

Annotations to *Ada* (6)

Part I Chapter 20 to 21

The Kyoto Reading Circle

The following members of the Kyoto Reading Circle are equally responsible for the text here: Chizuko Inoue, Gen'ichiro Itakura, Satoko Ito, Izumi Matoba, Maya Minao, Shoko Miura, Akiko Nakata, Keiko Nishiyama, Tadashi Wakashima, Motoko Yoshikawa.

Page and line references are to the Vintage International edition.

Part I Chapter 20

123.01: his nose still in the dreambag: Cf. Nosebag or G. Abeson in *Sebastian Knight*.

123.08: the tiger of happiness: Chinese or Oriental motif. Cf. 124.07: “three gongs, small, medium and big;” 124.13: “Chinese amateurs shaking with fatman mirth.”

123.14: break all records for the long jump: On October 18, 1968, the American athlete Bob Beamon won the long jump in the Olympic Games, Mexico City, with an unprecedented 8.90m jump, a record not broken until 1991. (See photos below.) Nabokov finished *Ada* on October 16, 1968, two days previous. In later revisions of his manuscript, it is possible he added this detail.



Bob Beamon at the 1968 Mexico City games. (Source: AP)

OLYMPIC GAMES

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Bob BEAMON

Beamonesque

Bob Beamon established himself as the favourite in the 1968 long jump by winning 22 of 23 meets in the pre-Olympic season. He almost met with disaster in the qualifying round. After fouling his first two attempts, he had only one try left. His teammate, Ralph Boston, advised Beamon to start his jump several centimetres before the takeoff board. Beamon followed this advice and qualified easily. The final was held the following day, 18 October. At that time, the world record was 8.35m, or 27 feet 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Beamon's first jump was so long that the optical measuring device slid off its rail before it reached Beamon's point of impact. Using an old-fashioned steel tape, the officials announced the distance as 8.90m. Beamon did not understand the metric system. When the distance was finally converted to 29 feet 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, Beamon was overcome by emotion and collapsed. It had taken 33 years for the long jump world record to progress 22 centimetres. In a matter of seconds, Bob Beamon had added another 55 centimetres. His achievement inspired a new word in the English language : Beamonesque, meaning an athletic feat so dramatically superior to previous feats that it overwhelms the imagination.



124.13: fatman: The image of “Hotei,” one of the Seven Chinese Gods of Good Luck

with a potbelly and a big smile. (See photo below.) Also he carries around a big bag and asks for donations. May refer back to 123.01: “dreambag” of sleep.



124.28 (all his trim stripes and colors were a little displaced, though, in the process of comic strip printing...): The image refers to the frequent “shear” in printing due to poor quality of Sunday comics by which colors are printed a little off their outlines.

124.32: as he rinsed his dentures orally with a mouthful of coffee: Another similar scene in “Tyrants Destroyed,” but with milk, not coffee; also in *Transparent Things* (Penguin 1972, p. 36) where Mr. R. rinses his mouth with whiskey. None of these scenes are pleasant.

126.01: She wore—though not in collusion with him—black shorts, a white jersey and sneakers: Both Ada and Van are wearing sneakers. This is the first time we see Ada in shorts.

126.08: Ungrateful age, ungrateful light, ungrateful artist, but *not* ungrateful lover: “Ungrateful” from the perspective of a third person, maybe that of a photographer, but not from Van’s. Ada doesn’t look pretty because she is not blessed with such conditions as her age (too young), light (too strong and overemphasizes her pale skin), nor a skilled artist who can make her more attractive, but at least she has a grateful lover—Van. “Age” also meaning “period.”

126.26-27: in delayed action, chased an imaginary insect off his pate: The image of Dan's action, one step behind its time, matches in temporal dimensions the spatial image of the "displaced" color printing of the Sunday comics referring to Dan's striped suit. Cf. 124.28.

127.02: She stole a foolish glance at the somber boy: A little shift in Van's evaluation of Ada?

127.08: americanismes: It refers to the expression "all wet" in the previous sentence, an archaic Americanism. This Americanism reminds us of the remark of Ada on the night of the fire. Cf. 120.22: "My nightie is *trempee*."

127.10-11: with a child's pink, stiff-bagged butterfly net in her little fist, like an oriflamme: "Oriflamme" (or Oriflam, oriflambe) is the royal red flag of France during the 12 to 15th centuries, the flag carried by Jeanne d'Arc. Lucette, with her "oriflamme," is suggestive of the virgin knight and her fate. As "flame," also Cf. 127:6: "the blaze from the library window."

127.12-14: She showed him the sharp petal of her tongue, and with a shock of self-indignation her lover felt himself flushing in his turn: Van feels self-indignation because he realizes Ada was making fun of his "fast ablaze in her bedroom" (127.03-04).

127.15-16: the *mestechko* ("little place") :Toilet.

127.26: Their fall is gentle: Echoes Chapter 21, 131.2, "mistook his *fall* for the shadow of a door being stealthily opened by some soft-fleshed eunuch" (emphasis added in italics).

127.31-33: that paraphrastic touch of 'chopper' and 'mud' is, of course, pure Lowden (minor poet and translator, 1815-1895): The poem (127.26-29) actually borrows the "mud"- "blood" rhyme from Robert Lowell's poem entitled "Colloquy in

Black Rock” which first appeared in *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946):

Here the jack-hammer jabs into the ocean;
My heart, you race and stagger and demand
More blood-gangs for your nigger-brass percussions,
Till I, the stunned machine of your devotion,
Clanging upon this cymbal of a hand,
Am rattled screw and footloose. All discussions

End in the mud-flat detritus of death.
My heart, beat faster, faster. In *Black Mud*
Hungarian workmen give their *blood*
For the martyr Stephen, who was stoned to death

Black Mud, a name to conjure with: o mud
For watermelons gutted to the crust,
Mud for the mole-tide harbor, mud for mouse,
Mud for the armored Diesel fishing tubs that thud
A year and a day to wind and tide; the dust
Is on this skipping heart that shakes my house,

House of our Savior who was hanged till death.
My heart, beat faster, faster. In *Black Mud*
Stephen the martyr was broken down to *blood*:
Our ransom is the rubble of his death.

Christ walks on the black water. In *Black Mud*
Darts the kingfisher. On Corpus Christi, heart,
Over the drum-beat of St. Stephen's choir
I hear him, Stupor Mundi, and the mud
Flies from his hunching wings and beak—my heart,
The blue kingfisher dives on your in fire. (Emphasis added in italics.)

128.22~25: “like a provincial come an hour too early. . .in the wheels of his buggy”:

Cf. In his Lecture on *Madame Bovary*, Nabokov refers to “Flaubert’s fondness for what may be termed the unfolding method, the successive development of visual details, one thing after another thing, with an accumulation of this or that emotion.” (*Lectures on Literature*, 172)

128.25: Floeberg’s Ursula: “Floeberg” suggests Flaubert; and the phrase quoted here (128.22~25) can be an example of Flaubertian style. “Floeberg” means a berg composed of floe-ice, an iceberg, hard and cold, which is symbolic of Flaubert’s style. “Ursula” is a blue butterfly in North America, one of “Blue butterflies nearly the size of Small Whites”(128.26) or “the big bold Blues”(128.32)

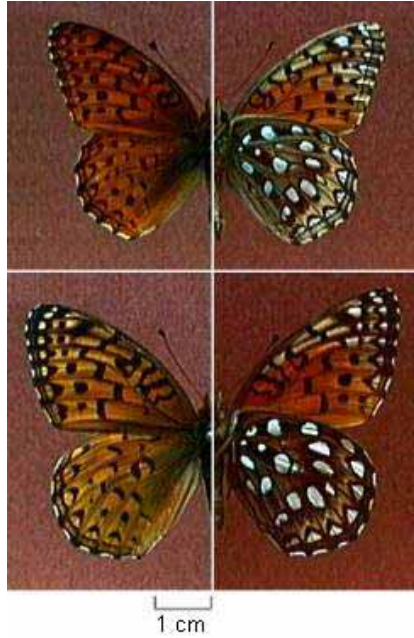
128.28~31: In less complex circumstances, forty years hence, our lovers were to see again. . . the same insect and the same bladder-senna . . . in the Valais: Cf. “(mused Van, in 1992, when he saw those *baguenaudier* flowers again)”(125.02-03). It is 1884 “now,” so 1922 is about “40 years hence”, when Van is in the Valais, the county in the south-western part of Switzerland on the border of France and Italy).

128.34~129.1: the evoked vision of Ada’s pale limbs: Cf. “the dark-haired, pale-armed girl” (39.21-22); “she, pale-thighed” (42.03); “her chalk-white body; the story of “Pygmalion” (120.27). See also: “his foreglimpse of live ivory accurately reproduced”(129.5-6).

129. 10~11: to sheathe them [Ada’s legs] in kisses from the A of arched instep to the V of velvet: To “sheathe” is the image provoked by the bladder-senna along the forest trail and the name of the bower, *Baguenaudier* which means bladder-senna, 128.6). The word “sheath” is in Latin *vagina*, and “velvet,” L. and French *villus*, suggesting pubic hair.

129.18: Phrody’s Encyclopedia: “Phrody” can be an endearment of Aphrodite, the Goddess of love and beauty. Also a butterfly, Aphrodite Fritillary (see photo below). In Part II, David Van Veen finds “a number of poems and the draft of an essay entitled ‘Villa *Venus*: an Organized Dream’” (348.2-3; emphasis added).

Aphrodite Fritillary (*Speyeria aphrodite*)



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Butterflies of North America

Aphrodite Fritillary (*Speyeria aphrodite*)



Aphrodite Fritillary (*Speyeria aphrodite* [Fabricius])

Wing span: 2 1/2 - 3 1/4 inches (6.3 - 8.3 cm).

Identification: Geographically variable. Upperside reddish orange-brown; male forewing with black spot below cell and with no black scales on veins. Underside of hindwing has pale submarginal band narrow or missing.

Life history: Males patrol for females during warm hours. Females walk about on the ground to lay single eggs near violets. First-stage caterpillars do not feed, but overwinter until spring, when they eat young leaves of violets.

Flight: One brood from mid-June to mid-September.

Caterpillar hosts: Various violet species including northern downy violet (*Viola fimbriatula*) and lance-leaved violet (*V. lanceolata*).

Adult food: Nectar from flowers of milkweed and viper's bugloss, among others.

Habitat: Moist prairies, high mountain meadows, openings in barrens, brushland, dry fields, open oak woods, bogs.

Range: Canada south of the taiga from Nova Scotia west through the northern Midwest and Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains, then south in the mountains to east-central Arizona and northern New Mexico; south in the Appalachians to northern Georgia.

Conservation: Not usually required.

The Nature Conservancy Global Rank: G5 - Demonstrably secure globally, though it may be quite rare in parts of its range, especially at the periphery.

Management needs: None reported.

References:

Opler, P. A. and G. O. Krizek. 1984. Butterflies east of the Great Plains. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 294 pages, 54 color plates.

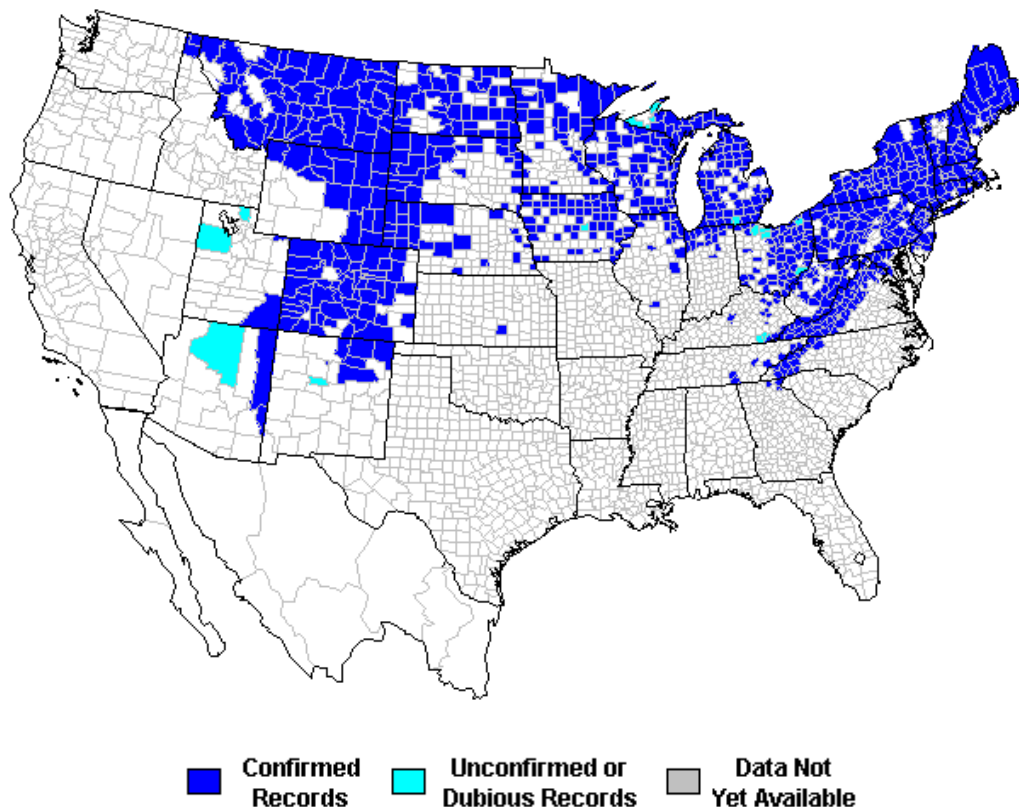
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Tilden, J. W. 1986. A field guide to western butterflies. Houghton-Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass. 370 pages, 23 color plates.

Author: Jane M. Struttman

Aphrodite Fritillary (*Speyeria aphrodite*)



Source:

Opler, Paul A., Harry Pavulaan, and Ray E. Stanford (coordinators).
 1995. *Butterflies of North America*. Jamestown, ND: Northern
 Prairie Wildlife Research Center Home Page.
<http://www.npwr.usgs.gov/resource/distr/lepid/bflyusa/bflyusa.htm>
 (Version 12DEC2003).

129.24: or (not very comfortably) on the Magic Carpet?: One of the many references to *The Thousand and One Nights*. When he performed on Ada’s 12th birthday, “on the silky ground of the pine glade, in the magical heart of Ardis, . . .a brachiambulant” (82.18~21), Van finds the “ pleasure of suddenly discovering the right knack of topsy-turvy locomotion was rather like learning to man, after many a painful and ignominious fall, those delightful glides called Magicarpets (or “jickers”) that were given a boy on his twelfth birthday . . .”(81.31-32); “his dreamy indolence of levitation” seemed “a result of the earth’s canceling its pull in a fit of absentminded benevolence”(82. 25-27). Van’s first bodily contact with Ada later that day in the

carriage is described: “her ample pine-smelling skirt . . . seemed to envelope him airily,” and in “a trance of awkward delight he held her by the hips” (86.17-20); “With his entire being, the boiling and brimming lad relished her weight. . . . He would have yielded and melted in animal laxity, . . . ” (87. 01-06). Van’s later experiences of sexual intercourse with Ada may be connected with a similar sense of being on the magic carpet.

Part I Chapter 21

129.5: live ivory accurately reproduced: Suggestive of the story of Pygmalion and the artist-artifact theme.

130.10: charged “*en lecture*”: “*En lecture*” is a French term to indicate that the book has been lent out.

130.33: a windmill of volumes: Reference to Don Quixote who suffered from foolishly attacking and receiving physical blow from a windmill, the fate of having read too many books—an unusual metaphor but also seen in *An Invitation to a Beheading*: “Violently scribbled pages, stacked windmill-fashion” (Penguin 1960, p. 102).

133.12: Les muses s’amusent: “Les muses s’amusent. Ça, m’amuse” is a common pronunciation practice for students of French.

135.23: When the last throb (frisson) of intercourse is terminated the female sucks out the male's body content through the mouth of her impassioned partner: Seems to quote from some scientific passage which depicts the mating habits of insects. There is a similar line on a website “World Sex Records” (<http://www.world-sex-records.com/sex-329.htm>) in a column entitled “Most vicious form of intercourse”: “At the end of mating, the female sucks out the male's body content through the mouth.”

136.1: Mme de Réan-Fichini : Mme Fichini is Sophie's step mother in *Les Malheurs*

de Sophie. She is hard on Sophie and is thrown out of the house for stealing food and wine.

136.9: *torovago*: In addition to Boyd's annotation, *Vago* might also echo Italian "undefined, indefinite" or Spanish "erratic." *Torovago* could be translated as "some indefinite/erratic bull-like position."

136.17: *Cheramie*: Could be a pun on *serromyia* as well as *cher amie*.

136.34: its tendency . . . of having monks and nuns perform sexual feats seemed to them as incomprehensible as it was depressing: Could refer to Musset's *Gamiani ou Deux Nuits d'excès* (1833). VN translated several of Musset's poems into Russian and possibly read *Gamiani* too. According to VNAY, VN read from a volume of Musset for Dmitri who was in bed because of influenza and probably then he got infected by the fatal virus (p. 659). The quoted line also reminds us of *Justine* and *Juliet* by *le sieur Sade*, as Brian Boyd has pointed out.

137.11: her deformed foot: Though there is a clash in social class, VN may be referring to compressed feet, which is not a Japanese but Chinese tradition of binding the feet of aristocratic female infants so that they would grow with tiny feet that kept them from walking. Since well-born women did not need to work, it is supposed that this tradition became established because the smaller their feet, the nobler and more desirable they were. Of course, this kept them unable to run away and totally dependent on those who served them. Although the print is identified as "Geisha with 13 Lovers," no original has been found. Though Japanese *ukiyo*e art is well-known for having produced abundant works of its pornographic branch, or *shunga*, such a large number of the clients seems unusual even for Japanese erotica. It is possible Nabokov exaggerated.

137.18-19: Van located, however, a fifteenth navel thrown in by the generous artist but impossible to account for anatomically: This extra navel can be interpreted as a signature of the anonymous generous *ukiyo*e artist, NaVel=VN himself. Cf. "Transcript of the *Ada* Forum, Nov.-Dec. 2002" *KRUG* VI: 2, 40.