

Annotations to *Ada* (12)

Part I Chapter 30

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The Kyoto Reading Circle

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Page and line references are to the Vintage International edition.

Part I Chapter 30

181.1: *The Ranter* (the usually so sarcastic and captious Chose weekly): Play on “rant on” or to speak or shout in a loud, uncontrolled or angry way, often saying confused or foolish things. Cf. 515.22 “Ranton Brooks,” where Villa Venus is located, as written by Van’s “former chum,” Lord Chose, in his *The Chimes of Chose*. Rantariver Club where Mascodagama’s performance was probably held, is in the town of Chose, which closely resembles Cambridge University. The student newspaper today in VN’s Cambridge University is *TCS*, or *The Cambridge Student*, which has a 60-year history. See another variation on “rant” (181.5) “the Rantariver Club.”

181.11: the Golden Curtain: Another name for the Golden Horde (181.2). Also Cf. 580.12: “Tartary, behind her Golden Veil”—one of the “Terrestrial autonomies” politically dividing Terra, the other one being the “Anglo-American coalition.” The Khan’s palace was enclosed by curtains decorated in gold (in Russ., Zolotaja Orda). Alfred Hitchcock’s film “The Torn Curtain,” for which Hitchcock had asked VN to write the script, but which was never realized, was released in 1966 (*Nabokov-Wilson Selected Letters* 361-364). The film, which recalls the spy theme in Nabokov’s “The Assistant Producer,” is about a defector and spy who is a multiple agent. The famous spy incident involving Cambridge University students Burgess and Philby may also

have contributed. See also the “make-up man” (181.15) who is “no doubt, a multiple agent.” Also the “golden” color may suggest that Van/Mascodagama comes from a country which is not the one beyond the Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union, but from beyond the Golden one, Russia before the revolution.

181.14: on the eve of the Crimean War: The Crimean War began in 1853 and ended in 1856.

181.15: a sick old clown with his old speaking goat: The goat is the sixth member of the “half-a-dozen members of a large Good-will Circus Company” (181.12). The “make-up man” (181.15) is, by one example of VN’s deliberately misleading constructions, not the sixth member of the circus but “one of the dancers’ husbands,” and he probably “makes up” for the other husbands in the role of “multiple agent” to the dancers. The make-up man’s wife is “red-haired” Rita (185.24), who becomes Mascodagama’s dancing partner.

181.18: the newly constructed “Chunnel”: The Dover Channel. Napoleon was first to propose digging a tunnel across the English Channel in 1802. The tunnel was completed in 1996 as Eurostar—one example of VN’s deliberate mixture of historical dates and events which are not yet history.

182.2: the Golden Horde: Cf. 581.5: “In 1926 Abdel-Krim surrendered, after yet another photogenic war, and the Golden Horde again subjugated Rus.” The Golden Horde is another name for the Mogul Empire, built by Batu, the grandson of Genghis Khan, who ruled Russia from the 13th to the end of the 15th century. The Mongol rulers were always chosen from the “Golden Family” of Temujin. (2)

182.9: Vascodagama: Portuguese explorer and navigator Vasco da Gama (c1460-1524) who found the route to India by way of the Cape of Good Hope. The Golden Horde was in its last half-century when he was alive.

182.15: Prince Potyomkin, a mixed-up kid from Sebastopol, Id.: Prince Potyomkin is the well-known lover of Empress Ekaterina. “Battleship Potemkin” (1925) or “Bronenosets Potyomkin,” is a film by Sergey Mikhailovich Eisenstein about a historical sailors’ mutiny. Nabokov disliked the pseudo-avant-garde presentation of Bolshevik artists like Eisenstein. In a letter, Nabokov writes,

I have a hunch that the general idea that avant-garde literature and art were

having a wonderful time under Lenin and Trotsky mainly due to Eisenstadt films—“montage”—things like that—and great big drops of sweat rolling down rough cheeks. The fact that pre-Revolution Futurists joined the party has also contributed to the kind of (quite false) avant-garde atmosphere which the American intellectual associates with the Bolshevik Revolution. (*Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters 1940-1971*. Ed. Simon Karlinsky. Berkeley: U California P, 1979, 222.)

The “mixed-up kid” rhymes with “Id.” for Idaho and “the Id” of Freud. In *Lolita, the Screenplay*, Beardsley is located in Idaho. Some of the girls Lolita meets call her a “mixed up kid.”

Dark: (to Fair) I bet her folks are divorced.

Fair: (to Dark) Yah. She looks like one of those mixed-up kids you see on TV.

(*Screenplay* 132)

Sebastopol, where a battle of the Crimean War was fought, was also a port of the Golden Horde. In the most memorable part of Eisenstein’s film, a baby carriage runs down the 192 “Odessa Steps” during a massacre by the army. Sebastopol is the port from which the Nabokovs left Russia for their émigré life.

182.18: Collective Dream: Reference to the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious.

182.22-3: telepathic collusion (they had never met and did not even know of one another’s existence): Nabokov and Borges, both born in 1899, were “literary men” who had missed meeting each other by a quirk of fate. For Nabokov’s comments on Borges and himself sharing “telepathy,” see *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1973), p. 80.

182.25: ondulas: A device using an undular technique, suggesting telepathic transmission by waves. This and the description of “a green world rotating in space and spiraling in time, which in terms of matter-and-mind was like ours” make one of the most explicit references to Terra. Cf. 342.5: “agents of Terra might have yanked [Theresa] back or destroyed her in flight had they managed to intercept her undissembling ondulas [. . .].”

183.7: Ladore, Ladoga, Laguna, Lugano and Luga: There is a pattern in VN’s

transliteration. Cf. 158.22: “In Luga? Kaluga? Ladoga?”

183.10: the Black Belfry group: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” and “The Devil in the Belfry” combined, invoking the effect of the “macabre quiver.”

184.34-185.1: an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: Van’s brachiambulation affords him with “a richly colored nether world that he had been the first to discover” (185.13-14). In *The Gift*, Fyodor also sees, lying down, a ball flying in reverse directions (Vintage 332).

185.14: For the tango, which completed his number: The tango was fashionable in St. Petersburg and then spread from there to New York in 1913. The tango which Van dances with the Crimean cabaret dancer who also sings the tune in Russian, is as mixed culturally as the people of Antiterra. The tango was first created in Buenos Aires, where the mazurka, polka, and waltz were brought by immigrants from Russia, Poland, and other parts of Europe and were mixed with the Cuban Habanera of the African immigrants to form the *milonga*, which was popular during the Argentine pioneering days of the 1870s. (James Stewart, “A Short History of Argentine Tango” <http://www.edinburgh Tango.org.uk/tango/Historyoftango.php>)

185.17: frock cut very low on the back: In Part 2, Chapter 8, both Ada and Lucette wear dresses cut very low.

185.25: Karaite: a Jewish sect.

185.25: Chufut Kale: A ruined fortress and town in the western part of the Ukraine, in the Crimea. While under Turkish rule (1475–1783), it was the center of the Jewish sect of Karaites. Jewish inscriptions date back to 1203, and the region was probably the last refuge of the Crimean Khazars (*Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed.). See Chapter 42, p. 319, where Cordula tells what she heard of Percy de Prey’s death in a “blessed ditch overgrown with cornel and medlar . . . Percy had been shot in the thigh during a skirmish with Khazar guerillas in a ravine near Chew-Foot-Calais, as the American troops pronounced ‘Chufutkale,’ the name of a fortified rock.” The yellow flower, cornel, placed close and combined with Chufut Kale in both pages, link the two scenes closely in order to evoke Lucette, whose red hair is linked to Rita’s.

185.26: Crimean cornel: a cornaceous plant that grows in the Crimea. Cornelia is the

name of Julius Caesar's wife.

185.26: kizil: (Russ.) dogwood

185.32: she adored her husband (the make-up fellow): At last, the suspected truth is told--Rita's husband is the fellow who "made up" for the lack of husbands among the three dancing girls.

186.2-3: the knowledge of the authorities: Chose University has hired detectives (p. 182) who have succeeded in discovering Van's secret identity as Mascodagama. Van had probably chosen the stage name because he wore a mask. The misprint in the invitation card from Windsor Castle, "Vascodagama," gives away their knowledge, as Van suspected.

186.10: Physical Stunts: Capitalized like one of the academic fields Van is studying. The phrase reflects a humorous treatment of Van's "decrepit" tutor's rigidly academic mentality.

186.13: an essay on Insanity and Eternal Life: Suggestive of Aqua's insanity and the question of an eternal afterlife, or the "otherworld," from which she seems to influence the lives of the living. Each of Van's academic studies focuses on the tragic victims in his life. Cf. 338.16: "Van had a passion for the insane as some have for arachnids or orchids."

186.14: what compromise pride and prudence might arrive at: Reference to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which is, in a way, a study of the value of compromise.