

## Annotations to *Ada* (7)

### Part I: Chapter 22 to 24

#### The Kyoto Reading Circle

The Kyoto Reading Circle is responsible for the annotations below. The following are the members of the Kyoto Reading Circle: Chizuko Inoue, Gen'ichiro Itakura, Satoko Ito, Izumi Matoba, Maya Minao, Shoko Miura, Yuriko Morita, Akiko Nakata, Keiko Nishiyama, Sumi Ota, Tadashi Wakashima and Motoko Yoshikawa.

Page and line references are to the Vintage International edition.

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#### Part I Chapter 22

**138.01: My sister:** Repeated also in *Blue Beard*. *Blue Beard* is referred to in I. 27 and 29.

**140.04: Which reminds us:** Does "which" mean *Vendange* that relates to the vine motif in art or Van and Ada's erotic experience while the other people are going out for the Festival? Cf. Brantôme's works and the "tome" in his name remind Van and Ada of a licentious tome (140.05) in the Ardis library (Boyd).

**140.23: Anyway (this may be purely a stylistic transition):** Does the "stylistic" refer to the style of narrative or the style of fine art?

**141.13: a crescent eaten out of a vine leaf by a sphingid larva:** The "crescent" is Van's exhausted part. The images of a sphingid larva, on which Boyd annotates, are available from the site of "Iziko: Museums of Cape Town": <http://www.museums.org.za/bio/insects/lepidoptera/sphingidae/>.

**141.18: a Venetian blonde:** is a pun on a Venetian blind and probably on a Veneziano's blonde.

#### Part I Chapter 23

**143.20: conifers:** later called "larches" (253)

**146.31: You are the ghost, old guide:** "The place swarmed with ghosts!" (36.19) says Van when he discovers his old French governess, Lariviere, at Ardis, at whose side Van sees Lucette for the first time. As Van narrates, Lucette is a ghost, haunting his and Ada's memory. Though she talks, as a guide to "that distant day," about the famous love story of Peter Townsend and Princess Margaret, Van insists that their love does not belong to the past.

**146.33: But *she* is by my side:** Van takes over Lucette's voice as the words reverberate

with the memory of Van and Ada's love story--"oaks" remind us of the "spreading oak tree"--le grand chêne--of the opening poem by Chateaubriand in Chapter 22 (138:12).

## Part I Chapter 24

**147.1: Lettrocalamity (Vanvitelli's old joke!):** There is no Giorgio Vanvitelli, an opera singer (147.17), but there is a Luigi Vanvitelli (1700-1770) who is a baroque Italian sculptor, architect, engineer and painter, the son of the Dutch painter Gaspard Van Wittel (1653-1736), but seems to be unrelated to the Lettrocalamity imagined here. Soundwise, we can see that the "L" in "Letrocalamity" suggests "Lucette" and "Vanvitelli" suggests "Van Veen". Lettrocalamity, as Nabokov notes, means "electromagnet," which refers to the cassette tape recorder that Van and Ada would have used had it not been forbidden. In Italian the word divides into "elettro" and "calamita" suggesting "electric calamity," the "L disaster" mentioned in Chapter 3 (17:1), the details of which are glossed over because it is "too well-known historically, and too obscene spiritually, to be treated at length in a book addressed to young laymen and lemans--and not to grave men or gravemen" (17.3-5).

### **Diana and Acteon by Luigi Vanvitelli**

c. 1770 (designed)

Marble, over life-size

Royal Residence, Caserta



**147.1-13: (for it's quite a long sentence):** The first sentence of this chapter is 13 lines long.

**148.1, 148.32:(Narrator. . .) (with several pauses):** The would-be beginning and narrator's comments to the tape if they had recorded their conversation then.

**148.9: a stuffed Parluggian Owl:** "Parluggian" is invented by Nabokov. *Aegolius funereus* is the name Nabokov identified to his French translator. The "Boreal Owl" or "the Tengmalm's Owl" is its common name. Boreas is the Greek god of the north wind. The word "Parluggian" has been discussed in NABOKV-L by several people:

1. Robert Cook: "Ugla" is of course "owl", cognate with the English word, with German "Eule" etc. "Parl-" suggests French "parler," and there are a few Swedish words with that first element." (<rcook@rhi.hi.is> Sat, 3 Feb 1996 14:58:12 -0800entry in NABOKV-L)

2. Alexander Dolinin: "The name Luzhin, the landowner from Luga from whose hothouses Hermann never steals peaches in the Russian version of *Despair*, various puns on Lugano in *Ada* and so on -- all these refer to Luga (adjective "luzhskii"), the river and the county (uezd) seat of Nabokov's summer paradise, about 20 miles from Rozhdestveno. The owl in question might then have a strong resemblance (par(a)-) to owls common for the Luga region." (<dolinin@facstaff.wisc.edu>Sun, 4 Feb 1996 15:51:53 -0800 entry in NABOKV-L)

3. Don Barton Johnson: The Parluggian Owl (*Aegolius funereus*--as VN indicated to his French translator) is indeed found in the area of the Nabokov family summer homes and across Northern Russian and through to the East coast of Canada and occasionally in winter along the Northern border of the Eastern U.S. and Canada. Thus its range includes "Russian" Canada where Ardis Manor is located. A bit like *Speak, Memory's* famous Swallowtail that escapes from Vyra and is recaptured in Colorado. (<NABOKV-L@UCSBVM.UCSB.EDU>Sun, 4 Feb 1996 15:51:53 -0800)

4. Gennadi Barabtarlo: According to Liddell and Scott, *aegolius* is "an unknown bird" mentioned by Pliny, a screeching owl of some description. In a sense, one can say that that funereal mythic bird is a Terra-Latinized Sirin of sorts -- which would only strengthen Professor Dolinin's "Luga" (or rather "near Luga", or "quasi-Luga") suggestion, with which I tend to agree. (<gragb@mizzou1.missouri.edu>Thu, 8 Feb 1996 13:57:57 -0800)

Known as the Boreal owl in the U. S., the Boreal, or Tengmalm's Owl was first classified in 1758 by Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), the Swedish naturalist, who developed binomial nomenclature to classify and organise plants and animals. "*Funereus*" comes from the Latin word for funeral. In North America, where it is known as the Boreal Owl, it was named after the Greek god of the north wind, Boreas. In other parts of the world, it is known as Tengmalms Owl. Other names for this Owl are Richardson's Owl, Sparrow Owl, Partridge-haw and Pearl Owl (Finland).

### **Tengmalm's (Boreal) Owl**

*Aegolius funereus*



**148.12: "Don't jingle them":** Ada tells Van not to jingle the empty beer bottles "left by some dead gardener" because Lucette might be spying. The line refers back to the "empty little bottle" tinkling on the shelf and points to the guilt felt by Van and Ada about Lucette. Also the keys Van was carrying figuratively evokes the keys to the "green door against which they were to bang so often with boneless fists in their later separate dreams" (148.29-30)

**148.22: I saw that verse in small violet letters before you put it into orange ones:** colored alphabet recalling Nabokov's own chromesthesia (see Don Barton Johnson, "Alphabetic Rainbows of *Speak, Memory*," *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis Publishers, 1985. Like Nabokov, Ada also seems to have the

ability to see letters as having distinct colors. The entire book, *Ada*, also ranges from violet to orange. Violet, Van's typist, becomes Mrs. Oranger by marriage to the editor and therefore becomes "visible." Violet is the extreme end of the rainbow; orange is more visible, vivid.

**148.29: (Van was already unlocking the door--the green door against which they were to bang so often):** Green seems to be a thematic color that runs throughout the book. There is a possible link with O'Henry's story, "The Green Door." Green is most often related with Lucette, who wears green, for whom Van and Ada feel guilt. In the previous chapter, Ada says to Lucette that she feels she was turning into a dragon, that the scales had begun to turn "green" (141:13). Other references to green in *Ada*, to mention just a few that we have found, are as follows:

green bench (36.19) Mlle. Lariviere is first seen sitting on a green bench and wearing green spectacles.

a longgreen box (53.14)

Lucette is seen wearing her green nightgown (64.27)

green-harnessed horses (153.8)

Lucette in her green pajamas (229.13)

Lucette in her green swimsuit, erotically described, ready to seduce Van (478.20, 27)

**149.11: milkmaid:** A hint that Van at 10 has already begun his sexual education. Cf. 151:21-22.

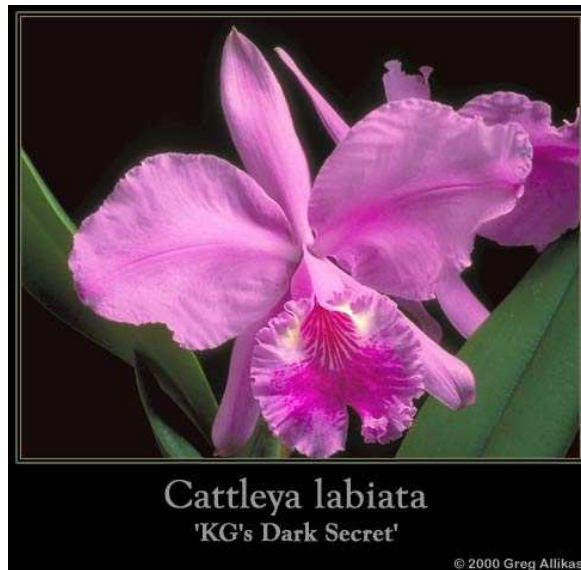
**149.21: one of his three tunes:** Demon knows 3 tunes; Van knows only one, his school song (cf.128:16).

**149.22: camler:** The cummerbunded Dutchman's mispronunciation of "gambler"

**149.25: two vacant lots:** A similar vacant lot with two tall buildings appears in "In Aleppo Once . . ."--images by which VN treats an otherwise serious threat of urbanization with a fairytale-like tone.

**150.10: six one-window carrosses of pumpkin origin:** A Cinderella reference to the orphan and one-time scullery maid at Ardis whom Marina discovers to be Demon's mistress.

**150.16: mauve tower:** See "mauve shades of Monsieur Proust," Chapter 8 (56:7). In VN's *Lectures on Literature*, VN calls the mauve color, which runs throughout *Remembrance of Things Past*, "the very color of time" (Harcourt Brace, 1980, p. 241). "This rose-purple mauve, a pinkish lilac, a violet flush, is linked in European literature with certain sophistications of the artistic temperament. It is the color of an orchid, *Cattleya labiata*."



<http://www.orchidworks.com/orchids/cattleya/july071.htm>

**150.22: massacred moles . . . probably pathological:** Proust had a servant catch mice in order to torture or kill them. According to André Gide, Proust, who took Gide to the site, was sexually aroused when he saw mice cannibalized by hunger in a brothel. (See André Gide. *Ainsi soit-il, ou, les jeux sont faits*. Paris: Gallimard, c1952, p. 151.)

According to J. E. Rivers in *Proust & the Art of Love\** (Columbia UP, 1980), pp. 77-78,

We have also heard that Proust had rats brought to the brothel and pierced with hatpins in his presence (1) . . . . As for the rats, André Gide, Bernard Fay, and Boni de Castellane all reported that Proust confessed to them about his sadistic experiments with rats. (2) And George Painter talks of being able to meet, in Paris between the wars, "the very chauffeur who declared, with a proud and beaming smile: 'It was who used to take the rats to Monsieur Marcel.'" (3)

Rivers's references:

(1) George D. Painter, *Proust: The Later Years*, (Boston: Little, 1959), pp. 268-70; Maurice Sachs, *Le Sabbat: Souvenirs d'une jeunesse orageuse* (Paris: Corrêa, 1946), p. 285.

(2) Painter, 268.

(3) Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust*, ed. Georges Belmont, (Paris: Robert Laffont-Opera Mundi, 1973), pp. 238-39.

Alain du Botton, in *How Proust Can Change Your Life: Not a Novel* (Vintage, 1998), p. 58, explains as follows: "MICE: Proust has a terror of these. When Paris is



bombed by the Germans in 1918, he confides that he is more terrified of mice than of cannons.

**151.5: numbering in raw-flesh red the white trunks of a row of young birches with Rose's purloined lipstick:** A reference to the garden of the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* where white roses are painted red. The rose motif is continued from the name of the scullery maid, described as "a lovely Irish wild rose" (150.26). Ada does this as "a preamble to a game she now could not remember." She tends to invent elaborate games that mystify others, like the first game she proposes to play with Van when they first meet.

**151.12: her crayon (tossed out by Marina . . .):** Rose's lipstick expressing female sexuality which, like the male counterpart in the terrier's hugging Dan's leg, is a part of the sexual education that the 6-year-old Ada and 8-year-old Van undergo in this scene.

**151.13: k chertyam sobach'im, to hell's hounds:** Cf. 23.11 where the same Russian phrase is translated as "to the devil." VN changes the translation because Rose's terrier "that had kept trying to hug Dan's leg" is the hell's hound in this very hellish scene.

**151.26 Gran D. du Mont:** Pun on the "Grandee," Marina's lover at the time. The letter read aloud, "dee" and "deed" also means "damn" and "damned," inferred from the beginning letter. Cf. 153.4: Marina was in Spain with her Grandee.

**152.8: little "turrets" and little "barrels":** Freudian male and female symbols. Lucette sings bagatelles about them and so is called "a macedoine of naivete and cunning."

**152.5: handsome suntanned man with a black mustache:** Quilty in *Lolita*, another nympholept, also had a moustache.

**152.7: Geneva's Manhattan Palace:** Cf. Part III, Chapter 8 (508:2).

**152.18: Ada only hoped the poor little thing would be as happy at Ada's age as Ada was now:** This is 1884, Ada is 12. In Chapter 36, Lucette, 12, plays scrabble with Ada, 16, but is not at all as happy as Ada is here.

**153.4-13: matching memories:** Cf. Sebastian Knight's novel, *Success*. Brian Boyd also points out that VN had an intense personal interest in coincidences and fatal meetings that brought together Vera and himself. Also in *The Gift*.

**153.17: the maze of the past where the mirror-lined narrow paths not only took different turns, but used different levels:** Time is conceived spatially, as in VN's interpretation of *Anna Karenina*. Two levels of time, crossing paths but missing each other because they proceed in different levels and speeds.

**153.24-25: in the final tragic triumph of human cogitation: I am because I die:** Cf. In his dying moments, Mr. R in *Transparent Things* gains perfect understanding of life that would have filled a book of greatest revelation but realizes, "Fortunately for my

self-esteem that book will not be written--not merely because a dying man cannot write books but because that particular one would never express in one flash what can only be understood *immediately*." (*Transparent Things*, Ch. 21).

**153.25: "But this," exclaimed Ada, "is certain, this is reality":** Written by Ada, who enjoys and deals more directly with life than philosophical Van.

**153.28: (it will, it was):** She can say, "It will," only because she knows "it was," having lived through it. She is narrating both in the past, as Ada of 1884, and in the present, as Ada in her nineties. "This has," Ada says, "all come together *here*." The paths made by Van and Ada, no matter how twisted in space and time, have come to meet at one decisive moment. But Ada knows "it was" all taken away. The awareness this line brings is tragic, although Ada is merely playing with the convergence of the tenses.

**153.32-33: 'in another part of the forest':** Van already regards this forest philosophically as being both a temporal and spatial one, while Ada regards reality as something to enjoy. Cf. "But, my love, my Van, I'm physical, horribly physical, I don't know, I'm frank, *qu'y puis-je?*" (I. 25)

**154.1: I want to make sure of our whereabouts and whenabouts:** Though Ada is unwilling to leave the special merging of space and time that they have arrived at, Van insists on the philosophical need for distinguishing time and space--anticipating his lifework, *Texture of Time*.

**154.04: we:** Note the use of first person plural, a novelistic convention.

**154.14: a pretzel-string of old novels:** Another mixing of the world of Van and Ada to the tradition of fiction (Cf. Van waylating Ada on the stair landing in Chapter 20, 127: 18-21). The coachman, the *traktir*-keeper and her son, the Gamlet itself come straight from old novels.

**154:21-22: bitochki. Each devoured half a dozen of them:** They each eat six because they have enjoyed six love-makings. They pause for a last one "before reaching the darkness" (154:24). Hunger and sexual desire are treated as synonymous in this chapter.

**154:26: lyrical coincidence:** Marina and Mlle Larivière are found drinking tea like the coachman in the *traktir*. Drinking tea contrasts with the orgy of eating that Van and Ada enjoy.

**155:1: glotonnerie impardonnable:** Refers not only to the lust of Larivière's "gentleman *au cou rouge*" but also to the "gluttony" of Van and Ada, especially Ada, who is voracious.

**156.15-16: qu'on mette du beurre par-dessus toute cette pâte britannique, masse indigeste et immonde:** Cf. ". . . little Miss Ada delicately but avidly (Ada, those adverbs qualified many actions of yours!) . . . licked up, before attacking the more amorphous



junkety depths of the stuff" (I.7, p.47) Note even here the use of "lait caillé" Cf. "Sundaes cause acne. The excess of the oily substance called sebum which nourishes the hair follicles of the skin creates, when too profuse, an irritation that opens the way to infection. But nymphets do not have acne although they gorge themselves on rich food" (I.11); "Lo, whose lovely prismatic entrails had already digested the sweetmeat, was looking forward to a big meal and had begun to fidget" ( *Lolita* I. 27).

**155:25: "Only seven," replied Ada with a munch smile:** Ada's secret joke for Van, who has quickly retired from exhaustion. The number points to the times Van and Ada have made love. Seven love-makings have "drained" Van "thoroughly."