

Annotations to *Ada*

Part II: Chapter 4 May 2021

The Kyoto Reading Circle

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Part II Chapter 4

359.1: What are dreams?: This is an imaginary lecture. 361.24 telling of Van's sexual dreams is evidence of how impossible it is to treat it as an actual lecture. Part IV is also a lecture on time by Van, but Part II Chapter 4 is a forerunner or a rehearsal in a way. See 362.27 where Van announces he will reserve the "passing of time" feeling for a later chapter.

As in *Lolita*, the narrator addresses an imaginary audience ("Ladies and gentlemen of the jury"). In this sense, *Lolita* is a prototype of *Ada*. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is a notable precursor using this imaginary audience device ("Sir" and "Madam").

359.6: during the last nine decades: References to Van's age at the various stages of the composition are scattered throughout the whole book: "Marginal jotting in Ada's 1965 hand" (15.22); "unremembered now, eighty years later" (32.5-6); "At ninety-four" (70.4); "Van, thank goodness, is ninety now—in Ada's hand" (104.28-29); "At ninety, Van remembered" (141.2-3); "ninety-three-year-old Baron Van Veen" (344.16-17); "I'm ready to oblige till I'm ninety," said Van" (403.22); "At ninety, he still danced on his hands" (571.33-34); "Van's ninety-seventh birthday" (587.21-22). The particularly interesting case here is 403.22 reference where Van proudly claims he can retain his virility till he is ninety. This statement looks like a

simple future projection, but it turns poignant if we assume Van is ninety when he is writing this passage, since he is “completely impotent” (575.24-25) at that age.

359.12-13: the memory of Ardis that a thorn in my day had maddeningly revived: Cf. The rose and thorn motif in *Lolita*: “Look at this tangle of thorns” (*Lolita* 9).

359.14-15: the stream of composition: Play on “stream of consciousness” emphasizing his work of writing, and leads to the “current” image (359.17) in the workings of the mind between being awake and asleep, ending in a “cataract” (360.1). This also is linked to Lucette’s death.

VN often plays with stream-of-consciousness concept. Cf. “self-conscious stream of modern traffic.” (*Sebastian Knight* 4) As is shown in Darkbloom’s note to *monologue intérieur* (593), it is VN’s pet theory that Leo Tolstoy used this device for the first time in *Anna Karenina*.

360.7: wringing my hands: Cf. “I had always thought that wringing one’s hands was a fictional gesture—the obscure outcome, perhaps, of some medieval ritual; but as I took to the woods, for a spell of despair and desperate meditation, this was the gesture (‘look, Lord, at these chains!’) that would have come nearest to the mute expression of my mood.” (*Lolita* 83)

360.7-8: “kneeling and wringing my hands” like the dusty-trousered Marmlad before his Marmlady in Dickens: Dickens in translation greatly influenced Dostoyevsky (Darkbloom’s note). Dostoyevsky’s Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment* is echoed in Marmlad and Marmlady. Dickens frequently used the cliché “wringing one’s hands”: “‘Business!’ cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again.” (*A Christmas Carol*); “‘They belong to the old gentleman,’ said Oliver, wringing his hands” (*Oliver Twist*). Cf. “London tailors wringing their hands in the fog, and a moneylender, the famous St Priest of Chose, asking for an appointment with Dick’s father” (175.12-15). Note that the string of words “London—wringing their hands—the fog—Dick’s” strongly evokes Dickens. “Wringing one’s hands” is also a pet phrase of Dostoevsky’s as well: “Weeping and sobbing and wringing her hands [руки ломая], she married me!” (*Crime and Punishment*) In VN’s second English translation of *Despair* (1966), Hermann refers to Dostoevsky as “Dusty”: “Mist, vapor . . . in the mist a chord that quivers.’ No,

that's not verse, that's from old Dusty's great book, *Crime and Slime*." (177) For further details, see Brian Boyd's extensive annotations.

Stephen Blackwell in N-L wrote that pâté de fruit is a kind of tarte called Marmalade in Saint Petersburg (<https://thenabokovian.org/node/10626>).

360.10: the great "somehow" of dreams!: Cf. "He discovered that a touch of subtle sport could be derived from constantly fighting temptation while constantly dreaming of somehow, sometime, somewhere, yielding to it." (575.10-12)

360.10-11: the book had already come out: In *The Gift*, Fyodor dreams that his collection of poems has already come out and received a good review before it is actually published.

360.13: a typo on every page: In *Pale Fire*, "fountain" and "mountain" typo makes a significant difference.

360.14-15: the meaningless "nuclear" instead of "unclear": A casual reference to the international politics at the time when *Ada* was composed. Cf. "agents from distant Atomsk." (581.22-23)

In his 1963 introduction to *Bend Sinister*, VN typically declares his supreme indifference to "[p]olitics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of 'thaw' in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on" (vii). However, it is not so *unclear* that he kept an eye on the political tension since the early Cold War period as his English novels like *Lolita*, *Pnin* or *Pale Fire* repeatedly showed the author's concern with what he calls "atomistique" (*The Waltz Invention*, Phaedra, 1966, n.p.). With the surrealistic image of an amputated human hand just above (360.12), this oneiric typo reminds us of the image of nuclear testing in the scene where Humbert Humbert and Lolita take a close look at a show window in their second road trip: "It was indeed a pretty sight. A dapper young fellow was vacuum-cleaning a carpet of sorts upon which stood two figures that looked as if some blast had just worked havoc with them. One figure was stark naked, wigless and armless" (*Lolita* 226). Cf. Douglas Anderson, "Nabokov's Genocidal and Nuclear Holocausts in *Lolita*," *Mosaic*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1996, pp.73-90. Shedding tears of grief after meeting his ex-wife, Pnin envisions an "[a]tomic bomb explosion" in a magazine cartoon of a shipwrecked mariner with a cat on a desert island (60). On the nuclear context of *Pale Fire*, see Steven Belletto,

“The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold, or Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, Chance, and the Cold War,” *ELH*, vol. 73, 2006, pp.755-80.

360.15-19: Or I would be hurrying to a reading I had to give—would feel exasperated by the sight of the traffic and people blocking my way, and then realize with sudden relief that all I had to do was to strike out the phrase ‘crowded street’ in my manuscript: VN’s actual dream in September 1967: “Dream last night: late for my lecture (had to return for my notes). Flock of sheep before me threatening to delay me still more. It occurs to me suddenly that I can simply cross the whole passage out, especially as I had used it before and it was too long. This I do—and arrive in time at the lecture hall.” (Boyd, *The American Years*, 527)

360.20: “skyscraper”: Cf. “Upon reaching New York, travelers in space used to be as much impressed as travelers in time would have been by the old-fashioned skyscrapers; this was a misnomer, since their association with the sky, especially at the ethereal close of a greenhouse day, far from suggesting any grating contact, was indescribably delicate and serene: to my childish eyes looking across the vast expanse of park land that used to grace the center of the city, they appeared remote and lilac-colored, and strangely aquatic, mingling as they did their first cautious lights with the colors of the sunset and revealing, with a kind of dreamy candor, the pulsating inside of their semitransparent structure.” (“Time and Ebb,” *Stories*, 582-83)

360.27: double-you-less: Loss of the other “Van” (“W” is made with two Vs).

361.5-6: the kind of precognitive flavor that Dunne has explained by the action of “reverse memory”: In October 1964, VN started an experiment of writing down his dreams, to find the validity of J. W. Dunne’s proposed model of time in his highly influential book “An Experiment with Time.” VN’s opening sentence in his first card reads: “The following checking of dream events was undertaken to illustrate the principle of ‘reverse memory’” (Quoted in Barabtarlo, *Insomniac Dreams*, 33).

The reversal of time is one of the main issues for VN. His notion of “future recollection” can be found as early as in “A Guide to Berlin”: “What indeed! How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody’s future recollection?” (*Stories*, 160); its most impressive use is Humbert’s failed attempt to murder Charlotte in the Hourglass Lake scene: “and as I watched, with the stark lucidity of a future

recollection (you know—trying to see things as you will remember having seen them), the glossy whiteness of her wet face so little tanned despite all her endeavors, and her pale lips, and her naked convex forehead, and the tight black cap, and the plump wet neck, I knew that all I had to do was to drop back, take a deep breath, then grab her by the ankle and rapidly dive with my captive corpse” (*Lolita* 86).

361.11: Osberg’s: Osberg, as Darkbloom has annotated, is Borges. In 1940, Borges wrote an article “El tiempo y J. W. Dunne” in Spanish. It was first translated into English as “Time and J. W. Dunne” in *Other Inquisitions* in 1964. VN may have read this because this joke on Borges comes immediately after mentioning Dunne.

361.11-12: “Tell me,” says Osberg’s little gitana to the Moors, El Motela and Ramera: “Little gitana” and “motel” in “El Motela” suggest Lolita and love of young girls, reminding Van of Ada. *The Perfumed Garden* cites “El motelâ” (Brian Boyd’s Annotations to *Ada*) as one of the “sundry names given to the sexual parts of man,” and explains: “El motelâ (the ransacker)—So named because it penetrates into the unusual places, makes itself well acquainted with the state of vulvas, and can distinguish their qualities and faults” (*The Perfumed Garden*, the 1963 Panther edition, 180). “Ramera” is “a prostitute” in Spanish.

361.12-13: “what is the precise minimum of hairs on a body that allows one to call it ‘hairy?’”: The question implied here is exactly when “hairyness,” which is a sign of puberty, begins. This is a typical example of the Sorites Paradox—How many strands of hair does one have to lose before you are bald? How many grains of sand do you have to have in order to make a “pile” of sand? The definition defeats its purpose. This is the paradox behind asking how many coincidences there should be before it becomes truth. *Lolita* is evoked here because Humbert makes the mistake of defining nymphets by definite age—from nine to fourteen.

361.15: “melts”: Begins a series of heat and fire images as in “flicks of fire” (362.09).

361.18: series of receding Adas: Looks ahead to Lucette’s death and her message in the water.

Cf. “As she [Lucette] began losing track of herself, she thought it proper to inform a series of receding Lucettes—telling them to pass it on and on in a

trick-crystal regression—that what death amounted to was only a more complete assortment of the infinite fractions of solitude.” (494.17-21)

361.28: Ada has just been delivered of a girl-child: Refers back to Chapter 3 of Part II, how Van was born and presented to Aqua as Marina’s child. The dream is a disguised form of the real family chronicle.

361.31-32: trying to make a transatlantic call for an ambulance to be sent from Vence at once: Another precognitive dream. What will actually happen is Lucette’s desperate room-to-room call to Van on a transatlantic liner (491). “Vence” phonetically suggests Van. Also a phonetic play *ambulance/Vence*.

362.1: an essentially triple and, in a way, tribadic, idea: Another precognition—the triple play actually happens (418-20) in Part II, Chapter 8.

362.3-4: Ada held it at both ends as if it were a mouth organ and now it was an organ: Figure of speech becomes fact “and now it *was* an organ,” accompanied with the dream-specific distortion of the meaning of the word “organ.” VN is very keen on this technique, and explains Gogol’s trick of “mere forms of speech directly giving rise to live creatures” in *Nikolai Gogol* (78). Lecturing on Dickens’ *Bleak House*, he draws attention to “an ominous note” of “as if” in the allusion of fire “as if he [Krook] were on fire,” and later, when Krook dies in spontaneous combustion, concludes that “the metaphor becomes a physical fact” (*Lectures on Literature* 77, 80).

362.8-9: their tongues meeting in flicks of fire and curling back again: In the opening sentence of *Lolita*, “fire” and “tongue” (in pronouncing “L”) and the repetition of the “L” sounds also appear to evoke sexual images.

362.20-21: with all the pangs (possibly full-bladder pangs in disguise) of not getting somewhere in time: Recalls dream-like scenes of Pnin not being able to get to his lecture and V not being able to find the dying Sebastian in time.

363.13-16: the pencil I’m holding is still conveniently long though it has served me a lot, but its rubber cap is practically erased by the very action it has been performing too many times: VN is provocative in his deliberate use of the obvious Freudian

symbols like “pencil” for the male penis and makes a naughty joke of “its rubber cap” performing “the very action” too many times.

363.20: a teashop humorist: Refers to Van in the “milkbar scene,” Part I, Chapter 27, when he makes a quip to Cordula’s saying that the milkbar is “round the corner,” that “corners were never round” (167.25).

363.20-21: a little conical titbit with a comical cherry on top: Comical rhyming of conical/comical and an obvious pun *titbit*.

363.22: a pink cake: “Girls were allowed to see boys at hideous teas with pink cakes....” (166.14)

363.23: a fraise-like frill or frilled phrase: French for “strawberry” to suggest the pink color. Also, the “frilled” neck ruff worn by sixteenth-century Englishmen like Raleigh are called a “fraise,” so that the cake resembles by emphasis on “frill” and “fraise” the image of the decapitated Raleigh.

363.25-26 Walter Raleigh’s decapitated trunk still topped by the image of his wetnurse: When Sir Walter Raleigh was beheaded, his head was taken away by his wife, so only his body was buried in St. Margaret’s Church in London’s Westminster Abbey. The plaque commemorating Sir Walter Raleigh in the church looks like a cake with frills and a red cherry at the top.



(Photo by G. Wilson. <http://travellinghistorian.com/parliap10w.jpg>)

On the opposite side of the plaque is a stained-glass window commemorating Raleigh and Queen Elizabeth I side-by-side. Directly under the larger, central, image of Elizabeth in the west window there is a smaller panel depicting Raleigh kneeling before the Queen. The “wetenurse” can be explained by the inscription

under the image (composed by the American poet James Russell Lowell) which reads: The New World's sons from England's breast we drew/ Such milk as bids remember whence we came,/ Proud of her past wherefrom our future grew,/ This window we inscribe with Raleigh's fame. This can be read as another oblique and slighting reference to the Boston Lowell family one of whose members is Robert Lowell. VN criticizes him on several occasions. For instance, "The Veens speak only to Tobaks/ But Tobaks speak only to dogs" (456:17-18) is a parody of the ditty "Here's to dear old Boston,/ Home of the bean and the cod,/ Where the Lowells speak only to Cabots,/ The Cabots speak only to God." (Note also the God/dog reversal.)



[\(https://www.pinterest.jp/pin/45106433743527529/\)](https://www.pinterest.jp/pin/45106433743527529/)

The popular legend that Raleigh was a lover of Elizabeth also links her to the "wetnurse," a mother-lover figure. The mention of "decapitation" also suggests VN's interest in satirizing the Freudian context. In *Speak, Memory*, he mentions a German collector of photographs of executions (278). *An Invitation to a Beheading* is another obvious work.

363.29: a pompon, say, or a pumpkin: Explosive labial consonants like "p" or "b," fricatives like "f" and "v" and labials like "m" in this passage are made by lips. The concentration of such alliterations here points back to Van's dream of oral play on him by Ada and Lucette and look also forward to "sturb" which suggests, according

to Darkbloom's notes, the German verb "sterben," "to die." Besides the orgasm suggested, the link suggests that one can alliterate oneself to death.

363.33: last night's dream: Actually, this refers to Van's dream of Villa Venus of the previous night which makes up Part II Chapter 3. VN is telling his readers not to read Freudian interpretations into that chapter.

364.5-6: too fiendish or too indifferent parent: Refers to "too fiendish" Demon Veen and "too indifferent" Marina, who are the parents of Van and Ada.

364.7 confession feasts: This refers to his entire "lecture," which disguises Van's confession of his frustrated love and sense of guilt. VN uses Freudian symbolism to reveal Van's secrets as well as to satirize the very method by which the secrets are revealed.