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NOTES AND BRIEF COMMENTARIES

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ANOTHER ADELAIDA: DOSTOEVSKY'S *THE IDIOT* IN NABOKOV'S *ADA*

Ada (full name Adelaida) Veen is the main female character in Nabokov's *Ada* (1969). Multiple origins of the name, uncommon in Russia, are possible. Russian "ad" (hell) is an obvious component. Hence the well-studied duality of Ardis, and the entire planet of Antiterra (Demonia), as both heaven and hell. "Adah, in the verse tragedy *Cain: A Mystery* (1821), by Lord Byron, is both wife and twin sister of Cain" (Boyd, B. AdaOnline, <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/>).

Ada Veen's proficiency in science brings to mind a relevant, real female scholar, Ada Lovelace (1815-1852), the daughter of the same Lord Byron. This Ada famously worked with Charles Babbage on developing his Analytical Machine, a prototype of modern computers (never built), and is considered the first computer programmer. Babbage called her "The Enchantress of Numbers." Ada Lovelace, also interested in phrenology and mesmerism, described her approach as "poetical science." Her father, Lord Byron, of course, is the most important literary influence in Russian literature in relation to Pushkin; Nabokov himself discussed Byron many times, particularly in his *Eugene Onegin* commentary.

The name Ada, amazingly, appears in one of the earliest of Nabokov's works: his translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (*Anya v strane chudes*, Berlin: Gamaiun, 1923). The young translator deployed the "Anya-Ada-Asya" word sequence (Doublets game, or world golf, invented by Lewis Carroll himself) to emphasize his Anya's transformations (for more detail, see: Fet, V. "Beheading First: On Nabokov's Translation of Lewis Carroll. *The Nabokovian*, 2009, 63, 52-63).

It appears, however, that *Ada* scholars have overlooked the only Adelaida existing in major Russian literature. It is Adelaida Yepanchina, the middle daughter of General Yepanchin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868). All three daughters have names starting with "A": Alexandra, Adelaida, Aglaya (compare this to Nabokov's Anya-Ada-Asya).

Ada famously starts with a mockery of Tolstoy novel's very first sentence. "In inverting Anna Karenin's opening sentence, Van tries to claim that, unlike Tolstoy's novel, *Ada* is no tragedy but the happy story of a unique family" (Boyd, B. *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985, 103). It appears that this important beginning might also refer to *The Idiot*, another opposite of a happy family chronicle. The Yepanchins, to whom we are introduced in the very first paragraphs of *The Idiot*, are indeed a very unhappy family. The novel's protagonist Prince Myshkin, a Christ-like figure, is mentally unstable and his attempts at family life are disastrous. Myshkin is given Tolstoy's first name and patronymic, Lev Nikolaevich—a sign of Dostoevsky's constant argument with Tolstoy (the two never met).

Like Nabokov's *Ada*, Dostoevsky's *Adelaida* is an artist. She paints nothing but landscapes and portraits that she never can finish, according to Mrs. Yepanchina, her mother. This is how Dostoevsky has *Adelaida* introduce herself: "For two years, I cannot find an idea for my new painting. Prince, give me an idea." So it is to her that Prince Myshkin makes a remarkable suggestion, to paint an "invitation to a beheading": "...indeed, I had a thought... to paint the face of a sentenced man, one minute before the guillotine would fall, when he is already standing on the scaffold, just before he would lie on that block."

Adelaida does not speak much but when her opinion is needed she ignores her family's ironical attitude toward the Prince. She is the only female character in *The Idiot* who is genuinely interested in Myshkin and in his words. All others take him for a fool, she takes him for a philosopher; all others mock him, she asks him to teach her and give her an idea for a painting. *Adelaida* is the first, and the only one, to defend Myshkin in front of her mother and *Aglaya*. One can see an inner connection between her and Myshkin: while everyone is making fun of him, *Adelaida* says thoughtfully: "You are a philosopher and came to teach us... teach us, please." This is the most exact characteristic of Myshkin, and the highest praise that he will ever hear. "...You have the face of a kind sister," says Myshkin to *Adelaida*, who clearly has a special place in Dostoevsky's heart—and is rewarded with a happy ending: she happily marries one "Prince Shch."

Let us now turn to the real-life prototypes of the Yepanchin family in *The Idiot*. This, unexpectedly, will bring us to the *Ada*

Lovelace connection again. Her younger Russian counterpart, indeed another “Enchantress of Numbers,” is the famous, precocious mathematician Sofia Kovalevskaya (1850-1891). In the best tradition of Nabokovian puzzles or chess problems, we discover that Sofia’s *older sister* Anna was a prototype of Adelaida Yepanchina’s *younger sister*, Aglaya.

It is commonly believed that the Yepanchins are loosely based on the family of the General Vasily Korvin-Krukovsky. Dostoevsky was a frequent guest of this family after his return from Siberian exile. The general had two daughters, Anna (the older) and Sofia (the younger). Anna’s first attempts at writing prose were encouraged by Dostoyevsky. Both girls were rebellious, knew and read Chernyshevsky, and both later married untraditionally.

In 1865, Dostoevsky (then 44) proposed to 21 year-old Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya (1843-1887), and was rejected. Anna is considered to be a prototype of a beautiful and cruel “nihilist,” the 20 year-old Aglaya Yepanchina in *The Idiot*. In the novel, Aglaya is the youngest of three sisters who, in the end, marries a Polish count and revolutionary, and converts to Catholicism (a great sin for Dostoevsky, and a reference to the Krukovsky family’s Polish roots). As if following the novelist’s prophecy, the real Anna Korvin-Krukovskaya married in 1870 a French army colonel, and a revolutionary, Victor Jaclard. Together with Sofia and her husband, the Jaclards were active in the Paris Commune in 1871. Later, Anna Jaclard became a well-known writer in Russia. She maintained her friendship with Dostoevsky.

The Idiot’s first chapter appeared in 1868. The same year, 18 year-old Sofia Korvin-Krukovskaya married Vladimir Kovalevsky, in a “fictitious marriage” (exactly as recommended in Chernyshevsky’s *What To Be Done*, 1862-1863), in order to be able to be educated in Europe. At some point, the marriage was consummated, and in 1878 they had a daughter. Vladimir, who became a famous paleontologist and a personal friend of Charles Darwin, committed suicide in 1883. Sofia Kovalevskaya became the first female Professor of Mathematics in history (Stockholm University, 1884). Her discoveries in mathematics continued the work of Leonhard Euler (see *Ada* about Van Veen who “could solve an Euler-type problem or learn by heart Pushkin’s *Headless Horseman* poem in less than twenty minutes”).

In her 1890 autobiography (Kovalevskaya, S.V. *Vospominaniya. Povesti*. Nauka: Moscow, 1974), Sofia remembers in great detail Dostoevsky's courting Anna. Sofia was 15 years old, and fell in love with the famous writer herself. "I was sitting close, without interrupting the conversation, looking at Fyodor Mikhaylovich, and listened with great attention to everything he was saying. He seemed to me now an absolutely different man, very young, sincere, kind, and intelligent. "Is it true that he is 43 years old?" I thought. "Is it possible that he is three times older than me?"

Sofia's genuine interest in Dostoevsky certainly reminds us of Adelaida's attention to Myshkin: while her parents are suspicious and skeptical about Dostoevsky ("What do we know about him? Only that he is a journalist and a former inmate. A good recommendation!"), Sofia knows that he is a great writer. "He was like a friend"; the 15-year old girl "immediately felt that Dostoevsky was very kind and close" to her.

We might see Sofia Kovalevskaya reflected also in Princess Sofia Temnosiny, the ancestral female in the Veen line in *Ada*. (Temnosinys were a real ancient princely family, which expired only in the 19th century). "Princess Sofia" is reminiscent of real Russian female rulers: Princess Sofia Romanova, sister of Peter the Great; or even Princess Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg, better known as Empress Catherine the Great. However, the name also refers to Sophia as an ancient symbol of Wisdom—Judaic, Gnostic, and Christian, as the martyr mother of Saints Faith, Hope, and Charity (three Christian virtues; 1 Corinthians 13:13). In the Russian tradition, Charity becomes Love, and the triple saints are *Vera, Nadezhda, Liubov'*. This Sophia was also the most important symbol for Russian Symbolists of the Silver Age (Vladimir Solovyov, Blok, Bely, etc.). The Latin equivalent of Sophia is Sapiientia, which directly connects us to the Linnaean name of our species.

The complex, mocking biography of Chernyshevsky in Chapter 4 of Nabokov's *Dar* (*The Gift*, 1938) is "based" on an imaginary work of one Strannolyubsky ("Strangelove"), "his best biographer." The real Alexander Nikolaevich Strannolyubsky (1839-1903) was a St. Petersburg mathematician who tutored Chernyshevsky's son, and is in fact playfully mentioned in *The Gift* as "the critic's father?" (Strannolyubsky's name appears in a letter to Chernyshevsky from his wife Olga Sokratovna dated 4 August 1888). Twenty years earlier

(1866-68), this real Strannolyubsky was also the first tutor of young Sofia Korvin-Krukovskaya, just before she married Vladimir Kovalevsky and moved to Europe (Vorontsova, L.A. *Sofya Kovalevskaya*, Molodaya Gvardiya: Moscow, 1957). It was Sofia Kovalevskaya who suggested that Sasha Chernyshevsky should study mathematics (A. Sklyarenko, NABOKOV-L, 8 June 2013). Sofia's tutor in Berlin in 1870-1874 was the famous German mathematician, Karl Weierstrass (1815-1897), who also taught Nikolai Bugaev, father of the poet Andrey Bely.

In *Ada*, the Korvin-Krukovsky family could also provide one of the sources of "Raven"—the nickname of Ada Veen's father, Demon Veen. The name "Korvin" (Korwin, Corvin) is common in Poland and Hungary, and derives from Corvinus (Lat., raven). Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490), the Renaissance "raven king" of Hungary, who had the largest library in Europe, was part of Korvin-Krukovsky's family legend. In fact, "Korvin" was formally added to the Krukovsky surname only in 1858, when the vain General proved his aristocratic family connections (V. P. Rumyantseva, *Rodoslovnaya Korvin-Krukovskikh* [*Genealogy of Korvin-Krukovskys*]. *Nevelsky sbornik*, St. Petersburg, 1997, 2, 146–157.) The Polish version of the name, known from the 13th century, is Slepowron (Blind Raven); their coat-of-arms featured a raven holding a golden ring in its beak. An ardent *Ada* scholar would be tempted to decode "Corvin" as "Cor Vin" (Lat., "heart of Veen").

The timeline in *Ada*'s Part 1 is 1863-1888. Scholars have not really explained why. This blissful time in Amerussia, however, corresponds to some particularly tumultuous years in real Russia: from the hope of the Great Reforms of Alexander II (1861) to his assassination by "the possessed" terrorists of the People's Will in 1881, two months after Dostoevsky's death. In the literary context, these decades were the formative time of the greatest Russian prose. We know that Nabokov admired Tolstoy and denied Dostoevsky the rank of a great writer. On Antiterra, Tolstoy is much more visible, and references to Dostoevsky are hidden, but in real history, both were most important figures who exerted immense influence on all future writers on Earth.

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