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Sources and Places in Ada

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## Forum

### *Ada*, the Bog and the Garden: or, Straw, Fluff, and Peat: Sources and Places in *Ada*

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Nabokov confessed that “*Ada* caused me more trouble than all my other novels.”<sup>1</sup> At the time he was *most* troubled, in the second third of the 1960s, when plans for works tentatively entitled *Letters from* (or *to*) *Terra* and *The Texture of Time* seemed bogged down, he explained to an interviewer the process of preparing for a new novel: “at a very early stage of the novel’s development I get this urge to garner bits of straw and fluff, and eat pebbles” (SO 31). This is already a kind of inspiration, he notes; but in his essay “Inspiration” he describes the forefeeling of a novel’s approach, then a sudden flash, “a shimmer of exact details ... a tumble of merging words,” that the “experienced writer immediately takes ... down” (SO 309), and cites the first surge of *Ada*, at the end of 1965:

*Sea crashing, retreating with shuffle of pebbles, Juan and beloved young whore—is her name, as they say, Adora? is she Italian, Roumanian, Irish?—asleep on his lap, his opera cloak pulled over her ... in a corner of a decrepit, once palatial whorehouse, Villa Venus. ...* (SO 310)

Nabokov comments on the contrast between the coloration of this passage and the finished *Ada* but draws attention to the “pleasing neatness” of the fact that it “now exists as an inset scene right in the middle of the novel (which was entitled at first *Villa Venus*, then *The Veens*, then *Ardor*, and finally *Ada*)” (SO 310). He had settled on the name *Ada* by February 1966, and over the next few months was astonished at the speed of the novel’s compositional flow.

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1. *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 138; hereafter SO. References to *Ada* or *Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969) are given in the text as page numbers of the corrected Vintage edition (New York: 1990).

*Ada* has many obvious sources: personal, like Nabokov's memories of Russia, Vyra, and first love; and impersonal, like Chateaubriand, Tolstoy, Proust, and the history of the novel. I want to focus on three unlikely pieces of fluff and straw, whose appeal lay partly in their unlikeliness and whose dates belong to the years immediately before Nabokov began writing *Ada*.

### *Veen, bog, Venus*

As Paul H. Fry first noted in 1985<sup>2</sup> and Wilma Siccama and Jack van der Weide discussed again in 1995,<sup>3</sup> Nabokov discovered the Dutch meaning of *veen*, and rediscovered the Dutch surnames Veen and Van Veen, in a detective novel published in 1964 by Nicolas Freeling, *Double-Barrel*.<sup>4</sup> Freeling, who died in 2003, was "credited with elevating the crime genre by creating probing examinations of complex personalities,"<sup>5</sup> but Nabokov had little interest in crime fiction except for the purposes of parody, in *Despair*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and *Lolita*. Freeling's novel presumably came to Nabokov's attention because at one point the detective and narrator, Van der Valk, sifting through criminal records in a dreary little town in Drente, the province in the north of the Netherlands to which he has been sent from Amsterdam, notes: "The State Recherche—very very thorough indeed— had even unearthed the fact that the burgomaster, earlier in his career, had once been thought rather too fond of sitting little girls on his lap. Charming; Burgomaster Humbert N. Petit of Larousse, III." (DB 25).

The nod to *Lolita* and even to Quilty's alias in the cryptogrammic paper chase<sup>6</sup> follows a few pages after this:

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2. "Moving Van: The Neverland Veens of Nabokov's *Ada*," *Contemporary Literature* 26:2 (1985), 123–39.

3. "Een sleutel in Meppel: Nederlandse aantekeningen bij Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada*," *Maatstaf* 1995:6, 17–27.

4. London: Victor Gollancz, 1964. Citations will be from the Penguin edition (Harmondsworth: 1967), hereafter *DB*. "Rediscovered" the surname because "there was a Cornell professor van Veen whose name was painted on the letterbox of a home in Highland Road, Cayuga Heights, Ithaca, when Nabokov was living further along Highland Road in 1957" (Brian Boyd, "Annotations to *Ada* 1: Part 1 Chapter 1, *The Nabokovian* 30 [Spring 1993], 9–48: 26).

5. *Time*, August 4, 2003, 12.

6. *Lolita* (New York: Putnam, 1958, and *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 250.

The keyword in this north-eastern corner of Holland is 'Veen.' It occurs as a suffix in place-names. Over to the west are Hoogeveen and Heerenveen—larger towns these, around the twenty thousand mark. To the south, Klazinaveen, Vriezeveen—smaller, hardly more than villages. ... 'Veen' means turf: the boggy peaty moorland that was cut for fuel in the depression days, before the oil pipelines and the natural gas. (DB 17)

On first being assigned to Drente, Van der Valk remarks: "All I know about Drente is that it is up in the north-east corner of Holland. ... A poor province; the ground is not much good for agriculture. Wet, peaty sort of moorland. What in Ireland is called 'the bog'" (DB 12). Two pages after commenting on *veen* in Drente place-names, Freeling returns again to the "boggy peaty moorland" theme:

The local people, and with them a swelling tide of strangers from congested metropolitan Holland, took with enthusiasm to easy work in sunny, canteen-and-canned-music factories. Pleasant change from trying to dig a living out of wet, black, stinking ground. (DB 19)

Freeling seems less interested in the mystery story than in a sociological evocation of stifling provincialism and provincial resentment at the new influx from the cities:

None of this told me much about the people who lived there. Were they too just like the ones in metroland? Had a thousand years in the 'Veen' ground produced a local type? There were local names—I saw several 'Van Veen' and 'Van der Veen' nameplates on doors. (DB 20)

As if in reply to Freeling, *Ada* stresses the Veens, inhabitants at Ardis of the Ladore region of "lovely rich marshes" (108) and "Ladoga bogs" (288), not as a "local type" but as a unique "happy famil[y] more or less dissimilar" (3) to any other on earth or Antiterra.<sup>7</sup>

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7. The Nabokov summer estates of Vyra, Rozhdestveno, and Batovo were surrounded by bogs and by places whose names reflected that terrain, like Gryazno ("Muddy," a village just to the north of Vyra: see Nabokov's not-always-reliable map in *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* [New York: Putnam, 1967]), Chornaya Rechka ("Black Brook," after its peaty water), Gryaznaya ("Muddy," again: the sluggish short river running past the Rozhdestveno manor). See Dmitri Ryabov, *Toponimiya Verkhnego Pooredezh'ya: Slovar'-spravochnik*, St. Petersburg: Muzei-usad'ba "Rozhdestveno," 1995.

Never one not to do his homework, Nabokov appears to have followed up Freeling's hint by consulting a map of the Netherlands. Freeling sets his novel in the province of Drenthe (as my atlas spells it), and there the concentration of *veen* towns common throughout the country—from Anerveen through Veendal, Veendijk, and Veenwouden to Witteveen—reaches its highest. Although Freeling's stress is on the province as a whole, he locates the action in the real town of Zwinderen, and specifically mentions as an example of the *veen* towns the nearby Klazinaveen (Klazienaveen according to my atlas: the Dutch continually reform their spelling). Between the two, five kilometers from Klazienaveen by road, lies another village called Erica. When Nabokov saw, as he surely did, the town of Erica in Drenthe nestled among other places named *-veen*, he must have thought of Venus Erycina, the temple to Venus as the goddess of prostitutes, in the Sicilian town of Eryx, now Erice, and from that have developed Eric Veen, the boy "of Flemish extraction" (347) who dreams up a chain of palatial whorehouses, the Villa Venuses.

Eric Veen's grandfather, David van Veen, an architect, proceeds to realize his late grandson's "Organized Dream" (348) by designing and building "parodies of paradise" that include "imitating ... the great-necessity houses of Dudok in Friesland," the province to the west of Drenthe. David van Veen's nephew and heir, "Velvet Veen," "an honest but astoundingly stuffy clothier" (350)<sup>8</sup> who takes over the final realization of the project, hails from a town in Drenthe located in the middle of a triangle formed by Wapserveen, Hoogetveen, and Kolderveen, and bearing the suggestive name of Ruinen.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of decay here in "Ruinen" becomes hauntingly dominant in the Villa Venus chapter, where Van even plays pointedly on the name's

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8. Which makes him sound exactly like the background characters in *Double-Barrel*.

9. Further confirmation of how closely Nabokov consulted the area of Drenthe in a detailed map of the Netherlands can be seen in the name Valthermond, a town lying between three *-veen* towns to the north (Eexterveen, Gieterveen, and Gasselternijerveen) and three to the south (Emmer-Erfscheidenveen, Klazienaveen, and Barger-Oosterveen). To anyone who knows *Ada* the town's name suggests both Walter (Demon) Veen and Van's nom de plume in *Letters from Terra*, Voltemand. And since Voltemand is a courtier in *Hamlet*, and the most *Hamlet*-saturated chapter of *Ada* takes place while Van is at Voltemand Hall, we should note in *Ada* I.5 the doubling of *Gamlet* (a village in the boggy area near Ardis, but also the Russian transcription of "Hamlet") and *Torfyanka* (or Tourbière), whose name means "peaty": in other words, a *veen-Hamlet* conjunction from Van's first arrival at Ardis. See below, n. 34 and text.

spelling “ruin,”<sup>10</sup> and echoes the theme in Latin, in Seneca’s *subsidunt montes et juga celsa ruunt*.<sup>11</sup>

Nabokov notes that his longest novel was “entitled at first *Villa Venus*, then *The Veens*, then *Ardor*, and finally *Ada*.” Already by the time he wrote down the first rush of the novel—“Juan and beloved young whore ... in a corner of a decrepit, once palatial whorehouse, *Villa Venus*”—he seems to have picked up a number of hints from Freeling’s *Double-Barrel* and a map of its locale: *Veen* as a surname, to echo *Venus* (and probably already *Van Veen*, to suggest a Don Juan or Don Giovanni), *Erica* among Drenthe’s *-veens* as a reminder of *Venus Erycina*, *Ruinen* as an index of decay. He seems already focused, in other words, on images and myths of sexual love that he aims also to question or complicate, in the *Villa Venus* case, perhaps by a sense of excess, exhaustion, destruction, and decay.

If the “*Veen*” Nabokov found in Freeling suggested characters called *Veen* who evoke *Venus*, did the Dutch sense of *veen* as “peat, bog, marsh” that Nabokov found there also form part of his emerging sense of the story? The evidence suggests it does, and that indeed Nabokov saw as a central metaphor of the novel a garden of love that in places sinks into a bog.

Nabokov was well aware of the Western medieval tradition of the garden of love, especially from the *Roman de la Rose*, which he had studied at Cambridge, and as his play on the name of “*Ardis Park*” suggests, he also knew of the derivation of the word “paradise” from Greek *paradeisos*, “park,” “paradise,” itself derived from Persian. The most famous artistic play on the ambiguity of a garden of love that seems from one side paradisaical, from another hellish, and centrally almost irresolvably ambiguous, is of course Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. As many have felt, from even before

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10. “All the hundred floramors opened simultaneously on September 20, 1875 (and by a delicious coincidence the old Russian word for September, ‘ryuen,’ which might have spelled ‘ruin,’ also echoed the name of the ecstatic Neverlander’s hometown)” (350). Van notes that *Ruinen* is “somewhere near Zwolle, I’m told” (350): Zwolle is indeed the nearest city, and a Nabokovian hint that we really should consult a map. An additional significance may be that the family of the great art-dealer Joseph Duveen, certainly in Nabokov’s mind while composing *Ada*, hailed from Meppel, between *Ruinen* and *Zwolle*; for the Duveen theme, see Siccama and van der Weide 23–25.

11. From Lucius Annaeus Seneca’s *Omnius tempus edax depascitur, omnia carpit*; translated by Nabokov in his Vivian Darkbloom notes as “mountains subside and heights deteriorate.” See J.E. Rivers and William Walker, “Notes to Vivian Darkbloom’s *Notes to Ada*,” in J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., *Nabokov’s Fifth Arc* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 289–90.

Bobbie Ann Mason's *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada*,<sup>12</sup> Bosch's great triptych serves as a kind of parallel parody of paradise throughout *Ada*; it is explicitly introduced into the novel just at the point where a stern father-figure is about to expel Ada and Van from their recreated paradise in Manhattan; and it is mentioned in a way that stresses Bosch's Dutch origins—his unfamiliar birth name, Jeroen Anthoniszoon van Äken (438), which reflects the family's origins in Aachen—and plays on the Dutch meaning of the place-name that provided Bosch with his new name as an artist, that of his hometown, 's-Hertogenbosch (familiarily, Den Bosch), which in its full form means "the woods of the duke," or as Demon phrases it, "ducal bosquet":<sup>13</sup>

"If I could write," mused Demon, "I would describe, in too many words no doubt, how passionately, how incandescently, how incestuously—*c'est le mot*—art and science meet in an insect, in a thrush, in a thistle of that ducal bosquet. Ada is marrying an outdoor man, but her mind is a closed museum, and she, and dear Lucette, once drew my attention, by a creepy coincidence, to certain details of that other triptych, that tremendous garden of tongue-in-cheek delights, circa 1500, and, namely, to the butterflies in it—a Meadow Brown, female, in the center of the right panel, and a Tortoiseshell in the middle panel, placed there as if settled on a flower—mark the 'as if,' for here we have an example of exact knowledge on the part of those two admirable little girls, because they say that actually the *wrong* side of the bug is shown, it should have been the underside, if seen, as it is, in profile, but Bosch evidently found a wing or two in the corner cobweb of his casement and showed the prettier upper surface in depicting his incorrectly folded insect." (436–37)

Nabokov had himself identified the Meadow Brown in a letter to *Life* magazine in 1949,<sup>14</sup> and at the beginning of 1964 had replied to an approach from a publisher, asking would he have an idea for a lavishly illustrated book, that he would indeed like to compile a book on butterflies in art.<sup>15</sup> He may not have known Bosch's birth name until seeing it on the first page of Mario

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12. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1974, especially Appendix One.

13. Discussed in a Nabokv-L posting, August 25, 1998. Available at <http://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9808&L=nabokv-l&P=R4027>.

14. *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov with Matthew J. Brucoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Brucoli Clark Layman, 1989), 93–94.

15. Brian Boyd (hereafter BB), *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 481–82.

Bussagli's *Bosch* (1966),<sup>16</sup> from which he quotes at the end of this chapter of *Ada*, and he may not have thought about the Dutch sense of 's Hertogenbosch until Nicolas Freeling had introduced him to the sense of *veen* in Dutch place-names, but he had of course known Bosch's painting a long time, and the way the two naked figures of Adam and Eve in the Edenic left panel multiply into crowds of naked revelers courting and cavorting in the formal garden of the central panel, only to reach a hell on earth in the right panel.

Nabokov remarks that his first foreglimpse of *Ada* "differs in coloration and lighting" (SO 310) from much of the finished novel, where Van invites us to join his long celebration of his love for Ada. As I observe elsewhere, years later "Van still rejoices in the happiness of his and Ada's special destiny at Ardis: they had seemed charmed there, privileged to reenact not only myths of Edenic or Arcadian innocence but also—and only increasing the paradisaical joy—myths of sexual experience, of Venus, Cupid, or Eros."<sup>17</sup> It is as if, in evoking Ardis, Van pretends to paint only two panels of Bosch's triptych, the left-hand panel, pure paradise, and the central panel as an exuberant comic expansion of the first, although in fact, as we discover, he knows better: he knows and remembers the hellish implied *in* Ardis (the central panel as ominous) and following on *from* Ardis (the hell realized in the right panel). As the dark hues and shades of his initial vision of the novel indicate, Nabokov himself saw from the first the hell that complicates the heaven of love, the bog encircling the garden.

But just how does Bosch's ironic image of the Garden of Earthly Delights relate to the decrepit Villa Venus in Nabokov's first flash of *Ada*, and how does *Ada*'s garden of love subside into a bog?

Again, Freeling's novel may have lightly suggested the main ways *Ada* complicates and questions myths of love. As Siccama and van der Weide note, Freeling's Van der Valk observes that in Drente "The locals had ludicrous names. Ook and Goop and Unk. Surnames as bad, and clans of course—generations of intermarriage no doubt" (DB 20-21). Despite the veneer of Dutch Reformed Church respectability and restraint, Van der Valk finds in the police files "a lot of immorality—a bit too much. I had the file on the past year's police court cases behind-locked-doors. Incest, mm; never quite unknown in these ingrown inter-married districts" (DB 23). These brief early

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16. Florence: Sadea, 1966. p. 3; trans. Claire Pace (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967). Source first identified by Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 147.

17. BB, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (1985; 2nd ed., Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001), 153.



allusions (there are no more) to incest and intermarriage in a region of *veens* appear to have triggered Nabokov's imagination to parody myths of Venus and Eros through an incestuous family of Veens, whom he situates at Ardis (from Greek "point of an arrow" [225], and reminiscent of the arrows fired by Venus's son Cupid) in the marshy Ladore region.<sup>18</sup> But it is not incest *per se* that complicates Van and Ada Veen's revisions of Venus.

Freeling's detective finds "a lot of immorality—a bit too much" in the police files of Drente because the neighbors eavesdrop and spy on one another inordinately. Van der Valk's French wife fulminates against the local "Housewives' snooping—incredible. If I lived here I'd turn into a window-peeper too" (DB 83). Van der Valk has been sent to Drente to discover a blackmailer, and in the course of his enquiries he interviews the director of a small electronics enterprise: "Your firm produces sensitive listening gadgets for various purposes. There's a lot of mention in the police reports of one that might have been useful in a blackmailer's hands" (DB 57). Van der Valk sets his wife to spying on the neighborhood, to testing the local networks of gossip, and later discovers that she herself in an amorous mood has been spied on by the blackmailer, whom he in turn spies on in a compromising situation—only to be caught himself in this act of tom-peeping.

The theme of multiple eavesdropping and spying (and as a minor variation, blackmail) also pervades *Ada*. In part it is a parody of eavesdropping as an immemorial device of narrative in general and of the novel in particular, as an aspect of *Ada's* general parody of the history of the novel.<sup>19</sup> But the spying on Van and Ada at their ardors in arbors at Ardis on the Veen estate in a region of "lovely rich marshes" seems likely to have been triggered in part by Freeling's *Double-Barrel* and its eavesdropping, tom-peeping, and blackmail.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Siccama and van der Weide 25 note the theme of multiple intermarriage also present in the Duveen clan.

19. In various places outside *Ada*, Nabokov discusses eavesdropping in other writers, including: in Lermontov (translator's Foreword, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov with Dmitri Nabokov [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958], x–xii); in Proust (*Pale Fire* [New York: Putnam, 1962], 87, and *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980], 230); and in Pasternak (interview with Penelope Gilliat, *Vogue*, December 1966, 279).

20. It is also a brief minor theme in Nabokov's autobiography, where he reports that a tutor spied on his dalliances with "Tamara" (Valentina Shulgina), and a gardener reported to his mother on the snooping. Nabokov added more details on this matter in each version of the autobiography, the last between November 1965 and January 1966, as he made final revisions to

Nabokov turns it, though, to a very different use. He establishes Van and Ada Veen as “children of Venus” (410), but their idyll at Ardis, which Van would like to present as “dream-bright ... pure joyousness and Arcadian innocence” (588), is complicated by two persistent eavesdroppers or spies: Blanche and Lucette (as well as the blackmailer Kim Beauharnais). At first, the complications seem merely comic; both Blanche and Lucette introduce one or more tragic or hellish notes, and each time, Nabokov signals that the garden of love, the paradise of love, can also be a moral quagmire.

Blanche and Lucette are paired as spies on Van and Ada almost as soon as these young “cousins” have something to hide, as their feelings for each other catch fire even before their “first free and frantic caresses” (97). Both Van and Ada keep diaries, and at one point just after the Shattal Tree incident, both rush back separately

to the house to hide their diaries which both thought they had left lying open in their respective rooms. Ada, who feared the curiosity of Lucette and Blanche (the governess presented no threat, being pathologically unobservant), found out she was wrong—she had put away the album with its latest entry. Van, who knew that Ada was a little “snoopy,” discovered Blanche in his room feigning to make the made bed, with the unlocked diary lying on the stool beside it. He slapped her lightly on the behind and removed the shagreen-bound book to a safer place. (96)

The “*shagreen-bound book*” puns on *chagrin* (Van imagines Blanche goes off somewhere to weep in her bower) and on *green with envy*, a color associated insistently with Lucette both because she wears green to tone with her red coloring, and because she herself is often green with envy as she watches Van and Ada (who for instance “frantically made love, while the child knocked and called and kicked until the key fell out and the keyhole turned an angry green” [213]). And just as Blanche here feigns to be making the bed she has already made, although she has in fact learnt from the diary all she needs to know of Van’s feelings for Ada and his first intimate contact with her, so Lucette, after being tied up by Van and Ada when they rush off to make love for the first time in her proximity, unties herself, spies on them, rushes back and has almost retied herself when they return, although to them “Writhing Lucette had somehow torn off one of the red knobbed grips of the rope and seemed to have almost disentangled herself when dragon and knight, prancing, returned” (143).

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*Speak, Memory*, at the time *Ada* was beginning to take shape in his mind: see BB, Vladimir Nabokov: *The American Years*, 506.

### Blanche

Awed by what she has read of Van's feelings for Ada in the diary, and soon an eager witness of their activities, Blanche circulates exalted reports of their love. Ada in 1892 declares she had never realized

that their first summer in the orchards and orchidariums of Ardis had become a sacred secret and creed, throughout the countryside. Romantically inclined handmaids, whose reading consisted of *Gwen de Vere* and *Klara Mertvago*, adored Van, adored Ada, adored Ardis's ardors in arbors. Their swains, plucking ballads on their seven-stringed Russian lyres under the racemosa in bloom or in old rose gardens (while the windows went out one by one in the castle), added freshly composed lines—naïve, lackey-daisical, but heartfelt—to cyclic folk songs. Eccentric police officers grew enamored with the glamour of incest. Gardeners paraphrased iridescent Persian poems about irrigation and the Four Arrows of Love. Nightwatchmen fought insomnia and the fire of the clap with the weapons of *Vaniada's Adventures*. ... Virgin châtelaines in marble-floored manors fondled their lone flames fanned by Van's romance. (409)

It is no accident that the series of those affected by the "sacred secret and creed" begins with "romantically inclined handmaids," for handmaid Blanche is reading *Les Amours du Docteur Mertvago* when Van first arrives at Ardis; or that the list continues with "swains" and "nightwatchmen," for Blanche observes Van and Ada on her way to her own trysts with swains who include the nightwatchman, Sore, to whom she passes on her own clap, as she also passes on romantic secrets to others, to her sister the handmaid Madelon (another romantically inclined handmaid who passes the "secret" of Van and Ada on to Percy de Prey), and to Van himself (the secret of Ada's love affairs with Rack and de Prey); or that the series ends with "virgin châtelaines," in mocking echo of Blanche's presenting herself to Van on his last night at Ardis as a kind of châtelaine ("*C'est ma dernière nuit au château ... 'Tis my last night with thee,*" 292), only for her non-virginity to be stressed once again ("quite aside from the fear of infection (Bout had hinted at some of the poor girl's troubles)," 293).

Blanche is central to the myths of Van and Ada's love at Ardis that saturate the Ladore countryside and *Ada* itself. But she also qualifies the myths she propagates. Sexually active with multiple partners on the Ardis staff—the butler, Bouteillan; his bastard son, the footman Bout; the nightwatchman Sore; and the coachman Fartukov—she represents the idea of sexual multiplicity so dominant in the central panel of Bosch's triptych and in the gardens of Ardis.

There are several ways in which Blanche's multiple sexual experience comments on Van and Ada's. First: she sees *their* love-making on the way to her own trysts, and then by gossiping about their ardor, helps build the "sacred secret and creed" that exalts Ardis into a romantic and sexual paradise. Second: in 1888 she also witnesses or learns from other servants and witnesses of Ada's affairs with Philip Rack and Percy de Prey, and when she passes the news on to Van, in effect expels him forever from an Ardis which he suddenly sees as hellish. Third: her protestations of sexual innocence are ironically undercut by her experience, indeed by her venereal disease, just as Trofim Fartukov's protestations that he would not touch her even through a leathern apron are undercut by his marrying her, and as Ardis's myths of Venus are cruelly undercut by the consequences Blanche's venereal disease has on their child, born blind as if in mocking replay of Venus's blind child, Cupid. Fourth: Blanche's combination of pretended sexual innocence and actual sexual damage, even as she offers herself to Van, contrasts so pointedly with Lucette, who is *actually* a virgin in the sense of never having made love to a man, but who has sustained sexual damage through her entanglement in the romps of Van and Ada, and who after she offers herself one last desperate time to Van, and like Blanche is rebuffed, takes her own life.

As I have written elsewhere: "The Veens' surname not only hints at Venus but also, less glamorously, means 'peat' in Dutch; Blanche, curiously, is 'Blanche de la Tourberie' (407) after her native village, Tourbière, the French for 'peaty.' Since she romanticizes Van and Ada's fervor, since her own love-making so often serves as a comic counterpoint to theirs, Blanche seems to have been positioned for some ironic comment on the myths of Ardis. ... A negative Venus, lover of an inverse Eros, mother of a 'hopelessly blind' Cupid, Blanche undermines completely the myths of love she has tried to disseminate."<sup>21</sup>

From her first appearance in the novel, Blanche acts as ironic variation on the sexual paradise of Ardis, and the "peat" theme that mocks the vengery of the Veens also sounds at once. On his first morning at Ardis, Van wakes early and wants to wander out to the garden, and finds, "standing at a tall window, a young chambermaid whom he had glimpsed (and promised himself to investigate) on the preceding evening" (48). With a "savage sense of opportune license," he clasps the wrist of her raised arm. She disengages, and he asks her name:

Blanche—but Mlle Larivière called her "Cendrillon" because her stockings got so easily laddered, see, and because she broke and mislaid things,

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21. *Nabokov's Ada*, 153, 155.

and confused flowers. His loose attire revealed his desire; this could not escape a girl's notice, even if color-blind, and as he drew up still closer, while looking over her head for a suitable couch to take shape in some part of this magical manor—where *any* place, as in Casanova's remembrances could be dream-changed into a sequestered seraglio nook—she wiggled out of his reach completely and delivered a little soliloquy in her soft Ladoran French:

*“Monsieur a quinze ans, je crois, et moi, je sais, j’en ai dix-neuf. Monsieur is a nobleman; I am a poor peat-digger’s daughter. Monsieur a tâté, sans doute, des filles de la ville; quant à moi, je suis vierge, ou peu s’en faut. De plus, were I to fall in love with you—I mean really in love—and I might, alas, if you possessed me rien qu’une petite fois—it would be, for me, only grief, and infernal fire, and despair, and even death, Monsieur. Finalement, I might add that I have the whites and must see le Docteur Chronique, I mean Crolique, on my next day off. Now we have to separate, the sparrow has disappeared, I see, and Monsieur Bouteillan has entered the next room, and can perceive us clearly in that mirror above the sofa behind that silk screen.”* (49)

Notice the “Casanova” that introduces another archetype of sexual license, and the irony of Blanche’s claiming to be almost a virgin in almost the same breath as she refers to an appointment with her gynecologist because she suspects the whites—which will turn out to be gonorrhea rather than leucorrhea. And notice that in her first direct speech Blanche identifies herself as “a poor peat-digger’s daughter.” Indeed, she will be called Blanche de la Tourberie, a surname which if translated into Dutch would become “van Veen.”

On Van’s last morning at Ardis the First, Bouteillan gives him advice:

*“Monsieur should be prudent. The winds of the wilderness are indiscreet. Tel un lis sauvage confiant au désert—”*

“Quite the old comedy retainer, aren’t you?” remarked Van drily.

*“Non, Monsieur,”* answered Bouteillan, holding on to his cap. *“Non. Tout simplement j’aime bien Monsieur et sa demoiselle.”*

“If,” said Van, “you’re thinking of little Blanche, then you’d better quote Delille not to me, but to your son, who’ll knock her up any day now.”

The old Frenchman glanced at Van askance, *pozheval gubami* (chewed his lips), but said nothing. (157)

Bouteillan presumably issues his warning because he has heard about Van and Ada’s ardor and activities from Blanche. Van attempts to deflect Bouteillan’s comments about himself and Ada by questioning Blanche’s fidelity to Bouteil-

lan, and he succeeds: the comment shuts Bouteillan up, and we can deduce, from the later evidence of Kim's blackmail album, that Blanche's relationship with Bout has indeed already begun. Van in this final chapter of *Ardis the First* is obsessed by the thought that Ada could be unfaithful to him in his absence, and although *she* has yet to be unfaithful, *Blanche's* infidelity anticipates what will happen in Ada's case by the time Van returns to Ardis.

On arriving at Ardis the Second, unexpectedly, Van witnesses Ada's hand being held and kissed twice by Percy de Prey. Stung with jealousy, he tears apart the diamond necklace he has brought for Ada, but she allays his suspicions, and they make love throughout a "strenuous 'Casanovanic' night" (198) only to be interrupted while "still fiercely engaged" by Blanche "back from a rendezvous with old Sore the Burgundian night watchman" (191). Again, the fact that Blanche once more has a new partner serves as an omen of Ada's own infidelities, whatever Ada may for the moment convince Van to believe.

During a Flavita (Russian Scrabble) game where Van takes notes "in the hope—not quite unfulfilled—of 'catching sight of the lining of time' (which, as he was later to write, is 'the best informal definition of portents and prophecies')" (227), Ada scores 383 points with a single word, TORFYaNUYu. Lucette objects:

"It's a place name! One can't use it! It's the name of the first little station after Ladore Bridge!"

"That's right, pet," sang out Ada. "Oh, pet, you are so right! Yes, Torfyanaya, or as Blanche says, *La Tourbière*, is, indeed, the pretty but rather damp village where our *cendrillon's* family lives. But, *mon petit*, in our mother's tongue—*que dis-je*, in the tongue of a maternal grandmother we all share—a rich beautiful tongue which my pet should not neglect for the sake of a Canadian brand of French—this quite ordinary adjective means 'peaty,' feminine gender, accusative case." (228)

The portent will become clear later, when on what will be his last morning at Ardis Van discovers it is Blanche who has slipped him a note warning him that he is being deceived by Ada. Visiting him as the night wanes, "in a wretched simulacrum of seduction," Blanche tells Van she loves him, "he was her 'folly and fever,' she wished to spend a few secret moments with him" (292). This time he is too preoccupied with the warning note to be stirred, "quite aside from the fear of infection" (293). Questioned, Blanche tells him of Ada's affair with Philip Rack. He stumbles out into the dawn, packs his bags, and confronts Ada, who, unaware that he has been referring to Rack, admits to her affair not with Rack but with Percy de Prey.

Van leaves Ardis, driven by the Russian coachman Trofim Fartukov, and drops off Blanche on the way (she has slipped him the note about Ada only because she has herself decided to leave Ardis Hall). Offering him further vivid details about Ada's relations with Percy, she

rambled on and on until they reached Tourbière. ... Van let her out. ... He kissed Cendrillon's shy hand and resumed his seat in the carriage, clearing his throat and plucking at his trousers before crossing his legs. Vain Van Veen.

"The express does not stop at Torfyanka, does it, Trofim?"

"I'll take you five versts across the bog," said Trofim, "the nearest is Volosyanka."

His vulgar Russian word for Maidenhair; a whistle stop; train probably crowded.

Maidenhair. Idiot! Percy boy might have been buried by now! Maidenhair. Thus named because of the huge spreading Chinese tree at the end of the platform. Once, vaguely, confused with the Venus'-hair fern. ... Who wants Ardis Hall!

"*Barin, a barin,*" said Trofim, turning his blond-bearded face to his passenger.

"*Da?*"

"*Dazhe skvoz' kozhaniy fartuk ne stal-bi ya trogat' etu frantsuzskuyu devku.*"

*Bárin*: master. *Dázhe skvoz' kózhanïy fártuk*: even through a leathern apron. *Ne stal-bi ya trógat'*: I would not think of touching. *étu*: this (that). *Frantsúzskuyu*: French (adj., accus.). *Dévku*: wench. *Úzhas, otcháyanie*: horror, despair. *Zhálost'*: pity. *Kóncheno, zagázheno, rastérzano*: finished, fouled, torn to shreds. (299–300)

Notice here the counterpointing of Blanche with Van's departure from Ardis and Ada; the stress on Blanche as hailing from "Tourbière ... Torfyanka ... the bog"; the phrase "Vain Van Veen," which also plays on the Dutch pronunciation of *veen*, close to our "vain"; the irony that at the very moment Van is filled with outrage at Ada's multiple infidelities he can himself be stirred with desire for Blanche; the sounding of the virginity and Venus/venereal themes, by way of the place-name Volosyanka, and thence "Maidenhair. ... Once, vaguely, confused with the Venus'-hair fern"; and at the very moment Van rejects Ardis one last time ("Who wants Ardis Hall!"), Trofim's declaration that he would not touch Blanche "even through a leathern apron." In fact, Trofim will even marry her, and they will have a damaged child; just as Van will return

to Ada, and as a result another child, Lucette, will have her light put out.<sup>22</sup>

Notice too that the unrecognized prophecy in the Scrabble game (“TOR-FYaNUYu ... Yes, Torfyanaya, or as Blanche says, *La Tourbière*, is, indeed, the pretty but rather damp village where our *cendrillon*’s family lives. But, *mon petit*, ... French—this quite ordinary adjective means ‘peaty,’ feminine gender, accusative case”)—a prophecy of the disclosure that will end Ardis the Second—returns in the reference now to Blanche’s “Tourbière. ... Cendrillon’s shy hand. ... Torfyanka ... *Frantsúzkuyu*: French (adj., accus.).”<sup>23</sup> Blanche de la Tourberie’s multiple partners, and her desire to have Van too as a partner, lead her to pass him that note that alerts him to Ada Veen’s multiple partners, and so turn Ardis the Second for Van from a paradise regained into a hell of infidelity and jealousy.

### *Lucette*

If Blanche’s active sexual experience presents one ironic comment on the idylls of Ardis and the myths of love that she does so much to disseminate, Lucette’s innocence presents another: at first, apparently comic as Van and Ada try to evade her curious eyes, but ultimately tragic as she becomes embroiled in their amours. Blanche offers herself to Van, who is repulsed at the thought of her venereal disease. Lucette offers herself to Van, who knows how damaged she is, not from having *too many* lovers, but from having had none. A witness to Van’s amours with Ada since she was eight, an eavesdropper, a spy, Lucette wants only him.

Nabokov signals the Lucette-Blanche parallel and contrast in many ways, through the Cinderella and the deflower motifs, and especially, as I show elsewhere, through the ironic combination, in very different ways, of claims of virginity and signs of sexual damage.<sup>24</sup> Here I want to focus on another motif that links them, and that suggests how central to Nabokov’s conception of *Ada* was the idea of complicating our response to the venereal Veens: the motif of *peat, bog, marsh* in the name of Blanche’s village and especially in the Dutch name of the Veens.

### *Marsh Marigold*

Ada may collect “bog orchids,” but the center of the *bog-peat-marsh* theme in the Veen name is Lucette, identified with the “marsh marigold” that Wallace

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22. For this connection, see Nabokov’s *Ada*, 155.

23. For this connection, see Nabokov’s *Ada*, 221.

24. See Nabokov’s *Ada*, 152–55, and BB, “Annotations to *Ada*, 7: Part 1 Chapter 7,” *The Nabokovian* 37 (Fall 1996), 63–64.



Fowlie carelessly omitted from his 1946 translation of Arthur Rimbaud's "Mémoire." Fowlie, not realizing at the time that the phrase *souci d'eau* meant "marsh marigold," translated it word for word as "care of the water"—as Lucette, indeed, becomes the "care of the water" when she jumps to her death in the Atlantic.<sup>25</sup>

Nabokov collected this particular piece of straw in 1960 or soon after, when Bollingen Press, which was preparing his translation of *Eugene Onegin* for publication, sent him their reprint edition of Huntington Cairns's anthology *The Limits of Art: Poetry and Prose Chosen by Ancient and Modern Critics*.<sup>26</sup> His copy preserves his outraged marginalia to Fowlie's translation of Rimbaud's poem on pages 1346–48, including beside an underlined "care of the water": "!! yellow flower le souci d'eau *C. palustris*!"<sup>27</sup>

Nabokov must have seen Fowlie's version of Rimbaud before reading Freeling's *Double-Barrel*, and may well have followed Freeling's hint that the Dutch *veen* means "peat, bog, marsh," precisely because he remembered this "marsh marigold." As he admits, he prefers "obscure facts"—*veen* as Dutch "marsh," *souci d'eau* as French "marsh marigold"—"to clear symbols" (SO 7). And as someone who has a character define genius as "seeing ... the invisible links between things,"<sup>28</sup> Nabokov appears to have anticipated that *this* link would somehow be fruitful, to have consulted an atlas, discovered Erica among the *-veen* place-names of Drenthe, and, recalling Venus Erycina, developed the idea for an ironic treatment of the myths of love that we find already foreshadowed in the passage he wrote down in a flash at the end of 1965.

I have discussed elsewhere the ironies of "deflowering"—Lucette's too-early sexual initiation by Van and Ada, but her dying a virgin because she wants no one but Van—that Nabokov builds around the fact that Fowlie unwittingly "deflowers" Rimbaud's *Mémoire* by substituting for *souci d'eau* "the care of the water," a phrase that itself foreshadows Lucette's death.<sup>29</sup> As first-time readers we view Lucette as a minor comic complication of Van and Ada's love, a farcical but easily removed hindrance to their ardor, but we discover as we read on, and as we reread, how tragic her entanglement in their love has become. As in the case of Blanche, the other recurrent witness of the Veens'

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25. *Ada* 63–65; see Nabokov's *Ada*, 51–57, 291–97; BB, "Annotations to *Ada*, 10: Part 1 Chapter 10," *The Nabokovian* 39 (Fall 1997), 43–63.

26. Originally published 1948; New York: Pantheon, 1960, Bollingen Series XII.

27. "Annotations to *Ada*, 10," 50.

28. *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974) 40.

29. Nabokov's *Ada*, 51–57, 150–51, 154–55, 215–16, 294–95; "Annotations to *Ada*, 10," 57–60.

passions, Lucette shifts from comical witness to tragic victim of unrestrained ardor, and in her case also from the periphery to the center of the novel, precisely because her fate so complicates Van and Ada's presentation of their love as triumphant. If Nabokov saw these possibilities very soon after reading Freeling's novel, with its Veens and peatbogs, its whiff of incest, and its air of eavesdropping, if he saw from very early on the chance for an ironic exploration of myths of love—as seems the case from the decrepit Villa Venus in his first sketch for *Ada*—how nevertheless could he weave the peatbog pattern through Lucette, when she has the same surname as Ada?

### *Images of Imitation*

That indeed was a challenge, but Nabokov already had another piece of straw at hand for his nest. He encountered Fowlie's mistranslation of Rimbaud's *souci d'eau* at the beginning of the 1960s. He read Freeling's *Double-Barrel* some time in 1964 or 1965. In between, he noticed a *New Yorker* advertisement for Barton and Guestier wines, in which two models in modern dress imitate the poses of two spectators in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's famous poster for the *Divan Japonais* cabaret, 75 rue des Martyrs, reproduced on the wall behind them, over the slogan "the wines you loved in Paris!" The advertisement appeared in the inside front cover of *The New Yorker* on March 23, 1963, an issue in which an excerpt from *The Gift* depicting Yasha Chernyshevsky's suicide was also published, and it ran for several years.<sup>30</sup>

The advertisement of course becomes the basis for Van's meeting with and description of Lucette in Paris on May 31, 1901 (III.3), at which she hears of his plan to cross the Atlantic on the *Tobakoff* in four days' time and determines to make one final effort to seduce him.

The advertisement was suggestive for Nabokov in many ways. It raises the question of the relationship between art and life, a central one throughout his thought and work, and especially in *Ada*, where the relationship between the world of the book, Antiterra, and the world of the reader, Terra or Earth, confronts us on page after page, and where the relationship between pictures (paintings, drawings, films, photographs) and events unsettles us again and again. The quiet but unmistakable contrast in period between the dress of the figures in the poster and the mimics in the photograph sounds the note of anachronism, which plays so insistently throughout *Ada*. The relationship between model and mimic also connects with the question of natural mimicry,

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30. For discussion, and a black-and-white reproduction, see my *Nabokov's Ada* 129–31; the cover reproduces in color the photograph of models and poster.

a key point of contact between Nabokov's science and his art and a subject whose artistic treatment would reach its apotheosis in his work in *Ada* I.16 (Ada painting imitations of mimetic orchids: more of this in a moment). Above all, the advertisement as a whole suggests the idea of imitation and doubling so important in *Ada*, from the imitation or doubling of planets (Antiterra and Terra, Venus and Earth) to the imitation or doubling of sisters or cousins (Aqua and Marina, Ada and Lucette, Walter D. Veen and Walter D. Veen) or eras or events (Ardis the First and Ardis the Second, the picnics on Ada's twelfth and sixteenth birthdays), most importantly of all in Lucette's imitative relationship to her sister, especially in her fatal love for Van.

There is no reason to suppose Nabokov saw all these possibilities as soon as he saw the advertisement. Indeed, he kept working on other things, but sometime in 1964 or more probably 1965, read Freeling's *Double-Barrel*, where *veen* as a surname and the Dutch for "peat, bog, marsh" meshed with the "marsh marigold" of Fowlie's translation, and with Venus and Venus Erycina. Now he could add the Barton and Guestier advertisement to his first ideas for a family of Veens as positive and negative embodiments of Venus, to Freeling's hints of incest and eavesdropping and Fowlie's inadvertent cue for a suicide by drowning ("the care of the water"). The advertisement's emphasis on imitation and doubling may have suggested a Veen who imitates her sister ("I knew it was hopeless," [Lucette] said, looking away. "I did my best. I imitated all her *shtuchki* (little stunts)" [386]), who becomes embroiled in her sister's love for their brother, whose image entangles with her sister's in her brother's mind and life. And the idea of a Veen who imitates a second Veen who makes love to a third Veen in an Ardis that imitates Eden but who ultimately commits suicide because of her entanglement evokes once again Bosch's triptych, with its Edenic image of Adam and Eve alone to the left, its frenzy of repetitive sensuality and sexuality in the center, its hellish consequences to the right.

Doubling and imitation pervade *Ada*. The most extraordinary example of mimicry in Nabokov, and perhaps the most extraordinary crossing of the boundary of art and science, art and nature, art and life, occurs when Ada, as she paints aquarelles on July afternoons in 1884, inventively imitates natural orchids that themselves imitate the females of insects whose males then copulate with the orchids. Nabokov here pointedly plays with the Venus theme, and the *veen*-bog theme, and the idea of an endless repetition or imitation of sexuality in Ardis and in the Villa Venuses and in the central panel of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, for he has Ada introduce odd changes and twists into her aquarelle of a mirror-of-Venus blossom (the genuine but extraordinary Mirror of Venus or simply Mirror Orchid, *Ophrys speculum*), which Ada herself "seemed in her turn to mimic" (99), while Van, leaning over

her, then rushes away with his mental image of her to masturbate over in a form of pseudo-copulation of his own, imitating the male wasps that copulate with the mirrory sheen of the orchid lip that mimics the metallic look of the female wasps; or when he has Ada paint a blend of *Ophrys scolopax* (=speculum under another name) and the invented *Ophrys veenae* (which one would expect to be a bog orchid, if the Dutch sense of *veen* supplied the grounds for the name).<sup>31</sup>

Four years later Lucette, trying to imitate her sister, shows how far she falls short of Ada's naturalistic and artistic brilliance as she tries merely to trace an orchid from one of the local bogs:

In the meantime obstinate Lucette kept insisting that the easiest way to draw a flower was to place a sheet of transparent paper over the picture (in the present case a red-bearded pogonia, with indecent details of structure, a plant peculiar to the Ladoga bogs) and trace the outline of the thing in colored inks. Patient Ada wanted her to copy not mechanically but "from eye to hand and from hand to eye," and to use for model a live specimen of another orchid that had a brown wrinkled pouch and purple sepals; but after a while she gave in cheerfully and set aside the crystal vaselet holding the Lady's Slipper she had picked. Casually, lightly, she went on to explain how the organs of orchids work—but all Lucette wanted to know, after her whimsical fashion, was: could a boy bee impregnate a girl flower *through* something, through his gaiters or woolies or whatever he wore? (288–89)

As if Ada imitating Mirror of Venus and Veen orchids, and Van imitating the insects that copulate with them, and Lucette in 1888 imitating Ada in 1884 were not enough, the discussion segues into Lucette's innocent but troubled reaction to her sitting atop Van on the way back from the picnic on Ada's 1888 birthday, itself the most remarkable imitation of the past, of Ada on Van's lap on the way back from the birthday picnic in 1884, in a novel saturated with such repetitions. Notice that the plant Lucette traces is an orchid peculiar to the Ladoga bogs and, as "a red-bearded pogonia, with indecent details of structure," calls to mind Lucette's red pubic hair, glimpsed and fondled by Van five years later in the disturbing *débauche à trois* scene.

(Notice, too, that the plant Ada wants Lucette to copy, a Lady's Slipper that is all she has collected while out ostensibly "botanizing" but in fact seeing

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31. See BB, "Annotations to *Ada*, 16: Part 1 Chapter 16," *Nabokovian* 45 (Fall 2000), 54–76, and Liana Marie Arangi Ashenden, "Mimicry, Mimesis and Desire in Nabokov's *Ada*," unpub. MA thesis, University of Auckland, 2000.

Percy de Prey for the last time, is an orchid of the *Cypripedium* genus, probably the type species, *Cypripedium calceolus*, a bog orchid, and that *Cypripedium* derives from Greek *Cypros* for the island sacred to Venus, and means “Venus’s slipper.”<sup>32</sup> As Liana Ashenden comments, “The veins, ripples, shape and color of the labellum of Ada’s wilted specimen imitate the male scrotum in an outrageous parody of sexual symbolism as Van describes the orchid’s ‘brown wrinkled pouch and purple sepals’ (289), when thinking about Percy de Prey.”<sup>33</sup> The garden of Venus becomes a bog because of sexual jealousy, as well as because of the other damage it causes.)

Lucette at Paris steps into a picture, suddenly, as she seems to reenact a Toulouse-Lautrec poster and a Barton and Guestier photograph. On board the *Tobakoff* five days later, she has all but seduced Van when Ada herself steps into the picture, into *Don Juan’s Last Fling*. As soon as she recognizes Ada on screen, Lucette, so near success, tries to tear Van away from the ship’s cinema and the image of Ada:

“Let’s go, please, let’s go. You must not see her *debasing* herself. She’s terribly made up, every gesture is childish and wrong—”

“Just another minute,” said Van.

Terrible? Wrong? She was absolutely perfect, and strange, and poignantly familiar. By some stroke of art, by some enchantment of chance, the few brief scenes she was given formed a perfect compendium of her 1884 and 1888 and 1892 looks.

The *gitanilla* bends her head over the live table of Leporello’s servile back to trace on a scrap of parchment a rough map of the way to the castle. Her neck shows white through her long black hair separated by the motion of her shoulder. It is no longer another man’s Dolores, but a little girl twisting an aquarelle brush in the paint of Van’s blood, and Donna Anna’s castle is now a *bog* flower. (489: last italics added)

Reminded so vividly and poignantly of Ada, Van realizes he cannot allow himself to make love even once to Lucette, and as a precautionary measure, rushes off to masturbate, for the first time in seventeen years—since, in fact, the time that he last masturbated over the image of Ada painting her blend of the mirror-of-Venus and *Ophrys veenae* orchids: “And how sad, how significant that the picture projected upon the screen of his paroxysm, while the unlockable door swung open again with the movement of a deaf man cupping his ear,

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32. Nabokov twice associates Eric Veen’s Villa Venuses with *Cypros*: “Cyprian party” (399); “Cyprian dreams” (419).

33. Ashenden 89.

was not the recent and pertinent image of Lucette, but the indelible vision of a bent bare neck and a divided flow of black hair and a purple-tipped paint brush" (490).

The orchid and bog theme, then, indicates Lucette's doomed attempts to imitate or match or replace her sister, and the fact that despite her being locked into the pattern of Ada and Van's avid sexuality, she will die a virgin. The only way she will be deflowered is like the unhappy marsh marigold in Fowle's translation, by being eliminated, by being turned into nothing more than the care of the water.

The theme of imitation, doubling, and repetition so striking in the advertisement that echoes Toulouse-Lautrec, in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, in Van and Ada Veen's ardors at Ardis, and in Lucette's involvement in their fate, is signaled from Van's first approach to Ardis. It seems in one light that Ardis will be a Garden of Eden, a paradise of sexuality, and in Ardis the Second a paradise regained, but as Van drives for the first time from the train station to the manor of the Veens, he passes through "Torfyanka, a dreamy hamlet," then "Gamlet, a half-Russian village" (35). In both, the driver waves to someone; "Hamlet" (the prince or the play) is in Russian *Gamlet*, and Torfyanka, we discover later, is half-Russian, half-French (it is also called Tourbière), so that the two villages seem to overlap in time as much as they succeed one another in space.<sup>34</sup> The odd repetition prefigures the doubling of the 1884 and 1888 picnic rides, and Lucette's involvement in the pattern of Van and Ada's repetition, since on both picnic rides they pass through Gamlet,<sup>35</sup> but the prominence of Torfyanka here, which we do not pass through again until Van leaves Blanche there after she has told him about Ada's infidelities at the end of Ardis the Second, serves as a first "portent and prophecy" of the end of Ardis and shows how carefully Nabokov already integrates the "peat-bog-marsh" sense of *veen* as qualifications of the themes and myths of love even as he drives his hero for the first time to the Veen manor.

### Paris

But if the imitation and repetition pattern that Nabokov chose to amplify from the Barton and Guestier advertisement affects the *veen* he discovered in Freeling, *veen* as "bog" also affects the treatment of Paris in the scene that imitates the advertisement that imitates Toulouse-Lautrec.

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34. See above, n. 9.

35. See BB, "Annotations to *Ada*, 5: Part 1 Chapter 5" (*Nabokovian* 35, Fall 1995), 56–57.

After Van describes in minute detail the scene of Lucette standing at the bar, as if in imitation of the Barton and Guestier advertisement, speech is turned on.

“I’m so happy and sad,” she murmured in Russian. “*Moyo grustnoe schastie!* How long will you be in old Lute?”

Van answered he was leaving next day for England, and then on June 3 (this was May 31) would be taking the *Admiral Tobakoff* back to the States. She would sail with him, she cried, it was a marvelous idea, she didn’t mind whither to drift, really, West, East, Toulouse, Los Teques. He pointed out that it was far too late to obtain a cabin (on that not very grand ship so much shorter than *Queen Guinevere*), and changed the subject. (461)

Notice Lucette’s question: “How long will you be in old Lute?” She means Paris, but on Antiterra characters sometimes refer to Paris as Lute. Why? From behind his Vivian Darkbloom mask, Nabokov explained the name “Lute” as “from ‘Lutèce,’ ancient name of Paris.” Rivers and Walker, in their glosses on Darkbloom, do not gloss this note.

Why does Nabokov intermittently (six times out of twenty) rename Paris “Lute”? On Antiterra New York is *always* slightly defocalized as Manhattan, but that reflects the fact that for most people outside the city, right here on Terra, Manhattan *is* easily the city’s most famous borough. But no one now thinks of Paris in terms of Lutèce. Why then does Nabokov?

There are two closely related answers. One is that the French name *Lutèce* derives from Latin *Lutetia*, which in turn derives from Latin *lutum*, “mud,” because in Roman times Paris was “a collection of mud hovels” that Caesar called *Lutetia Parisiorum* (“mud town of the Parisii”) (*Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*). It is no accident that another place-name in *Ada* has the sense of what Freeling, glossing *veen*, calls “wet, black, stinking ground.” And it is no accident that the name Nabokov cites as Darkbloom is the French version, Lutèce, for that almost spells “Lucette,” and by far the most important scene in Paris in the novel is this scene where Lucette learns that Van will sail on the *Tobakoff*, and, when she fails to entice him to her Japanese divan, makes one last-ditch effort to win him over after joining him on the *Tobakoff* or to take her own life should she fail.

Why does Nabokov not simply rename Antiterra’s Paris “Lute,” and leave it at that, as he renames New York “Manhattan” or Canada “Canady”? Why does he also call the city Paris?

After failing to entice Van to her Japanese divan, Lucette proposes to him that since Ada is already married, he should marry *her*, and hence get Ardis too

(left to Lucette by Marina), and they could then invite Ada there. “While she’s there, I go to Aspen or Gstaad, or Schittau, and you live with her in solid crystal with snow falling as if forever all around *pendant que je* shee in Aspenis. Then I come back like a shot, but she can stay on, she’s welcome, I’ll hang around in case you two want me. And then she goes back to her husband for a couple of dreary months, see?” (466). When Van dismisses the idea, she says she has “an important, important telephone call to make”: she quietly phones Cordula to arrange a suite on the *Tobakoff* (Cordula’s husband owns the liner) for her last attempt to win Van over.

It can be no accident that it is in Paris that Lucette makes her proposal that Van should marry her, despite her knowing Van’s heart will always be Ada’s, for two of the central stories of love in Western culture feature a “Paris” who loves someone already married. In the Trojan story Priam’s son Paris, after judging Aphrodite (Venus) as the fairest of the goddesses, is rewarded by Aphrodite with the fairest of mortal women, Helen, although Helen is already married to Menelaus and Paris’s abducting her will give rise to the whole Trojan war.<sup>36</sup> In *Romeo and Juliet*, Count Paris arranges with Capulet to have Juliet’s hand, although we know she is already married to Romeo.<sup>37</sup> Although Ada is officially married to Andrey Vinelander, both Lucette and Van regard her as Van’s for life when Lucette proposes to Van that he now marry *her*.<sup>38</sup>

He does not, and the next decision Lucette takes in Paris—to attempt a last amorous assault on Van aboard the *Tobakoff*, and failing that, to jump to her death and leave Van to read the letter she sends him from Paris “on June 2, 1901, ‘just in case’” (146)—clinches the tragic ironies of love that surrounds “all three Veens, the children of Venus” (410). The irony of the *veen* or “peat, bog, marsh” in their name becomes the irony of Lucette, the marsh marigold missing from “Mémoire,” and now forever the “care of the water.”

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36. In a bitter moment, when Ada decides to stay with the dying Andrey Vinelander, Van will explode in scorn: “Helen of Troy, Ada of Ardis!” (530).

37. On the night of the Burning Barn, Ada turns around to Van, “naively ready to embrace him the way Juliet is recommended to receive her Romeo” (121).

38. The Paris-“already married” theme is played in two other keys in the chapter preceding Van’s meeting with Lucette at Ovenman’s bar. In Paris, Van encounters first Greg Erminin, whom he discovers to be already married (a theme strikingly emphasized by the sustained echoes of *Eugene Onegin*, where Onegin in the final chapter finds that Tatyana has already married Prince N.), and then Cordula, whom he happily, hurriedly makes love to, despite knowing she is already married to Ivan Tobak.



And as if to indicate the irony, without losing the “Paris” allusions, Nabokov partially renames the city where she makes her fatal resolve “Lute,” in echo of “Lutèce,” in tribute to Lucette, “*mon enfant favori*” (as he called her in his 1975 television interview with Bernard Pivot),<sup>39</sup> and in anticipation of the “mud” on which she would rest.

If Nabokov names Paris as “Lute” because of Lucette, it is in accord with many other patterns in the novel, established long before Lucette’s death but in fact proving to be related to her: the water pattern (Aqua and Marina, and much, much more), the electricity-and-water pattern (the banning of electricity caused by the “L disaster”), the flower pattern, the mistranslation theme, and more. Bobbie Ann Mason was the first to suggest a Lucettocentric reading of *Ada*; I have taken it much further in *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness* and the ongoing “Annotations to *Ada*.”

Nabokov himself was one of the first promoters of such a reading, writing to Mason in the early 1970s identifying the Barton and Guestier advertisement and adding that it “should be looked up by all admirers of Lucette,”<sup>40</sup> or referring in 1975 to Lucette as his favorite child. But he had made such a reading possible from the first, and the evidence of sources of *Ada* like Fowlie’s mistranslation of Rimbaud’s *souci d’eau*, noted by Nabokov in 1960 or soon after, the Barton and Guestier ad, noted in 1963, and the sense of *veen* as “peat, bog, marsh,” and the pattern of eavesdropping, in Freeling’s 1964 *Double-Barrel*, suggest that Nabokov conceived her role as central to the novel from the start. From the first he linked the Veens with Venus, and anticipated a decrepit Villa Venus, and from the first he seems to have sought a way of linking “marsh marigold” to the Veens to show the boggy substratum of their garden of Edenic love.

Nabokov always liked an element of wit and surprise in the overall design of his fiction. In his first novel, the twist is that *Mary*, the heroine of the novel, although fervently expected, never actually steps onto the novel’s stage. In the novel before *Ada*, *Pale Fire*, the central irony, as I now read it, is that although Hazel is at the center of her father’s poem, Kinbote wrenches the text and commentary out of the family’s control to place himself at the center of the story, only for that very act itself to be under the deeper guidance of the dead Hazel.<sup>41</sup> And in *Ada* itself, the central irony of the novel is that the character who is relegated to the periphery by the intense ardor of the two older Veen

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39. “Apostrophes,” TF-1, May 30, 1975.

40. Cited in Mason, *Nabokov’s Garden* 163.

41. See BB, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

children and our eagerness to watch their amours is actually the covert center, source, and standard of the novel.

### *Coda: Replaying Love*

I may here have sometimes seemed to repeat what I have written elsewhere about *Ada*, so let me repeat myself again in order to say something new. I wrote above “Doubling and imitation pervade *Ada*”—referring especially to the fatal doubling of Ada’s love for Van in Lucette’s, and the way this complicates the novel’s myths of love. But there is another private Nabokovian myth of love that I think Nabokov also incorporates into *Ada* and its Boschean revision of *Venus*.

The replaying of a former love, whether in glory or despair, may be Nabokov’s central myth, from the 1920s to the 1970s, from Chorb hopelessly and absurdly replaying his love for his dead bride in one of Nabokov’s first fully mature stories or Ganin replaying his love for Mary in his first novel all the way to *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!*. In Nabokov’s second to last novel, Hugh Person woefully attempts to reenact his love for Armande by revisiting Switzerland, a reenactment that in the retelling also encompasses the replay of a Russian writer’s prostitute in the same room as Hugh’s, or Julia Moore recalling her former lover in the same room where she and Hugh make love, or R. recycling his former loves into his fiction. In his last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, Nabokov treats the myth most parodically, in the former wives that lead up to the You of the final section of the novel, thereby revisiting the myth he treated most personally and pointedly in the former loves that lead up to the You in the closing movement of *Speak, Memory*.

Nabokov of course reworks the myth most famously in Humbert’s re-embodiment of Annabel Leigh in *Lolita*. But he reworks it most rapturously and expansively—and complicatedly—in Van and Ada replaying the paradise of their Ardis the First love in Ardis the Second. For Van’s celebration of their love at Ardis the Second already incorporates pangs of jealousy, anxiety, awkwardness, and regret, like the ambiguity of Bosch’s central panel, with its lavish fruits that suggest an orgy of succulent ripeness and sweet delight but also endless reenactments of the forbidden fruit—and the implicit fatal follow-on—of the Fall. Ardis the Second explodes into a hell of despair when Blanche, herself a celebrant and an unwitting underminer of Ardis as a paradise of love, discloses Ada’s infidelity and Van flees Ardis’s garden via the bog beyond Blanche’s Tourbière:

“I’ll take you five versts across the bog,” said Trofim, “the nearest is Volosyanka.”

His vulgar Russian word for Maidenhair; a whistle stop; train probably crowded. (299)

And Nabokov reworks his myth of love's repetition most helplessly in Lucette's trying to reenact Ada in order to have a share of Van but ending in her hell of emptiness. Standing on the platform of the Maidenhair station, self-consciously thinking of Anna Karenin's end, Van feels suicidal:

Maidenhair. Idiot! Percy boy might have been buried by now! Maidenhair. Thus named because of the huge spreading Chinese tree at the end of the platform. Once, vaguely, confused with the Venus'-hair fern. She walked to the end of the platform in Tolstoy's novel. First exponent of the inner monologue, later exploited by the French and the Irish. *N'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert. L'arbre aux quarante écus d'or*, at least in the fall. Never, never shall I hear again her "botanical" voice fall at *biloba*, "sorry, my Latin is showing." *Ginkgo*, ginko, ink, inkog. Known also as Salisbury's *adiantofolia*, Ada's *infolio*, poor *Salisbury*: sunk; poor Stream of Consciousness, *marée noire* by now. Who wants Ardis Hall! (299–300)

Although Van thinks of Ada and the hell of never seeing or hearing her again, the "Maidenhair," mistranslation, the leavesdropping, the *écus d'or*, and especially the "sunk; poor Stream of Consciousness, *marée noire* by now" all point to Lucette and her virginal status, the "marsh marigold" or *souci d'eau* (the "forged *louis d'or* in that collection of fouled French," 64), the closing lines of Rimbaud's "*Mémoire*," and Lucette's sinking beneath the "black ... waters" of the Atlantic after a brief passage (493) of stream of consciousness.<sup>42</sup> And the *marée noire* (black tide) here is surely a pun on *marais noir* (black bog) at the very moment Van expels himself from Ardis forever.

For Nabokov the tension between the singularity and the multiplicity of love is a central mystery: the singularity of love, love at its best, the passionate conviction that no one else will do, and the multiplicity of love, its repeatability with the same person or others. A single overwhelming love allows Van and Ada to transcend the isolation of their selves, and the rampant repeatability of the act of love only adds to the enchantment. Yet because we and others are ultimately on our own, we and they can wish to overcome our solitude: we can be aroused by many, as Van and Ada certainly are, in ways that cause each other intense pain, or as Blanche is, in an unintended ironic chorus. Or, conversely, Lucette, unable to have the *one* love she yearns for, despite her repeated lovemaking with Ada, feels only her ultimate emptiness. In the shift from the paradise of the left panel, two lovers in a world of bliss, to

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42. See also Nabokov's Ada: 149–52, 156–57.

the crowded recapitulations and complicated ambiguities of the central panel and the torments of the right panel of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Nabokov found the richest straw for the boggy paradise of the Veens' venereal delights, and his most complex image of the triumphs and torments of love's singularity and repetitions.