

Dear Shoko and Forum friends,

Here are my comments and supplements on some of your fine finds:

1.30:

181.1: *The Ranter* (the usually so sarcastic and captious Chose weekly): [BB: **The river Cam running through Cambridge was once known as the Granta, which is still the name for two of its tributaries. The Anglo-Saxon name of the town, Grantebrycge, was modified to Cambridge and the river accordingly renamed the Cam.**

The larger Granta joins the other main tributary, the Rhee, a mile south of Grantchester, which Nabokov certainly visited as a Cambridge student, in May 1921 if not before, partly because it had been celebrated in the poem “The Old Vicarage, Grantchester” (1912), by one of Nabokov’s favorite poets at the time, Rupert Brooke (1887-1915).

Presumably because of the popularity among Cambridge students of punting along the river, a student magazine named *The Granta* was founded in 1889, a mix of student politics, humor and literary writing. The magazine continued until, after financial difficulties in the 1970s, it was relaunched to a much wider audience as a literary magazine of new writing, *Granta*, now England’s leading literary journal.]

181.11: the Golden Curtain: Another name for the Golden Horde (181.2). [BB: **182.2. Not quite “another name”: the Golden Curtain is presumably the barrier, like the Iron Curtain, separating Western Europe from the Golden Horde of Tartary.] . . .** The famous spy incident involving Cambridge University students Burgess and Philby may also have contributed. [BB: **The Cambridge Spy Ring, or the Cambridge Five, was a ring of British spies recruited at Trinity College, Cambridge, Nabokov’s own college, who passed on information to the Soviet Union in World War II and after. Guy Burgess (1911-1963) and Donald Maclean (1913-1983) caused an international scandal when they defected to the Soviet Union in 1951, evidently after having been tipped off. Suspicion fell on Kim Philby (1912-1988), who denied it, but also defected to the Soviet Union in 1963.]**

181.14: on the eve of the Crimean War: [BB: **On Earth**] The Crimean War began in 1853 and ended in 1856.

181.18: the newly constructed “Chunnel”: [BB: **A tunnel under the English Channel.**] 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.

[BB: **A first channel tunnel was begun in 1922, but digging stopped because of political objections. The project to construct a channel tunnel was revived in 1957 and much discussed before and after a 1960 report recommending it be built. The project was launched in 1973 but abandoned because of financial difficulties, then relaunched in 1984, with construction completed in 1994.]**

182.15: Prince Potyomkin, a mixed-up kid from Sebastopol, Id.: 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)

[BB: Nice link!]

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.

[BB: The battleship Potyomkin was part of the Russian Black Sea fleet, whose headquarters were at Sebastopol. The Odessa Steps are in the other most important Black Sea port.]

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.”

[BB: Evokes 1) the Black Mountain Poets, associated with Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina, whose poets, including Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley, were influential in the poetic avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s; and 2) the Graveyard School of English poets (Thomas Parnell, Edward Young, Thomas Gray and others) in the late eighteenth century, famous for their gloomy meditations on mortality and their images of skulls, coffins and the like. Nabokov had a low opinion of artistic groups and schools.] [AN: We were also reminded of the Black Mountain Poets, but we doubted that VN was interested in the poets, and we removed it from our annotations. Did VN refer to and/or read the poets?]

185.26: Crimean cornel: a cornaceous plant that grows in the Crimea. Cornelia is the name of Julius Caesar’s wife.

[BB: Probably a pun on the cuckold’s horns. *Cornus* is the genus of cornel, and *cornu*, Latin for “horn,” yields words like *cornute*, “To bestow horns upon; hence, fig., to make a cuckold of” (W2). Van will make a proposition to Cordula Tobak similar to that he makes to Rita: “Will you cooperate with me in cornuting your husband?” (456.30-31)]

I.31:

187.6: yellow-blue Vass frocks: **[BB: A small additional detail: “Vas,” “you” (plural or polite singular) is written in careful Russian correspondence with a capital (unlike any other pronoun): so “ya lyublyu Vas” could well be how the phrase would appear in old-fashioned letters.**

A larger addition: “Vass” plays with the name of the famous American fashion designer, Bill Blass (1922-2002), already prominent in the early 1950s.]

187.13: Baroness Von Skull: **[BB: I could not even recall this name (although I recalled “the dangling ends of tangled bangles”); she does not recur elsewhere. You**

are correct that Baron Von Skull is a villain—and the name of an episode—in the Hanna Barbera television cartoon, *Samson and Goliath* (1967). An image of the character can be seen at

<http://webpages.charter.net/superheroes/samsongoliath.html#3.2.2>.

Baron Von Skull from “*Samson and Goliath*” (1967)



Baron Von Skull

Samson and Goliath meet Baron Von Skull, a former World War One flying ace from Germany.



Snoopy pursuing the Red Baron?

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snoopy> [added by KRC]



Manfred von Richthofen, known as “The Red Baron” (1892-1918) [added by KRC]

Nevertheless I think we’re missing something. It is possible that VN came across this “Baron Von Skull” in one of the periodicals he bought in 1967, like the *International Herald Tribune* or *Time*; he certainly did pepper his texts with finds from improbable sources (and others have taken up the name “Von Skull,” now used, for instance, for a trucker’s cap). But Nabokov usually incorporated such trivia for a pointed local purpose, and I can’t yet see one here.

Cord Scott, in “Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11,” *Journal of Popular*

Culture 40:2 (2007), 325-43, names the arch-villain facing Captain America in the *Captain America* comics introduced in 1941 (by Timely, later Marvel Comics) as Baron Von Skull: “The most prominent enemy of Captain America also came from a super-serum experiment. Dubbed the Red Skull (perhaps underlining the inability of the American populace to distinguish between Nazis and Communists?), Baron von Skull exhibited the classic characteristics of any villain; he was cunning, psychopathic, and malicious. Whereas Captain America's formula only enhanced his abilities, the Skull's serum made him mentally unbalanced to a malevolent extent. At the end of the war, the Red Skull kept his Nazi origins, but became a criminal mastermind that controlled a vast empire around the world. Once again, this reflected the fear of the day that the key Nazis had escaped, and that the Red threat of Communism had re-emerged.” (334-35) However, no other source confirms “Baron Von Skull” as the original name of the Red Skull.

Another possible external allusion could be to the biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll (1864-1944), inventor of the concept of the *Umwelt* (the unique environment relevant to each organism's mind and behavior), reputedly a Baron before his family lost its fortune in World War I. That *could* link with another Veen relative, Erasmus Veen, who in some senses echoes Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), Charles Darwin's grandfather and an early proponent of evolutionary ideas. But where else would that take us?

One possible internal allusion would be to Mascodagama, who dominates the previous chapter, has a *black* cape, and has no head, no skull, where there seems to be one (184). And of course the color white and the skull can combine to make a *memento mori*. But we need still more. Sometimes it may be useful to show the perplexities, the wrong moves, the false tries, Nabokov sets up for his readers as for the hypothetical solvers of his chess problems.]

188.33-34: corn-and-bluet summer “creation”: [BB: Indeed, this describes the exact shades of the yellow-blue Vass dresses, corn yellow and bluet (cornflower) blue. But the double “corn” here suggests the slang *corny*, “trite, banal, gauche, unsophisticated, ineptly judged.”]

191.29: “In *The Annotated Lolita*, Nabokov mentions”: [BB: you may reference this edition, but VN wrote only *Lolita*, not *The Annotated Lolita*!]

193.18: spider spinsters: [BB: With pun on *spiders* as *spinners* of webs, and perhaps with an echo of the black widow spider?]

195.25: [BB: “ ‘Obman’ means ‘deceit’ in Russian. So does ‘manipulations’”: some confusion here; the Russian meaning of *obman* is correct, but *manipulations* is not a Russian word.]

196.4: phantom orchid: [BB: Cf. the poem “Lines Written in Oregon” (1953), which ends “Where the woods get ever dimmer, / Where the Phantom Orchids glimmer—/ Esmeralda, *immer, immer*” (P&P 171).]

196.5: my phantom orchid, my lovely bladder senna: [BB: Since, as the novel alludes to elsewhere (e.g. 73.29), the word *orchid* derives from the Greek *orchis*, “testicle,” its proximity in Ada’s speech to “bladder” also seems to suggest Van’s urinary-reproductive tract]

I.32

198.01: dollied: [BB: Shouldn’t you explain the word? Perhaps a pun on “doll,” since the camera, as it were, moves toward Lucette, associated with dolls throughout.]

198.24-25: “incestuous affection on her”: [BB: should be “for her.”]

199.07-08: The actor, who quite likely would run into somebody’s fist in a forthcoming scene: [BB: A pun: a *scene* of the movie being filmed; a *scene* as a “row, disturbance, argument, brawl” in the novel’s “real life,” if Van cannot curb his desire to punch him.]

199.14-15: a Nurjinski leap: [BB: Puns not only on Nijinski but on Rudolf Nureyev (1938-1993), also a Russian and the greatest male ballet dancer of *his* time, and after his defection from the Soviet Union to the West in 1961, by far the world’s best-known male dancer when Nabokov wrote *Ada*. He was famous for his ability to leap in the air longer than seemed possible.]

199.23: nenuphars: [BB: Not sure how this leads to “He was emphatically not Japanese.”]

203.21-23: reversing the action of Dr. Ero, pursued by the Invisible Albino in one of the greatest novels of English literature: [BB: In part also a comment on the claims that *Invisible Man* (1952), by Ralph Ellison (1913-1994), about a black (rather than albino or even white) hero, is one of the great novels of American literature. As early as 1964 a poll of two hundred literary figures judged it the most important novel since World War II.]

That’s all.

Best wishes, and I look forward to seeing most of you in June,
Brian Boyd

February 2008