

NOTES AND BRIEF COMMENTARIES

By Priscilla Meyer

Submissions, in English, should be forwarded to Priscilla Meyer at pmeyer@wesleyan.edu. E-mail submission preferred. If using a PC, please send attachments in .doc format; if by fax send to (860) 685-3465; if by mail, to Russian Department, 215 Fisk Hall, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT 06459. Deadlines are April 1 and October 1 respectively for the Spring and Fall issues. Most notes will be sent, anonymously, to at least one reader for review. If accepted for publication, the piece may undergo some slight editorial alterations. Please incorporate footnotes within the text. References to Nabokov's English or Englished works should be made either to the first American (or British) edition or to the Vintage collected series. All Russian quotations must be transliterated and translated. Please observe the style (American punctuation, single-spacing, paragraphing, signature, etc.) used in this section.

EMENDATIONS TO ANNOTATED EDITIONS OF *LOLITA*

Generations of readers and scholars have much benefited from Alfred Appel Jr.'s *The Annotated Lolita*. Appel's notes contain a great deal of interesting, intelligent and concisely expressed information, as well as some genuine moments of charming irreverence and inconsequence. Though fairly irrelevant from the point of view of scholarly annotation, Appel's recounting, spurred by the mere mentioning of Maeterlinck, of how Louis B. Mayer had brought the writer to Hollywood in the 30's, commissioned from him a screenplay, and received a work of Symbolist scenography with a bee for a hero is a pleasure to read. It is at such moments that one can

understand why Gore Vidal, upon the publication of *The Annotated Lolita*, thought the edition was a hoax and that Alfred Appel Jr. was nothing but Nabokov in disguise. In addition to being witty, urbane, and informative, the notes are a particularly valuable resource. Composed as they were with the help of Nabokov himself, they offer a rare insight into the author's conception of his work and what the reader needs to know to understand it. (The Nabokov Archive in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library contains two typescripts submitted by Appel to, and corrected by, Nabokov. The numerous admonitions—the phrase, “*please, don't*” recurs often—and notations in Nabokov's hand to be found in the margins of these typescripts did much to shape the final product, and had the happy effect of eliciting original comments and commentaries on Nabokov's part).

However, Appel's notes present two problems. The first is a structural one. Appel lets whole barns of cats out of *Lolita*'s bag, beginning with his entries for the book's opening chapter. The idea of disclosing the novel's conclusion to the reader at the outset of the book seems to run counter to the aims of a novel, as well as to Nabokov's professed desire to make the reader work as he did. Appel's notes make them for this reason difficult to use for the readership they would best serve: high school students, undergraduate university students and interested non-specialist readers reading the work for the first time. This is a problem which only the complete and consequent reworking of the notes can remedy. The second problem with these notes is that a number of factual errors slipped through the net that Nabokov placed below Appel's composition of these notes. Such things are inevitable and do nothing to detract from the considerable achievement of the editor. The following few emendations offered below note a few errors and offer provisional annotations. At the end of this short list are a few remarks on Brian Boyd's sparer annotations to the *Library of America* edition of *Lolita*.

Page 5. Note 1 (p. 324). "moral apotheosis." The deceptively perceptive John Ray Jr. tells us that what we are to read is "a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis" (AL, 5). The epithet is doubtless inflationary, but it should not prevent us from seeking its referent. Humbert is hardly promoted to divine status, and does not make a strong case for canonization. But he does appear to do something laudable. This "moral apotheosis" is best sought for in *Lolita's* tenderest chapter, where we read:

Somewhere beyond Bill's shack an afterwork radio had begun singing of folly and fate, and there she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my *Lolita!*), hopelessly worn at seventeen...and I looked and looked at her and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past; an echo on the brink of a russet ravine, with a far wood under a white sky, and brown leaves choking the brook, and one last cricket in the crisp weeds...[Nabokov's ellipses] but thank God it was not that I worshiped. What I used to pamper among the tangled vines of my heart, *mon grand pêché radieux*, had dwindled to its essence: sterile and selfish vice, all *that* I canceled and cursed. You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my *Lolita*, *this Lolita*, pale and polluted and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine....No matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn—even then I would go mad with tenderness at the

mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my *Lolita* (AL, 278; Nabokov's italics).

Nabokov was to remark of this scene years later that in reading it, "*le bon lecteur devrait avoir un picotement au coin de l'œil*" ["the good reader should feel [here] the forerunner of a tear"] (Interview with Anne Guérin, 27). In another interview, Nabokov himself confessed to having felt more than a forerunner, and to having written the passage through his own tears (Interview with *Les nouvelles littéraires*, 17). Without explanation, Appel locates this apotheosis in the closing lines of the book where Humbert hears the chorus of children's voices and recognizes the real tragedy being the absence of *Lolita's* voice therein ("...and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not *Lolita's* absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" [AL, 308]). It should be remembered that there is nothing morally decisive about Humbert's realization in this scene. It is a tragic moment, but involves no moral turn. And, consequently, it changes nothing in his behavior. When we replace this scene, recounted at the very end of the book, in its actual chronology, we remark that this supposed moral turn does not prevent him from continuing to search for his lost love with the same desperate intensity. This has not prevented Vladimir Alexandrov from concurring with Appel on the matter (without noting Appel's precedent—cf. Alexandrov's *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. 171). Both in his *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 249) and in "Even Homais Nods" (*Nabokov Studies*. 2 [1995], 62-86; 85), Boyd locates Humbert's "great epiphany" in "the scene above Elphinstone."

The question as to whether this is the sort of remark which needs to be annotated in this way in such an edition is another question. For a popular edition such as *The Annotated Lolita*

it seems to me that a definition and summary history of the term apotheosis would suffice.

Page 9. "Lo-lee-ta....Lo. Lee. Ta." In Appel's note to this line he cites Nabokov's remark from an interview which Appel himself conducted with Nabokov and where Nabokov states that Lolita, "should not be pronounced as...[A.A. Jr.'s ellipses] most Americans pronounce it: Low-lee-ta, with a heavy, clammy 'L' and a long 'O.' No, the first syllable should be as in 'lollipop,' the 'L' liquid and delicate, the 'lee' not too sharp. Spaniards and Italians pronounce it, of course, with exactly the necessary note of archness and caress" (cited at AL, 328). What Appel does not note—nor as, it seems, have later critics—is that such a pronunciation is incompatible with how the name is written in the text. Humbert writes: "Lo. Lee. Ta." If we pronounce his beloved's name as he directs us to, with a period and two spaces which separate it from the next syllable, then the 'o' is inevitably long. What is more, when we consider Dolores' given name, the pronunciation Humbert offers (rather than the one Nabokov recommends in the *Playboy* interview) is the more logical one: Dolores is called Lo by her mother, and others. Lolita, Humbert's unique name for her, would then likely take off from the earlier diminutive (Lo). It is my sense that Nabokov's remark is not an intentional contradiction but simply a change of phonetic preference.

10. "paleopedology and Aeolian harps." Appel correctly glosses "paleopedology" as "the branch of pedology concerned with the soils of past geological ages" but fails to note the pun: the study of past pedophiles.

16. "...their true nature which was not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)..." Appel offers an ample gloss of *nymphic*, discussing the role of nymphs in Greek and Roman mythology, as well as the term's scientific meaning, but leaves, alas, its initial meaning out of account—*nymph*, or *nympha* is Greek for "bride." Appel also leaves the demon in the parenthesis out of account. Humbert's choice of adjective is

obscure (the term is used by Chaucer, Milton and as late as Hazlitt, but had become quite rare in the 1950s). Humbert does not seem to have chosen it simply in keeping with his taste for archaism, but also for more programmatic reasons. The demon in question, given the Greek reference (*nymphic*) which precedes it, would not be devilish or demonic in the sense we think of today (and which we would usually denote as *demonic*). This demon, or better daemon, would be, as the OED describes such, "a supernatural being of a nature intermediate between that of gods and men; an inferior divinity, spirit, genius"—which is more in line with how Humbert conceives of Lolita—impish, mischievous, even otherworldly—but not evil.

22. "Oui, ce n'est pas bien." This French phrase means not, "Yes, that is not nice," (cf. note 22/3), but, "Yes, that is not good."

23. "...qui pourrait arranger la chose..." This means not "who could fix it" (Appel note 23/3), but, "who could arrange it" (there is no state of affairs which needs to be rectified—and this is not the meaning of the phrase). If one wants to retain Appel's formulation, one might say, "who could fix it up," though that idiom does not correspond to the simplicity of the French phrase.

43. "Monday. Delectatio morosa. I spend my doleful days in dumps and dolors." Appel offers the following note to this passage: "Latin; morose pleasure, a monastic term" (AL, 357; note 43/2). *Delectatio morosa* is indeed Latin and is indeed a monastic term, but does not mean morose pleasure. The term is part of the technical vocabulary of Christian doctrine. *Delectatio morosa* is pleasure taken in sinful thinking without desiring it, and is thus classified alongside of *gaudium*, dwelling with complacency on sins already committed, and *desiderium*, the desire for what is sinful, as "internal sins" in Catholic orthodoxy (since Aquinas). That Humbert's sin is at this point only "internal" is not irrelevant to the story he tells.

44/1. "*ne montrez pas vos zhambes.*" Appel correctly translates this but does not note that Charlotte's remark to her adolescent daughter is with the formal, revealing not only her accent but her French to be a sham (no mother would use the formal to her adolescent daughter).

70/2. "*peine forte et dure.*" Appel offers the translation, "strong and hard torture." Translated literally into today's French the term means "hard and severe punishment." Humbert's use of it is clarified when we note that the term is from French (Norman) Law (adopted eventually by English Law and abolished in the Felony and Piracy Act of 1772) denoting a punishment applied to prisoners who refused to plead and which involved placing heavy weights upon them. It bears noting that the phrase is found in Poe's "William Wilson" ("In a remote and terror-inspiring angle was a square enclosure of eight or ten feet, comprising the sanctum, 'during hours,' of our principal, the Reverend Dr. Bransby. It was a solid structure, with massy door, sooner than open which in the absence of the 'Dominic,' we would all have willingly perished by the *peine forte et dure.*") as well as in Baudelaire's discussions of Poe's childhood. In his first and rarely reprinted biographical introduction to Poe's works, "*Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses ouvrages*" (from 1852), Baudelaire, wishing to illustrate certain aspects of Poe's childhood, cites at some length Poe's tale "William Wilson" in his own translation and this passage in particular (cf. Charles Baudelaire *Œuvres complètes*. Two volumes. Edition de la Pléiade. Ed. Claude Pichois. Paris: Gallimard, 1976. II.256). This passage is not reproduced in Baudelaire's later and better known essay "*Edgar Poe: sa vie et ses œuvres*" (1856), where along with the slight change in title Baudelaire reworks the majority of his material.

72/1. "*The orange blossom would have scarcely withered on the grave, as a poet might have said.*" Appel calls this a parody of a 'poetic' quotation, which it is, but he does not note its import: orange blossoms traditionally represent marriage and

form part of the bride's accoutrement. Orange blossoms play a prominent role in Nabokov's beloved *Madame Bovary*.

89/1. "*Cavall and Melampus.*" These are the names of the Farlows' dogs. Appel writes: "'Cavall' comes from *cavallo* (a horse), and 'Melampus' from the seer in Greek mythology who understood the tongue of dogs and introduced the worship of Dionysus" (AL, 373). "Cavall" does come from *cavallo*. And *Melampus* is indeed a figure from Greek mythology. He is not a seer though. His gift is that he understands the language of nature. In the most oft-repeated story about Melampus, serpents lick his ears and he thus acquires the capacity of understanding the speech of all creatures (cf. *The Odyssey* 11.290 ff.). Dogs are nowhere isolated for special consideration and there appear to be no extant references to Melampus understanding the language of dogs (the most common stories involve birds, snakes and worms [the latter informing Melampus that a building was about to crumble]).

But it is not this Melampus which gives Byron's, and consequently the Farlows', dog its name. There is another *Melampus* who simply is a dog. One finds a reference in Ovid to *Melampus* as one of Acteon's dogs (Ovid *Metamorphoses* III.206). Appel, or his source, appears to have conflated the two stories. (As for the identity of this source, Neither *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Ed. N.G.L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard. 2nd edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. 666) nor the far more comprehensive *Paulys Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Munich: Alfred Druckenmüller Verlag, 1931 (reprinted 1984), which contains a 13-page article on "*Melampus*" (Volume XV.1, pps. 392-405), indicate the source of Appel's supposition. As for Cavall (or Cafal), it was the name of King Arthur's hunting dog.

[In the original annotation of the first photostat version which Appel submitted to Nabokov, Appel writes: "Charlotte's dogs [they are not Charlotte's dogs LD] are named after Edith

Louisa Cavell (1865-1915), the celebrated English nurse executed by the Germans during World War I, and Melampus, from Greek mythology, a seer who, among other things, cured the daughters of Proteus of a madness induced by Dionysos." Nabokov does not correct the error in ownership of the dogs (though this is corrected before the book goes to print), but does note that the allusion is to the names of Byron's dogs, that Cavall comes from *cavallo* (horse) and that Melampus "understood the tongue of dogs" and crosses out the rest.]

120/2. "*spoonerette*." Humbert's neologism refers not to spoonerisms nor to "necking" but to the position of Humbert and Lolita's bodies, Lolita with her back against Humbert's chest, fitting snugly as two spoons placed one upon another would fit. The "-ette" refers to Lolita's diminutive size.

158/2 and 158/3. Humbert, moving north, would not first observe San Francisco then "the coastline of Monterey" as Monterey is due south of San Francisco (Appel; AL, 391).

224/2 *un ricanement*. Appel translates this as "sneer." It is instead a contemptuous laugh or snicker. "I told myself with a burst of furious sarcasm—*un ricanement*—that I was crazy to suspect her..." (AL, 224). Humbert is laughing contemptuously here, not sneering.

258 "*She was so kind, was Rita, such a good sport, that I daresay she would have given herself to any pathetic creature or fallacy...*" The pathetic creature is of course Humbert. The "pathetic fallacy" is at least two things. Humbert, down on his luck and on himself, sees himself as a pathetic and fallacious creature. The "pathetic fallacy" is an allusion to a common term from the technical vocabulary of aesthetics. It was coined by John Ruskin (in 1856) and means, "the attribution of human emotion or responses to animals or inanimate things, esp. in art and literature" (OED). The reader would probably be right to hear an additional note in the remark: a ribald reference to Rita's loose lifestyle, as it seems Humbert is speculating that

she would have given herself sexually to just about any pathetic creature or on the basis of any pathetic fallacy.

259/3. *Schlegel*. Friedrich Schlegel is not necessarily the one who is being referred to here. His equally if not more famous brother August Wilhelm, whom Nabokov writes of in his notes to his critical edition of *Eugene Onegin*, is just as likely a candidate.

302/5. "*Clare the Impredictable*." Appel classifies this as a "portmanteau word" (after Lewis Carroll), which is correct, but credits Nabokov with its authorship, which is not. In Chapter 17 of *Ulysses*, Joyce refers to the "extermination of the human species, inevitable but impredictable" (*Ulysses*. Gabler Edition. New York: Vintage, 1986; 556; 17.465).

307. "*A kind of thoughtful Hegelian synthesis linking up two dead women*." At this moment in the story Humbert has just bumped to a stop, in a field, observed by approaching policeman. Appel treats his reader to a longish note where we read that the two women in question are Charlotte Haze and Lolita: "the death of Charlotte is remembered here...blending with the whole story of Lolita, from the cows on the slope (p.112) to her assumed death" (AL, 450). Somewhat irrelevantly, Appel continues: "This 'Hegelian synthesis' realizes Quilty's 'Elizabethan' play-within-the-novel, *The Enchanted Hunters*, which featured Lolita as a bewitching 'farmer's daughter who imagines herself to be a woodland witch, or Diana' (p. 200), and seven hunters, six of them 'red-capped, uniformly attired'" (ibid.). Appel concludes that, "when Humbert asks a pregnant and veiny-armed Lolita to go away with him, he demonstrates that the mirage of the past (the nymphic Lolita as his lost 'Annabel') and the reality of the present (the Charlotte-like woman Lolita is becoming) *have* merged in love, a 'synthesis linking up two dead women'" (ibid.). This is energetic but faulty reasoning. The first woman is indeed Charlotte, and the passage on page 97 shows this clearly as the vehicle of her destruction bumps similarly to a stop on an incline. The second

woman however is not Lolita (Appel's evidence is that during an early drive Humbert notes cows on a hillside and Lolita informs him, "I think I'll vomit if I look at a cow again" [AL, 112]). Some twenty pages earlier, Humbert recounts "Ramsdale revisited" and his visit to Charlotte's grave. During his stroll through the graveyard Humbert recalls and recounts the case of "G. Edward Grammar, a thirty-five-year-old New York office manager who had just been arraigned on a charge of murdering his thirty-three-year-old wife, Dorothy. Bidding for the perfect crime, Ed had bludgeoned his wife and put her into a car. The case came to light when two county policeman on patrol saw Mrs. Grammar's new big blue Chrysler...speeding crazily down a hill, just inside their jurisdiction...The car sideswiped a pole, ran up an embankment covered with beard grass, wild strawberry and cinquefoil, and overturned...It appeared to be a routine highway accident at first. Alas, the woman's battered body did not match up with only minor damage suffered by the car. I did better" (AL, 287-288). Humbert's reference, easy to misunderstand, is a macabre reference to what he refers to for the first time, if indirectly, as his "murder" of Charlotte (Humbert, another husband "bidding for the perfect crime," has done better in the disposal of his wife). The "synthesis linking up two dead women" is formed by one woman who was killed by a car that then rolled up to a stop on an embankment (Charlotte), and another was killed and then placed into a car which rolled up onto an embankment. It is highly unlikely that Humbert means Lolita as this second woman (baroquely fused with her mother in Appel's strange description), because he does not envision her as dead, and he goes to great lengths, up to and in the last lines of the novel, to stress how he feels she is still a part of "blessed matter" (AL, 309). The photostat version has a deleting line in Nabokov's hand through the initial version of this note accompanied by comments which are illegible.

311. "The first little throb of Lolita went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940, in Paris, at a time when I was laid up with a severe attack of intercostal neuralgia. As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the *Jardin des Plantes*, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage." Appel notes the importance of this "prison trope." Of this supposedly real source he says nothing. What then of this article which inspired Nabokov? Might it teach us anything about the process of his inspiration? As such, it may not—as it does not exist. The newspapers for those years have been combed and recombined but the article has not been found. And it seems that there is a good reason for this. The most thorough annotator of Nabokov's work in any language is the editor of the German critical edition of his works, Dieter Zimmer. In Zimmer's exhaustive note to the passage in Nabokov's essay where he refers to this inspiring article, Zimmer notes the various researches undertaken by him and others to find any such article in the newspapers of those years. More recently, Nabokov's son and literary executor Dmitri Nabokov noted that he knew nothing of the article's whereabouts and confirmed the fact that neither he nor anyone else had to his knowledge laid hands upon it (Email of Wednesday, November 13, 2002 5:51 AM. To be found on the Nabokov Archive List Serve. Nabokov List-Serve: <http://listserv.ucsb.edu>). Zimmer notes that the celebrated zoologist Desmond Morris published an exhaustive list of all known experiments conducted with primates involving drawing or sign making. Nabokov's ape is nowhere to be found therein (cf. Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita*. Rowohlt: Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1995; pps. 686-687. Cf. also Desmond Morris. *The Biology of Art* (New York: Knopf, 1962). Zimmer also directs his reader's attention to the claims of the reputed primatologist David Premack in his *The Mind of an Ape* to the effect that

though apes do not lack the motor skills to produce drawings, they seem to lack the mental skills for such complex depictions (Premack, 1983, 108ff.; cited Zimmer, *ibid.*). As another observer has noted, they can, however, take pictures. In a letter from October 26, 1998, Nabokov bibliographer Michael Juliar noted the following: "*Life* magazine, on page six of its 5 December 1949 issue, published most of a Nabokov letter about butterfly wings in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Delights* [cf. SL, 93-94]. On the facing page, seven, is a letter about the first photograph ever taken by an 'ape.' Mr. (or Mrs. or Miss) Clark writes, 'Photographer Bernard Hoffman's Cookie (*Life*, Nov. 14) was not the first ape to take a picture. My protégé, whose name was also Cookie, was an advanced shutterbug more than seven years ago when an article appeared in *This Week* magazine Oct. 11, 1942.' Accompanying the letter are two photographs, one of the 'first Cookie' examining a box camera (a Kodak brownie?), and one of humans looking into Cookie's cage, taken, of course, from Cookie's point of view. The bars of the cage stand out more than the human heads. On page ten, the letters continue with one pointing out that *Life* had published similar photos in its "Pictures to the Editors" on 5 September 1938. He says, '...you showed two pictures taken by a chimpanzee in a Berlin zoo.' *Life* reprints the two photos. If both were actually taken by the chimp, as the letter says, the first photo is of another chimp holding a man-made object. The second is of people staring (chimps point of view) into a cage. Again, the bars of the cage are clearly visible. Is it possible that Nabokov was referring to one of these three sets of photos: one published in 1949, one in 1942, and one in 1938, all published in the US?" This letter to be found at <http://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv-cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9708&L=nabokv-l&P=R2114>). In summary, writes Zimmer, "this article about the incident in Paris' Zoo has despite extensive efforts never been uncovered and is perhaps a fiction" (Zimmer, *ibid.*).

There is another phrase which merits noting here: "intercostal neuralgia"—a burning pain between the ribs. He would not be the first, as this is indeed what our first father is said to have felt when he passively provided life for a woman. It is possible that this wry symptom is meant to suggest to us that the pangs in question were those of creation.

APPENDIX: BRIAN BOYD'S ANNOTATIONS TO THE LIBRARY
OF AMERICA EDITION

Vladimir Nabokov. *Novels: 1955-1962*. New York:
Library of America, 1996.

There are two points in Boyd's more spare notes to *Lolita* that might be clarified. Both concern sexual matters. Boyd's note for "merkin" is incorrect (cf. p. 875). Boyd glosses the word as meaning, "false hair for the female genitalia." From the 16th to the 18th century *merkin* referred to "the female pudendum." Its modern sense is "an artificial vagina." Merkins were and are often equipped with such decorative "wigs," but that is not the primary sense of the word nor is it the sense Humbert is employing in his reference to his first wife.

Boyd's note glossing Humbert's reference to Ronsard's "*Je te salue o vermeillete fante*" (which Humbert modernizes as "fente") presents a small inaccuracy. The final term would be better translated as "cleft" rather than the "slit" which one finds in both Boyd's annotation and Appel's. (The first photostat draft of Appel's annotations translates the passage as "crevice," which Nabokov changes to "slit," which Appel then employs and Boyd adopts.) What neither annotator notes is that this is not the title but the first lines of a poem by Ronsard. The poem, whose title is "*L.M.F.*," went unpublished from 1619 to 1919 and is from Ronsard's *Livret de folatrics* (first published in 1553). (It was removed from the edition of 1560, replaced for the 1584 edition and the successive editions up until 1619 before being omitted from every edition of Ronsard's work until that of 1919.) Boyd and Appel cite its source as the "*Blason du sexe*

feminin." This work, if it exists, is an extremely rare one (evidence of which is that the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, possessing a *depôt légal* on every work published in France since the 16th century, neither possesses the work nor has any record of it). In any event, if this work exists it is not a work by Ronsard, as Appel and Boyd both indicate, nor was it the work in which the poem was first published, but an anthology or reference work of some sort. Boyd, who appears to take his note from Appel repeats the errors of that note along with an addition. He defines the term *blason*, as "a short poem in praise or criticism of a certain subject," which is not correct. A *blason* is such a poem in praise of a certain subject. A poem in "criticism" of a certain subject is a "*contre-blason*." To be absolutely precise, however, as Nabokov, in his notes and elsewhere was so fond of being, Ronsard's poem is neither, but instead belongs to the genre "*blason anatomique*."

—Leland de la Durantaye, Cambridge, Massachusetts

HIPPOPOTAMIANS IN ARDIS

Incorporating myriad puns, anagrams and coded allusions, *Ada* is the most playful of Nabokov's novels. And while literary playfulness—even Nabokov's literary playfulness—is often dismissed as unserious (if not juvenile), most of *Ada*'s "jokes" are deeply serious. Of *Ada*'s many jokes, few are more serious than a certain throwaway pun delivered by Van Veen.

Chapter Fourteen of *Ada*'s first part locates the Veens in the garden at Ardis, having tea. As tea is served, the Veens' neighbor Greg Erminin arrives, his arrival the spur that kick-starts a wide-ranging discussion of religion. As the conversation leaps between topics—from Judaism to dietary laws to crucifixion—eight-year-old Lucette grows increasingly

confused. Finally, unfamiliar with a long word, she turns to her cousin Van for help:

Lucette was puzzled by a verb Greg had used. To illustrate it for her, Van joined his ankles, spread both arms horizontally, and rolled up his eyes.

"When I was a little girl," said Marina crossly, "Mesopotamian history was taught practically in the nursery."

"Not all little girls can learn what they are taught," observed Ada.

"Are we Mesopotamians?" asked Lucette.

"We are Hippopotamians," said Van. (91)

Ada is rife with quips like Van's portmanteau "Hippopotamians," and one suspects that critics who posit the novel's playfulness as distracting (or worse) have such quips in mind. If at first—even second—glance, Van's quip appears a silly cast-off, disclosive only of a compulsion to juggle sounds, understood within a broader context the pun becomes a concise iteration of the lopsided love-triangle described in *Ada*.

A subtle pattern of interwoven details locates Van and Ada, as lovers, in the Mesopotamia crossly mentioned by Marina. If Mesopotamia is, etymologically, the "land between two rivers," Van and Ada, in their efforts to thwart Lucette's curiosity, repeatedly visit "Caliph Island" (406), a lush isle in the middle of the bifurcating Ladore River. Moreover, if Mesopotamia, where ancient Babylon was situated, is often referred to as Babylonia, not only are three "Babylonian Willows" growing on Caliph Island (216), but a "Babylonian butterfly" appears at the "forest fork" where Van and Ada separate following their first summer together (158). And finally, if the Biblical Garden of Eden is placed by tradition in Mesopotamia, beside the Shattal River (formed of the confluing Tigris and Euphrates rivers), Van and Ada share their first intimate moment while Ada is climbing a "Shattal Tree," (78), a tree later referred to as both the "tree of