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EUTOPIA IN *ADA*, OR THE AESTHETIC RECONFIGURATION
OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICAL HISTORY:
NABOKOV'S *SOUCI D'EAU* AGAINST
VLADIMIR LENIN'S ELECTRICITY

*This truth that I seek, I only knew it in my childhood and
every little bit of good that is found in my books
is only its reflection.*

*[C]ette vérité que je cherche, je ne l'ai connue que dans
mon enfance et tout le peu de bien qui se trouve dans mes
livres n'en est que le reflet.*

(Nabokoff-Sirine 1936, 153-154)¹

“Every man has probably experienced that sort of grief, if not terror, at seeing how the world and its history seem caught in an electable movement, which keeps gaining momentum and which seems able to change, toward ever coarser ends, nothing but the visible manifestations of the world. This visible world is what it is, and our action on it cannot make it be otherwise. So we think nostalgically about a universe in which man, instead of acting so furiously on visible appearances, would be employed in ridding himself of them, not just by refusing to act upon them, but by stripping himself enough to discover that secret place in ourselves from which an entirely different human adventure might possibly begin. More precisely, a moral one, no doubt.” (Genet, 41)

These lines that open Jean Genet's study of the Sculptor Alberto Giacometti might also help us to figure out the Nabokovian artistic quest: that of a universe in which humanity might have been free to set out on another adventure than the one that it lived through in

¹ This fragment only appears in the French version of “Mademoiselle O.”

the twentieth century as a result of ideologies that based their coercive power upon their will to transform the “visible world,” this “reality” that, in the postface to *Lolita*, is described by Nabokov as, “one of the few words which mean[s] nothing without quotes” (Nabokov 1991a, 312). It might also be, as we will suggest, that this universe borrows its texture from “one spot” in his native land that is “[b]eloved over all” (Nabokov 2019, 23), this secret place that, we will argue, permeates the 1969 novel in which the writer creates a new cosmogony: *Ada, or Ardor*.

Each time that the opportunity arose, Nabokov condemned the deceptiveness of an ideology that he knew well: Leninist ideology, which put a brutal end to hope for a democratic political process in Russia as a successor to czarist autocracy. He knew it well because his father, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov—who, after his murder in 1922, was saluted as “the true knight of Russian freedom” (V. D. Nabokov 2015, 497)—had, since the 1905 Russian Revolution, been one of the greatest defenders of freeing the people through democracy. Yet Leninist deceptiveness led to the belief, even in the West, that “[f]rom a spark, a fire will flare up”; the latter phrase served as an epigraph to the journal of the Social Democratic Labor Party, co-founded in 1900 by Lenin (then in exile) and named *Iskra*, which means *The Spark* in Russian. However, the spark that set Russia ablaze did not light the fires of freedom for the Russian people, as the Decembrist poet Alexander Odoevsky had hoped in the 1828-29 poem, “Strun veshchikh plamennye zvuki,” from which the epigraph-turned-Leninist-slogan was excerpted. “In February 1917, the path of freedom lay open for Russia. Russia chose Lenin. [...] The debate begun by the supporters of Russian freedom finally resolved. Once again, Russian slavery proved invincible,” Vasily Grossman observes in *Everything Flows* (181-2), his spiritual will and testament that he finished composing behind the Iron Curtain at the same time as Nabokov was writing *Ada* in Switzerland.

Nabokov had known this since his youth, at least since “the overthrow of the Constituent Assembly, when Bolshevism dropped its mask”² (V. D. Nabokov 1920). “The November Revolution had already entered upon its gory course, its police was already active” (Nabokov 1989, 176) and Vladimir D. Nabokov, one of the seventeen Cadets elected to this new Duma, was

² Following the February 1917 Revolution, legislative elections for a new Constituent had been set (with the agreement of the Bolsheviks) for the date of November 12/25, 1917. After Lenin’s assumption of power, the election results report highly unfavorable results for the Bolsheviks with 168 seats out of 703. When it gathers on January 5/17 and 6/18 1918, the Constituent Assembly is dissolved by Lenin, and the members of the opposition (primarily the Cadets) are chased out.

on the verge of being arrested; he owed his salvation to nothing more than an open door at the end of a hallway.

When one places Nabokov in opposition to Lenin, one unchanging factor comes to light: the denunciation of eschatological political lies, which promise a radiant future, but deliberately stamp out the *real* and *colossal* human cost of the communist “promise.” In 1949, an astonished Nabokov replied to Edmund Wilson, who was still praising Lenin, “You really believe that in the first years of the Soviet regime it was laying (with blood-stained hands) the (blood-soaked *papier-maché*) foundation of a new humanity?” (Nabokov, Wilson, 220). At the beginning of their correspondence, in addition to denouncing “this pail of milk of human kindness with a dead rat at the bottom” (33), Nabokov had also highlighted “[an]other horrible paradox about Leninism[:] [...] these materialists found it possible to squander the lives of millions of real people for the sake of the hypothetical millions that would be happy some day” (33).

What other “entirely different human adventure” (Genet, 41) might have been possible? The answer can be sought just as much in Nabokov’s defense as in his practice of “that fiery, fanciful, free thing – literature” (Nabokov 1981, half title page, back). Art, for him, is only authentic if it is free from all ideological subordination, as he already explained in 1934: “Writing in prose and in verse has *no relation at all* with the best of human intentions, turbines, religions, spiritual questions, or judgments of current events” (Schakovskoy, 31). Faced with the unbearable political negation of the artistic ideal that had been forged in Russia during the Russian Renaissance, it is a question of carrying on with the other possible kind of literature, one founded on freedom, that is “a challenge to the consciousness of man thrown into existence” (Xingjian, 299), and is therefore also about testing which form of resistance, or even of conquest, art might be. The stakes of the battle are indeed those of the power—or the unpower—of literature.

Since the writer had left the United States at the beginning of the sixties to settle in Switzerland, it might seem that he set himself apart from the twists and turns of the Cold War that had entered the USSR and the United States into a nuclear arms race leading the two blocs to the brink of a third world war. During this time, he writes *Ada, or Ardor*, a novel began in 1958 and, by all appearances, completely cut off from these historical considerations. Thus, according to Robert Alter, “this ambitious, formally elaborate, fantastically inventive novel” can be conceived of, following *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, as “the third panel in a Boschean tryptich, a novelistic Garden

of Earthly Delights that began with *Lolita* in 1954” (Alter, 103). The particularity of this novel appears to be that “Nabokov moved boldly from a vision of paradise lost to one of paradise regained – or retained – for the first time in his fiction” (103). *Ada, or Ardor* would be, as Maurice Couturier considers, one of his three “archetypal postmodernist novels” (Couturier, 258) because its author would have created a perfectly autotelic work, doing away with pre-textual referents along with the values that they entail. However, the consequence, for detractors of Nabokov’s art, would be that he had consequently produced “a supreme monstrosity of literary narcissism” (Alter, 103).

As far as we are concerned, it seems to us that, in this *roman-fleuve* summarizing his own journey through the twentieth century, Nabokov reconsiders the question that had haunted his creative output ever since his first novel, *Mary*: how can one protect and perpetuate the tradition of authentic art in a world of cataclysms (revolutions, world wars, tyrannies, genocides, mass exterminations, nuclear bombs) and what can the “eternal values” (Nabokov 1981, 2) of art do in the face of human suffering? This question reveals itself in its ethical form at the end of the novel when the two main characters, Ada and Van, the second of whom is concluding the writing of his memoirs, cannot come to agree on the moral effect of art: “Oh come, art cannot hurt. It can, and how!” (Nabokov 1990, 584) Though it is impossible for the reader to know which of the characters, Van or Ada, believes in art’s indifference or its responsibility, Brian Boyd, in *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, shows that it is the character Lucette who transforms the fiction of total love between Ada and Van into an examination of art’s moral responsibility through her impossible love for Van and her suicide (Boyd 1985).

There is a political side to this questioning of literature’s power or unpower: indeed, in this novel, the testing of art’s values, in our opinion, emerges by way of the aesthetic proposal for a reconfiguration of political history in which electricity and water clash. The competition between these two currents, with water replacing electricity on Antiterra, appears to be a metaphor of the quest for a good place to live—an extension of the secret place mentioned by Jean Genet and the dream of a human adventure different than that of historical determinism and the submission of art to utilitarianism, which bases the value of a work on its social usefulness in guaranteeing that the greatest number of people find “happiness.”

In *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time*, Will Norman rightly points out that “[t]he Swiss Nabokov is a writer of extraordinary disorientating, hermetic texts which typically superimpose several nations, languages and even temporalities over each other, moving into an ethereal (Alpine) territory which aspires to postmodern, postnational, even posthistorical status” (Norman, 130).

The most puzzling of these novelistic constructions is unquestionably the geographical and historical edifice that he develops in *Ada*. From the beginning of the novel, especially through proper names and toponyms, the reader is confronted with a composite foreign world, woven from the three languages that were dear to Nabokov: Russian, French, and American English. One must nevertheless wait until chapter forty-two of part one before this imaginary world is named for the first time, in a contradictory and obscure two-part statement, as a “splendid” but “terrible planet” that is also a “multicolored and evil world”:

Aqua used to say that only a very cruel or very stupid person, or innocent infants, could be happy on Demonica, our splendid planet. Van felt that for him to survive on this terrible Antiterra, in the multicolored and evil world into which he was born, he had to destroy, or at least to maim for life, two men.

(Nabokov 1990, 301)

Nabokov thus imagines that another configuration of the world could exist, and could be called Antiterra (while Demonica is a synonym that is more rarely used in the novel). However, the inversion that constitutes the Antiterrian world does not consist in proposing, amid the post-World War II and Cold War eras, the fictional creation of a better world where, like on the island of Utopia, the conditions for the happiness of everyone would be put in place. The Greco-Latin neologism—forged by Thomas More in 1516, working from the Greek privative “ou” and from *τοπος*—etymologically signifies “in no place” and originally refers to the imaginary island of *Utopia* on which an ideal society can be found. Its meaning evolved, however, and by the period leading up to the 1848 French Revolution, it ultimately referred to socialism and communism (Funcke). The relationship that Antiterra maintains with utopia is connected to this semantic and political evolution of the concept.

In the novel, the idea of another planet, named Terra, is born *on* Antiterra. Terra is “a distortive glass of our distorted globe” (Nabokov 1990, 18) that presents itself to the weak-minded and deranged as the actualization of a perfect world, of paradise, and of utopia. This complex apparatus that contrasts three planets—the fictional pair Antiterra/Terra and the Earth on which the reader lives, which therefore pose three possible configurations of the world—is indeed what allows us to consider that one of the concerns cutting across *Ada* is a quest for the “good place” that Miguel Abensour glosses as “a place of felicity where all is well” (30), that is, not utopia but *eutopia* (*eu* meaning “good”). In this, moreover, Nabokov appears to be pursuing the reflection initiated by Thomas More who added the term *eutopia* into the poem that opens the 1518 Basel edition of *Utopia* in order to play with the homophony (in English) between *outopia* and *eutopia* and thus to encourage the reader to ask himself if the political allegory of the island of Utopia is truly a *eutopia*.

In *Ada*, this quest for the good place is the object of an experiment with “the active or ‘combative’ facet of literature” (Morel, 353), which here is its ability to confront determinisms, if not to deconstruct them. This is not a new preoccupation since it dates back to the novelist’s early works, as Alexander Dolinin showed upon the 1999 publication of lectures that had remained unpublished during Nabokov’s lifetime but were originally delivered in 1926, 1927, and 1928. For Dolinin, the lecture entitled “On Generalities” (1926) constitutes “the writer’s manifesto, in which Nabokov, for the first time, formulates his position in relation to history and historicism—a position that remained unchanged throughout his artistic life” (Dolinin, 9). His target is historical determinism and, within this current of thought, its two principal actualizations as secular eschatologies: Marxism and Spenglerism. In his lecture, Nabokov denounces historical determinism as the consequence of “a very tempting and very harmful demon: the demon of generalizations,”

He captivates human thought by marking every phenomenon with a little label, and carefully placing it next to another. Through him a field of human knowledge as unstable as history is turned into a neat little office, where this many wars and that many revolutions sleep in folders, and where we can pore over bygone ages in complete comfort. (Nabokov 2019, 55)

Nabokov opposes this demon of generalization that, for him, structures all teleological thought on History to life understood as chance:

Let us admit to ourselves, once and for all, that history as an exact science is just for convenience [...]. If every human day is a sequence of chances—and in this lies its divinity and power—then all the more so is human history, too, only chance. [...] There is no system. History's roulette wheel knows no laws. Clio laughs at our clichés, at us speaking boldly, adroitly, and with impunity about influences, ideas, trends, periods, and eras, and deducing laws and divining the future. (56-57)

One must note the precociousness of the young artist's politico-philosophical analyses since he identifies phenomena that Western anti-Marxist thinkers would not describe until forty years later, in the sixties. Such is the case for Claude Lefort, the first French thinker of Soviet totalitarianism, who showed that, for totalitarianism, “the indetermination of history is unacceptable” (Gambarotto).

Working from this perspective, I propose that we consider the creation of Antiterra as a new stage in art's challenge to historical determinism during the Cold War era. Van suggests this when he reflects on “life, [...] unprovided on Desdemonia, where artists are the only gods” (Nabokov 1990, 521). In this sense, Antiterra would be a *counter-space*, a heterotopy, following the concept created by Michel Foucault in 1967. He describes heterotopies as places that are “absolutely different [...] that are opposed to all other places, that are destined, in a way, to erase them, to neutralize them or to purify them” (Foucault, 24); heterotopies are thus “mythical and real challenges to the space in which we live” (25). In *Ada*, the difficulty for the reader is that the critical dimension of Antiterrian heterotopy does not unfold through a direct confrontation with real space—that is, with Earth during the Cold War divided by the Iron Curtain into two blocs, East/West—but instead unfolds through a confrontation with the *idea* that is at the root of this earthly division and that is concretized, in fiction, by a belief in the existence of Terra. This idea is that of a determinism, regardless of the specific form it takes: in christianity, it is providence; in politics, it is historical materialism and its outgrowth in communism as a concretization of utopia; in philosophy, it is, as Van points out, “the determinist's statement” (Nabokov 1990, 535)

according to which “the future could hardly be considered nonexistent, since ‘it possessed at least one future, [or rather] feature, involving such an important idea as that of absolute necessity’” (535). One must therefore understand the writing of Van’s treatise, *The Texture of Time*, as a refutation of the future’s absolute necessity, which is the basis of determinist thought. For him, “the future remains aloof from our fancies and feelings. At every moment it is an infinity of branching possibilities” (560-61). And we encounter some of the young Nabokov’s anti-determinist positions in the thought of *Ada*’s narrator, summarized by this statement: “The unknown, the not yet experienced and the unexpected, all the glorious ‘x’ intersections, are the inherent parts of human life” (Ibid).

How is one, as an artist-creator, meant to challenge any providence that strips man of his receptiveness to life’s wonders? For us, this seems to be one of the experiments at work in the new cosmogony that the writer presents to his reader’s imagination in *Ada*. Our hypothesis is that, in this novel, the Antiterrian replacement of electricity with water takes part in this heterotopian proposal of contemplating the possibility of an “entirely different human adventure” (Genet, 41), concurrent with eschatological narratives whose matrix is the biblical narrative of Genesis, opening toward God’s creation of light in order to bring order to chaos.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century (also the beginning of Ardisian narrative), the current-turned-essential-additive for determinism has been electricity, as much an extension of divine light as it is an extension of the Laws of light according to which, “the Future did exist yesterday and by inference does exist today” (Nabokov 1990, 560). This is why, for us, electricity is at the heart of a confrontation among Antiterrians, which opposes electricity’s detractors with those who believe in its usefulness. The latter are among the “social thinkers” (560) who, according to Van as he writes *The Texture of Time*, “feel the Present as pointing beyond itself toward a not yet realized ‘future’ – but that is topical utopia, progressive politics” (Ibid).

The confrontation with this “topical utopia,” which is made into a reality in the theory of Terra’s existence, is the result of an event, “the L-disaster.” This event transpired on Antiterra “in the *beau milieu* of the last century” (17), that is, in the middle of the nineteenth century, since Van began writing his memoirs in 1957. The novel does not provide any information about the nature of this disaster. Antiterrian scientific progress had previously been more advanced than that of Earth: there were flying rugs “called Magicarpets (or ‘Jickers’)” (81), and the electromagnetic

telephone was invented there well before its invention by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876. The first political consequence of the L-disaster is a period of decline, the “great anti-L years of reactionary delusion” (17) also known as “the Great Reaction” (81), which is characterized by the decision to ban electricity, which became “unmentionable magnetic power” (21). It is therefore through looking at its consequences that it becomes possible to understand the L-disaster as “a euphemism [...] for speaking about the ‘disaster of electricity’” (Bouchet *et al.*, 1389).

At the same time, the bipolar world of Antiterra—born in the fourteenth century with the counterfactual victory of the Tartars over the Russians—is practically immobilized. This is confirmed by a comment from the narrator about “the cloudless course of Demonian history in the twentieth century, with the Anglo-American coalition managing one hemisphere, and Tartary, behind her Golden Veil, mysteriously ruling the other” (Nabokov 1990, 580). On the North American continent, one does not find the United States, but Amerussia, since the “Russians,” having thrown off the Tartar yoke, took exile in its northernmost province, Estoty (“Russia [...] being a quaint synonym of Estoty” [17]).

This *nearly* a-temporal bipolarity is challenged by the idea of Terra. Indeed, the other consequence of banning electricity, is a reaction to the reaction known as the “Great revelation” (20). This refers to the theory that the “New Believers” (20) developed starting in the 1860s of the existence of a twin planet, “sweet Terra,” which was supposedly irradiated by electricity, since “power [...] was used on Terra as freely as water and air, as bibles and brooms” (21).

Isabelle Poulin is the first to have shown the political side of this confrontation between Antiterra and Terra, and its rooting in the intellectual and political history of Russia:

The New Believers of the year eighteen sixty are none other than the radical Russian utilitarians for whom Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) becomes the ideologist following the publication of his dissertation-manifesto “The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality” (1855). The strange phonic kinship, particularly noticeable in English, between “revelation” and “revolution” can be further explained by the fact that “the man of the sixties” is “one of Russia’s first socialists,” as Lenin writes as early as 1907.³ Following the Revolution, Lenin

³ Lenin 1962, 292.

confirms that Chernyshevsky's "revolutionary theory," exhibited in the utopian novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) was a "Great Revelation."

(Poulin 2006, 194)

The fact that the subtitle of Chernyshevsky's novel is "From Tales about New People" (Chernyshevski, 38) reinforces this interpretation, which we can extend through this comment from Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift*: "No wonder that in a burst of vivid prescience the young Chernyshevsky noted in his diary in 1848 (the year somebody dubbed 'the vent of the century'): 'What if [...] there comes a new Messiah, and a new religion, and a new world?'" (Nabokov 1991b, 247).

After Chernyshevsky, it was indeed Lenin who became the new Messiah in Russia. In this way, the expression "L-Disaster" could be a syncretic discovery that metaphorically refers as much to the medium of the disaster (electricity, which can lead to the worst⁴) as to its theoretical cause, Leninism, the new religion of the new communist world. Chernyshevsky foreshadowed these causes during Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream in *What Is to Be Done?* in the form of a "completed kingdom" (Chernyshevski, 378) called "New Russia" (373) in which "every kind of happiness exists [...], whatever anyone desires [...] [e]veryone lives as he wants" (378), thanks to "pale, soft, bright light" (376): "electric light" (376).

If one is to better understand why electricity is prohibited on Antiterra, we consider that one must relate electricity back to what it symbolized in human history, this question of "the old urge 'toward the light'" (Nabokov 1991b, 175). Fyodor reflects on this urge, having been (like his creator) forced into exile during the Bolshevik Revolution:

had [it] concealed a fatal flaw, which in the course of progress toward the objective had grown more and more evident, until it was revealed that this "light" was burning in the window of a prison overseer, and that was all? When had this strange dependence sprung up between the sharpening of thirst and the muddying of the source? In the forties? in the sixties? and "what to do" now? (175)

⁴ One of these disasters occurs while Nabokov is writing *Ada*: on October 30, 1961, the USSR carries out the dropping of the "Tsar Bomba" on the archipelago of Novaya Zemlya in the Soviet Arctic, a 57 megaton hydrogen bomb, which is, to this day, the most powerful weapon of mass destruction ever used.

Electricity is the current that produces the transition from a world of darkness to one of light. Since its discovery, it has been an essential agent of both scientific and social progress. It has also historically come to symbolize revolutionary eruption. A French etching shows this as early as 1794. Entitled “La Chûte en masse : ainsi l’étincelle électrique de la liberté, renversera tous les trônes des brigands couronnés” [“The Fall en masse, this is how the electric spark of freedom will overthrow all the thrones of crowned bandits”], it depicts an experiment described as “Republican Electricity giving the Despots a Commotion that overthrows their thrones” (Queverdo, Dupuis); it is a political transposition of one of the first scientific experiments demonstrating electrical current (Serullaz, 289).

The banning of electricity on Antiterra could therefore have, in our view, an essentially anti-determinist political dimension. It would be a question, in fiction, of proceeding from an experiment consisting in preventing the future from happening, with full knowledge that, for the writer, this “future” is historically the past. Yet, what is this past for a Russian exile? On Earth, on the 21st of November, 1920, Lenin launches a vast plan of electrification for the new Russian Soviet Federative Republic with the following slogan, which has remained famous: “Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country” (Lenin 1920). The iconography of Soviet propaganda is, in all likelihood, the most expressive trace of the messianic identity of Lenin, communism, and electricity that we possess today. Consider, for example, this 1924 poster proclaiming that “Soviets and electrification are the foundation of the new world” (Samokhvalov), under the aegis of Lenin in the foreground who, like a prophet, guides the enlisted proletarians along the path of happiness for all.



In the race for progress and development that opposed the East and the West through most of the twentieth century, “The Electricity Fairy” (1937)—the title of Raoul Dufy’s monumental painting, which was created in particular to celebrate the social role of electric light—became the instrument and the symbol of the Bolshevik Revolution’s remarkable success, from the point of view of what, in 1949, Nabokov calls “the True Church” (Nabokov, Wilson, 226), in other words, communism.

By contrast, the men of Russia, renamed the “Motherland of Electricity” (as per the title of a story by Andrei Platonov, among others), found themselves subject to the materialist law of the electron, as illustrated by the infamous Soviet adage: “There was a smokehouse and a candle—now Ilyich’s lamp.” Starting in the 1920s Ilyich, which is Lenin’s patronymic name, becomes the

chosen name for the incandescent lamps that hang from the ceiling by a wire and that end up lighting every dwelling in Russia, doing away with the refuge of shade.

Since Antiterra's artists—qualified by the author as “enchanters” (Nabokov 1990, 20)—are, in the “New Believers” propaganda, bound to be “utterly degraded” (20) into “vicious monsters, [...] revilers and tormentors of female souls” (21), prohibiting electricity can therefore also be interpreted as an act of aesthetic resistance. It is about opposing the disappearance of supporters of genuine art—“noble iridescent creatures with translucent talons and mightily beating wings” (20)—a disappearance that has been planned by determinism and that historically occurred in the Soviet Union. In our view, this is the meaning of the replacement of electricity by water on Antiterra, since water appears to be conceived of as an anti-teleological fluid, symbolized by the “underground trickle” (440)—the fragile, but indomitable voice of “the dream-mind” (446). In the novel, the omnipresence of this invasive energy is protean: it is semantic, in character names and toponyms; physical, since it makes bedside lamps and dorophones (or hydrodynamic telephones) gurgle; and metaphorical, as an image and agent of fluidity. Artistically, what is at stake is indicating the possibility of a communication between souls other than one that is based upon the social usefulness of art and whose beauty relies upon the power of metaphorical evocation.

One of the effects of banning the naming of electricity, concomitant with its replacement by water, is the transformation of the Antiterrians' relationship with words. In order to refer to the banned energy, they must resort to images that connote it, for example, “lammer” (23). The only passage of the novel in which it is denoted, during an exchange between Van and Ada, can also shed light on what the lexical banning of electricity changes in the Antiterrians' relationship to art: “ringing for the maid in Georgian novels – inconceivable without the presence of elettricità – (I protest. You cannot. It is banned even in Lithuanian and Latin. Ada's note.)” (118) Here, it is suggested that without electricity, realism became impossible. The Antiterrians who respect the prohibition of naming electricity might therefore be anti-realists, and might be called “metaphorians.” Consequently, aquatic current might also be interpreted as the physical manifestation of anti-realism, or “metaphorism”—which, on Antiterra, would be opposed to utilitarianism.

The metamorphosis of Ida Larivière into Guillaume de Monparnasse, however, points out that the battle of words and of their usages has not been won in advance. On the one hand, Ida Larivière—Van’s governess, and later Ada’s and Lucette’s—has a name that makes use of the single *seme* found in the name “Mademoiselle O” (that, in French, is a homophone of *Mademoiselle Eau*), which Nabokov (fictionally) attributed to his teacher of French language and literature, Cécile Miauton. She is the feminine figure that, when he was a child, initiated him in the particularity of fiction, that is, in the power of imagination (Edel-Roy 2018, 270-283). Ida Larivière is also the one who passes this power onto the little Veens by making them learn Rimbaud’s “Mémoire” by heart. This poem becomes the *medium* of encrypted communication between Van and Ada in their love letters, thus symbolizing art’s ability to be a form of communication between souls that is not realist. From this point of view, Isabelle Poulin showed the vital nature of the dialogue between Nabokov himself and the modern French poets—and more specifically this poem—in the constitution of memory that has been stolen from the exile (Poulin 2017, 89-98).

It is indeed a question of how one uses this reservoir of sensations and images called literature by, in turn, becoming a creator. The governess’s poor use of this reservoir is no doubt the explanation behind her syncretic pen name, Guillaume de Monparnasse. This name assembles the artistic tendencies against which Nabokov built his art into a new post-national distribution of literature. There, one can read a dig against the naturalist-realist vein: one recognizes the evocation of Guy de Maupassant and the fact that Guillaume de Monparnasse’s first work, *La Rivière de diamants*, is a rewriting of Maupassant’s *La Parure*. In this work she turns realism into an instrument for condemning social injustice. Moreover, “Monparnasse” recalls the principal critics of Nabokovian art among Russian emigrants: the new spiritual guides known as the Paris School of poets, also called “the poets of Montparnasse,” in reference to the neighborhood in Paris where they could be found, which is written without a “t” in Russian.

A metaphor for placeless place, for time with neither end nor aim, for the infinite potentialities of life and of eternal renewal, for us, aquatic current seems therefore to be in a close relationship with a quest for the good place: the place of a communication that is *poiétique* because it is *meta*-phorical in the sense of “succession, change, transformation” that one finds in the Greek nomination *μετὰ*. As for the texture and values of this Nabokovian *eutopia*, in our view, they are

borrowed from the secret place of the author's childhood that he was deprived of by the Bolshevik Revolution.

In *Ada*, the imaginary Nabokovian universe—competing with utilitarian conceptions that betray art (such as, for example, socialist realism, which triumphed in 1965 when the Nobel Prize in Literature was attributed to Mikhail Sholokhov)—unfolds around a flower with a symbolic name in French, the *souci d'eau* (the marsh marigold in English), inherited as much from Rimbaud as from the writer's Russian past. The question of its naming preoccupies Ada and Van at one of Ardis's dinner parties. The conversation is mainly focused on Wallace Fowlie's transformation of "flowers into bloomers" (64) in his translation of Rimbaud's "Mémoire," subjecting the *souci d'eau* to the existentialist translation, "care of the water" (Nabokov 1990, 65). In the course of their conversation, the question arises as to the true Russian name of this wild flower. This becomes an opportunity for Nabokov to enact a sharing of antithetical cultures. Ada recalls the two words that Russians use to refer to the *souci d'eau*—*kuroselep* and *kaluzhnitsa*—but she makes a distinction between the two. The second word would be the more proper Russian synonym, used by real Russian speakers on Antiterra—the inhabitants of Kaluga, a city in French Estoty where the descendants of Russian emigrants live. The reason that Ada stays with *kaluzhnitsa* is most likely that it is formed from *kaluzha* which, in old Russian, means "marsh" or "swamp," since the *souci d'eau* is a perennial semi-aquatic plant.

The first word, *kuroselep*, is a less adequate synonym because it is perverted by its usage among bad speakers of Russian on Antiterra; it is the word that "muzhiks in Tartary misapply, poor slaves, to the buttercup" (63). It is indeed a question of possibility, since *kuroselep* sometimes refers to the *souci d'eau* and other times refers to the buttercup. Nabokov most likely attributes this comment to Ada as a way of denouncing Soviet distortions of the natural world (the "slaves" of Tartary are a reference to Soviets on Earth). The word is actually the abbreviation of *kurinaya slepota* (literally "chicken blindness"), an expression describing the blinding effect of the buttercup if it is looked at too closely.

With this encrypted linguistic game, Nabokov mocks the idiocy of a so-called culture that is ignorant of and mixes up the names of plants even though it claims realism as its structuring principle. Fyodor already points this out in "The Life of Chernyshevski": "the 'materialists' constant appeal to trees is especially amusing because they are all so badly acquainted with nature,

particularly with trees. [...] Chernyshevski [...] was unable to name a single wild flower except the wild rose” (Nabokov 1991b, 243-244). The battle for true words is therefore not a pure phenomenon of affectation or postmodernity in language, rather it is one of the principles of an anti-determinist ontology in Nabokovian creation: this battle implies the existence of a world of detail, of diversity and of difference whose stakes are to neither confuse one flower with another, nor one man with another (as Hermann does in *Despair*), nor one paradise with another.

As for the *souci d'eau*, Ada explains to Van that it is the flower which has “many other nicknames associated with fertility feasts” (65). If the “fertility feasts” (65) might be viewed as a beautiful metaphor for Nabokovian art, their source should be sought near the little plot of native soil that will forever remain close to his heart. For, if Nabokov ever knew of a good place, “it was in heaven... It was in Russia” (Nabokov 2000, 746), he explains in 1924, in one of his first prose texts entitled “Russian River” whose first lines impart each Russian river with its own poetic language, as subaquatic as it is superhuman:

Each of us remembers a Russian river, but, helpless, stops himself, having hardly begun to speak about it: only human words have been given to man.

Whereas rivers—like souls—are all unique... To be able to transmit their essence to others, one must, at least, know the bubbly babbling of sirens, the emerald speech of the waters’ spirits. (746)

The river that Nabokov loved as a child is the Oredezh, which connected his family’s three properties in a magic triangle whose map he drew for his autobiography. If, on Antiterra, it is the Russians of Kaluga who continue to use the authentic Russian name for the *souci d'eau*, *kaluzhnitsa*, in the Russia that Nabokov knew, it is on the Luga highway, in the place where an arm of the Oredezh spreads out into a marsh, that, at the very beginning of spring, the yellow clusters of *kaluzhnitsi* suddenly come into bloom, papering the writer’s native plot of land at the foot of Rozhestveno, his first love’s manor. In his autobiography, the exile who became the father of Van and Ada recalls, “because of its floating islands of water lilies and algal brocade, the fair Oredezh had a festive air at that spot” (Nabokov 1989, 72). In “Russian River,” Nabokov describes the favorite places of his youth, the length of the Oredezh’s “winding branching and looping

course,” which, in our view, constitutes the writer’s secret place that is transposed into the Ladore river and its landscapes, the Ardisian setting for Ada and Van’s love story.

The omnipresence of water in *Ada or Ardor* invites us to think that it might actually be a question of opening up the reader’s imagination to an aesthetic universe that rivals the ideological universe of electricity’s supporters. The origin of this attachment to water is Russian, as the book *Meanings and Values of Water in Russian Culture* reminds us; the book cites Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky, for whom “[t]he Russian came alive on the river, and lived with her in deep spiritual concord” (Costlow, Rosenholm, 1). Nevertheless, the qualities and purposes of water are universal (one might think of Gaston Bachelard’s essay, *L’Eau et les rêves* [*Water and Dreams*]) and they include water as “the constituent metaphor of change, shift, re-conceptualization, and new beginnings” (Costlow, Rosenholm, 9). Its role in fiction can admittedly be cruel and tragic, including Lucette’s suicide by drowning. However, it is actually the aesthetic treatment of this scene—and particularly the liquidity with which consciousness flows—that kindles the reader’s compassion for Lucette as she disappears into the ocean, and creates the kind of awareness that Brian Boyd studied with regard to the responsibility of art (Boyd 1985). Since water “connotes *becoming* as liberation from petrified norms, styles of life, and frozen traditions of aesthetics” (Costlow, Rosenholm, 9), it might be explored in *Ada* as the metaphor for aesthetic current—an antidote to determinism and a form of communication that lifts restraints from man, life, thought, expression, and representation. And, in a poem devoted to the tragic passing of his beloved father whom the song of water rescues from the void, Nabokov himself invites us to conceive of water within rebirth, on the other side of death: “if all the brooks sing anew of miracle, ...then you are in that song, you are in that gleam, you are alive” (Boyd 1990, 193-194).

Translated from French by Jackson B. Smith

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