

## Annotations to *Ada* (18)

### Part I Chapter 36

June 2009

#### The Kyoto Reading Circle in collaboration with Brian Boyd

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Page and line references are to the Vintage International edition.

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Part I Chapter 36
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**222.8: verbal circuses, “performing words,” “poodle-doodles”:** See *Pale Fire*, where Nabokov’s image of words performing in a circus appears (*Pale Fire*, Vintage 1962, 214). “Sure, sure,” said Shade. “One can harness words like performing fleas and make them drive other fleas.”

**222.13: alfavit:** Nabokov says this is an anagram of “Flavita,” but it resembles the Russian word for “alphabet” and also the beginning of the first name of its inventor. Alfred Mosher Butts, an American architect and inventor who happens to be born in the same year as Nabokov, created the original version of the game, “Criss-Crosswords,” which we are now familiar with as “Scrabble,” in 1938, as a variation of a former game he had invented called “Lexico,” which had been played without a board. James Brunot, a lawyer, bought the rights from Butts, slightly altered the rules, and named the game “Scrabble” in 1948. It became sensationally popular in the 1950s because the chairman of Macy’s, Jack Strauss, liked playing it and began a sales campaign in his New York store. (<http://www.msoworld.com/mindzine/news/proprietary/scrabble/features/history.html>) A previous “Russian variety” is Nabokov’s invention.

(Below: Scrabble board belonging to Vladimir Nabokov, from the Nabokov Museum, St. Petersburg.)



[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Nabokov\\_Scrabble.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Nabokov_Scrabble.JPG)

**222.16: “Madhatters”:** The reference is, of course, to Carroll’s tea-drinking character in *Alice in Wonderland* but also to the Manhattoes, the original inhabitants of Manhattan.

**223.15: a severe streptococcal ague:** Nabokov had a similar fever by which he lost his phenomenal power of calculation which he recalls in *Speak, Memory*.

**223. 28: Baron Klim Avidov:** Anagram for Vladimir Nabokov. See 223.34.

**223.33: Jurojin:** The Japanese name of one of the seven ancient Gods of Fortune, also known sometimes as Fukurokuju. Jurojin’s origins go back to a holy Taoist hermit-god, said to be Lao-tse’s reincarnation, whose face is red from drinking. He carries a peach, symbolic of long life, and a gourd filled with a liquid that gives immortality to those who drink it and is accompanied by a deer, symbol of nature and long life.



**223.34-224.4: Avidov . . . at a *particule*:** The gist of this short incident is that Avidov was accused by the Englishman Keyway of his pretensions to aristocratic lineage by using the French “de” before his name (d’Avidov). See Alexey Skylarenko’s discussion of the implications of the name “Avidov” in NABOKV-L Archives, Mon. 28 Jul 2008 23:45:59 +0400, entitled “ADA’s Baron Klim Avidov: ‘Good Should Have Fists’ or in Wine is Truth, God of a Free Man.”

**224.5: Venezia Rossa:** Venice is famous for the red brick the city produces.

**224.11: a speechless multilinguist in a frock coat with brass buttons:** This is the porter, recognized by his brass buttons.

**224.15: Pat Rishin:** In addition to Vivian Darkbloom’s note on the “patrician pun,” the chess term “pat” means “stalemate.” Though this chapter is about the game of scrabble, it abounds in analogical chess terms--names of chess pieces, such as “damsel,” (knight) “errant,” “Rookh” (rook), “queen.”

**224.15-16: champion of Underhill:** The prominent critic Norman Podhoretz (whose surname is close to “Underhill” in Russian or Ukrainian) wrote articles on “Edmund Wilson, the last Patrician,” in *The Reporter* for 1958 and 1959. “Underhill” also has overtones of “over the hill,” in the idiomatic sense of “past one’s best.” (Brian Boyd)

**224.16: Wilson, N.C.:** A geographically existent city in North Carolina. The first of

Nabokov's references to Edmund Wilson.

**224.23: Lalla Rookh:** A poem by Thomas Moore (1817). A princess of an Indian state on her journey to marry a prince stops in Kashmere and meets a poet, Feramore, who tells her a poem-narrative. She falls in love with him, but he reveals himself as the prince who was to marry her.

**225.7: a loyal dictionary:** One of the issues fought by Nabokov and Edmund Wilson in their letter exchanges was over the difference in their dictionary preferences.

(See "Reply to My Critics," *Strong Opinions*, Vintage 1973, 251, for Nabokov on judging on good dictionaries.)

**225.12-13: Especially boring were the girls' squabbles over the legitimacy of this or that word:** This scene resembles the Nabokov-Wilson disputes—perhaps an indirect self-criticism on Nabokov's part.

**225.17: the beautiful ARDIS which her governess had told her meant "the point of an arrow":** See "Ardis of Time," ( 538.30). "Ardis" means "arrow" in Greek. Van explains in Part 4 that the direction of time is one-way and irreversible.

**225.25: moronic Ozhegov:** An actual Russian dictionary which Nabokov disapproved of.

**225.26-27: a small but chippy Edmundson:** Shortened name of Nabokov's "chippy" opponent, Edmund Wilson. This lexicon is small because to Nabokov, Wilson's Russian vocabulary is small.

**225.27: Dr. Gerschizhevsky's reverent version:** In his notes, Nabokov writes, "a Slavist's name gets mixed here with that of Chizhevski, another Slavist" (598). The first Slavist is Alexander Gershenkron (1904-1978), an influential economic theorist and Harvard professor who knew twenty languages and was the severest of the critics of Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*. Gershenkron's biography has recently been published by his grandson, Nicholas Dawidoff, with the title, *The Fly Swatter: Portrait of an Exceptional Character* (New York: Vintage, 2002).

**225.29: a four-volume Dahl ("My darling dahlia," moaned Ada...):** Vladimir Ivanovich

Dal (or Dahl), 1801-1872, one of the greatest Russian lexicographers and author of a four-volume *Explanatory Dictionary of the Live Great Russian Language* (published in 1863-66). Of Danish-German stock, he collected sayings and fairy tales of the Russian people by travelling on foot through the Russian countryside. A friend of Alexander Pushkin, he was summoned to the latter's deathbed during the last hours of his life. Nabokov admired Dahl's dictionary as a masterpiece of [the lexicographer's art](#). ([Brian Boyd](#))



Dahl's portrait by [Vasily Perov](#).

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir\\_Dal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Dal))

**Dahlia** is a flower native to Mexico which was successfully bred after it arrived in the Netherlands in 1872. It was named after the Swedish 18<sup>th</sup>-century botanist Anders Dahl.



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Dahlia\\_at\\_the\\_RBG\\_in\\_2008.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Dahlia_at_the_RBG_in_2008.JPG)

**225.34: planchette:** A triangular or heart-shaped board supported by castors which moves on top of a board depicting the alphabet and spells out messages or answer questions during a spiritualist meeting.

**226.1-2: a sunset sky the last fire of which snaked across the corner of the reservoir:** See similar passage on 116.16-17.

**226.7: Miniver Musk:** See 114.16 where Blanche loses a “miniver-trimmed slipper on the grand staircase.”

**226.10: seven “luckies” . . . lay face down, showing nothing but their anonymous black backs:** With the references to Jurojin (223.33) and Benten (226.14), the case is strong again for the seven ancient Japanese gods of fortune, but also remindful of Kabuki actors sitting in black formal kimono and lined up, bowing their heads in a “Koujo” on the Kabuki stage—the formal greeting made by star Kabuki actors, all in matching formal black kimono, at the New Year performances. Particularly block-like is the “kamishimo,” the most formal wear for pre-modern Japanese, worn over their kimono, extending their shoulder line and making their backs a large flat square. If Nabokov knew about the seven gods, he might have seen photographs of a “Koujo.”



<http://fumikyuu.up.seesaa.net/image/1An1Ab1As1A5B20053.jpg>

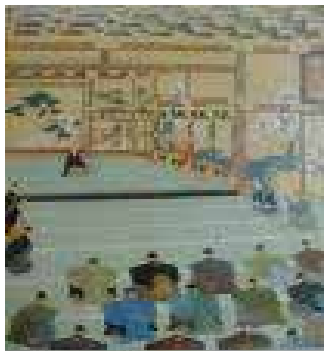
A “Koujo” stage usually begins with all bowing, some of them dressed in “kamishimo” which is flat at the back with square shoulders, which would resemble a square “tile” from the back.

A Kabuki actor in a “kamishimo”



[http://pds.exblog.jp/pds/1/200802/20/09/f0149209\\_0275377.jpg](http://pds.exblog.jp/pds/1/200802/20/09/f0149209_0275377.jpg)

Samurai lords lined up at a Shogun’s audience wearing kamishimo.



<http://odekake.huuryuu.com/nijyojyo7.jpg>

The personification of the blocks also recalls the playing-card soldiers in Alice’s Wonderland.

**226.14: Benten lamp:** Pun on “benzene lamp.” Benten or, more precisely, Benzaiten, is the only goddess of the seven ancient Japanese gods of fortune (or Shichifukujin) and has roots in the Hindu goddess Sarasvati (meaning “sacred river” in Sanscrit). Benten is commonly believed to be the goddess of prosperity, associated with water and sometimes with music, often depicted with seven arms holding protective weapons and/or a “biwa” (Japanese lute) , and is worshipped in both Buddhist and Shinto religions.



Benzaiten ([ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/弁才天](http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/弁才天))

**227.10: REMNILK, LINKREM:** Eerily includes the name “Klim Avidov” (223:24) from whom the siblings received their set of Flavita.

**227.11:** “... shift those two syllables and you get a fortress in ancient Muscovy.” “Oh, no,.... That pretty word does not exist in Russian.... There is no second syllable”: The Russian word mentioned here is *кремль*, the last mark of which is not a vowel but a sign to “soften” the preceding consonant.

**227.13-14: Ada, wagging her finger at the height of her temple in a way she had:** Cf. 240:13-14, where Demon makes the same gesture but with his left finger. The gene missed Van.

**227.27: TORFYaNUYu/228.8: Torfyanaya:** Torfyana is actually a city in Kamchatka in far-eastern Russia but in *Ada*, the name of Blanche’s village. See 35.1, Torfyanka, means a “peaty bog,” which Brian Boyd pointed out in his “Ada, the Bogs and the Gardens,” *Nabokov Studies* 2004.

**228.14: ‘peaty’: feminine gender, accusative case:** The feminine gender, accusative case of “torfyanaya” is “torfyanuyu”



**228.25: a translucent lakescape with Japanese dragons:** Another motif linking this chapter and Chapter 19. Cf. “typical raft ripples like fire snakes in Japan” (116.16). Dragons on lampshades are not very common in Japan and are more likely to be a Chinese motif. Cf. 373:3 where Lucette mentions “a Chinese stand japanned in red lacquer” with golden dragons painted all over it.

**228.30: (the dark-blue cup!):** Cf. “your Darkblue ancestor” (29.12)

**229.12: “You remember a lot, ha-ha”:** A reference connecting Ardis Park to Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. Cf. 18.1: “across the ha-ha of a doubled ocean.” See also our annotation on 231.7 with reference to Mansfield Park.