In VN’s novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) Vadim Vadimovich (the narrator and main character) mentions his extraordinary grand-aunt, Baroness Bredow, born Tolstoy, who summoned him to look at the harlequins:

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. (1.2)

*Vesenniy bred* (“Vernal Delirium,” 1853) and *Arlekin* (“The Harlequin,” 1854) are poems by Apollon Maykov. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1951) VN pairs Maykov with Mayakovski:

After 1923, when she moved to Prague, and I lived in Germanyand France, I was unable to visit her frequently; nor was I with her at her death, which occurred on the eve of World War Two. Whenever I did manage to go to Prague, there was always that initial pang one feels just before time, caught unawares, again dons its familiar mask. In the pitiable lodgings she shared with her dearest companion, Evgeniya Konstantinovna Hofeld (1884-1957), who had replaced, in 1914, Miss Greenwood (who, in her turn, had replaced Miss Lavington) as governess of my two sisters (Olga, born January 5, 1903, and Elena, born March 31, 1906), albums, in which, during the last years, she had copied out her favorite poems, from Maykov to Mayakovski, lay around her on odds and ends of decrepit, secondhand furniture. (Chapter Two, 4)

In his poem *Eshchyo Peterburg* (“Even More St. Petersburg,” 1914) Mayakovski compares a cloud to Leo Tolstoy:

В ушах обрывки тёплого бала,

а с севера - снега седей -

туман, с кровожадным лицом каннибала,

жевал невкусных людей.

Часы нависали, как грубая брань,

за пятым навис шестой.

А с неба смотрела какая-то дрянь

величественно, как Лев Толстой.

…The hours hanged over, like coarse abuse,

after the fifth the sixth hour hanged over.

And from the sky some trash looked

majestically, like Leo Tolstoy.

In his poem *Oblako v shtanakh* (“A Cloud in Trousers,” 1915) Mayakovski asks the reader:

*Vy dumaete, eto bredit malyariya?*

You think malaria makes me delirious?

In the poem’s Introduction Mayakovski says that he is twenty-two:

У меня в душе ни одного седого волоса,  
и старческой нежности нет в ней!  
Мир огромив мощью голоса,  
иду — красивый,  
двадцатидвухлетний.

In my soul there is not a single gray hair,

and there is no senile tenderness in it!

Having made the world huge with my voice’s power,

I walk – handsome,

Twenty-two-year-old.

The action in LATH begins when Vadim (who seems to share with VN his birthday: April 23, 1899) is twenty-two or twenty-three:

Some time during the Easter Term of my last Cambridge year (1922) I happened to be consulted, "as a Russian," on certain niceties of make-up in an English version of Gogol's *Inspector* which the Glowworm Group, directed by Ivor Black, a fine amateur actor, intended to stage. He and I had the same tutor at Trinity, and he drove me to distraction with his tedious miming of the old man's mincing ways--a performance he kept up throughout most of our lunch at the Pitt. The brief business part turned out to be even less pleasant. Ivor Black wanted Gogol's Town Mayor to wear a dressing gown because "wasn't it merely the old rascal's nightmare and didn't *Revizor*, its Russian title, actually come from the French for ‘dream,' *rêve*?" I said I thought it a ghastly idea. (1.1)

*Oblako* (cloud) differs from *yabloko* (apple) only in the first letter. At the beginning of “Vernal Delirium” Maykov mentions *v pochkakh yabloni* (in buds the apple trees) and *Egoriev den’* (St. George’s Day, April 23):

Здорово, милый друг! Я прямо из деревни!  
Был три дня на коне, две ночи спал в харчевне,  
Устал, измучился, но как я счастлив был,  
И как на счёт костей я душу освежил!  
Уж в почках яблони; жужжат и вьются пчёлы;  
Уж свежей травкою подёрнулась земля...

Вчера Егорьев день – какой гурьбой весёлой  
Деревня выгнала стада свои в поля!

In his poem *Ne zhaleyu, ne zovu, ne plachu…* (“I don’t regret, I don’t call, I don’t weep…” 1921) Esenin (Mayakovski’s main rival) says that everything will pass away, *kak s belykh yablon’ dym* (like smoke off the white apple-trees) and that he will never be young again. Vadim’s surname (never mentioned in LATH) seems to be Yablonski. As Vadim himself points out, his name and patronymic, Vadim Vadimovich, sounds like Vladimir Vladimirovich (VN’s name and patronymic) in a rapid and slurry Russian mispronunciation. At the end of his poem *O pravitelyakh* (“On Rulers,” 1944) VN mentions his “late namesake:”

Покойный мой тёзка,

писавший стихи и в полоску,

и в клетку, на самом восходе

всесоюзно-мещанского класса,

кабы дожил до полдня,

нынче бы рифмы натягивал

на "монументален",

на "переперчил"

и так далее.

If my late namesake,

who used to write verse, in rank

and in file, at the very dawn

of the Soviet Small-Bourgeois order,

had lived till its noon

he would be now finding taut rhymes

such as “praline”

or “air chill,”

and others of the same kind.

VN’s footnotes: Line 52/my late namesake. An allusion to the Christian name and patronymic of Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovski (1893–1930), minor Soviet poet, endowed with a certain brilliance and bite, but fatally corrupted by the regime he faithfully served. Lines 58–59/“praline” … “air chill.” In the original, *monumentalen*, meaning “[he is] monumental” rhymes pretty closely with Stalin; and *pereperchil*, meaning “[he] put in too much pepper,” offers an ingenuous correspondence with the name of the British politician in a slovenly Russian pronunciation (“chair-chill”).

At the beginning of his essay on Mayakovski, *Dekol’tirovannaya loshad’* (“The Horse in a Décolletté Dress,” 1927), Hodasevich mentions a horse that was dressed to imitate an old Englishwoman and that he saw in a circus in the fall of 1912:

Представьте себе лошадь, изображающую старую англичанку. В дамской шляпке, с цветами и перьями, в розовом платье, с короткими рукавами и с розовым рюшем вокруг гигантского вороного декольтэ, она ходит на задних ногах, нелепо вытягивая бесконечную шею и скаля жёлтые зубы.

Такую лошадь я видел в цирке осенью 1912 года. Вероятно, я вскоре забыл бы её, если бы несколько дней спустя, придя в Общество свободной эстетики, не увидел там огромного юношу с лошадиными челюстями, в чёрной рубахе, расстёгнутой чуть ли не до пояса и обнажавшей гигантское лошадиное декольтэ. Каюсь: прозвище "декольтированная лошадь" надолго с того вечера утвердилось за юношей... А юноша этот был Владимир Маяковский. Это было его первое появление в литературной среде, или одно из первых. С тех пор лошадиной поступью прошел он по русской литературе -- и ныне, сдаётся мне, стоит уже при конце своего пути. Пятнадцать лет -- лошадиный век.

Describing his trip to Leningrad in the late nineteen-sixties, Vadim mentions an Iranian circus company:

In order to draw out my neighbor before he and his riddle vanished, I asked him, in French, if he knew anything about a picturesque group that had boarded our aircraft in Moscow. He replied, with a Parisian *grasseyement*, that they were, he believed, Iranian circus people touring Europe. The men looked like harlequins in mufti, the women like birds of paradise, the children like golden medallions, and there was one dark-haired pale beauty in black bolero and yellow sharovars who reminded me of Iris or a prototype of Iris.

"I hope," I said, "we'll see them perform in Leningrad."

"Pouf!" he rejoined. "They can't compete with our Soviet circus."

I noted the automatic "our." (5.2)

Esenin is the author of *Persidskie motivy* (“Persian Motifs,” 1925), a cycle of fifteen poems. The first of Vadim’s three or four successive wives, Iris Black is English. Vadim visits Leningrad in the hope to find his daughter Bel. Isabel (Bel’s full name) and her friend Dora (a lame lady whom Vadim meets in Leningrad) bring to mind Isadora Duncan (one of Esenin’s wives). According to Dora, as a girl she dreamt of becoming a female clown, Madame Byron or Trek Trek. In his poem *Vozvrashchenie na rodinu* (“Coming Back to my Native Land,” 1924) Esenin mentions a little dog that greeted him *po-bayronovski* (à la Byron) with barks at the gate:

По-байроновски наша собачонка  
Меня встречала с лаем у ворот.

In one of her poems Vadim’s daughter Bel mentions “Médor, a dead dog:”

There is a hollow of dimness again in the sequence, but it must have been soon after that, in the same motor court, or in the next, on the way home, that she slipped into my room at dawn, and sat down on my bed—move your legs—in her pyjama top to read me another poem:

*In the dark basement, I stroked*

*the silky head of a wolf.*

*When the light returned*

*and all cried: "Ah!,"*

*it turned out to be only*

*Médor, a dead dog.*

I again praised her talent, and kissed her more warmly, perhaps, than the poem deserved; for, actually, I found it rather obscure, but did not say so, and presently she yawned and fell asleep on my bed, a practice I usually did not tolerate. Today, however, on rereading those strange lines, I see through their starry crystal the tremendous commentary I could write about them, with galaxies of reference marks and footnotes like the reflections of brightly lit bridges spanning black water. But my daughter's soul is hers, and my soul is mine, and may Hamlet Godman rot in peace. (4.3)

Hamlet Godman is a charlatan critic in Vadim’s novel *See under Real* (1939) that corresponds to VN’s novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). The characters of TRLSK include Mr. Goodman, the author of *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight.* According to Vadim, Baroness Bredow wanted him to invent reality.

The dog in Bel’s poem brings to mind a tombstone inscription mentioned by Vadim in his conversation with Iris:

"Splendid. We continue to walk toward the garden gate. Intervals of landscape can be made out between the plane trees on both sides. On your right—please, close your eyes, you will see better—on your right there's a vineyard; on your left, a churchyard—you can distinguish its long, low, very low, wall—"

"You make it sound rather creepy. And I want to add something. Among the blackberries, Ivor and I discovered a crooked old tombstone with the inscription *Dors, Médor!* and only the date of death, 1889; a found dog, no doubt. It's just before the last tree on the left side." (1.8)

In Chapter Five of *Eugene Onegin* Pushkin describes Tatiana’s name-day party and mentions an air to children known: “Réveillez-vous, belle endormie” (XXVII: 7-8). In Chapter Two (XXXVII) of EO Lenski visits the grave of Dmitri Larin (Tatiana’s and Olga’s father) and mournfully utters: “Poor Yorick!” (Pushkin’s note: “Hamlet’s exclamation over the skull of the fool, see Shakespeare and Sterne”).

Mayakovski is the author *Vot tak ya sdelalsya sobakoy* (“This is How I Became a Dog,” 1915), Esenin is the author *Sobake Kachalova* (“To Kachalov’s Dog,” 1925). Both Mayakovski in his “Cloud in Trousers” and Esenin in his “Coming Back to my Native Land” mention their sisters. The three of Vadim’s three or four successive wives (Iris Black, Annette Blagovo and Louise Adamson) seem to be his half-sisters. Btw., one of Esenin’s wives, Sofia Tolstoy, was Leo Tolstoy’s grand-daughter.

oblako + Neva/vena/Vena + krin = Nabokov + arlekin

oblako + Yablonski = yabloko + Oblonski

vena – vein

Vena – Russian name of Vienna

krin – obs., lily; in Shengeli’s sonnet *Pustynnik* (“The Hermit”) *nezrimyi rayskiy krin* (the invisible paradise lily) *ronyaet yabloki* (sheds apples)!

Oblonski – Stiva Oblonski, a character in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenin* (1877), Anna Arkadievna’s brother

Alexey Sklyarenko