

## LAUGHTER IN THE DARK BY VLADIMIR NABOKOV: ON THE SYMBIOSIS OF LITERATURE AND OPERA

Irina Beliajeva

Vilniaus universiteto Literatūros istorijos ir teorijos katedros magistrantė

The present article focuses on one of the English novels by Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark* (1937), which, same as other Nabokovian novels, is an example of a definite, tightly organized model of a text, oversaturated with literary, cinematographic, theatre and art allusions.

Inasmuch as texts of this kind require “being deciphered”, researchers have not once made attempts to read Nabokov’s works intertextually<sup>1</sup>. Among a large number of these investigations, special attention must be paid to Nora Buhks’s book<sup>2</sup>. In her thorough study of Nabokov’s Russian novels, Buhks also analyses *Kamera Obskura* (1933), which actually is *Laughter in the Dark*’s Russian counterpart and precursor.

This article, then, is structured as a dialogue with Buhks’s views<sup>3</sup>, its aim being to show how intertextual reading, first of all, expands the meaning and fills in the blank places of the text,

and second, clarifies the principles of textual structure formation. These two tasks of intertextual analysis demonstrate themselves as the reader tries to solve one of the riddles *Laughter in the Dark* presents, namely that of a little girl’s death.

This riddle finds itself at the junction of musical allusions and their literary sources, which form the textual layer of “the symbiosis of literature and opera” (Быкс, 1998, 102)<sup>4</sup>. Thus, one should examine two literary-operatic alloys engaged in the process of sense formation of Irma’s death. The first of these, though, would be approached, so to say, from the underside: Not Irma, but Margot is pushed forward here, and is introduced by Carmen, a most constant and productive image (symbol) in Nabokov’s oeuvre.

So. The fifth passage in Chapter Ten in *Laughter in the Dark* reads: “[...] she walked up and down the room in her red silk wrapper, her right hand at her left armpit, and puffed hard at a ci-

<sup>1</sup> Field, 1967; Johnson, 1985; Rampton, 1984; Allen, 1995, and especially Люксембург, 1999; Кац, 1996; Рылькова, 1999; Сендерович и Шварц, 1997. See also articles available on the Internet-site “Zembla”.

<sup>2</sup> Быкс, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, one should bear in mind the fact that Buhks analyzed *Kamera Obskura*, which despite all similarities is by no means identical with *Laughter in the Dark*!

<sup>4</sup> Very often literary and cultural references form concentrated syncretic knots, “either marking an Art ‘alloy’, or reflecting the conversion of one Art type into another” (Быкс, 1998, 100). Moreover, *Laughter in the Dark* being an example of Nabokovian “powerful tale with a melodramatic quality” (Allen, 1996, 820), “the references to all the Arts and their genres [in the novel] are always united by one theme – love drama, love tension” (Быкс, 1998, 100).

garette. With her dark hair falling over her brow she looked like a gypsy” (p. 50<sup>5</sup>).

The dark-haired gypsy smoking cigarettes is Mérimée’s Carmen. The direct and indirect references to Mérimée’s short story are ample in the novel. Carmen walks, “swaying her hips”<sup>6</sup>, and Margot is described as “swinging her girlish hips” (p. 47). Carmen is called “la belle baigneuse”<sup>7</sup>, and Margot, as the reader knows, “had long been wont to run along the shore of [Albinus’s] dreams” (p. 47).

Furthermore, Carmen is constantly compared to a chameleon and escapes from custody in “the /Calle de la Serpiente/ [– you know it, and that it earns its name by its many windings]”. The comparison with the chameleon is not accidental: First of all, the chameleon’s changing colours makes it the symbol of inconstancy. Second, in the Christian tradition, the chameleon symbolizes the devil that takes different disguises to deceive man. Indeed, José says: “She was lying [then], sir, as she has always lied”. Margot, whose symbolic nature in the text is the snake, being disloyal to Albinus, also lies to him throughout the novel.

“You lie,” whispered Albinus. “You and that scoundrel. Nothing but trickery and de-de-çoit, and...” (p. 124). “That was a base lie, a rascally trick from the beginning” (p. 125).

Finally, the chameleon can use its eyes independently of each other, so it is said to be able to see into the past and the future. This accounts

---

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, 1969. Henceforth quotations from the novel will be given according to this publication with a page indication.

<sup>6</sup> The references to Mérimée’s *Carmen* are given according to the English translation by Lady Mary Loyd.

<sup>7</sup> Mérimée, 1976, 491. In the Russian text (translated by M. Lozinsky) this description of Carmen is preserved („прекрасная купальщица“), while in the translation into English by Lady Mary Loyd Carmen is called simply “my fair lady”.

for the presence of “a dried chameleon” among “the indispensable adjuncts of [Carmen’s] art” of a fortune-teller. Cards are there, too, and it is natural that they are described as “bearing signs of constant usage”. And when Margot says to her landlady: “I’d like my fortune told,” “the latter took out from behind the empty beer bottles a decrepit pack of cards most of which had lost their corners so that they looked almost circular” (p. 31).

What is also very important is Carmen’s acacia blossom, which she flipped at José with her thumb so that it hit him just between the eyes. “I tell you, sir, I felt as if a bullet had struck me,” he says to the narrator. This fragment can be viewed as the addressee of Nabokov’s text twice: Albinus grows blind (his eyes are affected) and is murdered by Margot (a bullet in his side).

Besides, there are oranges “scattered” all over both Mérimée’s story and Nabokov’s novel. They serve as a symbol of passion and death in the both texts. The line of “orange” passion in *Laughter in the Dark* can be studied from the point of view of Biblical allusions<sup>8</sup>, and its correspondence with that in *Carmen* would not add any particularly new details to the issue discussed, whereas the line of death, connected with

---

<sup>8</sup> Snake the seducer, the Biblical serpent tempts Eve (and Adam), which leads to sin, banishment from the Garden of Eden, and finally death. The serpent takes away innocence from the first people. Their fall is associated with the symbol of apple. In *Laughter in the Dark* the role of apple is carried out by orange. The scenery and objects painted orange are noticed throughout the whole text (see, for example, pages 15, 96, 106, 111, 131), and the scene of Albinus’s orange-eating by the death-bed of his little daughter Irma is a clear allusion to the Biblical motif. Albinus in this scene may be referred to as the one who has already got to know love, i.e. has already eaten from the tree of life (Букс, 1998, 108). By the way, one might also remember the Greek (Roman) mythology, where orange is known as “a golden apple”, and it was the golden apple that Paris presented to Aphrodite (Venus) as to the most beautiful goddess.

the orange symbolism, is interesting to mention here exactly because of its remarkable correspondence with that in *Carmen*. Indeed, when the narrator enters Carmen's hovel, he finds scarce furniture there. But he stresses he “*must not forget to mention a jar of water, a pile of oranges, and a bunch of onions*” (*italics added*). As the story unfolds and José refuses to kill the narrator, “the gipsy cast a glance of the most utter scorn at him, then, seating herself Turkish-fashion in a corner of the room, she picked out an orange, tore off the skin, and began to eat it”. In Nabokov's novel, however, the oranges of this scene of the unsuccessful murder and, consequently, no death are used in the scene of the real death – that of Albinus's little daughter Irma: Albinus “found himself sitting in Paul's study. [...] On the table, a glass bowl with oranges gleamed. [...] Albinus took an orange and began peeling it slowly. [...] Albinus slowly ate the orange” (p. 96).

At the point of Irma's death another Carmen is introduced, that from Bizet's opera of the same name. The librettists Meilhac and Halévy have considerably remade the original plot of Mérimée's story, added more characters, and stressed the main disposition features of each of them.

In particular, in Bizet's “Carmen” the character of José's bride, Micaela, is extremely significant. Micaela appears on the stage at the very opening of the story, in Act One, *before José comes to know Carmen*: Sergeant Morales tells José that “Une jolie fille est venue [te] demander” – “A pretty has come to ask for [you]”<sup>9</sup>. It is interesting to note here that this musical line in the text of the Russian libretto goes as follows: “Тебя

искала красотка, вся в голубом” (*Оперные либретто*, 1979, II т., 274) – “A pretty girl, dressed in blue, has come to ask for you”. The blue colour of Micaela's dress in the opera is fully justified and is based on Mérimée's text: “I was a young fellow then – my heart was still in my own country, and I didn't believe in any pretty girls who hadn't blue skirts and long plaits of hair falling on their shoulders”, which is the fashion of “peasant women in Navarre and the Basque Provinces”. Remember here that Elisabeth, Albinus's wife, is depicted in “her pale blue nightgown” (p. 28), *still before Albinus has left his family for Margot*. (Blue is a colour of innocence and loyalty.)

Micaela appears in the listener's (reader's) view once again in Act Four. This time she comes to José, who is already a smuggler, to take him home. She urges him to “follow her”, as his mother is dying and “would not like to die without having forgiven” him. This episode finds its place in *Laughter in the Dark* as well: Paul, Elisabeth's brother, comes to Albinus to tell him that his “little girl is dying” (p. 94). For Albinus (like to José) this is “a rare opportunity [...] to raise his life to its former level, and he knew, with the lucidity of grief, that if he returned to his wife now, the reconciliation, which under ordinary circumstances would have been impossible, would come about almost of itself” (p. 98). Like José, Albinus does not take the opportunity, and this, finally, leads to his ruin.

Talking about Carmen and her place in Nabokov's novel, it is impossible to pass over still another Carmen. This time this would be a poetic cycle of the same name (1914) by Aleksandr Blok, a great Russian poet and the leader of Russian Symbolism. Blok wrote the poems of this cycle being impressed by his meeting and getting acquainted with Liubov' Aleksandrovna Del'mas, an operatic actress, who very ably performed a part of Carmen in Bizet's opera, on the

<sup>9</sup> The references to the French libretto of Bizet's “Carmen” and the English translation are given according to “Bizet's ‘Carmen’ – a direct translation for singers by Lea Frey”.

stage of St.-Petersburg Theater of Musical Drama (Орлов, 1980, 593).

For this analysis, it is the sixth poem of the cycle that is especially significant (Блок, 1980, 398–399). Curiously enough, this poem is a reminiscence of Blok’s first meeting Liubov’ Aleksandrovna. On that occasion she did not take part in the performance and was sitting in the hall (*ibid.*, 593). The theatre world of Blok’s “Karmen” becomes the cinema world in Nabokov’s *Laughter in the Dark*. And when Albinus sees Margot for the first time, she does not yet perform her part in the film of Albinus’s life – for the time being she is in the hall as well<sup>10</sup>.

In fact, Albinus could have described his first seeing Margot with Blok’s poem’s words. Indeed, he met her in the darkness of a small cinema hall (*В партере ночь*), he saw “the limpid gleam of her eyes” (p. 12) (*Сердитый взор / бесцветных глаз*). She was dressed in “a black frock [which] fitted her very face almost in dread” (p. 13; *Нагрудник черный близко, близко*). “There was nothing very much out of the common about all this: such things happened to him before” (p. 12): “he could not help remembering how many times beauty [...] had passed him by and vanished” (p. 13; *О, не впервые странных встреч / Я испытал немую жуткость*),

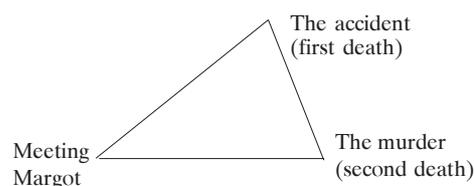
<sup>10</sup> Albinus’s life is indeed film-like: His real, full life begins in the cinema which he enters to see only the end of some film, and ends at the moment of the car crash. Moreover, his life ends once again – this time definitely and forever – in a cinematographic way, its final moments repeating the final moments of the film he saw in a small cinema at the beginning. Thus, Albinus goes through two deaths. In general, both *Kamera Obskura* and *Laughter in the Dark* stress the text’s connection with cinematograph. Cinema effects are ample in the both novels. Actually, camera obskura, as a synecdoche of cinematograph, stands for Kretschmar’s life. And, though the title of the second novel is changed to a phrase, which at first sight does not imply any cinema content, it is noteworthy that Albinus’s life as a film is presented more distinctly than that of Kretschmar.

and it “hurt [him] to look” (p. 13; *О, не глядеть, молчать – нет мочи, / Сказать – не надо и нельзя...*). “After three days he could ignore the memory of her no longer” (p. 13; *И сердцу суждено беречь [...] / Ваш образ, дорогой навек...*).

Finally, both Blok and Albinus see their Carmens in snowy and damp March: “One evening [in March (p. 7) – *I. B.*] he [Albinus] strolled about aimlessly and came to a small cinema the lights of which shed a scarlet sheen over the snow” (p. 12), and after the performance Albinus “stepped into a blood-red puddle; the snow was melting, the night was damp” (p. 13, *italics added*), etc.

In Blok’s poem „март наносит мокрый снег“.

Thus, one sees that Buhks’s statement about the allusion device in the novel is absolutely substantiated. Indeed, first, love tension is indisputable in the plots of Nabokov’s novel and its addressee; moreover, love leads to death; second, the addressee is syncretic: *Carmen* suggests the theme and its two variations, implemented through an “alloy” of prose, opera, and poetry. The three-fold image of Carmen helps to confirm Margot’s importance in Albinus’s life and her function of a femme fatale, as well as to fill in the otherwise blank spots of the text, which, above all, turn out to be the key-moments of the mythic cycle of Albinus’s life: birth – death – revival, the revival coming at the moment when “a stab [came] in his side which filled his eyes with a dazzling glory” (p. 159).



And! Carmen’s image appears to illuminate the episode of the death of Albinus’s little daugh-

ter Irma. At first sight, Irma's role in the novel does not seem to be extremely important: It cannot compare even with the role of her mother or Rex, let alone with that of Margot. Ironical as it may seem then, Irma's *death is* important. At least two questions arise: First, Why does the girl have to die at all? and second, Why does her death mark the compositional centre of the novel? (These two questions can also be regarded as the two sides of one and the same coin.) The answer lies in the image of "a whistle on the four notes" (p. 87), which introduces the other literary-operatic alloy to be presented in this article.

Buhks, going on talking about the syncretism in Nabokov's *Kamera Obskura*, describes "a whistle on the four notes" as "one of the most interesting, total and summary allusions of the novel, revealing several addressees brought together in one work – in a cinematographic work" (Быкк, 1998, 104).

Albinus's little daughter Irma, having heard "a familiar whistle on the four notes" (p. 87), gets out of bed and opens the window to see who is whistling. She motivates her actions by wanting to see her father, although she knows "perfectly well that it was not he", as he "was living with his little friend" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, "Irma thought: 'Who knows? Perhaps it is father after all? And no one will let him in; perhaps they told me on purpose that it was a strange man?'" (p. 88) As expected, and still to Irma's "great disappointment" (*ibid.*), it is not her father. While standing by the open window looking at a strange man, Irma gets cold and later dies. Buhks claims that "the whistle, the sound sign of the murderer of the girl, is a reference to F. Lang's film "M" (German "Mörder" – "murderer"), in which, at sight of a next victim, a girl-killer whistles a melody from E. Grieg's suite "Peer Gynt" (Быкк, 1998, 104). Buhks supports her suggestion by stating that in "M" the killer is

spotted by a blind man by his whistle (*ibid.*, 104).

In *Laughter in the Dark*, however, the reader finds some significant details added to the whole *Kamera Obskura* episode of Irma's getting cold and then dying. Still, interestingly enough, these details by no means reject the validity of Buhks's speculations; on the contrary, against the background of her reflections, they seem to make the meaning of the whole episode more complex and profound.

To begin with, the musical piece, from which the man whistles the four notes, is *named*: "Down in the street someone whistled four notes (*Siegfried*); and all was silent again" (p. 95). Compare in *Kamera Obskura*: "Down in the street someone tunefully whistled four notes – and all was silent again" (Набокков, 2001, 172).

"Siegfried", as it is known, is the third part of Wagner's four-opera saga "Der Ring des Nibelungen" ("Das Rheingold" – "Die Walküre" – "Siegfried" – "Götterdämmerung"). In "Siegfried" the main character (certainly, Siegfried himself) is shown as a courageous, fearless victor over any enemy, and a successful lover: The opera's final scene tells about Siegfried's happy union with Brunhild.

This connotation of success in love is certainly important for the man whistling in the street, as he has "for the last fortnight been visiting the lady on the fourth floor" (p. 87). For Irma, however, his happiness becomes her death.

But (and this is the second crucial addition to the episode) Irma goes to check if it might be her father whistling, because the whistle on the four notes is not simply "familiar" to her (as it is in *Kamera Obskura*): It is "*exactly* how her father whistled, when he used to come home" (p. 87) (*ibid.*; *italics added*).

So, Albinus used to whistle "Siegfried" when coming home to his wife and his child. Note here the role the whistle used to play for Albi-

nus's family: It was a conventional signal "just to let them [Elisabeth and Irma] know that he would be with them in a moment and that supper could be served" (*ibid.*). Against this ironic comparison of the two meanings of the opera in the novel, Irma's tragedy becomes more conspicuous. Really, now Albinus is, like the man in the street, happy in love, which "causes" his daughter's death:

Albinus		Irma
<i>cause</i>		<i>effect</i>
used to whistle "Siegfried"	→	recognizes the whistle in the street as her father's sign
is happy in love	→	now lives with her mother at her uncle's; does not see her father and even "must not talk about" him (p. 87)
does not live with his family	→	wants to make sure it is (not) her father whistling

It is not by chance that, when going back to Margot, after Irma has died, Albinus runs into a stranger in the doorway: "The front door was locked. But as he stood there, a painted lady in a Spanish shawl<sup>11</sup> came down, opened it and let in a snow-covered man. Albinus looked at his watch. It was past midnight. Had he really been there five hours?" (p. 97) (The reader knows that this snow-covered man is the one who has just whistled "Siegfried" in the street. So, the two "murderers" meet.)

It is not by chance either that the title of the musical piece whistled by both the man in the street and Albinus is given *not* at the moment of Irma's standing by the window at night, but at the moment of her death, when Albinus can hear it too. Of course, this may be explained very simply and reasonably: Irma, being just an eight-year-old girl, can (very understandably) be ig-

<sup>11</sup> A hint to Carmen?

norant of what origin the four notes of the whistle have, while Albinus, when hearing them, may recognize Wagner's "Siegfried"<sup>12</sup>.

Nevertheless, presenting "Siegfried" in the scene of Irma's death, and not her getting cold, may have at least one more explanation. Then, the "meeting" of all the three – "Siegfried", Irma, and Albinus – in one place and at one moment is essential.

Like other "operas" in the text<sup>13</sup> (except, perhaps, "Loengrin"), Wagner's "Siegfried" has its literary addressee as well. This, however, is not *Nibelungenlied* or any other folklore saga. Wagner's "Siegfried", as a melody of death, refers the reader to another masterpiece of Russian Symbolism, namely, to *Peterburg* by Andrey Belyi. *Peterburg* was published in 1913–14 in the almanac *Sirin* and later (1916) in book form. A revised version was printed in Berlin in 1922.

It is through this Belyi's work that the meaning of "Siegfried" in *Laughter in the Dark* is perceived. In *Peterburg* in Chapter Two, in the subchapter titled "Krasnyi Shut", it is said:

Собственно говоря, последние месяцы с предметом своим [Николаем Аполлоновичем Аблеуховым] Софья Петровна держала себя до крайности вызывающе: перед граммофонной трубой, изрыгающей „Смерть Зигфрида“, она

<sup>12</sup> This is an interesting point in the text: The indication to *Siegfried* is given in parenthesis. It may be understood as the author's (narrator's) addressing the reader (which he successfully does in other places of the novel as well), or it may be perceived as Albinus's own establishing the fact, though *unconsciously*, as he is torpid with grief. In the latter case it seems that the recognition of the opera does not raise any associations for him: It does not remind him of the role this musical work used to play in his previous life, the life connected with Elisabeth and Irma. In any case, here one comes to deal with the organization of Nabokov's text's narrative: the problems of point of view and focalization.

<sup>13</sup> Verdi's opera "Othello" (after Shakespeare's play), Tchaikovsky's opera "Pikovaja Dama" (after Pushkin's novel), Dargomyzhsky's opera "Rusalka" (after Pushkin's play).

училась телодвижению (и еще какому!), поднимая едва ли не до колен свою шелком шуршащую юбку, и т. д. (Белый, 1999, 142, курсив мой – И. Б.)

As the reader remembers, after Albinus and Elisabeth have broken it off, to live he comes to Margot's flat. On that very morning "after tea she [Margot] drove off to buy a gramophone. Why a gramophone? On this of all days..." (p. 50) and "the next morning Margot was out buying records" (p. 51).

Albinus's (or the reader's?) question is answered: The gramophone belching "Siegfried's Death" at Sophia Petrovna's in *Peterburg* "prophesies" death in *Laughter in the Dark*. It may be gathered that it is Albinus whom death awaits: Indeed, first Margot buys a gramophone (Chapter Ten), and then the reader learns that "Siegfried" is Albinus's melody (Chapter Twenty). So, from the moment Albinus steps over the threshold of Margot's flat, he is doomed to die.

However, one sees that by "Siegfried" is Irma "killed". (This is the idea with which the speculations on "Siegfried" have begun.) Her death is foretold by *Peterburg* as well: One of the through themes of Belyi's novel is patricide: "[...] the central line of the novel, which forms the basis of the plot, is the story of an attempt upon the life of Senator Ableuchov" (Долгополов, 1999, 917). "True, [...] the matter gets complicated since it is not just an assassination (murder) that has to take place, but a patricide. Nikolay Apollonovich has to redeem a pledge he once gave ["perhaps only in desperation" (Белый, 1999, 155) – И. Б.] and kill his father" (Долгополов, 1999, 919). In *Laughter in the Dark* this theme is condensed to one episode – the very one of Irma's death – and is exactly the opposite: The father "kills" his child.

Why?

The operatic allusion to "Siegfried" in Nabokov's novel reveals the sense of the image of

the whistle on the four notes in its immediate context of the episode of Irma's death by the help of the third text, whose role here is performed by Belyi's *Peterburg*. (And again the syncretism is found in love drama and executed on the level of the combination of the two Art types: literature and opera.) Still, the question of Irma's death remains unanswered: "Siegfried" then provokes further reflections and draws the reader's attention to a wider textual problem – that of the meaning of Irma's death as perceived through the mythic life of the main character, which question also explains the compositional structure of the text.

Indeed, the axis of the novel being in the main character, Albinus, the various meanings of the text are all perceived through his image, his life, his relationships with other characters.

In this view, the "reason" for Irma's death should be sought after in its having significance for Albinus's life – and not simply his "life", but his mythic life as well. Irma's death actually adds new points to issue of the mythic cycle of Albert Albinus's life, the more so that it introduces a new problem; that of *time in the novel*.

In the beginning, everything seems simple: The novel starts at a quite definitely marked point in time: "One evening (a week before the talk about Axel Rex)" (p. 12), which took place "upon a certain day in March" (p. 7) Albinus meets Margot. Some time later (if needed, it can be carefully calculated, when exactly it happened) Albinus is left by his wife and comes to live with Margot. Then, in winter, when "the snow glittered Christmas-like under the lamps [and] the sky was black" (p. 97), Albinus's daughter dies. The period from March to December takes up nine months. It is for nine months that Albinus lives with Margot, but they do not have a baby ("The doctor had told her [Margot] two years before that she could never have a child, and she regarded this as a boon and a blessing";

p. 51). Instead, Albinus's only child, the child by his wife Elisabeth, dies. Irma's father does not give a new life, he "takes away" the already existing one: Not only does he "kill" her by his whistle, but he also "kills" her by forgetting her, by "preferring" Margot to her:

After he had hastily swallowed some coffee, he went into Irma's former nursery – where a long table, with a green net across it, now stood; listlessly he took up a small celluloid ball and let it bounce, but instead of thinking of his child he saw another figure, a graceful, lively, wanton girl, laughing, leaning over the table, one heel raised, as she thrust her ping-pong bat. (P. 98)

Compare also Rampton's words: "Though he [Kretschmar = Albinus – *I. B.*] plots no murder, he is indirectly responsible for the death of his daughter who, weakened by her illness, comes to the window to look for him, catches a chill and dies. [...] When he leans that [Irma] is unwell, he is reluctant to leave his jealous mistress to go to the bedside of the dying girl. And, in one of those "moment of decision" scenes [...] Kretschmar [= Albinus – *I. B.*] chooses not to go his daughter's funeral so that he can stay at home and play with his new "child" (Rampton, 1984, 20, *italics added*).

Margot is "real life" (p. 154) for Albinus<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, Margot's and Albinus's child, so to say, is death for Irma and destruction for the whole family. And these death and destruction, in the long run, are meant for Albinus himself, too (but not for Margot).

Irma's and Albinus's deaths (NB: both Albinus's deaths) are essentially inter-connected and inter-influential. As a simplest proof, one could remember that before his own death Albinus is settled to live in Irma's room in Paul's flat:

---

<sup>14</sup> By the way, Margot is "real life, which [is] cruel, supple and strong like some anaconda" – which *in the end* "he longed to *destroy* without delay" (p. 154).

He was given what had been Irma's nursery. It surprised Elisabeth that she found it so easy to disturb the sacred slumber of that little room for the sake of this strange, large, silent occupant; to shift and change all its contents so as to adapt it to the blind man's needs. (*Ibid.*)

But more importantly, the deaths are brought together and compared against the background of one more death, the death of Emma Bovary of Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. The way Emma dies is recognizable in the deaths of Irma and, later, Albinus.

To start with, the very interior of the rooms, where Death is present, is similar: In *Madame Bovary*:

They [Homais and Canivet] found the room, as they entered, full of an atmosphere of mournful solemnity. Upon the work-table, covered with a white napkin, were five or six little balls of cotton wool in a silver dish, and near them stood a large crucifix between a pair of tall, lighted candles.

Emma was lying with her chin sunk on her breast; her eyes were staring and *her poor hands twitching at the sheets, in the ghastly, submissive way that dying people have, as though they were trying, prematurely, to draw the winding-sheet about them*. Pale as a statue, with eyes like burning coals, Charles, not weeping now, was standing facing her at the foot of the bed, while the priest, resting on one knee, was murmuring his prayers (Chapter 32 = Part Three, Chapter VIII, *italics added*),

and in *Laughter in the Dark*:

Nothing had changed there. Softly, rhythmically, Irma was tossing her head to and fro on the pillow. Her half-opened eyes were dim; every now and then a hiccough shook her. *Elisabeth smoothed the bedclothes: a mechanical gesture devoid of sense*. A spoon fell off the table, and its delicate jingle lingered for a long time in the ears of those in the room. The hospital nurse counted the pulse-beats, blinked, and cautio-

usly, as though afraid of hurting it, put back the little hand on the coverlet. (P. 94, *italics added*)

Albinus dies not in his bed, but, *when already shot, on the threshold of Death*, he “thought quite softly, *as if he were lying in bed*” (P. 159, *italics added*).

*She had finished at last*, [Emma] thought, with all things treacherous and base, with all the lusts of the flesh that had tortured her. She hated no one, now. A vague twilight was lowering upon her spirit, and, of all earthly sounds, Emma heard only the intermittent lamentation of that poor heart of hers, a lamentation soft and indistinct, like the last echo of a symphony dying away in the distance (Chapter 32 = Part Three, Chapter VIII, *italics added*),

whereas Albinus thinks:

*So that's all [...].* I must keep quiet for a little space and then walk very slowly along that bright sand of pain, towards the blue, blue wave. What bliss there is in blueness. I never knew how blue blueness could be. What a mess life has been. Now I know everything. Coming, coming, coming to drawn me. There it is. How it hurts. I can't breathe..." (P. 159, *italics added*)

However, these are just details. Against them it becomes especially clear that the thing which unites all the four deaths (Emma's, Irma's and Albinus's ones), and the thing which shows the fatal inseparability of the deaths of the daughter and the father, and, finally, the thing which makes Albinus's death inevitable and unavoidable is present in the both texts and all the deaths – the blind man. The role of the blind man is really dramatic: When Emma is dying, she hears the blind man *singing a song* under the windows of her house:

Suddenly there was a noise of heavy clogs on the pavement outside and the scraping of a stick, and a voice, a raucous voice, began to sing [...].

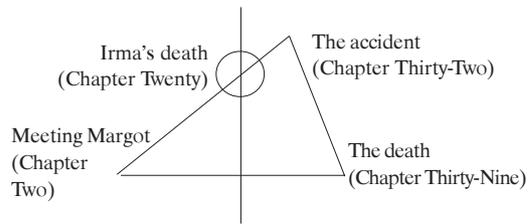
Emma sat bolt upright like a corpse suddenly galvanized into life, her hair dishevelled, her eyes fixed in a glassy stare, gaping with horror. [...]

“The blind man!” she cried, and broke out into a laugh – a ghastly, frantic, despairing laugh – thinking she saw the hideous features of the wretched being, rising up to strike terror to her soul, on the very threshold of eternal night. [...]

She fell back in a paroxysm on to the mattress. They hurried to her side. Emma was no more. (Chapter 32 = Part Three, Chapter VIII)

Irma comes to the window of her room when she hears *a whistle*. As it has already been pointed out, the whistle on four notes in *Laughter in the Dark* is an allusion to Lang's film “M”. What is significant to stress about it at present is that it is *the blind man* in this film who detects the murderer. Now, stumbling about furniture in his flat searching for Margot, the blind Albinus “advance[s] as quietly as possible so that he might *detect every sound*” (p. 158), thinking to himself something rather unexpected: “*Blind man's buff*, blind man's buff... in a country-house on a winter night, long, long ago” (*ibid.*). (Does this “country-house on a winter night, long, long ago” not refer to the place and time of Emma Bovary's death?) So, Irma seems to be avenged for. It is the blind man, who is her father, who finally “punishes” (“blind man's buff” – note the choice of the word) her “murderer” (“detecting every sound”), who is also her father. In this way, Irma's death puts Albinus's life into a certain vicious circle.

The idea of the “vicious circle” gives an answer to the other question of Irma's death: i.e. why it signs the precisely mathematical middle in the text's structure: There are thirty-nine chapters in the novel altogether, and Irma dies in Chapter Twenty.



Irma's death divides Albinus's life into two parts. These are not two *halves*, because the second one is "heavier": After Irma has died Albinus experiences two deaths. He also feels the "sense of dirt" that has covered his life as he started living with Margot. Irma's death, naturally, does not bring Albinus any renovation (renovation – revival comes only at the end of a mythic circle of life), but it brings understanding. It brings understanding of Time. Indeed, on the night when Irma has died and Albinus is going home to Margot, he looks at his watch: "It was past midnight. *Had he really been there five hours?*" (p. 97), and then "[p]erhaps for the first time in the course of the year he had spent with Margot, Albinus *was perfectly conscious* of the thin, slimy layer of turpitude which had settled on his life" (*ibid.*).

Hence, the center of the novel may be taken for the beginning and the end (simultaneously) of time, or, rather, timelessness. Here the idea of "the [vicious] circle" comes in. A circle has neither beginning nor end. A circle stands for continuity. To stress it once again, only the time of the novel's beginning (Albinus's meeting Margot) and its center (Irma's death) are carefully named. The time of the dénouement is ambiguous. Death seems to be eternal: Irma dies, and it is just the first link, the first element in the

chain of Albinus's deaths. And it is indicative and overwhelming that these links are all predicted back at the very opening of the novel, in the cinema episodes:

He glanced at the poster [...] which portrayed a man looking up at a window framing a child in a nightshirt [...] (p. 12);

A girl was receding among tumbled furniture before a masked man with a gun (p. 12);

A car was spinning down a smooth road with hairpin turns between cliffs and abyss (p. 13).

(Note that although the order of Albinus's deaths is mixed, Irma's death does surely come first!)

(At the very same time, one can also assume another explanation of why Irma's death marks the center of the novel. For Albinus it makes no difference, but the idea seems good for the composition of the novel for its own sake. It then turns out to be a further Nabokovian trick, a further fraud – one more twist that the text produces in its continuous play with the reader.)

To conclude, intertextual associations and reminiscences in Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* perform (as it has been pointed out at the beginning) two functions: First, they provide for the text's semantics by addressing the reader's memory and thus generating various levels of meaning in the novel. Second, they contribute to the text's aesthetics by securing its thematic unity and architectonics.

The two examples of the symbiosis of literature and opera found in *Laughter in the Dark*, which "(un)wrap" one of the text's riddles – the episode of Irma's death, remarkably turn out to answer to the both purposes of intertextual links.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Brooke, 1995: "Introverts and Emigres", *New Criterion*, 14/2, 58–64.
- Field, Andrew, 1967: *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary* (HTML at litrix.com), <http://www.litrix.com/madameb/madam001.htm> (followed in October 2003).
- Frey, Lea, *Bizet's "Carmen" – a direct translation for singers*, <http://www.aria-database.com/translations/carmen.txt> (followed in October 2003).
- Johnson, Barton D., 1985: *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, Michigan: Ardis Publishers.
- Mérimée, Prosper, "Carmen": the English translation by Lady Mary Loyd, <http://ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext01/carmn10.txt> (followed in October 2003).
- Mérimée, Prosper, 1976: "Carmen", *Nouvelles*, Moscou: Éditions du Progrès.
- Nabokov, Vladimir, 1969: *Laughter in the Dark*, NY: Berkeley Medallion Books.
- Rampton, David, 1984: *Vladimir Nabokov: a Critical Study of the Novels*, Cambridge: CUP.
- "Zembla", the official site of the International Vladimir Nabokov Society: <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/> (followed in October 2003).
- Белый, Андрей, 1999: *Петербург*, СПб: Кристалл.
- Блок, Александр, 1980: "Кармен", *Избранные произведения*, Ленинград: Лениздат.
- Букс, Нора, 1998: „Волшебный фонарь, или 'камера обскура'“, *Эшафот в хрустальном дворце. О русских романах Владимира Набокова*, Москва: Новое литературное обозрение.
- Долгополов, Леонид, 1999: „Роман А. Белого *Петербург*“, *Андрей Белый, Петербург*, СПб: Кристалл.
- Кац, Борис, 1996: „Уж если настраивать лиру на пушкинский лад...“, *Новое литературное обозрение* 17, 279–295.
- Люксембург, Александр, 1999: „Комментарии“, *Владимир Набоков, Собрание сочинений американского периода в 5 томах*, СПб: Симпозиум.
- Мериме, Проспер, 1981: „Кармен“, *Новеллы*, Москва: Правда.
- Набоков, Владимир, 2001: „Камера обскура“, *Машенька*, Москва: Эксмо-пресс.
- Орлов, Владимир, 1980: „Примечания“, *Александр Блок, Избранные произведения*, Ленинград: Лениздат.
- Рылькова, Галина, 1999: „О читателе, теле, славе“, *Новое литературное обозрение* 40(6), 379–390.
- Сабинина, Марина; Геннадий Цыпин (сост.), 1979: *Оперные либретто*, в 2 т., т. 2, Москва: Музыка.
- Сендерович, Савелий; Елена Шварц, 1997: „Вербная шутка, Набоков и популярная культура“, *Новое литературное обозрение* 24, 93–110 и 26, 201–222.

## VLADIMIRO NABOKOVO JUOKAS TAMSOJE: APIE LITERATŪROS IR MUZIKOS SIMBIOŽĘ

Irina Beliajeva

Santrauka

Šio straipsnio tyrinėjimo objektas – Vladimiro Nabokovo romanas *Juokas tamsoje* (*Laughter in the Dark*, 1938). Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas intertekstinis literatūros ir muzikos ryšys. Tokio pobūdžio ryšys atsiskleidžia tarp trijų Karmen istorijų – P. Mérimée, A. Bloko ir G. Bizet – ir tarp R. Wagnerio operos *Siegfriedas*, A. Belyj romano

*Peterburgas* bei G. Flauberto romano *Ponia Bovary*. Intertekstinis aiškinimas padeda išspręsti vieną romano pasiūlytų mįslių: paaiškina Irmos mirties epizodo prasmę ir jo svarbą. Literatūros ir muzikos sąsaja Nabokovo knygoje pasiūlo naujų perskaitymo galimybių ir leidžia kitokiu aspektu pažvelgti į teksto struktūrą.

Gauta 2003 11 04

Priimta publikuoti 2004 04 01

*Autorės adresas:*  
Literatūros istorijos ir teorijos katedra  
Vilniaus universitetas  
Universiteto g. 5  
LT-01513 Vilnius  
El. paštas: bems@dkd.lt