

## Annotations to *Ada* (22)

### Part I: Chapter 40

August 2017

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

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The Kyoto Reading Circle is deeply grateful to Professor Boyd for his generous comments and corrections. The comments contributed by Brian Boyd are indicated by his initials, "BB," and/or in blue.

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### Part I Chapter 40

**283.1-2: reading Antiterrenus on Rattner:** Reversing 230.4 (Ch. 37): "reading Rattner on Terra." Reversals abound in this chapter, so close to the end of Part I. This opening suggests that the fictional course of this novel is turning around to an opposite direction. When we look at the five Parts composing *Ada*, we find it hard to believe that what Van reports is real. The "success" of Van's *The Texture of Time* lecture and Van and Ada's regaining of happiness hardly seems a natural development. The "revenge story" beginning with Van's justified rage makes the reader expect a dramatic, romantic, satisfactory death of the two men but ends with a disappointing anticlimax. Could the rest of Van's narrative be his wishful thinking? As in *Lolita*, where the plot suggests a suspicious unnatural turn when Lo's letter to Humbert triggers the plot for revenge in the latter half, *Ada*'s plot may have turned into a fiction made by Van.

BB: I find the claims here frequently odd. Third sentence: "what Van reports": anywhere? Or just here? Why do Parts IV and V seem especially unnatural developments? (Why not the parents' love story, and the children's, in Part I, and the Villa Venuses, and Lucette's death too? No reason is given.) Van's justified rage? Why is he justified in his plans? Why is the death of the two men (Rack and de Prey) to be anticipated with pleasure? The rest of the narrative could be Van's wishful thinking (it could also for that matter be the fantasy of Humbert or John Shade or for that matter Falstaff or Genji), but so it could from Van's first sight of Ada. "Could's" are cheap; but what would pressure us into thinking we *should* take it this way? In *Lolita* what in the plot is suspicious and unnatural? Humbert seethed with violent jealous rage even at being deceived by the lover of the Valeria he despised; why would he not try to inveigle, from the only person who could tell him, the name of the man who took from him the woman he loved, and then try to wreak his revenge?

To BB, a reply from Shoko Miura (in italics):

*I think that your comment makes sense and we did expect something like this, but*

perhaps I didn't explain clearly enough the point that was made at the Kyoto Reading Circle (KRC), so let me clarify what we meant. Considering Nabokov's infrequent but definitely felt moral support of what is humane and just, it seems strange and somehow inexplicable that Van and Ada end up living together in a happy old age. That's what seemed to us to be "unnatural." Wouldn't it have been morally inexcusable for Nabokov?

We were discussing why Nabokov allowed such an ending and couldn't find an answer. Then, Tadashi reminded us that we are reading Van's, not Nabokov's, narrative and suggested that in *Lolita* and *Look at the Harlequins!*, there are discrepancies in the text. Nabokov may be making Van an unreliable narrator in a morally provocative sense.

Also, Alexander (Sasha) Dolinin had pointed out that Humbert may be deceiving us into believing in his narrative when what he says may be his fiction—that *Lolita* may not have written the letter to him, that all subsequent events were Humbert's fantasy ("Nabokov's Time Doubling: From The Gift to *Lolita*." *Nabokov Studies* 2 [1995] 3-40.). You made a clear answer in opposition in your essay, "Even Homais Nods: Nabokov's Fallibility; or, How to Revise *Lolita*" (*Nabokov Studies* 2 [1995]: 62-85.) and we actually studied this meaningful argument between you and Sasha in a panel some years ago at one of the Nabokov Society of Japan's conferences but we never came to a conclusion. Tadashi's point is that it can be similarly argued for *Ada* that with Nabokov, what is narrated and what occurred in reality are often different, that since Van mostly controls the narrative, he may be making up the ending into a happy one.

Since the phrase "reading *Antiterrenus* on *Rattner*," pointing to a reversal, occurs in the plot where Van's revenge narrative is about to begin, we saw a pattern similar to *Lolita*. Of course, as you say, "coulds are cheap" and we wish we could say "is"—but we'd like to know what you think of this possibility.

After this reply from KRC, Brian Boyd has not changed his view. Although this is a year after the forum on this chapter ended, being aware of how far beyond the perimeters of Ch. 40 this issue can reach, we at the KRC have continued discussion on this issue and have found some reasons why we still think that there is a "reversal" or a change to a narrative which was made up by Van after his second departure from Ardis and starts his journey for revenge. One is that, as we have mentioned, there are precedents for this reversal-to-false-narrative pattern besides *Lolita*. David Auerbach, not a Nabokovian per se but apparently a good re-reader, compares *Ada* to other "alternate worlds" Nabokov has created:

To the best of my knowledge, all of Nabokov's alternate worlds are revealed to be explicit fantasies *within the text*: the unnamed country in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Zembla in *Pale Fire*, Badonia in "Terra Incognita," and Padukgrad in *Bend Sinister*. It is unlikely that Antiterrenus is any different, even more unlikely that it is some kind of afterlife. It is the fantasy world of someone. (Auerbach, "Kinbote Triumphant in Hell: The Riddle of Nabokov's *Ada*," 17<sup>th</sup> Paragraph, 22 Nov. 2011, <http://www.waggish.org/2011/kinbote-triumphant-in-hell-the-riddle-of-nabokovs-ada/>.)

Auerbach lists among the reasons for the suspicious unreality of Van's narrative the unlikelihood of Van's book, *The Texture of Time*, becoming a bestseller as Van insists:

[H]is dreary, solipsistic treatise *The Texture of Time* (which forms Part 4) becomes a bestseller, unlikely enough in *any* world. It is a reality-denying book in which ideas take precedence over people. Nabokov loathed this approach, dismissing ideas as worthless to writing. (Auerbach, 18<sup>th</sup> Paragraph)

Another reason is that, within the text of *Ada*, we find the same tricks of sudden transformation of the narrative from reality (or what the reader should take as a real event in the story) to fantasy. One instance is Van’s first speech to Rack in the hospital, “I am Van Veen—in case you are no longer lucid enough to recognize somebody you have seen only twice. [...]” (314.5-315.23 [Ch. 42]), which the reader first takes to have happened but must revise his perception since Van then “tears up” the imaginary speech and follows it with his actual speech to Rack, “Mr. Rack, open your eyes. I’m Van Veen. A visitor” (315.26 [Ch. 42]). Another instance is in Part II, Chapter 3, the “Villa Venus” chapter, which is a chain of high-class whorehouses created in fantasy by Eric Veen, a boy of fifteen, and made into “real” buildings by his architect grandfather. Van reports the economic ruin and decay of all the villas at the end of the chapter. The reader realizes that the entire history of Villa Venus must have occurred in Van’s dream because the previous chapter, Part II, Ch. 2, ends with Van falling asleep and the succeeding chapter, Part II, Ch. 4, consists of Van’s lecture on dreams. The whole “Villa Venus” chapter is too fantastic to be true and it is an independent chapter, unusual in this novel, which can be taken out without loss to the narrative development. It is true that some characters are connected to Villa Venus but the point is that the source of information is Van. Van’s lecture in Ch. 4 also is unlikely to have happened.

All this goes to show that Nabokov is preparing his reader to suspect his text. Our point that “reversals abound in this chapter” has taken us this far and more will undoubtedly follow in future annotations, but we are going too far ahead of ourselves. In our next forum exchanges with Brian Boyd, we hope to continue discussion on this issue.

**283.7: a messenger, a slender youth:** actually turns out to be a girl, continuing the reversal of sexes motif associated with Percy in 168.16-18 (Ch. 27): “(an upper-form boy, Cordula’s cousin, had been caught with a lass disguised as a lad in the rooms of an eclectic prefect).” This was a story Van wanted to tell Ada and Cordula in the milk-bar scene to take revenge on Ada for an imagined lesbian relationship with Cordula.

**283.18: *Maidenhair*:** Maidenhair tree is the ginkgo tree but “maidenhair” is also a fern, called “Venus’ hair (or *venerin volosok* in Russian) fern.” (See below for variations.) There are also “maidenhair” seaweeds and a moss of the same name. Links to the “red-bearded” Pogonia orchid (see 288.4-25) suggests Van’s debasing of virgin Lucette’s “maiden” sexuality.



Adiantum Philippense



Adiantum Pedatum

The “Maidenhair plant,” or the ginkgo tree, is named *gingko biloba* (“two lobes”) because the leaf forks into two fan-shaped parts. According to “en.wikipedia.org,” the

"Maidenhair tree" is so named because "the leaves resemble some of the pinnae of the maidenhair fern, *Adiantum capillus-veneris*. The species was initially described by Linnaeus in 1771, the specific epithet *biloba* derived from the Latin *bis* 'two' and *loba* 'lobed', referring to the shape of the leaves. Two names for the species recognise the botanist Richard Salisbury, *Pterophyllus salisburyensis* as proposed by Nelson and the earlier *Salisburia adiantifolia* proposed by James Edward Smith. The epithet of the latter may have been intended to denote a characteristic resembling *Adiantum*, the genus of maidenhair ferns. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginkgo\\_biloba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginkgo_biloba).



The ginkgo leaves and tree in autumn

**283.18: *Tourbiere*:** Meaning "peaty bog," as discussed by Brian Boyd ("Ada: The Bog and the Garden: Or, Straw, Fluff, and Peat: Sources and Places in *Ada*." 2004. *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. 360-384.) See our note to 227.27 (Ch. 36).

**284.21: Praskovia Lansky:** See 242.16 (Ch. 38): "Prascovie de Prey," and 242.3-7 (Ch. 38), where Demon tells her story. She is the mother of Percy de Prey and has cuckolded her husband at least twice, once with Demon and then with Moses de Vere, the father of Vere de Vere (cf. 200.7 [Ch. 32]).

**284.34: flash-back to an old barn:** A metaphorical word-play. Lightning struck and set the barn on fire in Ch. 19.

**285.21: Monsieur Violette:** Marina's homosexual hair stylist. "Violet" Knox, Van and Ada's secretary, on the other hand, is a lesbian with whom Van suggests that Ada marry if Van dies first (see 584.13-14 [Part V, Ch. 6]: "One solution would be for you to marry Violet.")

**286.1: *Sexico*:** The combination of Mexico and sex refers to Pedro, whom Monsieur Violette mistakes Van for.

**286.12 a door has been left unlocked:** Lucette in Van's mind as he narrates is hinted in the locked door and swimming in water.

**286.25: zaychik:** “Zaychik” (diminutive of *zayats*, “hare” in Russian) refers to the chain of “lapin” references regarding Dr. Lapiner. *Krolik* means the usual rabbit, larger in size. See 591, Darkbloom’s note for p. 7. Moreover, [Russ.] *solnechniy zaychik* (*zayats*) means “sunbeams,” such as the spots of light streaming through trees. The word origin of *zayatz* (rabbit) is “something that jumps around.”

**286.25: this “sun blick”:** from the Russian word *blik* (a speck of light/patch of light).

**286.32 limp light:** The alliteration of the “l” sound occurs often in this passage, from “lost” flower (286.27) to “Lyaskan” (286.30), “l adored” (286.33)—(or “l adored,” slightly Frenchified), “lassitude” and “lass” (287.2). Ada comments, “That’s a beautiful passage, Van” (287.7).

**287.1-2: Turkish cigarettes:** Ada had smelled before of cigarettes, hinting at her meeting with heavy-smoker Percy, in Ch. 37.

**287.13: and they really parted:** Pun on going their separate ways and on parting their coupled bodies after love-making. BB: I would emphasize rather Ada’s “saying they must really part” (287.10-11) and Van’s bitter echo of that two lines later, “and they really parted.” It will be the last time they are “really together”—apart from Ada’s denying to Van that the secret note means anything and Van’s accusing her the next morning, after Blanche has explained the note—until 1892.

**287.14: Lady’s Slipper:** “lady slipper orchids” or “slipper orchids” are characterised by the slipper-shaped pouches (modified labellums) of the flowers – the pouch traps insects so they are forced to climb up past the staminode, behind which they collect or deposit pollinia, thus fertilizing the flower. . . . The *Cypripedium* genus is found across much of North America, as well as in parts of Europe and Asia. The state flower of Minnesota is the Showy Lady’s Slipper (*Cypripedium reginae*). The Lady’s Slipper is also the official provincial flower of Prince Edward Island, a province of Canada.



(See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cypripedioideae>.)

**287.21: The novelistic theme of written communications has now really got into its stride:** The plot of Van’s revenge “gets into stride” with the incident of the note slipped into Van’s pocket discovered immediately after this sentence and the note Van silently writes to Ada on her book’s flyleaf at the end of Ch. 39. See 250.4 (Ch. 38), “to continue the novelistic structure.” This chapter began with the incident of Percy’s letter. The self-referential theme reminds us that the exchange of written communications between characters has propelled the plot in novels since the earliest epistolary fictions of

Richardson and Rousseau.

**287.23: slip:** Nicely links with Cinderella-like Blanche and her "Lady's Slipper." The slip of paper was "slipped" into his pocket by Blanche but actually written by her sister Madelon. See also our note to 292.30 (Ch. 41): "slipped."

**287.26: whiffled and rippled:** This reference to ripples of water recalls Lucette's end. This slip of paper is another of the "water messages" appearing in the novel, as commented by Brian Boyd in his posting on Nabokv-L, 24 Nov. 2004.

**287.27: berne:** [Fr.] *berner* means "to deceive."

**288.6-7: Pembroke Table:** A light, drop-leaf table designed for occasional use, probably deriving its name from Henry Herbert, 9th Earl of Pembroke (1693-1751), a noted connoisseur and amateur architect. The table has two drawers and flaps on either side that can be raised by brackets on hinges (known as "elbows") to increase its size. Usually provided with casters (it was often used for bedside meals), the legs of the common English versions, as illustrated by Thomas Sheraton and others, are supported or reinforced by X-shaped stretchers.



(See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/449512/Pembroke-table>.)

**288.14-15: Blanche's "linen-folding" voice:** The quotation marks may suggest that Blanche is not actually folding linen at this moment. She usually sings this song while folding linen, but she could be singing it somewhere nearby. The song reminds Van of Percy.

**288.15: "Malbrough" (. . . *ne sait quand reviendra, ne sait quand reviendra*); 289.27: *Mon page, mon beau page*:** BB: See D. Barton Johnson, "Ada's Marlborough s'en va-t-en guerre," in Lisa Zunshine, ed., *Nabokov at the Limits: Redrawing the Critical Boundaries* (New York: Garland, 1999), 3-20. "Malbrough" and "Malbrook" references also occur in 145.25 (Ch. 23) to the French song about the "death" (he was only wounded) of John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough, the British enemy of the French in the Battle of Malplaquet, 1709. It became the song "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" in English. Janzy de Souza Mello wrote in her posting on Nabokv-L on 24 Nov. 2004, "I counted 20 brooks (not counting the 'burns' which, as I learned from B. Boyd's notes also mean 'brook'), plus seven Malbrough and Malbrook" in *Ada*. "*Ne sait quand reviendra*" (one knows not when he will return) hints at the general doubt of ever returning—not only Percy de Prey but also the pure happiness of childhood of Ardis and Van's absolute trust in Ada.

“Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre”  
(<http://ingeb.org/songs/marlbrou.html>)

1. Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Ne sait quand reviendra. :|  
Ne sait quand reviendra :|

Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Ne sait quand reviendra,  
Ne sait quand reviendra. :|

Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre,  
Ne sait quand reviendra.

2. Il reviendra z'à Pâques,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Il reviendra z'à Pâques  
Ou à la Trinité.

3. La Trinité se passe,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
La trinité se passe,  
Marlbrough ne revient pas.

4. Madame à sa tour monte,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Madame à sa tour monte  
Si haut qu'elle peut monter.

5. Ell' voit venir son page,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Ell' voit venir son page  
Tout de noir habillé.

6. Oh page, mon beau page,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Oh page, mon beau page,  
Quell' nouvelle apportez?

7. Aux novell' que j'apporte,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Aux novell' que j'apporte,  
Vos beaux yeux vont pleurer.

8. Quittez vos habits roses,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Quittez vos habits roses

Et vos satins brochés!

9. Prenez la robe noire,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Prenez la robe noire  
Et les souliers cirés.

10. Monsieur d'Marlbroug est mort,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Monsieur d'Marlbrough est mort,  
Est mort et enterré.

11. L'ai vu porter en terre,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
L'ai vu porter en terre  
Par quatre z'officiers.

12. L'un portait sa cuirasse,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
L'un portait sa cuirasse,  
L'autre son bouclier.

13. L'troisième portait son sabre  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
L'troisième portait son sabre,  
L'autre ne portait rien.

14. A l'entour de sa tombe,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
A l'entour de sa tombe  
Romarin fut planté.

15. Sur la plus haute branche,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
Sur la plus haute branche  
Le rossignol chantait.

16. On vit voler son âme,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
On vit voler son âme  
A travers les lauriers.

17. La cérémonie faite,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
La cérémonie faite,  
Chacun s'en fut coucher.

18. J'n'en dis pas davantage,  
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,  
J'nen dis pas davantage,

Car en voilà z'assez.

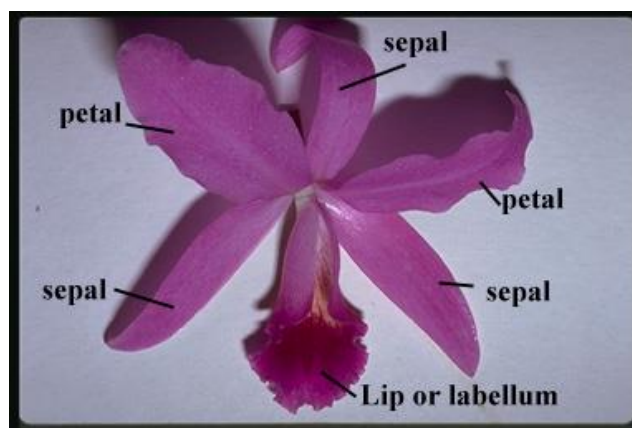
**288.27-28: Dead soldiers might smell even better:** Perhaps because of Blanche's "Malbrough" song, Van imagines Percy dead. "Malbrough" hints at "Marlboro," an American cigarette brand. As suggested in our note to 287.1-2, Percy is Ada's "unknown lover" who "was a heavy smoker, his open red mouth full of rolling blue fog" in 234.32-33 (Ch. 37).

**288.31-32: pogonia:** A genus of orchids (family Orchidaceae) belonging to the subfamily Vanilloideae. It includes 7 species, and takes its name from the Greek *pōgōn* and *pōgōnīās*, meaning, respectively, "beard" and "bearded."



(See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pogonia>.)

**288.32: indecent details of structure:** "Flower structure" means the anatomical parts of a flower. See Note for this chapter. "The "flower structure" of pogonia is seen by Van as "indecent," probably referring to the "labellum" of pogonia with its "beard" as resembling the human female pudendum. However, Van's perhaps unconscious identification of the "indecent" flower with red-haired Lucette is another example of his cruel treatment of his half-sister.



The Flower Structure of an Orchid

**289.8-9: could a boy bee impregnate a girl flower *through* something:** A reference back to the condom (275.24-26 [Ch. 19]: "the transparent, tubular thing, not unlike a sea-squirt, that had got caught in its downstream course in a fringe of forget-me-nots"—for further



notes, see our note to 275.20-22 [Ch. 39]) which Van had used with Ada in their recent tryst (266.11-16 [Ch. 39]). Lucette already seems to know the facts about sex, and although her question seems to be innocent, it implies the worry whether a girl can be impregnated even through clothes, since she had sat on Van's knee.

**290.8: "I'm telling you I found it *here*," (pointing at his heart):** By "*here*," Van implies not just where the note was found but his heart beneath it.

**290.10: "Your obedient servant":** Van deliberately echoes Percy's words at the end of his letter (284.2: "by your obedient servant") as a sarcasm to Ada.