

## Mikołaj Wiśniewski

### ADA: MAKE-BELIEVE STORIES

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What makes lovemaking and reading resemble each other most is that within both of them times and spaces open, different from measurable time and space.

Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*

“In reading, one should notice and fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes *after* the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected,”<sup>1</sup> Nabokov writes in the introduction to his *Lectures on Literature*. This nod to criticism’s pale fire may seem insincere, given the caustic quips he frequently directed at any hint of moral, lesson, message, or idea in literature. In one of his television interviews he claimed that he felt no desire to “touch hearts, and I don’t even want to affect minds very much. [...] I leave the field of ideas to Doctor Schweitzer and Doctor Zhivago.” He did not agree that *Lolita* could be called a satire, since satire, as he observed, “impl[ies] a purpose, an object”; he felt closer to the concept of parody, which he defined as a “game.” This specifically Nabokovian love of detail and distaste for cerebral, abstract generalizations can be noted at the beginning of his autobiography: remembering his English governess, Nabokov complains of her penchant for reading him “a shamelessly allegorical story, ‘Beyond the Blue Mountains,’” which, fortunately, “contained enough exciting details

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1980), 1.

to make one forget its ‘message.’”<sup>2</sup> A little earlier, we find out that one of the first things to register in four-year-old Vova’s memory was a picture hanging over the couch in his mother’s living room, where he loved to play — it was “one of those Napoleonic-battle pictures in which the episodic and the allegoric are the real adversaries [...]”<sup>3</sup>

The works of his favorite writer, Tolstoy, whose *Anna Karenina* he considered the greatest novel in all of literature, represented just such a battlefield for Nabokov. At the same time, he understood perfectly why “many people approach Tolstoy with mixed feelings. They love the artist in him and are intensely bored by the preacher.”<sup>4</sup> Although he stressed that it was not easy to “separate Tolstoy the preacher from Tolstoy the artist,”<sup>5</sup> it is hard to resist the conclusion that for Nabokov, Tolstoy’s ideas “do not matter much in comparison to a book’s imagery and magic.”<sup>6</sup>

Let us examine how Nabokov reads *Anna Karenina*: in a lecture of over 100 pages, he devotes two or three sentences to the novel’s moral message. There are two things that interest him: imagery (details, particular episodes, individual words) and the novel’s structure – firstly consisting in the repetition and interweaving of certain motifs, and secondly, the masterful manipulation of time. Nabokov almost entirely sidesteps the question of Anna’s guilt; he spends no time mulling over the question of the hypocrisy of Russia’s elites in the novel; he does not contemplate the social situation of women in Russia in the 1870s. Instead, he concentrates on the “immortal” details: on the finger held up by Oblonsky as he shaves to inform his valet that his sister is coming to Moscow without her husband; he delights in the description of the *иллюпающие* and *шершавые* (“limply plopping” and “scabrous”) oysters eaten by Oblonsky.<sup>7</sup> Nabokov finds the final and most philosophical chapter of the book, depicting Levin’s conversion, as rough going. What redeems it is the beetle Levin happens to catch sight of on a blade of grass: “What interests us here is not what Lyovin thought [...] but that little bug that expresses so neatly the turn, the switch, the gesture of thought.”<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, it seems, is more on the side of Anna, with her impatient, “desperate passions”<sup>9</sup>; Anna is like

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1981), 93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> These are the exact words Countess Vronskaya uses in discussing Anna’s suicide: “Why, what is the meaning of such desperate passions? It was all to show herself something out of the way...”. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett. New York: The Heritage Press, 1952, 891.

the children in Levin's thoughts who have a constant craving for "something of our own, and new" and want something more than what "has always been so, and always will be so. And it's all always the same."<sup>10</sup> Levin attains a state which could be called metaphysical passionlessness; Anna represents the opposite front. Her "problem" is not that she is jealous of Vronsky; "I'm not jealous," she says, "but I'm unsatisfied."<sup>11</sup> Neither does the problem consist in pangs of conscience. Anna does not want to renounce her ardor; she does not want to be reconciled with the fact that the passion which joined her to Vronsky has begun to weaken. Moreover, she also represents the artist Tolstoy — his "sensual temperament" and the delight (Nabokov has no hesitation in using the word) "that his magic produces in us."<sup>12</sup>

This is where Anna and Ada meet: the names of both ladies are palindromic<sup>13</sup>; in the first sentence of *Ada*, Nabokov quotes the first sentence of *Anna Karenina*, reversing it by 180 degrees<sup>14</sup> (one of a great many such references throughout the entire novel); most importantly, Ada's name is homophonic with the novel's alternate title: *Ada, or Ardor* ('אדא ןא 'ארדור). The titular pun contains the suggestion that the passion in question is not only the illicit love between the two protagonists, but also — and perhaps chiefly — the delight in language, both at the level of individual words (e.g. "in a surge of prepupational locomotion,"<sup>15</sup> describing butterfly larvae), and that of narrative structures: we thus have excellent samples of realist prose, romance, the novel of adventure, and the epistolary novel. *Ada* also has no shortage of fairy tale and fantasy elements of the Lewis Carroll variety, and even a dose of science fiction à la H. G. Wells. There are bits of dialogue that Jane Austen could have written; scenes ripped whole from the novels of the Marquis de Sade; the economy and precision of Flaubert; Gogolian grotesquerie; metanarrative exercises in the style of Beckett; as well as something of the *nouveau roman*—namely, something reminiscent of Alain Robbe-Grillet, highly esteemed by Nabokov, in the description of the incestuous *ménage à trois*. Finally, in the penultimate part of the novel, there appears a philosophical treatise on time and memory in the spirit of Bergson, though it is unclear how seriously we are meant to take the ideas expressed there, considering that, as we read, "it suddenly occurred to [the author of the treatise] that all his

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 914.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 874.

<sup>12</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures in Russian Literature*, 122.

<sup>13</sup> In Polish, the author's native language, Ada features in an atypically long palindrome: "Ada, panna, pocałowana woła: Co pan napada?" (Ada, the young maid, kissed, calls out: What's come over you, sir?).

<sup>14</sup> Tolstoy: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." *Anna Karenina*, 1. Nabokov: "'All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike,' says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel (*Anna Arkadieivitch Karenina*, transfigured into English by R. G. Stonelower, Mount Tabor Ltd., 1880)." *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, London: Penguin Books, 1969, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 50.

published works [...] were not epistemic tasks set to himself by a savant, but buoyant and bellicose exercises in literary style”.<sup>16</sup>

In one sentence, no less than in the novel as a whole, Nabokov can juggle a staggering number of details all the while playing with “the Texture of Time”<sup>17</sup> — slowing it down, speeding it up, performing *bravura voltes*. A typical sentence in *Ada* gives the impression of being intended primarily not to develop the action of the novel but to expand the text in a new discursive direction, as if the sentence desired to wallow in its own syntactic possibilities before finally looping around so as to continue being read an infinite number of times. Below, the beginning of the second chapter — the story of Demon and Marina’s romance — is peppered with good examples of the sort of challenges the novel presents to a translator:

As an actress, she had none of the breath-taking quality that makes the skill of mimicry seem, at least while the show lasts, worth even more than the price of such footlights as insomnia, fancy, arrogant art; yet on that particular night, with soft snow falling behind the plush and the paint, *la Durmanska* (who had paid the great Scott, her impresario, seven thousand gold dollars a week for publicity alone, plus a bonny bonus for every engagement) had been from the start of the trashy ephemeron (an American play based by some pretentious hack on a famous Russian romance) so dreamy, so lovely, so stirring, that Demon (not *quite* a gentleman in amorous matters) made a bet with his orchestra-seat neighbor, Prince N., bribed a series of green-room attendants, and then, in a *cabinet reculé* (as a French writer of an earlier century might have mysteriously called that little room in which the broken trumpet and poodle hoops of a forgotten clown, besides many dusty pots of colored grease, happened to be stored) proceeded to possess her between two scenes (Chapter Three and Four of the martyred novel).<sup>18</sup>

Nabokov lets it be clearly understood that *Ada* personifies the eroticism, or rather, the auto-eroticism of the text: “Her spectacular handling of subordinate clauses, her parenthetical asides, her sensual stressing of adjacent monosyllables [...] — all this somehow finished by acting upon Van, as artificial excitements and exotic torture-caresses might have done, in an aphrodisiac sinistral direction that he both resented and perversely enjoyed”.<sup>19</sup> *Ada* generates equally contradictory emotions in readers, and critics (even those who unanimously praised

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

Nabokov's earlier novels) have expressed such extreme opinions about it a synthesis thereof would perhaps demand that we call the book a pretentious masterpiece.

In the fragment cited earlier, we saw another characteristic feature of *Ada*, the “invasion of details” completely superfluous to the story being told (the hoop through which a trained poodle jumps), but which precisely for that reason achieve autonomy, transcend the novel's narrative logic and become a feat of artistic caprice. Nabokov thus “plays the fool” (playing his clown's horn) not only at the level of structure: the whole story of Ada and Van branches out — like the family tree at the beginning of the book — in a row of “intergradations and interweavings,”<sup>20</sup> such that at a certain point it becomes difficult to tell what is the “main” part of this bizarre family chronicle and what constitutes a digression which, after the manner of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, has veered out of control.

This heady mixture is topped off with Nabokov's beloved linguistic conundrums and chess problems (the solution to the latter often depends on an apparently inconsequential detail, e.g., merely moving the rook from h1 to g1). Reading *Ada*, not unlike reading *Pale Fire* or *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, gives one the feeling of wrestling with an intricately layered enigma whose key lies within reach if one can only stay focused. *Ada* leaves no doubt that it is keeping something hidden: concealment and masks, as well as deception and fakery, are undoubtedly among the novel's main themes. Van and Ada use an invented code in their love letters which incorporates lines from Rimbaud's “Mémoire”, and Marvell's “Garden.” Here it becomes immediately obvious that we are reading a coded message which Nabokov kindly helps us decipher in the following chapter. Yet that the message, we may assume, should in fact be read as a warning to keep our wits about us at all times while reading *Ada*. Let us consider another example.

In part 1, chapter 5 Van comes to Ardis Hall, where he will spend the long summer and seduce Ada. He gets out at the railway station, but to his disappointment nobody is waiting for him: “In a miniature of the imagination, he had seen a saddled horse prepared for him; there was not even a trap.”<sup>21</sup> After a time there comes “a hackney coach.”<sup>22</sup> Van decides to take advantage of the opportunity presenting itself and gets into the vehicle, which then is referred to as an “old *calèche*”<sup>23</sup> (a rather elegant carriage, not to be confused with an ordinary

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<sup>20</sup> In the television interview mentioned earlier, Nabokov states that: “I am not so much interested in the philosophy of the book as I am in weaving the thing in a certain way, in those intergradations and interweavings of certain themes and sub-themes.”

<sup>21</sup> Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

coach); but already on the way to Ardis the terminology changes to “sensitive runabout,”<sup>24</sup> which in fact refers to a small automobile. We then learn that this automobile is a “clockwork taxi.”<sup>25</sup> The “coachman” also changes to a “chauffeur.”<sup>26</sup> Yet when he arrives at his destination, we are in for a surprise: “A servant in waiting took [Van’s] horse.”<sup>27</sup>

And now for the return journey in part 1, chapter 25. The family servant Bouteillan is to drop Van off using the “family motorcar,”<sup>28</sup> but Van himself gets behind the wheel: “*Remouvez votre bottom, I will drive.*”<sup>29</sup> At one point he stops the car in order — he says — “to pick some boletes for Father”<sup>30</sup> (in reality, to say goodbye to Ada at their appointed place), leaps into a grove, and when he returns to the road... “Morio, his favorite black horse, stood waiting for him, held by young Moore. He thanked the groom with a handful of Stellas and galloped off, his gloves wet with tears.”<sup>31</sup>

What then is the purpose of all of these mysterious transformations, which during a quick reading can easily escape our attention? On the one hand, Nabokov appears to be playing a game of cat-and-mouse with the reader, testing and toying with him. On the other hand, we imperceptibly become aware that we have been drawn into the realm of fabrication, of extravagant fantasy. Note that the steed mounted by Van must be imaginary; imagination is clearly taking the place of reality. We thus start, at the very beginning of this long chronicle, to have doubts as to its verisimilitude; the inconsistencies we have caught may be seen as proof that the chronicler is a manipulator who constructs rather than reconstructs. This incurs further doubts: who exactly is the narrator of this story? Van? Ada? Van *and* Ada? Or someone else entirely who is standing in the shadows — some arch-manipulator, perhaps the one who occasionally makes his presence felt by posing as the editor? This is precisely why *Ada*, together with *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, is considered — in Brian McHale’s words — a text “of absolute epistemological uncertainty: we know that something is happening here, but we don’t know what it is [...]”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 128. Brian Boyd, in his detailed discussion of this fragment in *Nabokov’s Ada*, notes that Moore, who unexpectedly appears in place of Bouteillan, is an anagram of Romeo, while Morio may bring to mind the Moor, Othello. Both references are fitting, anticipating as they do Van’s jealousy and the tragic consequences of his romance with Ada (the death of Lucette). Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Brian McHale, *Post Modernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 18.

All of these elements — the linguistic games, the focus on form, the parodying of literary genres, the radical undermining of the narrator's reliability — caused Nabokov's oeuvre, at least since *Lolita*, to be hailed by McHale and others as postmodernist in the 1970s and to be tagged with the then-fashionable label of "the literature of exhaustion."<sup>33</sup> A similar opinion is expressed in *Ada* by Van's father, Demon, who replies to a letter from his son in the following words: "Your epistolary style is so involute that I should suspect the presence of a code, had I not known you belonged to the Decadent School of writing, in company of naughty old Leo and consumptive Anton."<sup>34</sup> Nabokov, here, presumably writes not only with reference to that lovable rogue Van, but also with an ironic nod to the new (in the late 1960s) strain in critical opinion regarding his own writing. *Yes, I am a postmodernist*, he seems here to be saying, *but not to any greater degree than Tolstoy or Chekhov*. In *Ada*, a whole series of such reflexive auto-commentaries are present; for example, we read: "Old storytelling devices may be parodied only by very great and inhuman artists."<sup>35</sup>

The idea of calling the author of *Ada* a postmodernist, and in particular an "inhuman" one, has been fiercely disputed by Brian Boyd. Despite Nabokov's reluctance to allow literature to intrude into the realm of ideas, Boyd has, with admirable meticulousness, analyzed and attempted to systematize the ethical and philosophical implications of novels that are often discussed largely in terms of pastiche, wordplay, and charades or formal experiments — novels such as *Pale Fire* or *Ada* itself. Above all, Boyd argues that reading Nabokov is not a journey into the domain of pure fantasy where epistemological questions are suspended or — in McHale's reading — totally obfuscated. The key word in this argument is "totally." Boyd, as opposed to McHale, does not consider the clues left by Nabokov to be deliberately misleading, intended to conduct the reader into a vicious circle of false interpretations. In other words, Boyd shows that each of Nabokov's worlds contains a key which allows us not only to discover *what in fact happens* at the level of plot, but which also leads us to a clearly defined ethical and, as Boyd underscores with particular energy, metaphysical position. "It is easy, though, to see how much attention [Nabokov] pays to surfaces—and to conclude, because we cannot immediately discern what lies behind them, that surfaces of scene and style are all Nabokov's interested in."<sup>36</sup> In Boyd's opinion *Ada* is

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<sup>33</sup> See John Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, Barth* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974).

<sup>34</sup> Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 391.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>36</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, ix.

not only “one of the most morally stringent of novels,”<sup>37</sup> but also, alongside *Speak, Memory* and *Pale Fire*, one of the most philosophical. “[T]he core and mantle of Nabokov’s philosophical world” is “determining the position of consciousness in the universe [...]. Perhaps most intriguing of all for Nabokov [is] the possibility of human consciousness breaking through its limitations to higher states of truth,”<sup>38</sup> which for Boyd equals the discovery of “conscious design”<sup>39</sup> in the world.

In this view, Nabokov’s oeuvre — seen against a background dominated by the “Decadent School” of late twentieth century literature — appears as a secret garden where metaphysics and eschatology find shelter; its formalism, metanarrativity, and postmodernist pastiches thus become (as befits an entomologist) a kind of intellectual camouflage. Nabokov appears to warn the reader about short-sighted passion for surface style in one of the rare moments when the Levin in him gets the better of the Anna: “I would say that the main favor I ask of the serious critic is sufficient perceptiveness to understand that whatever term or trope I use, my purpose is not to be facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure but to express what I feel and think with the utmost truthfulness and perception.”<sup>40</sup> It is hardly surprising that that particular quotation served as Boyd’s epigraph in his book on *Ada*, in which he lays out in detail his vision of “Nabokov’s philosophical world.”<sup>41</sup> Many critics strongly disagree with Boyd’s interpretation, which traces a rather definite metaphysical stance in Nabokov’s work; to the extent that those critics are inclined to see any kind of “philosophy” expressed by the author of *Lolita* at all, it would be an antimetaphysical philosophy of life.<sup>42</sup> The existence of this debate renders it impossible to read *Ada* — as perhaps we had initially planned — purely through the prism of “local delights,” those “sunny trifles” of Tolstoy’s. “Ada” is undoubtedly a synonym for artistic ardor, “desperate passions” for language and literature; but of course the name “Ada” can be read backwards too, and then the ardor of the title reveals itself to be considerably less “sunny.” It begins to cast a shadow, to conceal something, to keep silence, to displace something. We must therefore take a closer look at this other dark side of *Ada*, where our path will be lit by the “moonshine of generalization.”

Whether or not we agree with Boyd’s view of Nabokov-as-philosopher, it is hard to deny that *Ada* touches on problems that lie within the traditional concerns of the field of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>40</sup> Alden Whitman, “Vladimir Nabokov, 72 Today, Writing a New Novel.” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1971.

<sup>41</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*. See esp. part 2: “Nabokov and the World.”

<sup>42</sup> A good example of this is Martin Hägglund’s recent polemic with Boyd in the pages of *New Literary History* (Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 2006, 447-467).

metaphysics; firstly, time. The entire novel (not only the fourth part, in which Van deliberates on “the texture of time”) is more or less an essay on time; it deals with the subject directly (“That’s very clever, darling,” said Van, “– except that time itself is motionless and changeless”<sup>43</sup>), but also, with equal precision, *uses time*: the first and longest part focuses almost exclusively on the events of one summer; the succeeding parts are increasingly shorter (each about half the length of the previous one), but describe increasingly longer periods in the life of Ada and Van. This creates quite a specific effect: on the one hand, the summer in which Ada and Van’s romance began seems to stand somehow outside of time, or rather, before its beginning; it rises to the rank of an earthly, sensual paradise whose delights take up well over half of the novel. (It is no coincidence, incidentally, that the name of the estate where the action of the first part takes place, Ardis, resembles and contains within it the word *paradise*, and the road toward it — as noted earlier — leads through a series of fantastic metamorphoses.) Secondly, towards the end of the novel, time undergoes a kind of stretching and the narration densifies, so that *Ada* appears to lean into eternity, extending beyond its boundaries, becoming its own epitaph. The last paragraphs of the novel look like a blurb praising Van/Nabokov’s work, and some editions (such as Penguin 1970) actually feature this blurb on the back cover.

Next to the problem of time, *Ada* is rather obsessively devoted to the contemplation and simultaneously *negation* of transience and death. Near the end Van, in one of many autocommentaries on his chronicle, declares that “death should not appear too soon in the chronicle, and yet it should permeate the first amorous scenes”<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, though the sunny landscapes of Ardis do not at first glance appear to have any hint of mourning, by the very first page the editor (whose signature “[Ed.]” rhymes with “dead”) has informed us that with a couple of exceptions “all the persons mentioned by name in this book are dead.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the chronicler himself frequently gives the impression of writing from beyond the grave; at one moment he interrupts himself with the following: “I am weak. I write badly. I may die tonight.”<sup>46</sup> He thereby sounds just like Beckett’s Malone, who, bed-ridden by a mysterious paralysis, tells a variety of yarns and finds amusement in the telling (“Now it is a game, I am going to play”<sup>47</sup>) if only to pass the time remaining to him and, for a while, distract himself from the encroaching darkness. Was something similar going on in the case of

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<sup>43</sup> Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 379.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, New York: Grove Press, 1991, 180.

*Ada*'s narrator? Does this mean the fairy tale of Ardis was a soothing fabrication? And if so, what sort of hurt was it meant to soothe?

Before trying to answer that question, we should add what Nabokov often called “the hereafter” to the list of metaphysical motifs present in *Ada*.<sup>48</sup> The mysterious Terra, believed to exist by the characters in *Ada*, can be considered a posthumous Beyond or parallel otherworld. The action in the novel, let us remember, takes place on the planet Demonia (also called Antiterra), which resembles Earth's reflection in a crooked mirror, or rather, Earth crossed with the world of fairy tales (flying carpets are as common as bicycles there). The mutual relations between Demonia and Terra form the main source of the epistemological confusion to which McHale refers. Terra seems identical to our Earth, from which the conclusion might be drawn that Demonia—from the earthly perspective—is “the Beyond,” though it is certainly no paradise. Demonia is constituted by a more “cloudless” version of twentieth-century Earth. Wars do take place there, of course, but all of them are fought somewhere in distant Tartary, “beyond the Golden Curtain”;<sup>49</sup> the rest of the civilized world (or rather, antiworld) lives in comfort and peace, creating a unified, rather unusual Americo-Russo-European culture. It is a vision somewhat akin to Wells's *Time Machine*, where humanity in the distant future is divided between the carefree Eloi and the subterranean Morlocks. In other words, Demonia is a world from which the nightmare of (earthly) history has been excised, though not entirely successfully. Towards the end of the book a discussion arises concerning the veritable plague of conspiracy theories claiming that political elites are keeping the masses bamboozled under the delusion that Terra and Demonia are separate worlds:

[T]housands of more or less unbalanced people believed [...] in the secret Government-concealed identity of Terra and Antiterra. Demonian reality dwindled to a casual illusion. Actually, we had passed through all that. Politicians, dubbed Old Felt and Uncle Joe in forgotten comics, had really existed. Tropical countries meant, not only Wild Nature Reserves but famine, and death, and ignorance, and shamans, and agents from distant Atomsk. Our world *was*, in fact, mid-twentieth-century. Terra convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake, the bullies and beasts that Germany inevitably generates when fulfilling her dreams of glory. Russian peasants and poets had not been transported to

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<sup>48</sup> In *Pale Fire*, poet John Shade lectures at the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter. Nabokov's wife, Vera, maintained that the central theme of his work was always “the beyond.” Certain critics have gone further than Boyd and attempted to show that Nabokov was a Neoplatonist and gnostic. See, for example, Vladimir Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 144.

Estotiland, and the Barren Grounds, ages ago – they were dying, at this very moment, in the slave camps of Tartary.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, a similar “return of the repressed” appears much earlier, in the paradisiacal gardens of Ardis (part 1, chapter 39). This is one of the most enigmatic scenes in the novel: on Ada’s sixteenth birthday, an extremely opulent picnic has been prepared, and a lovely forest glade chosen for its location. Right away, a group of strange characters appear in the shade of the trees — “a dozen elderly townsmen in dark clothes, shabby and uncouth.”<sup>51</sup> They speak an unknown language, are “ill-shaven,” and drag along “what resembled an old bed-spread.”<sup>52</sup> They are reminiscent... of who, in fact? Migrant workers? Vagrants? Refugees? Perhaps escaped prisoners, who have unexpectedly encroached upon this storybook world? (Beckett comes to mind here, too; we may well read this scene as an inadvertent intrusion of Beckettian characters — those familiar Molloyes, Vladimirs, Estragons — into Nabokov’s novel.). Van makes an effort to ask these uninvited guests to leave, and when they have no reaction to his request: “He asked Marina – did she want him to use force, but sweet, dear Marina said, patting her hair, one hand on her hip, no, let us ignore them.”<sup>53</sup> Finally the strangers leave the glade, with Van musing on this “general relocation”<sup>54</sup> – that it is “a most melancholy and meaningful picture, but meaning what, what?”<sup>55</sup> The question remains unanswered, and the whole little scene appears to be another narratorial caprice on Nabokov’s part. It is only when, near the end of the novel, the repressed nightmare of history begins to return in the fantasies of “more or less unbalanced people”<sup>56</sup> and there is talk of “slave camps,”<sup>57</sup> that these mysterious intruders and the sinister euphemism “relocation”<sup>58</sup> retrospectively take on disquietingly real shapes.

Thus we begin to see more and more clearly that the heavenly Ardis and idyllic Demonica are underpinned by death, cruelty, and violence,<sup>59</sup> and that they maintain their

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 455-456.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

<sup>58</sup> In some translations of *Ada*, “evacuation” is used; both terms indirectly evoke the Holocaust.

<sup>59</sup> This is an appropriate place to remind the reader of the circumstances in which Van was first taken with the idea of writing a family chronicle: Ada was being blackmailed by Kim Beauharnais, who had brought an album of photographs showing her and Van in some compromising situations. Kim — then still a young boy, the son of a servant at Ardis Hall — had secretly photographed the pair of underage lovers. Ada paid a thousand dollars for the album and took the next opportunity to show it to Van, who did not hide his fury: “That ape has vulgarized our own mind-pictures. I will either horsewhip his eyes out or redeem our childhood by making a book of it:

existence thanks only to lies, or the willed ignorance recommended by Marina. It is curious to note, however, that such lying is justified by Van and elevated to the level of an art; though in fact the reverse is true: art itself is here defined as *redemptive falsehood*, a falsehood so perfect that it becomes true. Let us examine this paradox in greater depth.

The ardor referred to in the novel's title is also the *ardor of existential defiance*, whether of life's "sound and fury," or of transience and death. In different ways — in despair, with arrogance, in ecstasy, each time overflowing with "desperate passions" — Van and Ada attempt to conjure up what has been irretrievably lost (including passion itself). In the paradisiacal part of his chronicle Van, looking through Ada's diary from nearly eighty years earlier, declares with nervous enthusiasm that "nothing, nothing, nothing has changed."<sup>60</sup> A little later, these denials acquire a conspicuously hysterical tone: "I despise, I denounce death, dead bodies are burlesque, I refuse to stare at a stone under which a roly-poly old Pole is rotting, let him feed his maggots in peace, the entomologies of death leave me cold, I detest, I despise..."<sup>61</sup> We find similar, though less distraught, conjuring in Nabokov's autobiography. Here is the final passage of the third chapter in *Speak, Memory*, in which Nabokov remembers his childhood in pre-revolutionary Russia:

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leather couch where my uncle sits [...]. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness, a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.<sup>62</sup>

The very essence of remembering (to be expressed even more powerfully in *Ada*) contains within it the soothing lie which puts the past in order, the lie of art or imagination, "without which memory," as Van says, "is a stereotype or a tear-sheet."<sup>63</sup> This concept of *ordering deception* is not, for Nabokov, of an *ideological* nature; it does not mean the ascribing of the past to a particular logical scheme of events; it is the process of artistic transfiguration, the

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*Ardis, a family chronicle.*" Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 320. Since we are reading that family chronicle, we conjecture that the threat on Kim's person was not carried out — that violence has yielded to art. In truth, as we later learn, Van did to Kim exactly what he spoke of doing. The "either-or" alternative thus turns out to be deceiving, just as the "or" in the title is more an indicator of ambiguity than interchangeability.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>62</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, 62.

<sup>63</sup> Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 199.

creation of frame and form, which constitutes, in Ada's words, "something supporting and guarding life."<sup>64</sup> A creative memory for the catalogue of facts, which do not have a coherent meaning, adds *something of oneself*: "memory likes the *otsiebiatina*" (441). *Отсебятина* is precisely how the individual of artistic bent sets reality in order; it is the "novelistic touch,"<sup>65</sup> as Ada calls it, joined to life. Nabokov also likens the use of memory to deform or rewrite the past with the help of *отсебятина* to cinematography and montage:

Someday [...] one's past must be put in order. Retouched, retaken. Certain "wipes" and "inserts" will have to be made in the picture; certain tell-tale abrasions in the emulsion will have to be corrected; "dissolves" in the sequence discreetly combined with the trimming out of unwanted, embarrassing "footage," and definite guarantees obtained; yes, someday — before death with its clapstick closes the scene.<sup>66</sup>

Brian Boyd argues that Nabokov's metaphysics postulate the possibility of discovering "conscious design" in the world.<sup>67</sup> This is not the place to enter into a polemic with Boyd, but excerpts such as the previous one may lead us to conclude that Nabokov treated different kinds of reality-organizing designs or patterns less as objects to be discovered than as to be *created* by an act of artistic fiat. Of course the two positions are reconcilable, if — as in a Romantic prayer — we recognize that the artist gets his power from a divine source. This may be what Van has in mind when he says that on Desdemonia, "artists are the only gods."<sup>68</sup> Or he may intend something quite the opposite... One thing is certain (and here we return to the point of departure of this exploration): in Nabokov's world, the patterns that support and guard life are constructed out of the same "sunny trifles" as that form the artistic sensibility.

Nabokov's reminiscences about General Kuropatkin in the first chapter of *Speak, Memory* illustrate this wonderfully. In 1904, as the general visits the Nabokov family estate, he entertains the five-year-old future writer with match tricks:

This incident had a special sequel fifteen years later, when at a certain point of my father's flight from Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg to southern Russia he was accosted while crossing a bridge, by an old man who looked like a gray-bearded peasant in his sheepskin coat. He asked my father for a light. The next moment each recognized the other. I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>67</sup> Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 408.

imprisonment, but that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through [...]. The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography.<sup>69</sup>

This is the “dream-like, dream-rephrased, legend-distorted past”<sup>70</sup> — just the sort that we must reckon with in *Ada*. A legend can arrest the sinking of everything into oblivion; it creates a protective mesh woven from clues traced by the author. We should remember, however, that in Nabokov's case we can never be sure whether the trail of clues has been left by Providence or is pure language play. “Tropes,” Van Veen mysteriously says, “are the dreams of speech.”<sup>71</sup>

In Italo Calvino's novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, from which the epigraph to this essay was culled, we learn of two cults whose members are fanatical readers of novels. The members of one, the Wings of Light, believe that among the books piling up in the world there exist only a few which express truths. The Wings of Shadow, on the other hand, maintain that “literature's worth lies in its power of mystification, in mystification it has its truth; therefore a fake, as a mystification of a mystification, is tantamount to a truth squared.”<sup>72</sup> A perfect fake becomes a source of knowledge. *Ada* comes down on the side of the Wings of Shadow.

*Translated by Timothy Williams*



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<sup>69</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, 221.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>72</sup> Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, trans. William Weaver, New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1981, 180.