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HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND ‘REALITY’ IN NABOKOV’S INVENTED WORLDS: THE PROCESS OF SPECIALIZATION

Nabokov’s intricate approach to reality and the connections between reality and his writings has proved a tangled issue in Nabokovian studies. Indeed, while reality is a perplexing matter in any writer’s work, it is singularly nettlesome in a writer both exacting in his standards for scientific precision in fictional works and desirous of disentangling himself from the knots and tangles of context. Yet, many of Nabokov’s works are set in historical or geographic contexts which bear many similarities with external, non-fictional reality. If botanic reality must be respected in a work of fiction, how does Nabokov’s commitment to invention impact his depiction of history and geography in his invented worlds and how can his treatment of history and geography inform his vision of reality? The narrator’s appeal in *Look at the Harlequins* to “Play! Invent the world! Invent reality”¹ embodies Nabokov’s complex approach to reality. In his 1990 biography *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Brian Boyd points out the tension between Nabokov’s reliance on the reality of nature and the author’s preoccupation with invention:

Nature was one rival Nabokov knew he could not outdo at its own game. Apart from the occasional Zemblan bird or plant, he did not bother to reinvent his own tree of life, though he drew the one nature provided—the chick-fluff of a mimosa, the small helicopter of a revolving samara—with a surer skill than almost any artist. But what Nabokov could do was invent his own world, replete with surprising pattern, on small

¹ Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins*, 10.

scale and large, with some of the variety, complexity, and interlacing of hierarchies he had been entranced by in nature since early childhood.²

Notwithstanding Nabokov's artistic skills, this quasi-constant reliance on the scientific observation of nature seems to conflict with the idea of fiction as a totally invented world which, to paraphrase Flaubert in a 1852 letter to Louise Colet, would stand on its own by dint of nothing but form itself.³ Though Nabokov "invents his own world", the details of this imaginary realm, materialized through word composition, find their source in the "complexity" of reality, both historical and geographic, as perceived by the author, and raise the issue of the representation of reality in a fictional work. In the introduction to Stephen Blackwell and Kurt Johnson's 2016 *Fine Lines. Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art*, the co-editors quote Nabokov's appeal to critics to see his compositional decisions as motivated by his quest for "utmost truthfulness and perception," and demonstrate that Nabokov was animated by similar objectives in both his literary and scientific endeavors: "The very fact that he sees creativity as a matter of truth and of perception immediately suggests parallels with scientific work."⁴ Nevertheless, introduction of the terms "truth" and "perception" rather than "reality" by Nabokov himself allows for a sidestepping of prickly issues that may arise when discussing the possibility of representing objective reality. In the interview, Nabokov was fending off interpretations of his writing style as "facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure"⁵ and thereby insisted on his commitment to precision. The fact that he preferred the terms "truthfulness" and "perception" to "reality" is a characteristic manifestation of Nabokov's vision of reality as a notion just as elusive and nebulous as the purpose of a meretricious writing style.

Nabokov's vision of reality

In *Style Is Matter*, Leland de la Durantaye stresses Nabokov's rejection of the idea of art as representation of reality and the tension this creates with other aspects of his literary ethos: "Nabokov's idea of 'reality' thus rejects shared visions of art and the world it mirrors.

² Boyd, *Russian Years*, 298.

³ Flaubert, *Correspondance II*, 31.

⁴ Blackwell and Johnson, *Fine Lines*, 5.

⁵ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 179.

Integrating this position into Nabokov's aesthetics and ethics has—understandably—presented significant difficulties for Nabokov's critics."⁶ The brackets surrounding the word "reality" embody these difficulties and honor Nabokov's belief, as expressed in the afterword to *Lolita*, that reality is "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes."⁷

The quotes signify the elusiveness of reality as a notion, which Nabokov believes cannot be perceived uniformly and objectively. This can be seen in his response to Hebert Gold's mention of "everyday reality" in his 1967 *The Paris Review* interview of Nabokov: "Whose 'reality'? 'Everyday' where? Let me suggest that the very term 'everyday reality' is utterly static since it presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known. I suspect you have invented that expert on 'everyday reality'. Neither exists."⁸

Although this answer is evidence of Nabokov's apprehension when tackling the issue of reality and his refusal to take the term for granted, it also efficiently summarizes Nabokov's vision of reality as unattainable through mere empirical perception. To Nabokov, reality is perceived by individuals, creating singular visions: an author's composition should constitute a fastidious attempt to truthfully reproduce said author's individual perception. What is commonly known as "reality" is therefore only a merging of singular visions, an average of individual perceptions as shown in another of Nabokov's response to an interview question in which he once again objects to the uncritical use of the term: "Your use of the word 'reality' perplexes me. To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrumery, current editorials."⁹ Nabokov makes clear that the fulcrum of his fictional work is individual perception and not this average reality: "Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture"¹⁰ Since it feeds off singular visions, average reality has no independent intrinsic worth. As Leland de la Durantaye explains, Nabokov has clearly chosen the side of individual

⁶ De la Durantaye, *Style is Matter*, 43.

⁷ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 312.

⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 94.

⁹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 118.

¹⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 118.

perception: “Nabokov happily exiles himself to the ivory tower of his singular reality and focuses with rare intensity on the passionate pursuit of an inner vision.”¹¹

This compounds the apparent conflict between scientific accuracy and invention with the added complexity of tackling general notions such as history and geography according to an individual and specific perception.

Nabokov’s vision readily explains his opposition to realism, as expressed in his previously quoted interview: “Now if you mean by ‘old reality’ the so-called ‘realism’ of old novels [...] then you are right in suggesting that the reality faked by a mediocre performer is boring, and that imaginary worlds acquire by contrast a dreamy and unreal aspect. Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual.”¹² The paradox is not so obvious, since it is clear that realist works attempt to represent an average reality, which is only a merging and diluting of individual perceptions, while authors who reproduce their singular vision truthfully are dealing with a pure and authentic solution. In his lecture on *Mansfield Park*, he stresses this very point:

In a book, the reality of a person, or object, or a circumstance depends exclusively on the world of that particular book. An original author always invents an original world, and if a character or an action fits into the pattern of that world, then we experience the pleasurable shock of artistic truth, no matter how unlikely the person or thing may seem if transferred into what book reviewers, poor hacks call ‘real life’.¹³

In his lecture on *Madame Bovary*, Nabokov again minimizes the importance of the historical context, both as the context during which the novel is written and as the context in which it is set: “Everything that happens in the book happens exclusively in Flaubert’s mind [...] no matter what conditions in the France of his time existed or seemed to exist”¹⁴.

Yet, Nabokov’s invented worlds do feed off real-world geography and history, and the historic and geographic framework is nonetheless at work in the reader’s mind as they

¹¹ De la Durantaye, 47.

¹² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 118.

¹³ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 10.

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 126.

recognize within the fictional worlds historical events or geographic landmarks belonging to a shared reality external to the work of fiction.

Nabokov's position should not be construed as individualist relativism, with Nabokov believing that there is no objective reality because all singular perceptions of reality are equally valid. Even Nabokov's claim that "all reality is comparative reality,"¹⁵ though it showcases once more the writer's uneasiness with the notion, does not preclude the existence of an individual path towards reality or a hierarchy between singular perceptions, and therefore does not reject either scientific discoveries or established facts in history or geography.

Nabokov and the "referential fallacy"

Applied to literature, this vision of reality precludes any pretense to realism from a writer, for if "you can never know everything about one thing"¹⁶ as Nabokov points out in another interview, then you cannot represent it with full realism in a written form. To Nabokov, realism both as a literary movement and as an endeavor by overweening writers is guilty of confusing reality with a fictional representation, a position which is commensurate with a rejection of "referential fallacy", as defined by Michael Riffaterre in *Littérature et Réalité*: "In the same way that intentional fallacy incorrectly supplants the author with the text, referential fallacy incorrectly supplants reality with its representation [...] We nevertheless cannot be satisfied with correcting the mistake and ignoring its consequences, for this fallacy is part of the literary phenomenon, in its capacity as a fallacy belonging to the reader."¹⁷

In his adamant opposition to both referential and intentional fallacies, Nabokov seems to insert mocking allusions to this "fallacy belonging to the reader." This is part of Nabokov's attempts to preventively decommission any interpretation seen as completely benighted by the author. In order to prevent any Freudian interpretation, Nabokov makes numerous references to oneiric Freudian symbols and sexual innuendos to a comic degree.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 146.

¹⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 11.

¹⁷ «Tout comme l'illusion intentionnelle substitue à tort l'auteur au texte, l'illusion référentielle substitue à tort la réalité à sa représentation [...] Nous ne pouvons cependant nous contenter de corriger l'erreur et d'en ignorer les effets, car cette illusion fait partie du phénomène littéraire, comme illusion du lecteur.» Riffaterre, «L'illusion référentielle», in *Littérature et réalité*, 93, my translation.

Likewise, the same way he challenges the reader not to fall into the trap of intentional fallacy by notably creating spurious paratext or using unreliable first-person narrators, Nabokov challenges the reader not to fall into the trap of referential fallacy by accumulating mentions of geographical bearings, mixing references to reality with pure inventions.

This device can be seen in *Lolita*, where Humbert Humbert introduces himself by depicting the “salad of racial genes” which characterize his father and proceeds to subject the reader to a salad of geographical bearings: Paris, Switzerland, the Danube, Austria, Corfu, the French Riviera. Not even Humbert’s journey to the United States is spared a few detours: “[...] the gloom of yet another world war had settled on the globe when, after a winter of ennui and pneumonia in Portugal, I at last reached the States”. Despite this statement, Humbert still went through Canada, and the invented places of Pierre Point, Melville Sound during a fictional scientific expedition, before he finally reached the made-up town of Ramsdale in a fictional New England whose name only is borrowed from reality. Historical facts are also mixed with inventions, as the reader is told of an invented “epidemic,”¹⁸ which led Ramsdale’s schools to be closed “for the summer,”¹⁹ occurring on Fast Day, a real holiday unique to New Hampshire which in our “reality” only ended in 1991 (to be replaced by Civil Rights Day). Moreover, New Hampshire’s 1947 Fast Day occurred on April 24, not on May 30.²⁰ This is in line with Nabokov’s anti-historicism, as examined by Alexander Dolinin in “Clio laughs last: Nabokov’s answer to historicism”: “It is clear that Nabokov’s militant anti-historicism was not the pose of a snob but a fundamental position shaped in the cultural context of the 1920s and 1930s.”²¹ Nabokov’s view on the place of historical context and its representation in fiction constitutes a guiding literary belief steering the invented world away from ephemeral context and towards a less perishable truth:

Even a cursory look at his descriptions of Weimar Berlin – the site of all his major Russian works except *Invitation to a Beheading* – is sufficient to show that Nabokov’s vision is pointedly opposed to the image of the city as a “daemonic Sodom” on the verge of impending destruction. Where the émigré critics of the West see horrifying

¹⁸ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 40.

¹⁹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 40.

²⁰ *Nashua Telegraph*. April 7, 1947. <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/77722956/nashua-telegraph/> [accessed 05/16/2021]

²¹ Dolinin, “Clio laughs last,” 211.

symbols of historical catastrophe, Nabokov discovers just the regenerated forms of eternal *poshlost*'.²²

This is even more conspicuous in *Ada*, which is set in an invented world parallel to external reality. The author once again mixes invented names and places with ones taken from reality, but the reader is forced by the very name of the invented world, Antiterra, to confront the tangled issues of reality and representation, as Dieter E. Zimmer points out in his text “The Geography of Antiterra”:

The reader is constantly tempted to match Antiterra's places to those on earth and to equate both. For the correspondences and near agreements are so numerous that the reader assumes what strictly speaking cannot be taken for granted at all: that Antiterra and Terra will also be alike in their unmentioned and hence invisible aspects. This is a deeply entrenched habit of thinking: if two things are alike in thousands of explicit and countless implicit details, whether natural ones or purely cultural ones like names and dates, everybody will readily jump to the conclusion that the unmentioned and unknown rest will also be more or less equal.²³

This “deeply entrenched habit” derives from the referential fallacy, and Nabokov accumulates correspondences and enmeshes real bearings in invented ones to make the fallacy both more tempting and impossible to escape: a reader has to reject the referential fallacy or fully embrace it. The setting of the novel is structured with the purpose of ridiculing the referential fallacy since equating places in *Ada* with the name of real places is clearly illogical when the reader is told they are dealing with a fictional parallel world. *Ada* contains a multitude of invented locations, many of which have a tenuous but ostensible link to reality. This happens from the very first page, where an accumulation of places is to be found:

²² Dolinin, “Clio laughs last,” 201.

²³ Zimmer, “The Geography of Antiterra”.

Van's maternal grandmother Daria ('Dolly') Durmanov was the daughter of Prince Peter Zemski, Governor of Bras d'Or, an American province in the Northeast of our great and variegated country, who had married, in 1824, Mary O'Reilly, an Irish woman of fashion. Dolly, an only child, born in Bras, married in 1840, at the tender and wayward age of fifteen, General Ivan Durmanov, Commander of Yukon Fortress and peaceful country gentleman, with lands in the Severn Tories (Severniya Territorii), that tessellated protectorate still lovingly called 'Russian' Estoty, which commingles, granoblastically and organically, with 'Russian' Canady, otherwise 'French' Estoty, where not only French, but Macedonian and Bavarian settlers enjoy a halcyon climate under our Stars and Stripes.²⁴

The name of the American province, Bras d'Or comes from the existing Canadian province called Labrador; Canada is modified into "Canady"; Macedonia and Bavaria are existing places but placed here on the same level, as if Bavaria was a country; and Nabokov, according to Bryan Boyd's annotations on *Ada Online*, makes an allusion to a counterfeit map from 1558 which included a location called Estotiland.²⁵ Nabokov, in the second paragraph of the novel, makes a point of confronting the reader with a world which seems as if it could be an attempt to represent reality except for a few crucial details. "Canady" might be the most revealing choice: only one letter makes the word and the world different from reality, as if to stake an authorial claim on an invented world and to immediately decommission the referential fallacy. Likewise, Nabokov inserts historical figures such as Tolstoy or Jane Austen while also inventing historical watershed events like "the L disaster". Nabokov makes clear that no matter what similarities may be found between reality and his fictional world, the latter is fully under his aegis.

With Riffaterre's notion in mind, the depiction of a delusion existing among the characters of *Ada* about the existence of Terra reads as a satire of the referential fallacy:

There were those who maintained that the discrepancies and 'false overlappings' between the two worlds were too numerous, and too deeply woven into the skein of

²⁴ Nabokov, *Ada*, 3.

²⁵ Boyd, *Ada Online*.

successive events, not to taint with trite fancy the theory of essential sameness; and there were those who retorted that the dissimilarities only confirmed the live organic reality pertaining to the other world; that a perfect likeness would rather suggest a specular, and hence speculative, phenomenon; and that two chess games with identical openings and identical end moves might ramify in an infinite number of variations, on *one* board and in *two* brains, at any middle stage of their irrevocably converging development.²⁶

Fictional characters reproduce the fallacy as they believe in a “theory of essential sameness”. Nabokov reverse engineers the fallacy and reinvents it from fiction towards reality by staging the difficulty it poses for readers. The mention of the chess game could also constitute a metaphor for the representation of geographic and historical reality in a literary work: the opening and end game, which are fueled by the players’ knowledge of theory and often follow predetermined main lines or known variations depending on the players’ choices could represent the use of events and locations taken from reality while the middle game, where chess theory is absent, represents the invented aspects of the fictional world.

Impossibilities: Nabokov and realism

As an analyst and a teacher, Nabokov proves just as critical of the referential fallacy and the idea that a novel could faithfully represent a geographic and historical context. In his Cornell class on *Madame Bovary*, he first stresses the parlous nature of a reading based on the assumption that the novel is a representation of provincial 19th century France, which might tempt callow readers unfamiliar with the pitfalls of referential confusion. He then asks, purely rhetorically, “[...] can we call *Madame Bovary* *realistic* or *naturalistic*?” in order to establish the novel as a purely fictional world and free Flaubert’s work from the shackles of historical, geographical and literary context. He achieves this by listing all the ways the novel departs from reality:

²⁶ Nabokov, *Ada*, 18-9.

A novel in which a young and healthy husband night after night never wakes to find the better half of his bed empty; never hears the sand pebbles thrown at the shutters by a lover; never receives an anonymous letter from some local busybody.

[...]

A novel in which a young woman who has not been riding for several years—if indeed she ever did ride when she lived on her father’s farm—now gallops away to the woods with perfect poise, and never feels any stiffness in the joints afterwards.

A novel in which many other implausible details abound—such as the very implausible naiveté of a certain cabdriver—such a novel has been called a landmark of so-called realism, whatever that is.²⁷

The list is quite convincing. Indeed, in spite of Charles’ constant depiction as a naïve, artless and passive character, the fact that he has no inkling of his wife’s affairs for almost three years (one year with Rodolphe, two with Léon) despite living in a rather tight-knit community seems less than realistic. Likewise, Emma’s horse-riding abilities do remain unexplained. Although this list, in another context, might be seen as a succession of arguments reproaching the novel for its lack of realism, Nabokov uses this lack of verisimilitude as a compliment to *Madame Bovary*. He doffs his hat to Flaubert for not attempting a realism which is impossible.

A similar list could be made about Nabokov’s novels. In *Lolita*, for example: a novel in which a woman dies in a freak accident just as she discovers the narrator’s terrible secret, run over by a car that swerved to avoid a dog as she slipped on the conveniently wet cement into its path. Of course, in the novel Nabokov makes this lack of verisimilitude all the more obvious with self-referential allusions to “McFate” and all the improbabilities can be explained by the narrator’s very conceivable mendacity. To Nabokov, improbability in a novel is an asset as it crystallizes the invented aspect of the work. Creating a geography and a history made up of names or events taken from external reality mixed with inventions establishes an impenetrable barrier between the novel’s reality and external reality.

²⁷ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 146.

However, there is in *Ada* an example of a novel being torn apart over the improbability of its plot. Indeed, Mlle Larivière's novel, which she introduces as a realist novel, is received by the exacting narrators in this manner: "True; that might have been the intent—apart from the *pointe assassine*; but the story lacked 'realism' *within its own terms*, since a punctilious, penny-counting employee would have found out, first of all, no matter how, *quitte à tout dire à la veuve*, what exactly the lost necklace had cost. *That* was the fatal flaw in the Larivière pathos-piece [...]."28

If geographic locations and historical events can be invented, why can't human behavior? Although the critique is made by Nabokov's characters and not himself, there is no contradiction between this criticism and Nabokov's encomium celebrating the improbability of *Madame Bovary*. Indeed, Flaubert's novel is improbable compared to average reality, not "*within its own terms*": Charles is described as clueless, so his extraordinarily heavy sleeping is not out of character, and Antiterra, through its very name, explains away any confusion as to why the names of earthly locations are mixed with invented ones. On the other hand, Mlle Larivière's description of her own character clashes with her novel's final twist. Though Nabokov believes in fiction as the creation of a completely invented world, this world must be strictly regimented and the logic set by the author himself should not be broken within the book: "In point of fact, all fiction is fiction. All art is deception. Flaubert's world, as all worlds of major writers, is a world of fancy with its own logic, its own conventions, its own coincidences. The curious impossibilities I have listed here do not clash with the pattern of the book [...]."29

Scientific accuracy and exact details

Nevertheless, Nabokov's vision of fiction as the truthful reproduction of an inner vision, a singular perception of reality seems to be contradicted by the fact that the author was wont to mete out extremely sharp rebukes against writers who insert scientific inaccuracies in their writings. This habit goes hand in hand with Nabokov's love of details and his uncommon position as a writer/scientist: "As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail

²⁸ Nabokov, *Ada*, 87.

²⁹ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 146.

to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam.”³⁰

This quote summarizes Nabokov’s singular appreciation for details and images as opposed to generalizations, ideas and symbols. Along with this appreciation comes a requirement of exactitude, which Nabokov indulges not simply as a writer but as a reader and a teacher, as evidenced by his method of evaluating his students’ knowledge of *Anna Karenina*:

In my academic days, I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead. In that respect, general ideas have no importance. An ass can assimilate the main points of Tolstoy’s attitude toward adultery but in order to enjoy Tolstoy’s art the good reader must wish to visualize, for instance, the arrangement of a railway carriage on the Moscow-Petersburg night train as it was a hundred years ago.³¹

The instructions provided to his students indeed required them to imagine and describe an object pictured in striking detail in the novels under study, such as the train station in *Anna Karenina* or Emma’s hairstyle in *Madame Bovary*, seen through Charles’ eyes.

The question of scientific accuracy arises in Nabokov’s annotations to Eleanor Marx’s translation of *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert, in the novel, describes Charles’ last visit to Emma before making his proposal, as the character gazes at a table where flies are climbing up empty glasses previously filled with cider: “Des mouches, sur la table, montaient le long des verres qui avaient servi, et bourdonnaient en se noyant au fond, dans le cidre resté.”³² Marx translates “montaient le long des verres” with “crawled up glasses.”³³ Nabokov strikes out the word “crawled” and objects in the margins, arguing that flies do not crawl, they walk since they possess legs. Since the French verb “montaient” does not specify whether the flies are crawling or walking, the correction is not made on behalf of Flaubert’s singular vision

³⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 10.

³¹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 156-7.

³² Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 80.

³³ Marx, in her translation of *Madame Bovary*, 21.

(although in a separate scene later in the novel Flaubert does use the verb “walk” to describe another insect) or spurred by a superior knowledge of the French language. It is a correction based purely on scientific exactitude.

Not that Flaubert was a stranger to this exacting attitude towards scientific accuracy. In a letter to Louis Bouilhet, who previously sent him the draft of a poem containing this line: “Les aigles enivrés chancellent par les airs” Flaubert replies on May 4th, 1851, that the line lacks veracity: “Dans quelque chose d’exact soyons exacts. La violence des couleurs ne s’obtient que par l’exactitude de la couleur même, pénétrée de notre sentiment subjectif. [...] c’est qu’au contraire dans le ciel bleu cru, l’aigle va majestueusement et comme dans son vrai milieu. Le tableau où tu me le mets n’a pour lui rien d’excentrique. Il s’y plaît.”³⁴ This concern for exactitude is congenial to Flaubert who, unlike Nabokov, was unflinching and unapologetic in his quest for generalization. Distinct from realism, this endeavor led Flaubert to wish to represent a permanent truth and create types, an objective that Nabokov did not share but one that is clearly in keeping with the requirement for scientific accuracy.

However, Nabokov’s attachment to scientific precision in his translation is of course not justified by a mere respect for Flaubert’s vision. This can notably be seen in his letters, in which he routinely criticizes novels or texts of fiction by mocking their failure to portray natural phenomena in a scientifically accurate manner. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, he justifies his contempt for Malraux by an impossibility found in *La Condition Humaine*: “Do crickets (the cricket—the Goddamned couleur locale pet cricket—that was *éveillé* by one of the characters’ arrival, p.20) and mosquitoes (p. 348) occur, in the imaginal stage, *in early spring*, in Shanghai? I doubt it.”³⁵ If there is no way to objectively perceive the entire reality of an object, why is Malraux’s decision to include a cricket in an improbable time frame (from the standpoint of external reality) disqualifying? As the creator of an invented world, with a made-up geography and history, is Malraux not entitled to insert an existing insect in his world and reinvent it, as long as that is part of his singular inner vision? The presence of mosquitoes well outside of the summer months period, *in our world and according to our geographic and historical reality*, does seem improbable, and this observation by Nabokov shows both his attention to detail and his high expectations in terms of scientific precision. In

³⁴ “Drunken eagles stagger through the air”/“When dealing with something exact let us be exact. The strength of colors is only achieved through the exactness of color itself, instilled with our subjective viewpoint. [...] on the contrary, in a cloudless azure sky, the eagle flies majestically as if in his element. The image in which you place him is not outlandish, he is comfortable in it.” Flaubert, *Correspondance*, 778.

³⁵ Nabokov, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, 202.

any case, the reality of the mosquito in *La Condition Humaine* evidently does not depend “exclusively on the world of that particular book,”³⁶ and this comment may be seen as an exaggeration.

Scientific accuracy may not always be the goal, as can be seen in another letter to Edmund Wilson in which Nabokov focuses on a single detail to criticize Henry James’ *The Aspern Papers*:

The style is artistic but it is not the style of an artist. For instance: the man is smoking a cigar in the dark and another person sees the *red tip* from the window. *Red tip* makes one think of a red pencil or a dog licking itself, it is quite wrong when applied to the glow of a cigar in pitch darkness because there is no “tip”; in fact the glow is blunt. But he thought of a cigar having a tip and then painted the tip red—rather like those false cigarettes—menthol sticks with the end made to look ‘embery’—that people who try to give up smoking are said to use. Henry James is definitely for non-smokers.³⁷

Nabokov charges James with depicting a counterfeit cigar which lacks realism. His objections to the “red tip” may arguably be based on the superiority of his singular vision of reality, but he does claim objectivity. He uses the present simple as is customary to express general truths: “the glow is blunt.” The authority Nabokov is claiming to invalidate James’ image is that of an objective observation sharpened by an association of perceptions made by a group like “smokers.” If we were only dealing with singular visions, then the perceptions of cigar glows by both authors might simply clash and cancel themselves. Nabokov, by mentioning smokers, certainly seems to appeal to an external objective reality legitimized by the shared experiences of a category of people familiar with the object in question. However, the reality of the glow of a cigar is unquestionably observable in reality.

Reviewing Sartre’s *La Nausée*, Nabokov sets his sights on the song to which “great importance is attached”: “Roquentin would like to be as crisply alive as this song which ‘saved the Jew [who wrote it] and the Negress [who sang it]’ from being ‘drowned in

³⁶ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 10.

³⁷ Nabokov, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, 59.

existence’.”³⁸ Nabokov then adds: “I have ascertained that in reality the song is a Sophie Tucker one written by the Canadian Shelton Brooks,”³⁹ exposing that “in reality” the writer of the song is a Canadian born African-American composer and that the singer is a Jewish woman. Although Nabokov does not explicitly call this a mistake, the whole review is scathing and this is certainly meant as a slight, as is the mention *en passant* of Roquentin’s “quite implausible travels.” Nabokov is belittling the value of an invented world by pointing to inaccuracies between reality and its use in the work of fiction.

Although Nabokov is an author renowned for his “strong opinions,” most famously embodied by his feud with Edmund Wilson, these corrections cannot be dismissed as the priggish remarks of a pedantic and carping writer eager to find flaws in the productions of rivals. Indeed, Nabokov’s love of precision, including scientific accuracy, is at the core of his aesthetic ethos.

Furthermore, even writers beloved by Nabokov are susceptible to such mistakes. Nabokov proves so exacting that even major writers whom he considered first-rate sometimes fail to escape unscathed from this meticulous reading. Even Flaubert, renowned for his love of precision, is found wanting on one occasion in *Madame Bovary*. Nabokov, in his annotations, though he does not include the comment in his class, regretfully notices an apparent lack of accuracy during the first horse-riding scene with Emma and Rodolphe: “À côté, sur la pelouse, entre les sapins, une lumière brune circulait dans l’atmosphère tiède. La terre, roussâtre comme de la poudre de tabac, amortissait le bruit des pas; et, du bout de leurs fers, en marchant, les chevaux poussaient devant eux des pommes de pin tombées.”⁴⁰

In the margins, Nabokov writes: “Flaubert, I regret to say, has pine cones under firs.”⁴¹ Undoubtedly, firs do not produce pine cones. They do produce candle-shaped fir cones, which do not open but disintegrate at maturity, leaving only a central stem which could hardly be called a cone, let alone be pushed forward by the hoofs of horses. And yet, to inflexibly label this a mistake may be only possible by impugning Flaubert’s motive in laying down pine cones under firs. Indeed, *Madame Bovary* is an invented world and, as Flaubert wrote himself in a letter to referential fallacy-prone reader Alfred Cailteaux on June 4th, 1857: “Yonville

³⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 229.

³⁹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 229.

⁴⁰ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 261.

⁴¹ Nabokov, in his copy of Eleanor Marx’s translation of *Madame Bovary*, 163.

l'Abbaye lui-même est un pays qui n'existe pas."⁴² Nabokov praises Flaubert for "impossibilities" such as the sudden springing of horse-riding abilities in a main character or maintaining Charles Bovary in implausible ignorance for the whole novel, yet faults him for inserting pine cones after mentioning firs. It seems as if under Nabokov's own vision of reality, Flaubert should be given the benefit of the doubt, no matter how far-fetched the possible reason: could he not have inserted this impossibility in order to puzzle the reader, as a kind of proto-Nabokovian trick to preclude the referential fallacy and hint at Yonville l'Abbaye being an "invented province". Of course, the possibility that the pinecone incongruity is part of Flaubert's singular vision and not a simple oversight is fairly remote. Nevertheless, it seems initially that Nabokov's view is that it is perfectly fine to invent a whole fictional village in the middle of geographic and historical reality but not to take liberties with botany.

Reaching reality through specialization

It may be tempting to explain away this apparent double standard in Nabokov's tackling Flaubertian and other impossibilities as a consequence of his avowed preference for "the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas."⁴³ The thematic impossibilities listed as assets hindering the association with realism are neither details nor images, while the pine cones belong in both of these categories cherished by Nabokov. One may then conclude that Nabokov forgives, even encourages, implausible events in the plot of a story for the theme itself is irrelevant: what matters is style, the true content of a novel. Geography and history, like the general context of the plot, may be seen as part of the subject matter. Images, on the other hand, are part of the stylistic structure of a novel and therefore require the writer to be fastidious and precise. This would mean that Nabokov does believe in the possibility of perceiving and representing an objective reality when it comes to the aspects of literature he cares deeply about. However, the true explanation for Nabokov's apparent contradiction in dealing with implausibility in novels can be found in his own attempt to define reality. A quote from Nabokov's 1962 BBC interview provides a rare insight in Nabokov's attempt to clearly define reality, as well as proof that his adamant insisting on the elusiveness of the

⁴² "Yonville l'Abbaye itself is a place that does not exist." Flaubert, *Correspondance*, 728.

⁴³ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 10.

notion is part of a complex theory of reality and not merely a trick to avoid a potentially embarrassing discussion on an inchoate concept:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless.⁴⁴

Again, Nabokov starts out by denying the existence of an objectively perceived reality, but the difference lies in the fact that he then provides a clear definition not of reality itself but of a path towards reality through a specialized individual perception. Indeed, here Nabokov lays out a clear hierarchy of perceptions, from less to more specialized. Although an isolated quote by the author, it echoes a comment made by the narrator in *Ada*. In chapter 13, Van Veen directly equates botany and reality:

For the big picnic on Ada's twelfth birthday and Ida's forty-second *jour de fête*, the child was permitted to wear her lolita (thus dubbed after the little Andalusian gipsy of that name in Osberg's novel and pronounced, incidentally, with a Spanish 't,' not a thick English one), a rather long, but very airy and ample, black skirt, with red poppies or peonies, 'deficient in botanical reality,' as she grandly expressed it, not yet knowing that reality and natural science are synonymous in the terms of this, and only this, dream.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 10-11.

⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Ada*, 77.

Without succumbing to the intentional fallacy, the depiction of the phrase “botanical reality” within a specific world as redundant is only a slight exaggeration of Nabokov’s stated opinion that the botanist reaches the highest stage of reality, compared to the “ordinary person” or “the naturalist”. Moreover, as Yannicke Chupin points out in *Fictions d’écrivains*, Van Veen is among the narrators whom Nabokov endows with some of the ideal writer’s mindset: “Fyodor and Van are not merely clear-sighted; they are also meticulous observers of nature and the world around them and have understood the role played by knowledge and reality in fiction writing.”⁴⁶

Although reality cannot be **fully** perceived objectively, it can be better perceived through objective means such as scientific accuracy. What separates the botanist’s perception from the naturalist’s is the same thing that separates the naturalist’s vision from the ordinary person’s: scientific knowledge, perfected through empirical observation, experimentation and the exercising of reason, all of which lend more than a tincture of objectivity to the botanist’s ability to perceive. Scientific knowledge therefore allows the botanist to reach “yet another stage of reality”. In the same way, historical and geographic knowledge allows the writer to invent their own world, so that invention occurs while sitting on the shoulders of knowledge and not instead of it. The depiction of reality as an accumulation of stages, up which one may make their way through the acquiring of knowledge, without ever being able to reach the top, utterly excludes the possibility of relativism or solipsism as a fillip for Nabokov’s denial of the existence of objective reality. His vision of reality is instead motivated by a mixture of individualism and intellectual elitism, leading to this possible definition: the reality of an object, although unperceivable in its entirety due to its myriad qualities and the resulting overwhelming quantity of potential perceptions, exists not as a compact single entity but as a multiplicity of stages which can be reached one after the other through observation and scientific knowledge.

The implausibility of *Madame Bovary*’s plot lines is not verifiable through experimentation, and observation would prove a logistical challenge. The idea of impossibility merely stems from an average reality, the average individual’s common sense that a person not noticing the absence of their spouse even once over a period of three years is not believable. The seasonal occurrence of mosquitoes in the imaginal stage in Shanghai, or

⁴⁶ “Fiodor et Van sont non seulement clairvoyants ; ils sont aussi de minutieux observateurs de la nature et du monde qui les entoure et ont compris le rôle que jouait la connaissance de la réalité dans l’écriture.” Chupin, *Fictions d’écrivains*, 112 ; my translation.

the nature of fir cones, however, are observable phenomena and the deviation from natural science, even in a fictional work, must be unambiguously justified by a specific artistic intent. Likewise, geography and history are disciplines containing certain established facts, and invention in this case should constitute a voluntary departure from the knowledge of reality, not the consequence of the ignorance of reality. To Nabokov, the ideal writer sharpens their pen on the whetstone of scientific knowledge and keen observation: “The artist should *know* the given world”⁴⁷. Specialization is the key word in Nabokov’s vision of reality. According to him the writer should strive to adopt the specialized point of view of reality in order to carefully compose images that are as exact, and therefore as real, as possible.

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⁴⁷ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 32.