

Transcript of the Ada Forum

Aug.-Sept. 2004 (Part I Ch. 20-21)

Brian Boyd and the Kyoto Reading Circle

What follows is an edited transcript of the Ada Forum, held August 18-September 20, 2004 on the internet between the members of the Kyoto Reading Circle and Prof. Brian Boyd of Auckland University. The object of the Forum was to have an informal discussion of the Kyoto Reading Circle's "Annotations to *Ada* (6)" for Chapters 20-21, published in *Krug* VI: 1.

The Forum, led by Akiko Nakata, was begun in the hope of not only hearing Prof. Boyd's generous responses to the Circle's findings but also of delving deeper into the text and sharing whatever the participants found interesting, ranging freely into things Nabokovian. Discussions were again fruitful and led this time to an interesting discovery of cultural differences between Brian Boyd and the Japanese participators, for example, in responding to the phrase "tiger of happiness." Brian's response was warmest on the Circle's finding the source of Nabokov's mud-blood rhyme in Robert Lowell's poem "Colloquy in Black Rock" (see 127.31-33), which links to Brian's lecture, "*Ada*, The Bog and the Garden" that he gave in Kyoto last year. We are thankful to Brian for calling our attention to some minor errors in the KRC Annotations which have been duly corrected. The page and number references to the text, as in the Circle's "Annotations to *Ada*" in *Krug* and Boyd's "Annotations to *Ada*" in *The Nabokovian*, are from the Vintage International edition. –Shoko Miura

8-30 Brian Boyd

How pleasant to respond to the latest discoveries of the ADA forum and to be able now to put faces to at least seven of your names, and to imagine the room where I presume the deliberations again took place.

After 123.08:

BB: Are tigers especially associated with happiness in Chinese or Oriental lore? If not, this would not seem to me a particularly Chinese or Oriental motif.

After 124.32:

BB: Rinsing the dentures, though, is rather more repellent.

After 126.26-27:

BB: Nice link.

After 127.02:

BB: Not really. She wonders for a moment, did she dream it all? The anxious glance is “foolish” because it could give away too much to a less obtuse observer than Dan.

After 127.08:

BB: “Wet” meaning “Wrong; misguided; crazy; ‘off’” (Webster’s Second, *adj.*, 11) is not archaic (and despite Webster’s, not limited to the US).

After 127.12-14:

BB: ?? “His” “fast ablaze in her bedroom”? But it is *she* who says this.

After 127.31-33:

BB: Excellent find. The repeated “martyre,” an obsolete spelling, is curious. In *Ada* that spelling also occurs once, in the “rue des Jeunes Martyres” (459.21) where Van finds Lucette at Ovenman’s, in the scene that imitates the Barton and Guester advertisement that imitates the Toulouse-Lautrec poster of Jane Avril at the Divan Japonais cabaret; as Boyd 1985/2001 129-31 and n., notes, that spelling indicates in French a female martyr, Nabokov’s deliberate change from the “rue des Martyrs” of the cabaret and the original poster, and another pointer to Lucette as martyr. Ada’s translation “Their fall is gentle” of Coppée’s “Leur chute est lente” also links with the translation motif and its repeated pattern of the loss of flowers and leaves, associated especially with green-robed and not-deflowered Lucette (see Boyd 1985/2001, 51-60); and the “mud”-Veen (Dutch *marsh, swamp, bog*) motif, especially associated with Lucette and Lutèce or Paris as “Lutetia Parisiorum,” the mud town of the Parisii, as it was known by the Romans, is discussed in Boyd, “Ada, The Bog and the Garden,” *Nabokov Studies* 8 (2004) (the NSJ lecture, it could be called).

After 128.34:

BB: I’m not sure what that “her chalk-white body; the story of “Pygmalion” (120.27) means. There’s no “Pygmalion” at 120.27.

After 129.24:

BB: For the first time, incidentally, I notice consciously the marvelous joke of Magicarpets being given a boy on his twelfth birthday, in echo of the need to reach a certain age before being allowed to try for an automobile licence, and of old ethnographic customs, as if this were a kind of Amerussian pubertal initiation rite.

After 135.23:

BB: Unlikely to quote from a particular source. The devouring of males during or after intercourse by the females of many species of insects and spiders is well known to naturalists.

After 137.11:

BB: I would say it is all but certain Nabokov exaggerated, especially since the Western unluckiness of 13 somehow seems to reflect on the quality of the artwork, and on Daniel as its collector and its patient but erroneous explicator.

8-31 Akiko Nakata

After 123.08:

>BB: Are tigers especially associated with happiness in Chinese or Oriental lore? If not, this would not seem to me a particularly Chinese or Oriental motif.

AN: As far as I know, tigers are not associated with happiness in Chinese or Oriental lore. We thought the tiger introduced an Oriental motif to the chapter in which we would find more. If not, what could the tiger be for?

After 124.32:

>BB: Rinsing the dentures, though, is rather more repellent.

AN: Yes, if he took the dentures out of his mouth. As he rinses them "orally," there is no difference for the other people.

After 127.12-14:

>BB: ?? "*His*" "fast ablaze in her bedroom"? But it is *she* who says this.

AN: Right. I have just a hazy memory of it, but I think we meant "he was fast ablaze last night," didn't we? Anyone who has a good memory, please help me.

After 128.34:

>BB: I'm not sure what that "her chalk-white body; the story of "Pygmalion" (120.27) means. There's no "Pygmalion" at 120.27.

AN: Right. I think it should be just "her chalk-white body" (120.27). "The story of Pygmalion" seems to have slipped in.

9-1 Brian Boyd

"The tiger of happiness fairly leaped into being": this seems to me just a great image: an unexpected combination, tiger and happiness; but tigers are fierce, powerful, great leapers, and vividly colored: a fierce, powerful happiness sprang up unexpectedly and vividly in his soul: something like that. Thanks for forcing me to articulate this!

Even if Dan doesn't take his dentures out of his mouth, Van appears to be conscious of his swilling them around the gap between palate and prosthesis; some people (perhaps not in Japan, where decorum is different, but certainly in the West) do pop their dentures out of position, much to the annoyance of others, and Dan seems to be one of these.

9-2 Akiko Nakata

Thanks very much for the vivid, too vivid articulation. I did not imagine how unseemly Dan could rinse his dentures. I still naively wonder if your description of tigers would not be applicable to jaguars or

cheetahs. They are also fierce, powerful, great leapers, have a showy pattern--even if not so vivid in color as tigers, and they would make an unexpected combination with happiness. I suspect that VN chose a tiger for its exoticism. Another possible reason is that its marks look like bars. The tiger's marks seem to me to parallel with the bars against which the caged birds (in China) knock themselves out in a "dreamlined dash." The tiger of happiness leaps into being while Van is reluctant to leave the vestiges of a dream, on the other hand, the birds dashes outward half asleep and crash against the bars. Tiger, bars, dreams, dashes--they seem to me strangely connected with each other, and more strangely (because I do not know the background) with China.

9-2 Brian Boyd

Cheetahs are fast but not powerful or fierce as big cats go; jaguars are lithe stalkers and pouncers rather than mightily crashing leapers; and anyway all three are exotic to a European (or a New Zealander).

9-4 Akiko Nakata

Thank you, Brian, for clarifying the differences among the three felids. They are all exotic to a Japanese too, but tigers seem to me least exotic because China is one of their habitats. I thought VN would feel the reverse (yes, they live in Siberia too, though).

9-6 Shoko Miura

I have comments on two points made by Brian.

(1) After 123.08:

>BB: Are tigers especially associated with happiness in Chinese or Oriental lore? If not, this would not seem to me a particularly Chinese or Oriental motif.

Shoko: Although I thought Brian was right at first, I do think tigers are very Chinese or oriental because it is the symbol of strength, just as lions are in the west. And why didn't Nabokov say, "The lion of happiness fairly leaped into being"? The tiger is one of the 12 signs of the Chinese (and Japanese) zodiac. Tigers are a frequent subject of Chinese and Japanese paintings on screens and fusuma, or sliding doors, because they express fierce energy, although I don't think I've seen them in Buddhist temples. I believe they are secular, not religious, symbols.

(2) After 128.34:

>BB: I'm not sure what that "her chalk-white body; the story of "Pygmalion" (120.27) means. There's no "Pygmalion" at 120.27.

Shoko: Sorry. I'm sure it was I who slipped "Pygmalion" in and mixed someone else's notes with my own, because I found some scribbles in my book about it. The line reference is totally wrong. It should be (129.5). But may I expand on it since it seems a bit too important to dismiss? The place where I found

what I think is a hidden reference to Pygmalion is in the KRC annotations as follows:

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

I find that the tactile images of this chapter--"porcelain" (126.34), "ivory" (129.5)--and the color images of Ada's skin--"chalk white" (128.34), "translucently white-skinned" (126.33)--suggest the cold white marble sculpture of Galatea which Pygmalion turned into a living woman by his love and art. Van does narrate Ada into life, as it were, when he tells of evoking the vision of Ada's pale limbs (129.1). Though "coldly telling himself that fact could never quite match fancy," he finally realizes that the real Ada is indeed more than a match for his fancy when he gets his "foreglimpse of live ivory accurately reproduced." I thought the Pygmalion story lay behind this artist-artifact theme.

The phrase "live ivory" also suggests the paradoxical combination of living and dead matter, and therefore the power of love that overcomes dead matter. Also, the quick vs. the dead contrast is found in the hot-and-cold images throughout this chapter: besides the "fire" of the previous night, "blaze," "fast ablaze," "oriflamme," Ada and then Van blushing and flushing, Van feeling a cool-down when Ada shows him "the sharp petal of her tongue," Ada in her "sunbright" cotton frock, "Her hands were cold, her neck was hot" (128.8), not to mention the mud-blood rhyme of Coppee's poem--mud suggestive of death at the end of their "gentle fall" (though mud is linked to "fall into sexuality" in Boyd's Annotations in *The Nabokovian* No. 49, p. 74) and blood, of course, of life. The mud-Veen link that Brian enlightened us on in his Kyoto lecture gives a panoramic dimension to all this. Am I "all wet," as Van would say?

9-13 Brian Boyd

tigers:

I grant you that tigers feature more in Eastern visual art than in Western, although in Persian, Indian, Indonesian art as much as in Chinese (and even in Chinese iconography, lions also have a very central place).

But in English "tiger" does not automatically trigger associations with China, or even Asia. Shakespeare, who (like everyone else in his time) had a dim idea of the geographical range of tigers in his day or in the classical eras in which he often sets his stories, refers to "tiger" in 19 different works, or about half the canon; and I can see in these references no geographical associations, only evocations of ravenous ferocity and strength. One of his early images, "tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide," in *Titus Andronicus*, was famously used against him ("tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide") in an attack on

his supposed presumptuousness in the early 1590s (the passage from *The Groatsworth of Wit* is traditionally attributed to Robert Greene but now seems the work of Thomas Chettle). The most famous image of a tiger in English literature, Blake's "Tyger, tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night," evokes no Asiatic or Chinese associations I can see, and British colonial experience and Kipling made Indian tigers more familiar to Anglophone readers than any association between tigers and Chinese iconography.

Pygmalion:

perhaps (though is it really appropriate to Van and Ada?). What I do notice for the first time is that "his foreglimpse of live ivory" at 129.05 has a bizarre pre-echo of the *iv* in *ivory* and *live*, just as the "picture of Ivory Revery" at 36.12 has a bizarre post-echo of the *vory* in "ivory" (as well as referring to dreams that pass through the Gates of Ivory as being false dreams: see 36.12n.)

9-16 Shoko Miura

I think I've given a good example of the Japanese saying, "Get a sea bream with shrimp bait"--my small comments landed a beautiful big fish. I especially admire Brian's discovery of the "ivory" echoes. Perhaps tigers aren't so particularly Chinese for Nabokov. I think the other Chinese images in the chapter which Akiko mentioned are strong enough to stand on their own, though.