

Ardor or Ada?

Authority, Artifice, and Ambivalence in Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor*

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ABSTRACT
ARDOR OR ADA?: AUTHORITY, ARTIFICE, AND AMBIVALENCE
IN NABOKOV'S *ADA, OR ARDOR*

This thesis will argue for a number of fresh readings of and perspectives on Nabokov's *Ada*. I am equally interested in how Nabokov is read more generally and argue against some of the worst habits of Nabokov scholarship to date. Nabokov's own authority over how his works are to be read "correctly"—and that *there is* a way to read them correctly—is taken as read by a great number of dominant and influential Nabokovians, chief among them Brian Boyd. Though this approach yields ever-diminishing returns, it remains remarkably buoyant. Still, at least since Michael Wood's book *The Magician's Doubts*, there has been enough work to challenge the author's total authority over his own texts. Reading Nabokov with doubt, ambiguity, and even insubordination (like Eric Naiman) reveals richer, more nuanced texts than a more "correct" approach.

CHAPTER 1. AUTHORITY, AUTHORSHIP, AND STRUCTURE IN NABOKOV

The works of Brian Boyd and Michael Wood enact a contest between scientific and hermeneutic methods of reading Nabokov, with Boyd being the more "obedient" of the two when it comes to following the master's instructions. For Wood, criticism always remains a conversation. For Boyd, however, criticism is an all-or-nothing business: a "real solution" to a Nabokov book is as decisive as the code for DNA, and any further interpretive variations need to sit on top of and complement its impermeable structure.¹

¹ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 251, 257.

I will argue that Wood's more hermeneutic approach is the more productive of the two, laying the groundwork for the best (if not always the most prominent) contemporary Nabokov scholarship. Jacqueline Hamrit uses a nuanced combination of theory (with particular emphasis on Blanchot and Derrida) to argue that Nabokov's authority over his own text has always been fluid, resembling the dialectical push-pull of exappropriation, "a gesture combining mastery and loss of mastery".² My extension of Hamrit's work is to suggest that the professorial persona in Nabokov's non-fiction prose engages readers in a joking relationship. Certainly, the dynamic between Nabokov and his interviewers, critics, and readers shares a great deal in common with what anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Browne describes in "On Joking Relationships": we are purposefully misled, engaging in a high-stakes game of words and worlds with a "puppet-master". Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts' work, along with Siggy Frank's, presents a strong case that Nabokov's fictional worlds are constructed in a manner that recalls the traditional Russian *balagan*, "a temporary, quickly-knocked-together barnlike structure for fairground theatrical performances".³ Such work is in dialogue with Will Norman's work, which frames some more ambivalent aspects of Nabokov's work in terms of embodied instability, or a "papering-over of cracks".⁴

CHAPTER 2. GENERAL MATTERS OF ADA'S STORYWORLD

In this chapter I will argue that despite its being generally recognized as having science-fiction elements, there is a great deal that still has not been unpacked about the more alien workings and history of *Ada*'s fictional world. What we learn about the twin worlds of Terra and Antiterra and the history of communication between them comprises one of the novel's richest subplots. They are linked inextricably with the mysterious "L disaster", and with Aqua Veen

² Jacqueline Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), p. 2.

³ Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts, "'If We Put Our Heads Between Our Legs': An Introduction to the Theme 'Vladimir Nabokov and Arthur Schopenhauer'", *Nabokov Studies*, Vol. 11 (2007/2008).

⁴ Will Norman, *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 156-157.

and the supposedly “mad” and incarcerated citizens of Antiterra who claim to see and hear messages from Terra in the burbling sounds of water. By following that particular thematic thread, this chapter traces the counter-intuitive yet hugely revealing links between seemingly disparate parts of the book. I explore the surprising ubiquity of water in *Ada* (a replacement for the electricity outlawed since the L disaster) and the way in which Antiterra’s intricate network of copper pipes interacts with Van’s dysmorphic awareness of circulating blood pumping through his body. *Ada*’s aquatic undercurrents also preserve and transmit traces of Lucette. The chapter culminates by showing just how important these interlinkages are to our final picture of our “author”, an elderly Van, and making it clear that Aqua’s brief episode at the start of the novel is crucial to its final pages, as Van’s disturbing visions of Terra uncannily come to resemble his aunt’s.

Since the precise relationship of Terra and Antiterra is left deliberately vague in the novel itself, much like the circumstances of the “L disaster” itself, *Ada* scholarship has largely sidestepped these aspects of the text. A great many critics—Bobbie Ann Mason and Charles Nicol among them—try to explain away these difficult elements of the text as delusions belonging to our narrator. If we take the position that everything in Van’s memoir “really” takes place on Terra—or, even worse, on *Earth*—we are disregarding far too much of what makes this novel unique, strange, ambiguous, and *Nabokovian*. With the help of the methodology in Naiman’s work on *Ada*, I have pieced together some overlooked evidence about Terra, Antiterra, and the L disaster, and uncovered some new possible readings. Since *Ada* evokes such a densely woven and finely balanced fictional world, what I have found has wide-reaching ramifications for the rest of the novel.

CHAPTER 3. TIMEFLOW, RECURRENCES, AND PARAMNESIA IN *ADA*

At one point in his narration, Van describes an event as having had “a faint paramnesic tang” (3. 8. 510). The term “paramnesia” was coined by Emil Kraepelin in 1886 to describe “hallucinations of memory” that come about through “a mixture of invention and real experience.”⁵ Paramnesic memories are those that seem to spring into being out of nowhere, integrating more-or-less seamlessly into one’s perceptions despite having no clear point of origin. This chapter explores the extent to which paramnesia helps us read *Ada*, a text in which “Fantasy race[s] fact in never-ending rivalry and girl giggles” (3. 8. 531). This chapter builds on the last, helping investigate the nature of *Ada*’s world by looking at how Van, our narrator, perceives it.

CHAPTER 4. LUCETTE’S *POTUSTORONNOST*

Most critics of *Ada* agree on Lucette’s central importance, but they do not always agree on its nature. This chapter draws together the threads of the previous ones to argue against Brian Boyd’s reading of Lucette, in the hope of drawing out some fresh nuances of her role in the novel. Boyd tries to tie Lucette’s posthumous appearances into a sentimental (and didactic) parable regarding an “almost unbearably delightful” afterlife.⁶ Naiman’s deliberately “preposterous” reading of a Lucette frozen in a posthumous inferno of perpetual and unfulfillable lust demonstrates how a more ambivalent reading of Lucette’s “afterlife” can be a source of rich new readings untapped by a more “sensible” reader. What emerges is a far more nuanced text than Boyd has given us, melancholic and enigmatic where Boyd’s more author-“sanctioned” approach gives us false resolution and sanguinity.

⁵ Emil Kraepelin, *Clinical Psychiatry* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1907), p. 25.

⁶ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, p. 210.

Time flows strangely in *Ada*. Instead of a one-way march towards the future, it behaves more like a tidal river, with events from all over the timeline paramnesically rippling backwards and forwards. In just one recurring motif, Van sees an enigmatic figure of a redheaded lady in black sitting at a bar with her back to him several times throughout his life—always appearing and disappearing through the refraction of some kind of “optical mist” (3. 3. 460)—before the figure eventually coalesces into an adult Lucette close to when she dies. An event as rupturing as Lucette’s death seems to ripple backwards in time through both the novel as a piece of writing, and Antiterra as a world in and of itself. Because Van writes his memoir long after Lucette’s suicide, her signs (Naiman singling out the letters t, a, c, and l for particular attention) are scattered throughout the novel, and they do not mirror the linear progression of the plot. The second half of this chapter explores the way Lucette’s signs ripple and echo throughout *Ada*, before and after Van depicts her death. She often manifests despite, and at odds with, what Van as our narrator thinks is most important.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Chapter One: Authority, Authorship, and Structure in Nabokov	
1.1 <i>Potustoronnost'</i> as a Flawed Paradigm.....	1
1.2 Michael Wood and the Conditional Authority of the Author.....	5
1.3 Roland Barthes, The Author, and Nabokov.....	6
1.4 Brian Boyd's "Scientific" Model of Reading.....	9
1.5 Fact or Interpretation—Can a Reading of a Book Be Like Cracking the DNA Code?.....	13
1.6 Do all Nabokov's Riddles Have Fixed Solutions?.....	16
1.7 Folk Riddling and "Not-Knowing".....	20
1.8 "My Pedants"—Nabokov's Critical Persona.....	23
1.9 Derrida's "Author", via James Joyce.....	28
1.10 An Ambivalent Tyrant.....	31
1.11 Parody, and Nabokov's Joking Relationships.....	35
1.12 Alfred Appel Jr.'s Puppet Show.....	40
1.13 Theatre, the <i>Balagan</i> , and Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination.....	43
1.14 Duck-Rabbits, Bowstrings, Telescopes, Microscopes, and Embodied Instabilities.....	46
1.15 <i>Potustoronnost'</i> as a Structural Principle.....	50

Chapter Two: General Matters of *Ada*'s Storyworld

2.1	Terra and Antiterra.....	55
2.2	Is Antiterra Real or a Delusion?.....	56
2.3	The L disaster.....	59
2.4	<i>Ada</i> 's "Flowing" Style.....	67
2.5	<i>Letters from Terra</i>	71
2.6	The Ubiquity of Blood and Toilets.....	74
2.7	Lucette's Death.....	78

Chapter Three: Timeflow, Recurrences, and Paramnesia in *Ada*

3.1	Van's "Faint Paramnesic Tang".....	83
3.2	What is Paramnesia?.....	84
3.3	Anticipatory Memory and Future Recollection.....	91
3.4	The Tang of Nabokov's "Inspiration" (1972).....	95
3.5	Glow-worms, Jigsaw Pieces of Sky, and a Nimbus of Bright Irrelevancy....	102
3.6	"What a book, my God, my God...".....	107

Chapter Four: Lucette's *Potustoronnost'*

4.1	Is <i>Ada</i> Didactic?.....	111
4.2	Eric Naiman's Approach to <i>Ada</i>	116
4.3	Saussure's Signature (via Jean Starobinski).....	119
4.4	Lucette's Irreducible Trauma and its Representation.....	121
4.5	Lucette's Posthumous Influence on <i>Ada</i>	127
4.6	Paramnesic Flashes of Lucette's Silhouette.....	131

4.7	Ardor, or <i>Ada</i> (“Hell”)—Unbearable Delight or Hopeless Inferno?.....	134
4.8	Conclusion—Lucette Cannot Be “Solved”	139
	Bibliography.....	141

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Chapter One

Authority, Authorship, and Structure in Nabokov

1.1 *Potustoronnost'* as a Flawed Paradigm

In *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Vladimir Alexandrov identifies what he believes was the “central theme” of Nabokov’s work: the “otherworld”, as close an English approximation as there seems to be to the Russian word *potustoronnost'*.¹ The argument for its centrality was made by Véra Nabokov in the foreword to a collection of Nabokov’s poems in Russian (translated as follows by Dmitri Nabokov):

I would like to call the reader’s attention to a key undercurrent in Nabokov’s work, which permeates all that he has written and characterizes it like a kind of watermark. I am speaking of a strange otherworldliness, the “hereafter” (*potustoronnost'*), as he himself called it [...] He came closest to expressing it, however, in the poem “*Slava*” (“Fame”) where he defined it quite frankly as a secret that he carries within his soul and that *must not* and *cannot* be revealed. That secret existed unobtrusively within him, giving him his unshakable love of life and his luminosity to the silliest and most vicious attacks.²

Dmitri offered his own thoughts on *potustoronnost'*, hoping to clarify his mother’s statements:

The themes of falling and of fire, and of peeks into the world beyond, have been touched on by sensitive scholars like Boyd. Less profound commentators have declared the season open for spectre-hunting in Nabokov’s works. [...] What we have here is not the spiritualism of the table-rattling séance. It is a kind of serene superknowledge that shines, here and there, through a frosted windowpane in Father’s works.³

¹ Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 3.

² Véra Nabokov, as quoted in Dmitri Nabokov, “Translating with Nabokov”, in *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. George Gibian and Stephen Jan Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Center for International Studies, 1984), pp. 174-175.

³ Dmitri Nabokov, “Translating with Nabokov”, p. 174, 176.

Alexandrov notes that he found it surprising that Vera's comments—as well as Dmitri's, presumably—had not had more of an effect on the dominant trends of Nabokov scholarship by 1991. Aside from “a handful of earlier investigators” who argued for the importance of metaphysics to Nabokov, according to Alexandrov the “reigning scholarly perceptions” favoured Nabokov's “metaliterariness”, “insistent artificiality”, and “ironic manipulation of devices and forms of narrative fiction”.⁴ Yet importantly, the “handful” of scholars named in Alexandrov's notes for this chapter tucked at the end of the book includes Brian Boyd, who has exerted the greatest influence on the dominant paradigms of Nabokov's studies since Alexandrov's book. The situation is no longer as simple as it was when Alexandrov was writing; and, arguably, he oversimplified the nature of the debate even then. Certainly, Alexandrov's framing of an either/or choice for critics between emphasising Nabokov's metaliterary play and his metaphysical “otherworld” was as unproductive then as it is now. These supposedly incompatible aspects of Nabokov's fiction do not just complement but mutually reinforce one another. In his retrospective of *potustoronnost'* as a paradigm, long-time editor of the *Nabokov Studies* journal, Zoran Kuzmanovich, questioned Alexandrov's approach: “I've never really been able to find those critics who see Nabokov solely as a metafictionist”.⁵

Further reservations are raised by Alexandrov's description of his own approach:

It follows that any attempt to discuss [the] mysterious knowledge in terms other than the veiled ones [Nabokov] used, or in abstraction from the works in which he embodied it, is bound to betray it, at least to some extent. [...] The practical consequence of Nabokov's reticence about what the “otherworld” means for him is that any attempt to fathom it has to be made on the ambiguous ground consisting of his veiled hints and the reader's inferences. For this reason, and because maximal precision in all things is an essential virtue that Nabokov imposes on his readers, it should be understood that the terms I use when

⁴ Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, pp. 3-4.

⁵ Zoran Kuzmanovich, “No Ghosts Walk”, in *Transitional Nabokov*, ed. Will Norman and Duncan White (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 287.

discussing Nabokov's "otherworld" have only heuristic value; they are not items from Nabokov's own lexicon.⁶

Nabokov's vagueness on the subject of the "otherworld" is more of a problem than Alexandrov thinks. It seems impossible *not* to betray Nabokov's "mysterious knowledge" as soon as someone other than him starts trying to talk about it. We have no method of flawlessly recapturing the private knowledge of a writer no matter how "maximal" we try to make our "precision". There is a worrying assumption beneath Alexandrov's argument here, one that haunts Nabokov scholarship as effectively as any of Nabokov's fictional ghosts: "[Nabokov's] nonfictional writings are the highest linguistic authority to which we can turn in order to understand his belletristic works."⁷ In this model, far too much authority is ceded to Nabokov himself—or, as was the case above, to others members of his family—regarding how to interpret a complex and multifaceted body of work. Granting Nabokov excessive authority generates a further ghost, one who looks a lot like Nabokov without actually being him, and who posthumously polices all scholarly interpretation of Nabokov's works via its exclusive, mysterious, and private access to their correct interpretations. The stately indifference of an author-figure's "serene superknowledge", as Dmitri tried to rebrand it, is more likely to frustrate, infuriate, or even terrify a reader rather than comfort them. Its influence certainly seems to intimidate some Nabokov critics into endlessly deferring judgment not only on a work's more "correct" readings but also its capacity to signify to Nabokov's personal authority, as in Maxim D. Shrayer's deflection regarding *potustoronnost'*: "Nabokov's otherworld is an antiworld with respect to the reality of this world, and not much more can be said about it in terms other than Nabokov's own."⁸

⁶ Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, p. 5.

⁷ Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, p. 10.

⁸ Maxim D. Shrayer, *The World of Nabokov's Stories* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), p. 22.

The conflation within these trends of Nabokov's work and his biography is troubling, as is the readiness of Nabokov critics to take Véra and Dmitri's statements as straightforwardly authoritative. One could hardly dispute their personal familiarity with Nabokov, but the implication, even if tacit, that Nabokov's personal philosophy must inform, and function in the same way as, his literary work deserves challenge. Kuzmanovich laments this with refreshing bluntness—albeit via some (self-admittedly) mixed metaphors:

Nabokov's thoughts, Vera's thoughts, or Dmitri's thoughts about Nabokov's works may occasionally give teeth to our own thoughts, but they cannot always be used like mosquito netting we spread around our interpretations to keep them from being stung and bloodied by others. The thoughts of the Nabokovs, too, are discourse-bound, occasionally contradicted even by their other thoughts, and thus rarely self-evident.⁹

Kuzmanovich's mere suggestion that an author or their family's statements ought to be treated like any other piece of discourse has met with criticism. This divisiveness uncovers something peculiarly closed-off about Nabokov scholarship, and its dominant trends and trend-setters. In a rather against-the-grain reading of "The Vane Sisters" later in the same piece, Kuzmanovich wonders whether his "refus[al] to play a benighted Job to Brian's and Vladimir's God" would strike his reader as "downright impudent".¹⁰ Although his characterisations of himself, Boyd, and Nabokov respectively are offered (partly) in jest, they are telling nonetheless: the idea of other critics finding themselves cast as supplicants to "Brian's and Vladimir's God" is worth exploring in more detail.

⁹ Kuzmanovich, "No Ghosts Walk", p. 286.

¹⁰ Kuzmanovich, "No Ghosts Walk", p. 294.

1.2 Michael Wood and the Conditional Authority of the Author

Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts* offers a welcome challenge to the trend ceding total authority to Nabokov himself. He opens by attributing his own interpretations of Nabokov to a man named "V". This rhetorical gesture is an important foundation for Wood's book, throughout which he is forthright about the speculative aspect of reading Nabokov: "I am guessing about the mentality behind the facts, and I don't want to hide the guesswork."¹¹ The "V" figure is a productive invention, for he "has a humanity the first writer lacks, or if you prefer, finds the humanity the first writer was so keen to hide."¹² Wood argues that the version of Nabokov we encounter in epitexts is "too self-sufficient, too armoured against doubt" to have written the fiction attributed to him, and over which he seems to claim ultimate authority; this Nabokov is a public persona affected on purpose, another creation of "V". While Wood concedes early on, for the sake of convenience, "I'll call him ['V'] Nabokov from now on", he insists that the main purpose of attributing Nabokov's works to "V" "is not to deny his connection to the historical Nabokov, but to refuse too narrow and inflexible and immediate a connection, and to leave room for others."¹³ In other words, Wood believes that in order for his contribution to Nabokov scholarship to be as productive as possible, he needs to sever the public Nabokov's authority from Nabokov's fiction before he even begins textual analysis. I share his view: though it may seem an uncontroversial position to endorse, critical response like Alexandrov's has cast a thick fog over Nabokov scholarship, and there is often little tolerance for scholars who argue the opposite. This is particularly clear in Boyd, Wood's main interlocutor.

¹¹ Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov & The Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 2.

¹² Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 6.

¹³ Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, pp. 2-3.

Wood's and Boyd's conceptions of how to read Nabokov are heavily at odds, enacting a contest between scientific and hermeneutic methods of reading Nabokov. For Wood criticism always remains a conversation, whereas Boyd approaches criticism like a science, citing Karl Popper to justify his readings' supersession of everybody else's. While Boyd's rather more "obedient" body of work may dwarf Wood's in volume, Wood's approach has offered the more productive and collegial legacy. At the very least, Wood's work is more in line with the nature of *this* thesis, a debt and allegiance about which I am happy to be upfront.

1.3 Roland Barthes, The Author, and Nabokov

Roland Barthes, supposedly the announcer of the Author's death, advocates neither the complete liberation from, nor subordination to, an author's authority: rather, "The Death of the Author" resists models of criticism excessively beholden to an author's intention or personal biography. However, Barthes still harbours reservations eventually voiced more strongly in *The Pleasure of the Text*: "but in the text, in a way, *I desire* the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection), as he needs mine (except to 'prattle')." Here, the author is only dead as "institution," because he can "no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity".¹⁴

Wood hastens to distance himself from Barthes' "followers", who for him are purveyors of New Criticism who use Barthes' famous essay as an alibi for excluding all considerations of biography and context in pursuit of a "textual, implied author".¹⁵ Their implied author is entirely virtual and, as jokingly described by Jonathan Swift in *The Battle of the Books*,

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 27.

¹⁵ Jonathan Swift, *The Battle of the Books* (1704), (London: Chatto and Windus, 1908), p. lxiv.

comprised solely of “certain sheets of paper, bound up in leather”.¹⁶ Instead, Wood carefully aligns his approach with Barthes himself instead of his “followers”:

We can of course ignore the first architect, or dismiss the very idea of such a figure, and build a whole city of our own out of the disassembled stones. This is what Barthes seems to invite us to do, and what all kinds of readers do anyway, whether this is what they intend or not. But Barthes only seems to invite this. What he wants is to rob the first architect (Author or God) of His undivided theological authority and get to know the firm’s partners on more democratic terms.¹⁷

Echoing Barthes, Wood argues that “[t]he author cannot do without the reader, but the reverse is also true—however shadowy and marginal the author’s role may seem to have become.”¹⁸

Wood helpfully and meticulously lays out “the four major or most frequent meanings” of the name “Nabokov” as applied by his critics. These are worth reproducing here, since even in contemporary Nabokov scholarship their important differences are often blended and obscured beneath the evocation of the name:

1) the historical person whose life has been impeccably told by his biographer Brian Boyd, and whom I glance at occasionally here, but who is not my principal subject.

2) a set (also historical) of attitudes, prejudices, habits, remarks, performances which is highly visible, highly stylized, and which I find dull and narrow, and having almost nothing to do with the writing I admire: Nabokov the mandarin.

3) a (real) person I guess at but who keeps himself pretty well hidden: he is not only tender and observant but also diffident, even scared, worried about almost everything the mandarin so airily dismisses. I would think this person was a sentimental invention of my own if Nabokov’s texts were not demonstrably so full of him, and if I had any reason to invent him. Given the choice I would prefer another Nabokov in his place—someone less predictably the obverse of the haughty public presence. This diffident, doubting person is the one I think of most often as the author in Barthes’ later sense: the textual revenant rather than the face on the dustjacket.

¹⁶ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁷ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 20.

¹⁸ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 20.

4) identifiable habit of writing and narrating: mannered, intricate, alliterative, allusive, perverse, hilarious, lyrical, sombre, nostalgic, kindly, frivolous, passionate, cruel, cold, stupid, magical, precise, philosophical and unforgettable. Particular clusters of these characteristics are what we identify as Nabokov the author in Swift's sense, the performance on the sheets of paper.¹⁹

Keeping these four different "Nabokovs" in mind, or at least the distinctions they highlight, is very helpful when one is reading Nabokov scholarship. It is always worth asking which Nabokov a critic is talking about, why, and whether they switch from talking about one to another without indicating. Wood also wants to suggest that a writer's life is "a sort of fable, as all achieved careers are: exemplary, purified, haunting."²⁰ Taken together, the four Nabokovs in Wood's taxonomy comprise a purified fable of Vladimir Nabokov. Each has an interest in how the others appear. The historical Nabokov (1) projects a deliberate public persona (2); in *Strong Opinions*, in the collections of Nabokov's lectures, in *Nikolai Gogol*, in much of *Speak, Memory*, in occasional prefaces or afterwords, and anywhere else Nabokov writes or speaks as "himself". This persona is self-consciously cultivated, adopting a tone which seems always in the midst or on the verge of admonishing some poor undergraduate for rudimentary errors in taste or judgment. This persona tends to obscure the "diffident, doubting" Nabokov (3) who shapes "the performance on the sheets of paper" (4). Each of these Nabokovs has an interest in shaping his own version of a writer's life, in "purifying" it, so that it takes on a particular sheen: "The author is not dead or intending to die, he is seeking a perpetual controlling share in the interest his work arouses."²¹ Different versions of Nabokov can and do undermine each other in subtle ways, especially if a critic makes no effort to account for their subject's mischief. Nabokov the public persona can radiate such surety and truculence

¹⁹ Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 22.

²⁰ Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 3.

²¹ Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 18.

that he can seem to obliterate the worries and doubts of Nabokov the “textual revenant”, which radically alters the kinds of interpretations we get from readers less sceptical than Wood.

1.4 Brian Boyd’s “Scientific” Model of Reading

In *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, Boyd asserts that the difference between a reader who delights in the challenges of a Nabokov novel and one who feels antagonised by them can be likened to the difference between playing a game of chess and solving a chess problem. In *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Nabokov reveals he greatly preferred chess composition to competition: “delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.”²² Boyd argues that his novels mirror the strategies of his chess-problems. This is not so much because Nabokov wants to toy with them, but because “the relationship between composer and solver is fundamentally a generous one”. Boyd’s Nabokov invites his reader to be “the co-creators of his miniature worlds,” bringing the composer and the solver “as close to creative equality as the difference in their roles allows.”²³ He is quick to clarify, however, that this does not give readers, and certainly not critics, complete freedom to create any meaning they like. Anticipating resistance, Boyd pre-emptively castigates “‘advanced’ thinkers” (his equivalents of Wood’s “New Critics”, though no further context is given) for the damage they have done to the study of literature. They operate, he says, under the assumption that “we must accept as a universal truth that there is no such thing as truth, only local versions”, and that this kind of decentred truthlessness needs to stop.²⁴ Casting aside the scholarly conversations of what

²² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966), ed. Brian Boyd (London: David Campbell, 1999), p. 228.

²³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, pp. 9-10.

²⁴ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 3.

seems to be most critical theory post-Barthes—(it is difficult to tell because, while uncompromising, Boyd remains vague about where he sets his parameters, and who would fall under them)—he asserts that what he does is closer to science than the guesswork of other literary critics:

The very notion of the difficult pursuit of the complex truth of things seems outdated to many a postmodernist—until he or she needs, say, the latest medical treatment arrived at through just such a struggle for truth. In an age that has become particularly sceptical of the possibility of *artistic* discovery, both *in* art and *about* works of art, I want to affirm that writers and readers can discover new ways of writing and reading and that these discoveries have much in common with the process of scientific discovery.²⁵

In so doing Boyd—knowingly or not—splits not just Nabokov scholars but critics in general into two categories: you are either a “scientist”, like him, or you are a “postmodernist”, more concerned with proliferating wild and irrelevant reader-response criticism than “discovering” anything new about a text.

To prop up his model of reading, Boyd turns to Karl Popper. Aside from the epigram that opens his book—“‘We are discoverers; and discovery is a creative art.’ (Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*)”²⁶—Boyd’s most thorough attempt to justify and interrogate the implications of his methodology comes in an endnote. Referring back to a mention of Popper in the main text, the endnote mostly consists of John M. Ellis’ thoughts on Leo Spitzer, which Ellis put under the broad entry for “Theory” in the *New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Boyd quotes the following excerpt:

Spitzer suggested that the procedure of criticism, unlike that of a science, was circular: we proceed from general impressions of the text to careful inspection of specific features of it, which then leads to amended and improved general ideas, which in turn lead us to look again at other parts of the text [...] What

²⁵ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 3. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. vii.

Spitzer did not see was that he had described the typical method of the sciences—hypothesis and experiment—though to be sure in terms which were far superior to the misconceptions about scientific method that have been predominant in theory of criticism.²⁷

Boyd also insists that all ideas arrived at through a scientific method, even his own, are potential subjects for refutation. Despite this, he still refers to his own reading as the book's "synthetic" and "real solution".²⁸

For a supposedly intuitive solution to as complex a literary work as *Pale Fire*, Boyd's reading is remarkably convoluted. His own summary of his "real solution" is itself difficult to follow, even for those who know the novel well:

1) that Hazel survives after her death; 2) that her spirit has compensated "Kinbote" (apparently a Russian named Botkin) for the pain of his exile and persecution by inspiring him to develop the whole Zembla fantasy; 3) that she has done so in just such a way that Kinbote's importunate accounts of his imagined homeland will trigger Shade's imagination to write of his *own* past, including his loss of Hazel; and 4) that Hazel has then been joined beyond death by her father, who has helped her inspire Kinbote to recast Jack Grey in Kinbote's mind as Jakob Gradus and thus to give him a pretext for writing the commentary to "Pale Fire."²⁹

Though quoting this out-of-context may seem unfair, it is worth noting that Boyd's "solution" is *supposed* to be so persuasive that it can stand alone. Boyd's customary response to scholars who seriously challenge his solution is to argue that they have not looked at the text closely enough, or that they haven't looked at *his* text closely enough. Though it is obviously possible that they *have*, and that their contention is with *it* rather than with *Nabokov*, I have yet to see Boyd acknowledge that possibility in print.

²⁷ John M. Ellis, "Theory", in *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 1288.

²⁸ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, p. 247, 251.

²⁹ Brian Boyd, "Azure Afterimages: Reflections on *Nabokov's Pale Fire*", *Nabokov Studies* Vol. 6 (2000/2001): pp. 165-166.

Even before *Nabokov's Pale Fire* was published, critics had already noted a tendency in Boyd's otherwise laudable biographies towards "a peculiar identification with his subject" which "manifests itself in exaggerated claims for Nabokov's art".³⁰ "Throughout," notes Priscilla Meyer, "Boyd adopts Nabokov's point of view and adds his own scorn", which ultimately leads him to a general attitude of resentment towards readers for not being able to read Nabokov "properly", deploying veiled pejoratives like "some readers," "some critics," and "most readers".³¹ Even in this earlier book, Boyd's reading of *Pale Fire* stood out to Meyer for being "set upon reducing the shimmer of ambiguity."³²

Boyd's insistence on fixed, "real" solutions to Nabokov's novels is what ultimately unravels his method. He stakes a claim to having a monopoly on the ultimate destination of every other critic's interpretative labour, elevating his own authority to match that of an all-seeing, all-knowing Author figure. While admonishing those who "enslave themselves to intellectual fashion", Boyd explains that his "real solution" regarding the friendly ghosts of Hazel and John Shade inspiring Kinbote to write his commentary, was "simply unavailable" to critics at the time of *Pale Fire's* publication;³³ that is, *before* Véra Nabokov's assertion that *potustoronnost'* was the central theme of her husband's writing, and *before* the critical trend heralded by Alexandrov's rediscovery of that quote in his book, of hunting through Nabokov's novels for all manner of ghosts, ghouls, and wraiths properly began.³⁴ If, as Boyd says,

³⁰ Priscilla Meyer, "Nabokov's Biographers, Annotators, and Interpreters", *Modern Philology* Vol. 91, No. 3 (1994): p. 335.

³¹ Meyer, "Nabokov's Biographers, Annotators, and Interpreters", p. 336.

³² Meyer, "Nabokov's Biographers, Annotators, and Interpreters", p. 334.

³³ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, pp. 250-251.

³⁴ Describing Nabokov's tendency to introduce "substitute authors" in the place of narrators—as in *Bend Sinister*, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Pnin*—Marina Grishakova summed this period up as follows: "The naturalization of Nabokov's metaphor of the Author as invisible deity behind the text led to a rather obsessive search for 'ghostly' presences and 'otherworldly agents' in Nabokov's fiction." Marina Grishakova, "Stranger Than Fiction, or, Jerome David Salinger, Author of *Lolita*: Real, Implied and Fictive Authorship", in *Narrative, Interrupted: The Plotless, the Disturbing and the Trivial in Literature*, eds. Markku Lehtimäki, Laura Karttunen, and Maria Mäkelä (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), p. 247.

Nabokov aimed with *Pale Fire* to “generously” lead his reader towards creative equality, and if he fully expected their collaboration to crescendo triumphantly with Boyd's “real solution”, it paints an unfavourable picture of the Nabokov behind one of his best novels. Where Wood’s taxonomical listing of four separate Nabokovs provides a sober and productive, if not definitive, schema, Boyd’s single Nabokov appears to have been writing his fiction primarily for himself and a select few of his most dedicated interpreters, those dedicated enough to reach his “real solutions”.

1.5 Fact or Interpretation—Can a Reading of a Book Be Like Cracking the DNA Code?

In his introduction to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov admits that his scholarly enthusiasm for textual variants of Pushkin’s prose-poem is counter-balanced by his sympathetic horror, as “a fellow writer”, that they were not destroyed.³⁵ His proclamation earlier in the introduction that “In art, purpose and plan are nothing; only the results count”³⁶ finds its ambivalent counterpoint when he admits that, “As Pushkin’s historian, I gloat over them.”³⁷ Wood argues Nabokov is implying that while the same person “can be historian and judge, biographer and critic [...] he or she can’t do both jobs at the same time.”³⁸

Nabokov himself talked about this kind of double-bind in an interview. When Alfred Appel Jr. Appel asks him about the “possibilities of literary biography”, Nabokov answers:

They are great fun to write, generally less fun to read. Sometimes the thing becomes a kind of double paper chase: first, the biographer pursues his quarry through letters and diaries, and across the bogs of conjecture, and then a rival authority pursues the muddy biographer.³⁹

³⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, “The Structure of ‘Eugene Onegin’”, in Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin—Volume 1*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 59.

³⁶ Nabokov, “The Structure of ‘Eugene Onegin’”, p. 15.

³⁷ Nabokov, “The Structure of ‘Eugene Onegin’”, p. 59.

³⁸ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, pp. 13-14.

³⁹ Alfred Appel Jr. “An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov”, in L. S. Dembo (ed.), *Nabokov: The Man and His Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 23.

Wood most likely had Boyd in mind, or someone like him (Alexandrov, perhaps), when he admitted to finding “something comic in the recent attempts of Nabokov’s son and others to redeem the writer for conventional kindness; the death of the author scored for muzak.”⁴⁰ Whether or not the historical Nabokov was a kind person “isn’t why we read him,” Wood argues, and it need not influence *how* he is read: “he himself spent a lifetime building an austere, cold and unreachable public persona, as immune as could possibly be from such soggy apologies.”⁴¹ In his work as a biographer, details of Nabokov’s personal kindness make an indispensable commodity for Boyd; for his work as a critic, not so much.

Perhaps my most serious criticism of Boyd’s work is that he does not draw any noticeable distinction between the texts themselves and how he has chosen to read them. Much of Boyd’s oeuvre reads like the work of a biographer-cum-critic who does not acknowledge, or does not want to acknowledge, that there is a difference between the two roles, delivering his own interpretations with the same certainty as he would attach a date to one of Nabokov’s letters. For Boyd, the (saccharine) narrative he extracts from a convoluted reorganisation of textual minutia is a necessary part of *Pale Fire*’s “real solution”, which also happens to be a logical manifestation of Nabokov’s own personal kindness. Yet there are no unassailable links between Boyd’s textual discoveries and the story he has decided they tell. In Wood’s peer-review reader’s report regarding Boyd’s book (quoted by Boyd with Wood’s permission), Wood expressed strong misgivings about both its theoretical approach and its interpretation of its source material. Concerning Boyd’s approach, Wood had this to say:

⁴⁰ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 18.

The notion of “discovery” in literature has to work quite differently from the way it does in most sciences. What we discover in a persuasive reading of a novel is a range of new understandings, rather than a new settled truth.⁴²

Boyd refutes this at length, reminding us that he employs the “Popperian analogy” to describe his work because it implies that “although other hypotheses proposed for *Pale Fire* now seem demonstrably wrong, my own new hypothesis [...] should also be open to challenge, extension, complication, refutation” since, according to Popper, “even the most apparently well-confirmed finding in science [...] can *never* be a settled truth.”⁴³ Yet with his next analogy Boyd tightens his grip on his claim to a “real solution” once again:

Nabokov’s stress (and mine) on the “solution” to some of the problems his novels can pose no more means that everything is now settled and unproblematic in *Pale Fire* than cracking the code of DNA meant that everything was now explained in biology. Like the decipherment of DNA, one of Nabokov’s “solutions” opens up new problems on a new plane, without shutting off old ones.⁴⁴

While it may be true that cracking the DNA code generated “new problems on a new plane”, it is equally true that in scientific discourse the code, once discovered, straightaway became what Wood calls a “settled truth”. Geneticists would of course be free to return to old problems if they so choose, just as they would be free to disregard the DNA code entirely; but why would they? A literary critic, on the other hand, is free to argue with and reinterpret any part of another critic’s discoveries, and while scientists are also technically free to do this as well, in simply disagreeing with something as true as the code for DNA their work would be widely received as crackpot-science and/or conspiracy theory. Simply arguing with anything Boyd read in a Nabokov book, or with the interpretation he has of it, could never be a transgression on the

⁴² Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 256.

⁴³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 256.

⁴⁴ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 257.

same level, or even of a broadly similar nature; yet Boyd's defence of his approach presupposes that it would be. His gestures towards a collaborative scholarly conversation seem an afterthought at best and disingenuous at worst. Boyd has either misunderstood Wood's concerns or ignored them, since his defence doubles down on precisely the same fallacies that motivated his colleague's consternation in the first place, and he does not dispense with Wood's objections with anything like the conclusiveness he thinks he has.

1.6 Do all Nabokov's Riddles Have Fixed Solutions?

Boyd tells us that in his reader's report, Wood expressed discomfort with his (and Nabokov's) likening of the process of reading to solving a chess-problem, "since it too implies resolution." Boyd immediately turns to Nabokov's critical work to justify his approach to reading Nabokov's novels, even though in his book Wood took great care to explain, as we have seen, why doing so is a hindrance rather than a trump card in Nabokov scholarship. "Nabokov is consistent here", Boyd reassures us, since he referred to the existence of solutions to his novels on many occasions.⁴⁵ But *is* Nabokov consistent, even in those statements? Boyd provides three examples to back himself up, all of which are excerpted from longer passages. In each case, the passage's context renders it far more ambivalent than Boyd allows. The first is a fragment of Nabokov's response to the question "Why did you write *Lolita*?":

It was an interesting thing to do. Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of pleasure, for the sake of difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, p. 256.

⁴⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (1973), (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 16.

The second concerns *Transparent Things*, coming in response to an interviewer directly asking who this novel's elliptical narrator is: "The solution, my friend, is so simple that one is almost embarrassed to furnish it. But here goes." The answer to this particular inquiry, Nabokov says, is Mr. R, "[an] incidental but curiously active component of my novel".⁴⁷ In each case, Nabokov is referring to solutions *within* his novels rather than solutions *to* them. These kinds of conflations and generalisations most likely motivated Wood to call the "real solution" Boyd proposes to *Pale Fire* "deeply trivializing".⁴⁸

The last quote Boyd offers is the most revealing. It is taken from Nabokov's pseudonymous review of *Conclusive Evidence*, left unpublished during his lifetime and affixed by Boyd to the end of the Everyman's Library edition of *Speak, Memory* as an appendix in 1999. Attributing the quote to Nabokov directly instead of the pseudonymous reviewing persona Nabokov is affecting, Boyd quotes him as saying "The unravelling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind."⁴⁹ The problem is that the pseudonymous reviewer is not talking about solutions to Nabokov's novels at all. His comment is more in line with the Russian tradition of the folk riddle, as an analogy for the interaction and convergence of thematic components in *Conclusive Evidence* particularly, and the historical Nabokov's life more generally. The passage continues:

All thematic lines mentioned are gradually brought together, are seen to interweave or converge, in a subtle but natural form of contact which is as much a function of art, as it is a discoverable process in the evolution of personal destiny.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 195.

⁴⁸ Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, p. 257.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, "'Chapter sixteen' or 'On *Conclusive Evidence*'", in *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966), ed. Brian Boyd (London: David Campbell, 1999), p. 250.

⁵⁰ Nabokov, "'Chapter sixteen' or 'On *Conclusive Evidence*'", p. 250.

Leaving aside the quote's uncertain applicability, Boyd's error is presupposing that a "riddle" is necessarily a problem than can and must be solved. Yet Nabokov immediately complicates this position, which would have been clearer had Boyd not cut the excerpt off where he did in his own book. The piece itself continues as follows:

Thus, toward the end of the book, the theme of mimicry, of the "cryptic disguise" studied by Nabokov in his entomological pursuits, comes to a punctual rendezvous with the "riddle" theme, with the camouflaged solution of a chess problem, with the piecing together of a design on bits of broken pottery, and with a picture puzzle wherein the eye makes out the contours of a new country. To the same point of convergence other thematic lines arrive in haste, as if consciously yearning for the blissful anastomosis provided jointly by art and fate. The solution of the riddle theme is also the solution of the theme of exile, of the "intrinsic loss" running through the whole book, and these lines blend, in their turn, with the culmination of the "rainbow" theme ("a spiral of life in an agate"), and merge, at a most satisfying *rond point*, with the many garden paths and path walks and forest trails meandering through the book. One cannot but respect the amount of retrospective acumen and creative concentration that the author had to summon in order to plan this book according to the way his life had been planned by unknown players of games, and never to swerve from that plan.⁵¹

Clearly no scholar can be expected to quote everything from their subject's texts, or to preempt any and every criticism they might get for leaving this or that part out. Nevertheless, when a passage is deployed specifically to support a critical position its wider (or immediate) context actually undercuts, further scrutiny is certainly called for. The sense of the word "solution" Nabokov uses here differs significantly from the sense to which Boyd confines it. For Boyd, a proper "solution" to a Nabokov book is as decisive as the code for DNA, and any further interpretive variations will complement that solution's unchangeable, impermeable structure. Nabokov's pseudonymous reviewer, however, is talking about a convergence of thematic points, and he refers to the solution of the riddle *theme* rather than the solution of the riddle

⁵¹ Nabokov, "'Chapter sixteen' or 'On *Conclusive Evidence*'", p. 250.

itself. For the former, a “solution” indicates the coalescence of the themes, events, and fragments of a life, or a work about that life, around a *rond point*, the circular space from which the figurative garden and forest paths extend, and where they begin to blend to such a degree that they start to reflect one another, both pre-emptively *and* retroactively, in a timeless cycle of self-referentiality. This sense of the word “solution” is more fluid and versatile than Boyd’s, setting the text aflame with possible combinations and readings of thematic material instead of confining it to a single univocal “answer”. Nabokov’s conception of a “solution” here has more in common with a beguiling dance of interlinking components than the answer to a chess problem, however much he may have enjoyed composing the latter for their own merits.

Boyd and Wood agree that a crucial component of many of Nabokov’s works is “the sheer number of its pointed interconnections that seem to intimate a revelation just ahead”. Countless connections between different themes and components always seem “about to converge, to interlock, to fit together into a key that will open a door we still cannot see.”⁵² In the same way Barthes’ reader desires the image of the author, they covet (the image of) a solution. Yet at some point Boyd has conflated this desire to find a solution with the *jouissance* of actually providing one. Criticism seems to be an all-or-nothing business as far as Boyd is concerned: you either support the idea of a complete solution, or you are an enabler of interpretative chaos; you are either a scientific reader or a dull-witted “postmodernist” (his label)⁵³: Wood “would prefer doubts and irresolutions: not for nothing was *his* book about Nabokovian magic entitled *The Magician’s Doubts*.”⁵⁴ Boyd’s emphasis here is telling—“*his* book”—suggesting Boyd expects his own readers will naturally find Wood’s defence of the role of doubt in literary analysis (and, by implication, of ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty)

⁵² Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 116.

⁵³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 256.

as ridiculous and repugnant as he does. Boyd delivers this as if it is the final nail in Wood's coffin, that the word "doubt" is in his book's title, and he seems certain that his audience will be as happy to be free of another "postmodernist" as Boyd is pleased with himself for dispatching one. Doubt has no place in this way of reading: and neither, it seems, does disagreement or a difference of opinion.

1.7 Folk Riddling and "Not-Knowing"

The deviation between Boyd and Nabokov's conceptions of "riddles" and "solutions" suggests not just a simple error, but a series of contextual resonances in Nabokov that Boyd has not considered. These resonances become clearer the further one reads into the idiosyncratic conventions of folk riddles. Along with a number of quietly innovative papers on Nabokov, Savely Senderovich has published a book called *The Riddle of the Riddle: A Study of the Folk Narrative's Figurative Nature*. The scope of this study is tight, focussing on folk riddles and riddling practices from oral traditions in different parts of the world, as well as interrogating some of the idiosyncratic paradigms of riddle studies over the past two centuries. While Nabokov does not appear in this work, *Riddle of the Riddle* still offers some compelling parallels which suggest Nabokov inherited something important from traditional Russian folk riddles, most likely through the artists and writers he admired from the Silver Age.

Senderovich argues it is a fallacy to presume that "the folk riddle is addressed to the individual ability to figure out what is implied by the tricky description, that is, to the individual's wit."⁵⁵ Instead, the true matter of a folk riddle is in the asking ritual:

The folk riddle dwells on the brink of rationality. It is next to impossible rationally to derive an answer from the data of a question. The relationship

⁵⁵ Savely Senderovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle: A Study of the Folk Riddle's Figurative Nature* (London: Kegan Paul, 2005), p. 19.

between the descriptive part of the riddle and its answer is not one-to-one: various answers may correspond to one and the same description. Between the description and the answer lies a semiotic hiatus.⁵⁶

The “semiotic hiatus” presents an interesting dynamic: its emphasis falls on the riddling process rather than its answer. Answers to the kinds of folk riddles Senderovich studies are largely social properties; a subject either knows the answer because they have prior knowledge of it, or they are about to know because they are being led through the ritual of learning it. The emphasis is never on the knowing but on the ritual of not-knowing, and the riddle’s answer is never intended to be guessed. Once the riddling ritual commences, one is expected to struggle to find the riddle’s answer despite insufficient information, a struggle one is not only likely but *expected* to fail.⁵⁷

Donald Barthelme’s essay “Not-Knowing” describes the object of literary interpretation in similar terms. Writing of the “tyranny of great expectations” and the feverish “rage for final explanations” he observed in his contemporaries, Barthelme characterises the kind of criticism Boyd performs as follows:

Modern-day critics speak of “recuperating” a text, suggesting an accelerated and possibly strenuous nursing back to health of a basically sickly text, very likely one that did not even know itself to be ill.⁵⁸

A great writer, says Barthelme, does what a critic usually will not: “make a riddle out of an answer.” Acknowledging that he runs the risk of being misunderstood as arguing in defence of the mystification of literary texts, Barthelme asserts that any critic or critical community that

⁵⁶ Senderovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle*, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁷ Senderovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ Donald Barthelme, “Not-Knowing” in *Not Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*, ed. Kim Herzinger (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), p. 20.

operates according to “a refusal to allow a work that mystery which is essential to it” is doing something seriously wrong: “tear a mystery to tatters and you have tatters, not mystery”.⁵⁹

Likewise, we are never supposed to reach a final fixed “answer” to a Nabokov novel, or to any work of literature or art more generally. Their purpose and their solutions remain unknown, fixed as transcendental signifiers we desire but never attain. The linguistic play of Nabokov’s novels has more in common with the well-balanced elegance of a folk riddle than the pile of tatters left behind after Boyd has supposedly recuperated their “real solutions”.

A similar kind of reading for Nabokov specifically is suggested by Will Norman in *Nabokov, History, and the Texture of Time*. Dissatisfied with existing critical paradigms which “operate on Nabokov’s own public principle of historical exclusion,” Norman argues that too many Nabokov scholars “suspend critique of his literary metaphysics, as if to historicize them was in some sense to devalue the fiction itself.”⁶⁰ He suggests a change, “one not founded on the scrabbling for internal solutions”, which often exhausts its material as fast as it misreads it, “but on the expansion of enquiry beyond the limits indicated (and policed) by the author”. This allows for a crucial adjustment to the way Nabokov’s works have been read, wresting authority away from Nabokov’s public persona—whose stern words are far too often given the final say on everything—in order to “return his works to the territory out of which they developed”.⁶¹ For Norman, this means “exploring contradiction and irreconcilability in Nabokov’s work [rather] than in seeking resolution and harmony”. Citing Fredric Jameson, Norman recommends a process of reading Nabokov’s novels without filtering out the uncomfortable “glare” caused by the failure of mental categories, arguing that the contradictions that arise from this failure are the real areas of interest, rather than an inconvenience to be overcome in

⁵⁹ Bartheleme, “Not-Knowing”, pp. 18-19.

⁶⁰ Will Norman, *Nabokov, History, and the Texture of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

⁶¹ Norman, *Nabokov, History, and the Texture of Time*, p. 159.

pursuit of something else.⁶² Norman argues compellingly that Nabokov's, and Van's, attempted synthesis of time and timelessness in *Ada, or Ardor* is never intended to pass for a consistent metaphysical treatise, and that his fictional worlds are held together physically and philosophically by the "papering-over of cracks".⁶³ Fittingly enough, Nabokov's own comments in a 1969 interview support this reading: "This is Van speaking, Van Veen, the charming villain of my book. I have not decided yet if I agree with him in all his views on the texture of time. I suspect I don't."⁶⁴

1.8 "My Pedants"—Nabokov's Critical Persona

As helpful as Senderovich's work is, a Nabokov novel is obviously not bound by the conventions and traditions of folk riddling. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the descriptive half of a riddle's bipartite structure over the solution may motivate us to rethink our approach to reading Nabokov's fiction. Just as a folk riddle "presupposes communal knowledge of the answers",⁶⁵ Nabokov's compositions presuppose the eventual emergence of devoted scholars who will explore their intricately-woven tapestry of threads and themes. In an unusually candid interview, Nabokov, tongue firmly in cheek, described Alfred Appel Jr. as "my pedant", before expanding on precisely what he meant:

A pedant right out of *Pale Fire*. Every writer should have such a pedant. He was a student of mine at Cornell and later he married a girl I'd taught at another time—and I understand that I was their first shared passion.⁶⁶

⁶² Norman, *Nabokov, History, and the Texture of Time*, p. 157.

⁶³ Norman, *Nabokov, History, and the Texture of Time*, p. 156.

⁶⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, "'To be Kind, to be Proud, to be Fearless'—Vladimir Nabokov in Conversation with James Mossman", interview by James Mossman. In *Conversations With Vladimir Nabokov*, edited by Robert Golla. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), p. 155. Audio of this interview is also available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbtvWnvnXTE>.

⁶⁵ Senderovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle*, p. 54.

⁶⁶ Alan Levy, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Velvet Butterfly* (Sag Harbor, New York: Permanent Press, 1984), p. 15.

Though obviously mixed with a great deal of personal affection for his former students, it is important not to miss the extent to which he is mocking them and their efforts—albeit affectionately. The very idea of his work having cultivated its own pedants so devoted they would displace the more expected “first shared passion” of a romantic relationship with the apparently competitively erotic act of enthusiastically discussing their former teacher’s work clearly appealed to Nabokov. In retelling this anecdote the interviewer, Alan Levy, describes Nabokov’s expression as “positively cherubic,” and his delivery to be “an outburst of hyperbole that would live on to haunt us”.⁶⁷

In *Nabokov, Perversely*, Eric Naiman approaches Nabokov’s critical persona with an approach he calls “hermeneutic perversion”.⁶⁸ Naiman’s goal is to transgress the dictums of Nabokov-the-critic and liberate readers from their servitude. He does this by dispelling what he calls “Hermaphobia” which, via pieces like “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” and “Good Readers and Good Writers”, has put Nabokov’s readers in an “interpretive dilemma”, in which they

have to read imaginatively but not preposterously, without common sense and with it. They want to find things in the text but fear finding too much. A yearning for identity with the master has two faces: the desire to dazzle and the fear of seeming ridiculous or crude. The text simultaneously tempts the interpreter and threatens to expose him.⁶⁹

This uneasy combination of paranoia, narcissism, and a master/slave relationship with Nabokov’s critical persona, says Naiman, impels Nabokov scholars to conduct their work with “excessive caution, a fear of exposure, shame, and self-protecting (and, thus,

⁶⁷ Levy, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 15.

⁶⁸ Eric Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 20.

⁶⁹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 114.

self-intimidating) attacks on the interpretive excesses of others.”⁷⁰ The received idea of what constitutes a good reader of Nabokov, one fostered by his critical persona, is someone who

reads queerly, warily, with a strange mixture of aggression and submission, lashing out at his colleagues while fearing and welcoming the attentions of an author who thinks the best readers are taken from behind.⁷¹

Naiman argues that future Nabokov scholars need to escape their enslavement, and even reverse roles with their fickle and proscriptive master. At the risk of overworking the metaphor, and having examined and rejected Boyd’s “scientific” mode of reading, I find myself drawn to Wood’s description of what an “intimate dialogue with provocative texts” ideally looks like:

among the things we shall almost certainly lose is our certainty. But to lose certainty is not to lose understanding or knowledge. What remains is a demonstrable richness in the texts themselves, not so much meaning as a set of possibilities of meaning, a syntactical or structural chance of what I shall call wisdom but would be happy to give a more modest name. Texts we care about both will both resist and reward us; not necessarily in that order.⁷²

The emphasis here is on the text itself resisting and rewarding its reader. Wood, too, argues that the ideal reader of Nabokov is one whose curiosity inspires them to read insubordinately.⁷³ His choice of words is inspired by a line of Adam Krug’s in *Bend Sinister*: “curiosity in its turn is insubordination in its purest form.”⁷⁴ Wood reminds us that it is a “weird mixture of loyalty and insurrection which constitutes any active response to a work of the imagination.”⁷⁵ This mixture is not just a good approach to reading Nabokov’s fiction, but also as a response to Nabokov’s critical persona. Indeed, the ambivalence of both desiring and rejecting authority is

⁷⁰ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 115.

⁷¹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 131.

⁷² Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 7.

⁷³ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (1947), (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 47.

⁷⁵ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 6.

present even *within* Nabokov's haughty persona, collapsing the illusion that he demanded total mastery over his readers.

The compelling argument that Nabokov's critical persona both desires and rejects authority over his oeuvre at once is put forward by Jacqueline Hamrit in *Authority in Nabokov's Prefaces*, and it is worth exploring in detail. Hamrit applies Derrida's concept of "exappropriation" to Nabokov's work, a punning combination of appropriation and expropriation which Derrida describes thus:

What I mean by "exappropriation" is that appropriating something, and being therefore able to keep it in one's name, to write one's name on it, to leave it behind in one's name like a testament or inheritance, you've got to expropriate it, part from it. That's what you do when you write, when you publish, when you throw something onto the public stage. You part from it and it starts living a life of its own, as it were, without us. So in order to be able to claim a work, a book, a work of art or anything else, a policy or legislation of any kind or initiative, to appropriate it, to assign it to someone, it is necessary to lose it, to leave it, to expropriate it. That is the condition of such a dreadful trick: you've got to lose what you want to keep and you can only keep it if you lose it. It is very painful. The very act of publishing involves pain. It goes you don't know where, it bears your name, then it's terrible—you can't even piece it back together, or even read it. That's what I call "exappropriation," which also applies, not only to what we so easily talk about, i.e. literary or philosophical works, but also to everything else, to capital, to economy in general.⁷⁶

Hamrit believes Nabokov's critical persona, particularly in his prefaces, engages his work in a relationship based on "exappropriation". The public Nabokov is ambivalent about whether he should be given the authority to dictate how his works are to be read, and about whether he *wants* that kind of authority in the first place. The groundwork for reading Nabokov like this was laid by Wood, as we can see when he describes a literary text, and the way it is read, as sharing much in common with a will: "The will, as every nineteenth century novelist knew, is

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Dialogue entre Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et Jean-Luc Nancy", in *Rue Descartes* Vol. 52, No. 2 (2006): pp. 86-99, trans. and quoted in Jacqueline Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp. 103-104.

where the dead are most alive; a functional autobiography, immortality secured in the quarrels of others.”⁷⁷ Likewise, Derrida’s “exappropriation” is “a gesture combining mastery and loss of mastery,” glimpsed from the point of view of the author, dead or alive, who disappears into his text.⁷⁸ As Derrida suggests, the textual remnants the author leaves in his wake have a life of their own, bearing his name on their dustjackets but ultimately, and inevitably, exceeding his authority.

Hamrit’s chief interlocutor is Maurice Couturier, who believes Nabokov enjoys and advocates a programme of tyranny of the author figure, a kind of post-Barthes Revenge of the Author. Couturier’s position on the author’s authority, in essence, is that while “the reader of Nabokov’s texts has the illusion that he masters the game of deciphering and interpreting, he is merely subjected to the law of the author who is the real master of the game.”⁷⁹ Only by supplicating themselves before Nabokov’s authority does Couturier think a critic can arrive at a good enough interpretation of (or in Boyd’s words a “real solution” to) one of his works. Couturier describes the kind of “poetic epiphany” he enjoys in Nabokov, one only attainable via his kind of supplication:

The poetic epiphany [of understanding Nabokov] takes its temporal dimension from the intense sensation that the reader experiences in being suddenly in contact with this magician who has done all he can to remain inaccessible. To be sure, this is in part illusory, but that enhances rather than diminishes the intensity of the experience. I will never manage to have completely unmasked this magician and I will never be on equal footing with him, and it is this which drives my desire to pursue my reading even further, in the hope, always disappointed, to find myself in the presence, if not of the author himself, who is already dead, then at least of his desire, his frustrations and his anguished fears, which can be embodied only in me.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 19.

⁷⁸ Jacqueline Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov’s Prefaces* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), p. 2.

⁷⁹ Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov’s Prefaces*, p. 1. Couturier’s main works on Nabokov’s authority, *Nabokov au La Tyrannie de l’auteur* (1993) and *La Figure de l’auteur* (1995), are both in French. I will be quoting material translated and/or summarised by Hamrit and Naiman.

⁸⁰ Maurice Couturier, *Nabokov, ou la tyrannie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), p. 153, quoted and trans. in Naiman, *Nabokov Perversely*, p. 120.

Part of Couturier's intense pleasure is a feeling of sudden closeness with his master; a feeling he admits may be partially illusory, but which is somehow only stronger for that. Couturier is free to imagine and draw pleasure from whatever he wants, and also to tell us about it: but since he is arguing for a way of reading that should be replicated in others we are free to be sceptical of it.

1.9 Derrida's "Author", via James Joyce

Couturier's conception of a tyrannical author also resonates with Derrida's "Two Words for Joyce", in which Derrida unpacks a textual fragment from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: "And shall not Babel be with Lebab? And he war."⁸¹ The "he war" fragment is taken to represent something like "God's signature" on the events that surround the biblical story of the Tower of Babel.⁸² Derrida reads "war" both as a noun in English and a verb in German; the English attempts to erase, colonise, and domesticate the other language.⁸³ The war has been declared by God on linguistic coherence, as he simultaneously orders and forbids the reader from translating a settled meaning for the fragment.⁸⁴ In other words, Derrida makes a case that confusion permeates linguistic signs to such an extent that the very idea of unambiguously inscribing or communicating anything without doubt is impossible, even for God himself.

Derrida argues that Joyce's prose is unhumanly self-aware, as close to God-like as is possible. Joyce himself declared that his work—specifically *Ulysses* when he said it, though

⁸¹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), p. 258.

⁸² Jacques Derrida, "Two Words for Joyce", in *Post-Structuralist Joyce*, eds. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 157.

⁸³ Derrida, "Two Words for Joyce", p. 156.

⁸⁴ Derrida, "Two Words for Joyce", p. 154.

the quote is even more applicable to *Finnegans Wake*—ideally requires his reader to spend their whole life reading, comprehending, and translating it: “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality.”⁸⁵ For Derrida, each of Joyce’s words, each “marked piece of information”, is at every moment interacting with every other component of the book at a “quasi-infinite speed”, effectively making it impossible for the human mind to comprehend the work in its totality.⁸⁶

[Joyce] repeats and mobilizes and babelizes the (asymptotic) totality of the equivocal, he makes this his theme and his operation, he tries to make outcrop with the greatest possible synchrony, at great speed, the greatest power of the meanings buried in each syllabic fragment, subjecting each atom of writing to fission in order to overload the unconscious with the whole memory of man.⁸⁷

He describes *Finnegans Wake* as if it were something like a “too-powerful, outsize calculator incommensurable with any translating machine conceivable today”.⁸⁸ While the text appears to be working to translate the chaos of clashing languages and their significations, it simultaneously obstructs its reader with countless ambiguous, and unstable fragments, frozen between a multitude of potential meanings.

The voice of Joyce’s dreamer-narrator, says Derrida, pre-empts and subsumes not just his own voice but also that of his reader. In an extract Derrida provides, however, it swells into something more: all of human history and its inhabitants crying out at once, quivering in the unstable vessel of a single uncanny voice:

Loud, hear us!
Loud, graciously hear us!

⁸⁵ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 521.

⁸⁶ Derrida, “Two Words for Joyce”, p. 147-148.

⁸⁷ Derrida, “Two Words for Joyce”, p. 149.

⁸⁸ Derrida, “Two Words for Joyce”, p. 156.

[...]

Oh Loud, hear the wee beseech of thees of each of these they unlitten ones!⁸⁹

Meanwhile, the Christian God the voice entreats is caught in similar linguistic instability, since the “he war” is a multilingual undecidable. Further, the “Lord” is now the “Loud”, and God has himself been subsumed by the entreating voice’s time-spanning and all-encompassing throng of babble:

Loud, heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughers low!
Ha he hi ho hu.
Mummum.⁹⁰

The laughter here, Derrida argues, is that of the Joyce-like author-figure himself, the closest thing to a real God-figure in all of *Finnegans Wake*’s chaos. The author-figure lurks in some purgatorial space, suspended between his reader and the action of the novel. He chuckles to himself the whole time, a ceaseless and disquieting laughter aimed at both the limits of language and his readers’ attempts to tame it. As Derrida puts it:

What does this writing teach us of the essence of laughter if it recalls that laughter to the limits of the calculable and the incalculable, when the whole of the calculable is outplayed by a writing about which it is no longer possible to decide if it still calculates....?⁹¹

For Derrida, then, a work of literature becomes an unending, virtually impenetrable network of veiled interactions between parts and fluctuating constellations of possible readings. In this example, Derrida’s hypothetical author-figure has pre-empted every single interpretation his reader could summon forth, and laughs a malevolent, uncanny laugh at their efforts. His Joyce

⁸⁹ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 259.

⁹⁰ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 259.

⁹¹ Derrida, “Two Words for Joyce”, p. 157-158.

essay is useful to read alongside his work on “exappropriation”, where Derrida’s conception of an “author” seems to be an ambivalent coalescence of the implied tyrannical author of *Finnegans Wake* and a text’s historical author.

1.10 An Ambivalent Tyrant

By writing as himself and in his own voice, Nabokov’s authority “seems to confirm and be confirmed by” whatever assertions he makes in his epitexts. The critical Nabokov uses prefaces to perform his approximation of Derrida’s Joycean “omnipresent author”. They fulfil the same function as Derrida described in *Dissemination*, commenting on the work as a finished product and correcting misreadings:

it is the word of a father assisting and admiring his work, answering for his son, losing his breath in sustaining, retaining, idealizing, reinternalizing, and mastering his seed.⁹²

Hamrit concedes that there is plenty of evidence in Nabokov’s epitexts to back up Couturier’s position; Nabokov appears to claim total mastery over his texts’ interpretations on many occasions. She cites Nabokov’s foreword to *Lolita: A Screenplay* as an example:

if I had given as much of myself to the stage or screen as I have to the kind of writing which serves a triumphant life sentence between the covers of a book, I would have advocated and applied a system of total tyranny, directing the play or the picture myself, choosing settings and costumes, terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the bit part of guest, or ghost, prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and the art of one individual.⁹³

⁹² Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (1972, Eng. 1981) trans. Barbara Johnson (London : The Althone Press, 1981), pp. 44-45.

⁹³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay* (1973), (New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. ix-x.

Despite passages like this, Hamrit insists there is a crucial sense of ambivalence underpinning Nabokov's gestures towards mastery, which suggests a more nuanced stance on authorial authority. Though there are many instances of Nabokov's critical persona endorsing authorial tyranny, there are others to counterbalance them, which see him arguing for the importance of private, independent readings. This is a layer of nuance Couturier overlooks (as does Boyd), and Hamrit is correct to insist on it. In "Good Readers and Good Writers", for example, the critical Nabokov says "a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine." The spine is where we experience the "telltale tingle" which Nabokov values above all else, "a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual". Where it is the artist's job to "build his castle of cards", it is the reader's imagination that turns it into "a castle of beautiful steel and glass."⁹⁴ In other words, Nabokov's aesthetic project requires an interplay between reader and writer which necessitates the latter loosening his grip on his creation. Once his book makes it to print, his reader may arrive precisely where Nabokov anticipates, or they may arrive somewhere else entirely—either way, his work is done.

In his Afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov expressed a view of authorship more in line with W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley's work on the intentional fallacy than might be expected:

Teachers of Literature are apt to think up such problems as "What is the author's purpose?" or still worse "What is the guy trying to say?" Now I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination—which, I admit, sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers", in Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures of Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 6.

⁹⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (1956), in Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita* (1970), ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 311.

As Hamrit surmises, the view Nabokov expresses here is that “[meaning] indeed overflows authorial intention”, and that “knowing his intention is neither available nor desirable”. This is not to say that the question of authorial intention is of no interest whatsoever, or that an author’s critical writings are off-limits to an interpreter. Rather, Hamrit insists on the gap, or *béance*, “between saying and meaning,” or writing and reading. In this model of reading, a text is able to say things the author does not intend it to mean, always containing “elements that are unperceived by the writer [...] that the reader reveals.”⁹⁶

Hamrit explores some interesting repercussions of Nabokov’s critical persona, arguing that this Nabokov should be approached with the same care and caution as one of his narrators. The main impetus, and justification, for Hamrit’s approach, and for thinking of the critical Nabokov in terms of a performance, is the following passage from *Lolita*’s afterword:

After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one—may strike me in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book. A few points, however, have to be discussed; and the autobiographic device may induce mimic and model to blend.⁹⁷

Nabokov’s aside here—“may strike me in fact”—is perhaps the most interesting fragment of in what is already a complex epitext. In one moment of uncharacteristic self-deprecation we catch a glimpse of the sudden vertigo of the historical Nabokov realising that as he writes in his own voice, he may have temporarily transformed into an impersonation of himself, dragging the words on the page along with him. That vertigo would have only intensified when he realised that, if true, by the time the reader gets their hands on the afterword, the historical

⁹⁶ Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov’s Prefaces*, p. 16.

⁹⁷ Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”, p. 311.

Nabokov will have long since left the scene, leaving only the words, his impersonation, on the page. All that is left is an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov, and it is the impersonation that still resounds with an echo of Nabokov's original concern that he may be just an impersonation. This neurotic crisis of identity, endlessly repeating itself on the page with every read-through, takes place even apart from the afterword's intention to say anything about *Lolita* itself, concerned instead with (irresolvable, unstoppable) speculation about which version of the self-noticing-the-self is the impersonation, and how many layers deep this self-reflexive cycle of recognition might go. In this moment, argues Hamrit, the historical Nabokov—"the one at the origin of an autobiography" who was originally responsible for the scribal act, "the one that plays the role of an author while writing the postscript and which echoes the real one and the implied one present in the novel"—self-consciously trapped a "spectral self" in his epitext's resin.⁹⁸ Hamrit suggests that far from being a rare or singular genus, this kind of spectral self lies behind almost all evocations of an "author" in literature and literary theory, and is not limited to Nabokov. Nabokov's neurotic aside is an unusually clear articulation of the "mise-en-abyme structure" inherent to the concept of an "author", made up at all times by "blurred and numerous identities."⁹⁹

It seems just as likely that the spectral image of an "author" lurking beneath the murky surface of the writing bearing his name is as much a component of Nabokov's important theme of *potustoronnost'* as the literal ghosts in his narratives, which occupy studies by Boyd and Alexandrov. Hamrit's own description of an author certainly has a hint of *potustoronnost'* to it: "Elusive and spectral, [the author] resembles a ghost characterized, according to Derrida, by its double nature juxtaposing his real and unreal dimensions."¹⁰⁰ Eric Naiman puts forward an

⁹⁸ Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces*, p. 25.

⁹⁹ Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁰ Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces*, p. 25.

interesting and productive reading of *Ada* that sees Lucette's ghost act as a kind of unnoticed, uncredited co-author of Van's text, his memoir. It will be worth keeping Hamrit's, Derrida's, and Naiman's thoughts about authorship in mind for my analysis of that aspect, and others, of *Ada*.

1.11 Parody, and Nabokov's Joking Relationships

Hamrit and Derrida's descriptions of exappropriation resemble another disorienting combination of double meaning and misdirection: joking. It will make a helpful supplement to Hamrit to explore the playful, joking relationship Nabokov constructs between himself and his readers. In both his fiction and his encounters with interviewers and journalists, Nabokov was always testing the lengths to which his interlocutors were willing to go in their attempts to understand him. A journalist hoping he would disclose something important on one topic might find themselves a recipient of some unexpected, often unperceived, insight into something else entirely. Nabokov would rarely give the answers that were expected of him and almost never made things easy his interviewers, preferring to take advantage of the licence with which his celebrity imbued him in order to amuse himself with his own private games.

In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon noted that the "parodic echoes" of Nabokov's fiction are often overlooked.¹⁰¹ Likewise, the parodic tone of his critical and interview material has largely escaped close attention. The relationship between Nabokov and his interviewers and critics has much in common with those described by anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Browne in "On Joking Relationships". Here, a joking relationship is a mainstay of interpersonal relations within tribal communities, manifesting in situations where there is an irreconcilable

¹⁰¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 90.

social disjunction between two parties. It develops as an alternative to a relationship built around avoidance and “extreme mutual respect”, in which the two parties avoid conflict through “a limitation of direct personal contact.” In contrast, a joking relationship is based on “mutual disrespect and licence” which manifests as “a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism” which “is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously.”¹⁰²

Nabokov frequently toyed with and chastised interviewers, his rebukes often deliberately illogical. In one unique scenario Nabokov chose to preserve in *Strong Opinions*, he reprimands the BBC, to whom he granted an on-camera interview slated to appear in print soon after. Introducing the interview years later in his own collection, and on his own turf, Nabokov clearly has an axe to grind: “I have mislaid the cards on which I had written my answers. I suspect that the published text was taken straight from the tape”, he complains, “for it teems with inaccuracies.”¹⁰³ His rule, of course, is that the written word is more accurate than speech: “My vocabulary dwells deep in my mind and needs paper to wriggle out into the physical zone. Spontaneous eloquence seems to me a miracle.”¹⁰⁴ The BBC reporters clearly could not have been expected to know this rule—that their subject considers extemporaneous verbiage to be not just undesirable but inaccurate—and Nabokov *knows* they could not have known it. What reads at first like unabashed pomposity reveals more interesting layers of sly mischief and playfulness the longer one thinks about it. Nabokov does not *want* these interviewers to please him and follow his undisclosed set of rules; he wants them to make mistakes so he can reprimand them, on the record and in writing, as part of an ongoing private joke, at once exposing and upholding his own fussiness.

¹⁰²A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships”, *Africa*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (July, 1940): pp. 196-197.

¹⁰³ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 4.

A further example of a long-standing policy of his idiosyncratic teasing of unwitting journalists comes from a 1984 *New York Times* feature on Nabokov by Alan Levy (which does not appear in *Strong Opinions*).¹⁰⁵ Nabokov dragged his interviewer up and down steep hillsides in Montreux for half a day hunting butterflies, spoon-feeding him entomology lessons as they went. Levy commented out loud at one point that listening to Nabokov talk about the samples he collected was “[like] walking through a very detailed catalog”. Nabokov’s reply is reproduced as follows: “‘Good simile!’ says Nabokov, definitely *onstage*, as though dishing out a tennis compliment. ‘You can put it in quotes and give it to me.’”¹⁰⁶ This is a complex, more modern example of what Radcliffe-Brown calls “the playful antagonism of teasing” inherent to a joking relationship.¹⁰⁷ This kind of teasing comprises part of

a continual expression of that social disjunction which is an essential part of the whole structural situation, but over which, without destroying or even weakening it, there is provided the social conjunction of friendliness and mutual aid.¹⁰⁸

Despite Nabokov’s approval of Levy’s simile—he would not even jokingly agree to let something be attributed to him otherwise—the teasing insinuation of Nabokov’s praise, as Levy describes it, is that his interviewer’s attempts at literary style are rather quaint. Clearly aware of the disjunction between Levy’s skill and reputation as a writer and his own, Nabokov over-performs appreciation for what he perceives to be a journeyman journalist’s tremulously-ventured simile. Further still, Nabokov “aids” the less-experienced writer by discerning which

¹⁰⁵ Also published in book form as Alan Levy, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Velvet Butterfly* (Sag Harbor, New York: Permanent, 1984).

¹⁰⁶ Levy, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁷ Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships”, p. 197.

¹⁰⁸ Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships”, p. 200.

of Levy's own spoken comments are worth recording, and by permitting him to attribute one to his more famous interviewee.

At the conclusion of the tiring butterfly hunt, Nabokov and Levy climb into a taxi, and the latter recounts: "Was it a successful day?" asks the driver. "Beckoning knowingly toward me, Nabokov confides: 'From *his* point of view, it was successful. From *mine*, well, I've had better days.'"¹⁰⁹ By overtly acknowledging their divergent interests—he hunts butterflies, Levy hunts usable material—Nabokov playfully frames the relationship between artist and critic as a competition. He also mischievously suggests that a "successful" result for his interviewer—gathering enough material for an engrossing profile on Nabokov—paradoxically requires that *he* have a "bad" day himself, subtly undermining the legitimacy of whatever Levy has collected for his feature. A "good" journalistic profile on a celebrity is a balance of intimacy and incident, a generic requirement Nabokov clearly understands. By dragging his unprepared interviewer on an exhausting half-day butterfly hunt up and down steep hillsides, Nabokov ensures that his less athletic interviewer will physically struggle to keep up with his subject, and that as a result the feature's more "intimate" moments—another requirement of the genre—will largely consist of moments where Nabokov chooses to fall back from his usual pace. He drops in and out of his interviewer's grasp, reversing the traditional power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee—usually closer to that between a witness and their cross-examiner—and in so doing makes it clear that he is being forced to alter his usual, more authentic routine to accommodate his hanger-on. Nabokov all but ensures that Levy's profile will be less of an "accurate" representation of his daily life, and more a reflection of the conditions of the interview itself. His sly "advice" on what to include, or to whom to attribute certain comments, sees Nabokov assert his own authorial mastery over a worn down, tired out

¹⁰⁹ Levy, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 38.

interlocutor who at that point was probably grateful for whatever he was given so long as it was not another steep slope to scale.

Perhaps the most amusing example I have found of Nabokov's joking interactions with critics, again seeing him cultivate a façade of "friendliness and mutual aid", is in an article by Herbert Gold in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Gold, briefly Nabokov's successor teaching English Literature at Cornell University, tells an anecdote about discovering that Michael Scammell, translator of *The Gift*, was a pseudonym for Nabokov himself. "Examining the name 'Scammell,' I derived a near anagram, Le Masc, which becomes Le Masque, which becomes, clearly, the Mask for Nabokov." Such was his confidence that he had caught his colleague in an act of authorial deception, Gold wrote to Nabokov to let him know his "ghostly behaviour" had been detected: "My suspicions were confirmed by the sweet and evasive reply from Véra Nabokov: 'My Husband wishes to thank you for your recent very interesting communication ...'" That, Gold must have thought, was that; until, after an unspecified amount of time, he made a further, even more enlightening discovery:

Epilogue to this story: It turns out that there really is a translator named Michael Scammell, though the Nabokovs did not find it necessary to disappoint me in my little "discovery." This is an example of life turning into a Nabokov satire. Russian boxes within boxes, a phantom beckoning the pedantic friend into his hall of errors.¹¹⁰

Gold's sheepish tone here is the sign of a good sport. He acknowledges his mistake and is pleased to have (unknowingly) been co-opted into a Nabokovian game. Nabokov, too, must have been delighted by Gold's letter, making an active decision to stay tight-lipped and keep his correspondent trapped in his own "hall of errors." The letter gave Nabokov an opportunity to sow the seeds for a profound experience of professional discombobulation somewhere in

¹¹⁰ Herbert Gold, "The Artist in Pursuit of Butterflies", *Saturday Evening Standard* (1967), p. 84.

Gold's future when in an inevitable double-take he realises that not only was he mistaken, but was actively misdirected by a poker-faced Nabokov. In the moment of Gold's anagnorisis, however it came about, the figure of tyrannical author was rendered very much alive for *him*, at least: alive, and tittering.

A writer who misdirects his readers and critics to such a degree as Nabokov certainly cannot be entirely trusted. In print Nabokov conducts himself as if he is in a joking relationship, but it is a one-sided joking relationship operating according to a set of rules only he knows. Nabokov acts out a performative combination of respect and disrespect with his interviewers and readers, an act that leaves a gap for, but without necessarily inviting, the joking relationship to be made mutual. The gap for us to reciprocate, becoming partners in a joking relationship between author and reader, has been left wide open. However, it must remain a partnership, a dance, even long after the historical author's death. Rather than being cowed by Nabokov's authority, his readers are free to treat him with the same combination of respect and disrespect with which he treats us. This is the insubordinate reading Wood and Naiman's works suggest.

1.12 Alfred Appel Jr.'s Puppet Show

Having looked at authority and authorship in Nabokov's critical and interview material, the next step is to explore how they manifest in his fiction. To pick just one motif he kept returning to throughout his career, and whose signs and characteristics are everywhere in his oeuvre, Nabokov's fondness for the theatre and theatricality is worth unpacking.

In the section titled "Nabokov's Puppet Show" of his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel Jr. presents an unexpected but surprisingly fitting metaphor for the involution of Nabokov's fictional worlds. In one of their face-to-face interviews, Appel explains, he recounted an episode from his home-life to a clearly delighted Nabokov. To

entertain their children one afternoon—noted incidentally to be “Nabokov’s ideal readers”—Appel and his wife propped a makeshift puppet theatre on the edge of their couch, crouching behind to operate it. Unfortunately, the ramshackle cardboard construction unexpectedly collapsed mid-production, breaking the show’s spell and suddenly exposing their “puppeted hands”, “naked wrists”, and comically half-concealed faces to their offspring as the awkward tools of a pair of over-eager puppet-masters:

For several moments my children remained in their open-mouthed trance, still in the story, staring at the space where the theater had been, not seeing me at all. Then they did the kind of double take that a comedian might take a lifetime to perfect, and began to laugh uncontrollably, in a way I had never seen before - and not so much at my clumsiness, which was nothing new, but rather at those moments of total involvement in a non-existent world, and at what its collapse implied to them about the authenticity of the larger world, and about their daily efforts to order it and their own fabricated illusions. They were laughing, too, over their sense of what the vigorous performance had meant to me; but they saw how easily they could be tricked and their trust belied, and the shrillness of their laughter finally suggested that they recognized the frightening implications of what had happened, and that only laughter could steel them in their new awareness.¹¹¹

According to Appel, Nabokov enthusiastically agreed that this anecdote was an apt representation of the response he always hopes to get from his audience at the end of one of his novels. It is consistent with what Nabokov wrote in *Nikolai Gogol* about the reading process: “Imagine a trapdoor that opens under your feet with absurd suddenness, and a lyrical gust that sweeps you up and then lets you fall with a bump into the next traphole.”¹¹² The feeling of disorientation that disconcerts a Nabokov protagonist as they try to gain a foothold

¹¹¹ Alfred Appel, Jr., “Introduction”, in Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita* (1970), ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. xxxii.

¹¹² Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (1944), (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 141.

in an unstable fictional world is a foundational goal of what Nabokov called “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me.”¹¹³

Still, there is a subtle difference between these two apparently similar narrative dissolutions, and it lies both in their respective audiences’ reactions, and in each of the creators’—Appel and Nabokov—expectations about what those reactions are going to be. As uncommonly and almost fantastically refined as Appel’s children seem to be—at least according to their father’s reportage—presumably once the fog of their bafflement had cleared they were left reassured by the gentle, laughing, nurturing faces of their loving parents. This is decidedly *not* the sensation one is left with when Nabokov’s literary puppet-shows dissolve. It seems quite likely that his enthusiasm for Appel’s colourful anecdote should not be taken as a serious expression or endorsement of a rigid aesthetic program.

It seems obvious—almost too obvious—that there is a notable similarity between the reassurance and comfort Appel’s children draw from knowing the author of their momentary disorientation is their father, who loves them unconditionally and clearly means them no harm, and the combination of reassurance and aesthetic pleasure Appel describes feeling when one of Nabokov’s fictional apparatuses collapses. For him, Nabokov was a former teacher and scholarly mentor, and something of a paternal figure. Taking his cue, and instructions, on how to read Nabokov from Nabokov’s own *Nikolai Gogol* monograph, Appel explains the tiered structure of his old professor’s fiction: “There are thus at least two ‘plots’ in all of Nabokov’s fiction: the characters in the book, and the consciousness of the creator above it—the ‘real plot’ which is visible in the ‘gaps’ and ‘holes’ in the narrative.”¹¹⁴ Paraphrasing from *Speak, Memory*, Appel continues his theorem by explaining how the reader ought to draw reassurance

¹¹³ Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Appel Jr., “Introduction”, p. xxvi

and a sense of stability from the knowledge that Nabokov himself is responsible for, and lies at the root of, all his works' dizzying puzzles:

The contiguous world is the mind and spirit of the author, whose identity, psychic survival, and "manifold awareness" are ultimately both the subject and the product of the book. In whatever way they are opened, the "windows" always reveal that "the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus" of everything.¹¹⁵

While this passage certainly works as a description of how Nabokov liked to think of and speak about his masterly grip over his own writing at the time, taken as a critical analysis on its own terms Appel's conclusion is somewhat lacking. Though I may be drawing a long bow, it does seem that Appel is, perhaps unknowingly, describing a private and unreproducible reading experience only he could have, knowing the author as intimately as he did. For Appel, having his old professor at the nucleus of his reading is familiar, comforting, and amusing, as it was for his children to have him at theirs. For the rest of us, being subjected to a Nabokovian author-figure's unpredictable whim yields the kind of vertiginous fear and disorientation Derrida describes in his Joyce essays.

1.13 Theatre, the *Balagan*, and Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination

There is still a great deal of value in Appel's puppet theatre analogy, though perhaps not in the manner he intended. Since Appel, there have been several excellent studies that explore the overt theatricality of Nabokov's aesthetics in new ways.

Siggy Frank's central thesis in *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* is that "Nabokov integrates the theatrical mode as a structural device into his novels," enacting a tension between "how they emulate, appropriate and resist theatrical properties" at the same time as asserting

¹¹⁵ Appel Jr., "Introduction", pp. xxvi-xxvii.

their own autonomous, self-contained realities.¹¹⁶ Frank introduces her book as “a study in the gaps [and] thresholds marking the blurred transitional spaces between different realms in Nabokov’s fictional worlds.” She is most interested in the fault-lines between “the written text and the ephemeral nature of theatre,” and in what happens when an “uprooted theatre performance” is dropped into the fictional world of prose.¹¹⁷ Hamrit acknowledges that Frank’s notion of an author who “recedes into the background and dissolves into his art” shares some common ground with her own work on Nabokov and exappropriation, reaching the same conclusions from different angles.¹¹⁸ Before this, Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts’ papers built a case that Nabokov’s fictional worlds are constructed in a manner that recalls the traditional Russian *balagan*, “a temporary, quickly-knocked-together barnlike structure for fairground theatrical performances”.¹¹⁹ They quote, by way of example, from *Look at the Harlequins!*, in which the protagonist’s aunt plants in him the seeds of creativity:

“Stop moping!” she would cry: “Look at the harlequins!”
 “What harlequins? Where?”
 “Oh, everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two and two together—jokes, images—and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!”
 I did. By Jove, I did.¹²⁰

Harlequin started life as Arlecchino, the comic trickster in Italian *commedia dell’arte*. Russian Symbolists fused *commedia* and *balagan* conventions during the Silver Age, importing a fixation with masks and improvisation along with it.¹²¹ Traditionally inhabited only by marionettes, the *balagan* now housed hybrid characters played by real actors. Actors would

¹¹⁶ Siggy Frank, *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Frank, *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination*, p. 17.

¹¹⁸ Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov’s Prefaces*, p. 146.

¹¹⁹ Savely Senderovich and Yelena Shvarts, “‘If We Put Our Heads Between Our Legs’: An Introduction to the Theme ‘Vladimir Nabokov and Arthur Schopenhauer’”, *Nabokov Studies*, Vol. 11 (2007/2008).

¹²⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 8-9.

¹²¹ Frank, *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination*, p. 131.

wear masks and were free to improvise new lines in a mix of plot and play, with the figure of the puppet-master relegated to an abstract cosmological concept instead of a physical presence hunched over the stage and pulling on literal strings. Nabokov described this distinctly Russian kind of cultural appropriation in an early essay, “Laughter and Dreams”:

The Russian soul is endowed with the power of breathing its own life into those various forms of Art, which it finds in other nations; so it happened that the French “cabaret” (a rendez-vous of poets, actors and artists), without losing anything of its lightness and brilliancy acquired in Russia a distinct national flavour. Folklore, songs and toys, were magically recalled to a new life, producing the effect of those lacquered curves and patches of rich colour which are associated in my mind with the first blue days of a Russian spring.¹²²

During his time in Berlin, Nabokov was involved with a number of Russian-language émigré theatre companies, both as playwright and occasionally an actor. One company was even named Lidiia Ryndina’s Balagan Theatre.¹²³ “Laughter and Dreams” was originally published in Berlin in 1923 alongside another essay titled “Painted Wood”. Both demonstrate how fascinated he was at the time by *balagan* theatre’s vivid interplay of intertwined-yet-misaligned realities:

Wooden toys and the dead heroes of Russian songs woke up, stretched themselves and lo! here they are again, laughing and dancing, glossy new. A man walking along the street in some great stone-grey town, would suddenly come across the name of their new home—“Russian Theatre-Cabaret”. And if he entered, there he would be, gaping at the whirling wonders of a foreign art. Wonders to him, not to us. We have grown tired of our playthings... We wink at each other behind the curtains, while the foreigner is taking in the delightful lie. Art is always a little slyish and Russian art particularly so.¹²⁴

¹²² Vladimir Nabokov, “Laughter and Dreams” (1923), in *Carrousel* (Aartswooud: Spectatorpers, 1987), p. 18.

¹²³ Frank, *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination*, p. 28.

¹²⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, “Painted Wood” (1923), in *Carrousel* (Aartswooud: Spectatorpers, 1987), pp. 23-24.

Nabokov's own work would prove to be every bit as "slyish" as his Silver Age predecessors'. He would continually make use of the foundational tension in *balagan* theatre between "the seeming autonomy of the performing object which seems to have a life of its own and the tight control of the puppeteer over the performing object."¹²⁵ This tension underpins much of Nabokov's play of worlds; his fictional worlds are structured like *balagans* whose boundaries extend everywhere and whose rules are in a constant state of flux. In Nabokov's hands, narrative landscape becomes a lively production, stitching familiar-seeming language and objects into a mocking mimicry of reality.

1.14 Duck-Rabbits, Bowstrings, Telescopes, Microscopes, and Embodied Instabilities

To step beyond dedicated Nabokov scholarship for a moment and link these ideas to more widely known aesthetics and philosophy, the ever-shifting details and landscapes of Nabokov's fictional *balagans* also bear a striking similarity to Ludwig Wittgenstein's mercurial figure of the duck-rabbit. Referring to a drawing which looks as much like a duck as a rabbit—usually perceived as either one or the other but not both at once—Wittgenstein describes the kind of perspectival oscillation Nabokov's fictional *balagans* stage unrelentingly. What intrigues Wittgenstein in a figure like the duck-rabbit is determining what triggers the transition in a subject's perceptions of its different states at different times, and what it is about the body's senses that makes the duck-rabbit shudder back and forth between them without ever being both at once.¹²⁶ Wittgenstein argues that this phenomenon effectively makes the object into "a chimera; a queerly shifting construction", whose shifting between competing

¹²⁵ Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, p. 132.

¹²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 195.

states, or “the flashing of an aspect”, becomes “half visual experience, half thought.”¹²⁷ Like the duck-rabbit, a simple figure in a Nabokov work (a person, for instance) can turn into another in an instant (perhaps a mannequin), without warning. The change seems to occur in the perceptions of an observer, either as experienced or as reported by our narrator—first- or third-person—or in the perceptions of the reader themselves, caught on some anomalous detail, “like a jagged fingernail caught in satin, the lining of Hell.”¹²⁸

This kind of shifting is a fundamental part of Nabokov’s style. A reader (or protagonist) can see a consistent story-world in one second, and an artificial weaving of fakery—props, automatons, torn backdrops, etc.—in the next. Senderovich explains a similar aspect of a folk riddle’s modal shifting:

In logical terms, the complementarity of quantum mechanics is a disjunctive type, while in the case of the folk riddle we face a conjunctive one. It is possible, in our case, to combine two complementary points of view within a framework that will give an uncompromised place to each. However, this uniting framework is not the sum of two constituent parts but can be metaphorically described as a kind of bifocal arrangement whereby each of two complementary views is open to each of two eyes with different power [sic] of focal adjustment, so to speak, one telescopic and the other microscopic.¹²⁹

Appel deploys a strikingly similar metaphor to describe perspectival shifting in Nabokov’s work, also touching on the kind of fascination with the senses that preoccupies Wittgenstein:

Radical and dizzying shifts in focus are created in the reader’s mind as he oscillates between a sense that he is by turns confronting characters in a novel and pieces in a game—as if a telescope were being spun 360 degrees on its axis, allowing one to look alternately through one end and then the other.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 196-197.

¹²⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), (New York: Vintage, 1990), Part 3, Chapter 8, Page 530. Hereafter cited in text.

¹²⁹ Senderovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle*, p. 38.

¹³⁰ Appel Jr., “Introduction”, pp. lxvi-lxvii.

This kind of flashing occurs in *Lolita*, when Humbert finally confronts and murders Quilty. Aspects of theatre, puppets, and the *balagan* all appear during that episode, seeming to shunt in and out of focus from moment to moment. When Humbert and Quilty fall to the ground wrestling over Humbert's pistol, the reader's perceptions flash between the graceless struggle of two literati, the generic fistfights in old Westerns, and a scene from a puppet-show:

In its published form, this book is being read, I assume, in the first years of 2000 A.D. (1935 plus eighty or ninety, live long, my love); and elderly readers will surely recall at this point the obligatory scene in the Westerns of their childhood. Our tussle, however, lacked the ox-stunning fisticuffs, the flying furniture. He and I were two large dummies, stuffed with dirty cotton and rags. It was a silent, soft, formless tussle on the part of two literati, one of whom was utterly disorganized by a drug while the other was handicapped by a heart condition and too much gin. When at last I had possessed myself of my precious weapon, and the scenario writer had been reinstated in his low chair, both of us were panting as the cowman and the sheepman never do after their battle.¹³¹

Perhaps even more intriguing is when, after shooting his arch-rival innumerable times and passing through Quilty's unsettlingly inhuman slideshow of exaggerated voices, emotions, and pop-culture references, jerking from one to the other with each bullet ("capsules wherein a heady elixir danced"),¹³² Humbert experiences a vivid waking-dream. Instead of Quilty bleeding on the carpet in front of him, Humbert sees Charlotte:

I may have lost contact with reality for a second or two [...] a kind of momentary shift occurred as if I were in the connubial bedroom, and Charlotte were sick in bed. Quilty was a very sick man. I held one of his slippers instead of the pistol—I was sitting on the pistol. Then I made myself a little more comfortable in the chair near the bed, and consulted my wrist watch.¹³³

¹³¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita* (1970), ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 299.

¹³² Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 303.

¹³³ Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 304.

It is not difficult to see how this kind of “momentary shift” recalls Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbits, and the aesthetic instability of *balagan* theatre.

Though the invocation would undoubtedly have enraged Nabokov, Senderovich invokes Freud’s theory of the joke as a companion to this kind of shifting in folk riddles. In particular, he focuses on Freud’s description of a joke as presenting a “formation of substitutes”, playing with “*manifest* and *latent* levels of content”. Senderovich identifies Freud’s “favourite subject studied under many guises” as a kind of symbol, or symbolic structure, which functions as a “double signification” which “at the same time expresses and conceals certain content.”¹³⁴ Senderovich links Freud’s thinking here to Viktor Shklovsky and his theory of *ostranenie* (“defamiliarisation” and/or “estrangement”). Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* functions as “a fundamental artistic device aimed at presenting well known subjects in a new, odd light thus making them unfamiliar and evoking fresh interest and curiosity.” When this manifests through prose—and, presumably, an image like Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit—it produces “an unfamiliar an [sic] enigmatic image which must be figured out.”¹³⁵

In his later work *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*, Shklovsky offers an interesting tweak to his writing about *ostranenie*. The bowstring becomes an extended metaphor-cum-theory, with a bow representing a kind of making-strange machine. A bow is built on, and into, a taut, balanced tension between collapse and cohesion, held in the shape of being bent *out* of shape. Shklovsky takes it, and the book’s title, from Heraclitus: “They do not understand how that which differs from itself is in agreement: harmony consists of opposing tension, like that of the bow and the lyre.”¹³⁶ Though it seems like a simple point, Shklovsky

¹³⁴ Senderovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle*, p. 63. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁵ Senderovich, *The Riddle of the Riddle*, p. 66.

¹³⁶ Shushan Avagyan, “Translator’s Preface”, in Viktor Shklovsky, *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar* (1970), trans. Shushan Avagyan (Champaign, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2011), p. x.

emphasises that estrangement is about making something strange out of something usually taken for granted—a straight piece of wood is bent into a new shape when it becomes part of a bow. Using language in such a way as to make something unfamiliar from something familiar, or dissimilar from the similar, is like a bow because it “uses the system as part of its new message without destroying the entire system.”¹³⁷

Shklovsky’s bowstring is the closest theory-based expression I have come across to date of the kind of embodied instability that courses through every level of Nabokov’s aesthetic project. Whether we are looking at his fiction or epitexts, Nabokov renders everything strange—even interpretation itself.

1.15 *Potustoronnost’* as a Structural Principle

It is worth spending some more time on Nabokov’s *potustoronnost’* theme at this point, particularly as it relates to matters of structure and authority in his works. Alexandrov’s framing of an either/or choice between reading the *potustoronnost’* theme solely through a metaphysical or a metafictional lens—one which obscures shades of one from the other in the manner Alexandrov’s critical narrative suggests—is clearly flawed. D. Barton Johnson proposed a general “two world” model for reading Nabokov, one which can and probably ought to be read in light of both takes on *potustoronnost’* at once:

Much of Nabokov’s fiction displays an underlying “two world” cosmology. Both worlds are imaginary but one is relatively like our own, while the other, often patently fantastic, is an anti-world. Either may be the scene of the novel’s action, but the other is never far away. Signs and portents of the other world leak through, influencing, and sometimes controlling, the events of the novel’s “primary” world.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar* (1970), trans. Shushan Avagyan (Champaign, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2011), p. 57.

¹³⁸ D. Barton Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), p. 155.

Whether Nabokov is writing about the world of the living interacting with the world of the dead in a literal sense (via ghosts, messages from the dead, mysterious premonitions), or whether his concerns are more metafictional in any particular example from one of his texts, Johnson's "two world" model is worth keeping in mind regarding *potustoronnost'*. Although Johnson has occasionally been criticised for limiting his cosmology to two worlds instead of more—exactly how many more is not always specified—his formulation remains robust. The kind of leaking between worlds he draws attention to here plays an important role in *Ada*; at times quite literally, as we will see in the dynamic between Terra and Antiterra in my next chapter

Alexandrov was not the first critic to pay attention to *potustoronnost'* in Nabokov. As accomplished as his book is in its own right—and it is still often the first port of call for students and scholars of Nabokov seeking to encounter his "otherworld"—Alexandrov is not as careful as some of his predecessors to explore why taking *potustoronnost'* too literally (that is, spiritually) might be a mistake. By somewhat misleadingly framing the scholarly conversation as a contest between metaphysics and "metaliterariness", Alexandrov overlooks some of his texts' most interesting nuances. Those aspects of *potustoronnost'* work in concert, and those critics who pay attention to both consistently produce more interesting work. Even W. W. Rowe, who has "served as a tempting whipping boy for Nabokovians eager to tar a reading as an *over-reading*"¹³⁹ ever since Nabokov publically repudiated him in "Rowe's Symbols", managed to spot the multifacetedness of Nabokov's *potustoronnost'*. Taking his cue from one of the discarded notes from *Pale Fire*'s composition process which Nabokov shares in *Strong Opinions*—"Time without consciousness—lower animal world; time with consciousness—

¹³⁹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 21.

man; consciousness without time—some still higher state”)¹⁴⁰—Rowe demonstrates more thoughtfulness than he is usually given credit for:

The author, as a Creator who can turn backwards and forwards at will the file cards upon which he composes, similarly transcends the time of his unsuspecting characters’ world. In this sense, the author’s own time can be compared to his characters’ hereafter.¹⁴¹

A fictive agent’s ability to manipulate and/or traverse narrative-time becomes an important marker of *potustoronnost’* for Rowe; even Nabokov’s scholarship’s most notorious “ghost-hunter” recognises the importance of the metaliterary to *potustoronnost’*.

Rowe was followed by Pekka Tammi, who produced what is still perhaps the most considered account of how intermeshed the metaphysical and metafictional are in Nabokov’s conception of *potustoronnost’* in *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics*, appearing six years before Alexandrov’s book:

It [*potustoronnost’*] is not to be taken in an altogether literal sense. In all its thematic intricacy the Nabokovian production is hardly susceptible of a reading taking its cue from any of the conventionally “otherworldly” issues: “the existence of God”, the possibility of “life after death”, “reincarnation”, or other eschatological matters. Certainly it is not to be reduced to a straightforward commentary on any sort of “*poltergeist*” phenomena. On the other hand, while the concept of “another world” can undoubtedly be traced back to a variety of former poetic systems (there is a ready-made analogy with Russian Symbolist poetics), one does not believe that literary-historical comparisons as such will serve to explain the more distinctive occurrences of the theme in its Nabokovian context.¹⁴²

While acknowledging Véra’s (now-famous, then relatively recent) comments on the subject, Tammi also refers his reader to a far less famous (though no less important) passage from

¹⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 30.

¹⁴¹ W. W. Rowe, *Nabokov’s Spectral Dimension* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), p. 108.

¹⁴² Pekka Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics: A Narratological Analysis* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1985), pp. 23-24.

Nabokov's obituary for Vladislav Khodasevich from 1939. Nabokov's words here stand apart from Véra's because they reflect directly on the inseparability of *potustoronnost'* from matters of art and composition:

Be it as it may, all is finished now: the bequeathed gold shines on a shelf in full view of the future, whilst the goldminer has left for the region from where, perhaps, a faint something reaches the ears of good poets, penetrating our being with the beyond's fresh breath, and conferring upon art that mystery which more than anything characterizes its essence.¹⁴³

Taking his cue from Nabokov here, Tammi concludes that “the theme of *potustoronnost'*, accurately pointed out by the author's widow, can be understood also as a logical extension of the other dominant concerns in the Nabokovian canon”. In doing so, Tammi recuperates the aesthetic aspects of the otherworld theme from the shadow of the more literal/metaphysical readings. He is more interested in how the *potustoronnost'* theme shapes the narrative structure of Nabokov's works, in which “the quest for ‘another world’ spirals back to the problem of unity in the artistic structure.”¹⁴⁴ Tammi eventually reviewed Alexandrov's book for *The Russian Review*, and while his overall tone is collegial, he reminds us of the nuances Alexandrov's book somewhat obscures. While praising Alexandrov for his “very strong readings of particular Nabokov works”, Tammi points out that “the argument setting the metaliterary readings against the metaphysical is somewhat skewed”, and that the book is at its strongest when “Alexandrov does not discuss just metaphysical issues.” He also notes that the book “does not supply a wholly novel recipe for reading Nabokov,” since, as his own work went to great efforts to draw out, Véra's comments about the importance of *potustoronnost'* had not been nearly as neglected or bungled as either Alexandrov or Dmitri Nabokov

¹⁴³ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 227.

¹⁴⁴ Pekka, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics*, pp. 24-25.

indicated.¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, when read alongside Alexandrov, Tammi offers a valuable recuperation of the kind of “metaliterariness” from which Alexandrov is so keen to distance himself. Any fresh reading of Nabokov’s *potustoronnost’* will benefit from the best insights of both perspectives.

¹⁴⁵ Pekka Tammi, Review of *Nabokov's Otherworld* by Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Russian Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (October 1992): p. 583.

Chapter Two

General Matters of *Ada's* Storyworld

2.1 Terra and Antiterra

Despite Nabokov's well-documented distaste for the genre, *Ada's* setting is indelibly science fictional.¹⁴⁶ The novel takes place on a fictional planet called Antiterra, which shares many common features with our world both culturally and geographically. Still, there are strange variations between Earth and Antiterra. Rather than being separate landmasses divided "with tangible water and ice", Antiterra's America and Russia are instead "poetical" separations within a single united country, "Amerirussia" (1. 3. 18). The names and works of famous artists, writers, and historical figures differ somewhat, with Osberg standing in for Borges, Froid for Freud, and even Vivian Darkbloom, anagrammatically, for Nabokov himself. Antiterra also has a shadowy counterpart called Terra, which seems to correspond even more closely to Earth than Antiterra, specifically Earth at the time *Ada* was written. The very existence of Terra is hotly disputed on Antiterra, being variously relegated to the regions of fiction, speculative science, and "terrology (then a branch of psychiatry)", a discipline whose picture of Terra is based almost entirely on the testimony of mentally-ill patients incarcerated in sanatoriums:

Sick minds identified the notion of a Terra planet with that of another world and this "Other World" got confused not only with the "Next World" but with the Real World in us and beyond us. (1. 3. 20)

¹⁴⁶ "I loathe popular pulp, I loathe go-go gangs, I loathe jungle music, I loathe science fiction with its gals and goons, suspense and suspensories." Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 117.

Out of this, somehow, an imperfect yet recognisable picture of Terra manages to concatenate. Particularly revealing is “a more complicated and even more preposterous discrepancy” than the America/Russia problem, this one regarding time:

But (even more absurdly), if, in Terrestrial spatial terms, the Amerussia of Abraham Milton was split into its components, with tangible water and ice separating the political, rather than poetical, notions of “America” and “Russia,” a more complicated and even more preposterous discrepancy arose in regard to time—not only because the history of each part of the amalgam did not quite match the history of each counterpart in its discrete condition, but because a gap of up to a hundred years one way or another existed between the two earths; a gap marked by a bizarre confusion of directional signs at the crossroads of passing time with not all the no-longers of one world corresponding to the not-yets of the other. (1. 3. 18)

Time is not the only way in which Antiterra, Terra, and Earth differ. Electricity is illegal on Antiterra; even mentioning it is taboo. This is because of the “L disaster”, an event whose background and specifics remain veiled and mysterious throughout the novel. Our narrator assumes such an intimate familiarity with Antiterranean history among his readers that he never takes the time to explain the L disaster.

2.2 Is Antiterra Real or a Delusion?

Before talking more specifically about the L disaster, however, it is worth taking a moment to acknowledge the ongoing debate among Nabokov scholars about whether Terra and Antiterra are “real” places within *Ada*’s narrative landscape, or whether they are solely the invention of Van and/or Ada. Bobbie Ann Mason’s position in *Nabokov’s Garden: A Guide to Ada*, is unambiguously in favour of Van having semi-deliberately hallucinated Terra and Antiterra. In her reading, Van really lives on Earth:

Van Veen, the narrator of the novel—who is obsessed with his sister Ada and wants to re-create in his chronicle the Ardis, or paradise, of his youth with her—

is given to exaggeration, as well as self-delusion, romanticizing, and (both conscious and unconscious) distortion and manipulation of memory. He is so unable to face the real world head-on that he goes so far as to fantasize that his story did not take place on the planet Earth, where human beings live and die, but on Antiterra, subtitled Démonia, a hell which he argues he must escape through the private, self-reflecting act of incest: a delicious and erotic flight from the deadly claims of the world around him. Van, I suggest, invents Antiterra to justify his own departure from reality: for him Démonia is the planet ruled by his father Demon and others of his ilk (tabooists with conflicting sets of standards). If the world is such a place, then, Van congratulates himself on trying to construct a more nearly perfect world: his private Ardis, or Eden. And this act of escape from Antiterra is, in effect, Van would argue, an escape to Terra—to earth, to nature, and to a normalized geography.¹⁴⁷

Despite her uncompromising position regarding Antiterra's unreality, Mason never quite presents enough convincing evidence; she simply restates her position when she ought to be proving it. Her argument takes as already-true precisely that which it ought to set out to prove, with a reading that sees the novel's more difficult, alien, and distinctive characteristics weave together at the end into a straight-forwardly didactic narrative. Nabokov's novel offers none of the certainty she so confidently extracts from it. At the very least, there is little textual evidence to back up her assertion that Van himself would see an escape from Antiterra as an escape to Terra.

Though he ends up drawing broadly similar conclusions to Mason, Charles Nicol's argument is a little more nuanced, and he takes more of the text's unique qualities into account. Nicol argues that Antiterra is "a world of two" for which "Van and Ada have re-created the past without any referents outside their own memories and perceptions." In his reading, which echoes Mason, Van and Ada are co-creators of the imaginary Antiterra according to Nicol, and the medium for their make-believe is their (semi-)co-authored memoir: "This re-created world is called both Antiterra and Démonia in the novel, but it might also be called Vaniada or Veen-

¹⁴⁷ Bobbie Ann Mason, *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974), p. 12.

us, or even Water-world”. He thinks that “the key technological difference between Terra and Antiterra” is the telephone, which on Antiterra is replaced by the water-powered dorophone, and that this discrepancy is “simply a matter of the characters’ solipsistic perception.”¹⁴⁸ Nicol pins this reading to the importance of an episode late in Part Four, when Van, now 52 years old, hears Ada’s voice over a phone; it manages to aurally recapture his ideal, eternally young Ada: “Goldenly, youthfully, it bubbled with all the melodious characteristics he knew” (4. 1. 555). Without dismissing the episode’s significance, Nicol’s analysis of the telephone/dorophone thematic constellation has blind spots which compromise his argument that Antiterra only exists in Van and Ada’s “solipsistic perception.”

There is a necessary and irreducible ambiguity about Terra and Antiterra in the novel that recalls the embodied instability of Shklovsky’s bowstring. Although Van’s possible invention of Antiterra is the preoccupation of many Nabokovians, the novel steadfastly resists closure about whether Terra is real from Antiterra’s vantage point. Antiterra’s “reality” is maintained for most of the novel, and is so important to the complex history and lore of our fictional world that unambiguously denouncing it as a deluded invention is not so much a matter of throwing out a baby with its bathwater, but of emptying out an entire ocean and everything in it. One of the most substantial losses would be the enigmatic subplot regarding the unusual ways the two worlds, seemingly invisible to one another, manage to communicate, and the powerful consequences of their communication. Terra and Antiterra offer further proof of the ubiquity of a “two world” structure to the “aesthetic cosmology” of Nabokov’s fictional worlds.¹⁴⁹ Johnson’s commentary regarding how the two worlds in a Nabokov novel can

¹⁴⁸ Charles Nicol, “Buzzwords and Dorophonemes: How Words Proliferate and Things Decay in *Ada*”, in *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. Gavriel Shapiro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 95.

¹⁴⁹ Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, p. 1.

interact and communicate with each other is hugely important for *Ada*, since he deals with both structural and metaphysical concerns:

His novels [...] often contain two fictional worlds—one primary and one secondary. Although the two worlds are separated by some fundamental boundary, usually death or insanity, they interact in mysterious ways. Nabokov's ghosts form one of the secret patterns that links the two fictive worlds.¹⁵⁰

The details surrounding Terra and Antiterra's interactions are crucial, and it forms the backbone of a largely concealed subplot which is among the novel's most important, but least commented-upon.

2.3 The L disaster

Despite the text's deliberate vagueness on the subject, the circumstances surrounding the L disaster form an incredibly rich vein for analysis. The lack of agreement among the scholarly community on precisely what the L disaster is can perhaps be attributed to *Ada*'s sporadic and fleeting disclosure of the event's details. Still, more of its specifics can be reconstructed than one might expect, especially if one synthesises some of the "best guesses" of existing *Ada* scholarship. There has been plenty of critical speculation, with a popular reading being that the L stands for Lucette.¹⁵¹ As tempting as this association is—and there is certainly a lot of Lucette threaded through the L disaster motif—it would be out of narrative chronological step for Lucette to be the disaster's sole progenitor. The L disaster is first mentioned early, in the chapter introducing Aqua. Nabokov establishes strong associative links

¹⁵⁰ Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, p. 156.

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Marijeta Bozovic: "One might even conjecture that the Veens' anguish and guilt over Lucette prompts them to invent the L disaster". Marijeta Bozovic, *Nabokov's Canon: From Onegin to Ada* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 149.

between Aqua and the L disaster, and we also learn conclusively that the L disaster had already happened by the time Aqua kills herself, long before Lucette's own suicide. As unusual as timeflow is in *Ada*, it would still be a stretch to imagine a disastrous event in Antiterra's history being named for Lucette's suicide if it was already in the common lexicon at least two decades beforehand.

Chronology aside, however, the question remains: what is the L disaster? Somewhat surprisingly, the most interesting and useful proposal comes not from a prolific Nabokovian, but from Science Fiction scholarship. In his article about *Ada* for *Science Fiction Studies*, Roy Arthur Swanson turns to the study of astronomy and interstellar communication for his unique reading of the L disaster. He explains that, at the time of *Ada*'s composition, the "L factor" was a term used by astronomers to describe "modern civilization's ability to extend communication through galactic space."¹⁵² Rather than a measure of time in which they are able to project a signal, "L" describes the short window of time in which humanity would hypothetically retain the ability to communicate with other galactic civilisations before either: 1) the level of technological advancement needed to successfully communicate with another civilisation precipitates our own extinction; 2) that same level of advancement, if it does not kill everyone, alters humanity's collective consciousness and priorities such that we lose interest in communicating with other civilisations.¹⁵³ Regarding *Ada*, Swanson proposes that the L disaster, and the resulting ban on electricity, has something to do with communication between Terra and Antiterra. As innocuous as his suggestion may initially seem, it effectively refreshes the conversation on the L disaster. Swanson's application of philosophical speculation on

¹⁵² Roy Arthur Swanson, "Ada as Science Fiction", *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 1975): p. 85.

¹⁵³ Swanson, "Ada as Science Fiction", pp. 85-86.

extraterrestrial contact to the study of *Ada* fills a void from which Nabokovians have generally shied.

The actual details of first contact between Terra and Antiterra are never overtly discussed in the novel, with Van explaining that “they are too well known historically, and too obscene spiritually” for him to waste his time covering them. Still, there are plenty of asides and parenthetical disclosures in his narration revealing enough of the fundamentals to reconstruct a basic narrative. Contact between the two worlds was both accidental and revelatory, since the mysterious events of the L disaster “had the singular effect of both causing and cursing the notion of ‘Terra’” (1. 3. 17). The contact could have “caused” Terra in the sense of *discovering* it, though of course the wording is intentionally ambiguous. While we do not get much of an idea of the duration, content, or effects of contact, Van does occasionally slip details about its aftermath into his narration. Specifically, it brought about the “great anti-L years of reactionary delusion” during which electricity and electrical devices were banned and replaced with water-powered equivalents (1. 3. 17). Throughout the novel we encounter several unusually named telephone replacements. The most commonly used is the “dorophone”, which is explicitly named four times (1. 2. 16), (1. 29. 179), (1. 31. 195), (1. 38. 260), but we also find variations in “hydrodynamic telephones” (1. 3. 23), “clepsydrophone” (1. 2. 14), “campophone” (2. 5. 376), “polliphone” (2. 5. 376), and even a “magnetic telephone” (1. 13. 83). All but the last are powered by networks of water-coursing pipes woven around and between buildings, which gurgle and swell anytime there is a call. The water pipes power other things as well, including lamps, film projectors, and telegraph machines called “hydrograms” (1. 29. 178), but it is in the context of the telephone that they exert the most force on the rest of the novel. The network of water-flow is an important part of the novel’s pivotal scene—the

death of Lucette Veen. Before this, however, we need to turn to another kind of covert aquatic presence in *Ada*, that of Aqua Veen, Van's "mother".¹⁵⁴

Already mentally-ill when she miscarried, Aqua nevertheless believes Van—the secret lovechild of her husband Demon and her sister Maria, substituted for the stillborn child she lost—to be hers, right up until her suicide (though she does suspect foul play a few times throughout her illness). Aqua's mental illness is overtly positioned on a timeline against Terra and Antiterra's first contact, as is a more general trend in similar afflictions among other Antiterrans:

Chronologically, the initial stage of her mental illness coincided with the first decade of the great Revelation, and although she might have found just as easily another theme for her delusion, statistics show that the Great, and to some Intolerable, Revelation caused more insanity in the world than even an over-preoccupation with religion had in medieval times. [...] Sick minds identified the notion of a Terra planet with that of another world and this "Other World" got confused not only with the "Next World" but with the Real World in us and beyond us. (1. 3. 20)

This passage introduces one of the most important aspects of the Terra/Antiterra dynamic: in the wake of the L disaster, Terra's very existence is disavowed. The years following Terra's discovery or "creation"—the first decade of which lines up with the onset of Aqua's illness—see a rise in two different types of delusion. First, in a combination of state- and self-censorship, Antiterrans react to the L disaster with "reactionary delusion" (1. 3. 17), policing their own memories, perceptions, and imaginations to filter out all traces of Terra. The obvious

¹⁵⁴ I put "mother" in scare-quotes with reason. Although Van is raised believing Aqua is his mother, through a tangled web of infidelity, mental illness, a miscarriage, and a post-birth substitution perpetuated by Demon and Marina (Van's concealed biological mother), Aqua is Van's aunt. Since Ada herself is also the product of Marina's long-term affair with Demon—and not his brother, her legal father Dan—Van is full-siblings with the titular Ada. This leaves Lucette, the younger redheaded Veen child, as the only legitimate offspring of Marina and Dan's relatively passionless marriage. Even though she and Ada are raised as sisters, they turn out to be half-siblings, sharing only a mother by blood. This means that Van is Lucette's half-brother rather than her cousin; none of which is covered by the official Veen family tree with which Nabokov opens the novel.

implication is that, for it to be retroactively labeled a “disaster”, whatever knowledge came about through contact with Terra must have been shocking and traumatic. Post-contact, the official narrative dictates that Terra is both false *and* illegal at once, enforcing a deliberate cognitive dissonance. The “reactionary delusion” of the general population is a direct consequence of this state-mandated dissonance. The narrative of contact between Terra and Antiterra quietly develops in concert with its own censorship as the novel progresses. Van eventually writes a novel called *Letters From Terra*, whose rendering of Terra is pieced together “from jagged bits filched from [the] deranged brains” (2. 2. 345) of his patients. It is released to very little fanfare, selling only six copies worldwide in its first year on the market and garnering two (disappointing) reviews. Van suggests that its failure has as much to do with its subject-matter as its quality: “Statistically speaking, no reviews could have been expected, given the unorthodox circumstances in which poor Terra’s correspondence had been handled” (2. 2. 343).

The other, less common, less socially acceptable type of delusion manifests only in those who are considered insane by Antiterra’s establishment. Whether these patients are labelled insane because they are indeed insane, or because they refuse or are unable to adapt to state-mandated cognitive dissonance remains ambiguous. Ironically, their “insanity” seems to be more “true” than the rest of the population’s “collective delusion”, since mental patients like Aqua are still in contact with Terra (whose existence the state all but confirms *because* of their Orwellian thought-policing). The testimony of the “deranged” becomes more reliable, and certainly more valuable, than their apparently more rational counterparts. Viewed from this angle, Aqua becomes an even more sympathetic and tragic figure, since it appears likely that her “sick” mind is hardly sick at all, or at least not in quite the way her doctors insist. The visions she has of Terra see her involuntarily superimpose that other world over her

surroundings on Antiterra, as well as conflate Terra with the “Other World” of an afterlife. Despite first appearances, her nightmarish visions are unlikely to be the sole product of her own psychoses; they may well result from a genuine link between the two worlds, as flashes of Terra are picked up by the altered senses of her “sick” mind. With official channels of communication between the two worlds discontinued and blocked up by means of a state-imposed ban of electricity (most likely to prevent further contact), the “messages” received by mental patients are an unanticipated second route keeping them connected. There is some special, hidden capacity in Antiterra’s mental patients which allows them to perceive what others do not. Van draws heavily on their testimonies—and his own—while writing *Letters From Terra*, compiling them “with such diligence and skill from extrasensorial sources and manic dreams” (5. 5. 581).

The original medium of communication, the “unmentionable magnetic power” of electricity has been “denounced by evil lawmakers” (1. 3. 21). Nevertheless, Aqua’s experiences—and, indeed, even Van’s own ever-increasing aquatic sensitivity, which unfolds across the span of his memoir and its composition—make it clear that there is still an open channel between the two worlds leaking from one to the other through the water currents that replaced it.¹⁵⁵ Fittingly, for Aqua these illicit messages from Terra are buried in her namesake’s burbling sounds. At some point during her various stints in sanatoriums throughout her life, Aqua develops “a morbid sensitivity to the language of tap water”. She notices at first that the sounds of flowing water start to include replays of recent conversations—mostly interactions between doctors, nurses, interns, and other patients—some for which she was

¹⁵⁵ This idea first occurred to me while reading David Field, “Fluid Worlds: Lem’s *Solaris* and Nabokov’s *Ada*”, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (November 1986): pp. 329-344. Though there is nothing in particular in that article that overtly makes the same connection, Field’s general reading of the centrality of water to Antiterra—and his inspired comparison of Nabokov’s science fictional world to that in Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1961, Eng. 1970)—was such an important spark of inspiration for this chapter it would be remiss of me not to mention him.

present and some not (1. 3. 22). The voices she hears are so strong and clear, in fact, that for a while she believes she has “accidentally hit upon such a simple method of recording and transmitting speech,” one seemingly more developed and efficient than early iterations of “very expensive hydrodynamic telephones and other miserable gadgets that were to replace those that had gone *k chertyam sobach'im* (Russian ‘to the devil’) with the banning of an unmentionable ‘lammer.’” Though at first she finds the messages “eager and mocking but really quite harmless”, even considering the potential of harnessing her discovery into a new and better kind of water-phone, it is not long before Aqua’s senses are overwhelmed by the oppressive flow of “the rhythmically perfect, but verbally rather blurred volubility of faucets”, which “began to acquire too much pertinent sense” (1. 3. 23). Van reports that the water “spoke” to her, “forcibly and expressively,” as, over time, “the burbly flowlets grew more and more ambitious and odious,” and that Aqua eventually stops using tap water completely to try and escape its overpowering “voice” (1. 3. 24).¹⁵⁶

In his seminar on anxiety, Jacques Lacan gives a helpful and pithy definition of a symptom as “a leaking tap.”¹⁵⁷ This is especially true (and literal) in Aqua’s case, and even when she stops using tap water, the deafening flow of too-much-information returns with a vengeance, seeping imperceptibly into other parts of her inhabited space. She sees nightmarish visions and “excruciations” manifest in other physical objects:

Man-made objects lost their significance or grew monstrous connotations; clothes hangers were really the shoulders of decapitated Tellurians, the folds of

¹⁵⁶ This episode is sometimes misread as proof that Aqua invented Antiterra’s water-powered dorophones herself, or that her sensitivity to tap-water led her to develop another more efficient method for transmitting speech through water which was actually adopted by Antiterrans lawmakers (see Swanson, “*Ada* as Science Fiction”, p. 85). A more careful reading of the passages in question makes it very clear that neither gloss is accurate. Aqua only *hopes* that she has inadvertently discovered an exciting new method of telecommunication, but her optimism is short-lived. The text contains no evidence that Aqua’s “findings” were ever shared with Antiterra’s lawmakers, much less actually adopted.

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan—Book X*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 321.

a blanket she had kicked off her bed looked back at her mournfully with a stye on one drooping eyelid and dreary reproof in the limp twist of a livid lip.
(1. 3. 24)

At this point Van's descriptions of Aqua's discomfort grow more graphic and disturbing: "the anguish increased to unendurable massivity and nightmare dimensions, making her scream and vomit" (1. 3. 25). Her senses are assaulted by the Berlioz-like dance between "mental panic and physical pain", which in Aqua's tortured condition have "joined black-ruby hands, one making her pray for sanity, the other, plead for death" (1. 3. 24). This motif of a delirious, dizzying dance between dialectically opposed forces locked in a kind of *symphonie fantastique* of the senses is an important one. Much later in the novel, Van also experiences a rupture in his sensory perceptions, curiously similar in its description: "Fantasy raced fact in never-ending rivalry and girl giggles" (3. 8. 531). It is also worth noting that the passage sees "pain and panic, like a pair of children in a boisterous game" enact a grotesque mirroring of Van and Ada's incest, emitting "one last shriek of laughter and [running] away to manipulate each other behind a bush as in Count Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*" (1. 3. 25). That aside, the anguish caused by this constant sensory overload eventually drives Aqua to take her own life, leaving behind a cryptic suicide note: "My sister's sister who *teper' iz ada* ('now is out of hell')" (1. 3. 29), suggesting that she believed that after death she would pass from the false "hell" of Antiterra into the paradisiacal otherworld of Terra. The note also implies that Nabokov's chosen title for this novel (only a few chapters in at this point) is meant to signify more than just Ada herself, but also *ada*, the Russian for Hell, and its manifestation in the overpowering, unendurable throng of sensory information to which Aqua is subjected. Antiterra has become increasingly unreal for Aqua, and the aquatic messages from Terra more and more legitimate, so she decides to "escape" the captivity of Antiterra's false prison by killing herself and passing into the "Next World". In light of what we have uncovered about

the role of water in *Ada*, Johnson's "two world" model for reading Nabokov seems even more relevant now, especially when he talks about "leaks" between worlds:

Both worlds are imaginary but one is relatively like our own, while the other, often patently fantastic, is an anti-world. Either may be the scene of the novel's action, but the other is never far away. Signs and portents of the other world leak through, influencing, and sometimes controlling, the events of the novel's "primary" world.¹⁵⁸

Aqua's ability to perceive the superimposed worlds of Terra and Antiterra lands her in a terrible kind of solitude from which suicide seems the only escape. So is *Ada*, on some important though half-concealed level, a novel about Van coming to see something like what Aqua saw, and, eventually, sharing her horrible solitude? A good way to explore these open questions is to trace the novel's water motifs, since water becomes as important and revealing for Van as for Aqua, exerting an omnipresent pull on his memoir's narrative and style. All manner of instabilities, ambiguities, and ambivalences undergird much of the novel's structure and composition.

2.4 *Ada's* "Flowing" Style

Time flows as strangely as water in *Ada*; so too does Van's writing style. In a television interview conducted four years before *Ada's* publication, Nabokov shared index cards from his work-in-progress (then entitled *The Texture of Time*). Of *Ada's* ongoing composition, he confessed:

It's very, very difficult to write. I find the more I speak about it, the vaguer it gets. The difficulty about it is that I have to devise an essay, a scholarly-looking essay, on time, and then gradually turn it into the story I have in mind. The metaphors start to live. The metaphors gradually turn into the story because it's very difficult to speak about time without using similes or metaphors. And my

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, p. 155.

purpose is to have those metaphors breed. To form a story of their own, gradually, and then again to fall apart, and it will all end in this rather dry, though serious and well-meant, essay on time. It's proved so difficult I really don't know what to do about it.¹⁵⁹

The index cards themselves are now kept in a collection of unpublished material from the Nabokov archive in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection. Marina Grishakova offers helpful snippets and quotations of them in her book *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction*, with Nabokov's *Notes for Texture of Time (1957-1968)* being particularly revealing. As relayed by Grishakova, this archival text is made up of "excerpts from different sources written on index cards and accompanied by Nabokov's own comments."¹⁶⁰ One of the key sources Nabokov lists here is "G. Whitrow's *The Natural Philosophy of Time* (1961)", from which he copied the following excerpt on a separate card. It includes a paraphrased image Whitrow borrowed from Henri Piéron's *The Sensations: Their Functions, Processes and Mechanisms*, which seems to have piqued Nabokov's interest:

[...] specious present: may last a few seconds—seldom more than five; it has been defined (by Piéron) as a series of successive events retained in an act of unified comprehension "like water in the hollow of the land".¹⁶¹

Nabokov's own note below the passage he has copied out simply reads: "Find another metaphor". In the Whitrow/Piéron passage, the image of a small nook or hollow filled with water is made into a metaphor for any cluster of "unified comprehension".¹⁶² In other words,

¹⁵⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, "USA: The Novel—Vladimir Nabokov", interview by Robert Hughes, in *Conversations With Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Robert Golla (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), p. 98. The original filmed interview is also available online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3fsSL4Bw9w.

¹⁶⁰ Marina Grishakova, *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2012), p. 78.

¹⁶¹ Grishakova, *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction*, p. 79.

¹⁶² Though he has put the passage in quotation marks, Nabokov seems to have misquoted, or perhaps compressed, Whitrow slightly in his notes—which is to be expected in a private document. It is also worth noting that Whitrow's image is of water in the hollow of a "hand" rather than the "land". Without having seen Nabokov's handwritten notes myself, it is difficult to judge whether Nabokov has indeed written "land" instead

the “specious present” becomes a small chunk of time in which a subject is overcome by a cluster of accumulated sensory data: a short but potent reverie. Despite his hastily scribbled marginal note, the kind of metaphor Nabokov eventually employed in *Ada* still bears much in common with the image from Whitrow/Piéron. However, where Grishakova is more focused on the Sisyphean task of making sense out of Van’s philosophy of time, honing in on the image of a small hollow, I am far more interested in the water that is supposed to fill it, and how the many and varied effects of its flow form one of the novel’s most neglected subplots. *Ada*’s aquatic undercurrents are not just described by its style: they shape and direct it.

Laci Mattison argues that *Speak, Memory* already saw Nabokov equate the passage of time, specifically the Bergsonian concept *durée*, with flowing water. The example she cites is from that book’s opening chapter, in which Nabokov recounts a Proustian moment of involuntary realisation, one innocuously triggered by learning the respective ages of his mother and father (thirty-three and twenty-seven, at the time):

I was given a tremendously invigorating shock. As if subjected to a second baptism [...] I felt myself plunge abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time. One shared it—just as excited bathers share shining seawater—with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time’s common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies could perceive.¹⁶³

of “hand”, or if Grishakova has simply misread his handwriting. In any case, Whitrow’s original text is as follows: “Although [William] James spoke of its permanence of quality, he realized that the mental present is not an interval of fixed duration, but it a variable stretch of time with its content perceived as having one part earlier and another part later. The term ‘specious present’ as used by psychologists is unfortunately somewhat ambiguous. In its widest sense it can be regarded as signifying a duration of temporal experience compatible with a certain perspective unification. In a more restricted sense it may be confined to an interval of time during which events are not recognized as being earlier or later but are confused in an apparent simultaneity. James maintained that in its wisest sense, the mental (or specious) present can last as long as a minute, but Piéron places at about five or six seconds the limit of time during which a series of successive events can be retained, ‘like water in the hollow of a hand’, in an act of unified comprehension.” G. J. Whitrow, *The Natural Philosophy of Time* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1961), pp. 79-80.

¹⁶³ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 11.

Later in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov relates a story he heard from his mother about his great-aunt Pasha's final words: "That's very interesting. Now I understand. Everything is water, *vsyo-voda*."¹⁶⁴ Leona Toker pushes Aunt Pasha one step further, suggesting that she "did not have a way with words", and possibly meant to say *vse-voda* instead: "everything flows".¹⁶⁵ This reading is rendered a little dubious by Nabokov's prior description of Pasha as "a very learned, very kind, very elegant" lady (who nevertheless somehow managed to move a frustrated Anton Chekhov to an "incredibly coarse outburst" over some unspecified disagreement at a dinner-party).¹⁶⁶ Given her education, too, it is certainly plausible Aunt Pasha would have been aware of Heraclitus' famous aphorism πάντα ῥεῖ ("everything flows")—if she had wanted to say that, she would have.¹⁶⁷ Mattison is nevertheless correct to argue that "the water metaphor established here runs throughout *Speak, Memory*."¹⁶⁸ Nabokov lets a similar water metaphor direct the flow of *Ada*, a novel which both echoes and subtly twists the sensibilities he espoused in his autobiography. Yet Van, in many ways a warped version of his author, does not possess the stylistic and thematic control to keep his aquatic motifs as delicately balanced as Nabokov does in *Speak, Memory*: they gradually overwhelm him in unanticipated ways. Indeed, one of *Ada*'s other interesting (aquatic) subplots sees Van come to share Aqua's "morbid sensitivity" to water without even realising it. As the composition of his memoir progresses, he increasingly displays signs and symptoms eerily similar to those of his aunt.

¹⁶⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁵ Leona Toker, "Nabokov and Bergson on Duration and Reflexivity" in Leona Toker, "Nabokov and Bergson on Duration and Reflexivity" in Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin, and Pricilla Meyer (eds.), *Nabokov's World—Volume 1: The Shape of Nabokov's World* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 134.

¹⁶⁶ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁶⁷ Simplicius, *On Aristotle Physics 5*, trans. J. O. Urmson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 87.

¹⁶⁸ Laci Mattison, "Nabokov's Aesthetic Bergsonism: An Intuitive, Reperceptualized Time", *Mosaic*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (March 2013): p. 42.

2.5 *Letters from Terra*

Van spends much of his life working in psychology, specialising in the mental health of Terra “believers”. Much of what he reveals about his work reinforces the narrative of Terra and Antiterra’s contact we pieced together earlier with Swanson’s help, which in turn strengthens the case that Van shares Aqua’s “morbid sensitivity” to Terra’s aquatic signals.

During his training he worked on “an ambitious dissertation he never completed, ‘Terra: Eremitic Reality or Collective Dream?’” (1. 30. 182). Even at this early stage in his career, he is in regular contact with Terra “believers” from different walks of life, and is struck by the consistency of their testimonies:

He interviewed numerous neurotics, among whom there were variety artists, and literary men, and at least three intellectually lucid, but spiritually “lost,” cosmologists who either were in telepathic collusion (they had never met and did not even know of one another’s existence) or had discovered, none knew how or where, by means, maybe, of forbidden “ondulas” of some kind, a green world rotating in space and spiraling in time, which in terms of matter-and-mind was like ours and which they described in the same specific details as three people watching from three separate windows would a carnival show in the same street. (1. 30. 182)

As fixated as Van had been in early life, Terra is still relegated to being another background detail in *Ada*’s main narrative action until his first chapter about his novel *Letters From Terra*.

Van acknowledges that putting Terra at the heart of a space romance was potentially dangerous and politically fraught. Apparently, however, the “great anti-L years of reactionary delusion” (1. 3. 17) had waned somewhat when he wrote *Letters From Terra*, since at that point Terra was “a subject that had been worried to extinction” (2. 2. 338). Public interest in Terra had dropped off to the point that Van’s novel fails both critically and commercially (2. 2. 343). Still, this must have given Van a long enough window of time in which he was free to satisfy his “pleasurable urge to express through verbal imagery a compendium of certain inexplicably

correlated vagaries observed by him in mental patients, on and off, since his first year at Chose” (2. 2. 338).

Recounting the novel’s composition later in life, with occasional parenthetical interruptions from Ada—“(I disagree, it’s a nice, nice little book! Ada’s note.)” (2. 2. 338)—it becomes clear that Van had been increasingly skeptical of Antiterranean state’s official narrative regarding the L disaster: “There were good reasons to disregard the technological details involved in delineating intercommunication between Terra the Fair and our terrible Antiterra” (2. 2. 338). He admits that his “knowledge of physics, mechanicalism and that sort of stuff had remained limited to the scratch of a prep-school blackboard”, which suggests that the communication between Terra and Antiterra was a technological coup. In any case, Van remembers consoling himself that even “the slightest reference to [the] ‘magnetic’ gewgaws” he would have needed to include in a faithful reconstruction would have had no chance of making it past censors (2. 2. 338-339). Instead Van concocts an elaborate conceit which sees his visitor from Terra, Theresa, “beaming a dozen communications from her planet” to Sig, her interstellar pen-pal and love interest on Antiterra. When she finally travels to his world in a space capsule, she discovers she is Lilliputian in size compared to her beau. He can only make out her “tiny, though otherwise perfect, shape” under a microscope, and needs to keep her in a test tube, “swimming inside like a micromermaid” (2. 2. 340). In a dramatic revelation late in *Letters From Terra*, Theresa admits she had actually “exaggerated the bliss” of Terra in her initial messages to Sig. Had she not, “agents on Terra might have yanked her back or destroyed her in flight had they managed to intercept her undissembling ondulas, now mostly going one way, our way, don’t ask Van by what method or principle” (2. 2. 342). Despite both his skepticism and professed ignorance, Van’s synopsis suggests inspiration from his patients’ claims that they received their communiqués through the water that replaced electricity in the

now-unidirectional line of communication from Terra to Antiterra: “As earlier experimentators had conjectured, our annals lagged by about half a century behind Terra’s along the bridges of time, but overtook some of its *underwater currents*” (2. 2. 340-341, my emphasis). Even if Van is not aware of his word-choice here as he summarises his early novel, Nabokov has certainly trained his reader to be attentive to subterranean aquatic circulations well enough by now for these “underwater currents” to stand out.

Van’s abridgement of *Letters From Terra* contains quite a number of subtle evocations of Lucette. Following her death at sea, she is imbued by Van with the qualities of a mermaid; words, colours, and textures associated with Lucette’s personality and appearance turn up everywhere in *Ada*, both before and after her death. Her tell-tale signs turn up a number of times in Van’s summary of the convoluted plot of *Letters From Terra*:

Elaborating anew, in irrational fabrications, all that Cyraniana and “physics fiction” would have been not only a bore but an absurdity, for nobody knew how far Terra, or other innumerable planets with cottages and cows, might be situated in outer or inner space: “inner,” because why not assume their micro-cosmic presence in the golden globules ascending quick-quick in this flute of Moët or in the corpuscles of my, Van Veen’s—

(or my, Ada Veen’s)

—bloodstream, or in the pus of a Mr. Nekto’s ripe boil newly lanced in Nektor or Neckton. (2. 2. 339)

It is not difficult to discern Lucette in the “micromermaid” Theresa, making her “micro-cosmic presence” felt in the “golden globules ascending quick-quick in this flute of Moët”—rising instead of sinking in her aquatic medium—or to appreciate how her glistening form is immediately mirrored in a corpuscle in Van’s bloodstream. The latter embeds and enlists her in prolepsis of an elderly Van’s “morbid sensitivity” to the night-time temple-throb of his body’s circulation.

Tellingly, near the end of the book Van's source(s) for his novel's Terra have subtly shifted. Where before it had been the "deranged brains" of the patients from which he had "filched" its details (2. 2. 345), in *Ada's* penultimate chapter we learn that this was supplemented with material extracted with "diligence and skill from extrasensorial sources and manic dreams" (5. 5. 581), possibly including his own. Ada herself seems to believe, in the last chapter, that Terra is the afterlife: "we have a double chance of being together in eternity, in terrarity" (5. 6. 583-584).

2.6 The Ubiquity of Blood and Toilets

The episode in which Van and Ada ensnare Lucette into a humiliating, abortive three-way tryst is preceded by a subtle thematic recurrence of Aqua and her illness. Without ever naming his aunt, Van is reminded of her by the sound of running water filling Ada's bath:

Van, at a geographical point a shade nearer to the elder girl, stood and used in a sustained stream the amenities of a little *vessie* (Canady form of W.C.) next to his dressing room. He removed his dinner jacket and tie, undid the collar of his silk shirt and paused in virile hesitation: Ada, beyond their bedroom and sitting room, was running her bath; to its gush a guitar rhythm, recently heard, kept adapting itself aquatically (the rare moments when he remembered her and her quite rational speech at her last sanatorium in Agavia). (2. 8. 414)

When Aqua's afflictions and fate are first discussed earlier in the novel, the throw-away detail of her overhearing a young medical student play "a non-Chinese guitar" seems fairly trivial. Here, however, almost exactly four-hundred pages later, it reappears under a different guise, in the "guitar rhythm" Van hears in the gush of water running into Ada's bath. Though she is not named, there is little doubt that the "her" brought to mind by a guitar rhythm in the water which keeps on "adapting itself aquatically" is Aqua. Van also references a "quite rational" conversation he had with Aqua towards the end of her life, when it seems she would have

shared most of the details of her illness with him (the same details Van recounts for his reader when Aqua is first introduced). Though the conversation itself is never depicted, it is strongly implied that Aqua told Van about hearing the sound of a “recently heard” guitar replaying itself in flowing tap water, since it is the eerie echoing of that event which makes Van remember her here in the first place. It is left up to the reader to connect these ambiguous threads, and to recognise just how similar Van and Aqua actually are.

Elsewhere, the network of water-pipes threaded through the Ardis house, connecting the hydro-powered appliances to one another and their power-source, suddenly produce a disruptively loud noise:

All the toilets and waterpipes in the house had been suddenly seized with borborygmic convulsions. This always signified, and introduced, a long-distance call. (1. 38. 260-261)

This passage sets an important precedent: every time a dorophone rings, nearby pipes and toilets tremble and throb along with it. These watery convulsions exert such a palpable force in Antiterra that they provoke sympathetic undulations in whatever liquids happen to be nearby:

At this point, as in a well-constructed play larded with comic relief, the brass campophone buzzed and not only did the radiators start to cluck but the uncapped soda water fizzed in sympathy. (2. 5. 376)

It would be easy to explain away this anomalous fizzing as little more than the expected behaviour of carbonated water, if not for a strikingly similar force exerted on Van’s bloodstream and nervous system under near-identical circumstances: “he received an unexpected dorophone call which for a moment affected violently his entire pulmonary and systemic circulation” (2. 5. 365). This sudden and violent spasm is not an isolated incident. Van is acutely, uncomfortably aware of the throbbing sound of his blood circulating around his

body, culminating in his own “morbid sensitivity” to night noises, especially the “throbbing in his temples”, in the closing pages of the novel (5. 2. 570). The creaks and moans of his aging body harmonise with the night-noises of the hotel-rooms in which he spends most of his evenings. Wrestling with insomnia on a nightly basis—much like his creator—Van imagines he can “hear himself dying” in quite a literal sense (5. 2. 570). By this point in his life, we are told, “physical despair pervaded his unresolvable being” (5. 2. 572).

Well before this, though, in a few key moments of great mental strain throughout his life, Van is driven to the point of distraction by his own audible blood circulation. He gives us a glimpse of already being kept awake by the sound of his own blood-flow when he first introduces Aqua, seeming to recognise something in her

morbid sensitivity to tap water—which echoes sometimes (much as the bloodstream does predormitarily) a fragment of human speech lingering in one’s ears while one washes one’s hands after cocktails with strangers.
(1. 3. 22-23)

By the time Van comes to codify his theory of time in his mini-treatise “The Texture of Time”, the motifs of water-flow and blood-flow have intermingled. He speaks of “the body’s innate awareness of its own bloodstream” (4. 1. 540), entreating us not to “confuse Time with Tinnitus, and the seashell hum of duration with the throb of our blood” (4. 1. 559). He writes about how his own attempts to “listen to time” have developed, at least once, into

the growing realization that I am listening not to Time itself but to the blood current coursing through my brain, and thence through the veins of the neck heartward, back to the seat of private throes which have no relation to Time.
(4. 1. 536)

The blood-water mix suffuses his theorisation of time flowing through space, which comes in turn to stimulate and remind him of a different urge. Much as Van retreats to his cabin

bathroom to perform “a series of sixty-year-old actions” after being aroused by Lucette during their final voyage together, while composing the “Treatise” Van is compelled by the distracting throb of his own circulating blood to pull over at a road-side garage to urinate, ridding himself of at least some of his body’s aquatic makeup: “My time is also Motionless Time (we shall presently dispose of ‘flowing’ time, water-clock time, water-closet time)” (4. 1. 539). Van’s pit-stop brings our attention to another of *Ada*’s persistently recurring motifs: bathrooms. Gurgling toilets are surprisingly ubiquitous throughout the novel, appearing frequently at important moments in the narrative. The distracting prattle of “burbly flowlets” of water is linked to the bathroom early on, when Aqua hears “the most hateful of the visiting doctors” at her first sanatorium “garrulously pour hateful instructions in Russian-lapped German into her hateful bidet” (1. 3. 24). Later, just before he perceives the “guitar rhythm” in the water filling *Ada*’s bath, Van uses “in a sustained stream the amenities of a little *vessie* (Canady form of W.C.)” (2. 8. 414).

Along with Aqua’s sensitivity to water, the bathroom motif is consistently linked to the L disaster. One episode sees Van and *Ada* copulate in the “lateral part” of an “L-shaped bathroom”, just out of sight of a nine-year-old Lucette soaking in the bathtub. Lucette has been told by her sister that she will die if she leaves the water—ironic, considering her fate—and “the sea-green eye of the bathroom looking glass” does not see around the corner, although a telltale “empty medicine bottle” does beat in time to their love-making (1. 23. 144-145). A few chapters later the same loose constellation of motifs leads back to interstellar bodies—crucial components of the “L factor”—as Van notes that the toilet in a rented room beside the Ladore River “was a black hole, with the traces of a fecal explosion, between a squatter’s two giant soles” (1. 29. 179). Here we have a bathroom cosmos in miniature, with a Big-Bang-like “explosion” of fecal matter, a black hole, and two “soles” (“suns” in Latin) positioned in an

orbit around each other like the twin worlds of Terra and Antiterra. And in contrast to this surprisingly elegant fecal cosmos in the *Ada*'s first part, by the time Van recounts the ailments of his aging body in Part 4 the "black fudge [is] fouling the bowl slope so high that no amount of flushing could dislodge it" (4. 1. 561).

2.7 Lucette's Death

By his memoir's third part, Van has come to see Antiterra's horrible watery aspect as infusing most of its space (figuratively, at least):

Furnished Space, *l'espace meublé* (known to us only as furnished and full even if its contents be "absence of substance"—which seats the mind, too), is mostly watery so far as this globe is concerned. In that form it destroyed Lucette. (3. 7. 504)

Van's descriptions of his own writerly "stream of composition" increasingly mirror Aqua's "morbid sensitivity" to water. Following the compositional schema Nabokov shared in his 1965 television interview, the metaphors linking Van and Aqua breed, live a life of their own, and eventually fall apart. The traumatic experience of Lucette's death at sea, for example, sees a door, concretised in a metaphor, swing open, then shut, on Van's awful guilt:

We all know those old wardrobes in old hotels in the Old World subalpine zone. At first one opens them with the utmost care, very slowly, in the vain hope of hushing the excruciating creak, the growing groan that the door emits midway. Before long one discovers, however, that if it is opened or closed with celerity, in one resolute sweep, the hellish hinge is taken by surprise, and triumphant silence achieved. Van and Ada, for all the exquisite and powerful bliss that engulfed and repleted them (and we do not mean here the rose sore of Eros alone), knew that certain memories had to be left closed, lest they wrench every nerve of the soul with their monstrous moan. But if the operation is performed swiftly, if indelible evils are mentioned between two quick quips, there is a chance that the anesthetic of life itself may allay unforgettable agony in the process of swinging its door. (2. 9. 430-431)

Here Van seems to be describing, via a literary conceit, the approach he needs to take to Lucette's death to endure the pain it causes him. Van finds his memory of her death, and the circumstances surrounding it, incredibly painful, and needs to dictate this part of his memoir to his typist in a single burst, knowing he will most likely never be able to face the task of revising it. What will bear particular importance for us is the manner in which Van's cast-off metaphor of the swinging door of memory is gradually developed, physicalised, and tied in with the bathroom motif.

The first sign that something like this is happening comes when the doors in the *Tobakoff's* corridor all seem to spontaneously sprout ears: "'I apollo, I love you,' she whispered frantically, trying to *cry* after him in a *whisper* because the corridor was all door and ears" (3. 3. 467). The ears are figurative; Lucette worries about being overheard by other passengers. Just over twenty pages later, the swinging door makes another appearance, this time eavesdropping as Van masturbates in his cabin's water-closet, trying to rid himself of the temptation to sleep with Lucette:

In a series of sixty-year-old actions which now I can grind into extinction only by working on a succession of words until the rhythm is right, I, Van, retired to my bathroom, shut the door (it swung open at once, but then closed of its own accord) and using a temporary expedient [...] vigorously got rid of the prurient pressure as he had done the last time seventeen years ago. And how sad, how significant that the picture projected upon the screen of his paroxysm, while the unlockable door swung open again with the movement of a deaf man cupping his ear, was not the recent and pertinent image of Lucette, but the indelible vision of a bent bare neck and a divided flow of black hair and a purple-tipped paint brush. (3. 5. 490)

Through a prolepsis several pages earlier, we received the only glimpse of Van on board the ocean-liner after Lucette has drowned—presumably *very* soon after, when he would have returned to his cabin and used its bathroom following their rescue attempt:

He understood her condition or at least believed, in despair, that he *had* understood it, retrospectively, by the time no remedy except Dr. Henry's oil of Atlantic prose could be found in the medicine chest of the past with its banging door and toppling toothbrush. (3. 5. 485)

What seemed at first to be little more than a metaphor for painful memories reveals itself to be honing in not just on actual bathrooms, but specifically on the bathroom in Van's cabin on the *Tobakoff*. Its toppling toothbrush and banging, unlockable door, are mirrored here in miniature by the medicine chest. Each detail places us firmly in Van's water-closet, and while the chapter cuts off immediately following Lucette's drowning, this gives us a fleeting glimpse of Van's grief immediately after, for which he can find "no remedy". The rhythmically "banging door" of his "medicine chest" recalls Ada and Van's love-making in the L-shaped bathroom earlier in the novel, "with an empty medicine bottle idiotically beating time on a shelf, when Lucette was already calling resonantly for the tub" (1. 23. 145): an analeptic reminder of the cruelty that drove Lucette to suicide.

In her preparations for death, Lucette deposits the torn fragments of her abandoned attempt at a suicide note in her cabin's toilet:

But she had planned everything except that note, so she tore her blank life in two and disposed of the pieces in the W.C.; she poured herself a glass of dead water from a moored decanter, gulped down one by one four green pills, and, sucking the fifth, walked to the lift which took her one click up from her three-room suite straight to the red-carpeted promenade-deck bar. (3. 5. 492)

She washes down a lethal dose of sleeping pills with (now uncharacteristically) "dead" water, or alcohol: "hateful, vulgar, but potent" though it may be, the fermented fluid is bereft of the secret voices that tortured Aqua. Her head starts to "swim like hell" (3. 5. 493), which, in a dark pun of Van's, is precisely what she finds herself unable to do when she dives into the ocean:

Although Lucette had never died before—no, dived before, Violet—from such a height, in such a disorder of shadows and snaking reflections, she went with hardly a splash through the wave that humped to welcome her. (3. 5. 493)

The watery abyss is imbued with chilling agency in Van's description of her entry into the humping ocean, as if the seal between Terra and Antiterra has been breached by her fall, and the otherworld bends to welcome her.

The subtle resonances between Van's visits to his cabin bathroom, all occurring on the same day, produce ripples which are felt throughout the novel. By placing Van in the water-closet of his cabin following Lucette's death, with "every nerve of [his] soul" wrenched by the "monstrous moan" and "unforgettable agony" of what has just taken place (2. 9. 430-431), Nabokov marks this as a formative and traumatic event that ruptures Van's experience of the world.

Of *Ada*, Nabokov said: "my purpose is to have [...] metaphors breed. To form a story of their own, gradually, and then again to fall apart".¹⁶⁹ In one way or another, everything flows [*vse-voda*] to and from Lucette and Aqua's deaths. In a sense, *Ada* takes Aunt Pasha's dying words, *vsyo-voda* ["everything [is] water"],¹⁷⁰ and develops their premise into Antiterra's otherworldly aquatic currents. Nabokov's symbolic linkage of water and mortality clashes, by design, with Van's "rather dry, though serious and well-meant, essay on time", forming "a story of their own"¹⁷¹ that undermines his haughty rejection of death. Eventually sharing Aqua's "morbid sensitivity" to water and the messages it carries, Van is able to pick up signs from Lucette from her beyond, often recording them in his memoir without even realising it (like the narrator of "The Vane Sisters"). The nature of these messages, Van's

¹⁶⁹ Nabokov, "USA: The Novel—Vladimir Nabokov", p. 98.

¹⁷⁰ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 49.

¹⁷¹ Nabokov, "USA: The Novel—Vladimir Nabokov", p. 98.

perceptions, and Lucette's experience of her otherworld, will form the basis of our investigation in the final two chapters.

Chapter Three

Timeflow, Recurrences, and Paramnesia in *Ada*

3.1 Van's "Faint Paramnesic Tang"

In examining matters regarding *Ada*'s enigmatic storyworld, we have also touched on the nature of Van's perception of it. Along with the subplot about contact between Terra and Antiterra, one of the most intriguing ancillary narratives concerns the nature and consequences of Van's "morbid sensitivities" for the way he reports his narrative. This chapter will focus on the way he perceives timeflow in particular.

Late in the novel, Van trips over a "gaudy suitcase" in the Hotel Bellevue's foyer. The trunk, we learn, has been left there by an "unfortunate green-aproned *cameriere*". Still composing himself, Van makes for the hotel lounge, only to be interrupted on his way:

A German tourist caught up with him, to apologize, effusively, and not without humor, for the offending object, which, he said, was his. "If so," remarked Van, "you should not allow spas to slap their stickers on your private appendages." His reply was inept, and the whole episode had a faint paramnesic tang—and next instant Van was shot dead from behind (such things happen, some tourists are very unbalanced) and stepped into his next phase of existence. (3. 8. 510)

Despite his apparent demise, the next sentence continues as if nothing has happened, as Van moves to "the threshold of the main lounge" and, unperturbed, begins to "scan the distribution of its scattered human contents". This is one of the most enigmatic episodes in the novel. Van's "paramnesic tang" has surprisingly deep implications, and paramnesia as a concept gives us

rare insight into the unique behaviour of timeflow and recurrences of certain images and motifs in *Ada*.¹⁷²

3.2 What is Paramnesia?

To date, Nabokov scholarship has largely overlooked this “paramnesic tang”. Boyd uses the word “tang” twice in *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, in descriptions of Nabokov’s prose:

Nabokov is celebrated for the precision of his visual details, yet it is not the precision alone that imparts that special tang to his descriptions but rather the sense of the crisp autonomy of the thing described.

[...]

For Nabokov only the perception of a thing’s uniqueness is worthwhile. Unless this is grasped, reality has no tang. To grasp it requires the full alertness of the conscious mind, fresh observation, an accumulation of detail, a refusal to sacrifice the discreteness of a thing.¹⁷³

Adopting Nabokov’s own diction suggests reference to the Hotel Bellevue episode; but in fact, Boyd has nothing to say about it. Among his many examples from the text, only two contain the word “tang”, and both are quotes from Van’s exegetical treatise on time:

[Time] is “a constant accumulation of images” (545) which, though we can no more visit than we can the future, “has at least the taste, the tinge, the tang of our individual being” (560).

[...]

The Past for Van is “colored” and specific: it has “the taste, the tinge, the tang of our individual being” (560). It is “an accumulation of sensa” (544), and out of this accumulation, out of “the colored contents of the Past” (547) memory can choose what it likes, and in any order.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Much of the chapter has been published as David Potter, “Paramnesia, Anticipatory Memory, and Future Recollection in *Ada*”, in *Vladimir Nabokov and the Fictions of Memory*, ed. Irena Księżopolska and Mikołaj Wiśniewski (Warsaw: Fundacja Augusta hr. Cieszkowskiego, 2019), pp. 124-156.

¹⁷³ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001), p. 31, 69.

¹⁷⁴ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*, p. 189, 191. Page references in Boyd.

J. E. Rivers was one of the first to mention paramnesia in Nabokov scholarship, though his use of it does present some problems. Rivers pronounces that “triple encoded episodes” in *Ada* “are designed to produce in the reader what Nabokov calls elsewhere in the novel ‘a faint paramnesic tang.’”¹⁷⁵ It remains unclear why Rivers has decided that only *triple* encoded episodes produce a paramnesic effect, other than that he only cites three recurrences of each motif he uses as an example. *Ada* is such a densely woven text that its major motifs are far more recurrent than Rivers allows. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth explains:

Just getting through a syntactical unit (sentence, paragraph) [in *Ada*] requires one to keep simultaneously in play several separate thematic voices [...] Like the firefly, each theme signals in “its own specific rhythm” and also in cumulative relation to all the other rhythms, each with its own frequency. By the end of the novel the complexity of this colored anthemion is immense.¹⁷⁶

As Ermarth points out, the sheer scale and frequency of thematic recurrences and resonances in *Ada* is overwhelming. But are all its recurrences paramnesic, as Rivers seems to suggest?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines paramnesia as “Memory that is unreal, illusory, or distorted; spec. the phenomenon of déjà vu; an instance of this.”¹⁷⁷ The definition of déjà vu, on the other hand, offers us this: “An illusory feeling of having previously experienced a present situation; a form of paramnesia.”¹⁷⁸ Though reasonably specific, this is a frustratingly circular pair of lexicographic definitions—certainly not conclusive on their own. Déjà vu translates from the French simply as “already seen”. However, paramnesia’s prefix signifies something “analogous or parallel to, but separate from or going beyond, what is denoted by the

¹⁷⁵ J. E. Rivers, “Proust, Nabokov, and *Ada*” in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Phyllis A. Roth (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), p. 149.

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 197-198.

¹⁷⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, “paramnesia, *n.*”, OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com/view/Entry/234699. Accessed 21 September 2019.

¹⁷⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, “déjà vu, *n.*”, OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com/view/Entry/49217. Accessed 21 September 2019.

root word”; an amnesia simultaneous with a sense of having “already seen”, perhaps a remembering and a forgetting rolled into one moment.¹⁷⁹

Christoph Henry-Thommes’ *Recollection, Memory and Imagination: Selected Autobiographical Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* includes the most detailed discussion of paramnesia in Nabokov scholarship so far, building on the word’s definition in *Webster’s Dictionary*:

Webster’s defines “paramnesia” as “a distortion of memory in which fact and fantasy are confused. Also called pseudomemory.” In this context one must, first of all, keep in mind Van’s programmatic statement that “memory likes the *otsebyatina* (“what one contributes oneself”)” (*Ada* 441). Secondly, and this is even more important, the interaction and mutual penetration of fact and fantasy (*phantasia*) is a basic feature of the autobiographic act practised by Van and Nabokov, which feeds on both memory and creative imagination.¹⁸⁰

While neither lexical entry offers a detailed enough picture of paramnesia to make complete sense of the anomalous foyer passage, they are certainly moving us in the right direction.

J. W. Dunne’s *An Experiment with Time* (1927) includes a brief section regarding “Identifying Paramnesia”. It is part of his discussion of keeping a dream diary, instructions Nabokov followed closely in his own experiment with recording his dreams between 14 October 1964 and 3 January 1963.¹⁸¹ Though Dunne was without formal training in theoretical science—he started writing after retiring from aeronautical engineering—he believed he had proven that dreams could foretell future events, that these future events could ripple backwards into earlier dreams, and that this confirmed that time could flow both forwards and backwards. “Identifying Paramnesia” is singled out as a cognitive problem which creates the false

¹⁷⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, “para-, prefix”, OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com/view/Entry/137251. Accessed 21 September 2019.

¹⁸⁰ Christoph Henry-Thommes, *Recollection, Memory and Imagination: Selected Autobiographical Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2006), p. 315. Page references in Henry-Thommes.

¹⁸¹ Published recently as Vladimir Nabokov, *Insomniac Dreams: Experiments with Time by Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Gennady Barabtarlo (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

impression that you have previously dreamed something you have only just encountered. Dunne argued that detailed dream recording would arm his fellow time-trackers with the means to either confirm or falsify the feeling of “Identifying Paramnesia” when it inevitably struck, creating a written record that would prove, one way or another, if an earlier prophetic dream had indeed taken place.¹⁸² Nabokov read and admired Dunne’s work while he was writing *Ada*, and it seems likely that this would have been the most recent, if not necessarily first, place he would have come across such an uncommon term by the time he wrote the scene in the Hotel Bellevue’s foyer. Dunne’s gloss of paramnesia is incomplete, however. Though he gestures generally in the direction of a collective body of doctors in apparent semantic agreement on paramnesia, other writings and medical journals from the period suggest that thinking about paramnesia was more complex. Further reading beyond Dunne, and beyond dedicated Nabokov scholarship, reveals a rich vein of pretexts to its appearance in *Ada*.

The term “paramnesia” was coined by German psychologist Emil Kraepelin in 1886 as a label to distinguish qualitative from quantitative memory disturbances.¹⁸³ By the time it reappeared in Kraepelin’s *Clinical Psychiatry* (1907) as part of a broader discussion of memory disorders, he had refined its specific connotations. That book describes paramnesia as “a mixture of invention and real experience” which gives rise to “hallucinations of memory”. It occurs especially often in “paresis, paranoid dementia, and [...] maniacal forms of manic-depressive insanity”, as well as occasionally in “epileptic and hysterical befogged states.”¹⁸⁴ A paramnesic hallucination of memory seems as if it has spontaneously come into being, integrating seamlessly into consciousness despite there being no point of origin. The realisation

¹⁸² J. W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time*. 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp. 44-45.

¹⁸³ Ivana. S. Marková and German E. Berrios, “Paramnesias and Delusions of Memory”, in *Memory Disorders in Psychiatric Practise*, ed. German E. Berrios and John R. Hodges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 313.

¹⁸⁴ Emil Kraepelin, *Clinical Psychiatry* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1907), p. 25.

that a real-seeming memory is actually structured around the absence of an experience you *thought* you held ruptures the contiguity of one's mental landscape.¹⁸⁵ More simply, paramnesia varies from déjà vu, as the Oxford English Dictionary suggests, because it takes the form of a disruptive incursion into the subject's mental landscape, and is frequently a source of distress. This is precisely the kind of rupture we find again and again in *Ada*.

Havelock Ellis incorporated paramnesia into *The World of Dreams* (1911), further specifying the term by likening it to the state of "pseudo-reminiscence" that can intrude into and linger on after dreaming, when one is in a hypnagogic state (that is, either emerging from or falling into sleep):

The best known form of paramnesia is that in which we have the illusion that the event which is at the moment happening to us has happened before [...] or that [it] might happen to us again [...] When we have half awakened from a dream and are just able to realise that it was a dream, that dream constantly tends to appear in a more plausible or probable light than is possible a few moments later when we are fully awake.¹⁸⁶

Within the next few decades, the term started to infiltrate literary theory, particularly in studies of Romanticism. The earliest example I have found is in Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian's *A History of English Literature* (1933), in which the authors insist that

¹⁸⁵ There is a secondary meaning of paramnesia—which the OED identifies as "*disused rare*"—as a description of the "loss of memory for the meaning of words." Freud described submerged paramnesia as effectively a card-trick of the mind, carried out when a faulty recollection is successfully substituted in place of a forgotten impression (Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987), p. 200). These false memories supposedly originate from some interrupted act of orientation earlier in a subject's life, an unconscious substitution which Freud thinks complicates the analysis of childhood memories because unimportant details act as "screen memories": "for other impressions which are really significant" (Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, p. 83). He argues a "screen memory" is not valuable in and of itself, but for the associations it carries with another buried unconscious memory. Though there has been plenty of scholarly discussion about Freud's "screen memories", including some cogent criticism from Derrida, and though Nabokov was hugely antagonistic towards Freud—"the Viennese quack" in *Strong Opinions*—for the purposes of this study we are more interested in paramnesia's primary meaning as an illusory distortion of memory.

¹⁸⁶ Havelock Ellis, *The World of Dreams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), p. 230-232.

All that Romantic writers imagine and feel is accompanied by a shade of wonder, because they see those emotions and those images rise within themselves with a surprising spontaneousness, and because all such imaginings, in spite of their novelty, bring with them a disturbing impression of an intimacy of old date. Romanticism is as a whole, in this respect, a phenomenon of collective “paramnesia”, the reviviscence of a subconscious personality.¹⁸⁷

Legouis and Cazamian’s description of the simultaneous wonder and disquiet on display in paramnesic episodes in Romanticism re-emerges in George Poulet’s “Timelessness and Romanticism” (1954). Where Legouis and Cazamian spoke of Romanticism in general, Poulet is more particular, citing an episode from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Speculations on Metaphysics* (1814). Poulet’s analysis of Shelley’s paramnesia, of all the competing invocations of the term, is closest to Nabokov’s use of it in *Ada*. Shelley reflects on an experience he had sometime around 1805 when he was confronted by a fairly “common scene” of fields and windmills somewhere near Oxford:

The scene was a tame uninteresting assemblage of objects [...] The effect which it produced on me was not such as could be expected. I suddenly remembered to have seen that exact scene in some dream of long—

He cuts himself off mid-sentence. Shelley’s brief explanatory note reproduced at the foot of the page in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1906) explains the abrupt interruption: “Here I was obliged to leave off, overcome by thrilling horror.” This edition also has an additional recollection from his wife, author Mary Shelley: “I remember well his coming to me from writing it, pale and agitated, to seek refuge in conversation from the fearful emotions it excited.”¹⁸⁸ It seems likely that Percy’s experience unsettled him not because a similar memory revived with a feeling of being *still* real and *still* alive (*a la déjà vu*) but because as soon he

¹⁸⁷ Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, *A History of English Literature* (London: Dent, 1933), p. 1030.

¹⁸⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Speculations on Metaphysics” (1814), in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley—Volume II*, ed. Richard Hearne Shepherd (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), p. 193.

saw this “tame uninteresting assemblage of objects,” Shelley remembered having seen it before. In other words, the full effects of a first encounter with the scene and the memory of having already seen it are experienced simultaneously and arrestingly. Despite the fearful agitation in which they were set down, Shelley’s words accurately preserve the unanticipated sting of Kraepelin’s paramnesia and its mixture of reality and invention.

This brings us to Henri Bergson’s “serial time”, a concept that was highly influential on Nabokov. Serial time has an in-built paramnesic tang. Bergson holds that “the formation of recollection is never posterior to the formation of perception; it is contemporaneous with it.”¹⁸⁹ Whatever content there is in the moment of reception must be preserved simultaneously to that moment’s appearance and destruction, and it must be preserved in anticipation of its own reappearance in the subject’s memory. Søren Kierkegaard, too, briefly sketched this serial experience of time as “repetition”, which he described as “recollection forward”, at once pre-empting and *ensuring* the re-emergence of a collected perception.¹⁹⁰ Over half a century later, Bergson expands:

[Our] actual existence [...] whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment in our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting.¹⁹¹

By Bergson’s understanding, then, memory *is* consciousness, and vice versa. It was Gilles Deleuze who applied the term “paramnesia” to Bergson’s formulation as a label for the moment when a subject becomes conscious of this duplication. Paramnesia, explains Deleuze, is the

¹⁸⁹ Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy* (1919), trans. H. Wildon Carr (London: MacMillan, 1920), p. 128.

¹⁹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Writings: Vol. VI—“Fear and Trembling” and “Repetition”*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 131.

¹⁹¹ Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, p. 135.

feeling one experiences when “the *forgotten* thing appears in person to the memory which essentially apprehends it.”¹⁹² For Deleuze, since memory is the medium through which the perception of matter is made conscious, by the time we are conscious of our surroundings they are no longer “present” to us. There is no such thing as a presence that is not already in the past. Even the memory of a perception is a memory of a memory of a perception, a dizzying co-dependence which Deleuze argues “makes possible a whole pathology of duration.”¹⁹³

3.3 Anticipatory Memory and Future Recollection

John Burt Foster Jr.’s work on “anticipatory memory” and “future recollection” in Nabokov offers some vital clues regarding Van’s “paramnesic tang”. In *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, Foster introduces the term “anticipatory memory” to describe Nabokov’s “paradoxical attitude toward time”.¹⁹⁴ Ganin, the main character in Nabokov’s first novel *Mary*, decides that the youthful anticipatory ideation he held prior to meeting Mary was crucial to his reimagining of her later in his life. His earlier impatience to reach that future, to meet Mary—who, as Foster notes, is important for Ganin “not as a specific person, to be sure, but just as [a] dream of meeting some girl”¹⁹⁵ —is ultimately what the elder Ganin believes prepared his memory to preserve such vivid impressions, themselves a blend of imagination and reality.

The kind of romanticisation of youthful anticipation we see in *Mary* is characteristic of (very) early-career Nabokov. It would not be long before, as Foster argues, “[t]he picture that

¹⁹² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968), trans. Paul R. Patton (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 140. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (1966), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone, 1988), p. 118.

¹⁹⁴ John Burt Foster Jr., *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 54.

¹⁹⁵ Foster Jr., *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, p. 55.

initially conveyed romantic anticipation” came instead to suggest “the darker uncertainty of imagined tragedy”.¹⁹⁶ By Nabokov’s third novel, *The Luzhin Defence*, anticipation has become a vehicle for anxiety, fear, and eventually horror. Young Luzhin is agitated by the prospect of his first year of school, which looms over him like “something new, unknown, and therefore hideous, an impossible, unacceptable world”.¹⁹⁷ As Foster notes of this passage, “There is no room [...] for the initial basis of memory in *Mary*, the promise of happiness to come.”¹⁹⁸ The description of the moments leading up to Luzhin’s suicide at the novel’s end confirms the terrible fears of his younger self, imagined or not. Clinging to the outside edge of a high window, as the transformation of his surroundings into chess-motifs continues unabated, he is horrified by the prospect of a nightmarish future one last time:

Before letting go he looked down. Some kind of hasty preparations were under way there: the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him.¹⁹⁹

Where “anticipatory memory” centralises expectation, “future recollection” is about imagination. In Nabokov, it sees a subject imagining a hypothetical point in the future where they, or some devoted reader of the yet-to-be-published stories of their life, will attribute some importance to their present experience. Foster identifies the following passage from *Speak, Memory*, concerning the Nabokov family’s time in Crimea in 1918, as “the fullest treatment of future retrospection” in Nabokov’s oeuvre:²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Foster Jr., *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, p. 65.

¹⁹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Luzhin Defence* (1930, Eng. 1964), trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 6.

¹⁹⁸ Foster Jr., *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, p. 63.

¹⁹⁹ Nabokov, *The Luzhin Defence*, pp. 178-179.

²⁰⁰ Foster Jr., *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, p. 57.

In that summer of 1918, a poor little oasis of miraged youth, my brother and I used to frequent the amiable and eccentric family who owned the coastal estate Oleiz. A bantering friendship soon developed between my coeval Lidia T. and me. Many young people were always around, brown-limbed braceleted young beauties, a well-known painter called Sorin, actors, a male ballet dancer, merry White Army officers, some of whom were to die quite soon, and what with beach parties, blanket parties, bonfires, a moon-spangled sea and a fair supply of Crimean Muscat Lunel, a lot of amorous fun went on; and all the while, against this frivolous, decadent and somehow unreal background [...] Lidia and I played a little oasal game of our own invention. The idea consisted of parodizing a biographic approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past as perceived by a doddering memoirist who recalls, through a helpless haze, his acquaintance with a great writer when both were young. For instance, either Lidia or I (it was a matter of chance inspiration) might say, on the terrace after supper: “The writer liked to go out on the terrace after supper,” or “I shall always remember the remark V. V. made one warm night: ‘It is,’ he remarked, ‘a warm night’”; or still sillier: “He was in the habit of lighting his cigarette, before smoking it”—all this delivered with much pensive, reminiscent fervour which seemed hilarious and harmless to us at the time; but now—now I catch myself wondering if we did not disturb unwittingly some perverse and spiteful demon.²⁰¹

That he, in writing his autobiography, had now assumed the role of the “doddering memoirist” was an irony not lost on Nabokov. Indeed, he even toyed with it further in his memoir’s unpublished sixteenth “chapter” “On *Conclusive Evidence*”, which we glanced at in Chapter 1.²⁰² It takes the form of a pseudo-review by an anonymous critic, commentating on the main text’s Crimea episode:

In the cypress alleys of Crimean gardens (where Pushkin had walked a hundred years before) young Nabokov amused and annoyed a girl friend of his, who had a taste for romantic literature, by commenting upon his own movements or words in the reminiscent, slightly mincing manner his companion might be supposed to develop many years later when writing her memoirs (in the style of memoirs connected with Pushkin): “Nabokov liked cherries, especially ripe ones,” or “He had a way of slitting his eyes when looking at the low sun,” or “I remember one night, as we were reclining on a turf bank—“ and so forth—a game that was surely silly but seems less silly now when it is seen to fall into

²⁰¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, pp. 193-194.

²⁰² “On *Conclusive Evidence*” is not included in Foster’s analysis, most likely because it was not widely available until it was published in the 28 December 1998/4 January 1999 edition of *The New Yorker*.

the pattern of predicted loss, of pathetic attempts to retain the doomed, the departing, the lovely dying things of a life that was trying, rather desperately, to think of itself in terms of future retrospection.²⁰³

That the nameless critic quotes phrases that do not actually appear in Nabokov's book is amusing enough. He also expands on the subtle suggestiveness behind the young Vladimir and Lidia's "amorous fun" with a not-so-subtle quip about the former's fondness for ripe cherries, stopping short of disclosing exactly *what* they did on the turfy bank that one night in 1918. However, before we have much of a chance to process these double entendres, Nabokov—or, rather, the Nabokov holding a cardboard cut-out mask of a stuffy old critic named anything other than "Nabokov" over his face—slices through an ironic distance, several embedded fictional layers deep, to activate crushing resonances between the two passages. He reminds us that, like the "merry White Army officers" mentioned in the main text, this "poor little oasis of miraged youth," many of the people he knew then, his father and his brother, and indeed most of the Russia of his childhood, "were to die quite soon". The young Nabokov's game of future recollection becomes, in the hands of the master craftsman he eventually became, an elegy for "the lovely dying things of a life". The very act of recalling these memories, colourful and witty though his descriptions may be, forces Nabokov to confront the fact that his younger self was playfully calling forth images of a future that, unbeknownst to him, would also see him looking back on the destruction of many of the people and much of the culture he was describing. He does not mention in either passage, incidentally, if Lidia and her family survived the horrors that were to follow in the wake of their amorous games—perhaps an absence which speaks volumes. Future recollection, then, becomes an inherently melancholic device for

²⁰³ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 253.

Nabokov, even more so than Foster realised; *Ada*'s paramnesic episodes bear the mark of this melancholy, especially where Lucette is involved.

3.4 The Tang of Nabokov's "Inspiration" (1972)

Van's narration is beset by structural instability, quite often a direct result of his concatenation of reality and invention. In what could easily have been a playful mirroring of Kraepelin's definition of paramnesia, Nabokov offers us this line barely twenty pages after Van's encounter with the gaudy suitcase: "Fantasy raced fact in never-ending rivalry and girl giggles" (3. 8. 531).²⁰⁴ Indeed, the ineptness of Van's reply after tripping over the suitcase signals a lapse in more than just his usual cruel and withering wit; there has been a lapse in his capacity to tell fact and fantasy apart. This is the second explicit instance of a variety of memory hallucination Van calls "forking". The first describes an abortive suicide-attempt of Van's after Demon discovers his affair with Ada:

Van sealed the letter, found his Thunderbolt pistol in the place he had visualized, introduced one cartridge into the magazine and translated it into its chamber. Then, standing before a closet mirror, he put the automatic to his head, at the point of the pterion, and pressed the comfortably concaved trigger. Nothing happened—or perhaps everything happened, and his destiny simply forked at that instant, as it probably does sometimes at night, especially in a strange bed, at stages of great happiness or great desolation, when we happen to die in our sleep, but continue our normal existence, with no perceptible break in the faked serialization, on the following, neatly prepared morning, with a spurious past discreetly but firmly attached behind. Anyway, what he held in his right hand was no longer a pistol but a pocket comb which he passed through his hair at the temples. (2. 11. 445)

²⁰⁴ As noted earlier, this mirrors an earlier line about Aqua, whose "mental panic and physical pain" are said to have "joined black-ruby hands, one making her pray for sanity, the other, plead for death" (1. 3. 24).

In this episode, Van seems to hold a gun to his head and pulls the trigger and, *after* having done so, discovers the gun to have been a comb. The gun as described seems as real as anything else on Antiterra, and there is a list of details regarding the feel of its nozzle against Van's pterion and the comfortable texture of its concave trigger that vouch for its corporeality. Yet by the time it should already have been too late, some unseen hand has card-tricked the instrument of Van's destruction into a harmless pocket comb.

As narrated, this sequence of events only really makes sense if the Van experiencing the paramnesic distortion of memory is the older Van who is writing the memoir, our narrator. Van himself suggests as much when he concludes the episode by noting there "are other possible forkings and continuations that occur to the dream-mind, but these will do." (2. 11. 446). The present tense here suggests that "dream-mind" refers to Van's mental state as he drafts this section, with our narrator conceding in a rare moment of candour that he may have concatenated fact and fantasy. And later, when narrating his stumble over the gaudy suitcase, our narrator has *another* distorted paramnesic experience of being shot. Despite old Van's assurance that "such things happen," our previous encounter with his apparent death-by-firearm has taught us that they almost certainly do not. In both cases, our narrator's mind quickly synthesises the impossible event, and Van observes that, even in writing, his memory has somehow transitioned from his "death" to what happened next with "no perceptible break in the faked serialization" (2. 11. 445).

Paramnesic hallucinations of memory often occur in a certain kind of epilepsy, specifically during the "ecstatic seizures" which trigger an "intellectual aura." The aura in this exceptional type of epilepsy is sometimes described, in psychological case studies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, as pleasurable. Some of the surveyed patients in one study even admitted to deliberately triggering a seizure at some point, before their condition

worsened.²⁰⁵ Indeed, some of Aqua's symptoms are remarkably similar to these patients', right down to the experienced mix of pleasure and pain:

The dreadful sickness, roughly diagnosed in her case, and in that of other unfortunate people, as an "extreme form of mystical mania combined with existstalienation" (otherwise plain madness), crept over her by degrees, with intervals of ecstatic peace, with skipped areas of precarious sanity, with sudden dreams of eternity-certainty, which grew ever rarer and briefer. (1. 3. 22)

Van also experiences ecstatic seizures like this. His description of the euphoric sensation temporarily afforded him after making love to Ada offers a fine example:

It would not be sufficient to say that in his love-making with Ada he discovered the pang, the *ogon'*, the agony of supreme "reality." Reality, better say, lost the quotes it wore like claws—in a world where independent and original minds must cling to things or pull things apart in order to ward off madness or death (which is the master madness). For one spasm or two, he was safe. For one spasm or two, he was safe. The new naked reality needed no tentacle or anchor; it lasted a moment, but could be repeated as often as he and she were physically able to make love. (1. 35. 219-220)

In a more recent medical study conducted by Bjørn Åsheim Hansen and Eylert Brodtkorb, patients explain that the onset of an ecstatic fit sometimes triggers a sudden and increasing sense of unfamiliarity with their surroundings, a kind of felt encounter with Shklovsky's *ostranenie*. As in Van's case, this is often intermingled with an erotic component. One patient described the feeling as an "oscillating erotic sensation, like twinkling polar light", a "trance of pleasure", with "an emotional wave striking [...] again and again", during which one is "compelled to obey a sort of phenomenon".²⁰⁶ Like Aqua's, Van's seizures grow increasingly unpleasant over time, and they are likened more than once to an epileptic fit:

²⁰⁵ J. Hughlings-Jackson, "On a Particular Variety of Epilepsy ('Intellectual Aura'), One Case With Symptoms of Organic Brain Disease", *Brain*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1888): pp. 182-185.

²⁰⁶ Bjørn Åsheim Hansen and Eylert Brodtkorb, "Partial Epilepsy with 'Ecstatic' Seizures", *Epilepsy & Behavior* 4, Vol. 4, No. 6 (2003): pp. 667-669.

Despite an athletic strength of will, ironization of excessive emotion, and contempt for weepy weaklings, Van was aware of his being apt to suffer uncurbable blubbing fits (rising at times to an epileptic-like pitch, with sudden howls that shook his body, and inexhaustible fluids that stuffed his nose) ever since his break with Ada had led to agonies, which his self-pride and self-concentration had never foreseen in the hedonistic past. (2. 6. 389-390)

In Van's case, the pleasurable erotic component of these kinds of fits appears to have intermeshed fully with his passion for Ada, so much so that her absence during their decades-long period of separation later in the novel—during which the above passage appears—sees his fits become wholly unpleasant. Even once they reunite, just before the death of Ada's doddering husband Andrey Vinelander, Van's exercise of his withering and cruel wit on Ada is accompanied by the physical pain of one of these fits:

As had been peculiar to his nature even in the days of his youth, Van was apt to relieve a passion of anger and disappointment by means of bombastic and arcane utterances which hurt like a jagged fingernail caught in satin, the lining of Hell. (3. 8. 530)

On this occasion, Ada is forced to repeat herself to an enraged Van in a manner that recalls “a fool dealing with an epileptic” (3. 8. 530). There is further evidence to suggest that the elder Van, our narrator, also suffers from similarly blinding and cruel outbursts, vituperatively referring to a comment made by his half-sister: “a mistake on silly Lucette's part.” Indeed, Lucette's comment triggered an extended tirade from his younger self, during which he “went on in a madman's voice so well controlled that it sounded overpedantic [...] rocking this side and that with clenched hands and furrowed brow” (2. 5. 380). Taken together, these pieces of evidence make a case that Van's narration, complete with its arcane inter- and intra-textual parodies and allusions piling up layers deep, acquires some of its murky quality from paramnesic malfunctions of memory.

In an essay on “Inspiration” (1972), Nabokov himself may have hinted, with tantalising (and teasing) subtlety, that something like paramnesic warpings of perception had been overlooked by readers of *Ada*. In his lecture on *Bleak house*, Nabokov describes one of the crucial symptoms of “aesthetic bliss” as a “tell-tale tingle” one feels “between the shoulder blades.”²⁰⁷ “Inspiration” sees Nabokov revisit that tell-tale tingle, this time paying particular attention to both the artist’s process and to *Ada*, then his most recent novel:

A prefatory glow, not unlike some benign variety of the aura before an epileptic attack, is something an artist learns to perceive very early in life. This feeling of tickly well-being branches through him like the red and the blue in the picture of a skinned man under Circulation. As it spreads, it banishes all awareness of physical discomfort—youth’s toothache as well as the neuralgia of old age. The beauty is that, while completely intelligible (as if it were connected with a known gland or led to an expected climax), it has neither source nor object. It expands, glows, and subsides without revealing its secret. In the meantime, however, a window has opened, an auroral wind has blown, and every exposed nerve has tingled.²⁰⁸

The essay includes an extended quote from the first draft material Nabokov scribbled down for *Ada*, a variation on a scene set in the Villa Venus involving Van and a terrified young concubine. Indeed, the entire first half of “Inspiration” can easily be read as a subtle corrective to early misreadings of *Ada*. Nabokov closes the essay by asserting that every good artist knows how to distinguish the tingle of inspiration from “the froth of a fit”.²⁰⁹ His wording and choice of images throughout this essay closely recalls Van’s epileptic-like fits without overtly linking them. As always, Nabokov leaves enough ambiguity for his reader to draw their own conclusions.

²⁰⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 64.

²⁰⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 309.

²⁰⁹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 311.

Ada's own "tell-tale tingles" are worth pursuing as well. The episode involving Spencer Muldoon, a patient of Van's who was "born eyeless" and suffers both from "fits of violent paranoia" and "a singular case of chromesthesia", is especially revealing. Muldoon's mysterious condition means he can perceive a "gamut of 'stingles'" by stroking the tops of pencils, a sensation likened to "the tingling aftereffects of one's skin contact with stinging nettles" (3. 4. 469). This episode would not necessitate a mention here except that Muldoon's "stingles", or something very much like them, also seem to be experienced by Van, at first subtly but with increasing obtrusiveness as the novel progresses. Two pages into Van's "The Texture of Time", for example, the word "*shchekotiki*" appears. Expressing his thoughts out loud into his speaking-jewel as he perseveres through heavy rain on the motorway, Van fumbles and rummages at once for a road map, for the correct words, and for some precursor to his ideas:

What an effort, what fumbling, what irritating fatigue! [...] And Aurelius Augustinus, too, he, too, in his tussles with the same theme, fifteen hundred years ago, experienced this oddly physical torment of the shallowing mind, the *shchekotiki* (tickles) of approximation, the evasions of cerebral exhaustion—
(4. 1. 537)

While the precursor Van eventually settles on is Saint Augustine (full name Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis), he unknowingly activates a different pre-text. A fuller definition of *shchekotiki* appears in *Bend Sinister*, where Nabokov cites it as an outmoded piece of child-like slang dating back to the Silver Age:

I might start writing the unknown thing I want to write; unknown, except for a vague shoe-shaped outline, the infusorial quiver of which I feel in my restless bones, a feeling of *shchekotiki* (as we used to say in our childhood) half-tingle, half-tickle, when you are trying to remember something or understand something or find something, and probably your bladder is full, and your nerves are on edge, but the combination is on the whole not unpleasant (if not

protracted) and produces a minor orgasm or “*petit éternuement intérieur*” when at last you find the picture-puzzle piece which exactly fits the gap.²¹⁰

This passage reveals that the cursory English-language gloss of *shchekotiki* offered by Van in *Ada*, “tickles”, completely (and, I venture to say, suspiciously) elides the sensation’s other half, its *tingles*. In a sense, *this* is a missing picture-puzzle piece in “The Texture of Time”. Not only is Spencer Muldoon brought to mind by Van’s description of his car’s wiper blade—“the wipers functioning metronomically, chronometrically: the *blind finger* of space poking and tearing the texture of time” (4. 1. 537, my emphasis)—the reader, if they chase up other appearances of the word earlier in Nabokov’s oeuvre, is unexpectedly stung by *shchekotiki*’s papered-over tingles.

Some of the most striking episodes of Van’s hallucinations of memory are preceded by some variant of “sting” or “tingling”, ranging from an “uncanny tingle” during a disquieting anecdote of Lucette’s about Ada’s wedding (3. 5. 481), or a description of how a scene young Van beheld lying in a hammock staring up at a ceiling of stars was to “retingle” (1. 12. 73) later in his life. In every instance, the sting takes on a strong paramnesic tang. In fact, the “tang” itself has concealed another kind of stinging tingle. The Oxford English Dictionary reveals that the word “tang” is a carry-over from Middle English, originally referring to the sting thought to be concealed in a snake or a serpent’s tongue.²¹¹ This, too, “retingles” in the passage Van composes on what seems to be the final night of his life. In what editor Ronald Oranger tells us is a hastily scrawled note written “on a separate writing-pad page” and tucked into the

²¹⁰ Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, pp. 157-158.

²¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, “tang, *n.*”, OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com/view/Entry/197460. Accessed 21 September 2019. Further resonances activate when one remembers the passage in *Speak, Memory*, where Nabokov derides his “miserable” first attempt at writing a poem: “I vaguely remember the mention of ‘memory’s sting’—*vospominan’ya zhalo*”. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 175.

manuscript with instructions to “Insert” it soon after Van’s description of the euphoria of making love to Ada, Van writes the following:

For the sake of the scholars who will read this forbidden memoir with a secret tingle [...]—its author must add in the margin of galley proofs which a bedridden old man heroically corrects (for those slippery long snakes add the last touch to a writer’s woes) [...] the rapture of her identity, placed under the microscope of reality [...] shows a complex system of those subtle bridges which the senses traverse—laughing, embraced, throwing flowers in the air—between membrane and brain, and which always was and is a form of memory, even at the moment of its perception. I am weak. I write badly. I may die tonight. (1. 35. 220)

Once again fantasy races fact in “never-ending rivalry and girl-giggles”, this time “throwing flowers in the air” as they run, and as “those long slippery snakes add the last touch to a writer’s woes”. Van’s euphoric appreciation of Ada, “the rapture of her identity placed under the microscope of reality”, is said to be the glue that has held Van’s manuscript, and indeed his mind and his senses, together. By imparting a “secret tingle” to the scholars he anticipates—or “future recollects”, if we remember our time with Foster—will pick up and read his “forbidden memoir”, Van passes on the euphoric qualities of his paramnesic fits, even as the “snakes” of his now-painful illness sting and consume him.

3.5 Glow-worms, Jigsaw Pieces of Sky, and a Nimbus of Bright Irrelevancy

Late in the novel Van explains that in his old age he has started to notice a recurring pattern in his life: “that furtive, furcating cracks kept appearing in his physical well-being, as if inevitable decomposition were sending out to him, across static gray time, its first emissaries.” (5. 2. 569) As fitting and realistic a description of the natural aging process as this may be, Nabokov is also punning, since in a very real sense Van *has* been seeing emissaries of “furtive, furcating cracks” since he was a boy; they have just been outside his body instead of inside it.

Ada is threaded with descriptions of panoramic expanses extending over Van's head, whether a plaster ceiling or star-filled night sky, and they too begin to take on the kind of "monstrous connotations" (1. 3. 24) Aqua once saw embodied in human-made objects. These expansive vistas develop increasingly bright fissures each time they appear. They begin, quite literally, to tear, with jigsaw pieces of sky falling out and leaving gaping black voids which disturb Van the more the motif recurs.

On his first visit to Ardis, Van chooses a hammock suspended between two trees instead of a bed, so that he may lie staring up at the night sky as he waits for sleep. Though this is early in the novel, and at this point young Van is relatively relaxed, the passage still has an unsettling undercurrent:

Yet, let it be observed (just while the lucifers fly and throb, and an owl hoots—also most rhythmically—in the nearby park) that Van, who at the time had still not really tasted the Terror of Terra—vaguely attributing it, when analyzing his dear unforgettable Aqua's torments, to pernicious fads and popular fantasies—even then, at fourteen, recognized that the old myths, which willed into helpful being a whirl of worlds (no matter how silly and mystical) and situated them within the gray matter of the star-suffused heavens, contained, perhaps, a glowworm of strange truth. His nights in the hammock [...] were now haunted not so much by the agony of his desire for Ada, as by that meaningless space overhead, underhead, everywhere, the demon counterpart of divine time, tingling about him and through him, as it was to retingle—with a little more meaning fortunately—in the last nights of a life, which I do not regret, my love. (1. 12. 73-74)

This haunting "meaningless space" is signposted early on as being destined to "retingle", with "a little more meaning fortunately", at the conclusion of his life.

To understand how this passage "retingles" in the novel's final pages—and in the material Van seems to have drafted on his death-bed—it is worth taking a short detour through a few works by some *Mir iskusstva* artists Nabokov admired. The first is evoked by the "lucifers" which "fly and throb" above the park near the house. Superficially, "lucifers" is just a stylish

moniker for fireflies, whose light-producing enzyme has the scientific name “firefly luciferase”. Yet the passage also evokes Alexandre Benois’ design for the drop curtain for his and Stravinsky’s collaborative effort *Petrushka* (which Nabokov attended as a young man in 1911),²¹² on which more demonic “lucifers” fly across its night-time vista (see *Figure 1*).



Figure 1²¹³

Further, while recalling the shooting star in Benois’ drop curtain, the “glowworm of strange truth” Van’s prose suspends within “the gray matter of star-suffused heavens” also evokes Leon Bakst’s *Terror Antiquus* (1908) (see *Figure 2*). Figuratively, Van is talking about how, staring

²¹² Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “Looking at Harlequins: Nabokov, The World of Art and the Ballet Russes”, in *Nabokov’s World—Volume 2: Reading Nabokov*, ed. Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin, and Pricilla Meyer (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 86.

²¹³ Alexandre Benois, *Petrushka Drop Curtain Designed by A. Benois* (1911), pen, ink, and tempera on paper, (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art).

into the night-sky, he reflects on the fragment of truth that must be hidden in the “whirl of worlds” that comprised “unforgettable Aqua’s torments” about Terra, Antiterra, and an otherworld. Bakst’s painting depicts a similarly vertiginous relationship between two worlds, the present and the ancient past, and like Benois’ it is bifurcated by its own bright “glowworm”.



Figure 2²¹⁴

Bakst was a close friend of the Nabokov family, exerting a considerable influence on a young Vladimir, and it is very unlikely Nabokov would not have remembered one of Bakst’s most

²¹⁴ Leon Bakst, *Terror Antiquus* (1908), oil on canvas, 2.5 x 2.7m. (Saint Petersburg: State Russian Museum).

famous paintings even that much further along in his life; certainly one with “Terror” and/or “Terra” embedded in its title. The bifurcating “glowworm” on Bakst’s canvas also finds a companion in Van’s anecdote about Muldoon. On the night before Van is to transfer Muldoon to Kingston, the “poor fellow” dies, “leaving the entire incident suspended in midair”, both in memory and history, “within a nimbus of bright irrelevancy” (3. 4. 470). One would struggle to find a more fitting and faithful prose description of Bakst’s glowworm than that.

These details become much more important when, later in the novel, Van starts to perceive tears in various canvas-like panoramas above his head, strongly recalling each “nimbus of bright irrelevancy”, and far less “furtive” than those the elderly Van detects in his own aging body. Elsewhere, we are told that Van’s earliest memory is of lying in his crib as a baby, face-up to the ceiling as he would be face-up to the stars in Uncle Ivan’s hammock as a teenager: “a chunk of green plaster ornament, dislodged from the ceiling by an earthquake, crashed into my cradle” (4. 1. 536). This bears a striking resemblance to his description of Aqua’s abnormal object-relations: “Jigsaw pieces of sky or wall came apart, no matter how delicately put together” (1. 3. 25). In one of the most disturbing passages in Nabokov’s body of work, Van attempts to reify his suspended memory of a young Ada into the body of a terrified child-concubine at the Villa Venus. The episode takes place in “what appeared to be a moonlit gallery but was really an abandoned, half-demolished, vast reception room with a broken outer wall, zigzag fissures in the floor, and the black ghost of a gaping grand piano” (2. 3. 356-357). A savage storm rages as he caresses the frightened proxy, tearing pieces from the ceiling and exposing them to the elements, though it is left ambiguous if the storm is predominantly physical or psychological:

Through a great rip in the marbled brick and plaster, the naked sea, not seen but heard as a panting space separated from time, dully boomed, dully withdrew its platter of pebbles, and, with the crumbling sounds, indolent

gusts of warm wind reached the unwalled rooms, disturbing the volutes of shadow [...] Beneath [the ceiling], on a rump-tickling coarse couch, Van reclined, pouting pensively, pensively caressing the pretty head on his chest [...] The child's eyes were closed, and whenever he kissed their moist convex lids the rhythmic motion of her blind breasts changed or stopped altogether, and was presently resumed [...] It was not Ardis, it was not the library, it was not even a human room [...] The ruinous Villa no longer bore any resemblance to Eric's "organised dream," but the soft little creature in Van's desperate grasp was Ada. (2. 3. 357)

With the path of his eyes Van tears what seems to be a literal hole in the "marbelized brick and plaster" over the bed, and a "naked sea" allows "indolent gusts of warm wind" to reach his "unwalled" room. Somehow, the gurgling flow of water has found its way to him, even in the guts of the Villa Venus.

3.6 "What a book, my God, my God..."

By the novel's final chapter, Van's epileptic symptoms have grown horrifically painful: "Sudden ice hurtling down the rain pipe: brokenhearted stalactite" (5. 6. 583). Van explains that he and Ada dismissed his illness "for a whole summer of misery" as little more than a simple "touch of neuralgia." Once properly diagnosed by his Swiss doctor, Lagosse, Van finally admits to himself that, rather than a mere touch, each of his painful fits is more like "[a] giant, with an effort-contorted face, clamping and twisting an engine of agony" (5. 6. 587). This oppressive giant of an epileptic aura seems to have dogged Van's mental state his entire life, in one form or another. Not only have his paramnesic symptoms made it hard for him to distinguish fact from fantasy, we have ample reason to believe that Van's writing has imprinted, and now communicates, the idiosyncratic manner in which his illness sees him experience the world. Whether knowingly, unknowingly, or a mixture of both, Van's narrated world is an unstable blending of contradictions, jarring fantastical elements, and hallucinated temporalities. The psychological novelty of Van's manuscript is all but confirmed when in the final chapter

Van makes passing reference to Dr. Lagosse’s “intense interest in the almost completed but only partly corrected book”, at one point excitedly exclaiming: “‘*Quel livre, mon Dieu, mon Dieu*’” (5. 6. 587)—which translates as: “What a book, my God, my God.”²¹⁵ Van obviously interprets his doctor’s enthusiastic effusion as praise for the quality of his art. In light of his paramnesia, however, it seems just as likely that what Lagosse saw in his patient’s book was a thrilling articulation of a rare psychological condition, and one which may just be astounding enough to attract serious notice from the psychological community. Bold, and possibly farfetched, though this claim may seem, it receives some immediate support on the following page. Van’s editor Ronald Oranger informs us (parenthetically, where many of Nabokov’s best secrets are hidden) that since Van’s death, “Doctor” Lagosse has been made a full Professor (5. 6. 587). In the preface to the English edition of *Glory*—two years after *Ada*’s first publication—Nabokov acknowledges that many of his novels contain subtle paratextual markers that exist to create fictional levels “beyond the time-frame of the novel in an abstraction of the future that the reader can only guess at”.²¹⁶ These are the kinds of markers Tammi means when discussing the “metaliterariness” of *potustoronnost’*, in which “the quest for ‘another world’ spirals back to the problem of unity in the artistic structure.”²¹⁷ *Ada* contains just such a marker in the form of its brief prefatory note:

With the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Oranger,
a few incidental figures,
and some non-American citizens, all the persons
mentioned by name in this book are dead.

²¹⁵ The English translation Nabokov gives in his pseudonymous Vivian Darkbloom notes glosses the French word “*mon*” as “good” rather than “my”: “p. 587. *quell livre* etc.: what a book, good God.” (“Notes to *Ada*—by Vivian Darkbloom”. 606). It remains unclear if we are to attribute this mistake (“mistake”) to Nabokov himself or his Darkbloom persona—I suspect the latter.

²¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory* (1932, Eng. 1971), trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. xiv.

²¹⁷ Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics*, pp. 24-25.

We already know that the non-American Lagosse is still alive, through Oranger's parenthetical acknowledgement of his promotion—confirming that it took place since Van's death. Lagosse's promotion is a significant last-minute revelation. It suggests that what might have been the most interesting thing about Van's manuscript to his doctor was not its art, but Van *himself*. In this reading, Dr. Lagosse would have most likely been struck by the text's unintentionally vivid illustration of how someone with Van's unusual neuro- and psychological ailments experiences his life.

The briefly sketched figure of Lagosse brings to mind another Doctor, Dr. Weber, the psychiatrist in charge of Daniel Paul Schreber, whose illness formed the basis for one of the most famous psychiatric case-studies of the early twentieth century. Schreber penned *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* to explain the complex internal logic of an extensive network of paranoid delusions—including that he was in direct communication with God through the rays of the sun tickling his nerve-endings—and to argue a case for his release from incarceration. Perhaps predictably, his *Memoirs* had the opposite effect, as Dr. Weber's testimony to the court—included as an appendix to most editions of Schreber's book—demonstrates:

[Schreber's *Memoirs*] are not only valuable from the scientific medical [sic] point of view for assessing the total character of his illness, but they also afford ample support of practical value for the understanding of the patient's behaviour. [...]

When one looks at the content of his writings, and takes into consideration the abundance of indiscretions relating to himself and others within them, the unembarrassed detailing of the most doubtful and aesthetically impossible situations and events [...] one finds it quite incomprehensible that a man otherwise tactful and of fine feeling could propose an action which would

²¹⁸ This passage is not assigned a page number in the book. Since the first page of the first chapter is Page 3, and there are several pages between that and the note in question—one simply saying “*Ada*” and another “*Part One*”—and since there are no roman-numerals on any of the pages leading up to this, in a sense the prefatory note comes from nowhere. To me, at least, this seems consistent with Nabokov's sense of humour.

compromise him so severely in the eyes of the public, were not his whole attitude to life pathological, and he unable to see things in their proper perspective, and if the tremendous overvaluation of his own person caused by lack of insight into his illness had not clouded his appreciation of the limitations imposed on man by society.²¹⁹

I have cherry-picked those passages, of course, but Weber could just as easily be talking about Van. Our narrator's abundance of indiscretions extends far beyond his cruel, and "usual", withering wit, from his assault of the underage concubine at the Villa Venus (2. 3. 357) to the blinding of photographer Kim Beauharnais with an alpenstock (2. 11. 441). He certainly overvalues his own person, to paraphrase Weber, and does not understand his limitations. Van expends a great deal of air in his "Treatise" arguing against the existence of the future, and that he personally is immune to death in quite a literal sense—"Who said *I* shall die?" (4. 1. 535). Those concordances aside, however, the point is that Dr. Lagosse could easily be intended to serve a similar narrative function as does an unwitting Dr. Weber in Schreber's book. If Van's memoir was indeed the prestigious discovery that led to Largosse's promotion, it would have had a lot to do with the book's carefully woven network of ecstatic tingles and paramnesic tangs.

²¹⁹ Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), trans. and ed. Ida Macalpine and Richard A. Hunter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 275, 283.

Chapter Four

Lucette's *Potustoronnost'*

4.1 Is *Ada* Didactic?

In this chapter I will challenge Boyd's interpretation of the character Lucette. I agree with Boyd to the extent that I too think Lucette is centrally important to *Ada*, but for different reasons, and with different ramifications for the text as a whole. As with *Pale Fire*, Boyd's reading is hindered not by his carefully assembled quotations and details from the text, but his interpretation of their tone. With the assistance of Naiman and Wood in particular I will argue that Boyd's reading is remarkably inattentive to much of *Ada*'s ambivalence, and to the nature of Lucette's suffering and death. He is so determined to recuperate a "happy ending" for every Nabokov novel that his readings unknowingly contort and reassemble their components into a text more of his own making than his master's.

In Nabokov's—and indeed *Van's*—hands, incongruity becomes the very stuff from which fictional objects are woven, and they are woven deceptively, being given just enough verisimilitude to pass for familiar objects. Yet *Ada* has enough strangeness to consistently surprise us with *balagan*-esque modal shifts. Where Wittgenstein wants to determine what in our senses causes a shift in our perception to take place, and Shklovsky is beguiled by duck-rabbit-like figures themselves (objects embodying opposing tensions), Nabokov is interested in harnessing the jarring transitions between an object's different states. *Ada*'s prose is saturated with potential meanings: hints, connections, double entendres, and suggestions. Aside from the narrative's overtly sexual scenes and subject matter, the seemingly inexhaustible generative charge and potential meanings in *Ada*'s prose suffuse it with erotic suggestiveness.

When Naiman turns his provocative gaze to *Ada* and its scholarship, his book takes an inspired turn. Beginning with a fairly modest recount of Boyd's revulsion at Rowe's analysis of the novel's sexual symbolism, Naiman manages to transcend both approaches. Boyd berates Rowe thoroughly, perhaps because Nabokov did so first in his article "Rowe's Symbols" (included in *Strong Opinions*). Regarding an episode in which Ada tumbles from a tree-branch and winds up with Van's face in her crotch, Boyd grows particularly ornery with his predecessor. The passage from *Ada* unfolds as follows:

Van, in blue gym suit, having worked his way up to a fork just under his agile playmate (who naturally was better acquainted with the tree's intricate map) but not being able to see her face, betokened mute communication by taking her ankle between finger and thumb as *she* would have a closed butterfly. Her bare foot slipped, and the two panting youngsters tangled ignominiously among the branches, in a shower of drupes and leaves, clutching at each other, and the next moment, as they regained a semblance of balance, his expressionless face and cropped head were between her legs and a last fruit fell with a thud—the dropped dot of an inverted exclamation point. She was wearing his wristwatch and a cotton frock. (1. 15. 94)

The analysis from Rowe which drew the ire of both Nabokov and Boyd is this:

"Butterfly," in Nabokov's works, can often be seen to symbolize the female private parts. Above, one has only to read the word *as* as *when* (or especially as *since*) to effect the transformation, which is carefully screened, but not at all encumbered, by the italics of "*she*." [...] Given an "omission of panties," the words "panting" and "branches" construe quite vividly as improper puns. Most vivid of all, however, is Van's (very hidden) "expressionless face."²²⁰

In response, Nabokov thoroughly chastised Rowe, particularly for his Freudian theoretical commitments:

I wish to share with him the following secret: In the case of a certain type of writer it often happens that a whole paragraph or sinuous sentence exists as a discrete organism, with its own imagery, its own invocations, its own bloom,

²²⁰ W. W. Rowe, *Nabokov's Deceptive World* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 113.

and then it is especially precious, and also vulnerable, so that if an outsider, immune to poetry and common sense, injects spurious symbols into it, or actually tampers with its wording (see Mr. Rowe's crass attempt [...]), its magic is replaced by maggots. The various words that Mr. Rowe mistakes for the "symbols" of academic jargon, supposedly planted by an idiotically sly novelist to keep schoolmen busy, are not labels, not pointers, and certainly not the garbage cans of a Viennese tenement, but live fragments of specific description, rudiments of metaphor, and echoes of creative emotion.²²¹

Nabokov's criticism here is extremely broad. He contends that, for writers such as himself, linguistic units exist as "discrete organisms" which evoke, and *invoke*, a certain amount of images, effects, and intra- and extra-textual connections. He, as the author, stands in complete mastery over all of these units, controlling and pre-empting all possible readings in a manner similar to the Joyce-figure in Derrida's essays. And yet these special, "blooming" units of expressive magnificence are tragically vulnerable to the "outsider", who turns its "magic" to "maggots" by extracting or injecting "spurious symbols" or, worse still, tampering with the original wording of their specimens in aid of whatever ill-fated attempt at dissection they always already destined to bungle. This short article is not one of Nabokov's finest moments; and yet he concedes that while what Rowe "mistakes for the 'symbols' of academic jargon" have most certainly not been intentionally planted by him, the linguistic clusters of invention which make up *his* paragraphs and sentences are "live fragments". In other words, Nabokov ever-so-quietly concedes that his compositions take on a life of their own once they leave his pen, allowing that they can have additional resonances beyond those he has foreseen (even if he thinks particular readings, like Rowe's, are deeply mistaken).

Boyd seizes Nabokov's repudiation as if he has been handed a signed permission slip and tears into Rowe himself. What he provides, rather hypocritically, rephrases Nabokov:

²²¹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 305.

Rowe does not explain *why* we should change the words a writer has settled on after long deliberation. But in any case he seems too excited by the possibility of having a vagina in the sentence to think what happens if we do take his suggestion. If we substitute *when* for *as*, we might momentarily construe the meaning to be that Van took Ada by the ankle between finger and thumb when she would have a closed vagina. The subordinate verb however now has a conditional and recurrent value, while the action of the main clause happens only on one occasion. So in fact with the proposed transformation the sentence becomes the impossible: he took her ankle (once), when(ever) she would have a closed vagina. Except that in “would have” the verb “taken” is understood: he took her ankle (once), when(ever) she would have taken a closed vagina. Hmm. Shall we try *since*? He took her ankle since she would have taken a closed vagina. Sigh.²²²

This refutation does not make it into the main body of Boyd’s *Ada* book, but sits instead at the end as an appendix entitled “Spectral Hypotheses”. The appendix begins with an epigram from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* which immediately casts Boyd as a true champion of Nabokov’s cause:

Thus, if I continue to harp
on the subject, I do so for
Sebastian Knight’s sake.²²³

Given that only a few pages later Boyd criticises Rowe for homogenising Nabokov’s works, it seems odd that Boyd would preface his diatribe with a quote, taken completely out of context, from *Sebastian Knight*, seemingly deployed for the sole purpose of making himself look like Nabokov’s more deserving champion. Naiman offers a welcome critique of Boyd’s “Knight of the Order of Nabokov” façade:

Boyd’s insistence on reducing [Rowe’s, then Nabokov’s] text to pure denotation, on straightening out the meaning into paraphrase [...] reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of how erotic suggestion works.²²⁴

²²² Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*, p. 242.

²²³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Ada*, p. 377. Nabokov’s original is not a poem—the enjambment is Boyd’s.

²²⁴ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 257.

In Chapter 1 we explored how Boyd misconstrues the concepts of riddling, solutions, and scholarly dialogue. Naiman teases out the hidden stakes behind Boyd's admonition of Rowe: "Boyd's hostility [...] rests partly on the consequences of Rowe's approach for an ethically oriented, character-centred reading".²²⁵ For Boyd, argues Naiman, "*Ada* succeeds because it is both a beautiful and a subtly didactic work."²²⁶ Naiman claims that in his savage persecution of Rowe for violating one of Nabokov's perceived pet-peeves, Boyd unwittingly promotes a manner of reading that is demonstrably anathema to Nabokov's career-long crusade against didacticism.²²⁷

When read against Boyd's, Naiman's reading of *Ada* is of a deeply agonistic text, in equal parts sexually allusive and sexually frustrated. For Boyd, Lucette is more of a central figure than she may at first appear. Even in death—and, indeed, *because* of it—she unites an otherwise overpoweringly complicated text with a unifying moral. Drawing the text together into a neat coda is not just a side-effect for Boyd, but the purpose of her character. Naiman summarises:

Not surprisingly, Boyd isolates Lucette's drowning as a moment of the book's greatest moral relevance to the reader's extratextual existence. According to Boyd, it is from here that the book sends us spinning back through the text, appalled by the realization that we have been ignoring Lucette's pain and are somewhat complicit in her death. Her fate, he argues, gives us a "healthy" and "stern lesson" that we can take into our real life.²²⁸

²²⁵ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 257.

²²⁶ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 248.

²²⁷ Just a few examples from *Strong Opinions*: "Art is never simple [...] art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex [...] I do not care for the slogan 'art for art's sake' because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists—there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art." Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, pp. 32-33. "[T]he heart is a remarkably stupid reader [...] The middlebrow or the upper Philistine cannot get rid of the furtive feeling that a book, to be great, must deal in great ideas. Oh, I know the type, the dreary type! He likes a good yarn spiced with social comment; he likes to recognize his own thoughts and throes in those of the author; he wants at least one of the characters to be the author's stooge." Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 41.

²²⁸ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 260.

Naiman thinks this “stern lesson” is proffered by Boyd not just because it can translate into the reader’s real life, but also because it allows him “to escape from the control of Ada’s erotic poetics”.²²⁹ This erotic poetics is no small force, and indeed the kind of “erotic suggestion” Naiman argues Boyd misunderstands defines his own deliberately provocative reading of *Ada*.

4.2 Eric Naiman’s Approach to *Ada*

Naiman’s analysis is as complex as it is playful and seductive, and rather difficult to summarise. His through-line entails four recurring letters, emphasised by Van as he narrates—(perhaps dictates)—the traumatic (though lyrically described) death of Lucette:

Although Lucette had never died before—no, *dived* before, Violet—from such a height, in such a disorder of shadows and snaking reflections, she went with hardly a splash through the wave that humped to welcome her. That perfect end was spoiled by her instinctively surfacing in an immediate sweep—instead of surrendering under water to her drugged lassitude as she had planned to do on her last night ashore if it ever did come to this. The silly girl had not rehearsed the technique of suicide as, say, free-fall parachutists do every day in the element of another chapter. Owing to the tumultuous swell and her not being sure which way to peer through the spray and the darkness and her own tentacling hair—t,a,c,l—she could not make out the lights of the liner, an easily imagined many-eyed bulk mightily receding in heartless triumph. Now I’ve lost my next note.

Got it.

(3. 5. 493-494)

Van needs to literally spell out his unusual compound-adjective—“tentacling”, a yoking of “tentacle” and “clinging”—to his well-meaning but slow-witted typist Violet Knox, who has obviously asked how to spell it. His answer, “t,a,c,l”, argues Naiman, has unexpected reverberations elsewhere in the novel, both before and after Lucette’s suicide. In particular,

²²⁹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 260. *Ada* is not italicised in the original.

Naiman singles out a passage over two-hundred pages earlier in which Van describes the visceral relief he gets from having sex with Ada (1. 35. 219-220), which I highlighted in my discussion of Van's paramnesic flashes in Chapter 3. For Naiman, this passage indicates that "sex is the locus of extraverbal reality" for Van.²³⁰ A few textual fragments such as "*cling* to things" and "the new naked reality needed no *tentacle* or anchor" (my emphasis) resonate retroactively with the way Lucette's drowning is described. Naiman's case is aided even further by the recurrence of the "t,a,c,l" motif elsewhere in the novel.

In what might seem at first to be an endorsement of Boyd's reading, Naiman writes:

The connection between the two scenes suggests that Van's and Ada's extratextual reality does have a price—Lucette; their sexual intercourse sends out tentacles that lead to Lucette's suicide. Her death is reality's anchor: this is where the hard lessons of real life begin.²³¹

Yet Naiman's reading is more nuanced. The part about "lessons of real life" beginning at Lucette's death is at least partially ironic; Naiman has only just chastised Boyd for didactic moralising. His own reading is about to dovetail with what is at once a more sophisticated "moral" interpretation than Boyd's, as well as a refutation of that kind of reading.

Knowingly provocative, Naiman postulates that Rowe was correct, even "ingenious", when he pointed out that these four letters, which both "echo verbally and reflect visually" the name Lucette, are markers of posthumous interaction with Van in one of his erotic dreams:

That night, in a post-Moët dream, he sat on the talc of a tropical beach full of sun-baskers, and one moment was rubbing the red, irritated shaft of a writhing boy, and the next was looking through dark glasses at the symmetrical shading on either side of a shining spine with fainter shading between the ribs belonging to Lucette or Ada sitting on a towel at some distance from him. Presently, she turned and lay prone, and she, too, wore sunglasses, and neither he nor she could perceive the exact direction of each other's gaze through the black amber, yet

²³⁰ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 260.

²³¹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 261.

he knew by the dimple of a faint smile that she was looking at his (it had been *his* all the time) raw scarlet. Somebody said, wheeling a table nearby: “It’s one of the Vane sisters,” and he awoke murmuring with professional appreciation the oneiric word-play combining his name and surname [...] (3. 8. 520-521)

“The Vane Sisters” is an important precursor to *Ada* in Nabokov’s oeuvre. It, too, contains subtle markers of both metaphysical and metafictional dimensions of *potustoronnost’*. Its titular sisters, Sybil and Cynthia Vane, somehow manage send a message to the narrator (a former lover of Cynthia) from beyond the grave. He meditates on the possibility of life after death, and idly contemplates his surroundings—including the subtle beauty of some dripping icicles and the shadow-play of a parking meter’s silhouette—as he goes about his business. Though on a surface level his meditations are inconclusive, unbeknownst to him the first letters of each word in his final paragraph comprise a hidden acrostic: “*Icicles by Cynthia. Meter from me Sybil*”.²³² By intertextually referring back to his earlier story, Nabokov signifies its kinship with *Ada*.

Naiman’s interpretation of Van’s dream is that its surface layer of the beach, too-conveniently shaded the colour “talc”, plays a complex game of erotic substitution with Lucette. The “red, irritated shaft of a writhing boy” is at first dislocated from Van himself, before eventually revealing itself to have “been *his* all the time” (3. 8. 520). For Naiman, the insinuation is that until the writhing boy’s shaft is discovered to have been Van’s, Nabokov is playing a game of substitution; our protagonist is experiencing a fraction of the pent-up sexual frustration Lucette died without resolving. Naiman argues it is *she* Van is masturbating; her ghost has somehow piggybacked Van’s dream, and card-tricked herself into his body. This

²³² Vladimir Nabokov, *Nabokov’s Quartet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p. 90.

dislocation is a sign that “the dream marks a life after death for Lucette’s sexual frenzy, even if it has shifted from one sex to the other.”²³³

4.3 Saussure’s Signature (via Jean Starobinski)

Ferdinand de Saussure explored a similar kind of linguistic signature as Lucette’s “t,a,l,c” in a series of notebooks later compiled, edited, and published as *Words Upon Words* by Jean Starobinski. As part of a larger examination of anagrams in ancient literature, and under the heading “Recapitulation”, Saussure describes the kind of language play of the “t,a,l,c” motif. Speaking particularly of the recapitulation of proper names in ancient texts, he establishes the following:

[The] poet must have before him, with a view to forming his lines, the greatest number of potential *phonic fragments* he can draw from the theme. For example, if the theme, or one of its words, is *Hercolei*, he has available to him the fragments *-lei-* or *-co-*, or, with another division of the words, the fragments *-ol-* or *-er-*, and with still another, *rc* or *cl*, etc. [...] He must then compose his piece so that the largest possible number of these fragments is incorporated into his lines, for example, *afleicta*, to recall *Herco-lei*, etc.²³⁴

Saussure also identifies a pair of literary conventions he calls *anaphony* and the *hypogram*, both worth adding to our vocabulary for *Ada*. Where an anagram is a complete recombination of a word, containing all its letters in a different order, anaphony is an “incomplete anagram [...] which is restricted to the imitation of certain syllables but is not obliged to reproduce that word in its entirety.” It can provide “simple assonance” without being a full anagram.²³⁵ As a specific instantiation of anaphony, a hypogram “*inserts a simple name into the complex array*

²³³ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 261.

²³⁴ Jean Starobinski, *Words Upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 12.

²³⁵ Starobinski, *Words Upon Words*, p. 14.

of syllables in a poetic line”.²³⁶ Saussure explains how an author can use anaphony and hypograms to interlace their compositions with different kinds of signatures:

Without any reason for clinging to the term *hypogram*, at which I have lingered, it strikes me that the word answers quite well to what must be designated. It is in no serious disagreement with the meanings *ὑπογράφειν*, *ὑπογραφή*, *ὑπόγραμμα*, etc., if one excepts the single meaning of *signature*, which is only one of the meanings it assumes.

either, *allude to*;

or, *reproduce in writing*, like a notary, a secretary.²³⁷

Starobinski resumes this thread later in his commentary, explaining that the hypogram’s function is “*to recognize and reassemble its leading syllables, as Isis reassembled the dismembered body of Osiris.*”²³⁸ It is also worth noting the accidental confluence between Saussure and *Ada* in Saussure’s word-choice here: for us the word “clinging” is already entangled in Nabokov’s “t,a,l,c” hypogram, via “tentaclinging”. “Tentaclinging” is just one example of how Nabokov deploys hypograms, easily fulfilling Saussure’s criteria: “*by supporting the structure of a line with the sonorous elements of a name, the poet has imposed on himself a supplementary rule in addition to the rules of rhythm.*”²³⁹ It is hardly an accident that three of the four letters in “t,a,l,c” appear in the name “Lucette”. Even given that a soft “c” is not entirely equivalent to a hard “c”, phonetically speaking, Lucette’s signature is still scattered abundantly throughout Van’s prose.

²³⁶ Starobinski, *Words Upon Words*, p. 20. Italics in original.

²³⁷ Starobinski, *Words Upon Words*, p. 17.

²³⁸ Starobinski, *Words Upon Words*, p. 20. Italics in original.

²³⁹ Starobinski, *Words Upon Words*, p. 20. Italics in original.

4.4 Lucette's Irreducible Trauma and its Representation

Van's uncanny "post-Moët dream" is not the only time Lucette appears to infiltrate his sleep. Following the death of Ada's husband, Ada and Van make an abortive attempt to reignite their passion. This seems to have failed at first, and that evening, after Ada's departure, Van takes an extremely potent sleeping pill ("favodorm", a linguistic compound of the Latin *favere*, a favour, and *dorm*, sleep),²⁴⁰ as Lucette did on the *Tobakoff* the night she died. Sapped by tiredness, melancholy, and regret, Van mulls over parts of his treatise on time:

At best, the "future" is the idea of a hypothetical present based on our experience of succession, on our faith in logic and habit. Actually, of course, our hopes can no more bring it into existence than our regrets change the Past. The latter has at least the taste, the tinge, the tang, of our individual being. But the future remains aloof from our fancies and feelings. At every moment it is an infinity of branching possibilities. A determinate scheme would abolish the very notion of time (here the pill floated its first cloudlet) [...] The determinate scheme by stripping the sunrise of its surprise would erase all sunrays— (4. 1. 560-561)

Succumbing to the effects of the pill, Van retires to bed. Here his conscious mind collapses into an eldritch dream, wherein he recapitulates elements of his recent history until he finds himself "speaking in the lecturing hall of a transatlantic liner", and being "sneeringly" asked, by "a bum resembling that hitch-hiker from Hilden", for an explanation of why it is "that in our dreams we know we shall awake, is not that analogous to the certainty of death, and if so, the future—" (4. 1. 561). Naiman argues Lucette's signature is in this dream too, with her signature letters "t,a,l,c" appearing hypogramatically in "transatlantic, lecturing, lecture".²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Jürgen Bodenstein, *The Excitement of Verbal Adventure: A Study of Vladimir Nabokov's English Prose* (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University, 1977), p. 156.

²⁴¹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 262.

Earlier in the chapter, Van's description of the lake at Mont Roux, his and Ada's designated meeting-place, develops organically into a meditation on Lucette's beauty, and associates her with the undulating reflections of sunlight on the water's surface:

The wide lovely lake lay in dreamy serenity, fretted with green undulations, ruffled with blue, patched with glades of lucid smoothness between the ackers; and, in the lower right corner of the picture, as if the artist had wished to include a very special example of light, the dazzling wake of the westering sun pulsated through a lakeside lombardy poplar that seemed both liquefied and on fire.
(4. 1. 555)

This is one of the novel's only "calm" aquatic scenes. Lucette is figuratively alive and recapitulated in the lake through particular images and their associative links. The "green undulations, ruffled with blue" evoke her physicality; her green eyes and fiery golden hair are rendered strikingly elsewhere in the novel, through an almost hypogram-like network of recurring images. Perhaps the most memorable image of Lucette's green eyes comes when Van recounts Ada's strategy for continuing their incestuous trysts despite her younger (half-)sister's increasing, and annoying, stamina for shadowing them. Ada's plan is for Van to "fool Lucette by petting her in Ada's presence, while kissing Ada at the same time, and by caressing and kissing Lucette when Ada was away ('in the woods,' 'botanising')." Van retrospectively concedes that the plan "was not simple, was not clever, and moreover worked the wrong way." He wonders idly if she "did it on purpose", to which *we* see an immediate reaction via Ada's parenthetical note in Van's manuscript: "(Strike out, strike out, *please*, Van.)" (1. 34. 213). Here Lucette's innocent, peering, and eventually angry green eyes are sealed in linguistic resin:

[Lucette] increased her momentum so cannily that Ada and her cavalier, in the pardonable blindness of ascending bliss, never once witnessed the instant when the round rosy face with all its freckles aglow swooped up and two green eyes leveled at the astounding tandem. [...] The three of them cuddled and cosseted so frequently and so thoroughly that at last one afternoon on the long-suffering black divan he and Ada could no longer restrain their amorous excitement, and

under the absurd pretext of a hide-and-seek game they locked up Lucette in a closet used for storing bound volumes of *The Kaluga Waters* and *The Lugano Sun*, and frantically made love, while the child knocked and called and kicked until the key fell out and the keyhole turned an angry green. (1. 34. 213)

On the evening leading up to her suicide, Van regards his half-sister lustfully:

Lucette made him think of some acrobatic creature immune to the rough seas. He saw with gentlemanly displeasure that her tilted chin and black wings, and free stride, attracted not only blue innocent eyes but the bold stare of lewd fellow passengers. (3. 5. 486)²⁴²

The pull of Lucette's beauty on the "blue innocent eyes" of other passengers—though with the notable omission of their more licentious stirrings—finds its counterpart in the "green undulations, ruffled with blue" which Van observes on the lake's surface at Mont Roux years later. Perhaps even more striking is the way in which Lucette is made manifest in the "lakeside Lombardy poplar that seemed both liquefied and on fire" (4. 1. 555); "both liquefied and on fire" could just as easily describe Lucette's perpetual state of unrequited yearning for Van.

This network of images reverberates with yet another episode earlier in the novel, in which Van and Ada try to seduce Lucette (part teasingly and part out of boredom). Their assault on Lucette is arresting, and the recurrence of its images and motifs elsewhere in the novel suggests its lasting trauma on their victim; it is certainly no wonder that Lucette's ghost keeps returning to them. Ada entreats Van, her "garden god", to order breakfast by "ring[ing] up room service":

²⁴² Later we learn that Van's prosaic description is far from reliable. One of the last things she says to the kindly Robinsons—whose account of the night has likely made its way to Van via a coroner's report, or from the Robinsons themselves, given he was not present—is this: "I don't know, I'm very tired [...] and the rock and roll are getting worse." (3. 5. 492) This hardly fits the earlier description of her as "immune to the rough seas"; if he was mistaken about this, it also suggests Van may not have paid attention to her emotional fragility in the lead-up to her suicide.

["I refuse to let the staff know that I have two girls in my bed, one (*teste* Flora) is enough for my little needs."

"Little needs!" snorted Lucette. "Let me go, Ada. *I* need a bath, and *he* needs you."

"Pet stays right here," cried audacious Ada, and with one graceful swoop plucked her sister's nightdress off. Involuntarily Lucette bent her head and frail spine; then she lay back on the outer half of Ada's pillow in a martyr's pudibund swoon, her locks spreading their orange blaze against the black velvet of the padded headboard.

"Uncross your arms, silly," ordered Ada and kicked off the top sheet that partly covered six legs. Simultaneously, without turning her head, she slapped furtive Van away from her rear, and with her other hand made magic passes over the small but very pretty breasts, gemmed with sweat, and along the flat palpitating belly of a seasand nymph, down to the firebird seen by Van once, fully fledged now, and as fascinating in its own way as his favorite's blue raven.

[...]

Thus seen from above, as if reflected in the *ciel* mirror that Eric had naively thought up in his Cyprian dreams [...], we have the large island of the bed illumined from our left (Lucette's right) by a lamp burning with a murmuring incandescence on the west-side bedtable. The top sheet and quilt are tumbled at the footboardless south of the island where the newly landed eye starts on its northern trip, up the younger Miss Veen's pried-open legs. A dewdrop on russet moss eventually finds a stylistic response in the aquamarine tear on her flaming cheekbone.

[...]

Sounds have colors, colors have smells. The fire of Lucette's amber runs through the night of Ada's odor and ardor, and stops at the threshold of Van's lavender goat. Ten eager, evil, loving, long fingers belonging to two different young demons caress their helpless bed pet. (2. 8. 418-420)

The narrative action is confined to a picture-frame-shaped setting, described by Johnson as "Synesthesia writ large in a painting".²⁴³ Not only is there a reflection of the living painting on the ceiling, in the "*ciel* mirror", but Van also concludes it all with a perfunctory (and self-congratulatory) "Unsigned and unframed." Lucette's humiliated exit follows: "That about summed it up (for the magical gewgaw liquefied all at once, and Lucette, snatching up her nightdress, escaped to her room)" (2. 8. 420). The "magical gewgaw" which "liquefied all at

²⁴³ D. Barton Johnson, "A Shimmer of Exact Details: *Ada's* Art Gallery", in *Nabokov and The Art of Painting*, ed. Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), p. 133.

once” is the framed *mise-en-scène* itself, with Lucette herself quickly dissolving from view as well.

The mix of aestheticised erotics and emotional cruelty makes this episode an uncomfortable read. Nabokov heightens both at once, hitting his reader with evocative, near-pornographic eroticism at the same time as he unnerves them with Ada and Van’s detached cruelty. Lucette’s intense discomfort is both vividly rendered and unstintingly graphic. The reader’s ambivalent response—arousal and horror—mirrors the ambivalent combination of feelings the abuse stirs in Lucette. She loves Van, and cannot help but let a small “dewdrop” develop on her “russet moss” (her vagina moistens slightly, in other words), which immediately finds its “stylistic relief” in her shame at herself, “in the aquamarine tear on her flaming cheekbone.” She knows she is being toyed with, and feels doubly humiliated; first, for finding herself in such a horrible situation in the first place, and second for unwillingly being aroused by it.

Lucette is linked to flame at least four times throughout the episode—“her locks spreading their orange blaze”, “the firebird seen by Van once, fully fledged now”, “her flaming cheekbone”, “the fire of Lucette’s amber”—and the whole scene is illuminated by a burning, “louder-murmuring”, dorocene lamp—“(et pour cause)” [“and for good reason”]—along with the dancing shadows it casts on the walls. The “good reason” for the water-powered lamp’s “louder-murmuring” seems to be another example of flowing water responding directly to the emotional states of Antiterra’s inhabitants: the “*pour cause*” could be either Lucette’s distress or Van’s lust. Ada, for her part, remains unmoved, either by Lucette’s obvious suffering or by whatever pleasure she may just have taken in her and her brother’s abortive three-way. “She’s terrible nervous, the poor kid,” says Ada, before nonchalantly revealing she instigated the whole affair so they could be rid of her—“You can order that breakfast now” (2. 8. 420).

Following breakfast, Van checks the guestroom for Lucette, but finds only a short note “scrawled in Arlen Eyelid Green” pinned to her pillow, which whimpers the following line: “*Would go mad if remained one more night*” (2. 9. 431). To return to an image from the lakeside at Mont Roux, one could easily, and without much poetic exaggeration, characterise her emotional state—a mixture of sadness, fear, betrayal, and frustrated sexual repression—as being “both liquefied and on fire”, whether or not one chooses to trap the image in a jet-black “lombardy poplar” (4. 1. 555).²⁴⁴

Returning finally to the favodorm slumber at Mont Roux, we follow Van as he walks out onto his hotel balcony overlooking the lake. After a long and lyrical sequence, Van discovers that Ada has returned, is now lodged in the room below him, and is also out on her balcony at that moment admiring the same view. After some (rather soppy) poetic perambulations from Van—“All her flowers turned up to him, beaming, and she made the royal-grant gesture of lifting and offering him the mountains, the mist and the lake with three swans”—they finally speak. Ada reveals what caused her sudden change-of-heart:

“I told him [her driver] to turn,” she said, “somewhere near Morzhey (“moses” or “walruses,” a Russian pun on “Morges”—maybe a mermaid’s message), And you slept, you could sleep!” (4. 1. 562)

Nabokov’s pseudonymous notes, attributed to Vivian Darkbloom (an anagrammed “Vladimir Nabokov”), gloss “mermaid” as an “allusion to Lucette” (“Notes to *Ada*—By Vivian Darkbloom”. 606). Indeed, “mermaid” is one of the many pet-names Van and Ada use for Lucette throughout the novel. Boyd argues that this “mermaid’s message” is “an action

²⁴⁴ Though Van largely leaves his and Ada’s cruelty unchallenged and uninterrogated in his narration, Nabokov was certainly aware of their shortcomings. In a 1969 interview, Nabokov calls Van “the charming villain of my book” and Ada “bitchy and lewd”. Nabokov, “To be Kind, to be Proud, to be Fearless”, p. 155, 157. Audio of this interview is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbtvWnvbXTE>.

manifesting the generosity that characterized her in life, a free gift of kindness that becomes the basis for the happiness of Van and Ada's lives and so of *Ada* itself."²⁴⁵

From a certain angle, Boyd's reading does fit the novel: it expresses what Van and Ada would like to believe, and for their reader to believe, about Lucette. Enamoured as he is by Van and Ada's "forty-five years of faithful and cloudless love",²⁴⁶ Boyd articulates how Lucette's life (and death) appears from the lovers' point of view. Naiman, however, suggests that Lucette's own experience of the other world is quite different. For all the ornate complexity of *Ada*'s prose, the emotional tumult Lucette's abuse stirs in her is excruciatingly clear. Whether her profound distress is transformed into cloudless serenity and kindness by her death remains to be seen.

4.5 Lucette's Posthumous Influence on *Ada*

Boyd argues that the prime mover behind Van's artistic project is a kindly and generous ghost:

Lucette is a ghost who does not return physically yet influences the lives of mortals, her intervention in Van and Ada's lives [is] an act not of revenge but of kindness.²⁴⁷

Boyd's Lucette retains none of the profound sadness which drove her to suicide; she forgives her siblings unconditionally, seemingly because the afterlife is so "unbearably delightful" that she is pleased to have ended up there so quickly.²⁴⁸ These days she is more preoccupied with making sure Van's memoirs are an artistic triumph, working hard as an invisible third co-writer

²⁴⁵ Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, p. 208.

²⁴⁶ Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, p. 209.

²⁴⁷ Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, p. 208.

²⁴⁸ Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, p. 210.

subtly peppering his surroundings with the seeds of inspiration. Let me—or, rather, Boyd—explain:

Van seems to be aware of Lucette's presence no more than the narrator of "The Vane Sisters" can discern the role of Cynthia and Sybil Vane. But if Lucette has inspired Van to write *Ada*, her inspiration shows not only that she forgives Van and Ada for their part in her downfall and not only that she is beyond jealousy and wishes her brother and sister as much happiness as possible in mortal life (for these attitudes are manifest in her turning Ada back down the road to Van in 1922), but also that, in accordance with her deep kindness, she wishes others to share in the happiness of Van and Ada and to be warned of the need for the consideration whose absence contributed to her own suicide. In sending Van and Ada back to an investigation of their past, she generously gives them and their readers a foretaste of the delights of a life beyond time, where consciousness can survey and arrange the past in an endless blend of discovery and creative wonder. When he intimates Lucette's participation in *Ada* Nabokov surely fulfills more completely than he has anywhere else what he has defined as the aim of the greatest fiction, to afford "a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."²⁴⁹

Naiman responds: "Boyd's sanguinity is problematic," he begins, before laying out a counter-reading that manages, with a trickster's glee, to demonstrate the extent to which Boyd's reading is not substantiated by the text.²⁵⁰

First, he argues that the Lucette who posthumously watches over Van and Ada from the otherworld, if that is indeed what she does, clearly "has not been cured of her Ophelian frenzy." A great many of the moments and episodes which recall Lucette also "evoke her libidinally." Boyd assumes that sublime happiness automatically greets Lucette after her death when he should be arguing for it. His reading sees suicide as its own solution; the profound sadness Lucette felt in life not just downplayed, but miraculously negated. Naiman interrogates Boyd's sentimental reading:

²⁴⁹ Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, p. 219.

²⁵⁰ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 263.

Might Lucette's spiritual survival be a survival of "spirit" in the Shakespearean sense, of a perpetually aroused ghost that now truly has only words and letters to play with? Her continued verbal nymphomania would show that [...] she has not escaped the text after all; rather, she continues to observe the lovers as she did in her earlier life. For her and the reader there is no escape from the pleasure and the torture of disembodied language [...] Indeed, the continued presence of Lucette's spirit indicates emphatically that yes, there is lust after death, a kind of disembodied existence where we will suffer the hell of being continually aroused.

[...]

Lucette is a sign sender and code master, but those mermaid's messages are also the sign of her textually eternal sexual martyrdom. Co-creator of the text, Lucette is also the reader who cannot get into it and who cannot be kicked out.²⁵¹

This alternative reading, though deliberately provocative, responds better to the distinctive character of *Ada's* prose than does Boyd's contention. Even the simplest of *Ada's* syntactical units is charged with "Ophelian erotic excitement", for which Naiman argues Lucette's "perpetually aroused ghost" is at least partially responsible.²⁵² He also argues that if Boyd is correct, and Lucette's ghost "inspires" Van to write *Ada*, "Her creative presence would extend to *all* of the memoir, not just to the parts that relate to her posthumous spiritual existence."²⁵³

Perhaps Naiman's most convincing evidence comes from an episode we touched on earlier (via Rowe, and renunciations of same), the erotically-charged moment when Van's lips half-accidentally kiss Ada's thigh after her tumble from "the glossy-limbed shattal tree at the bottom of the garden" (1. 15. 94):

After the first contact, so light, so mute, between his soft lips and her softer skin had been established—high up in that dappled tree, with only that stray ardilla daintily leavesdropping—nothing seemed changed in one sense, all was lost in another. Such contacts evolve their own texture; a tactile sensation is a blind spot; we touch in silhouette. Henceforth, at certain moments of their otherwise indolent days, in certain recurrent circumstances of controlled madness, a secret sign was erected, a veil drawn between him and her— (1. 16. 98)

²⁵¹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, pp. 263-265

²⁵² Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 264.

²⁵³ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 264. Emphasis in Naiman.

Here Naiman goes “t,a,l,c”-hunting again. He notes the latent irony in the sentence fragment “a tactile sensation is a blind spot”, interacting as it does both with the “t,a,l,c” hypogram and Spencer Muldoon. Even more revealing, however, is “that stray ardilla daintily leavesdropping”. “Ardilla” is another (admittedly obscure) name for a squirrel, and is very close to the name Van mistakenly assigns Lucette, the serial eavesdropper, when he first sees her: “Ardelia”. Van also notes that, due to a recent bout of pneumonia, eight-year-old Lucette is “still veiled by an odd air of remoteness that children, especially impish children, retain for some time after brushing through death” (1. 5. 36). The recurrence in both the ardilla and the veil in the “veil drawn between” Van and Ada during the shattal tree scene is yet another instance of Nabokov’s densely interwoven fabric of connections and suggestions. For Lucette to be “veiled” by the odd air of “brushing through” death, rather than *with* it, in her first appearance suggests that, as a textual figure, she already overflows with thematic resonances to other parts of the book. Further, the memorably strange phrase “we touch in silhouette” bears her hypogrammatic signature as well, since, as Naiman argues, “this word, ‘silhouette,’ phonetically [contains] Lucette’s name”, and “will later be used to announce Lucette’s presence in the bar” not long before her death.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, p. 264.

4.6 Paramnesic Flashes of Lucette's Silhouette²⁵⁵

As we explored in Chapter 1, one of the most consistent markers of *potustoronnost'* in Nabokov is when a fictive agent appears to have the ability to manipulate and/or traverse narrative-time. In her capacity as a hidden co-author of Van's *Ada*, Lucette's "spirit" is Nabokov's *potustoronnost'* par excellence, a perfect argument in favour of Tammi's reading of *potustoronnost'* as a balance rather than a choice between the metaphysical and metaliterary. It is through her that *Ada* sees "the quest for 'another world' [spiral] back to the problem of unity in the artistic structure."²⁵⁶ Her hypogrammatic interpolations via the "t,a,l,c" motif having been well established by now, we will now look at how her posthumous presence manifests in one of the novel's paramnesic threads as well. Lucette's spirit is hugely resourceful, and exploits Van's illness (see Chapter 3) to send "a series of receding Lucettes" backwards through time from the point of her death, which drift in and out of view of Van's perceptions throughout his earlier life.

Van often ends up in bars, cafes, or restaurants before his trip with Lucette on the *Tobakoff*. Usually distracted by some more immediate event, at different times (and years apart) he notices an enigmatic figure of a woman in black seated at the bar with her back to him. While visiting *Ada* at her boarding school, Van notices the mysterious silhouette for the first time at the back of a tearoom: "It was empty, save for a slender lady in black velvet, wearing a beautiful black velvet picture hat, who sat with her back to them at a 'tonic bar' and never once turned her head" (1. 27. 169). Much later, Van is dining at "a passably attractive restaurant"

²⁵⁵ Parts of this section appeared, in an earlier form, in David Potter, "Nabokov in Dreamland—Review of *Insomniac Dreams: Experiments with Time by Vladimir Nabokov*", *Sydney Review of Books*, 2018, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/insomniac-dreams-experiments-with-time-vladimir-nabokov/>.

²⁵⁶ Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics*, pp. 24-25.

the night before a duel. Though looking forward to the fight, he is as interested in sex as he is food, and spies what he thinks might be a suitable candidate for the former:

At the far end of the room, on one of the red stools of the burning bar, a graceful harlot in black—tight bodice, wide skirt, long black gloves, black-velvet picture hat—was sucking a golden drink through a straw. In the mirror behind the bar, amid colored glints, he caught a blurred glimpse of her russety blond beauty; he thought he might sample her later on, but when he glanced again she had gone. (1. 42. 307)

This enigmatic thread finally coalesces even later in the narrative. Soon before they board the *Tobakoff*, Van discovers her drinking in a bar called Overman's not far from his hotel:

He headed for the bar, and as he was in the act of wiping the lenses of his black-framed spectacles, made out, through the optical mist (Space's recent revenge!), the girl whose silhouette he recalled having seen now and then (much more distinctly!) ever since his pubescence, passing alone, drinking alone, always alone, like Blok's *Incognita* [...] She wore a high-necked, long-sleeved romantic black dress with an ample skirt, fitted bodice and ruffy collar, from the black soft corolla of which her long neck gracefully rose [...] From under the wavy wide brim of her floppy hat of black faille, with a great black bow surmounting it, a spiral of intentionally disarranged, expertly curled bright copper descends her flaming cheek, and the light of the bar's "gem bulbs" plays on her bouffant front hair, which, as seen laterally, convexes from beneath the extravagant brim of the picture hat right down to her long thin eyebrow. (3. 3 460-461)

Aside from Lucette's silhouette, and the veil of "optical mist", this passage contains yet another telling intertextual reference. The Aleksandr Blok play Nabokov references, *Neznakomka*, commonly translated as *The Unknown Woman*, revolves around a timeless figure such as Lucette becomes after her death. Blok's Unknown Woman is a concatenation of divine mystery and earthly passion, manifesting to the poet-hero (or "Blue One") in a dreamlike between-space, as "a beautiful woman in black" with a "pale, falling brilliance." "She, like a statue, waits" for

the poet to meet her on a bridge in Saint Petersburg.²⁵⁷ Time dilates and contracts at once when they meet, as if they only share a brief moment together as separate time-streams momentarily cross:

BLUE ONE.
Centuries flowed by like dreams.
I have waited so long for you on this earth.

UNKNOWN WOMAN.
Centuries flowed by like moments
In space. I glided as a star.²⁵⁸

When Van finally catches up to Lucette in Overman's, he experiences a similar kind of time-bending alongside his moment of enigmatic revelation: "It was a queer feeling—as of something replayed by mistake, part of a sentence misplaced on the proof sheet, a scene run prematurely, a repeated blemish, a wrong turn of time." (3. 3. 460) The moment of Lucette's death stirs up even more time-bending ripples:

As she began losing track of herself, she thought it proper to inform a series of receding Lucettes—telling them to pass it on and on in a trick-crystal regression—that what death amounted to was only a more complete assortment of the infinite fractions of solitude. (3. 5. 494)

One could easily dismiss these receding, regressing Lucettes as a simple case of foreshadowing, but I think that would be a misreading of this narrative thread, which depends on an idiosyncratic blending of prolepsis, paramnesia, and *balagan*-esque shifts both in Van's perceptions and *Ada*'s storyworld. Lucette's recurring silhouette is a tangible "leak", in Johnson's sense of the word, from one world to another, a clear instance in which "Signs and

²⁵⁷ Aleksandr Blok, *Aleksandr Blok's Trilogy of Lyric Dramas: A Puppet Show, The King on the Square, and The Unknown Woman*, trans. and ed. Timothy C. Westphalen (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 103.

²⁵⁸ Blok, *Aleksandr Blok's Trilogy of Lyric Dramas*, p. 104. Emphasis in stage directions.

portents of the other world leak through, influencing, and sometimes controlling, the events of the novel's 'primary' world."²⁵⁹

4.7 Ardor, or *Ada* ("Hell")—Unbearable Delight or Hopeless Inferno?

Naiman's reading of Lucette's posthumous existence, frozen forever in a state of unreconciled lust, recalls Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*. The Second Circle of Hell is reserved for the lustful, along with those who died in circumstances relating to their aberrant sexual desire. Virgil names "more than a thousand shades" for Dante, "departed from our life because of love" (ll. 67-69), among them Paris and Helen of Troy, Isolde's lover Tristan, Cleopatra, and Semíramis. An endless storm blows through the Second Circle:

The hellish hurricane, which never rests,
drives on the spirits with its violence:
wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.
[...]
now here, now there, now down, now up, it drives them.
There is no hope that ever comforts them—
no hope for rest and none for lesser pain.²⁶⁰

Dante converses with Francesca da Rimini and her brother-in-law Paolo Malatesta, a pair of shades who are blown through the "hellish hurricane" locked together in an eternal embrace. They are trapped in lust for having read a salacious text about Lancelot, and allowing it to spur them into adultery. Naiman's description of Lucette's posthumous tumult is strikingly similar, arguing she experiences "a kind of disembodied existence where we will suffer the hell of being continually aroused."²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, p. 155.

²⁶⁰ Dante, *The Divine Comedy* (1320), trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), ll. 31-45. Indentation of *terza rima* stanzas preserved from Mandelbaum.

²⁶¹ Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, pp. 263-265

Canto V has had a long afterlife in visual art. The most famous depictions of Dante's lovers, by Ary Scheffer, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Blake, each accentuate a different aspect of their plight. The first panel of Rossetti's triptych depicts Francesca and Paolo's adulterous kiss, with the centre showing Dante and Virgil looking towards the lovers' shades in the right-hand panel, floating together through the Second Circle's "hellish hurricane" (see *Figure 3*). In Scheffer's painting the lovers are naked, frozen as punishment in the middle of an erotic assignation they will never complete (*Figure 4*). Where Rossetti's lovers appear consoled by one another's company, Scheffer's are exhausted and despairing. The lack of hope or comfort in the latter captures the afterlife of Naiman's Lucette, caught in "the hell of being continually aroused" without ever being able to consummate her love for Van.

Boyd's reading of Lucette's posthumous limbo is notably more upbeat:

In allowing such shockingly unforeseen pleasure and new insight into familiar events, Nabokov makes almost unbearably delightful the prospect of an immortality in which such discoveries would be rife [...] If we have been offered this analogy, Lucette, it would appear, has been granted the thing itself. Lucette, always pushed to one side by Van and Ada and the reader, has come almost to dominate the novel. Her fate in life serves as a lens for focussing all the nastiness in Van and Ada and a film for making visible the infrared of evil that Van tries to bleach in the sunshine of his story. But although her death and its ramifications steep the book in an unexpectedly infernal hue, she herself after her death turns the story of Van and Ada into something more radiant than any reader could expect: in making possible the renewed and now flawless love of the aging Van and Ada, she also offers us intimations of a harmony even in this life somehow akin to a tenderness from beyond.²⁶²

While astute enough to register the novel's "infernal hue"—though, given the Russian meaning of "*ada*", his finding this "unexpected" is odd—Boyd still concludes that Lucette's experience of the afterlife is "almost unbearably delightful". This is precisely the kind of "deeply trivializing" reading Wood criticises in his reader's report to Boyd's *Pale Fire* study: "The

²⁶² Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada*, p. 210.

trouble with it is its cost, what you have to take with it and give up because of it. . . . Death itself is diminished, its horror is cancelled, and a desperate sentimentality beckons.”²⁶³ Even Dante, a Fourteenth-century Catholic, is more attentive and compassionate to the lovers’ fate, the details of their suffering, and the manner of their deaths, than Boyd is to Lucette:

When I replied, my words began: “Alas,
how many gentle thoughts, how deep a longing,
had led them to the agonizing pass!”
Then I addressed my speech again to them,
and I began: “Francesca, your afflictions
move me to tears of sorrow and of pity.
But tell me, in the time of gentle sighs,
with what and in what way did Love allow you
to recognize your still uncertain longings?”
[...]
And while [Francesca] said these words to me,
[Paulo] wept, so that—because of pity—
I fainted, as if I had met my death.
And then I fell as a dead body falls.²⁶⁴

Blake’s watercolour depicts Dante after his collapse. The lovers themselves are less prominent than in Rossetti and Scheffer, with Blake’s focus being on the spiralling conflagration of sinners and its overpowering effect on Dante. Francesca and Paulo float apart from the rest in the centre of a whitened halo at the top-right of the frame, curiously tranquil considering their hopeless state in the original text (see *Figure 5*). Blake’s depiction of Dante’s fainting is faithful, though the kind of peaceful salvation he affords the lovers is not unlike that which Boyd imagines for Lucette. Blake is an artist, however, and Boyd is a critic, one who stakes a serious claim on a methodology that can arrive at “real” solutions to his source material. That Blake’s watercolour takes some liberties in its artistic reimagining is to be expected; in Boyd, however, it is worrisome.

²⁶³ Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire*, p. 257. Formatting and (unbracketed) ellipses of Wood’s report is Boyd’s.

²⁶⁴ Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, ll. 112-142.

Taken together, Naiman, Wood, and Dante (along with his followers in visual art) seriously challenge Boyd's reading of Lucette and her posthumous bliss. For his part, Naiman's reading takes into account the fundamental "contradiction and irreconcilability" for which Norman advocates (as we saw in Chapter 1), rather than dogmatically seeking "resolution and harmony".²⁶⁵ At the very least, his self-consciously "preposterous" reading—which actually holds up to scrutiny remarkably well—proves there is an ambivalence to Lucette's posthumous life that Boyd glosses over. Looked at in a certain light, Naiman's reading works as a parody of Boyd's, an exaggerated "be-careful-what-you-wish-for" parable of a flawed reading taken to its absurd conclusion. The difference between their readings is that one takes into account the ambivalence inherent to *Ada*, while the other eschews it.

²⁶⁵ Norman, *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time*, p. 157.



Figure 3²⁶⁶



Figure 4²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (1855), watercolour on paper, 254 x 449 mm. (London: Tate Britain).

²⁶⁷ Ary Scheffer, *Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta Appraised by Dante and Virgil* (1835), oil on canvas, 172.7 x 238.8 cm. (London: The Wallace Collection).



Figure 5²⁶⁸

4.8 Conclusion—Lucette Cannot Be “Solved”

Boyd’s reading risks trivialising Lucette's suffering; at the very least, it overlooks much of it. Lucette commits suicide. To decide, on textual evidence which is ambiguous at best, that miraculously she becomes profoundly, serenely happy, peaceful, satisfied, content, generous, loved, and fulfilled in death, in the otherworld, is to rob her of something more important than a lesson: it robs her of the truth. “Death itself is diminished,” says Wood, “its horror is cancelled”. Lucette’s treatment at the hands of her siblings is so excruciating that rationalising a happier ending for her is tempting, but it is still an escape-hatch, a way out of dealing with

²⁶⁸ William Blake, *The Circle of the Lustful* (1824-1827), pen, ink, and watercolour over pencil on paper, 374 x 530 mm. (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery).

her life as it is in the text, transforming it posthumously into something different, less complicated, less discomfoting, and with a clear “lesson” at the end. Rendering Lucette’s emotional tumult inert is a patronising disservice to the character as Nabokov wrote her, exactly the kind of cruel reduction with which Van or Ada abused her in life. It is not for us as readers to dictate how that character should be feeling, nor how we would prefer she felt. It is our job to read the text as it is, and the Lucette that lurks in the otherworld behind Van’s prose is deeply discontented. She is frozen as *herself* after death, the self who was mistreated and troubled; her collaborative voice, such as it is, reflects that. As with so much in Nabokov, Lucette’s posthumous “spirit” is not there to teach us anything, especially not as part of a didactic cautionary tale. She is just *there*, frozen in eternal lovesickness like Fransceca de Rimino. She is on her own, however, without a Paulo Malatesta to share her terrible solitude.

Where Boyd sees Lucette’s projected otherworld as “almost unbearably delightful”, I am not so convinced. Naiman could have described her posthumous existence in precisely the same words, but he also explains why a perpetual state of unbearable delight might not be the kind of clear-skied bliss Boyd assumes. Naiman’s reading is one that supports as fundamental, without trying to solve or resolve, the novel’s essential ambivalence. The text does not tie itself up as neatly as Boyd thinks. Regardless of how elegantly all the loose ends are tied up in Boyd’s interpretation, and how enticing a happily-ever-after ending can be, Boyd’s interpretation is *not* Nabokov’s novel. *Ada* is still a dangerous novel to try and “sum-up”, a veritable hades—or *ada* (Rus. “hellmouth”)—of depths and contradictions which have no trouble swallowing unwary readers, and scholars, whole and never spitting them back out again.

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