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TOILETS, TREES, AND INSPIRATION IN *ADA*

Nabokov is only one in a long line of distinguished writers who have gone to the toilet for their inspiration, but his abundant use of scatological imagery has been remarked on by only a few critics (e.g., Struve, Proffer, Boyd, Naiman). He uses scatology with great ingenuity, and for various reasons: as privately-coded jokes; to satirize authors and schools of thought; as an index to character or part of a branching system of meaning in his novels—even, as unlikely as it sounds, to imply otherworldly presences. Such is the case in *Ada*.

Like *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, *Ada* has its share of “complicated waters” (*A*, 495) in the scatological sense. Water is the ruling metaphor of the novel, and Nabokov is brazenly upfront about it, naming two of his principal characters Aqua and Marina. Aqua, a suicide, is the more interesting of the two, and the first few chapters, which describe her sad decline, foreshadow the events of the narrative in several complex ways and define her links with Lucette. In these first chapters, Nabokov presents a kind of blueprint for what follows. Water has replaced electricity as the main source of power on Antiterra, but Aqua, in her madness, hits upon a more efficient means of communication:

She developed a morbid sensitivity to the language of tap water—which echoes sometimes (much as the bloodstream does predormitorily) a fragment of human speech lingering in one’s ears while one washes one’s hands after cocktails with strangers. [...] Bathwater (or shower) was too much of a Caliban to speak distinctly—or perhaps was too brutally anxious to emit the hot torrent and get rid of the infernal ardor—to bother about small talk; but the burbly flowlets grew more and more ambitious and odious, and when at her first “home” she heard one of the most hateful of the visiting doctors [...] garrulously pour hateful instructions in Russian-lapped German into her hateful bidet, she decided to stop turning on tap water altogether. (*A*, 22-4)

Aqua’s madness does not detract from the veracity of the underlying concept as it applies to the world of *Ada*. Nabokov is establishing the fact that running water—of *any* kind—will be associated throughout this novel

with the act of communication. *Any* kind, because the reference to the bidet is a sign that this association has a scatological dimension. And indeed, throughout *Ada*, toilets, and acts of defecation and urination, are persistently associated with instances of written and verbal communication, in the form of ‘hydrodynamic’ telephone calls, letters and novels. Moreover, these acts of communication often have an otherworldly dimension. At the center of it all lies Lucette, dead more than half a century by the time Van begins his family chronicle, but, like Hazel Shade *vis-à-vis* her father, apparently trying to communicate with or through him from beyond the grave. She does so by means of the complex patterns which she invites him to perceive in his written account of his life with Ada. Van misses many of these patterns, but Nabokov hopes we’ll be sharp-eyed enough to spot them. Our task is made doubly difficult because the scatological details in *Ada* often seem so innocuous. It’s easy to overlook them, or, like Van and Ada, discount them as irrelevant.

For example, when four years after Lucette’s death Van and Ada meet at Mont Roux, Lucette’s presence is evoked by several images, many of which go unrecognized by them. After a bout of lovemaking, the lovers go for a stroll:

A boxwood-lined path, presided over by a nostalgic-looking sempervirent sequoia (which American visitors mistook for a “Lebanese cedar”—if they remarked it at all) took them to the absurdly misnamed rue du Mûrier, where a princely paulownia (“mulberry tree!” snorted Ada), standing in state on its incongruous terrace above a public W.C., was shedding generously its heart-shaped dark green leaves, but retained enough foliage to cast arabesques of shadow onto the south side of its trunk. A ginkgo (of a much more luminous greenish gold than its neighbor, a dingily yellowing local birch) marked the corner of a cobbled lane leading down to the quay. (*A*, 522)

Why does Nabokov draw attention to these trees? And what is the significance of the W.C.? Bobbie Ann Mason associates the Lebanese cedar with the sealyham cedar at Ardis and notes that a paulownia appeared during Van’s first tour of Ardis. For Mason, the public W.C. “recalls the botanical names given the public facilities at the Goodson airport.”¹ But it

¹Bobbie Ann Mason, *Nabokov’s Garden: A Guide to Ada* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1971), 45-46.

is worth investigating further to discover what Nabokov's real intentions are in this passage. Let us begin with the "mûrier," or mulberry, the name of a street marked not by a mulberry. In this absence-marking name, we find a tree connected to many myths, several of which seem particularly relevant to Lucette and the theme of communication (specifically, letters) with which she is associated throughout the novel. We cannot confirm that Nabokov knew of these myths or the literary texts in which they appear, but they present some intriguing associations. In the *Language of Flowers* (L. Burke, 1865, and many editions thereafter), (mulberry means "I shall not survive you," an especially appropriate motto for Lucette, who does not survive Van and Ada—at least not in mortal form. The mulberry tree is also said to be ruled by Mercury, messenger of the gods, which introduces the theme of divine communication. There is another association with Richard Johnson's *The Seven Champions of Christendom* (1596), wherein Eglantine, daughter of the King of Thessaly, is imprisoned by an enchanter within a mulberry tree, from which she mournfully cries for release. However, the most significant and relevant association is likely found via *Pale Fire* and its reference to Shakespeare's "midsummer mulberry" (PF 291) under which the mythical Pyramus and Thisbe committed suicide (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, sc. 1; cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.55-165).

Nabokov may have had these and still other myths in mind, but the most immediate, local referent, and the source of all these secondary associations, lies elsewhere. The street name recalls the cake of mulberry soap which became such a conspicuous feature of Ada's early romance with Van, and is inextricably associated with the loss of sexual innocence: Ada's and, tragically, Lucette's. This cake of soap makes its first appearance in Chapter 9, Part 1, when Van, soon after his arrival at Ardis, catches sight of Ada washing her face and arms over an old-fashioned basin" (*A*, 60): "A fat snake of porcelain curled around the basin, and as both the reptile and he stopped to watch Eve and the soft wobble of her bud-breasts in profile, a big mulberry-colored cake of soap slithered out of her hand, and her black-socked foot hooked the door shut with a bang which was more the echo of the soap's crashing against the marble board than a sign of pudic displeasure" (*A*, 60). As Brian Boyd notes, the fall of the soap and the bang of the door which was "more the echo" of the soap's crash "comically imitate the fruit of the Fall and nature's groaning echo of man's first disobedience' as rendered in Milton's *Paradise Lost*."² But the tone is much

² Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Christchurch, NZ: Cybereditions, 2001), 148.

less comic later, when eight-year-old Lucette sticks the soap between her legs in imitation of Van's penis:

"I'm Van," said Lucette, standing in the tub with the mulberry soap between her legs and protruding her shiny tummy.

"You'll turn into a boy if you do that," said Ada sternly, "and that won't be very amusing." (*A*, 144)

Lucette's act reveals that she has seen Van naked. The incident in question is full of scatological imagery, and, like the bathtime episode, contains several details which resonate throughout the novel, prefiguring Lucette's death. The day before, the three children had played by the banks of the brook at Ardis:

Lucette had abandoned her skipping rope to squat on the brink of the brook and float a fetus-sized rubber doll. Every now and then she squeezed out of it a fascinating squirt of water through a little hole that Ada had had the bad taste to perforate for her in the slippery orange-red toy. With the sudden impatience of inanimate things, the doll managed to get swept away by the current. Van shed his pants under a willow and retrieved the fugitive. (*A*, 143).

Aroused by Van's nakedness, Ada had conspired to get him on his own for a few minutes by tying Lucette to a tree. However, Lucette had managed to untie herself and had spied on them making love. "Good lord," said Van, "that explains the angle of the soap!" (*A*, 152). Like the soap, the urinating doll which kindles Lucette's sexual curiosity is a key leitmotif in *Ada*. Van refers to it in his account of Lucette's death in the Atlantic, when she, too, was "swept away by the current" and he had tried in vain to retrieve her: "she did not see her whole life flash before her as we all were afraid she might have done; the red rubber of a favorite doll remained safely decomposed among the myosotes of an unanalyzable brook" (*A*, 494). This doll finally comes to represent Lucette herself, excluded from Van and Ada's games, "a pretty plaything stranded among the forget-me-nots of a brook" (*A*, 589).³

³ Boyd also notes that the "doll ghoulishly foreshadows Lucette's drowning" (*Nabokov's Ada*, 117).

All of these memories converge in the “absurdly misnamed” Mulberry Street in Mont Roux, and seem designed to act as a kind of silent reproach to Van and Ada, a reminder (a “forget-me-not”) of the hurt they are causing others—Andrey in particular—by their affair. This ghostly “mulberry” evokes the earlier bathroom “mulberries,” which now lead us to the paulownia, “standing in state on its incongruous terrace above a public W.C.” This tree recalls Van’s first visit to Ardis, when the drawing room was “invaded across the threshold by the large leaf shadows of a paulownia tree (named, by an indifferent linguist, explained Ada, after the patronymic, mistaken for a second name or surname of a harmless lady, Anna Pavlovna Romanov, daughter of Pavel, nicknamed Paul-minus-Peter, why she did not know, a cousin of the non-linguist’s master, the botanical Zemski. . .)” (*A*, 43). What Ada doesn’t mention is that, by dint of these Romanov dynasty connections, the paulownia is also known as the “princess tree”: this is why Van refers to it as “princely” (*A* 522). Ada may not know the reason behind Paul’s nickname, “Paul-minus-Peter,” but the allusion directs us to a poem in Van’s anthology entitled “Peter and Margaret,” which deals with another Peter, another ghost, another princess, and another, different kind of tour:

“Here, said the guide, was the field,
There, he said, was the wood.
This is where Peter kneeled,
That’s where the Princess stood.

No, the visitor said,
You are the ghost, old guide.
Oats and oaks may be dead,
But *she* is by my side.” (*A*, 146)

In notes he sent to Bobbie Ann Mason, Nabokov explained the meaning of this poem: “it is a stylized glimpse of a mysterious person visiting the place, open to tourists, where in legendary times [...] a certain Peter T. [Peter Townsend] had his last interview with the Queen’s sister. Although he accuses the old guide of being a ‘ghost’, it is he, in the reversal of time, who is a ghostly tourist, the ghost of Peter T. himself [...] it should send a tingle down the spine of the reader.”⁴ Immediately prior to the first chapter’s attic scene, Van asks Lucette to memorize this poem so that he

⁴ In Nabokov’s personal response to Bobbie Ann Mason (encl. to letter signed by Véra, of Jan. 29, 1973, p. 6, quoted in Mason, *Nabokov’s Garden*, 185n2; also at Berg Collection).

and Ada can go to the attic to make love. Lucette transcribes it from memory in her last completed letter to Van, which he reads only *after* her death. The “ghostly tourist,” Nabokov suggests, is Lucette herself. Boyd refers to this letter as “the most significant” one in the novel, and Lucette’s “last letter to Van,”⁵ but this isn’t strictly true, for Lucette attempts one more, final letter prior to her suicide. Spurned by Van on board the *Tobakoff*, she spends her last moments trying “to think up something amusing, harmless, and scintillating to say in a suicide note. But she had planned everything except that note, so she tore her blank life in two and disposed of the pieces in the W.C.” (*A*, 492). We can now see how appropriate it is that Lucette’s last “letter” to Van should appear in the form of a paulownia tree, that the text should associate this tree with a mulberry, and that this tree should be standing above a W.C.—the symbolic recipient of Lucette’s last, unfinished note. If we combine this information with the fact that trees and toilets are associated throughout *Ada* with the act of communication—letters, chance touches, and long-distance calls—we can see that Nabokov wants us to interpret the image as one of Lucette’s long-distance calls from the beyond.

* * *

Equipped with these patterns, we can take our interpretation of these W.C.s and bathing spaces one or two steps further. The evidence presented so far seems unequivocal, especially when one juxtaposes the subtexts of suicide and reincarnation linked to mulberry trees with the presence of a W.C. and the recent memory of Lucette’s flushed note.

The first extra trail begins with an aside and a parenthetical, after Van and Ada share a lingering embrace after dinner at the Bellevue hotel, and after escaping Dorothy Vineland, on the first day of their brief reunion in Mont Roux in 1905: “Wipe your neck!” he called after her in a rapid whisper (who, and wherein this tale, in this life, had also attempted a *whispered cry?*)” (*A* 520, italics original). We find the answer to this question on p. 467 (Part Three, ch. 3). There, in Paris at their last meeting before the fatal journey on the *Tobakoff*, Van has just kissed Lucette deeply and she begs for more; he refuses and walks off, pretending offense at her words, an act that provokes this response:

“I apollo, I love you,” she whispered frantically, trying to *cry* after him in a *whisper* because the corridor was all door and ears, but he walked on, waving both arms in the air without looking back, quite forgivingly, though, and was gone. (*A* 467, italics original)

⁵ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*, 204.

A first-time reader won't know what to make of these italics, but once noticed, they make the link between the scenes obvious. Even more striking than the link between the two pages are the words' initials in the second instance: *whispered cry*. This detail, too, now solidifies the connection between Lucette and the W.C. motif which recurs both just before her death, and at the Mont Roux reunion. More than that, even her notable accessory, "her little black handbag," (*A*, 467) is echoed in the Mont Roux scene, where Ada sets up the tryst by "'forgetting' her tiny black silk handbag." The connections continue when Ada arrives in Van's hotel room, where he announces, "'Smart girl! . . . but first of all I must go to the *petit endroit* (W.C.).'" Suddenly obtrusive here are the italicized French phrase and the seemingly redundant gloss in large, parenthetical capitals. Nabokov is nudging us hard to see a puzzle and find its solution.⁶

In between these two latter scenes, Van has a "post-Moët dream" of Ada and/or Lucette, in which he "sat on the talc" of the beach; in this dream, this ambiguous "she" is called "one of the Vane sisters" by someone nearby (*A* 521). As shown by Brian Boyd, the talc in this dream is a distinct echo of Lucette's hair "tentacling" as she drowned, with the letters "t, a, c, l" re-emphasized by Van to Violet Knox, the typist.⁷ It is, of course, deliberate that Van unwittingly dreams in this moment of another Nabokov work (misinterpreting the significance), and specifically of characters who communicate with a narrating writer through secret nature-based and typographic means.

These several elements come together to suggest that Lucette is the creative center and—in a sense—source of the novel (and not only its moral center), something reinforced by the fact that the paulownia tree is cryptically embedded at the top of the Family Tree on the work's first page, while Lucette herself is invisibly present in the novel's first chapter, in the scene showing unnamed (and undressed) Van and Ada in the attic (*A* 6ff); Lucette, we later learn, is downstairs in her room memorizing the poem "Peter and Margaret." The sexualized mulberry soaps in the early episodes are also little signatures, reminders, perhaps, of the connection between the siblings' sexual activity and Lucette's suicide, as well as of her creative role in the novel.

⁶ One could also see in this "*petit endroit*" yet another connection to Lucette, through the "pet" (fart, Fr.) theme in *petit*; on "pet," see Eric Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 261-2, and Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, 143-4.

⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, 251.

These connections between Lucette, inspiration, and creativity, become clearer by linking *Ada's* W.C.s to those that appear in *Speak, Memory*.⁸

In Chapter 4 of his memoir, originally published as “My English Education,” Nabokov dates some of his earliest creative experiences, and especially their conscious crafting into artistic form, to two W.C.s in the Vyra manor house:

The toilets were separate from the bathrooms, and the oldest among them was a rather sumptuous but gloomy affair with some fine panelwork and a tasseled rope of red velvet, which, when pulled, produced a beautifully modulated, discreetly muffled gurgle and gulp. From that corner of the house, one could see Hesperus and hear the nightingales, and it was there that, later, I used to compose my youthful verse. (*SM* 85).

Similarly, at a much younger age, Nabokov would sit on a “more modest arrangement” (an ersatz W.C., a toilet nook overlooking the filling bathtub), and “a dreamy rhythm would permeate my being. The recent ‘Step, step, step,’ would be taken up by a dripping faucet. And, fruitfully combining rhythmic pattern with rhythmic sound, I would unravel the labyrinthian frets on the linoleum” (*SM* 85). It is due to the creative intensity of this moment that Nabokov entreats parents, “never, never say ‘Hurry up’ to a child” (*SM* 85). Thus, we propose, the *whispered cry* through the W.C.s of *Ada* calls directly (or perhaps labyrinthically) back to the foundational moments of Nabokov’s own creative life, as well as being central to *Ada's* creative internal source.

⁸ Naiman broaches the conjunction of “sites of artistic creativity and excretion,” *Nabokov, Perversely*, 61.