

Annotations to *Ada* (21)
Part I: Chapter 39
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The Kyoto Reading Circle in Collaboration with Brian Boyd

The following members of the Kyoto Reading Circle are equally responsible for the text here: Shun'ichiro Akikusa, Atsushi Goto, Yoko Kaede, Maya Minao Medlock, Shoko Miura, Akiko Nakata and Tadashi Wakashima. Page and line references to *Ada* and all other Nabokov works are to the Vintage International edition.

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Part I Chapter 39

266.4: maize-yellow slacks: Later echoed by Ada's mention of the word "husked" (267.2) and by Lucette (267.25: "she husked out of her sweat shirt"). In their brief affair in the ravine, Ada tells Van: "[T]he most extraordinary word in the English language is 'husked,' because it stood for opposite things, covered and uncovered, tightly husked but easily husked, meaning they peel off quite easily" (267.1-5). Of course, this image is for the male organ although, having intercourse with her, Van must have "husked" Ada's "maize-yellow slacks" or "husked-corn (laughing) trousers" (281.8-9, underlining added).

266.7-8: a rumpled ribbon of black silk: In *Mary*, Ganin recalls the barn concert where he first saw Mary, who had her hair tied with "the black silk bow like two outstretched wings" (48 [Ch. 6]).

266.13-14: ravenous ardor in a ferny ravine: one example of Nabokov's alliterative patterning. BB: Notice also the play on family names: "ravenous ardor" reminds us that Ada is the daughter of "Raven" Veen (very much present in the previous chapter),

whose surname recurs exactly in the sound of the second syllable of the matched word, “ravine.”

266.18-19: I used to play word-games here with Grace and two other lovely girls: In Ch. 13, on her twelfth birthday picnic, there were only three girls. Ada played the word-game with Lucette and Grace. The fourth girl in her memory is Greg: the latter then “put on his sister’s blue shirt, hat and glasses, all of which transformed him into a very sick, mentally retarded Grace” (81.15-16).

266.19-20: ‘Insect, incest, nicest’: See 85.16-17 (Ch. 13), where Ada transforms “Nicest” into “Incest.”

267.12-13: it stopped to have its picture taken and take pictures itself: The analogy between the reflection of photograph and that of water. Such an act of taking pictures anticipates the presence of kitchen Kim. Or perhaps Lucette: in Ch. 34, she is said to “lurk behind every screen, to peep out of every mirror” (211.18-19).

268.8-9: his splendid new black Silentium motorcycle: See 257.4 (Ch. 38), where Van wanted to buy a Silentium with a side car. Greg rode a black stallion in the first picnic scene.

268.15-16: a dozen elderly townsmen, in dark clothes, shabby and uncouth: As Brian Boyd mentioned in his lectures at Nabokov 101 seminar on *Ada* in 2002, this group of gypsy-like people is suggestive of the Twelve Apostles and the Last Supper. Uncle Dan, feeling “considerably intrigued,” approaches them “with his glass of Hero wine in one hand and a caviar canapé in the other” (273.8-12) suggesting the Eucharist.

269.3: “Please go away, this is private property”: In *Mary*, when Ganin speaks to Mary for the first time, a similar phrase is used: “‘This is private property,’ he said in a low, hoarse voice. ‘There’s even a notice on the gate saying so’” (56 [Ch. 8]).

269.34: the Green Grass aria: alludes to Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* (1853). Cf. 270.3: “Traverdiata’s poor old head.” The phrase “Green Grass” probably echoes the title of Tom Jones’s song, “Green, Green Grass of Home” (1966). The title "*La Traviata*" means literally “the woman gone astray,” or perhaps more figuratively, “the fallen woman.” Marina’s shabby looks and the empty glass she holds which in her song she would

“replenish” suggest her loss of beauty and youth.

270.4: her hairdye an awful pine rust color: Marina dyes her hair in unpleasant colors. See 38.31 (Part I, Ch. 5): “her auburn locks were bleached.”

270.21-22: ‘Ombre Chevalier,’ which is really nothing but a fish: “Ombre chevalier” is a grayling, a freshwater fish. In French, *ombre* is shadow, whereas *omble* is the name of a group of river fish species *Salvelinus* (in French, *amble*; Late Latin, *amulus*).

271.16-17: “The conversation became general,” as Monparnasse liked to write: See 68.11-12 (Part I, Ch. 11): “and the conversation became general and loud.”

271.31: the mouse-and-cat: Pun on the honey-colored Muscat wine Van and Percy are drinking. Another reversal of words to reflect the reversal of roles—Percy and Van are playing a cat-and-mouse game, insinuating to each other how sexually intimate they have been with Ada.

272.5: Dorn (flipping through a literary review, to Trigorin); 272.8-9: (taking Trigorin by the waist and leading him to the front of the stage): referring to Chekhov’s last scene in *The Seagull* (*Anton Chekhov: The Major Plays*, Signet Classic, 1964, p. 170), where Dorn takes Trigorin to the front of the stage to ask him to take Arkadina away from the scene somehow, since her son has just shot himself in the room next door. Van’s words are, however, anticipated by Ada, who asks *him* the same question before he does. Reversals occur repeatedly in this scene beginning with Van’s mention of his Mascodagama training, the “mouse-and-cat” verbal reversal, culminating in the reversal of Van-as-interrogator, Ada-as-caught-spy roles.

272.11-12: Ada stood with her back against the trunk of a tree, like a beautiful spy who has just rejected the blindfold: This is how Van sees Ada facing his accusation of unfaithfulness. The image will be repeated in Ch. 41. See 297.7-8: “There was the time she stood with her back against a tree trunk facing a traitor’s doom.” Ada’s posture also reminds us of Lucette (see 143.14 [Ch. 23]: “Lucette must be tied to a tree with the skipping rope”) who actually spies on Van and Ada, “the beautiful spy.” This image of Ada is similar to the film *Dishonored* (Paramount Pictures, 1931, directed by Joseph von Sternberg) in which Marlene Dietrich, the beautiful spy, plays her piano in prison and saunters out to face the firing squad. For the famous ending, see

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8hbUadCZKI>. It is probably the highpoint of Nabokov's recurrent references to Dietrich.

272.31: (gurgled, rippled): Both are water metaphors. Marina's laughter "rippled," not her voice. Her elderly daughter laughs in the same manner. See 62.24 (Part I, Ch. 10): "a sudden peal of rough-rippled laughter"; 210.8-9 (Ch. 33): "a triple ripple of sonorous, throaty, erotic and rather cosy laughter." On Marina's "Ada-like ripples of rolling laughter (*pokativshis' so smehu vrode Ardi*)" (201.25-26 [Ch. 32]), see also 279.1-2: "Larivière can go and' (and Ada's sweet pale lips repeated Gavronski's crude crack)."

273.1: Snap: A card game in which the players show a card at a time to each other and the player who says "snap" first when two identical cards are produced wins.

273.11: Hero wine: Hérault (meaning "hero") is an area in Languedoc in France known for wine made from muscat grapes. Rabelais wrote about the wine "Muscat de Mireval" which is from this area. "Hero" suggests Percy who dies on the battlefield in the Crimean War.

273.13: "The Accursed Children": In French, "*Les Enfants Maudits*" (198.26-27 [Ch. 32]). See also 199.12-13 (Ch. 32): "accursed children."

273.16: Crimean ravine: For more references to the Crimean War, see 181.14 (Ch. 30, first mention); 309.13-14 (Ch. 42): Tapper's gay partner as an old veteran of "the first Crimean War"; 316.10-11 (Ch. 42): "The Crimean War: Tartar Guerillas Help Chinese Troops." The Amerussian forces are fighting Crimea in this antiterranean world war which is similar to the Second World War in our earth's history. There is a word play on "Crimea" "Cream" "Kremlin" through the chapters. See 240.17 (Ch. 38), where Demon calls a hair cream "Crêmlin." Cream/Krem link comes from "KREM or KREME" (227.20 [Ch. 36]) in the children's Flavita game. "Kremlin" means a fortress (origin of the word is Tartar).

273.18: the shelter of the macchie: "Thickets"; pun on [Fr.] *Maquis*, rural guerilla bands of the French Resistance during World War II. In French, *maquis* means "thicket" or "bush." They used to hide in the type of high ground in southern France covered with scrub growth. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maquis_\(World_War_II\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maquis_(World_War_II)).

273.29-30: I had begun to bleed every time: In this paragraph (273.15-30), Van switches from third person to first person narrative voice. Van has “begun” to bleed each time he shaved and would do so for the next seven decades, that is, till he is in his nineties. John Shade in *Pale Fire* also makes a “gory mess” while shaving in Canto 4 and envies the “bloke” in the TV commercial with smooth skin (*PF*66).

273.32: there was once a ‘telephone’: In Ch. 13, Marina shows Van and Lucette the “the exact pine and the exact spot on its rugged red trunk where in old, very old days a magnetic telephone nested, communicating with Ardis Hall” (83.24-27). Cf. Part I, Ch. 3, 21.22-23: “The unmentionable magnetic power,” and 23.9: “the extremely elaborate and still very expensive hydrodynamic telephones.”

274.4-5: Cardinal Carlo de Medici: There was a Carlo di Cosimo de’ Medici, an illegitimate son of Cosimo and a Circassian woman, but he never became a cardinal.

274.30: How did the scuffle start?: In the use of catechism, this paragraph resembles the seventeenth episode of *Ulysses* in which Bloom and Stephen are urinating together and seeing a falling star. About Part 3, Ch. 2 of *Ulysses*, Nabokov says: “The questions are set in a catechistic pattern, and the phrasing is more pseudoscientific than scientific” (*Lectures on Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, p. 357).

275.9-12: He freed one scarlet ear, was retrapped, was tripped and collapsed under Van, who instantly put him “on his omoplates,” na lopatki, as King Wing used to say in his carpet jargon: The association of wrestling mat with “carpet” is hidden in this “pet” jargon of King Wing, Van’s wrestling teacher. Russian idiom “*klast’ na lopatki*” (literally, “lay one on one’s shoulder blades”) means “knock one down.”

275.20-22: rearranging the rumpled shirt around his husky torso and asking Greg in a husky voice to find a missing cufflink: “Husky” hides the word “husk” (See our note to 266.4: “maize-yellow slacks”) Percy’s missing cufflink is later found by Greg (276.14-17). By the “missing” motif, this scene is linked to Ch. 23; at the previous picnic, Van missed his wristwatch, which he forgot Ada was wearing (142.19-143.2). The “forget-me-nots” (143.1) among which Van thought he dropped his wristwatch, appeared again in Ch. 39; this time, “the transparent tubular thing, not unlike a sea-squirt” gets caught in the downstream course “in a fringe of forget-me-nots”

(275.23-26). Van recognized the condom “with amused embarrassment” (275.24), because he had used it with Ada that morning.

276.26: between the beau and the beast: Actually, “the beau” might be Percy and “the beast” Van. Curiously enough, the former recovers his spirits before seeing Ada, while the latter—even though he was the winner—looks seedy and feels dejected. Van as a character narrating this story looks at himself at times with disapproval and shows a contrasting perspective toward himself. In Ch. 42, he depicts himself as character as well as objective narrator as in 302.22-23: “while the better Van in him tugged at his sleeve, aghast and ashamed.”

276.28: toadstools: from Percy’s viewpoint (BB: [he would understand this as meaning poisonous, although toadstool is an imprecise term and does not accurately reflect the poisonousness of mushrooms](#)). Cf. “In classical simplicity of form, boletes differ considerably from the ‘true mushroom,’ with its presposterous gills and effete stipal ring. It is, however, to the latter, to the lowly and ugly agarics, that nations with timorous taste buds limit their knowledge and appetite, so that to the Anglo-American lay mind the aristocratic boletes are, at best, reformed toadstools” (*Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* 45). BB: [Notice that Ada has been carrying two “red boletes in one hand and three in the other” \(276.20\) and that the first time she had touched the glans of Van’s penis she had responded, “Now what’s this? The cap of the Red Bolete is not half as plushy” \(119.25-26 \[Ch. 19\]\); but here Percy takes from Ada these red boletes and starts “stroking their smooth caps” \(276.28-29\).](#)

276.31: Skrotomoff: One of the numerous crude jokes in this chapter: scrotum + “Korotom” (277.30).

277.30: Korotom wrestling, as used in Teristan and Sorokat: Presumably, “Korotom,” “Teristan” and “Sorokat” are the names of cities. BB: [Korotom seems more a play on “karate,” and Teristan perhaps on “Turkistan.”](#) “Teristan” and “Sorokat” resemble the Russian word “*tritsat*” (thirty) and “*sorok*” (forty), and seem to suggest that this kind of wrestling was known in the thirties and forties. It is interesting that the word play has turned the place reference to a time frame. As motor images abound on this page because Percy is about to drive off on his convertible, it might be worthwhile to see that “Korotom” in reverse begins with “motor.”

278.1: his black silent steed: The “steed” is not a horse, but Greg’s “splendid new black Silentium motorcycle” (268.8-9). Cf. 257.4-5 (Ch. 38): “I tried to find a Silentium with a side car.” Both Van and Greg ride black horses. See Ch. 14, the first picnic scene, where Greg “in smart riding breeches dismounted from a black pony” (89.16-17). Ch. 5, where what Van rides changes shapes from a horse, to a calèche, and to a hackney coach. When he arrives at Ardis, he descends from “a victoria” (37.11); at the end of Ch. 25 the family motorcar turns into “Morio, his favorite black horse,” and the driver Bouteillan into a groom (159.9).

278.24-26: a tattered copy of *Tattersalia* with pictures of tremendous, fabulously elongated race horses: “Tattersalls” (formerly “Tattersall’s”) is the main auctioneer of race horses in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It was founded in 1766 by Richard Tattersall (1724-1795), who had been stud groom to the second Duke of Kingston. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tattersalls>. Here the footboy conceals himself to enjoy the copy, as if he were (or actually he was) reading a pornographic magazine.

278.35: the sensation of fate’s rerun: This entire scene is a rerun of the first picnic scene in Ch. 13. The sensation Van had when he took Ada on his knee. Immediately, the crude joke of Gavronski (G. A. Vronski) reruns (279.1-2).

279.1-2: “Larivière can go and” (and Ada’s sweet pale lips repeated Gavronski’s crude crack): The “crude crack” of G. A. Vronsky, Marina’s director, was told in Ch. 32: “‘If she protests,’ said Vronsky, ‘she can go and stick a telegraph pole—where it belongs’” (201.22-23).

279.10-11: Hurry up or she’ll pull that cock off: Besides the meaning of the penis, a “cock” can refer to a kind of “cocked” cap, a bicorne, as worn by Napoleon, although this phrase seems a variation of Lucette’s song (278.15-16: “He screwed off a nipple, / He left him a cripple . . .”). BB: more likely to refer to the young footboy now occupying “her habitual perch” (278.31), referring to “cock” as (“one occupying a position of success and control” (W3).

280.10-12: Lucette’s compact bottom and cool thighs seemed to sink deeper and deeper in the quicksand of the dream-like, dream-rephrased, legend-distorted past: As in 280.28-30 (: “Poor Lucette stole [...]”), the theme of the three siblings sharing their

thoughts and dreams comes in. Lucette's dreams are "rephrased" by Van and Ada. Likewise, the entire scene of the second picnic is a rephrasing of the first picnic. Van later uses the expression, "Designing and re-designing various contingencies" (307.28-29 [Ch. 42]) as he enjoys thinking of the duel with Captain Tapper.

280.22-23: *Ombres et couleurs*, an 1820 edition of Chateaubriand's short stories: Though an evocative title, this is a non-existent work.

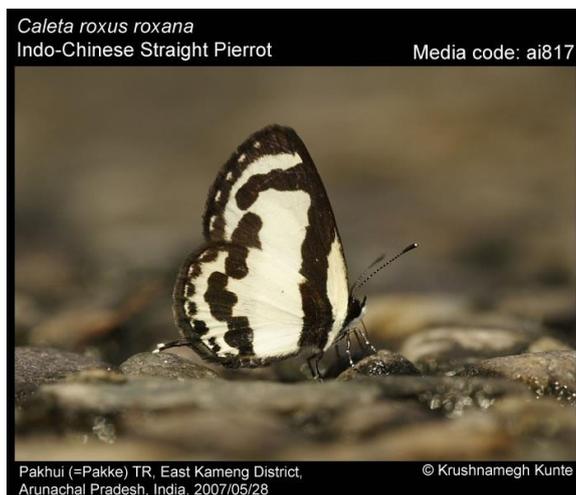
280.28-30: Poor Lucette stole a languorous look at him and looked away again—at the red neck of the coachman—of that other coachman who for several months had haunted her dreams: How does Van know what Lucette was thinking? He (or Ada, his co-narrator) takes the prerogative of the "anonymous" narrator here, not impossible since he narrates in third person. "That other coachman" is Ben Wright, who drove the carriage on the return trip from the first picnic in 1884 (Ch. 13). Trofim took over the job and is the present coachman. They both have red necks (See 85.31-86.1 [Ch. 13], where Mlle Lariviere pokes Ben Wright in his fat red neck with her parasol.) "Who for several months had haunted her" sounds at first reading to mean the second picnic of 1888, but it is possible that Lucette kept in fond memory for several months the carriage ride of the first picnic. However, it might be more meaningful to think of Ada, the co-narrator, to put her own experience into Lucette's memory. It seems hard to imagine that Lucette had felt strongly enough about Van during the first carriage ride and she was sitting beside Ben Wright. Ada, who sat behind Ben, would have had Ben's neck directly in front of her and would have associated this view with her first stirring of love for Van, which would explain the memory haunting her for several months. In the next paragraph, the Van-Ada narrator reveals the mutual sharing of thoughts and feelings among the three siblings: "Therefore we find ourselves more comfortably sitting within Van while his Ada sits within Lucette, and both sit within Van (and all three in me, adds Ada)" (281.2-4). Sharing dreams is an important scene in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* where Anna and Vronsky have the same dream about a railroad worker which foreshadows her suicide. "Sitting" is used to allude to the two carriage ride scenes.

281.18: the piercing and preying ache: a play on "Percy de Prey."

281.32-34: honest Van chided himself for having attempted to use a little pauper instead of the princess in the fairy tale: The "p" alliteration recalls Mark Twain's *The*

Prince and the Pauper (1881) where roles are exchanged, as Lucette and Ada change roles of sitting on Van's lap. The little pauper refers obviously to Lucette, whom Van tried to use as a substitute to revive his excitement in having Ada on his knees during the first ride four years ago. However, the fairy tale of Cinderella, who turns from pauper to princess, is a link that brings Blanche with her Cinderella connotations to compare to Lucette. This fairytale about exchanged roles perhaps reflects the mental suffering of Van, who is anxious about losing Ada. In *Lolita*, when Humbert first sees Lolita, his mind is described with the image of a fairytale in which a little princess is "lost, kidnaped, discovered in gypsy rags" (*The Annotated Lolita* 39 [Ch. 10])

282.1-2: Pierrot in Peterson's version: No source found for "Peterson's version." BB: In part a play on Charles Perrault, the great codifier of French fairy-tales, and on Pierrot (little Pierre, little Peter) and Peterson (just as the "pauper" and the "princess" change places, so these other two p-names seem to swap). The name "Peterson" appears only twice in *Ada*. The other occurrence is on 258.29-30 (Ch. 38): "Peterson's Grouse, *Tetrastes bonasia windriverensis*." "Pierrot" is the common name of a butterfly, "Caleta roxus," found in India, Java and other parts of southeast Asia. One of the common subspecies, called "Straight Pierrot" is a white butterfly with conspicuous black patterns and a black fringe around the wings with a line of white spots.



(See <http://www.ifoundbutterflies.org/3-lepidoptera/caleta-roxus>.)

282.6: Gamlet: "Hamlet" in English. See our note to 282.13 for reference to Shakespeare's play.

282.13: *Thorns and nettles*: Probable allusion to Ophelia, associated by her drowning to Lucette, in *Hamlet*. In the Queen's speech ("There is a willow" etc.) mourning Ophelia's death, she mentions various plants, including nettles (Queen's speech: 4th to 7th line) as making up Ophelia's garland. The image of "kerchiefed peasant nymphs," who sing this "old ditty" and "unwashed, no doubt," anticipates Ada's refusal to comply with Van's wish to make love in Ch. 40: "she said, as she drooped on a garden chair that she was exhausted and filthy and had to wash her face and feet" (285.30-32).

282.29-30: *She read it, and slowly, silently erased the lines with the top of the pencil:* This chapter which is often self-consciously abundant in colors and references to book-reading, ends with an erased page and a closed book (of the little footboy's *Tattersalia*).