

## Annotations to *Ada* (9)

### Part I Chapter 27

#### The Kyoto Reading Circle

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Page and line references are to the Vintage International edition.

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**163.14: the Common:** Count de Prey's duel on Boston Common. Cf. 90.11-13: "Rather soon (*skorovato*) she consoled herself," remarked Marina, alluding to the death of the Count killed in a pistol duel on Boston Common a couple of years ago."

**163.18-20: Blindman's Buff . . . Scrabble and Snap:** the two sets of alliterations suggest their growth in a progression from B to S in the alphabet.

**163.19: babes:** A play on "babes in the wood." In the French translation, this word appears as "poucette" (screw), the feminine form of Le Poucet (Tom Thumb) which reminds us of Lucette.

**164.01: She's a budding Duse:** Italian actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) was a rival of Sarah Bernhardt and played the part of Juliet at the age of 16, at about the same age as Cordelia here.

**164.02: prof push:** "prof" here comes from "professional?" In the French version, only this part is replaced with an English word, "piston-party," whose meaning is not clear. The Russian version uses the words meaning "pro-push."

**164.02-04: "You'll stick to Cordula de Prey, I, to Cordelia O'Leary." "D'accord.":** A series of rhyming. "D'accord" points to the close proximity of the two names. Later, Van combines Ada and Cordula into "Ardula."

**164.29: not Tilttil, that's in Blue Beard . . . :** Beard-bird pun. This part reminds us of Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird* in which Tilttil is one of the protagonists, and that leads us to focus on "*Mytilène*" which reminds us of the name of the other protagonist in *Blue Bird*.

Also, the combination of the words “Tiltit” and the “B” in “Blue Beard” may imply the connection behind these key words and *Mytilène* by reminding us of “Bilitis.” See the note on *Mytilène*.

**165.02: *Mytilène, a petite isle*, by Louis Pierre:** Mytilene is another name for the island of Lesbos in Greece. Pierre Louys treated lesbianism as a theme in his works, and the second chapter of his *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is entitled *Mytilène*. Bilitis is a poetess in ancient Greece. *Les Chansons de Bilitis* appears as “Bilitis” later on. See 194.28.

**165.3: “garbotosh”:** “Garbo” (Fr. garbage) refers to the “meddlesome garbage collector” who appears in 163:14-15, but also can mean “Garboesque,” with which the “prof-push” becomes relevant. The actress Greta Garbo is remembered for her mannish roles in Garbo hat and trenchcoat. Cordula is compared to Garbo because of her “meddlesomeness” as well as the suggestion of her lesbianism. D. Barton Johnson in his 30 August 2003 posting to NABOKV-L connects Cordula’s similarity to Garbo and the film “Anna Christie,” based on Eugene O’Neill’s play, in which Garbo plays her first talking role as a reformed prostitute and man-hater. Garbo “was widely rumored to have lesbian lovers” Read Don Johnson at site below.

<http://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0308&L=nabokv-l&P=R101449>

A photograph of Garbo in Garboesque hat in “Anna Christie” film (1930) by MGM can be seen at:

[http://www.imdb.com/gallery/mptv/1261/Mptv/1261/6137\\_0002.jpg?path=pgallery&path\\_key=Garbo,%20Greta](http://www.imdb.com/gallery/mptv/1261/Mptv/1261/6137_0002.jpg?path=pgallery&path_key=Garbo,%20Greta)



**165.6: dry straw and damp:** In the French translation, “straw with leaf rust.” When straw is damp, brown leaf rust (or “orange rust”) spreads and turns the straw brown. This begins a train of rustic figurative expressions describing Cordula such as “felt-booted apple-cart girls” (165:12) or “apple-cankered” (168:12).

**165.10: “sickle folds”:** Greta Garbo had these.

**165.28: American ambivert:** Probably connoting to Van her sexual preferences, both lesbian and heterosexual. Cordula, “laughing alone,” seems to insinuate that she is “advanced” in a certain way, living in a lesbian paradise at the dorm, where the girls are heard “whispering French” in their sleep. If we read sexual connotations into the word “French” (slang for oral sex), this would explain the unusual repetition of the phrase “Advanced French.”

**166.16: a certified milk-bar:** A place outside school where the girls of Ada’s school are allowed to meet boys. The “milk bar” is a probable allusion to Anthony Burgess’s the *Clockwork Orange* (1962). In both the novel and Kubrick’s film version (1971), for which Kubrick himself wrote the script, the narrator Alex goes to the Korova Milkbar to have a milk drink laced with drugs called “milk plus” which is served from the nipples of coin-operated mannequins and guaranteed to “make you ready for a bit of the old ultra-violence.”

**166.20: hoping to use his magic wand for transforming whatever young spinster came along into a spoon or a turnip:** reminds us of the story of Cinderella and it sounds like folklore as well. The turnip reminds us of “The Giant Turnip,” a well-known Russian folktale, but nobody is transformed into anything in the story. The spoon alliterates with “spinster.” The “spoon” may also be linked to the *Little Old Mrs. Pepperpot* series by Alf Proysen (1914 – 1970) which features a little old lady who turns into a tiny spoon-sized woman. The “turnip” suggests that Van thinks that Cordula is a dunce.

**166.26: “two young ramblers are exceptionally prone to intertwine, and a thorn is always close to a bud”:** Miss Cleft, the headmistress, talks in daring metaphors. “[S]he [Cordula] admires Ivan and adores Ada—consequently can only add zest to the zipper” (166.33-167.01) is an example. Her tone is soft, but she is indecent as her name suggests. She reminds us of the headmistress of Beardsley High School in *Lolita*.

Contrastingly, Miss Pratt does not intend to, but to Humbert's sinful ear, she seems intent on cornering him (Part II, Ch. 11).

**167.3: figli-migli:** "Low jinks" in the Russian version. It might echo "mimsy-flimsy," a pair of portmanteau words used by Humpty Dumpty: "Well then, 'mimsy' is 'flimsy and miserable' (there is another portmanteau for you)" *Through the Looking-Glass*, Chapter VI.

**167.7: puddles reflecting a sullen sky and the fence of the hockey ground:** The first appearance of the water theme in the chapter. Puddles are one of the important Nabokovian motifs. They are most obvious in *Bend Sinister*. Some of the other puddles are seen in: "It was a pity nobody saw the display in the empty street, where the auroral breeze wrinkled a large luminous puddle, making of the telephone wires reflected in it illegible lines of black zigzags" (*Pnin*, Ch. 4); ". . . a tiny half-dead unfledged bird was helplessly twitching," under a swaying and dripping tree ("Signs and Symbols"); there are also some puddles into which several characters step in *RLSK*.

**167.09: "dressed to kill," ... a fellow waiter:** An allusion to the death of Lucette, which repeatedly appears in the chapter. "A fellow waiter" could suggest Ada who will be responsible for her sister's death as a sort of accessory to Van.

**167.14: And how goes it with you, sweet cousin?:** The Shakespearean sounding line introduces some Shakespearean motifs to the chapter: Romeo and Juliet as referred to, and Ophelia and her drowning.

**167.15: a shiny black raincoat and a down-brimmed oilcloth hat:** Chapter Motif: water, black. Cf. "[O]ur black rainbow" (160). The raincoat and hat remind us of a firefighter, and of course, Garbo's famous mannish raincoat and "Garbo hat." (See 165.3)



**167.16: as if somebody was to be salvaged from the perils of life or sea:** Chapter Motif: death in the sea. Another allusion to the death of Lucette. “[T]he perils of life or sea” sounds slightly strange. Nabokov might change the phrase in order to attract the reader’s attention to the peril of Lucette’s life in the sea.

**167.19: Her breath smelled of ether:** Motif: Ether. “The last time I enjoyed you,” said Demon “was in April when you wore a raincoat with a white and black scarf and simply reeked of some arsenic stuff after seeing your dentist ... ” (245). He [Demon] definitely smelled of ether. Please, please, please go. (Part II, Ch. 10, 438). Another ether united to the sea appears with Aqua: “[S]he saw giant flying sharks with lateral eyes taking barely one night to carry pilgrims through black ether across an entire continent from dark to shining sea, before booming back to Seattle or Wark” (Part I, Ch. 3, 21. Belatedly we would like to indicate that “from dark to shining sea” is from the US Anthem, “from sea to shining sea”).

**167.19: Her mood was even blacker than his:** Chapter Motif: Black.

**167.24: there were no survivors, apparently:** Chapter Motif: Death in the sea.

**168.12: Cordula, apple-cankered:** His jealousy makes Van severe about Cordula. Her dimple is described as “at their worst, the creases down the well-chilled cheeks of felt-booted apple-cart girls” (165). Cordula is often associated with the apple, probably the forbidden fruit.

**168.23: an old pun:** As Brian Boyd notes in the LoA edition, *amour-propre* is "self love," and it could mean "clean love" while *amour sale* is "dirty love." If we regard *amour-propre* as to mean "proper love," it is, from Van's viewpoint, "heterosexual love," while *amour sale*, "dirty love," is "homosexual love." As Darkbloom notes, the pun is from Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*. In the novel, Missy, a female character, is going to say the vulgar pun but she does not:

“What is it? *Comme cela m'intrigue,*” said Katerina Alexeevna. “I must find it out. I suppose it is some *affaire d’amour propre; il est tres susceptible, notre cher Mitia.*”

“*Plutôt une affaire d’amour sale,*” Missy was going to say, but stopped and looked down with a face from which all the light had gone—a very different face from the one with which she had looked at him. She would not mention to Katerina Alexeevna even, so vulgar a pun, but only said, “We all have our good and our bad days”(Ch. 27, Translated by Louise Maude).

Much later, Cordula will be pregnant by Van, which could have a slight allusion to *Resurrection*.

**168.24: Proustian pangs:** Charles Swan was jealous of Odette’s lesbian lovers rather than her male lovers; later, Marcel experiences the same pangs caused by Albertine for her lesbian affairs.

**168.26: Before his inner bloodshot eye Ada was duplicated and enriched, twinned by entwinement, giving what he gave, taking what he took: Corada, Adula:** To Van’s eye, as seen in the mirror, Ada and Cordula are entwined inseparably.

**169.13: quelque petite blanchisseuse:** An allusion to Blanche, who has spied Van and Ada. Also a pun on blanche (white) and dirtiness, echoing amour-propre and amour sale.

**169.19: Racan:** Honorat de Bueil, Seigneur de Racan (1589-1670). French poet, one of the earliest members (1635) of the French Academy.

**169.19: Racine:** Racine seduced Thérèse du Parc, the leading actress of Moliere’s troupe and Moliere’s favorite, and Racine convinced her to leave the troupe. The episode might allude to Van’s suspicions of Cordula.

**169.24: a slender lady in black velvet, wearing a beautiful black velvet picture hat, who sat with her back to them at a “tonic bar” and never once turned her head, but the thought brushed him that she was a cocotte from Toulouse:** Apparently the lady is Lucette Van will be seeing on the Tobakoff, imitating the advertisement for Barton & Guestier wines, which imitates Toulouse-Lautrec’s *Divan Japonais*. Brian Boyd quotes from this paragraph in his *Nabokov’s Ada* (160), but there he does not refer to the ghost or future recollection of Lucette.

**169.32: a moribund Romeo:** “echoes Van’s wild jealousy [without object](#) at the end of

Ardis the First” (Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada* 160). Another hint of lesbianism.

**169.33: grand Joyce after petit Proust:** “distracts us by demanding that the allusion be identified—but much more important is that we resist being diverted from noting the purity of Van’s hypocrisy” (Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada* 161). Boyd identifies the allusion as to recall “the artful clumsiness of Joyce’s Ch. 16, set in the Cabman’s shelter, a small coffee house under the overhead railway lines by Dublin’s Custom House” (Ibid n. 329). We should also remember the washerwoman of *Finnegan’s Wake*, as we have just heard Van referring to “*quelque petite blanchisseuse.*” Cf. “Did he know Joyce’s poem about the two washerwomen?” (Part I Ch. 8, 54).

**170.01: bed-buvard scrawl:** As he writes in bed, the letters are scrawled as if they are “*bu*” by the soft mat of the bed. The expression also suggests Van’s vitality has been absorbed in bed.

**170.04: her dead-shamming hand:** Chapter Motif: *Romeo and Juliet*.

**170.16: Ardula:** For the last time, Ada and Cordula look entwined and united to Van’s eye.