According to Vadim Vadimovich (the narrator and main character in VN’s novel *Look at the Harlequins!*), spying had been his “*clystère de Tchékhov*” (a play on *violon d’Ingres*, “a hobby”) even before he married Iris Black (Vadim’s first wife):

Brushing all my engagements aside, I surrendered again--after quite a few years of abstinence!--to the thrill of secret investigations. Spying had been my *clystère de Tchékhov* even before I married Iris Black whose later passion for working on an interminable detective tale had been sparked by this or that hint I must have dropped, like a passing bird's lustrous feather, in relation to my experience in the vast and misty field of the Service. In my little way I have been of some help to my betters. The tree, a blue-flowering ash, whose cortical wound I caught the two "diplomats," Tornikovski and Kalikakov, using for their correspondence, still stands, hardly  scarred, on its hilltop above San Bernardino. But for structural economy I have omitted that entertaining strain from this story of love and prose. Its existence, however, helped me now to ward off--for a while, at least--the madness and anguish of hopeless regret. (5.1)

In a letter of October 22, 1896, to Suvorin Chekhov mentions *gromadnye klistiry* (huge clysters) that he made to a rich peasant whose bowel was blocked with *kal* (faeces):

Вчера у одного богатого мужика заткнуло калом кишку, и мы ставили ему громадные клистиры. Ожил.

In the same letter to Suvorin Chekhov speaks of the flop of the first performance of his play *Chayka* (“The Seagull,” 1896) in the Aleksandrinsky Theater and compares himself to a man who proposed to a woman and was refused:

Я поступил так же разумно и холодно, как человек, который сделал предложение, получил отказ и которому ничего больше не остаётся, как уехать. Да, самолюбие моё было уязвлено, но ведь это не с неба свалилось; я ожидал неуспеха и уже был подготовлен к нему, о чём и предупреждал Вас с полною искренностью.

I acted as coldly and reasonably as a man who has made an offer, received a refusal, and has nothing left but to go. Yes, my vanity was stung, but you know it was not a bolt from the blue; I was expecting a failure, and was prepared for it, as I warned you with perfect sincerity beforehand.

One of the main characters in “The Seagull” is Nina Zarechnyi. Her name brings to mind Mme de Rechnoy (alias Nina Lecerf), Sebastian’s mistress in VN’s novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). Describing his first meeting with Iris Black, Vadim mentions Nina Lecerf:

Ivor had gone to fetch my whisky. Iris and I stood on the terrace in the saintly dusk. I was lighting my pipe while Iris nudged the balustrade with her hip and pointed out with mermaid undulations--supposed to  imitate waves--the shimmer of seaside lights in a parting of the india-ink hills. At that moment the telephone rang in the drawing room behind us, and she quickly turned around--but with admirable presence of mind transformed her dash into a nonchalant shawl dance. In the meantime Ivor had already skated phoneward across the parquetry to hear what Nina Lecerf or some other neighbor wanted. We liked to recall, Iris and I, in our later intimacy that  revelation scene with Ivor bringing us drinks to toast her fairy-tale recovery and she, without minding his presence, putting her light hand on my knuckles: I stood gripping the balustrade in exaggerated resentment and was not prompt enough, poor dupe, to acknowledge her apology by a Continental hand kiss. (1.3)

In the first production of “The Seagull” Vera Komissarzhevskaya played Nina Zarechnyi. *Na smert’ Komissarzhevskoy* (“On the Death of *Komissarzhevskaya*,” 1910) is a poem by Alexander Blok. In the Introduction to his poem *Vozmezdie* (“Retribution,” 1910-21) Blok mentions Komissarzhevskaya, Vrubel and Tolstoy (the three great artists who died in 1910):

1910 год - это смерть Комиссаржевской, смерть Врубеля и смерть Толстого. С Комиссаржевской умерла лирическая нота на сцене; с Врубелем - громадный личный мир художника, безумное упорство, ненасытность исканий - вплоть до помешательства. С Толстым умерла человеческая нежность – мудрая человечность.

In Blok’s “Retribution” the hero’s father was nicknamed Demon. In Chapter Three of his poem Blok mentions Vrubel (the author of *The Demon Seated* and *The Demon Downcast*):

Его опустошает Демон,

Над коим Врубель изнемог...

Его прозрения глубоки,

Но их глушит ночная тьма,

И в снах холодных и жестоких

Он видит "Горе от ума".

According to Vadim, his father (whose society nickname was Demon) was portrayed by Vrubel:

My father was a gambler and a rake.His society nickname was Demon. Vrubel has portrayed him with his vampire-pale cheeks, his diamond eyes, his black hair. What remained on the palette has been used by me, Vadim, son of Vadim, for touching up the father of the passionate siblings in the best of my English romaunts, *Ardis* (1970).

The scion of a princely family devoted to a gallery of a dozen Tsars, my father resided on the idyllic outskirts of history. His politics were of the casual, reactionary sort. He had a dazzling and complicated sensual life, but his culture was patchy and commonplace. He was born in 1865, married in 1896, and died in a pistol duel with a young Frenchman on October 22, 1898, after a card-table fracas at Deauville, some resort in gray Normandy. (2.5)

Chekhov is the author of *Duel’* (“The Duel,” 1891). Chekhov’s letter to Suvorin in which he speaks of the flop of “The Seagull” is dated October 22, 1896. In a letter of Oct. 17, 1897, to Sobolevski Chekhov says that one of his neighbors in the Pension Russe in Nice turned out to be a spy:

Живу всё в том же Pension Russe, всё так же тихо и мирно, как и при Вас. Впрочем, была и революция. До моего сведения дошло, что живущие в том же пансионе шпион (варшавский молодой человек оказался таковым в конце концов) и земский начальник платят Вере Дмитриевне по 9 франков в день; я же плачу 11. Меня это немножко покоробило, я стал бунтовать и мне сбавили 1 фр. Плачу теперь 10.

*Revolyutsiya* (a revolution), as Chekhov calls a reduction of the rent, brings to mind the Bolshevist revolution mentioned by Vadim:

I was eighteen when the Bolshevist revolution struck--a strong and anomalous verb, I concede, used here solely for the sake of narrative rhythm. (1.2)

The Bolshevist coup took place on Oct. 25 (OS), 1917. It means that Vadim was born in the time span between Oct. 25, 1898, and Oct. 25, 1899. Therefore he simply could not see his father (who died earlier). But in the same chapter of LATH Vadim says that he saw his parents infrequently:

I saw my parents infrequently. They divorced and remarried and redivorced at such a rapid rate that had the custodians of my fortune been less alert, I might have been auctioned out finally to a pair of strangers of Swedish or Scottish descent, with sad bags under hungry eyes. An extraordinary grand-aunt, Baroness Bredow, born Tolstoy, amply replaced closer blood. As a child of seven or eight, already harboring the secrets of a confirmed madman, I seemed even to her (who also was far from normal) unduly sulky and indolent; actually, of course, I kept daydreaming in a most outrageous fashion.

"Stop moping!" she would cry: "Look at the harlequins!

"What harlequins? Where?"

"Oh, everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together--jokes, images--and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!"

I did. By Jove, I did. I invented my grand-aunt in honor of my first daydreams, and now, down the marble steps of memory's front porch, here she slowly comes, sideways, sideways, the poor lame lady, touching each step edge with the rubber tip of her black cane. (ibid.)

The name Bredow comes from *bred* (delirium; gibberish; nonsense). In Aldanov’s novel *Bred* (“Delirium,” 1955) Shell (the main character) is a professional spy. In the opening line of his poem *Smychok i struny* (“The Bow and the Strings”) Innokentiy Annenski mentions *tyazhyolyi, tyomnyi bred* (“heavy, dark delirium”):

Какой тяжёлый, тёмный бред!

Как эти выси мутно-лунны!

Касаться скрипки столько лет

И не узнать при свете струны!

Кому ж нас надо? Кто зажёг

Два жёлтых лика, два унылых...

И вдруг почувствовал смычок,

Что кто-то взял и кто-то слил их.

"О, как давно! Сквозь эту тьму

Скажи одно: ты та ли, та ли?"

И струны ластились к нему,

Звеня, но, ластясь, трепетали.

"Не правда ль, больше никогда

Мы не расстанемся? довольно?.."

И скрипка отвечала да,

Но сердцу скрипки было больно.

Смычок всё понял, он затих,

А в скрипке эхо всё держалось...

И было мукою для них,

Что людям музыкой казалось.

Но человек не погасил

До утра свеч... И струны пели...

Лишь солнце их нашло без сил

На чёрном бархате постели.

What heavy, dark delirium!   
What dim and moonlit heights!   
To touch the violin for years   
And not to know the strings by light!   
  
Who needs us now? And who lit up   
Two hollow, melancholy faces...   
And suddenly the bow felt   
Someone take them up, unite them.   
  
"How long it's been! Amidst this gloom   
Just tell me this: are you still the same?"   
The strings caressed the bow,   
Rang out, caressed it slightly trembling.   
  
"Is it not true, that we will never more   
Be parted. It's enough..."   
Yes, replied the violin,   
But pain was throbbing in her heart.   
  
The bow discerned it and grew mute,   
The echo still continued in the violin...   
What was a torture to them both   
The people heard as music.   
  
But the violinist didn't snuff   
The candles out 'til dawn...The strings sang on...   
The sun found them worn out   
On the black velvet of their bed.

“To touch the violin for years and not to know the strings by light!” Vadim never finds out that the three of his three or four successive wives are the daughters of Count Starov (a diplomat who seems to be Vadim’s real father). *Skripka Rotshil’da* (“Rothschild’s Violin,” 1894) is a story by Chekhov. Vadim’s full name seems to be Prince Vadim Vadimovich Yablonski. One of Annenski’s poems begins *Pod yablon’koy, pod vishneyu…* (“Under the apple tree, under the cherry tree”). Chekhov is the author of *Vishnyovyi sad* (“The Cherry Orchard,” 1904).

In his poem *Pamyati Annenskogo* (“In Memory of Annenski,” 1912) Gumilyov mentions *pevuchie* *bredni* (melodious fantasies) and calls Annenski “the last swan of Tsarskoe Selo:”

К таким нежданным и певучим бредням

Зовя с собой умы людей,

Был Иннокентий Анненский последним

Из царскосельских лебедей.

Describing his childhood, Vadim mentions the Imperial Sanatorium at Tsarskoe:

The recurrence of my childhood's disarray kept me in the Imperial Sanatorium at Tsarskoe for most of the next winter and spring. In July, 1918, I found myself recuperating in the castle of a Polish landowner, a distant relation of mine, Mstislav Charnetski (1880-1919?). (1.2)

At to the name Kalikakov, it also seems to hint at *yaka kaka* (“what a nasty thing”) mentioned by Gogol at the end of his story *Noch’ pered rozhdestvom* (“Christmas Eve,” 1832):

Но ещё больше похвалил преосвященный Вакулу, когда узнал, что он выдержал церковное покаяние и выкрасил даром весь левый крылос зелёною краскою с красными цветами. Это, однако ж, не всё: на стене сбоку, как войдёшь в церковь, намалевал Вакула чёрта в аду, такого гадкого, что все плевали, когда проходили мимо; а бабы, как только расплакивалось у них на руках дитя подносили его к картине и говорили: "Он бачь, яка кака намалёвана!" -- и дитя, удерживая слезёнки, косилось на картину и жалось к груди своей матери. (chapter 14)

*Yaka kaka* is the devil in hell painted by Vakula on the church wall.

Alexey Sklyarenko