

Annotations to *Ada* (23)

Part I: Chapter 41

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The Kyoto Reading Circle
in Collaboration with Brian Boyd and Leona Toker

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Part I Chapter 41

291.2: G. A. Vronsky: Grigoriy Akimovich Vronsky, an ironic allusion to Count Alexei Kirilovich Vronsky, the lover of Anna Karenina in Tolstoy's novel, reminding us of Nabokov's reversal of Tolstoy's first line (3.1-2 [Part I, Ch.1]).

292.6-8: he fell asleep, and saw himself on a mountain smothered in snow, with people, trees, and a cow carried down by an avalanche: "Avalanche," which smothers one in snow, can be seen as a combination of "Ada," "Van" and "Blanche." Nabokov pays particular attention to "avalanche nightmares" for their effect of imagerial transformation, or "verbal colluvia." In *Transparent Things*, Hugh has a nightmare about an avalanche:

Less frightening but perhaps imperiling a person's brain to an even greater extent were the "avalanche" nightmares at the rush of awakening when their imagery turned into the movement of verbal colluvia in the valleys of Toss and Thurn whose gray rounded rocks, *Roches étonnées*, are so termed because of their puzzled and grinning surface, marked by dark "goggles"

(*écarquillages*). (TT 60)

[Ch. 16], underlining added)

Hugh has difficulty sleeping (punning on “toss and turn”) and his nightmare is transformed into a fictional place name (Thurn und Taxis, which it resembles, is the name of the ancient German family that established the postal system in Europe) in a word play characteristic of Nabokov, as seen in 292.11-12: “the slight creak (that had been a scream in his confused nightmare).” The repeated sounds link a real event to one in a nightmare, in which the sound is tremendously magnified. The verbal “colluvia” (plural of *colluvium*, a deposit of sediment as in *colluvial soil*, continuing the metaphor of an avalanche rushing down the slope to a valley and depositing colluvia of humanized rocks—now awakened and amazed, wearing goggles like skiers) of such a nightmare is an imaginative network of multiple word-play and imagery, forming conscious sensations out of nightmares while also suggesting the theme of being buried. For further reference to “avalanche,” see our later note to 295.11-12: “Son killed by avalanche [...]”

292.30: slipped: Cf. 287.23 (Ch. 40): “slip.” Echoes are found in the note revealing Ada’s betrayal which Blanche “slipped” into Van’s pocket, Blanche’s lost slipper with Cinderella overtones, and the Lady’s Slipper orchids.

293.19: fear and adoration in her veiled eyes: Nabokov uses “veiled” to refer to Ada’s emotions, which logically cannot be seen if her eyes are hidden as with a veil, which is the meaning to a native English speaker. (BB: veils can be thin enough to be rather transparent; they need not be opaque, and in the kind of social context here women’s veils would not have been.) As Shun’ichiro Akikusa points out, this expression is an example of Nabokov’s “assimilation” of the Russian language in his English works (“Nabokov no ‘Fushizen-na Jukugo’: Exophonie, aruiwa “Gaika” kara “Ika” e” [“Nabokov’s ‘Unnatural Idiom’: Exophonie or from ‘Foreignization’ to ‘Defamiliarization’”]. *Krug* [the journal of the Nabokov Society of Japan] New Series 1, 2008, p. 5). “Veiled eyes” here expresses fear and adoration, which could only be associated to the word if one knew the Russian equivalent, “*glaza s povolokoi*,” which is an idiom meaning (LT:) romantic melancholy sexiness. For more examples of emotional connotations of “veiled eyes,” see 216.2-3 (Ch. 35): “as if new layers of reticence and sadness had accumulated, half-veiling the pupil”; 478.26-27 (Part III, Ch. 5): “Her half-veiled gaze dwelt upon him with heavy, opaque greed.”

294.11-14: thrushes were singing so richly, with such sonorous force, such fluty fioriture that one could not endure the agony of consciousness, the filth of life, the loss, the loss, the loss: An amazing series of alliterations of “f” and “l,” as reminder that Rack played the flute.

294.23-24: a cake of soap must be solid ambrosia to the ants swarming over it: Ada is the soap and the men who fall in love with her are the ants. From Van’s aggressive mood, Rack and Percy are seen as ants soon to be drowned. See 29.26-27 (Part I, Ch. 3): “with a lot of cute little ants queuing to get at my pretty pills” in Aqua’s last letter, suggesting the theme of betrayal. Aqua dies of the “pretty pills,” just as Van’s rivals are seen dying in “solid ambrosia.” Aqua (water) is deadly in the shower image, drowning the ants. She signed her letter referring to her own death as a release: 29.28-29 (Part I, Ch. 3): “*teper’ iz ada* (“now is out of hell”).” She now can taste ambrosia.

294.27-28: exceptions might be made for artists, pianists, flutists: Van is trying to find a reason in “the code” for killing Rack, the flutist, in a duel.

295.11-12: Son killed by avalanche, no hat found, contraceptives donated to Old Guides’ Home: In *Transparent Things*, Jacques, the son of an old guide, is killed by an avalanche. Two passages in the novel relate to *Ada*:

She liked people to fit. The Swiss boy, with whom Armande was skiing at the moment on the permanent snows high above Witt, fitted. So did the Blake twins. So did the old guide's son, golden-haired Jacques, a bobsled champion. (*TT* 38 [Ch. 12])

Not a belief in ghosts. Who would care to haunt half-remembered lumps of matter (he did not know that Jacques lay buried under six feet of snow in Chute, Colorado), uncertain itineraries, a club hut which some spell prevented him from reaching and whose name anyway had got hopelessly mixed with “Draconite,” a stimulant no longer in production but still advertised on fences and even cliff walls? (*TT* 94 [Ch. 25])

295.13-15: After the passage of about eight decades all this sounds very amusing and silly—but at the time he was a dead man going through the motions of an imagined dreamer: See 295.3-4: “Van shaved, Van pared his toe-nails, Van dressed with exquisite

care”: The narrator is Van himself nearly eight decades later, looking at himself from a third-person point of view.

295.16-17: to fix his skis, in the driving snow, on the brink of the slope, but the skis had vanished: The snow on the slope connects to Aqua in the Swiss Alps.

295.25-26: a black-haired girl of sixteen or so: The effect is a defamiliarized vision of Van who sees Ada as if for the first time. See also 295.31-32: “Van, to his horror and shame, saw Van wait for her to come down.”

295.26: in yellow slacks and a black bolero: In Chapter 39, Ada wears “a plain linen blouse, maize-yellow slacks” for the grand picnic on her birthday (266.4). Her black jacket is mentioned in Chapter 41, 298.4-5: “the girl in yellow slacks and black jacket.” The colors seem to anticipate death. As Boyd says in his annotations, Ada’s dressing in colors yellow and black is shared by Aqua (28.20 [Part I, Ch. 3]: “yellow slacks and a black bolero”) and Lucette, thus associated with suicide or imminent death. In Part III, Ch. 3, Lucette, trying to seduce Van, says, “Oh, try me, Van! My divan is black with yellow cushions” (464.7-8). See also 492.25-26 (Part III, Ch. 5): Lucette changes “into black slacks and a lemon shirt (planned for tomorrow morning)” before jumping to her death into the sea.

295.27-28: She signaled telegraphically: Ada is seen as a sailor signaling with flags, her arms extended.

296.2: You and I were high up in the Alps: Ada has the same dream as Van. This reminds us again of Jacques’s death by snow in *Transparent Things* (See our notes to 292.6-8 and 295.11-12). Aqua, who died in the Swiss Alps, can be felt lurking behind their dreams also.

296.5: humble but reliable sauce, I mean source: Together with 296.7: “Where can I find your tumbler?” Van plays with words having to do with the kitchen.

296.28-29: He turned, as they say, on his heel, and walked toward the house: In *Transparent Things*, Hugh’s action is similarly described: “With an oath and a sigh Hugh retraced his steps, which was once a trim metaphor, and went back to the shop” (TT14 [Ch. 5]).

296.34: The picture—which penetrated him: This passage discusses Van’s process of capturing the image of Ada in his memory, his imagined last “sight” of her that he never actually saw because he did not look back, and ends with 297.7: “enduring mosaic,” pointing to the “tessellation” image. See 3.17 (Part I, Ch. 1), where the map of Antiterra is described as “that tessellated protectorate” like a mosaic of America and Russian pieces. See also 298.2: “Those were the fragments of the tessellation” and 299.2: “confetti of poppies” as continuing the mosaic imagery to express memory as a tessellation.

297.5-7: Tiffs between them had been very rare, very brief, but there had been enough of them to make up the enduring mosaic: See our note to 296.34.

297.7-8: There was the time she stood with her back against a tree trunk, facing a traitor’s doom: Cf. 298.6-7: “leaning her back now closer now less closely against the tree trunk, and tossing her hair.” Van’s recurring image of guilty Ada facing an imaginary firing squad. See our note to 272.11-12 (Ch. 39).

297.15-16: to find a rhyme with “patio” and she was not quite sure if he had in mind a certain foul word: The “foul word” is obvious, but a less obvious rhyme, and not a “foul” one, could be “Horatio” since there are several references to *Hamlet* in this chapter. **BB:** not quite a rhyme to “patio,” and usually you’d seek a common rather than a proper noun.

297.26: a bog to see if a certain orchid was out: the bog orchid is a hidden reference to Van’s family name “Veen” which, as Boyd has pointed out in “*Ada: The Bog and the Garden; Or, Straw, Fluff, and Peat: Sources and Places in Ada*” (2004, in *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. 360-84), means “peat bog” in Dutch, with reverberations of paradise and hell. It has etymological roots in Old English “fen,” meaning “mud, mire, dirt, marsh, moor” (“fen,” Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com>).

297.31: roly-poly old Pole is rotting, let him feed his maggots in peace: Van’s word-play on “Krolik” also recalls the fool Yorick in the grave scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the mixture of the comedic and the ghostly. **BB:** actually the word-play points to a closer *Hamlet* echo, with Polonius. “Let him feed his maggots in peace” recalls *Hamlet*

4.3.17-23: Hamlet: “At supper.” Claudius: “At supper? where?” Hamlet: “Not where he eats, but where a’ is eaten—a certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else, and we fat ourselves for maggots.”

298.2: Those were the fragments of the tessellation: As in our note to 296.34, in Part I, Ch. 1, the word “tessellated” is used to describe the setting of *Ada* as a “tessellated protectorate” (3.17). Nabokov’s concept of himself as a “tesselist” comes, according to Dmitri Nabokov’s note in *Selected Letters*, “from ‘tesselate,’ to form into or adorn with mosaic” (*Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977*. Eds. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989, p. 434 [n. 2])—a term used by Nabokov in his letter to Carl Proffer about the latter’s book, *Keys to Lolita* (1968). Nabokov’s comment is dated May 1, 1968:

In a little diary I kept in Ithaca, N.Y., in 1951 I find listed under January 6 several projects I was engaged in at the time, and among them is *The Kingdom by the Sea*, the first working title of *Lolita*, or more exactly of a fair draft on index cards of the twelve first sections plus several passages from the second part (I am, as I have often mentioned a tesselist). (*SL* 433, underlining added)

298.6-7: leaning her back now closer now less closely against the tree trunk, and tossing her hair: See our note to 297.7-8: “There was the time she stood with her back against a tree trunk, facing a traitor’s doom.”

298.23: ant-eater’s tongue: The “ant” motif continued in connection with Aqua in her last letter (29.26-27 [Part I, Ch. 3]: “a lot of cute little ants queing to get at my pretty pills.”), and the ants that drowned in water, anticipating Lucette’s suicide by drowning, and now threatened by their natural enemy, the ant-eater. Demon and Marina, on whose robe Ada recognizes the anteater, caused Aqua’s death, a pattern repeated by their children.

298.25: P’s and R’s: Percy and Rack—the French translation has P de P, Percy de Prey, but it is also a play on “mind your P’s and Q’s.”

298.34: calèche: See 34-35 (Ch. 5), where Van arrives at Ardis Hall. The description of his arrival in Ch. 5 and his departure in Ch. 41 are complementary contrasts. He

arrives and departs by a calèche and the landscape he goes through on departing, such as Torfyanka village, is a reversal of his arrival. Also showing complementary structure is Trofim's warning Van not to touch Blanche, that "French wench," because of her venereal disease, which echoes the same fear Van had in the train before coming to Ardis.

299.13: "Malbrook" *s'en va t'en guerre*: "Marlborough goes to war." For full reference to the song and to Percy as hero going to war to die, see our note to 288.15 [Ch. 40]. Blanche hums this song, "Malbrough' (. . . *ne sait quand reviendra, ne sait quand reviendra*)" (288.15)—meaning one does not know when he will return, and foreshadows not only Percy's imminent death in battle but also suggests that Van and Ada's happiness might never return.

299.29: Maidenhair: See our note to 283.18 (Ch. 40).

299.31-32: Idiot! Percy boy might have been buried by now!: Van is disgusted with himself for not realizing when he got the letter of challenge that Percy was Ada's lover. If he had known it then, he might have taken his revenge at the duel (buried by now) and not risked Percy's death in battle, which would deprive him of the satisfaction of killing him.

299.34-300.1: She walked to the end of the platform in Tolstoy's novel: See 28.27-28 (Part I, Ch. 3), where Aqua smiles, "enjoying the thought (rather 'Kareninian' in tone)." Tolstoy's Anna Karenina walks to the end of the platform and to her death.

300.1-2: First exponent of the inner monologue, later exploited by the French and the Irish: The first exponent is Tolstoy. "The French" is Dujardin and "the Irish" author, Joyce.

300.2-3: *N'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert*: See 92.8 (Ch. 14): "*Jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais*" for Ada's "revised monologue" of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where the beautiful garden that bloomed in May will never, in winter, be green again. The French phrase suggests the English "never." In the next line, Van uses the word "never."

300.5: *Ginkgo*: The "k" comes before the "g" and is italicized because (BB) this is taxonomic Latin. The tree can be spelled either way in English.

300.6: inkog: In Russian, the spelling of the third letter is “k” and not “c.” The anagrammatic play on “gingko,” almost turning into “incognito,” suggests “unknown” and “disguised.” The next sentence begins with the word “known.”

300.6: Salisbury’s adiantofolia: The “confusion” mentioned in 299.34 (“Once, vaguely confused with the Venus’s hair fern”) arose from the resemblance of the maidenhair fern to maidenhair tree, which is the gingko tree. Richard Salisbury suggested the name “adiantofolia” for the gingko tree. The name “Ada” is in “adian” and there is a run of word play on “gingko.”

300.7: poor *Salisburia*: sunk; poor Stream of Consciousness: After 299.29-30: “train probably crowded,” the rest of the chapter is written in the stream-of-consciousness style. The theme of sinking and being buried, which is also a central theme in *Transparent Things*, is continued from 299.31, where he fears that Percy has been buried, to Salis-“buria” and the suggestion of sinking, ends with a black sea that implies Lucette’s death in the night sea. **BB:** the taxonomic term *Salisburia* has been “sunk” (taxonomically demoted or replaced) by the genus name *Ginkgo*.

300.7: marée noire In French, a sea polluted by oil-spilling. (**BB:** as Darkbloom notes, it simply means “black tide.”) In 1967, the shipwreck of an oil tanker named *Torrey Canyon* off the coast of Cornwall, England, caused petrol pollution that was called *marée noire* in French. The phrase therefore is associated with the “fouling” theme—Ada “fouled” (300.18) also implies the “fouling” of the book *Ada*. There is a stream of associations leading Ada to death by water, from “Ada’s infolio” (anagram for *Adiantofolia*), “folio” meaning the size of printing paper, “ink” (300.6) in “gingko,” to the black color of the ink with which this manuscript is written, *marée noire*, the polluted sea, to “sunk,” the death of Ophelia, Lucette, and the shipwreck of *Torrey Canyon*. The polluted sea caused the death of many seabirds and sea life. The “fouling” of Marina and Aqua is also implied. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torrey_Canyon and in French, http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar%C3%A9e_noire. **BB:** “Ada’s infolio” refers to one of Ada’s “several botanical atlases” (288.11 [Ch. 40]), which are folio in size and where she would have found Salisbury’s adiantofolio.

300.14: fártuk: Meaning “apron” in Russian, it is almost Trofim’s family name (**BB:** *fartukov* means “of aprons”) and as it turns out in Part II, Ch. 1, Blanche marries Trofim, who seems to abhor her in this passage, and becomes “Madame Trofim

Fartukov” (334.21).

300.17: *Úzhas, otcháyanie* Both are Russian titles of works by Nabokov—the short story “Terror” and the novel *Despair*. From this point, the Russian is probably not spoken by Trofim but by Van in his “stream of consciousness.” He feels terror and despair, and also pity for the love that is finished, the relationship that has been fouled and torn to shreds. The conflict and mixture of languages reflects the mixed passion and frustration in Van.