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## NABOKOV'S DUELS WITH LITERATURE

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When Nabokov published his English translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* in 1964 he appended detailed and varied comments several times longer than the main text.<sup>1</sup> Many of these comments relate to duels, including Pushkin's own (such as the last, fatal one), as well as those in the novel itself. These comments point not only to the style, motivation, and behavior of the characters, or to possible influences and parallelisms that Nabokov found with other poets, but also to the duel as an institution, its codex and history.<sup>2</sup> Comprehensive and concentrated at every detail, Nabokov presents this motif studiously and thoroughly, pointing the reader to customs and typical situations. Nevertheless, Nabokov's interest in duels is not limited to his study of Pushkin's life and oeuvre; in several of his literary works — both stories and novels — the duel is the main, or at least one of, the leitmotifs.

In this paper, we will examine two of Nabokov's early stories from his Berlin period, i.e. the period when he published under the pseudonym Sirin, and then trace the duel motif to two of Nabokov's American novels, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Ada*. This analysis will show the span of the stylistic and narrative procedures and meanings that the duel motif acquired in Nabokov's work, transforming itself from a literary into a meta-literary and meta-narrative motif.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A novel in verse*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Comments in the sixth chapter of the novel, which covers the duel between Onegin and Lenski, are at the beginning of volume 3 of the edition mentioned in note 1. See especially vol. 3, 43–51, but also vol. 2, 428–34.

Nabokov published the story “An Affair of Honor” for the first time in Berlin in 1927 under the title “The Scoundrel” (“Подлец”)<sup>3</sup> (The English translation was, in fact, a second version of the story, with the current title dated from 1966; the translator was Nabokov’s son Dmitri). Nabokov’s storytelling strategy in this story consists of building minute and carefully developed backdrops, elaborate and nuanced psychological motivations, and the patterns of motifs and details by which his later prose became known. One such detail is the opening motif of remembrance — the hero cannot remember the precise date of his first acquaintance with a certain Berg, which will later prove to be “accursed.”<sup>4</sup> The thoroughly bureaucratized conscience of the protagonist needs to know the exact time; later in the story, even when totally drunk, he does not forget to wind his watch, of which he is very proud. In the same sentence, we learn the hero’s name, Anton Petrovich, an allusion to Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and his novella *The Duel* (*Дуэль*). In a note accompanying this story in the American edition of *Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, Nabokov mentioned that the duel was a Romantic topos, the interest in which had started to decline with Chekhov’s novella.<sup>5</sup> The patronymic *Petrovich* could refer to Turgenev’s hero Pavel Petrovich, another possible example of taking the duel motif out of its Romantic context

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 199–221; Vladimir Nabokov, *Vozvrashchenie Chorba* (Moscow: АСТ; Kharkov: Folio, 2001 / Владимир Набоков, *Возвращение Чорба*. Москва: АСТ; Харьков: Фолио, 2001), 109-148. There are some differences between the text of the story in Russian and English translation, which are not the products of the translator’s unavoidable interventions, since there are some inserted sentences and significant changes which are believed to originate from Nabokov himself. For example, the sentence “И говорили, что у этого приятеля прегнусная фамилия.” / “And the story was that this friend of his has a hideous name”) (122) was deleted. (This refers to the character with the last name Gnushke (Гнушке): since the homophony is lost in translation, the reason for rejection of this sentence is clear.) Ана Никаноровна (Анна Никаноровна) became Adelaida Albertovna. Deleted also is the sentence “Танька моется”, – с любовью подумал Антон Петрович... (“Tanka is washing herself,” Anton Petrovich thought with love...) (112) which is the protagonist’s thought before he entered the bedroom and found her lover. Because of that, all his later insistence on how much he loved his wife, and his imagining of some of her actions or gestures, sound as a hyperbole and idealization of what was lost. Some additions in the English version are due to cultural differences. For example, instead of “Курдюмовы так и остались бедняками, а он и Берг с тех пор несколько разбогатели” (Kurdyumovs remained poor, he and Berg since then got somewhat richer) (109), in the English version reads: “Kurdyumovs remained poor as they had become after the Revolution, while Anton Petrovich and Berg, even though they were also emigrants, since then got somewhat richer” (Nabokov, *The Stories*, 199). The most important changes concern the intertextual elements, of which there are many more in the English version, i.e. when Mityushin describes the place chosen for the duel and adds that it is not quite the Lermontov’s mountain decor (Ibid, 209), and in particular during an internal monologue of Anton Petrovich, as will be discussed further in this text. It should be borne in mind that the English version originated in 1966, the period when Nabokov was writing *Ada*, a novel in which more than anywhere he used various forms of intertextuality. For detailed account of differences between Russian and English version of the story, see: Hannu Tammola, “Nabokov’s Podlets (‘The Scoundrel’) vs. An Affair of Honor” in *Electronic proceedings of the Kätu symposium on translation and interpreting studies*, 3 (2009): 1-11.

<sup>4</sup> Nabokov, *The Stories*, 199.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 652.

and making a farce of it.<sup>6</sup> The story also contains an allusion to Pushkin who himself alludes to the works of Baratinsky and Bestuzhev-Marlinsky in the mottos of “The Shot,”<sup>7</sup> as well as to Tolstoy and Lermontov.<sup>8</sup> The main character’s last name and the first name and patronymic of his opponent Berg remain unknown until the end — none of the characters in this story has a full first and last name. Considering the attention that Nabokov pays to names throughout his oeuvre, this suggests that in the background of this story about duels, a story about identity may appear.

The first part of the story introduces the polar opposite relationship between Anton Petrovich and Berg. Anton Petrovich is a relatively well-off Russian emigrant in Berlin, a bank clerk who enjoys buying modern ties and handkerchiefs (the only information the narrator gives about Anton Petrovich’s habits at the start, followed up later with new gloves, a very expensive fountain pen, a new black suit that Anton Petrovich worries will be ruined in the duel, etc.). In contrast to the broad-shouldered, thundering, boastful war veteran Berg, Anton Petrovich is short-legged, plump, ugly and shortsighted.

The plot begins with Anton Petrovich’s unannounced and early return from a business trip, where he finds Berg calmly dressing in his bedroom and Anton Petrovich’s wife singing in the bath. Anton Petrovich is almost paralyzed; his movements become automatic. Using external and internal monologues, on occasion very similar to the intermittent and nearly senseless associations accompanying Anna Karenina to the railroad station, where this story also leads the protagonist, the narrator recounts, in detail, Anton Petrovich’s thoughts and emotions following his wife’s infidelity with Berg.

Berg stays calm, but Anton Petrovich trembles and does not know how to behave. “Do something quick...,” he thinks, and starts to take off a glove.<sup>9</sup> The attribute “mechanical” is repeated twice, so that when Anton Petrovich throws a glove at Berg (and misses), it cannot be considered a conscious challenge to a duel: it is as if the glove intervened on its own. Hitting the wall, the glove falls into a pitcher; this image of the floating glove haunts Anton Petrovich as he

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<sup>6</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, transl. Richard Freeborn (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2008). For the duel motif (chapitre 24) see Ibid, 149-172.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt identified the citations as fragments from the works *The Ball* by Baratinsky and *An Evening in a Bivouac* by Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, both from the 1820s and both about duels in which no one perishes. Wolf Schmidt, *Poetsko čitanje Puškinove proze: Belkinove priče*, transl. T. Bekić (Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad: Izdavačka Knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 1999), 153, 173.

<sup>8</sup> Jovan Popov, “Literarnost života: Puškinovi i Ljermontovljevi dvoboji” in *Tumačenje književnog dela i metodika nastave, I*, ed. O. Radulović, 153-177 (Novi Sad: Orpheus, 2008), 153, 165.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov, *The Stories*, 201.

wanders the streets after fleeing his house, leaving behind a message imploringly throwing his wife out of their home, and a hundred mark. Material objects motivate actions throughout: a few hours later, after drinking in the apartment of a certain Mityushin, the idea of a duel dawns on Anton Petrovich (or at least on his tongue). “I want you to be my second,” he says, to interrupt the hallucinatory trembling of the objects in the room: the chessboard sliding towards the bottles, the bottles and the table towards the sofa, the sofa with a sleeping Adelaide towards the window, which itself starts moving.<sup>10</sup> Mityushin is playing chess when Anton Petrovich addresses him; the link between the duel and chess is an important motif in *Luzhin’s Defense* as well.<sup>11</sup>

The situation is comical: Adelaide is snoring and Mityushin at first does not understand what Anton Petrovich wants. The other second, Gnushke, quotes biblical prohibitions of murder and warns: “A cousin of mine was also killed in a duel,” and “If you kill him, they’ll put you in jail for several years; if, on the other hand, you are killed, they won’t bother you.”<sup>12</sup> These seconds hardly fit the traditional types of the ritual, and instead seem a pair of comic chatterboxes, like K’s assistants in the *Castle (Das Schloss)*, or Laurel and Hardy (i.e., Stan and Ollie).<sup>13</sup>

The narrator recounts Anton Petrovich’s thoughts and changing feelings throughout the following day: the uncertainty, the fear that he tries to hide, his perceptions about the actions of people he meets that day. Despite his hopes that the drunken seconds have forgotten about the duel, it has already been arranged for the next day. Berg’s seconds are suggestively named Markov and Archangelsky (in Anton Petrovich’s confused consciousness, the latter soon becomes “Angel”). These names underwent a significant change: in the Russian version Mityushin wrongly calls them Malinin and Burenin (“Малинин и Буренин”) and is corrected by Gnushke — Burenin and Magerovski (“Буренин и полковник Магеровский”).<sup>14</sup> In the English version, Mityushin calls them Marx and Engels, and Gnushke corrects — Markov and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>11</sup> Luzhin’s father, inviting his son to a chess game, not knowing of son’s mastery, “(quoting Pushkin’s doomed duelist): “Let’s start, if you are willing””. Vladimir Nabokov, *Luzhin’s Defense*, transl. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage, 1990), 64.

<sup>12</sup> Nabokov, *The Stories*, 204.

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov’s interest in this type of film comedy is mentioned by a number of researchers of his life and works. For example, Barbara Wyllie, “Nabokov and Cinema” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 215–31; Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 363.

<sup>14</sup> Nabokov, *Vozvrashchenie*, 127. A. Malinin and K. Burenin are authors of school arithmetic texts in the late nineteenth century, available at Google Books ([http://books.google.rs/books/about/Ari%E1%B8%9Fmetika.html?id=6YWekgAACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.rs/books/about/Ari%E1%B8%9Fmetika.html?id=6YWekgAACAAJ&redir_esc=y))

Arkhangelsk. Thus, in the second version, Mityushin's mistake is transformed into a deliberate mockery of the current ideological "duels."

The mention of Christmas at the start of the English version as the approximate date of Berg's appearance in the life of Anton Petrovich (in Russian version it was just winter, "случилось это прошлой зимой"<sup>15</sup>) — combined with Berg's observation that he looks to himself like a muscular angel and with the new names of his seconds — reinforces the association with Biblical Jacob's struggle. The accompanying motif of ladders might affect another detail in the plot: after throwing Berg out of his bedroom, Anton Petrovich has to escort him to unlock the front door. The humiliating descent contrasts starkly to Jacob's glorious ascent, a parody of the parable of testing moral strength and resolve.

Like Tolstoy's Bezukhov, Anton Petrovich does not know how to use weapons.<sup>16</sup> Anton Petrovich's opponent has a notebook with 523 crosses supposedly representing the "Reds" he killed during the war, while in *War and Peace* (*Война и мир*) Dolokhov is explicitly described as a "murderer." Neither Pierre nor Anton Petrovich are in their right minds when they challenge their opponents; however, Bezukhov's irrational impulses are differently motivated, and that "terrible and ugly" something gradually overwhelming him does not have the comic character of Anton Petrovich's drunken boasting.<sup>17</sup> Both call their opponents scoundrels (perhaps explaining the original title), though Anton Petrovich is not brave enough to say it to Berg's face.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, both are the object of ridicule before the duels; however, while Pierre admits that he is afraid of the heartless Dolokhov and longs to escape, he does not do it.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, Anton Petrovich does not admit his fear but eventually runs away and hides. These references to *War and Peace* underline the difference between the nineteenth-century nobles and contemporary clerks, as well as between the aristocratic and bourgeois-bureaucratic view of the world. The latter seems to be cowardly and conformist from Nabokov's perspective.

Gnushke continues with inappropriate advices, telling Anton Petrovich to take classes from his opponent's second, maliciously abetting him instead of trying to conciliate opponents,

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<sup>15</sup> Nabokov, *Vozvrashchenie*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, transl. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York : Vinatge, 2007), 239-240

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 237, 238

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 238; Nabokov, *The Stories*, 204.

<sup>19</sup> Tolstoy, 238, 241.

which should be his duty as a second. This type of second is frequent in real and fictional stories about duels.<sup>20</sup>

During the night, Anton Petrovich thinks about Berg's skill with a gun and measures the room in an attempt to imagine the given distance. He also foretells his own death, "philosophizing" about the relationship between expectations and reality, he tries to predict his fate by studying the cards, and reads (like Pechorin, but with the opposite effect). The book he reads is *The Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)*; Berg, of course, means "mountain" in German. Along with the other associations and allusions to literary duels we can add the duel of Nafta and Setembrini.<sup>21</sup> As in Chekhov's novella, this final duel is motivated by opposite world views and irreconcilable ideas: it seems that Anton Petrovich tries to attribute significance to his conflict with Berg and to suppress the fact that it is a case of banal adultery and a mere "affair". The allusions, here, could be a sort of narrator's implicit ironic commentary.

Anton Petrovich tries to imagine death, and the feelings of a man hit by a bullet;<sup>22</sup> smoking, he thinks that remembering the trivia of everyday life is an ill omen. These recollections, however, are not a reckoning with himself or a recapitulation of life, as in the case of Laievsky or Pechorin ("I think back over my whole past life and involuntarily find myself wondering what have I lived for"<sup>23</sup>), but a chain of remembered images that his conscience associatively recalls — a toy pistol, and a trail in the park. When he begins to prepare for the duel, all of his thoughts and actions are grotesque: he imagines that he will raise his collar, maintain a slightly cynical coolness and proud kindness, like in the movies. Berg ought to be waiting with his seconds when he and his seconds arrive, because it says so in the books: "does one salute one's opponent? What does Onegin do in the opera? [...] Somebody (in a Pushkin

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in *Eugene Onegin* or in *The Hero of Our Time*. See Popov, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> In fact, probably the entire penultimate chapter of the novel, "Hysterica Passio" in Lowe-Porter's translation or "The Great Petulance" in John Woods' one, with its symbolism of the spirit of intolerance, strife and aggression—in which, in the form of gradation, three cases of conflict are depicted: from the savage fight between Sonnenschein and Wiedemann, through the comical statement about "an affair of honor" between Zutawski and Japoll—ending in slapping instead of a duel—to the fatal duel of Nafta and Settembrini. See Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, transl. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage, 1996), 687.

<sup>22</sup> Given the fact that in the English version one of his associations with the duel will be the opera *Eugene Onegin*—opera is not mentioned in the original Russian version—at the thought of an immediate death, Anton Petrovich has a vision of the tenor who portrayed the death in a very convincing and realistic way (Nabokov, *The Stories*, 212). Otherwise, in that later version of the story, the "media" nature of Anton Petrovich's association is emphasized more: opera, film, literature.

<sup>23</sup> Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, transl. Nicolas Pasternak Slater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 116.

story?) ate cherries from a paper bag.”<sup>24</sup> The story he remembers is Pushkin’s “The Shot” (“Выстрел”): Silvio’s opponent eats cherries he picked along the way out of his cap, not a bag purchased fruit.<sup>25</sup> This is another evidence of Anton Petrovich’s fondness for shopping but Nabokov’s replacement of a cap with a bag can also serve as an indication of Anton Petrovich inauthenticity; he is a character made of betrayed and distorted literary allusions, a parody. Furthermore, in “The Shot”, Silvio is so irritated by his opponent’s equanimity and indifference that he refuses to shoot, so that this dim memory in Anton Petrovich’s case participates in the shift between fear and deceptive hope that Berg is not going to shoot at all. As he gets dressed, Anton Petrovich feels that his organs have an independent life and rhythm of their own, as if he contains a double.<sup>26</sup> He tries unsuccessfully to mask his pallor with rouge; the mirror, the mask motif, and the window next to him are all recognizable elements of Nabokov’s décor; the play of reflections and illusions often accompanies decisive moments in the lives of his characters.

The beautiful morning contrasts romantically with the protagonist’s psychological state: images of nature intrude like elliptical, fragmentary sentences into his mind. His ride is filled with suppressed yawning, a typical gesture for a Romantic hero. Onegin and Pechorin yawn, but out of boredom and a blasé lack of concern for life. Anton Petrovich yawns because he has not slept all night; again, he constantly falls out of the role he is trying to play. He feels like a dreamer in a mysterious train who suddenly realizes that he is dressed inappropriately. To cap it all off, the wheels of the train clatter “slaughterhouse... slaughterhouse... slaughterhouse.”

Just before the duel, Anton Petrovich (under the pretext that he is thirsty) escapes through the kitchen and bathroom of a café, and into the woods. On the train back to Berlin, he runs into Leontiev, a poor journalist, whose wife (earlier seen snoring in Mityushin’s bed) betrays him at every turn. Leontiev, a miserable, indecisive, and sheepish man, is despised and pitied by everyone. He serves as Anton Petrovich’s double, a warning portrait of a cowardly cuckold. A sudden narrative turn takes place: Anton Petrovich makes a decision and returns home to find his seconds and his wife waiting for him. They tell him that it was Berg who fled from the duel first, and that his wife has returned to him because of Berg’s cowardice.

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<sup>24</sup> Nabokov, *The Stories*, 212. The allusion to Pushkin’s *The Shot* does not exist in the Russian version of the story.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Pushkin, *The Tales of Belkin*, transl. Hugh Aplin (London: Hesperus Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Comp. “He was aware of something new in his body, a sort of awkwardness he had not felt before, and his movements were strange to him.” Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *The Duel and Other Stories*, transl. Constance Garnett (New York: Ecco Press, 1972), 139. However, in Chekhov’s story this physical discomfort is a hint of the lifestyle changes and actions that will produce in Layevsky’s life a cathartic experience before and during the duel.

However, with the thought that “such things don’t happen in real life,” Anton Petrovich finds himself back in the Berlin hotel room.<sup>27</sup> The story ends with his glance around the room – in which, it seems, he will have to live from now – and at his torn stocking and blistered heel (the swift-footed Achilles, perhaps).<sup>28</sup> The narrative switchback, just at the moment when the reader expects culmination, questions the illusion of the grace of fate.

The duel motif, then, provoked a series of distortions and reversals. In place of aristocratic ideas about personal honor, consecrated rituals and tradition, we see random triggers and banal circumstances; in place of an honor-bound, resolute and brave hero, the challenger is a paltry, shapeless bureaucrat and a dishonorable coward. In place of the archetypal defeat of the boastful abuser by the weak victim, which a reader could have expected due to the introductory opposition between Anton Petrovich and Berg, the feeble person remains feeble until the end. The number of references to the great nineteenth-century Russian literary tradition only underlines the fact that, for Anton Petrovich, the duel is a thing of books and movies and completely inauthentic to his lived experiences. By including these allusions, Nabokov interweaves the history of the motif into a psychological study: against such a background, the difference that his “de-romanticized” hero represents becomes even more noticeable.

Nabokov soon returned to the duel motif. The story “Orache” (“Лебеда”) was first published in Paris in year 1932;<sup>29</sup> the English translation is co-authored by Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov. The action of the story takes place in St. Petersburg around 1910, and according to a note by Nabokov himself, includes a series of autobiographical details.<sup>30</sup>

This time, the duel motif is subordinate to characterization and the description of psychological drama. It is presented as a missing event — in this case, not because it did not happen at all, but because for the hero of this story, the boy Peter, it remains in the sphere of the imaginary. Peter goes through his own “duel” when the school thug Shchukin, who upon hearing from a teacher that Peter is taking boxing lessons, challenges him to show off his new skills. In

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<sup>27</sup> Nabokov, *The Stories*, 221.

<sup>28</sup> As much as the duel that did not happen due to Anton Petrovich’s cowardice is a sign of the world where courage and honor have a different meaning and a different value than in the heroic world—in which a fateful duel between Hector and Achilles takes place — so is this “Achilles heel” a possible allusion to Achilles’s words to Odysseus during his visit to Hades: even a slave’s life is better than death.

<sup>29</sup> Nabokov, *The Stories*, 325–31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 659

turn, his desk-mate at school gives him a newspaper from which he learns that his father has agreed to fight in a duel with a political opponent. Affectionate, dreamy, lonesome and vulnerable, Peter is completely distraught. A slip of the tongue summarizes his dismay and provides the title of the story: in a verse, Peter replaces the word *lebeda* (*orache*) with *beda* (*orache*).<sup>31</sup>

Peter's actions, impressions, and feelings are presented in detail from one moment to another. Nabokov shows how sensitive and imaginative children react in anticipation and premonition of dramatic events. The whole day Peter experiences the horror of his father's upcoming duel. His anxiety colors with significance the accidental objects he encounters and notices. In an attempt to divert his thoughts, he reaches for an illustrated encyclopedia in the home library – his favorite room. Flipping through the book, he comes across a picture of a duel; it is then that the silence and stasis of the house becomes frightening and unbearable. At dinner, Peter's father, his guest, and the servants all behave normally, making the boy even more anxious. Before going to bed he thinks about Onegin and Lenski; the next day, imagining the duel for the umpteenth time, he thinks about Pushkin's "the mist of a frosty dawn"<sup>32</sup> and wishes he could say, "Let me take your place."<sup>33</sup> He then learns from the newspaper that the duel had already taken place the prior morning, that the opponent missed and that his father had shot into the air. The story ends with a cathartic outburst of tears. Here too, the duel remains a thing of literature and the imagination, but it serves to reveal the depth of the boy's love, and to bestow an aura of nobility to the father.

The story builds from Nabokov's autobiography: his father had escaped a political duel by a hair's breadth.<sup>34</sup> Combined with the tradition of the duel in Russian prose, the ritual seems to have left a strong impact on Nabokov. Peter is not Nabokov's only character whose father becomes involved in a duel – the motif also appears in the novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, but with a fatal outcome.<sup>35</sup> In an attempt to write the biography of his recently deceased half-brother, Sebastian Knight, the storyteller, V., initially clings to the traditional biographic method. He writes about the death of his (their) father and the cause for V's first polemic with

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 326, 662.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 331.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Zoran Kuzmanovich, "Strong opinions and nerve points: Nabokov's life and art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1941).

external sources: unlike the newspapers, V. claims that their father was only wounded in a duel and died a few months later due to complications from a subsequent disease. The figure of the father is important because the narrator recognizes in Sebastian's style of writing the intensity and dynamics of their father's movements and adventurous spirit. Unnamed, he is presented as a brave soldier, although his military success came only after he divorced his first wife, Sebastian's mother, Virginia. He is portrayed as noble, honest, witty, and of a restless but not reckless spirit. The precise cause of the duel was Sebastian's mother, three years after her death, anticipating Sebastian's later, "posthumous" influence on his half-brother.

Living happily and peacefully with his new wife and two sons, their father begins to hear rumors related to his former and already late wife. A certain Palchin appears, for whom Virginia left him. It is possible that Sebastian and V.'s father did not go to Palchin with the intent of challenging him, but only reacted in the moment to Palchin's vulgar, if supposedly conciliatory comparison.<sup>36</sup> Virginia's adultery and desertion took place almost ten years earlier; for the storyteller, his father's actions remain inexplicable and he continues to insist on his parents' happiness.

However, how reliable are V's statements, especially upon a second reading, when the reader takes into account the uncertainty of his ontological status in the world of the novel, as well as the fact that his biographical method transforms into imaginings, divination, and empathy, eliminating distinctions between the real and the imaginary? The father was a representative of the old tsarist aristocratic order, a Guard; honor for him meant something quite different than for his supposed son V. Furthermore, V. was a child at the time, and hardly a reliable witness of his father's happiness in his second marriage; he admits that he learned certain things only ten years after, as well as from his mother. It might be conjectured that his father confronted a man whose identity had been unknown to him because he deliberately did not want to know for whom his wife had left him; perhaps he had been under the illusion that he was not a deceived husband. The narrator had already recounted how his father suffered after his wife left, and even hinted that his father's military service was a form of self-destruction. Palchin himself could have provoked a strong reaction, no matter how many years had passed. In short, the narrator forces readers into psychologizing and close character study, trying to find plausible

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<sup>36</sup> "It is nobody's fault that you and I were in the same boat once" (Ibid.,12).

motivations — an attitude towards the subject/protagonist that the biography will constantly question, subverting heuristic and explicative values of psychology (psychoanalysis) and psychological motivation in narrative.

The duel takes place during a snowstorm on the shore of a frozen creek (very like the inevitable *Eugene Onegin*). The narrator reports that two shots were fired before their father fell whereupon Palchin lit a cigarette with trembling hands. Therefore, their father either missed or shot into the air. The first is unlikely, given the fact that he is an experienced and skilled soldier and hunter; it would imply extreme distress, and that this echo of the past was not mere “bark,” as V. claims.<sup>37</sup> The second option is that the man deliberately missed, not wanting to kill his wife’s former lover. Further reason for his consideration might be found in the hint that the sister of Palchin’s fiancée, a “very charming and carefree girl”, was more than a friend.<sup>38</sup> In any case, V’s description is so sketchy that we can only be certain of the duel ruining their family. His accusatory tone suggests that V. does not want to understand his father’s motives or to go into details.

Apart from his mother, V.’s only source of information is Sebastian’s *Lost Property*. There, the eve of the duel is described; the family members suspect nothing, and the father is neither frightened nor upset. Regardless, when V. talks about the work later,<sup>39</sup> it becomes clear that it is not an autobiography although V. repeatedly dissects it for autobiographical data supporting his beliefs. V. finds the passage that mentions “my half-brother” especially valuable, i.e., V., who according to another biographer does not exist at all. However, when he later analyzes Sebastian’s work, V. questions the relationship between the writer’s biography, his work, and his own method. Did Sebastian bring in autobiographical elements and transpose real people into his works, or does V. “pull” characters out of the books into a “real” or homodiegetic life? The question “At which narrative level and in whose fiction the duel takes place?” remains open.

More than a pretext to introduce a passage important to the narrator into the story of Sebastian’s life, the duel serves a function in V.’s detective search through his alleged brother’s past. One of the potential candidates for Sebastian’s mysterious femme fatale remembers a conversation about the duel (again rumors and “a man [...] killed in a duel”), which helps V. find

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 111-113.

connection between Sebastian and the Rozanov family. He collects “one of the most precious pages from Sebastian’s life”,<sup>40</sup> i.e., the story of Sebastian’s first tragic love: Sebastian, like his father, was abandoned for another man. The episode related to his father’s duel, therefore, plays multiple roles in the structure of the novel: it opens several key thematic complexes, such as the impact of and ethereal “law of some strange harmony”, which links the search for Sebastian’s last love with V.’s distant past, childhood, and first love.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, in one of his last and most complex novels, *Ada or Ardor*, Nabokov returns to the motif of the duel in several episodes of the novel.<sup>42</sup> *Ada* includes, mentions, or alludes to several duels: some actually occur in the world of the novel, some only in the minds of the characters, and some only in language, as comparisons and metaphors. Each is an echo or anticipation, a prefiguration of the others, as well as a nexus of associations and allusions to an almost library inexhaustible and manifold in literary and historical duels. Given that the history of literature, especially of the novel (the history of its forms, narrative techniques, methods of representing love, death, etc., and its typical themes and motifs) is both a means and a subject of *Ada*, the duel motif creates a dense, often inextricable material of interweaving references.<sup>43</sup>

For the purpose of this paper, of special interest are father and son relations, particularly that of Demon and Van, and the relations of the protagonists to their literary “templates” which can be recognized through the repetitions, variations, permutations, and combinations of details at all linguistic and textual levels.<sup>44</sup> The intertextual references are important to the creation of characters by amalgamation, anagrammatic transfer, and playing with etymology, homophony,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 136-137.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York : Vintage International, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> The intermittent history of the novel determines, according to Zoran Paunović’s PhD thesis, the composition of *Ada* and the apparent shifts in the techniques of motivation, characterization, and descriptions throughout the novel. “Sentimentalism, romanticism, realism, a stream-of-consciousness novel—these are apparently the four anchor points on which this splendid novel by Nabokov was built...” Zoran Paunović, *Гутачи бледе ватре: амерички романи Владимира Набокова* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1997), 277.

<sup>44</sup> This aspect of the novel Boyd formulates in the following way: “A theme Nabokov particularly explores in *Ada* is the relationship between novelty and familiarity, between original and imitation.” Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, 2nd ed. (Christchurch : Cybereditions, 2001), 309. Boyd is primarily interested in repetition and differences within the novel. However, this relationship is also crucial for understanding of the function of intertextual elements in the novel. Thus it is very important to identify the dynamics of these relationship—as, for example, Joyce, Nabokov also associatively links his characters with a number of other literary characters and situations, but at the same time these relations are not static, so that one and the same traditional character is associated with more than one character from *Ada*. Boyd elsewhere notes a key difference in the treatment of Joyce’s and Nabokov’s allusions: “Joyce conceals allusions unless they are part of his characters’ worlds; Nabokov obtrudes them to stir up his readers’ minds.” Brian Boyd, “Words, Works and Worlds in Joyce and Nabokov,” *Cycnos* 12, no. 2 (25 June 2008), URL: <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1443>. Accessed May 15, 2011.

and realized metaphors. To avoid “hunting” for references, only those dealing directly with Nabokov’s duel motif will be mentioned. The first duel shown in the novel is between Walter D. Veen, i.e. Demon, father of (Ivan) Van Veen. Demon is an extremely rich banker, a hedonist, an art-loving bon vivant, and a wanderer; a sort of restlessness is the main link between Nabokov’s and Lermontov’s namesake character Demon, who loses not only Tamara but also love itself in a “duel” with an angel. Nabokov’s Demon’s theatrical love for Marina, a pretentious and licentious actress, leads to a duel sparked by Marina’s adultery — revealed by a supposed Parmigianino sketch. The duel itself is described as “Parmigianino-like”: deformed and disproportionate. Recounted in a few Proustian sentences that condense time and overlap events, this duel has more to do with narrative style than with dramatic events.<sup>45</sup>

Demon sets out to “hunt” Baron d’Onski, to challenge him to a duel on European soil;<sup>46</sup> in a lengthy digression we learn that he was prompted by rumors that duels are about to be banned in the Western Hemisphere, and then that he found the Baron and challenged him to a duel by hitting him with a purple glove. The challenge takes place in a bookstore, in a very “plastic” scene — everything happens in this novel, literally or symbolically, amid books. The owner of the bookstore, a blasé witness to the challenge, presents a figure whose apparent non-functionality and redundancy in the plot echoes similar phenomena in Gogol.<sup>47</sup> The next sentence amasses incidental and irrelevant characters and events, spanning several years. In place of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the duelists before the event, precisely all the places, objects, and persons spattered by the duelists’ blood are depicted; the essential elements of the

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<sup>45</sup> Nabokov, *Ada*, 14. Recognition of the similarities between the beloved woman and a painting is also a Proustian element in this episode (like Proust’s Swan, Demon is an art lover and sensitive to the harmony of art and life; Swann saw Odette in the Botticelli frescoes in the Sistine Chapel). Boyd also identified a passage from *The Captive*, which inspired Nabokov to construct “Eve on klepsidrophone” from Parmigianini’s drawing of Adam (Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*, 286). Obsessive jealousy that reacts on every hint of possible adultery also links Demon to Proust’s characters.

<sup>46</sup> At his first appearance, Baron d’Onski is introduced as Baron d’O (Nabokov, *Ada*, 12). In the play—which is actually a parodistic anti-Terrean transformation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, where Marina (in the role of “Tatyana”) appears for the first time—thus is called the character who should correspond to Onegin. When Tatyana from the original *Eugene Onegin* sends her nanny’s son to carry her letter to Onegin, she calls him “O”. Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: a novel in verse*, transl. James E. Fallon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77 (chapter 3, verse 34). Therefore the play turns to be an anticipation of events in “real” life which will happen later, on several occasions, to Van and Ada as well.

<sup>47</sup> In particular in *Dead Souls*. Nabokov himself, regarding Gogol’s style, wrote of “wealth” and “torrent of ‘irrelevant’ details” Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, 1981), 19, 60. Comp. also “Nabokov particularly values the autonomy, the separate vitality of what he creates, an object or an instant or a character suddenly there and itself, with no purpose whatever in the development of a story or in the assignation of its meaning.” Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*, 29.

duel — the choice of weapons and seconds, for example — are mentioned laconically, although the names evoke a flood of associations.<sup>48</sup> It remains unclear whether d’Onski died years later of complications due to his wound, or if his death has nothing to do with the duel at all. Thus a duel prompted by dramatic passions is presented in the romantic tradition, though described sans romantic pathos. The episode is, instead, grotesque and hyperbolic, compressed and stretched, exhaustive in the “wrong” details, and told in the staccato rhythm of Demon and Marina’s three-year relationship — or rather, Van’s understanding of it. Seventeen years and about hundred pages later, Demon’s scar from the duel is mentioned in parenthesis in the context of Demon’s musings about logical discontinuity between the disputable nature of present reality and the unquestionable reality of memories, à propos Marina’s dissimilarity with the adored image of her in Demon’s recollections.<sup>49</sup> Given that for Van dueling seems linked to becoming an artist and that in his case it would not lead to the outcome of an authentic love, the echoes and repetitions of the motif underline the difference between Demon and his son; particularly those connected with their respective attitudes toward the problem of time and memory.

The duel-deaths of the de Preys, in turn, serve the function of explaining the status of a duel on Antiterra, the world of the novel. The first part of the novel takes place in the ninth decade of the nineteenth century, with flashback episodes in several previous decades. Although, the course of time on Antiterra is not synchronized with the sequence of centuries on the Earth: thus the world of *Ada* retains a link between aristocratic honor and its ritualized defense through the duel. However, the variety of contexts in which the duel motif appears does not allow the motif to be understood as merely illustrative of some epoch and its local characteristics. These two incidentally mentioned duels also foreshadow the eventual duel between Van and a younger de Prey. The name de Prey is mentioned for the first time in part one, chapter 14 – Marina mentions that the widow of Count de Prey comforted herself quickly after his death in a duel.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> In the vicinity of the place of the duel, there is a garden “in an amusing arrangement by Douglas D’Artagnan” (Nabokov, *Ada*, 14-15). D’Artagnan is, of course the Dumas’ musketeer who begins his career by a triple duel, while Douglas is the name of the famous actor and producer, Douglas Fairbanks—who in the self-produced movie *The Three Musketeers* (1921) played D’Artagnan. The caricatural side of this duel scene perhaps owes something to the comical atmosphere of early Hollywood staging of duels and, more broadly, to the technical characteristics of the film editing, and to recognizable fragmentation of sequences. This caricature is also reinforced by the name of one of the seconds - St. Alin (15) = Stalin, as suggested in meticulous commentaries by Boyd. See *ADA online, with annotations by Brain Boyd*, <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/> (<http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada12ann.htm> # 1503 accessed 15.5.2011).

<sup>49</sup> Nabokov, *Ada*, 251.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

In chapter 27, Demon off-handedly discloses that the cause of death (not of Count de Prey any more, but of Major de Prey, Demon's obscure relative) was the weak light on the field and a garbage collector who shouted and distracted the major.<sup>51</sup> Cordula de Prey, in turn, becomes Van's mistress after his duel. Nabokov plays with the set of characters whose mutual relationships he deliberately leaves obscure, as well as the circumstances of their affairs. The duel motif is linked to the de Prey name, but "broken" into fragments that the reader must piece together throughout the storyline.

Duels also mark the end of the first part of the novel. In place of several planned duels, an accidental conflict takes place. Van's duel is introduced slowly, with pauses and digressions, across several chapters. He buys a gun for a duel (having read through Ada's parable about a girl torn between three men). He also cites Tuzenbach's words from before a duel (from Chekhov's drama *Three Sisters* / *Три сестры*) — a seemingly minor detail.<sup>52</sup> However, on Antiterra, Chekhov's play is called *Four Sisters*<sup>53</sup> and Ada is to play the role of Irina who, in the "original" drama is supposed to become Tuzenbach's wife. The duel takes place in Antiterra's play as well: the actor Johnny "Starling," yet another of Ada's lovers, plays the role of Skvortsov (*skvoretz* means 'starling' in Russian), the second in an "amateurish" duel.<sup>54</sup> Van will later fantasize about challenging this newly discovered rival as well, but once again circumstance (in this case, attempted suicide) will thwart his desire for honorable revenge.

The interaction between Van and Percy de Prey serves as an important example for the way that Nabokov treats the duel motif in *Ada*. The argument between the jealous, and still only suspicious, Van and a drunken Percy gradually escalates into a vague, ambiguous challenge to a duel. In the spirit of false reconciliation, Percy asks Van whether he shoots as well as he wrestles. Van, switching to French and to the "the terrible second person singular of duelists in old France" asks whether this is, indeed, a challenge;<sup>55</sup> Percy smiles without a word and puts on his gloves, confirming his readiness to fight. Percy's ritualistic gesture as well as Van's French signal the transition from intimate to conventional, from real jealousy to an aristocratic ritual that

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>52</sup> Comp. Van words: "Tuzenbakh, not knowing what to say: 'I have not had coffee today. Tell them to make me some.' Quickly walks away." (235) with "Тузенбах (не зная, что сказать). Я не пил сегодня кофе. Скажешь, чтобы мне сварили... (Быстро уходит.)" А. П. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem: V 30 t. T. 13. P'esy. 1895—1904.* (Moskva: Nauka, 1978), 181.

<sup>53</sup> Nabokov, *Ada*, 427.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 430.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 277.

suppresses private emotions in the name of public honor. When Percy sends Van a letter confirming his keenness to fight the latter refuses, deliberately insulting the messenger. However, an odd comparison keeps the idea alive: Marina explains that she, like her grandmother, has her hair done in the open, in order to “preempt zephyrs,” and Van (if indeed Van) adds the comparison, “(as a duelist steadies his hand by walking about with a poker).”<sup>56</sup> Does this parenthetical observation represent Van’s preoccupation at the time, or is it a comment of octogenarian storyteller Van, who lives through his obsession with duels? Regardless, Van’s desire to eliminate potential or actual rivals is linked to Marina’s hairstyling, which is itself presented as a “duel” — but with nature; French phrases (e.g. “*qu’on la coiffe au grand air air*”) and the word “zephyrs” instead of wind confirms Marina’s pretentiousness and unnaturalness, the pose of an actress who attentively takes care of her image. Furthermore, the diction suggests that Van’s dueling fantasies are much the same. The comic undertone undermines the serious terms in which Van, throughout the entire novel, tries (unsuccessfully) to treat duels.

After a final confirmation of Ada’s infidelities, Van, like his father, wends to find his beloved’s lovers. This parallel with the father is further straightened. Chapter 42 (the chapter about the duel) starts with Van’s recollections of his alleged mother’s (Aqua’s) words, who used to call our planet after her husband — Demonica — arguing that “only a very cruel or very stupid person, or innocent infants, could be happy” on it;<sup>57</sup> as Van is neither stupid nor an innocent infant anymore, it seems that the recollection implies his cruelty, which Aqua herself felt from her narcissistic and egoistic husband. Van, again like his father, would not pay attention to the feelings of persons he is going to use as means of his liberation from the agony that Ada’s infidelities have caused.

Instead of an “appropriate” duel with Percy, or with one of Ada’s other lovers (the consumptive music teacher Mr. Rack), Van finds an outlet for his misery by challenging the quite innocent Captain Tapper because of an inoffensive objection. The day before the duel is filled with shopping: all the items that Van purchases are listed (including a cane, among other items).<sup>58</sup> Van behaves rudely and inappropriately; and despite the detailed and precise account of

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 285.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 301.

<sup>58</sup> Buying lingerie, clothing, cosmetics and like necessities—but also a suitcase—should indicate something about Van’s feelings on the eve of the duel. Does it reflect his confidence and assurance that he will not be killed in the duel, or a mechanism of deluding his fear, even self-encouragement is at stake here? Van the psychologist and psychiatrist is not always ready to really expose the motives of his actions. Further, Van, when planning his duels,

his day, there is a sense of chaos and confusion. For Van, the duel does not really proceed in any honorable way, although he expects it “with keen exhilaration.”<sup>59</sup> The device is revealed; the duel is obviously compensation for something else. Van dreams of performing some complicated move, “something artistic and tricky” thinking at times about the duel as if it depended only on his own plans and intentions.<sup>60</sup> He writes a letter to his father, addressing him as if he were already dead. First he writes a confession of his love affair with Ada, but then tears it up in favor of an absurdly brief apology for his own meaningless death. An echo of the word “dorophone” (i.e. telephone working on water) links his own experiences with Demon’s duel (after his duel, Demon writes a letter to Marina reminding her of their conversation by way of dorophone stating that he could not forgive her because she had been with another man while he had been longing to see her). One of the hotel doormen likewise resembles his father’s former valet Bouteillan, instrumental in Demon and Marina’s affair and later assigned to drive Van to the station after the first idyllic summer at Ardis. This similarity incites a dream “about words”, in anticipation of Van future life as a writer and his preoccupation with words. The servant’s name is derived from the French word for “bottle” or “flask” (“bouteille”), and is therefore associatively linked with various liquids, one of the complex systems of images and symbols throughout the novel (water is in the name of Van’s alleged mother and wine is in the name of Ada’s future husband, for example). These devices are only a few of the many, seemingly completely irrelevant and incidental details which Nabokov uses to link the related episodes.

The description of Van’s preparation for the duel is exaggerated and caricatured because physiological needs are needed in respect to the ritual of the duel.<sup>61</sup> A “structurally perfect stool”

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thinks about the code that does not allow one to challenge persons of lower birth. Therefore he decides, should Rack refuse to fight, to beat him with a stick (like Turgenev’s Petrovich did to Bazarov). However, he forgets the elegant cane he brought from Ardis Hall, and must buy another one — rough and with a sharp pointed tip. In the hospital he acquires a third one, i.e. the “Third Cane”, knotty and with a solid heel (*Ada*, 312). When he later lifts the rod towards the dying Rack, the latter thinks that Van is offering support and explains that he is too weak to stand (316). However, the symbolism of the rod is not exhausted by the apparent opposition between insatiable Van and powerless Rack. The rod (stick, cane, alpenstock) is, in fact, one of the leitmotifs of the novel, interwoven with the duel motif. A stick is a paraphernalia in the first games — shadow-and-shine — of Ada and Van, which Van will throw away, insulting Ada with his comments about her games (52); while nudging Percy on the creek, the narrator, imitating dramatic uncertainty, adds to a number of rhetorical questions the following: “Was there something — a stick? Twisted out of a fist?” (275); a alpenstock is an instrument by which Van allegedly blinds Kim, a photographer-blackmailer, whom he first wanted to challenge to a duel (447), and so on. The rod thus reveals Van’s selfishness and cruelty.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 307.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 308.

<sup>61</sup> Bathing, getting dressed up, and other such details are common in the presentation of this ritual, for example in *The Hero of Our Time*, or in the previously mentioned story by Nabokov himself, “An Affair of Honor.”

will become Van's reminder of the impending event, on the eve of his reconciliation with Ada and the start of their secret life.<sup>62</sup> After driving through unsightly and poor suburbs to the place specified for the duel, Van feels a twinge in the knee he had hurt in wrestling with Percy, and sees a butterfly. A trademark of Nabokov the lepidopterist—the butterfly here is also a code for Ada.<sup>63</sup> Ada's symbolic appearance seems a premonition of certain death. Many details from previously described duels reappear: accidental passersby, two children — a boy and a girl — that divert Van's attention, allegedly because the boy looks like a boy from the train but, in fact, because the two children remind Van of the idyllic phase of his and Ada's love. During the ensuing fight, "in the kind of single combat described by most Russian novelists and by practically all Russian novelists of gentle birth,"<sup>64</sup> Van is only wounded. However, he does not fall and manages to fire in the air "with nice dignity."<sup>65</sup> Citing his beloved Russian literature, via distracting from de Prey's duel to instead emphasize the dignity and aesthetic quality of the action, the entire duel is represented as oscillating between pathos and distanced neutrality.

Because of the wound, Van loses his miraculous acrobatic talent and can no longer perform under the pseudonym Mascodagama, as he used to; he also becomes a writer, replacing physical prowess with cognitive and linguistic stunts.<sup>66</sup> This duel thus marks the end of the "Arcadian" period of Van and Ada's love, and is linked to the motif of exile from Paradise, a favorite leitmotif of the émigré Nabokov.

Duels however continue to cast a shadow over the events that follow. Refusing to answer Ada's letters, Van tells himself "he would be firm and suffer in silence – his self-esteem is satisfied; the dying duelist dies a happier man than his live foe ever will be".<sup>67</sup> It seems that here Van follows the line that Nabokov himself formulated in connection to Onegin's duel: for a defamed gentleman, it is much more important to face his opponent's bullet calmly and serenely

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<sup>62</sup> Nabokov, *Ada*, 310, 389.

<sup>63</sup> For example, "'Tomorrow you'll come here with your green net,' said Van bitterly [to Ada], 'my butterfly.'" (Ibid, 158)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 310.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>66</sup> This parallel between a circus performer, an acrobat, and a writer is explicated in the description of Van's circus career: "Van on the stage was performing organically what his figures of speech were to perform later in life — acrobatic wonders that had never been expected from them and which frightened children" (185). In addition to a general modernist mythology of the writer as conjurer or harlequin, here the writer-acrobat borrows his name from Vasco da Gama, representing a part of the subtle and multilateral exploration of the relationship of art and non-artistic spheres.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 337.

than to shoot him.<sup>68</sup> He thinks briefly of challenging a certain Max Mispel for misrepresenting his first literary work. Actually, Van just fantasizes about fencing in the dawn and plays with the essential aristocratic idea according to which one's reputation must be defended at all costs. Mispel's apology, an article titled "The Weed Exiles the Flower," is linked to the botanical motif in *Ada*.<sup>69</sup> Given that botany is Ada's main passion and that certain types of flowers (violets and orchids in particular) appear as her symbols, these plants and botanical names are not merely a way of feminizing Van's opponents, but also serve as indications that Van's opponents are substitutes for Ada. Van's duels, ultimately, are duels with Ada herself.

Van also engages in an imaginary duel with Ada's husband in one of several bifurcations, where his desire breaks the continuity of reality and moves freely in the boundlessness of time and space. Van imagines it as the final version of *Les Enfants Maudits*, the movie shot in Ardis during his second stay there — based on the book by Ada's nanny La Riviere — and the first of Ada's unsuccessful attempts to become an actress. This cinematic frame suggests a Western — including a simultaneous draw, cacti, and yucca — parodied by Vinelander's inappropriate tuxedo and Van's white suit. Van's seconds are Tobak, husband to Van's mistress Cordula and the owner of the ship *Tobakoff* where Lucette commits suicide and Lord Erminin, father of the twins with whom Ada and Van socialized at Ardis.<sup>70</sup> This vision combines elements from various periods of Van and Ada's lives into an unpleasant metamorphosis of picnics Ada and Van used to go on with acquaintances and friends. Nevertheless, even in this fantasy Van fails to do away with his opponents: Van, "shot" in the sole of his shoe, hits his opponent in the middle of the lower abdomen but the outcome remains uncertain. That is to say, in none of Van's worlds does he manage to successfully kill Ada's lovers or husband in a duel.

The very last duel in the novel takes place throughout the book, and is a duel with time. In the fourth, essayistic and philosophical part of the novel, Van reveals his theory of time, of the relationship between time and space, past, present and future, memory and reminiscence. Unexpected and unexplained statements like, "I have been wounded in my duel with the

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<sup>68</sup> *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 3:17.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Tapper has been presented as "of Wild Violet Lodge" (*Ada*, 241); the name of a Van's second, Rafin, Esq., is a wordplay with Rafinesque, the name of a type of violet, as Vivian Darkbloom, yet another instance of the author of this novel, explains in "Notes to Ada"; Mispel is German term for the medlar.

<sup>70</sup> Reader is expected to remember that one of the important scenes — the moment of Van's identification with Tuzenbach — is caused by the fact that, after returning from the city, Ada suspiciously stinks of tobacco.

Imposter,”<sup>71</sup> extend the duel metaphor and, in the context of the treatise on the possibilities of comprehending time and space, presents Time as a cheater. Van now ascribes to his entire life — more precisely, to his relationship with time — the characteristics of a duel, which implies that it is not simply a conflict, but above all a challenge and a struggle in which ritual, aristocratic code (dignity, honor, skill, courage, and luck) are equally important, although the terms of duel are adverse and disadvantageous.

More importantly, in the mechanism of a duel Van recognizes the ways that fate and chance function. While there was no logical or meaningful connection between his (and Demon’s) various duels, all of them emerge retrospectively through the structure of narrated memories as interconnected: the gradual development of one topic with one element predetermines the others. Considering that his philosophical treatise “*Texture of Time*” deals with the status of the future, this casts a new light on Van’s plans and predictions throughout. On a metaphysical level, Van’s injury in his duel in Part 1 has been caused by his misconceptions of the future (planning duels with Percy and Rack, “reading” the pain in his knee and the butterfly as a sign of death, etc.). The idyll of Ardis the First, on the contrary, came from Ada and Van’s complete surrender to what Van here calls “nowness”, i.e. a moment without a future that would obliterate his endless potential.

In Ada, therefore, duels are more talked about and imagined than enacted. They most often occur at the level of narration as an implicit comment, an element of characterization, or a metaphor. Van, for example, is positively obsessed with duels. The frequency and multifunctionality of the motif evokes the compulsion to duel in Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*, and a vision of the world as an unending competition.<sup>72</sup> All the duels in *Ada* originate from Van, who, while not the only narrator of the novel, constantly changes his point of view to indulge the possibilities of first- and third-person narration alternatively. Van’s unreliability, sustained with his theories about memory, is a part of the implicit and explicit poetics of the novel. In addition, his frequent allusions to the history and diverse means of presentation of the novel, his parodies and/or pastiches of periods and styles, his ironic recognition that certain scenes and events from his life, are following the logic of novelistic

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 552.

<sup>72</sup> In more details: Caroline Oriot “Le duel dans *Jacques le Fataliste* de Diderot”, *Dix-huitième siècle* 1, no. 40 (2008), 359–94. [www.cairn.info/revue-dix-huitieme-siecle-2008-1-page-359.htm](http://www.cairn.info/revue-dix-huitieme-siecle-2008-1-page-359.htm). DOI: 10.3917/dhs.040.0359.

representation; all constantly remind a reader that every motif, including that of the duel, refers back to the novel itself and simultaneously to the literary history of the given motif.

Thus, while Nabokov's "duel stories" from the 1930s gave the narrator occasion to concentrate on the internal world of his characters and to compress the story into a short period of time, in the novels, the duels are presented as symbolic encounters connecting remote moments in time. By the end of *Ada*, the duel has come to serve as a model for the relationship of man (e.g., human consciousness) with time. The real confrontation – between defense of honor and human dignity – is not against fellow man but against time. The different duels in Nabokov's oeuvre, in step with the changes in his creative work, therefore draw this motif out of a culturally recognizable context. The duel motif loses its referential function and serves as a nostalgic and metatextual commentary on the changing relations between social and literary conventions, as well as on the transformation of representations of specific cultural phenomena to representations of representations.

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