraph from Blok’s poem *Golos iz khora* (“A Voice from Choir,” 1910-14):

О, если б знали, дети, вы,

Холод и мрак грядущих дней!

O children, if you could foresee   
the future cold, the future dark!

One of Blok’s first poems was *Sirin i Alkonost, ptitsy radosti i pechali* (“Sirin and Alkonost, the Birds of Joy and Sorrow,” 1899). VN’s Russian nom de plume was Sirin.

“Soda” rhymes with *oda* (“ode”) and with “coda.” *Oda k radosti* is the Russian title of Schiller’s poem *An die* *Freude* (“Ode to Joy,” 1785) used by Beethoven in the final (fourth) movement of his *Ninth Symphony* (1824). In his “Ode to Count Khvostov” (1825) Pushkin compares Khvostov to Byron. In his poem *Kak v* *Gretsiyu Bayron, o, bez sozhalen’ya…* (“Like Byron to Greece, oh, without regret…” 1927) G. Ivanov mentions *golos bessmyslenno-sladkogo pen’ya* (a voice of the meaninglessly sweet singing) and *blednyi ogon’* (pale fire):

Как в Грецию Байрон, о, без сожаленья,  
Сквозь звёзды и розы, и тьму,  
На голос бессмысленно-сладкого пенья…  
— И ты не поможешь ему.

Сквозь звёзды, которые снятся влюблённым,  
И небо, где нет ничего,  
В холодную полночь — платком надушённым.  
— И ты не удержишь его.

На голос бессмысленно-сладкого пенья,  
Как Байрон за бледным огнём,  
Сквозь полночь и розы, о, без сожаленья…  
— И ты позабудешь о нём.

*Pale Fire* (1962) is a novel by VN. Its three main characters are the poet Shade, his mad commentator Kinbote (who imagines that he is Charles the Beloved, the last self-exiled king of Zembla) and his killer Gradus. It seems that, to be completed, Shade’s unfinished poem needs not only Line 1000 (identical to Line 1: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain”), but also a coda (Line 1001: “By its own double in the windowpane”). According to G. Ivanov, to his question “does a sonnet need a coda” Blok replied that he did not know what a coda is. *Tam, gde zhili sviristeli…* (“There where the waxwings lived…” 1908) is a poem by Velimir Khlebnikov.

The total number of lines in Shade’s poem brings to mind *A Thousand and One Nights* (the Arabian collection of fairy tales) and the set of a Thousand-and-One Best Plays in Marina’s boudoir:

Ada showed her shy guest the great library on the second floor, the pride of Ardis and her favorite ‘browse,’ which her mother never entered (having her own set of a Thousand-and-One Best Plays in her boudoir), and which Red Veen, a sentimentalist and a poltroon, shunned, not caring to run into the ghost of his father who had died there of a stroke, and also because he found nothing so depressing as the collected works of unrecollected authors, although he did not mind an occasional visitor’s admiring the place’s tall bookcases and short cabinets, its dark pictures and pale busts, its ten chairs of carved walnut, and two noble tables inlaid with ebony. (1.6)

Marina’s husband Daniel Veen (Lucette’s father) is known in society as Red Veen or *Durak* Walter:

On April 23, 1869, in drizzly and warm, gauzy and green Kaluga, Aqua, aged twenty-five and afflicted with her usual vernal migraine, married Walter D. Veen, a Manhattan banker of ancient Anglo-Irish ancestry who had long conducted, and was soon to resume intermittently, a passionate affair with Marina. The latter, some time in 1871, married her first lover’s first cousin, also Walter D. Veen, a quite as opulent, but much duller, chap.

The ‘D’ in the name of Aqua’s husband stood for Demon (a form of Demian or Dementius), and thus was he called by his kin. In society he was generally known as Raven Veen or simply Dark Walter to distinguish him from Marina’s husband, Durak Walter or simply Red Veen. Demon’s twofold hobby was collecting old masters and young mistresses. He also liked middle-aged puns. (1.1)

Describing his novel *Letters from Terra*, Van mentions an obscene ancient Arab, expounder of anagrammatic dreams, Ben Sirine:

The only other compliment was paid to poor Voltemand in a little Manhattan magazine *(The Village Eyebrow)* by the poet Max Mispel (another botanical name — ‘medlar’ in English), member of the German Department at Goluba University. Herr Mispel, who liked to air his authors, discerned in *Letters from Terra* the influence of Osberg (Spanish writer of pretentious fairy tales and mystico-allegoric anecdotes, highly esteemed by short-shift thesialists) as well as that of an obscene ancient Arab, expounder of anagrammatic dreams, Ben Sirine, thus transliterated by Captain de Roux, according to Burton in his adaptation of Nefzawi’s treatise on the best method of mating with obese or hunchbacked females *(The Perfumed Garden,* Panther edition, p.187, a copy given to ninety-three-year-old Baron Van Veen by his ribald physician Professor Lagosse). His critique ended as follows: ‘If Mr Voltemand (or Voltimand or Mandalatov) is a psychiatrist, as I think he might be, then I pity his patients, while admiring his talent.’ (2.2)

On Antiterra VN’s *Lolita* (1955) is known as *The Gitanilla*, a novel by Osberg (1.13). Pushkin attempted to learn Spanish reading Cervantes’ novella *La Gitanilla* (1613).

Alexey Sklyarenko