

From *Onegin* to *Ada*: Nabokov's Canon and the Texture of Time

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## ABSTRACT

### From *Onegin* to *Ada*: Nabokov's Canon and the Texture of Time Marijeta Bozovic

The library of existing scholarship on Vladimir Nabokov circles uncomfortably around his annotated translation *Eugene Onegin* (1964) and late English-language novel *Ada, or Ardor* (1969). This dissertation juxtaposes Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* (1825-32) with Nabokov's two most controversial monuments and investigates Nabokov's ambitions to enter a canon of Western masterpieces, re-imagined with Russian literature as a central strain. I interrogate the implied trajectory for Russian *belles lettres*, culminating unexpectedly in a novel written in English and after fifty years of emigration. My subject is Nabokov, but I use this hermetic author to raise broader questions of cultural borrowing, transnational literatures, and struggles with rival canons and media.

Chapter One examines Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, the foundation stone of the Russian canon and a meta-literary fable. Untimely characters pursue one another and the latest Paris and London fashions in a text that performs and portrays anxieties of cultural borrowing and Russia's position vis-à-vis the West. Fears of marginalization are often expressed in terms of time: I use Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* to suggest a global context for the "belated" provinces and fashion-setting centers of cultural capital.

Chapter Two argues that Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*, three-quarters provocation to one-quarter translation, focuses on the Russian poet and his European sources. Nabokov reads *Onegin* as a masterpiece of theft and adaptation: the lengthy notes painstakingly examine precedents, especially in Byron and Chateaubriand, and evaluate for originality by comparison. When does Pushkin engage in derivative "native" imitations, and when in subtle and brilliant parody?

Chapter Three concludes that Nabokov attempts his own timeless masterpiece with *Ada, or Ardor*. Planet Antiterra, Nabokov's personal "world republic of letters," transplants and conflates his beloved literatures. To create this Russo-Franco-Anglophone world, *Ada* lifts lines, characters, and *fabula* from *Onegin* but also from works by Byron and Chateaubriand. A pattern emerges of great English, French, and Russian triads; it repeats more faintly with Dickens, Flaubert, and Tolstoy (Nabokov hoped one day to translate *Anna Karenina*); but the most fraught iteration is Joyce, Proust, and Nabokov himself.

Chapter Four looks at traces of Joyce and Proust in *Ada*. The two modernists serve as signs by which great readers recognize one another, as indexes to the "real" and the beautiful, and as carriers of tradition; but *Ada* subsumes its rivals through imitation and parody. However, the incestuous lovers Ada and Van Veen, heirs to the greatest literary traditions in the world, die childless. Is *Ada* a dead end, Nabokov's *Finnegans Wake*? Or can masterpieces interbreed indefinitely?

Chapter Five examines *Ada* in the context of its working title, *The Texture of Time*. Van is a scholar of Henri Bergson, of the duration of the past into the present, and of spatial metaphors for time. Van aspires to an eternal present, but the one-way time of ordinary mortality threatens to take over the narrative. The structure of the novel mimics Zeno's paradox, famously refuted by the French philosopher: Part Two is roughly half the size of Part One, and so on. The arrow (Ardis in Greek, the name of the Veens' lost

paradise) speeds towards the final target, but the Veens aim for immortality and to die into their book.

Chapter Six turns to the visual arts. Nabokov's novel reads like a gallery, with Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* in pride of place. *Ada* animates the Old Masters, but there are also no fewer than three film adaptations depicted in the novel, betraying an ongoing struggle between the media (and echoing Stanley Kubrick and Nabokov's skirmishes over *Lolita* the film). If it is to survive beyond inbreeding with diminishing results, the novel form must subsume more than its own recent greats.

I conclude with Nabokov as an image in the work of contemporary novelists, a source and a transcultural precursor to a new generation of international writers.

## **From *Onegin* to *Ada*: Nabokov's Canon and the Texture of Time**

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*to my parents*



## Introduction:

### Influence, Translation, Parody, Struggle

How the Romans Enriched Their Language: Imitating the best Greek authors, transforming themselves into them, devouring them; and after having well digested them, converting them into blood and nourishment, taking for themselves, each according to his nature, and the argument he wished to choose, the best author of whom they observed diligently all the most rare and exquisite virtues, and these like shoots, as I have already said, they grafted and applied to their own tongue.

—Joachim du Bellay  
*The Defense and Illustration of the French Language*, 1549<sup>1</sup>

There are *two* goddesses of Eris on earth...The one Eris would a man praise, if he has any sense, likewise the other would he rebuke; for these two goddesses have an entirely distinct character. For the one fosters awful war and strife, the cruel woman!...The high-throned Zeus, however, placed the other Eris in the roots of the earth and among men, as a much better one. She drives even the inept man to work; and should one man lacking in property look upon another man who is wealthy, he will then rush to sow and to plant in the same fashion and to put his house in order; neighbor competes with neighbor, striving toward affluence. Good is this Eris for men. The potter also resents the potter and carpenter the carpenter; the beggar envies the beggar and the poet the poet.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, translating Hesiod  
*Homer's Contest*, 1872<sup>2</sup>

## I. Influencing Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov, one of the most allusive—and elusive—literary grandmasters of the twentieth century, was notoriously cagey on the subject of influence and “family resemblances” to other authors. “I do not believe that any particular writer has had any

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest,” trans. Jordan Dietrich and Janet Lungstrum, in *Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Control*, ed. Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 37-38.

definite influence on me,” he liked to claim consistently and improbably, disputing the eager suggestions of one critic or interviewer after another.<sup>3</sup> And yet in spite of Nabokov’s protests, a veritable library of Nabokov scholarship has sprung up, seemingly in an attempt to do precisely what he sought so passionately to prevent: to fix his meaning, to contextualize Nabokov, to unravel and unmask his similarities to, and perhaps his reliance on, earlier and contemporary writers. Why is this so? What are we after, and what is it that we respond to so strongly as readers, that drives us to such intertextual quests?

I will attempt an answer in the following work. Rather than offer one more study of “Nabokov and Author X,” I hope to use my three principal texts—Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin* (1825-32), Nabokov’s voluminous annotated *Eugene Onegin* translation (1964), and Nabokov’s late English-language novel *Ada, or Ardor* (1969)—to unearth a complicated composite genealogy, along with its stakes and implications. What do we do with these texts? Alexander Gerschenkron has said of Nabokov’s translation that it can and should be studied, but that it cannot be read.<sup>4</sup> Many have responded similarly to *Ada*’s code-switching, trilingualism, and many-layered allusions. The two works are often seen as Nabokov’s most overtly “aristocratic” and solipsistic, and hence as his most controversial monuments. What the critical reaction points to and yet obfuscates is that these are also the most ambitious moments of Nabokov’s career. I will argue that in the one work, Nabokov sought to define a canon of “immortals”; in the other, he meant to enter it himself.

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 46 (hereafter abbreviated as *SO*).

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Gerschenkron, “A Manufactured Monument?” *Modern Philology* 63 (1996): 340.

The controversy and the literary feud that followed the publication of Nabokov's eagerly awaited translation has become the stuff of legend.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, few novels aside from *Finnegans Wake* provoke such critical divergence as *Ada*, acclaimed by some as a masterpiece but viewed by many other readers as Nabokov's fall into indulgent irrelevance. I read *Ada* as Nabokov's self-conscious attempt to create a late-twentieth-century modernist masterpiece: it stands as a monument to the last century's ambitions, and as a masterpiece of contradiction and self-parody. I will try to illuminate Nabokov's new world and to show that the plot predicts the readers' meta-literary discomforts, for the incestuous lovers Van and Ada Veen prove sterile and their bloodline a dead end.

Not least, this study reflects back on Pushkin's seminal novel-in-verse itself. *Evgenii Onegin* is a complex meta-literary fable: untimely or belated characters pursue one another, but also the latest French and English fashions, in a text that both performs and portrays anxieties about literary borrowing, and about Russia's cultural position *vis-à-vis* the capitals of the West. However, was *Onegin* the *Ada* of its era—initially perceived as overly esoteric and preoccupied with meta-literary games, but ultimately influential? How did Pushkin's "novel," after a limited impact on its contemporaries and arguably even on the development of nineteenth-century Russian literature, come to be accepted as the cornerstone of Russian culture in the twentieth century and today?<sup>6</sup> Moreover, how

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<sup>5</sup> I summarize the controversy in my second chapter. Much of the exchange between Nabokov, Robert Lowell, and George Steiner over Nabokov's own translation and Lowell's translations of Mandelstam, was published in the anti-communist and CIA-funded *Encounter*, adding a complicated ideological layer to the literary debate. See Sylvan Fox, "Stephen Spender Quits *Encounter*," *New York Times*, May 8, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Iurii Tynianov, after describing literary tradition as "pushing off from what is already known—a struggle" in his seminal article "Dostoevsky and Gogol (Towards a Theory of Parody)," notes that with less immediate sources and influences, "there is no such contest: these are simply bypassed, with either disavowals or veneration....Precisely such a silent struggle describes the attitude of almost all nineteenth-century Russian literature to Pushkin: evading him, while paying ostensive homage." Iu. N. Tynianov, "Dostoevskii i Gogol' (k teorii parodii)," *Poetika; Istoriiia literatury; Kino* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 37

did *Onegin* finally enter an international tradition and come to influence English-language literature, inspiring the English *Onegin* stanzas of such works as Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) and Diana Burgin's *Richard Burgin: A Life in Verse* (1989)?

Pushkin's belated foreign triumph came after the Nabokov translation and the subsequent controversy. I will argue that Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* intended not only to bring Pushkin back to life, and to promote "his Pushkin" over other readings of the Romantic poet, but even to rewrite history, as George Steiner has claimed that powerful translations can do.<sup>7</sup> The translated *Onegin*, shown through Nabokov's notes to be thoroughly interpenetrated with English and French literature, finally gave Pushkin's original the international status it had hitherto never quite achieved.

In this light, Nabokov's objections to "influence-hunters" suggest more than a struggle to control the interpretation of his own novels, although of course that as well. Nabokov aimed to set the fashion not only in writing but in reading: he had no interest in fitting into someone else's anthology of Russian writers, but instead provided his own transnational literary genealogy coded into the *Commentary to Onegin* and, more overtly and parodically, in the incestuous family trees of *Ada's Antiterra*. Examined, this

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(translations mine unless otherwise noted). Years later, Iurii Lotman summarizes the interpretation that has come to be more or less canonical: "The narrative principles of *Evgenii Onegin* presented a phenomenon so innovative that the literature of Pushkin's time, for the most part, was incapable of evaluating the scale of his artistic breakthrough." *Pushkin: Biografiia pisatel'ia; Stat'i i zametki 1960-1990; "Evgenii Onegin," Kommentarii* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2005), 413.

<sup>7</sup> George Steiner claims that translations introduce "an alternate existence, a 'might have been' or 'is yet to come' into the substance and historical condition of one's own language, literature, and legacy of sensibility.... The hermeneutic of import occurs not only across a linguistic-spatial frontier but also requires a motion across time. What ordinary translation tries to do is 'to produce the text which the foreign poet would have written had he been working in one's own speech now, or more or less now.'" Later he clarifies, "The translator labours to secure a natural habitat for the alien presence which he has imported into his own tongue and cultural setting.... The foreign text is felt to be not so much an import from abroad (suspect by definition) as it is an element out of one's native past. It has been there 'all along' awaiting reprise. It is really a part of one's own tradition temporarily mislaid." See his *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 351-52, 365.

genealogy reveals an implied trajectory for Russian letters, extending from Pushkin's early verse narrative to culminate unexpectedly in a late twentieth-century novel, written in English and after fifty years of emigration. *Ada* is Nabokov's final act of alchemy with the Russian canon. Effectively, he tried to call Antiterra, the peculiar literary planet of *Ada*, into being—to rescue his Russian tradition by translating and annexing it, with pride of place and resisting total assimilation, to a hybrid, if English-dominant canon. As a consequence, the canon of Western masterpieces is re-imagined with Russian literature as central, rather than a marginal strain.

## II. The Problem of Pre-Texts

Writing about Nabokov and Pushkin, as about any writer and a literary “precursor,” or any artist and a cultural tradition, means by necessity writing about time. Literary traditions by definition negotiate between continuity and change, between duration and revolution, between canons and avant-gardes. Jonathan Culler offers a preliminary definition of literature as “a paradoxical institution,” for “to create literature is to write according to existing formulas—to produce something like a sonnet or that follows the conventions of the novel—but it is also to flout those conventions, to go beyond them.” The socio-political implications are no less contradictory: “Literature has been the activity of a cultural elite, and it has been what is sometimes called ‘cultural capital’....But literature cannot be reduced to this conservative social function: it is scarcely the purveyor of ‘family values’ but makes seductive all manner of crimes.”<sup>8</sup> John Milton's Lucifer refuses to serve, and a Romantic tradition is born.

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 40.

The language we use to describe literary apprenticeships, appropriations, and rebellions almost inevitably involves metaphors of biological bloodlines and/or of violent struggle. As most critics agree, the border between aggression and homage is thin.<sup>9</sup> In Russian theoretical thought, Iurii Tynianov's first published work, "Dostoevsky and Gogol (Towards a Theory of Parody)" (1921), has been a springboard for such studies. Tynianov depicts a young Dostoevsky working with Gogolian fragments, openly stylizing and producing variations on his precursor's themes: in early works such as *Poor Folk* (1846), *The Double* (1846), and "The Landlady" (1847) "it remained undecided, which elements in Gogol would prove fundamental to Dostoevsky: it was as if Dostoevsky were sampling different Gogolian practices, piecing them together." Stylization nearly unnoticeably turns to parody and to efforts to improve on Gogol, both stylistically and ethically. In his more mature writing, "the subtle web of stylization/parody over a tragic and complex subject matter comprises Dostoevsky's distinctive grotesque."<sup>10</sup> Thus Dostoevsky moves from being "the new Gogol" or "a young Gogol" to a fully-fledged singular literary identity.

Harold Bloom provocatively popularized the notion of literary family struggle in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *The Western Canon* (1994), embracing the Greek term *agon*. Bloom describes his Canon (defiantly capitalized and singular) as the product of generational and Oedipal struggle: "The tang of originality must always hover in an inaugural aspect of any work that incontestably wins the *agon* with tradition and joins the Canon....The aesthetic and the agonistic are one, according to all the ancient

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Lethem imagines literary appropriation as ecstatic plagiarism, a *mélange* of aggressive homage, in a piece inspired by the controversy over Nabokov's alleged plagiarism of Heinz von Lichberg's "Lolita." See his "The Ecstasy of Influence: a Plagiarism," *Harper's Magazine*, February 2007, 59-71.

<sup>10</sup> Tynianov, "Dostoevskii i Gogol," 43, 46.

Greeks... What Homer teaches is a poetics of conflict, a lesson first learned by his rival Hesiod.”<sup>11</sup> Such a canon rests unapologetically on the ideals of masterpieces and monuments of individual genius; Bloom, not unlike Nabokov in some of his conservative stances, likewise bears aloft the ideals of an earlier twentieth-century era.<sup>12</sup>

But the long last century offers a broad, renewed interest in creative struggle. Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer of the recent *Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Contest* begin with Nietzsche, “the agonal prophet of the postmodern world,”<sup>13</sup> to reclaim agon for a range of approaches. Lungstrum and Sauer argue that, through his very “faith in the literary canon as an infallible product of the agonal scene of literary production and reception... despite its current state of siege in the age of multi-culturalism,” Bloom misses “the irony of the current situation: as past and present minority literature is entering the canon and changing the entire canonization process, it is demonstrating that the agonistic forces of literary production and reception are indeed alive and well.”<sup>14</sup>

Even more recently and also on the left side of the critical spectrum, Pascale Casanova follows in the footsteps of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to imagine a highly combative “world republic of letters,” where national canons compete for prestige and cultural capital. She writes of literary frontiers, “independent of political boundaries, dividing up a world that is secret and yet perceptible by all (especially its most

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<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Trade, 1995), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, sparks fly when Bloom reads Nabokov. Maintaining that it is hardly possible in the modern age to reject Freud, Bloom has called Nabokov a “great (and ignorant, in this) hater of Sigmund Freud,” and added in his analysis of *Lolita*’s finale that “Nabokov would not have appreciated being told that, on Freudian grounds, or reality, Humbert’s transcendence of a lifetime’s perversion is just not persuasive... ‘The overestimation of the object’ was Freud’s grim reduction of romantic love.” Harold Bloom, introduction to *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Lungstrum and Sauer, “Creative Agonistics: An Introduction,” in *Agonistics*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

dispossessed members); territories whose sole value and resource is literature...; a world that has its own capital, its own provinces and borders, in which languages become instruments of power.”<sup>15</sup> Not only is the “Western Canon” under agonistic attack, but there have always been competing centers of literary power with respective canons, and ideologies to push. Casanova’s politically charged vision may seem a strange complement to the aloof Nabokov and the untouchable Pushkin, and yet we will see an awareness of just such outsider status and an eye on the trend-setting European capitals in the works of both Russian writers.

I will borrow another broad model from translation studies: George Steiner describes a fascinatingly similar process of appropriation and transformation in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975). Steiner, another “perfectly normal trilingual child” like Nabokov, draws four basic “movements” to the hermeneutic of translation: trust, aggression, incorporation, and retribution. “The commerce between meanings, between poets, which is translation, is preceded by violent and total incursion,” he writes. “We plunge into the life, into the integral being of the source attempting (vainly) to break through the Narcissus-image which meets us at the surface and, it may be, continues to meet us at considerable depth.”<sup>16</sup> Strangely, Steiner’s four-part hermeneutic of translation bears a family resemblance to Harold Bloom’s “six revisionary ratios” in *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>17</sup> In their attempt to model the relation of text B to text A, both writers

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<sup>15</sup> Casanova, *World Republic*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, 411.

<sup>17</sup> These ratios, which also serve as the subdivisions of the book, are clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis, and apophrades. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).



ultimately have recourse to the mystical in order to describe the process required for a “true” translation, or a “true” work of art.

For that matter, we might even juxtapose with these discussions a suggestive pre-modern model from the *Lives of the Saints*:

Hagiography, constantly repeating itself, is always beginning again. . . . Jerome [in the ordinary *Life of Paul*] forces us to acknowledge the violence of creativity at work in those writerly acts of textual recycling—citation, iteration, imitation, mimicry, dislocation, translation, decomposition, fragmentation, and recombination—through which the Holy Life is produced and again reproduced, never quite the same as before.<sup>18</sup>

We need only recall T. S. Eliot’s writing on the immortal canon to see that the religious origins of the term are never far off, even for the modernists.<sup>19</sup>

What I hope to illustrate in this preliminary overview of suggestive models in several traditions is the *kind* of language, the common metaphors that we use when speaking of influence and traditions. I will circle around such key terms, and make use of these—themselves often embattled—models of creative struggle to fuel my explorations of the canon-fashioning, form-shattering, even demiurgic ambitions of Pushkin and Nabokov in *Onegin* and *Ada*. My dialectics embrace the tension between continuity and change, translation and fiction, and the centers and margins of cultural production. In this way, I hope to reach beyond the limitations of one more influence study.

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<sup>18</sup> Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>19</sup> I have in mind T. S. Eliot’s famous 1919 essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” See his *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976), 47-59.

### III. The Novel, Imitative Desire, and the Russians

“When a painter wants to become famous for his art he tries to imitate the originals of the best masters he knows. . . . In the same way Amadis was the pole, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights, and we others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him”—so opens René Girard’s *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961), with an illustration of Don Quixote’s imitative or “mimetic” desire. Modeling his very passions on chivalric literature, “Don Quixote has surrendered to Amadis the individual’s fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire.”<sup>20</sup> Girard’s well-known study argues that the novel form, beginning with *Don Quixote*, has seen a marked preponderance of characters fashioning themselves quite openly after literary models. Girard concludes that novelistic insight has repeatedly unearthed a great psychological law, that all desire is fundamentally imitative. Whereas the “Romantic revulsion, hatred of society, nostalgia for the desert, just as gregariousness, usually conceal a morbid concern for the Other,” he writes, the great artists of the novel form reveal the genuine hierarchy of desire.<sup>21</sup>

Here we see a particular way of alluding to previous literature: Girard is correct in noting that the novelists he studies (Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky) consistently cast their characters as imitative readers, usually with disastrous or tragicomic consequences. But perhaps the Romantic novel has the advantage of allowing the author to explore certain paradigmatic Romantic stances, while maintaining a distance from the characters and their desires. Both Pushkin’s *Onegin* and Nabokov’s *Ada* are extreme in this regard: *Onegin* is a parody of Byronic demonism and *ennui*,

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<sup>20</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Girard, *Deceit, Desire*, 15.

Tatiana a quick study of the heroines of Sentimental fiction, and the Veens, along with their lost paradise Ardis, are built entirely out of old novels.

Iurii Lotman's readings of *Evgenii Onegin*, in this rare instance in agreement with Nabokov's own *Onegin Commentary*, stress the meta-literary games and parodic appropriations in Pushkin's text. Lotman sees in the technique a distancing effect from the "literariness" of the preceding tradition: by exposing literary behavior and literary expectations as artificial and naïve, Pushkin's novel in verse appears realistic by contrast.

The complex interlacing form of "foreign" and the author's own discourse constitutes the most important characteristic [of the work]....In order to evoke in the reader a sense of simplicity, of natural spoken language, of the lifelike spontaneity of the subject matter and the artlessness of the characters, it was necessary to create a significantly more complicated formal construction than anything seen in the literature of those years. The effect of *simplification* was accomplished at the price of a marked *complication* of the text's structure.<sup>22</sup>

Lotman's ingenious reading acknowledges the art and technical ingenuity of Pushkin's achievement, while simultaneously accounting for the tendency in Russian criticism to experience Pushkin's characters as living people or social archetypes.

However, perhaps there is something distinctively Russian about the imitativeness of *Onegin* as well. The political philosopher Marshall Berman, drawing primarily from the literature of nineteenth-century Petersburg, came up with the compelling notion of an early and powerful Russian "modernism of underdevelopment," a peculiar self-conscious strain to the burgeoning literary tradition. In contrast to the modernization of rapidly advanced nations, he sees an emergent culture based on their echoes and reflections, preserving itself "only through vast reserves of self-irony."<sup>23</sup> Like Casanova's model of

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<sup>22</sup> Lotman, *Pushkin*, 412, 420.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 232.

competitive cultural centers and of outsiders searching for ways both to steal culture and to break in, Berman's view suggests that a sense of cultural belatedness, expressed through imitative and parodic characters, might lead to more innovative literary solutions.

Paradoxically, the marginality of St. Petersburg proved a cultural asset. The literature of a city itself imitative of European metropolises reflected alienation and acute historical self-awareness even before these became the dominant literary trends of Europe. By no coincidence, many of our terms and tools for the study of influence, parody, and intertextuality emerge from studies of the literature of St. Petersburg. Many focus on a slightly later and internationally lauded period in Russian literature: Tynianov's theory of parody stems from Dostoevsky's debt to Gogol; and Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality evolves from work on Mikhail Bakhtin, who also looked to *The Double* as the fountainhead for Dostoevskian polyphony. But Pushkin offers an even earlier and, to Nabokov, far more appealing prototype than Dostoevsky for a Russian tradition of parody and play with precursor texts.

What is by now a commonplace of Slavic Studies—the idea that Russian literature is unusually synthetic—owes a great deal to the example of Pushkin's *Onegin* and to its influential readers. It is in regards to this tradition of Russian imitativeness that *Evgenii Onegin* and *Ada* in turn begin to look even more interesting.

#### **IV. Positioning *Onegin* and *Ada***

My dissertation explores the ways that Pushkin's *Onegin*, Nabokov's *Onegin*, and Nabokov's *Ada* build on allusions to earlier and Western European texts and engage actively with the construction and reconstruction of literary canons. The juxtaposition of

these texts aims to do more than illuminate two controversial works by a crucial but hermetic twentieth-century author: it raises broader questions of cultural borrowing, transnational literatures, and struggles with rival canons, as well as with other media.

Chapter One, “Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin*: The Breguet Keeps Time,” reexamines Pushkin’s *Onegin*, the meta-literary fable that has come to serve as the foundation stone for the Russian canon. While Onegin’s fancy Breguet watch keeps perfect time, Pushkin’s novel in verse teems with anxieties about belatedness: what is fashionable in the provinces is already dated in Moscow or St. Petersburg, and hopelessly behind an imagined London or Paris. Meanwhile, the fantastic meta-literary digressions of *Onegin* circle around questions of “timeliness” in literature. Where does Russian literary fashion stand, in Pushkin’s day, in comparison to European standards and innovations? The text enacts the fear of being disastrously, unfashionably late on the scale of national culture, yet it simultaneously aims to end this literary belatedness by providing Russian letters with a modern and original *chef d’oeuvre*—a verse novel that proved ahead of its time in Russia for nearly a century.

Chapter Two, “Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin*: Readings in the Chateaubyronic Genre,” examines Nabokov’s controversial hybrid project, three-quarters provocation to one-quarter translation, as an autonomous text and as something of an anti-novel in its own right. Nabokov reads Pushkin’s novel as a masterpiece of appropriation and adaptation: the lengthy notes painstakingly trace precedents, especially in Byron and Chateaubriand, and evaluate by comparison. When does Pushkin engage in conventional or derivative “native” imitations, and when in original and subtle parody? Nabokov studies Pushkin’s methods of linguistic/literary synthesis and “acceleration” in the most serious scholarly

endeavor of his life, finding in Pushkin a brilliant example of how to make new out of old, timeless out of belated, and central out of marginal. Nabokov views *Onegin* as the point of origin for the Russian novel, and for Russia's entry into a transnational canon to which he saw himself as heir.

Chapter Three, "Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor: Translating the Russian Novel*," turns to Nabokov's most complicated work of fiction, which I read as his self-conscious and somewhat self-ironizing attempt at a timeless masterpiece. If Pushkin's Russian literature was late to the European stage, Nabokov feared that Russian high culture and literary language had now been prematurely blighted. Mourning what he saw as Russia's brief stretch of cosmopolitan cultural relevance, Nabokov tries to "translate" and annex the best of it to the New World. The mysterious planet Antiterra, which reads as a personal and idiosyncratic "world republic of letters," transplants and conflates all of Nabokov's beloved literatures.<sup>24</sup> To create this Russo-Franco-Anglophone world of literature, *Ada* steals lines, characters, and *fabulae* from *Onegin* but also from works by Byron and Chateaubriand. A pattern emerges of great English, French, and Russian triads; it repeats more faintly with Dickens, Flaubert, and Tolstoy; and the most fraught iteration involves Joyce, Proust, and Nabokov himself.

Chapter Four, "*Ada* and the Modernist Agon: In Pursuit of Joyce and Proust," argues that Nabokov updates the agon to take on his own French and English rivals. In *Ada*, Joyce and Proust serve as secret signs by which great readers recognize one another; as carriers of an eternal truth, mysterious quality, and transnational tradition of human greatness; but also as resources for imitation and parody. Even in this new struggle,

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<sup>24</sup> I borrow Casanova's term, but Nabokov has opposite ideological aims: Casanova exposes "masterpieces" and "geniuses" as complex creations of cultural capital, whereas Nabokov, not unlike T. S. Eliot, whom he claimed to despise, is unwilling to give up on mysterious, immortal, and absolute beauty.

Pushkin remains the model for how to pull off cultural grand theft: in essence, Nabokov tries to do with Joyce and Proust what he claimed that Pushkin had accomplished with Byron and Chateaubriand. *Ada*, which like *Onegin* pursues its project simultaneously on the level of plot and meta-literary reflection, is rife with tongue-in-cheek literary genealogies. However, *Ada* and Van Veen, heirs to the greatest traditions in the world, die childless. Perhaps books share a similar fate—can masterpieces interbreed indefinitely? The ostensible romantic plot of *Ada* hints at the magician’s doubts—we are left with a masterpiece in quotation marks.<sup>25</sup>

Chapter Five, “*Ada*, Bergson, and the Texture of Time,” examines *Ada* in the suggestive context of its working title, *The Texture of Time*. The exploration of time in *Ada* is far more sustained and complex than in any of Nabokov’s other works: how to make sense of time, how to preserve memory?<sup>26</sup> Again the novel nods to the modernist temporal obsessions of Joyce and Proust, and to the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Van Veen is a writer, a lover, a philosopher of time, and reportedly a great Bergson scholar. Bergson’s seminal thoughts on duration, on the perseverance of the past into the present, on the falsity of models for time based on metaphors of space, as well as his cult of subjective and artistic thought, were hugely influential on international modernisms, and perhaps more central to Nabokov than he cared to admit. While Van and *Ada* aspire to an eternal present and try to elude mortality, the one-way arrow (*Ardis* in Greek, the name of the Veens’ lost paradise) of time speeds towards death, the final target.

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<sup>25</sup> For a psycho-literary analysis of Nabokov’s ambivalences, see Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> As Georges Bataille writes, “What we desire is to bring into a world based on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain.” See his *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 18-19.

Chapter Six, “Nabokov’s Words and Moving Images,” turns to a final creative struggle fueling *Ada*, a competition with visual media. Critics commonly stress the painterly sensibility of Nabokov’s verbal art; Nabokov himself emphasized his interest in the possibilities and paradoxes of *Ut pictura poesis*. In *Ada*, Nabokov’s familiar foregrounding of the image translates into a private gallery of Old Masters and other works of art, with a concentrated look at Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. However, there are also no fewer than three fictional film adaptations depicted in the novel, betraying an ongoing struggle between the media and echoing Stanley Kubrick’s and Nabokov’s skirmishes for narrative control over *Lolita* the film. In *Ada*, Nabokov attempts to imitate and improve on the most threatening twentieth-century rival medium. Perhaps this is one way to move beyond inbreeding modernist classics with diminishing results: if it is to survive, the novel form must subsume far more than its own recent greats.

## **V. After *Ada***

Vladimir Nabokov left behind more than the pleasures of his prose: he managed to shift the literary landscape. Great writers and exceptional critics are always the ones re-arranging the prescribed books of tradition, and Nabokov meant to be both. His constant provocations, found in the *Lectures*, in interviews, and in *Strong Opinions*, and embedded in his literary texts, changed both how and whom we read. English-language audiences now know of at least one Russian writer who detested Dostoevsky, and have accepted—whether believing that Nabokov did so satisfactorily or not—that *Evgenii Onegin* must be worth translating. The *Onegin* stanza entered English-language poetry, and after the



publication of Nabokov's last six books the international novel would never be the same. James Wood even suggested that Nabokov's literary style ruined two or three subsequent generations of writers. American pop culture—not to mention more recently, Japanese—shows no signs of shedding his influence. And the study remains to be done of *Ada*'s translations “back” into Russian, and their effect on post-Soviet fiction.

*Ada*'s allusions are striking and maddening enough to have drawn a great deal of critical attention, of which I will make grateful use throughout my study. I have nevertheless found lacking a contextually broad and satisfying reading of its literary games. I try to raise questions that are both specific to the work (e.g. *Ada* seems qualitatively different from Nabokov's other novels, the novel in which he overtly tangles with *Ulysses* and *À la recherche*) and more broadly cultural: can Nabokov rescue his Russian tradition by translating and annexing it to a transnational canon? In recent years, Mikhail Epstein, writing about what he calls “transculture,” has urged us to let go of old binaries and look to the world for examples of creative, possibly transcendent new cultural categories.<sup>27</sup> It is in this light that I want to reconsider the possibilities of *Ada*, and the transnational traditions that such novels might inspire.

Effectively, Nabokov re-negotiates the centrality of Russian literature to an ideal Western canon. In part, *Ada* offers a fairy tale of the world as it should be, in Nabokov's eyes: Russian, French, and English languages and literatures mingle, coexist, and reign supreme on Antiterra, and cultural capital *is* capital. *Ada*'s intellectuals inherit the riches of the world not only figuratively but literally; we might remember *Speak, Memory*'s play on smuggled family jewels versus the authentic inherited cultural treasure. An

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<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 105.

international intellectual aristocracy, much like what Casanova describes in *World Republic of Letters*, is, in Nabokov's defiant world, also the financial ruling elite.

To put it another way: once he broke out of the provincialism of national discourse and began thinking in terms of international reception, Nabokov faced the same problem as had Samuel Beckett: how to write after Joyce and Proust? Critics as diverse as Pascale Casanova and Harold Bloom see Beckett as the terminal point for one powerful trajectory of neo-Romantic culture. Beckett, to escape his cultural baggage, abandoned Dublin for Paris and began writing in French. Divorced from his native English, he could strive for a literature as abstract and hence as international and autonomous as possible.

Nabokov's is the opposite reaction. If Beckett moved forward by subtracting, Nabokov innovates by adding, especially in *Ada*. Russian and French infect his English and history permeates the present; he aims for even greater density, but without losing the seduction of a narrative arc as did *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>28</sup> Like the multi-lingual puns, his allusions double and triple, pointing to film, visual arts, and literary precursors at the same time. Somehow, this exuberance is possible in the New World: not incidentally, Nabokov relocates the capital of culture from Paris to New York. His Manhattan is a glamorous cosmopolitan utopia, the meeting place for the greatest languages and literatures in the world. Even when Van and Ada move to multicultural Switzerland at the novel's end, as Nabokov and Vera did in life, it is only to retire: they withdraw from the center to Europe's quieter periphery.

Exuberance tends to be productive. For all the sense of closure that *Ada* may have had for Nabokov, who would never write anything so indebted to Russian literature again, the

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<sup>28</sup> And yet the two projects, *Ada* and the *Wake*, have a good deal in common: Joyce was also accused of "having created in the *Wake* the ultimate private language." Andrew Schmitz, "The Penman and the Postal-Carrier: Preordained Rivalry in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*," in Lungstrum and Sauer, *Agonistics*, 248.

novel has proven to have an afterlife. We see it in exegetic projects, such as the multi-author *AdaOnline* (appropriate for a novel that in many ways resembles hyper-text) and in literary responses, like Cynthia Zarin's *The Ada Poems*, and the recent bilingual anthology *A Night in Nabokov Hotel*.<sup>29</sup> Read in a new context, the layer-cake of *Ada* seems far from a dead end, but rather opens rich possibilities for new, multi-lingual and transnational canons.

Throughout this dissertation, I will play a number of seemingly contradictory positions against each other. If my analysis of Pushkin, Nabokov, and other “giants” sneaks in a vocabulary of the individual and heroic, it is because such an understanding of authorship is central to the thinking of both of my authors. Nabokov's very insistence on artistic autonomy and literary immortality make him a case study of one side of the twentieth century's major dialectic. As Edmund Wilson said, somewhat ironically, since Wilson could never forgive Nabokov what he understood quite well about an earlier generation:

When the prodigious concerted efforts of the War had ended only in impoverishment and exhaustion for all the European peoples concerned, and in a general feeling of hopelessness about politics, about all attempts to organize men into social units—armies, parties, nations—in the service of some common ideal, for the accomplishment of some particular purpose, the Western mind became peculiarly hospitable to a literature indifferent to action and unconcerned with the group...[But these modernist writers] had maintained an unassailable integrity...It had required a determined independence and an overmastering absorption in literature to remain unshaken by the passions and fears of that time—and in the masterpieces which these scattered and special writers had been producing in isolation, and as it were, secretly, while pandemonium raged without, their justification was plain.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cynthia Zarin, *The Ada Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2010); Anatoly Kudriavitsky, ed., *A Night in Nabokov Hotel: 20 Contemporary Poets from Russia* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (1931, repr.; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 227.

For Nabokov, for numerous immigrants and émigrés, and for so many other twentieth-century writers and critics, the war never ended. It remains to be seen if twenty-first century criticism will forgive and partially rescue such vocabulary from automatic association with the dated and the reactionary.

At the same time, *pace* the great individualist critics and Nabokov himself, I try to modernize the discussion by reintroducing larger cultural pressures. Notions of cultural capital are in no way contradictory with individual projects, as I hope my readings will show. Few today will argue, as Osip Brik did at the turn of the twentieth century, that “even without Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin* would have been written”; it remains no insult to notice that, without a certain set of historical and economic circumstances, there would have been no Pushkin.

My two “giants” are remarkable loci for observing the dialectics of individual and literary tradition. The shifting Russian canon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, simultaneously peripheral and central to an imagined West, makes an especially fascinating field, with relevance for other cultural traditions. Finally, the poetic novel, in Pushkin’s and Nabokov’s different takes, presents an ideally monumental and meta-literary project. As Jonathan Culler writes, “the basic convention which governs the novel...is our expectation that the novel will produce a world.”<sup>31</sup> The poetic novel, in turn, produces a markedly self-conscious and double-layered new world. *Onegin* instantly signals its artificiality as a “novel in verse” through form, rhyme, and meter. Nabokov demonstrates the same degree of artificiality and precision in prose through the use of complex allusions and echoing counterpoint, tightly controlled and signifying structure, as well as virtuoso multi-linguistic play.

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 189.

Ultimately Nabokov's *Ada*, like his *Onegin*, will continue to enrage as many or more than it bewitches. But the enchanter's audacity and desire to control are shot through with brilliance and with self-reflective anxiety. The central aesthetic problem of *Ada*, like any final ethical stance on its heroes, remains painfully open to interpretation.

## Chapter One

### Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*: The Breguet Keeps Time

Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside of literature than the forms of sonata and fugue can exist outside of music.

—Northrop Frye  
*Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957<sup>1</sup>

Pushkin never broke the skeleton of tradition—he merely rearranged its inner organs—with less showy but more vital results.

—Vladimir Nabokov,  
letter to Edmund Wilson, 1942<sup>2</sup>

#### I. Protean Pushkin and the Russian Canon

“*Pushkin nashe vse*” (Pushkin is our everything), asserts Apollon Grigoriev in a much-quoted phrase. It would be the subject of another study, and has been of several, to investigate Pushkin’s eminent appropriability. The uses to which Pushkin has been put are nearly innumerable.<sup>3</sup> We are familiar with Pushkin the literary revolutionary of Visarion Belinsky and his school of social criticism; Pushkin the conservative populist of the Slavophiles; Pushkin the Western-leaning aristocrat; Dostoevsky’s universal Pushkin from the 1880 speech; the “My Pushkins” of so many Russian modernists; the 1937 Pushkin signaling a neoclassicist turn in Soviet art; the African Pushkin; and these are only a few of the most well-known readings.

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<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 73.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview, see the three volumes of *Two Hundred Years of Pushkin*, especially vol. 3: *Pushkin’s Legacy*, ed. Joe Andrew and Robert Reid, *Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2003). The point is driven home by Catriona Kelly’s *A Short Introduction to Russian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), which conjures all of Russian literature from a single Pushkin lyric.

Countless Russian writers have paid obligatory homage to Pushkin for the sake of their own literary credentials: even those, as Tynianov has noted, that seemed to be writing in an entirely different key. As a prime candidate for the origin of the Russian literary canon, the conveniently ambiguous Pushkin could be interpreted to prefigure whatever the desired current trend.<sup>4</sup>

Monika Greenleaf situates the poet's cult in the larger context of Romantic canon-building projects:

Like Shakespeare, or for that matter Goethe, Dante, Mickiewicz, or any of the other “first poets” venerated by Romanticism, Pushkin had to be shown to be seminal, the origin without origin, pregnant with all the forms of his culture. Indeed in Dostoevsky's Christian/Russian variation on this model, not only is the artist's ability to transcend himself as a man reinterpreted as kenosis, but the specifically *Russian* artist's ability to impersonate and incorporate any European nationality testifies to the millennial role of Russian culture itself.<sup>5</sup>

The Russian “first poet” offers a twist on the general Romantic trend: Pushkin opens the fount of Russian letters by performing an alchemical transformation of his Western European sources. As latecomers to the European cultural scene, Russian writers shared with the German Romantics “a fascination with European fashions and an ironic talent for conflating or stepping outside of them.”<sup>6</sup> The putative millennial role of Russian culture—the idea of Russia as an all-encompassing redeemer nation—owes much to Pushkin's *Onegin* and to its powerful later readers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an insight on the qualities that make Pushkin such an ideal screen, one need only try the same feats of appropriation with Vladimir Mayakovsky, as Rossen Djagalov has humorously suggested (in a personal correspondence).

<sup>5</sup> Monika Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> With Lotman, Boris Uspensky, William Todd and many others, Greenleaf writes that Russian culture is marked by “syncretism, the tendency of Russian society and art forms to conflate and play off against each

Pushkin proved brilliantly suited to appropriation. His protean authorial persona evades readers from text to text and his oeuvre covers a broad range of genres and styles, while leaving tantalizing gaps for his heirs.<sup>8</sup> The overarching impression left by his works is “one of accelerated creative diversity and protean potential, full of promise for a Russian literature intent on catching up with centuries of European culture.”<sup>9</sup> Lotman has stressed the accelerated leap forward that *Evgenii Onegin* presented formally, as “a phenomenon so innovative, that the literature of Pushkin’s time, for the most part, was incapable of evaluating the scale of his artistic breakthrough.”<sup>10</sup>

Subsequent generations, however, not only recognized the achievement but selected facets of Pushkin’s work to invent the Russian tradition that they needed. The modernists read Pushkin as one of their own, temporally misplaced and speaking to them over the heads of his contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> The poet-Pushkinists Valerii Briusov, Vladimir Khodasevich, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, and Osip Mandelstam wrote beautiful essays in which they worked out the theories and praxes of their own poetics, projecting Pushkin

against the background of modern poetics and modern poetics against the background of Pushkin, as the combination of possessive adjective and proper name suggests. They testify to the compulsive, perhaps apocalyptic urge of Pushkin’s readers to

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other *simultaneously* ‘multiple modeling systems’ . . . both indigenous and imported, sometimes up-to-the-minute but more often chronologically out of sync with European fashion.” *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> William Todd III argues that Pushkin fused the “various social images of the writer that the ideology and the institutions of his time offered him: the Russian gentleman amateur, the professional European man of letters, the inspired and autonomous poet of the Romantic movement.” *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Lotman, “Chuzhaia rech’ v Evgenii Onegine,” *Pushkin*, 413.

<sup>11</sup> See Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 4-6, for an illuminating short overview of the last two centuries’ famous Pushkinists.



“finish speaking for Pushkin” (*dogovarivat’ za Pushkina*), to fill the structural gaps, supplement the allusions and historical or literary context, and halt the semantic oscillation of his works.<sup>12</sup>

The great critics of the early twentieth century followed in the same vein. Tynianov, his eye conditioned by new media as well as style, inverted value systems to find meaning in rupture and in the “juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements.” The new terminology available to literary criticism borrowed from that of cinema and montage: the Romantic fragment, as a similar principle with a long history in verbal art, was suddenly central both to Pushkin’s greatness and to future Russian poetics.<sup>13</sup>

It is there, or in that spirit, that my Pushkin also picks up. Nabokov, like the Formalist critics, sought to scrape away the accumulated banalities from a reified and kitschified Pushkin in order to build his revised Russian canon on a clean foundation. Pushkin was not only modern but timeless, a paradigm of the heights reached by Russian literature and the eternal model for any Russian writer. Nabokov’s Pushkin emerged out of modernist readings and the modernist sensibility, and in turn proved so provocatively authoritative as to force all subsequent Pushkinists to contend in one way or another with Nabokov’s encyclopedic tomes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Tynianov describes the difficult semantic bridging performed by the reader/viewer of montage or fragment with examples from cinema and from Pushkin: “Big form in literature is not determined by the number of pages, nor is it determined in cinema by footage. The concept of ‘big form’ is related to energy, and should be understood in terms of the level of effort expended by the reader or viewer in construal of the work. Pushkin created big form in verse on the basis of digressions. ‘Prisoner of the Caucasus’ is not any longer than some of Zhukovsky’s epistles, but it is big form because the digressions, which are far from the material of the plot, expand the ‘space’ of the poem to a considerable degree.” Cited by Herbert Eagle, *Russian Formalist Film Theory* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1988), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Todd writes, “Pushkin’s novel has inspired two of the twentieth century’s most subtle critics, Vladimir Nabokov and Iurii Lotman, to illustrate its art with encyclopedic commentaries” (*Fiction and Society*, 106). Greenleaf’s monograph in turn pushes tellingly against Nabokov’s *Onegin*. She concludes that “if American critics are joining their voices to, or raising their voices against, the always ongoing indigenous debate about Pushkin, it means that Pushkin has finally reached the world audience that has always been

In this chapter, I will try to set the foundation for the rest of my study by turning once more to Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, with an eye to the Romantic and modernist interest in Pushkin as the fountainhead of Russian literature. Pushkin's own cultural concerns translate into a meta-literary fable about fashion, timeliness, and eternal art—a novel in verse that performs as well as portrays attempts to accelerate time. Here is yet another Pushkin, colored by the perspectives of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

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*Evgenii Onegin* was written and published “in various media between 1825 and 1832 as separate parts and fragments, detailing (and willfully ignoring) events in its characters’ lives between the late eighteenth century and 1825...and addressing the central literary and ideological issues of the time.”<sup>15</sup> *Onegin* contained enough tantalizing detail to allow Vissarion Belinsky to read it as an encyclopedia of Russian life. Pushkin himself called the separately published first chapter a “description of the social [*svetskaia*] life of a young man from Petersburg at the end of the year 1919.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the novel is also terribly non-chronological and out of step with history: Nabokov argued vehemently that *Onegin* “is not a picture of ‘Russian life’” and that the novel “would disintegrate at once if the French props were removed and if the French impersonators of English and German writers stopped prompting the Russian-speaking heroes and heroines” (2:7-8).

On closer examination, *Onegin* performs sleights of hand with both space and time: English, French, and German literary traditions clash, contradict, and seduce one another

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claimed for him” (*Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 348)—a feat in no small part due to Nabokov’s translation and the subsequent controversy.

<sup>15</sup> Todd, *Fiction and Society*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Richard Gustafson, “The Metaphor of the Seasons in *Evgenij Onegin*,” *SEEJ* 6, no. 1 (1962): 6.

on Pushkin's pages, miraculously resulting in a work of Russian literature. Moreover, by the twentieth century *Onegin* could stand metonymically for the entire grand Russian literary tradition. The existent library of *Onegin* exegesis concludes that Pushkin is "doing something" with the Western literatures that he imitates and engulfs, and that something is often linked with Russia's late arrival on the international literary scene. But by re-reading the text with an eye to its struggles with fashion and timeliness, we can re-contextualize those insights in a useful and productive framework.

All literature manipulates and wrestles with time, but few works are as temporally self-conscious as Pushkin's *Onegin*, or grow that much more so in their subsequent exegesis. Through highly semioticized behavior and through their reading, manners, and dress, the heroes and heroines of Pushkin's text race to catch up with and overtake one another. In the process, they grow painfully aware that fashions are relative, perceiving their distance from the trendsetting capitals in temporal terms. Like James Joyce's culturally colonized Irishmen in *Ulysses*, Pushkin's heroes gaze at each other, or are in turn examined by the narrator, with the growing suspicion that they are the crooked copies of foreign originals.

The text itself follows suit: metaliterary digressions question the timeliness and adequacy of the elegy versus the ode, or the short lyric versus the novel; mourn the dearth of an adequately expressive Russian lexicon; and even lodge complaints about the poet's changing reception in the culturally conservative Russia of the 1830s. Structural interruptions, and what Nabokov has called the "Pursuit" motif of Chapter One further disrupt the expected narrative flow. The novel begins with a death and ends *in medias res*, praising the writer wise enough to know when to stop. Only in Chapter Seven does

the narrator remember to include: “Bless my long labor,/O you, Muse of the Epic...Enough! The load is off my shoulders!/To classicism I have paid my respects:/though late, but there’s an introduction.”<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile *Onegin* echoes with parodic warnings to do things at the appropriate time, advice that the text itself seems unable or unwilling to follow. But does the motif of timeliness reflect an outsider’s anxiety that Russian letters were lagging behind the developments of European Romanticism, or a peerless innovator’s scorn for convention? Or is it possible that *Evgenii Onegin* captures both?

## II. Time Flows Differently in the Provinces: Theorizing Russia and the West

Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1975 cinematic masterpiece *Zerkalo* (*The Mirror*) includes a lengthy quotation from the famous unsent letter that Pushkin wrote to Pyotr Chaadaev in 1836. Chaadaev had decried Russia’s tragic divide from and lag behind Europe in the first of his “Philosophical Letters.” Although the original addressee never saw it, Pushkin’s impassioned reply—that Russia had a unique, if as yet unclear destiny in world history—was to captivate the Russian imagination for the following two centuries.

Here is the oft-quoted segment in the original French, the language to which both Pushkin and Chaadaev turned for philosophical discourse:

*Il n’y a pas de doute que le schisme nous a séparé du reste de l’Europe et que nous n’avons pas participé à aucun des grands événements qui l’ont remuée; mais nous avons eu notre mission à nous. C’est la Russie, c’est son immense étendue qui a absorbé la conquête Mongole. Les tartares n’ont pas osé franchir nos frontières occidentales et nous laisser à dos. Ils se sont retirés vers leurs déserts, et la civilisation chrétienne a été sauvée. Pour cette fin, nous avons dû avoir une existence*

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<sup>17</sup> “Благослови мой долгий труд,/О ты, эпическая муза!” adding humorously, “Довольно. С плеч долой обуза!/Я классицизму отдал честь:/Хоть поздно, а вступление есть,” 7:LV. I give Nabokov’s 1975 revised translation unless stated otherwise. See Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. and ed. Vladimir Nabokov, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

*tout-à-fait à part, qui en nous laissant chrétiens, nous laissait cependant tout-à-fait étrangers au monde chrétien... Vous dites que la source où nous sommes allé puiser le christianisme était impure, que Byzance était méprisante et méprisée etc.—hé, mon ami! Jésus Christ lui-même n'était-il pas né juif et Jérusalem n'était-elle pas la fable des nations? l'évangile en est-il moins admirable?... Quant à notre nullité historique, décidément je ne puis être de votre avis... et (la main sur le coeur) ne trouvez-vous pas quelque chose d'imposant dans la situation actuelle de la Russie, quelque chose qui frappera le futur historien? Croyez vous qu'il nous mettra hors l'Europe? Quoique personnellement attaché de coeur à l'Empereur, je suis loin d'admirer tout ce que je vois autour de moi; comme homme de lettre, je suis aigri; comme homme à préjugés, je suis froissé—mais je vous jure sur mon honneur, que pour rien au monde je n'aurais voulu changer de patrie, ni avoir d'autre histoire que celle de nos ancêtres, telle que Dieu nous l'a donnée. (October 19, 1836)<sup>18</sup>*

Such a letter, with its admixture of national pain and pride, sheds a poignant light on Pushkin's relationship to Russian language and *belles lettres*. He writes in French, at the same time as he insists on Russian cultural singularity, and predicts that the historian of the future will certainly include Russia in the cultural map of Europe. All that is needed is a feat, "*quelque chose qui frappera*," to reconfigure the world. Contextualized by such a letter, Pushkin's translations, imitations, and variations on European literary themes readily suggest a conscious project to accelerate Russian literary time, that is to say, Russia's cultural pursuit of Europe.

Nineteenth-century Russia is hardly singular in suffering over perceived cultural backwardness, and Pushkin's attempt to enliven a national literature through meta-

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<sup>18</sup> "There is no doubt that the schism separated us from the rest of Europe, and that we did not take part in any of the grand events that shook her, but we have had our own mission to fulfill. It is Russia, it is her immense expanses that absorbed the Mongol conquest. The Tatars did not dare to cross our Western borders and leave us at their backs. They turned back to their deserts, and Christian civilization was saved. For this higher end, we had to lead an entirely separate existence, which, while leaving us Christians, nonetheless rendered us completely foreign to the Christian world.... You say that the source from which we drew Christianity was impure, that Byzantium was worthy of and inspired contempt, etc.—O my friend, was not Jesus Christ himself born a Jew and was not Jerusalem the fable of nations? Are the gospels any less admirable for it?... As regards our historical insignificance, decidedly I cannot agree with you.... And don't you find there to be something meaningful in the current position of Russia, something of the sort that may astound a future historian? Do you believe he will situate us outside of Europe? Even though I am devoted to the Emperor personally, I am far from admiring everything that I see around me: as a man of letters, I am irritated; as a man of opinions, I am offended—but I assure you on my honor that I would not exchange my fatherland or wish for any history but that of our ancestors, such as God has given us" (my translation). The complete original is available online at <http://pushkin.niv.ru/pushkin/pisma/687.htm>.

literary synthesis is hardly the first of its kind. Greenleaf's study of Pushkin invokes German self-fashioning and Herder's eighteenth century dictum: "If we do not become Greeks, we will remain barbarians."<sup>19</sup> The impulse on both sides of the East/West culture wars raging in Russian letters was "to locate the present in relation to (sacred) origins, to reinvent a national genealogy" both authentically local and rooted in authoritative models. But we might also compare Pushkin's work to various projects that shaped Europe centuries before. Pushkin's Russian does just what Joachim du Bellay proposed for fifteenth-century French: it imitates, transforms, and devours foreign sources, "and after having well digested them, convert[s] them into blood and nourishment."<sup>20</sup>

Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* offers a global perspective for such national concerns. Casanova spatializes Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital: by combining Bourdieu with the geographical thinking of world systems, she models the distribution of literary capital around the world.<sup>21</sup> The central hypothesis is that there exists a world republic of letters, divided by literary frontiers into

a world that is secret and yet perceptible by all (especially its most dispossessed members); territories whose sole value and resource is literature... a world that has its own capital, its own provinces and borders, in which languages become instruments of power... Rival languages compete for dominance; revolutions are always at once literary and political. The history of these events can be fathomed only by recognizing the existence of a literary measure of time, of a "tempo" peculiar to literature; and by recognizing that this world has its own present—the literary Greenwich meridian.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Even Pushkin cited Lomonosov's 'discovery' of the Greek heritage of Russian linguistic structures as proof of the poetic superiority of the Russian language." Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 29, 62-63.

<sup>20</sup> Casanova, *World Republic*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu extended the concept of capital to include cultural, social, and symbolic capital, arguing that cultural and social practices revealed power dynamics akin to those of economics, most famously in his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Casanova, *World Republic*, 4.

Dominant languages and literatures violently suppress or consume minor ones. A chasm separates capitals from the provinces: in all periods of Western history, an *über*-capital such as Rome or Paris emerges as the center of the cultural world. This center establishes the “now” of fashion, while the rest look on and strive to imitate. Distance from the capital reads as backwardness, for “the aesthetic distance” of a work from the center may be measured by the “temporal remove from the canons that...define the literary present.” On the contrary, a work is said to be “contemporary, that it is more or less current (as opposed to being out of date—temporal metaphors abound in the language of criticism), depending on its proximity to the criteria of modernity; that it is modern or avant-garde.”<sup>23</sup>

Casanova borrows from sociology and anthropology to create an expansive global model for canon-formation and cultural rivalries. While granting the literary world a relative independence, she politicizes what is too often depicted as “peaceful internationalism, a world of free and equal access in which literary recognition is available to all writers, an enchanted world that exists outside time and space and so escapes the mundane conflicts of human history.”<sup>24</sup> Instead she draws attention to the profound cultural conflict fueling the republic of letters, a world where writers from culturally colonized spaces are often called on to make an agonizing decision: to assimilate to a foreign ideal and perpetuate an oppressor culture’s dominance, or to work as national writers with a limited local audience, languishing in the obscurity of their minor (forgotten, neglected, or newly reinvented) native tongue.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 43.

The Algerian writer Mohammed Dib in “Thief of Fire” rawly describes the dilemma of such a cultural outsider:

The poverty of the means granted to him is so impossible to imagine that it appears to defy all credibility. Language, culture, intellectual values, scales of moral values, none of these gifts that one receives in the cradle are of any possible use to him... What to do? The thief gets hold at once of other instruments, ones that have been forged neither for him nor for the ends that he means to pursue. What matters is that they are within his reach and that he can bend them to suit his purposes. The language is not his language, the culture is not the heritage of his ancestors, these turns of thought, these intellectual, ethical categories are not current in his natural environment. How ambiguous are the weapons at his disposal!<sup>25</sup>

Only the greatest writers escape their immediate context for a hard-won creative autonomy: “The modern work is condemned to become dated unless by achieving the status of a classic, it manages to free itself from the fluctuations of taste and critical opinion... to be rescued from aging, by being declared timeless and immortal.”<sup>26</sup>

Presumably a new classic shifts slightly the distribution of cultural capital, reconfiguring the literary map, just as Pushkin’s lines to Chaadaev suggested.

For Casanova, the paradigmatic twentieth-century writers to escape the national/collaborator aporia are Joyce and Beckett.<sup>27</sup> Unwilling to remain in Dublin or to out-English the English in London, Joyce and Beckett both found refuge in the international capital of Paris. Beckett even famously chose to write in French or to self-translate into English, seeking always a language that felt non-native, while Joyce found an English idiom that was his alone.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 220. I cite the translation provided in *World Republic*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>27</sup> Casanova considers Joyce “the inventor of a new aesthetic, political, and above all linguistic solution to literary dependence. There is an international genealogy, then, that includes all the great innovators honored as true liberators in the peripheral lands of literary space, a pantheon of great authors regarded as universal classics” (*World Republic*, 327-28). Such a reading reverberates powerfully with Nabokov’s transnational genealogy; however, Casanova only mentions Nabokov somewhat superficially, as yet another twentieth-century writer who was forced to change languages to survive.



Eastern Europe figures little in *The World Republic of Letters*: most of the territories discussed are either Western European or former colonies.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, Casanova offers tools especially useful for reading Russian cultural history: nineteenth and twentieth-century Russian culture consciously negotiated and competed with Western European centrality, often in terms strikingly similar to Casanova's. Pushkin, and Nabokov a century later, prove archetypal members of the intellectual International.<sup>29</sup>

Marshall Berman looks specifically to Russian literature to suggest another model for cultural appropriation. He draws from Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and others to find in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg a prescient "modernism that arises from backwardness and underdevelopment":

This modernism first arose in Russia, most dramatically in St. Petersburg, in the nineteenth century; in our own era, with the spread of modernization—but generally, as in old Russia, a truncated and warped modernization—it has spread throughout the Third World. The modernism of underdevelopment is forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity, to nourish itself on an intimacy and a struggle with mirages and ghosts. . . . It turns in on itself and tortures itself for its inability to singlehandedly make history—or else throws itself into extravagant attempts to take on itself the whole burden of history. It whips itself into frenzies of self-loathing, and preserves itself only through vast reserves of self-irony. But the bizarre reality from which this modernism grows, and the unbearable pressures under which it moves and lives—social and political pressures as well as spiritual ones—infuse it with a desperate incandescence that Western modernism, so much more at home in the world, can rarely hope to match.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> While acknowledging the existence of centripetal and centrifugal cultural forces, Casanova's book underemphasizes the latter. Centers and peripheries are mutually interdependent: the provincial's hunger for the capital is matched by the urban passion for alterity—the lure of the exotic. Furthermore, Casanova never addresses the differences between literary (primarily or entirely language-based) culture and the other arts. The twentieth century dominates her book, but cinema is entirely absent from consideration. One of the most prevalent responses to the "minor language" paradox has been to write poetry in moving images.

<sup>29</sup> Casanova borrows this term from Valéry Larbaud, Joyce's first editor and translator into French (*World Republic*, 5).

<sup>30</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid*, 232.

Berman emphasizes the self-ironizing imitation arising from political and cultural backwardness, and from the paradox or double marginalization of the Russian writer. However, if Casanova's thief of fire only rarely escapes his circumstances and breaks into a state of autonomy, Berman argues that the "unbearable pressures" of belatedness may in fact lead to better literature. He considers Russian literature the paradigmatic modernism of underdevelopment, something of an unofficial movement to spread from St. Petersburg through much of the Third World in the course of the next century.<sup>31</sup>

Casanova and Berman offer politically charged models for mapping literary patterns and traditions around the world, and draw our attention to the anxieties and paradoxical opportunities available to the local writer working from a position of cultural and economic belatedness. It is the dispossessed members of the world republic of letters who are most aware of the "literary Greenwich meridian" and of their own fraught relationship with literary fashion: in order to be read at all, they must become timeless and international.

### III. "Blest Who...": the Untimely Man

On the level of plot alone, Pushkin's *Onegin* reads as a veritable fable about the untimely man. *Onegin* seems to do everything at the wrong moment, while narrative digressions and didactic asides reinforce the building anxiety over belatedness and poor timing. The most striking and memorable stanza on the topic of timeliness occurs late in the novel:

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<sup>31</sup> The spread of the modernism of underdevelopment, in this reading, seems to overlap with that of socialist politics. Berman's self-conscious outsider is inevitably something of a revolutionary. Thus he stresses Pushkin's putative Decembrism: "In 1832 [Pushkin] began a sequel to his 'novel in verse' *Evgenii Onegin*, in which his aristocratic hero would participate in the December rising. His new canto was written in a code known only to himself" (*All That is Solid*, 181).

<p>Блажен, кто с молодю был молод,          Блажен, кто во-время созрел,          Кто постепенно жизни холод          С летами вытерпеть умел;          Кто странным снам не предавался,          Кто черни светской не чуждался,          Кто в двадцать лет был фронт иль хват,          А в тридцать выгодно женат;          Кто в пятьдесят освободился          От частных и других долгов,          Кто славы, денег и чинов          Спокойно в очередь добился,          О ком твердили целый век:          N. N. прекрасный человек.</p>	<p>Blest who was youthful in his youth;          blest who matured at the right time;          who gradually the chill of life          with years was able to withstand;          who never was addicted to strange dreams;          who did not shun the fashionable rabble;          who was at twenty fop or blade,          and then at thirty, profitably married;          who rid himself at fifty          of private and of other debts;          who fame, money, and rank          in due course calmly gained;          about whom lifelong one kept saying:          N.N. is an excellent man. (8:X)</p>
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Here are the practical, worldly man's beatitudes, parodying the Gospel of St. Mark:  
 blessed are the reasonable and the conformists, for theirs is the kingdom here on earth.

That initial irony aside, the repetitions and list structure genuinely enhance the commonsensical authority of the content. Internal sound echoes hint at an innate reasonableness to its logic; round dates punctuate a philosophy of civilized normality, and the second line's "matured" (*sozrel*) links the "natural" human life to biology.

Characters are likened to flora throughout the novel in verse, nearly always in the context of timeliness: Onegin is prematurely withered; Lensky is blighted on the vine; and Tatiana ripens when her time comes.

There is no room for childhood in this particular list. We meet Pushkin's young characters only at a marriageable age and as budding participants in society. The reader is tricked into sharing the point of view of provincial matchmakers who see in any new bachelor an opportunity: "Wealthy, good-looking, Lenski/was as a suitor everywhere received:/such is the country custom" (2:XII).<sup>32</sup> The accoutrements of age are to be

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<sup>32</sup> "Богат, хорош собою, Ленской;/Везде был принят как жених;/Таков обычай деревенской." These lines are reminiscent of Jane Austen's opening to *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." For Pushkin

acquired sequentially: society, wife, money, status. Life is a straight line, a clear and comprehensible trajectory.

The implication is that time can be measured and broken into controlled intervals. The repeated sounds “*Blazhen, kto,*” “*kto,*” “*o kom,*” are calming and liturgical. Rhymes are simple: nouns mainly rhyme with nouns, verbs with verbs of the same masculine past tense ending, one genitive plural with another. The final *rhyme riche* (*vek/chelovek*) or compound rhyme (*tselyi vek/chelovek*) ends the stanza with the same vaguely suggestive logic: the duration of life and man are equivalent and mutually containing. The model life even stops short of the unpleasant logical conclusion, a model death.

The stanza projecting what might have been Lensky’s life, were it not for the duel, evokes a very different mood:

А может быть и то: поэта  
Обыкновенный ждал удел.  
Прошли бы юности лета:  
В нем пыл души бы охладел.  
Во многом он бы изменился,  
Расстался б с музами, женился,  
В деревне счастлив и рогат  
Носил бы стеганный халат;  
Узнал бы жизнь на самом деле,  
Подагру б в сорок лет имел,  
Пил, ел, скучал, толстел, хирел,  
И наконец в своей постеле  
Скончался б посреди детей,  
Плаксивых баб и лекарей.

And then again: perhaps, the poet  
had a habitual lot awaiting him.  
The years of youth would have elapsed:  
the fervor of the soul cooled down in him.  
He would have changed in many ways,  
have parted with the Muses, married,  
up in the country, happy and cornute,  
have worn a quilted dressing gown;  
learned life in its reality,  
at forty, had the gout,  
drunk, eaten, moped, got fat, decayed,  
and in his bed, at last,  
died in the midst of children,  
weepy females, and medicos. (6:XXXIX)

Here again is the “list of life,” but viewed from an angle grim enough to make us envy Lensky his early exit.

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and Austen, see Catharine Nepomnyashchy, “Jane Austen in Russia: Hidden Presence and Belated Boom,” *The Reception of Jane Austen in Russia*, ed. Anthony Mandal and Brian Southam (London: Continuum, 2007), 334-349.

Yet the moral of the novel, if it exists, and the way it is most often read, condemns the attempt to escape such lists. Onegin does everything at the wrong time. His physical youthfulness contrasts with an affected iciness: in imagery, he is prematurely withered, a blighted bud. Initially this artificiality seems dashingly demonic, but the last chapter sums him up quite mercilessly:

Онегин (вновь займуся им),  
Убив на поединке друга,  
Дожив без цели, без трудов  
До двадцати шести годов,  
Томясь в бездействии досуга  
Без службы, без жены, без дел,  
Ничем заняться не умел.

Onegin (let me take him up again),  
having in single combat killed his friend,  
having lived without a goal, without exertions,  
to the age of twenty-six,  
oppressed by the inertia of leisure,  
without employment, wife, or business,  
could think of nothing to take up. (8:XII)

Onegin has merely survived until the age of twenty-six: his life is a list of missed opportunities and of all he has failed to accomplish. The narrator projects the vector of a socialized, teleological lifespan and then judges the characters according to that pattern. Onegin was neither youthful when young, nor has he ripened with age. He has failed to acquire the signs and symbols that demonstrate progress in life, such as service, spouse, and rank. Worse yet, his *ennui* is no longer in fashion.

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But are we taking *Onegin* dangerously literally? Pushkin's novel in verse, in Lotman's words, "does not only mean what it 'means,' but something else as well."<sup>33</sup> According to Greenleaf, it is precisely in such didactic moments that the text evades our attempts to attribute the represented worldview:

[The] well-nigh proverbial lines represent not mature wisdom, but the ironically "mentioned" common sense of the "collective": "*Blazhen, kto smolodu byl molod, / Blazhen, kto vo vremia sozrel'* (Blest who was youthful in his youth, blest who matured on time) (8,10,1-2). Unexpectedly, the process of maturation... is itself

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<sup>33</sup> Lotman, *Pushkin*, 428.

ironized as an attribute of the crowd into which “we” as readers have been integrated.<sup>34</sup>

There is no consistent dialectical development, not even to an ironic and mature viewpoint: “Demystified clear-sightedness, which would seem to be the logical end of an ironic ‘sentimental education,’ is actually the starting point, which in retrospect will turn out to have been a form of blindness.”<sup>35</sup> Part of the problem is that the demystified viewpoint and the sentimental education are themselves borrowed concepts that already seem dated by the end of the novel.

While Greenleaf reads *Onegin* as “a deliberately fabricated Romantic fragment poem” that consistently refuses closure, Lotman has argued that the serial publication of the text, combined with the fact that the author and the epoch changed over the course of the novel, were “for the most part circumstances external to Pushkin’s original concept. The distinctive characteristics of the novel came together spontaneously and only subsequently were they rendered meaningful by the poet as a conscious principle.”<sup>36</sup>

Most of the satisfying readings of *Onegin* find that the governing principle is a story of meta-literary maturation. Jan Meijer argues that *Onegin* outgrows lyric poetry, leaving behind the eponymous hero and allowing Pushkin alone to go forward.<sup>37</sup> The characters read, write, and misread each other’s “texts,” allowing for subtle play with the conventions of literature and interpretation. In Lotman’s words, “the heroes themselves

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<sup>34</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 244.

<sup>36</sup> Lotman, *Pushkin*, 95.

<sup>37</sup> Jan M. Meijer, “The Digressions in ‘Evgenii Onegin,’” in *Dutch Contributions to the Sixth International Congress of Slavists*, ed. A. G. F. Van Holk (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 122-52.

are drawn into the same literary world as the readers. Their self-interpretations and their grasp of the essence of events are often predicated by various literary clichés.”<sup>38</sup>

Todd elaborates that the “audience (or reader) provides, together with conventional codes, a necessary component of any social act,” and so “the characters, like the poet, must reckon with their audience and reach that audience through, and only through, the conventions of their culture.”<sup>39</sup> Todd’s most appealing contribution is to read the novel as Tatiana’s *bildungsroman*, with the heroine as the closest stand-in for the author, a Pushkin-in-skirts:

The final step in Tatiana’s cultural maturation occurs when she become the hostess of a Petersburg salon and, as a “legislatrix” (8:28) and “goddess” (8:27), imposes what her age considered an aesthetic order upon reality... This achievement [is] almost equal in its emotional range to the novel as a whole... The author-narrator underscores the parallels between her creation and his.<sup>40</sup>

Tatiana takes the “less than inspiring materials of her social situation and shapes them in brilliant fashion” into a recognizably European cultural product.<sup>41</sup> In this reading, Tatiana is the timely woman to Onegin’s untimely man: like the author, she catches up to fashion, overtakes it, and even sets it. However, Tatiana’s accomplishment remains bittersweet. She outpaces Onegin and catches up to the cultural fashions of her day, but what has the fashionably Europeanized Tatiana—or Pushkin at the end of his novel—gained other than a sense of lonely superiority?

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<sup>38</sup> Lotman, *Pushkin*, 444.

<sup>39</sup> Todd, *Fiction and Society*, 124.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Greenleaf adds: “Utterly shaped by the language of novels—*romany*—she sees life as a system of signs, and waits for them to take on the recognizable configuration of some textual ‘original.’ Hence, her first glimpse of Eugene is a recognition scene: ‘*Eto on!*’ (That’s him!)... Tatiana is always the tense semiotician, parsing Eugene’s gestures for his conformity to this or that literary type; conjuring over hot wax and mirrors; conning a book of symbolism... able truly to begin perceiving Eugene only by ‘reading’ the imprint of his thumbnail in the margins of his favorite books. She can ‘perceive’ only another reader, can interpret only another act of reading.” *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 249-50.

Coming back to the leitmotif of “life as a list,” we can turn to the novel’s final stanza:

Блажен, кто праздник жизни рано	Blest who life’s banquet early
Оставил, не допив до дна	left, having not drained to the bottom
Бокала полного вина,	the goblet full of wine;
Кто не дочел ее романа	who did not read life’s novel to the end
И вдруг умел расстаться с ним,	and all at once could part with it
Как я с Онегиным моим.	as I with my Onegin. (8:LI)

Why cut off there, prematurely, without giving us the expected end of the teleological trajectory—Onegin’s marriage or death? We end with Onegin, but the hero, heroine, author, and reader are all left in limbo: it remains fundamentally unclear whether the story, or the meta-literary project that it represents, is finished.<sup>42</sup>

The “Blest who” structure of these final lines echoes the earlier recipe for timeliness, now openly parodic and twisted to implicate the reader. For the author, to be early is even better than being on time, for he sets the fashion and surprises his audience: the writer knows when to stop and the reader should follow suit. If dropping life’s novel or leaving life’s banquet sounds grimly like dying young, by refusing plot closure, Pushkin leaves open the possibility of continuing his story and thus defers another kind of death. Conversely, we might conclude that the untimely Onegin simply fails to find his proper ending: just as he grew jaded too early and loved too late, now he parts ways with his author before the end of the narrative. As a result, Onegin lingers on, unchanging, unfinished, as if vampirically undead. Paradoxically, Onegin’s failures provide Russian literature with a productively open-ended fairy tale, a model for an ambiguous relationship with time, fashion, and the authority of culture-defining centers.

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<sup>42</sup> Nabokov argues that the novel is fundamentally unfinished despite its beautiful formal symmetry; Greenleaf claims that as a Romantic fragment, *Onegin* is perfectly and permanently unfinished.



#### IV. Dandies, Provincial Misses, and Trendsetters

Another word for “timely” is “fashionable.” Pushkin’s heroes run into trouble when they act out of time, affecting *ennui* too young and falling in love too late, but poor timing is even more evident when the characters fail to master the vicissitudes of fashion—a kind of applied timeliness. In *Onegin*, “the shaping force of history manifests itself in the characters’ lives not in the guise of a rapacious Cossack horde...but as change in cultural possibilities and, most importantly, as ‘fashion’.”<sup>43</sup> Pushkin’s characters read, interpret, and evaluate one another as provincial, affected, or stylish according to the prevailing tastes that they follow; there is a distinct and unforgiving Greenwich meridian in fashion. At this moment, to be a member of Russian high society means to dress “according to the latest London fashion, speak and write French, dance the Polish mazurka, and bow with cosmopolitan grace.”<sup>44</sup>

What makes Pushkin’s text so fascinatingly ambiguous and “polyphonic,” to borrow Bakhtin’s term from his writings on Dostoevsky, is the refusal to espouse fully any of the represented styles and ideologies. Some are privileged over others: the timely local life, a “humdrum country idyll,” is not only boring but virtually unnarratable. The heroes are violently liberated through an encounter with foreign customs, but then these too are quickly spent and discarded.

From the perspective of provincial Russian common sense, the timeliest character of all is Olga. Perfectly natural, Olga “bloomed like a hidden lily of the valley/which is

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<sup>43</sup> Todd, *Fiction and Society*, 122.

<sup>44</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 220.

unknown in the dense grass/either to butterflies or bee” (2:XXI).<sup>45</sup> To the point of banality, she is exactly what a country maiden should be: “Always as merry as the morn” (2:XXIII).<sup>46</sup> But Onegin, the narrator, and the reader have long moved on from this ideal:

...но любой роман	...but any novel
Возьмите и найдете верно	take, and you'll surely find
Ее портрет: он очень мил,	her portrait; it is very winsome;
Я прежде сам его любил,	I liked it once myself,
Но надоел он мне безмерно. (2:XXIII)	but it has palled me beyond measure.

Onegin later rankles Lensky with the observation, “In Olga’s features there’s no life,/just as in a Vandyke Madonna” (3:V).<sup>47</sup> Oddly, the fresh and natural younger Larina is too familiar a representation, the typical beauty of a certain kind of novel or painting. The Russian country maiden is but a type, the dated copy of well-known foreign originals.

Olga hardly needs warnings to be young in her youth: she plays with dolls and other children, and at marriageable age falls sweetly in love with her intended. Pushkin does not fail to show that Olga’s timeliness extends to the point of cruelty: “Poor Lensky! Pining away,/she did not weep for long” (7:X).<sup>48</sup> Since it was simply time for her to love and marry, she replaces one lover with another, first in her flirtation with Onegin and then by marrying soon after Lensky’s death.

The pseudo-German Romantic Lensky idealizes all that is natural and unspoiled, and expresses his dismay over Olga’s coquetry precisely in terms of her youth: “Scarce out of swaddling clothes—/and a coquette, a giddy child!/Already she is versed in guile,/already

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<sup>45</sup> “цвела, как ландыш потаенный,/ Незнаемый в траве глухой/Ни мотыльками, ни пчелой.”

<sup>46</sup> “Всегда как утро весела.”

<sup>47</sup> “В чертах у Ольги жизни нет./Точь-в-точь в Вандиковой Мадоне.”

<sup>48</sup> “Мой бедный Ленский! изнывая,/Не долго плакала она.”

to be faithless has been taught” (5:XLV).<sup>49</sup> Lensky has his own conventional timeliness. Also consistently marked by the epithet “the young” or “the youthful Lensky,” he is “in the full bloom of years” (2:VI),<sup>50</sup> and “from the world’s cold depravity/not having yet had time to wither” (2:VII).<sup>51</sup> Despite a foreign education and the influence of his dangerous older friend, no premature blight darkens Lensky’s bloom. The affected melancholy of his verse remains purely theoretical, and he hardly seeks a “Svetlana” (the Sentimental heroine of Vasily Zhukovsky’s 1813 ballad) in cheerful Olga.

But Lensky is already behind the times in his imitations of German verse. Attributing the rebuke to a stern critic, the narrator complains of elegists: “always the same thing/ regretting ‘the foregone, the past’;/enough! Sing about something else!” (4:XXXII).<sup>52</sup> Yet Lensky has his charm, and even Onegin hesitates to cut short his youthful naiveté:

И без меня пора придет;	without me just as well that time will come;
Пускай покамест он живет	let him live in the meanwhile
Да верит мира совершенству;	and believe in the world’s perfection;
Простим горячке юных лет	let us forgive the fever of young years
И юный жар и юный бред. (2:XV)	both its young glow and young delirium.

After all, Lensky is happy: “Blest hundredfold who is to faith devoted;/who, having curbed cold intellect,/in the heart’s mollitude reposes,” the narrator intones (4:LI).<sup>53</sup>

Again we see the telltale formula “blest who” (*blazhen, kto*) linked with a warning about the well-timed life and the dangers of a cold and arrogant intellect. Timely Lensky

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<sup>49</sup> “Чуть лишь из пеленок,/Кокетка, ветренный ребенок!/Уж хитрость ведает она,/Уж изменять научена!”

<sup>50</sup> “В полном цвете лет.”

<sup>51</sup> “От хладного разврата света/Еще увянуть не успев.”

<sup>52</sup> “И всё одно и то же квакать,/Жалеть о прежнем, о былом:/Довольно, пойте о другом!”

<sup>53</sup> “Стократ блажен, кто предан вере,/Кто, хладный ум угомонив,/Покоится в сердечной неге.”

opposes untimely Onegin, clearly the referent of the next lines: “but pitiful is he who foresees all” (4:L1).<sup>54</sup>

The ability to see too far ahead suggests the bitter gift of prophecy in classical tragedy: divination haunts *Onegin* in parodic echoes of the thinking man’s foresight. The over-aware hero and narrator, “enemies of Hymen,/perceive in home life nothing but/a series of wearisome images,/a novel in the genre of Lafontaine” (4:L).<sup>55</sup> This is the life for which Lensky was intended, a boring novel in Lafontaine’s style.<sup>56</sup> Poor Lensky was “born” to live and die in poetry or prose: whether his story ends in a wedding and funeral is less relevant, for either ends the possibility for narrative.

Lensky duels in the name of youth itself, lest “a flower two morns old/wither while yet half blown” (6:XVII).<sup>57</sup> Such is the clichéd language of his verse, but death comes to the poor poet as that same premature blight: “The youthful bard/has met with an untimely end!/The storm has blown; the beauteous bloom/has withered at sunrise” (6:XXXI).<sup>58</sup> Lensky’s language becomes suddenly appropriate as the plot shifts to accommodate and legitimize the elegiac style. This is only the first of many twists and transformations in *Onegin* that problematize the evaluation of good taste.

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<sup>54</sup> “Но жалок тот, кто все предвидит.”

<sup>55</sup> “мы, враги Гимена,/В домашней жизни зрим один/Ряд утомительных картин,/Роман во вкусе Лафонтена.”

<sup>56</sup> August Lafontaine (1758-1831), a popular German novelist and contemporary of Goethe.

<sup>57</sup> “двухутренний цветок/Увял еще полураскрытый.”

<sup>58</sup> “Младой певец/Нашел безвременный конец!/Дохнула буря, цвет прекрасный/Увял на утренней заре.”

\* \* \*

Olga and Lensky are straw figures, foils for the more complicated heroine and hero. Like Onegin in the first chapter, Tatiana is introduced through negation and contrast: if country girls are golden and rosy, Tatiana is their photographic negative. “Neither with her sister’s beauty/nor with the latter’s rosy freshness” is she blessed; “She was not apt to snuggle up”; and “wished not to play and skip” (2:XXV).<sup>59</sup> The list of negations and expectations that Tatiana fails to fulfill continues for stanzas. Even after her transformation into an ideal St. Petersburg beauty, Tatiana remains characterized by the qualities she lacks, but now *sans* any affectation or vulgarity.<sup>60</sup>

As a girl Tatiana avoids Olga and her companions, and shows no inclinations toward sewing, embroidery, or dolls.<sup>61</sup> For all the subsequent life of Pushkin’s Tatiana as a model of Russian womanhood, the character never has children: there is something sterile—even blighted—in the kind of adulthood she eventually achieves.<sup>62</sup>

Romantic novels are to blame for the heroine’s dangerous ideas: “She early had been fond of novels;/for her they replaced all” (2:XXIX).<sup>63</sup> Her father did nothing to prevent her passion, seeing little harm in books, since “he, never reading,/deemed them an empty

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<sup>59</sup> “Ни красотой сестры своей,/Ни свежестью ее румяной”; “Она ласкаться не умела”; “Играть и прыгать не хотела.”

<sup>60</sup> Poets have used the same technique for centuries, whether to describe their beloved or God.

<sup>61</sup> “С послушной куклою дитя/Приготовляется шутя/К приличию—закону света” (2:26): “with her obedient doll, the child/prepares in play/for etiquette, law of the *monde*.”

<sup>62</sup> In fact none of the principal characters have children. The cursory presence of the previous generation suggests some cyclical continuity, but nothing comes next. Only creative production, rather than biological continuity, offers a chance at immortality. Marriage is un-narratable, and Tatiana effectively ends the novel by refusing to commit adultery. See Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979).

<sup>63</sup> “Ей рано нравились романы;/Они ей заменяли всё.”

toy” (2:XXIX)<sup>64</sup>, but the reader knows better. A book led Paolo and Francesca into mortal sin in Dante’s *Inferno*: no surprise then that Tatiana reads a “delicious novel” with such attention, and “with what vivid enchantment/drinks the seductive fiction!” (3:IX).<sup>65</sup> René Girard reminds us that novels are as dangerous as Tristan and Isolde’s love potion, preparing the way for emotions as fatal. So it is with Tatiana: “Long since had her imagination,/consumed with mollitude and yearning,/craved for the fatal food” (3:VII).<sup>66</sup>

Tatiana follows her literary models to make the inappropriate and untimely move of declaring love to a man she has met only once. True, young Tatiana merely falls in love when her time comes, and in that sense finally behaves as naturally as Olga; but fashion—and Onegin—do not condone her actions.<sup>67</sup> Only the narrator defends his heroine by stressing her natural, childish inexperience: “Tatiana in dead earnest loves/and unconditionally yields/to love like a dear child” (3:XXV).<sup>68</sup> Her real education takes place in Onegin’s castle, where the maiden raids his bookshelves and grows in leaps and bounds: “To reading fell/Tatiana with an avid soul;/and a different world revealed itself

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<sup>64</sup> “в книгах не видал вреда;/Он, не читая никогда,/Их почитал пустой игрушкой.”

<sup>65</sup> “Теперь с каким она вниманьем/Читает сладостный роман,/С каким живым очарованьем/Пьет обольстительный обман!” By an odd coincidence, Nabokov’s reputedly direct ancestor Can Grande della Scalla, prince of Verona, sheltered Dante during his exile. Dante wrote the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in the prince’s house, and dedicated *Paradiso* to his benefactor (*SO* 188).

<sup>66</sup> “Давно ее воображенье,/Сгорая негой и тоской,/Алкало пищи роковой.” See Girard, *Deceit, Desire*, 1-15.

<sup>67</sup> As Todd writes, “Disrespect for conventions in Eugene Onegin covers a similarly broad range of possibilities, from the creative mixing of genres (a novel in verse) to the fashionable and socially acceptable eccentricity of Eugene (an accomplished dandy) to insultingly casual disregard (Eugene’s use of his valet as his second in the duel) to potentially dangerous violation (Tatiana’s letter to Eugene).” *Fiction and Society*, 125.

<sup>68</sup> “Татьяна любит не шутя/И предается безусловно/Любви, как милое дитя.”

to her” (7:XXI).<sup>69</sup> The provincial miss learns to read the reader, parsing Onegin’s nail-marks and marginalia until she understands the hero better than he understands himself:

Что ж он? Ужели подражанье,  
Ничтожный призрак, иль еще  
Москвич в Гарольдовом плаще,  
Чужих причуд истолкованье,  
Слов модных полный лексикон?..  
Уж не пародия ли он?

Who’s he then? Can it be—an imitation,  
an insignificant phantasm, or else  
a Muscovite in Harold’s mantle,  
a glossary of other people’s megrims,  
a complete lexicon of words in vogue?..  
Might he not be, in fact, a parody? (7:XXIV)

Catching up on her reading, Tatiana grasps that her beloved is modeled after Byron rather than Richardson, but no more original for it.

Increasingly timely in literature, as in youthful love, Tatiana is no longer the misplaced duckling of the early chapters by the time that she arrives in the city and is evaluated by “Moscow’s young graces.” The cosmopolitan charmers find her a bit provincial and pale, but “on the whole not bad at all” (7:XLVI).<sup>70</sup> In the final chapter and before her next meeting with Onegin, Tatiana metamorphoses into a St. Petersburg swan. She remains a list of negations, but how different the sense:

Она была нетороплива,  
Не холодна, не говорлива,  
Без взора наглого для всех,  
Без притязаний на успех,  
Без этих маленьких ужимок,  
Без подражательных затей..  
Все тихо, просто было в ней,  
Она казалась верный снимок  
*Du comme il faut*...(Шишков, прости:  
Не знаю, как перевести.)

She was unhurried,  
not cold, not talkative,  
without a flouting gaze for everyone,  
without pretensions to success,  
without those little mannerisms,  
without imitational devices..  
All about her was quiet, simple.  
She seemed a faithful reproduction  
*du comme il faut*...(Shishkov, forgive me:  
I do not know how to translate it.) (8:XIV)

The next stanza continues to praise her divine lack of flaw:

Никто б не мог ее прекрасной  
Назвать; но с головы до ног

None could a beauty  
have called her; but from head to foot

<sup>69</sup> “Чтенью предалася/Татьяна жадною душой;/И ей открылся мир иной.” Pushkin uses the word *zatomok* for castle, which makes Onegin’s abode seem even more “borrowed” or Byronic.

<sup>70</sup> “младые грации Москвы”; “а впрочем очень недурной.”

Никто бы в ней найти не мог  
Того, что модой самовластной  
В высоком лондонском кругу  
Зовется *vulgar*. (Не могу—

none could have found in her  
what by the autocratic fashion  
in the high London circle  
is called “vulgar” (I can’t—

Люблю я очень это слово,  
Но не могу перевести;

much do I like that word,  
But can’t translate it. (8:XV-XVI)

Olga Vainshtein writes that “The good taste, ‘*comme il faut*,’ commanded by Pushkin’s heroine imparts a surprising paradox: by adhering completely to worldly convention, a person seems maximally natural. This is the truest sign of the absence of vulgarity.”<sup>71</sup> In these few years, Tatiana has reached the height of fashion. Coming full circle, she now appears natural, the highest compliment that can be paid to urban artifice.

Tatiana and Onegin are capable of more subtle play with literary patterns than are the other characters: the hero and heroine choose what fashion to follow, drawing on their models with some awareness. As a result they are both more interesting and more volatile than those who progress peacefully through life stages. Initially led by belated trends that reach the countryside, Tatiana speeds up her development and moves ever closer to the cultural centers; in the end, the masterful and sophisticated salon hostess is in a position to define fashion in the capital.

In Tatiana’s last encounter with Onegin, she criticizes her former beloved for being so terribly late: “But *now!*.../How, with your heart and mind,/be the slave of a trivial feeling?” (8:XLV).<sup>72</sup> For if Tatiana moves from dangerous untimeliness to learn the full importance of appropriate action, Onegin makes the reverse journey.<sup>73</sup> He begins as a St.

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<sup>71</sup> Olga Vainshtein, *Dendi: moda, literatura, stil' zhizni* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2006), 184.

<sup>72</sup> “А нынче!.../Как с вашим сердцем и умом/Быть чувства мелкого рабом?”

<sup>73</sup> “Eugene’s development, then, reverses Tatiana’s. As she matures in her ability to relate literature and life in a variety of ways, he loses control over the materials of his culture.” Todd, *Fiction and Society*, 134.



Petersburg dandy, defined exclusively by the fashions of his time and set. Youth and prime are over in a flash, for Onegin is born and raised in a stanza and a half. A confident player in *le monde*, he negotiates five or more social events in an evening with the help of his trusty Breguet. The ticking foreign watch is his only moral guide.<sup>74</sup>

On the surface all is highly directed motion: Onegin “like an arrow,/has flown up the marble stairs” (1:XXVIII) to some ball or other.<sup>75</sup> Yet nothing happens at all. The narrator, who shares Onegin’s early excesses, summarizes: “He will awake past midday, and again/till morn his life will be prepared,/monotonous and motley” (1:XXXVI).<sup>76</sup> “Like a London *Dandy*” (1:IV) and like many a Byronic hero before him, Onegin burns out before life even begins.<sup>77</sup> An unnatural and premature spleen besets him: “feelings early cooled in him”; “toward life he became quite cold” (1:XXXVII-XXXVIII).<sup>78</sup> Hero and lyric persona nurse their regrets side by side on the banks of the Neva, but this life too proves unnarratable. The plot only begins with Onegin’s move to the country, for what interests Pushkin is the clash of sensibilities that ensues:

Eugene begins, like the others, by shaping his life along a literary pattern: that of the dandy—cold, scornful, amorally destructive....His life is, on the social plane, analogous to a work of art understood as an end in itself, an object of aesthetic contemplation. The dandy glorifies form and, in Baudelaire’s famous definition, dictates it...[but] Eugene’s Byronic redaction of dandyism, which makes his life an

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<sup>74</sup> The watch is still popular with today’s *monde*, and advertised in journals like the *New Yorker* with references to *Eugene Onegin* and a full-page portrait of Pushkin. Greenleaf notes, “Most clearly emblematic of the passage’s mortal pressure is the recurrent ringing of the sleepless, efficient, foreign watch—the metronome that regulates the *perpetuum mobile* of Onegin’s dandified existence.” *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 225.

<sup>75</sup> “стрелой/Взлетел по мраморным ступеням.”

<sup>76</sup> “Проснется за полдень, и снова/До утра жизнь его готова,/Однообразна и пестра.”

<sup>77</sup> “Как *dandy* лондонский.”

<sup>78</sup> “рано чувства в нем остыли”; “к жизни вовсе охладел.”

aesthetic object, finds an audience in the country which is unprepared to appreciate it or even to accept it.<sup>79</sup>

By the time Onegin meets Tatiana, he is already ruined: “this was the way he killed eight years,/having lost life’s best bloom” (4:IX).<sup>80</sup> He stirs for a moment, but can predict the future too easily: years of suffering after a moment of happiness. He explains it all to Tatiana, and once more in temporal terms: “For dreams and years there’s no return;/I shall not renovate my soul” (4:XVI).<sup>81</sup> Tatiana should follow the country customs and bloom with the seasons:

Сменит не раз младая дева  
Мечтами легкие мечты;  
Так деревцо свои листы  
Меняет с каждою весною.  
Так видно небом суждено.  
Полюбите вы снова: но...

A youthful maid more than once will exchange  
for dreams light dreams;  
a sapling thus its leaves  
changes with every spring.  
By heaven thus ‘tis evidently destined.  
Again you will love... (4:XVI)

The chiasmic reversal of desire that takes place between Tatiana and Onegin has been commented on many times, but suffice to say that the restraint of one is motivated and “genuine” by the logic of the novel, whereas the other’s is *only* fashion. Tatiana’s mature wisdom comes through experience and a series of events shared with the reader: the loss of love, Lensky’s death, disillusionment, and compromise. Onegin is a sphinx with no mystery, as Tatiana learned from his library, an imitation tilting into unintended parody.

Onegin’s attempt to shake the pattern of a timely life dooms him and at least two others. Only too late does he try to revive through love: “Spring quickens him: for the

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<sup>79</sup> Todd, *Fiction and Society*, 132-33.

<sup>80</sup> “Вот как убил он восемь лет,/Утрата жизни лучший цвет.”

<sup>81</sup> “Мечтам и годам нет возврата;/Не обновлю души моей.”

first time...” (8:XXXIX).<sup>82</sup> The narrator responds with another didactic stanza, the sequel to the “Blest who” verses. Now we see what happens to the untimely man:

<p>Любви все возрасты покорны;          Но юным, девственным сердцам          Ее порывы благотворны,          Как бури вешние полям:          В дожде страстей они свежеют,          И обновляются, и зреют —          И жизнь могущая дает          И пышный цвет и сладкий плод.          Но в возраст поздний и бесплодный,          На повороте наших лет,          Печален страсти мертвой след:          Так бури осени холодной          В болото обращают луг          И обнажают лес вокруг.</p>	<p>All ages are to love submissive;          but to young virgin hearts          its impulses are beneficial          as are spring rains to fields.          They freshen in the rain of passions,          and renovate themselves, and ripen,          and vigorous life gives          both lush bloom and sweet fruit.          But at a late and barren age,          at the turn of our years,          sad is the trace of a dead passion...          Thus storms of the cold autumn          into a march transform the meadow          and strip the woods around. (8:XXXIX)</p>
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Thus is Onegin tried and condemned. Tatiana belittles his passion; then even the author and readers abandon Onegin.

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The Muse and the Narrator remain not-quite-characters, but mysterious doubles or even triple-shadows to Tatiana and Onegin, providing a link between the world of the novel and the meta-literary concerns to which we will turn next. The divine Muse breathes fresh air into a work so concerned with irreversible consequences. Her “life story” opens Chapter Eight in one of *Onegin*’s most charming digressions. Immortal and ever young, the Muse shifts shape according to changes in fashion and philosophy.

The narrator, a lyric persona who shares Pushkin’s biography, seems to have suffered all of his characters’ combined disappointments in the fashionable world.<sup>83</sup> He overtakes

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<sup>82</sup> “Весна живит его: впервые...”

<sup>83</sup> “Alas, at various pastimes/I’ve ruined a lot of life!”, “Увы, на разные забавы/Я много жизни погубил!” (1:XXX).

Onegin in every frivolity and dissipation, and their friendship is born of shared disillusionment:

<p>Я был озлоблен, он угрюм;          Страстей игру мы знали оба;          Томила жизнь обоих нас;          В обоих сердца жар угас;          Обоих ожидала злоба          Слепой Фортуны и людей          На самом утре наших дней.</p>	<p>I was embittered, he was sullen;          the play of passions we knew both;          both, life oppressed;          in both, the heart's glow had gone out;          for both, there was in store the rancor          of blind Fortuna and of men          at the very morn of our days. (1:XLV)</p>
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The morally poisonous and empty *monde* has ruined both young men. But the crucial difference between the two is again one of fashion: Onegin's dated *ennui* pales before Pushkin's productive and innovative poetics. For the only chance of escaping the eternal return of fashion, is to become timeless.

## V. Literary Pursuits

As Pushkin's characters pursue one another and the latest St. Petersburg, Paris, or London fashions, *Evgenii Onegin* itself performs and portrays anxieties over literary fashion, changing tastes, and cultural borrowing. Plot and meta-literary untimeliness merge and infect one another: how is a writer to be recognizably modern, and yet to forge ahead and set the fashion? The famously protean text mimics the abrupt reversals and peculiar dialectic of the world of fashion.

The metaphor of the chameleon best expresses the culture of European dandyism in the nineteenth century. . . . The aesthetic side of dandyism above all presupposes good taste and a sophisticated responsiveness to everything beautiful, an ability to orient quickly and to discern fashionable trends. . . . [Goncharov writes that the dandy] is given to eternal chameleonism; his taste is ever in motion; he plays the role of a clock hand, and all check their taste by him as if synchronizing watches to some single regulator, but all are slightly behind.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Vainshtein, *Dendi*, 214.

Pushkin's polyphonic text leaps from one trend to another: while his characters are left slightly behind, the invisible tastemaker changes shape following subtle currents discernable only to him.

Olga represents one quickly abandoned old-fashioned literary ideal; Lensky, the straw poet, allows Pushkin to satirize Sentimental lyric poetry and his own early apprenticeship to the Germanophile Zhukovsky. In passing, the lyric persona puts the critics in their place, seeming to float above their fray:

—Одни торжественные оды!  
И, полно, друг; не все ль равно?  
Припомни, что сказал сатирик!

Nothing but solemn odes!  
Oh, come, friend; what's the difference?  
Recall what said the satirist!

...  
«Но всё в элегии ничтожно;  
Пустая цель ее жалка;  
Меж тем цель оды высока  
И благородна...» Тут бы можно  
Поспорить нам, но я молчу:  
Два века ссорить не хочу. (4:XXXIII)

“But in the elegy all is so null;  
its empty aim is pitiful;  
whilst the aim of the ode is lofty  
and noble.” Here I might  
argue with you, but I keep still:  
I do not want to set two ages by the ears.

But of course he does precisely that throughout, setting the fashions of one epoch against another. Moving quickly through Tatiana's Sentimental phase, Pushkin spends the bulk of the novel satirizing Onegin's demonic Romantics: Byron, Chateaubriand, Constant, and others blend to form Onegin's affected spleen. The first is his especial target, for Byron is the fountainhead of all this fashionable cruelty: “Lord Byron, by an opportune caprice,/has draped in glum romanticism/even hopeless egotism” (3:XII).<sup>85</sup>

Having mastered and discarded so much, it is no wonder that the writer considers switching to prose:

Быть может, волею небес,  
Я перестану быть поэтом,  
В меня вселится новый бес,  
И, Фебовы презрев угрозы,

Perhaps, by heaven's will,  
I'll cease to be a poet;  
A new fiend will inhabit me;  
and having scorned the threats of Phoebus,

<sup>85</sup> “Лорд Байрон прихотью удачной/Облек в унылый романтизм/И безнадежный эгоизм.”

Унижусь до смиренной прозы;  
Тогда роман на старый лад  
Займет веселый мой закат.

I shall descend to humble prose:  
a novel in the old mood then  
will occupy my gay decline. (3:XII)

There are not only right and wrong times to love, but right and wrong times for genres and forms. Literary fashions come and go: is there an appropriate time in life for short lyrics, and a moment for a longer masterwork? Is youth best suited for poetry, and the mature years for prose? The narrator admits, “The years to austere prose incline;/the years chase rhyme, the romp, away,/and I—with a sigh I confess—/more indolently dangle after her” (6:XLIII).<sup>86</sup> But perhaps lost youth coincides with a lost cultural moment; the lyric sensibility itself has eroded. The narrator must move on to more contemporary ambitions: “and soon, soon the storm’s trace/will hush completely in my soul:/then I shall start to write/a poem in twenty-five cantos or so” (1:LIX).<sup>87</sup> As early as the first chapter, *Onegin* signals that it is a meta-novel, “about” the difficult process of writing *Onegin*.

Pushkin’s novel in verse has been read as a progression from poetry to prose. Craig Cravens writes that by combining verses with a long narrative form, “Pushkin exploits the capacity of lyric poetry to express a state of mind and combines it with a fictionally created character and world. . . . In short, by mixing the genres of lyric and novel, Pushkin created an unprecedented type of psychological narration.”<sup>88</sup> The destroyed Chapter Ten would have been the most prosaic and certainly the most historical, but even as is *Onegin*

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<sup>86</sup> “Лета к суровой прозе клонят,/Лета шалунью рифму гонят,/И я—со вздохом признаюсь—/За ней ленивей волочусь.”

<sup>87</sup> “И скоро, скоро бури след/В душе моей совсем утихнет:/Тогда-то я начну писать/Поэму песен в двадцать пять.”

<sup>88</sup> Craig Cravens, “Lyric and Narrative Consciousness in *Eugene Onegin*,” SEEJ 46, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 683. Cf. Greenleaf: “the polarities contained in the subtitle *A Novel in Verse* are resolved by a dialectical reconciliation of the values of the latter with the former.” *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 206. See also Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956).

suggests a stylistic and aesthetic authorial trajectory. The momentum picks up and the work grows increasingly plot driven: most of the action takes place in the second half. The first chapter is essentially all digression, but the sixth, seventh, and eighth are packed with narrative events: “Forward, forward, my story!” (6:IV).<sup>89</sup>

Cravens bases his contrastive parallelism of “timeless lyric” and “chronologically-driven narrative prose” on a dichotomy familiar from Roman Jakobson: “narrative foregrounds sequence and metonymy, and lyric foregrounds simultaneity and metaphor.”<sup>90</sup> However, *Onegin*’s painstakingly constructed verse powerfully enacts the thematic concern with timeliness. What captures the progress of time better—and more relentlessly—than regularly metered verse? Pushkin’s iambic tetrameter pounds on, ever timely and teleological: each line progresses towards its inevitable end, as does each tightly structured *Onegin* stanza. Even the well-known “little feet” digression reads as an index to meter. When the narrator exclaims, “Ah little feet, little feet! Where are you now?” (1:XXXI)<sup>91</sup>, he links little feet with metric feet, and the lightly pounding meter with *le temps perdu*. If the narrative drive of any novel is based on the passage of time, the novel in verse might be read as an attempt to control and aestheticize that passage.<sup>92</sup>

Meijer reads *Onegin* as so transforming the “array of forms out of which it grew, and which it outgrows, that it cannot continue. It...can only lead beyond itself to something

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<sup>89</sup> “Вперед, вперед, моя история!”

<sup>90</sup> Cravens, “Lyric and Narrative Consciousness,” 688.

<sup>91</sup> “Ах, ножки, ножки! где вы ныне?” The Russian terms do not coincide as in English, but are related only metonymically: *nozhka* and *stopa*.

<sup>92</sup> Georg Lukács writes: “In the world of distances, all epic verse turns into lyric poetry (*Don Juan* and *Onegin*, although written in verse, belong to the company of the great humorous novels), for, in verse, everything hidden becomes manifest, and the swift flight of verse makes the distance over which prose travels with its deliberate pace as it gradually approaches meaning appear naked, mocked, trampled, or merely a forgotten dream.” *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 59.

new. This is a developmental model in both *fabula* and form: in fact, the plot thematizes the same forward-moving development that the form displays.”<sup>93</sup> Serial publication and the work-in-progress sensibility encourage the reader to remain aware of the text’s composition. We are left with a novel about the effects of time on literature, illustrating those temporal effects, and attempting simultaneously to outrace time and to stop it, interrupt it, or confuse it altogether. The paradox of fashion is that one must be timely to be stylish; one must be ahead of time to set the style; and to escape the whirl of fashion altogether one must become immortal. What better way to gesture toward immortality than to refuse an ending?

Pushkin’s audience remained with him up to a certain point. However, “the hostile and bewildered reviews...of the final chapters of *Eugene Onegin* reveal a new impatience with ‘fragmentariness,’ an unwillingness on the part of the reader to grapple with a discontinuous, polymorphous structure, to make the effort to connect one semantically or stylistically disparate scene with another.”<sup>94</sup> Pushkin was too far ahead of his time: he had lost his audience. At the end of the last chapter, among the other fruitless reading *Onegin* turned to in despair, we find:

И альманахи, и журналы,  
Где поученья нам твердят,  
Где нынче так меня бранят,  
А где такие мадригалы  
Себе встречал я иногда:  
*E sempre bene*, господа.

both “almanacs” and magazines  
where sermons into us are drummed,  
where I’m today abused so much  
but where *such* madrigals  
to me addressed I met with now and then:  
*e sempre bene*, gentlemen. (8:XXXV)

Even immortals hear the ticking of fashion’s fancy watch.

Several years later, when Pushkin thought again of taking up *Onegin*, he wrote:

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<sup>93</sup> Meijer, “The Digressions in ‘Evgenii Onegin,’” 150.

<sup>94</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 2-3.



Итак, еще роман не кончен—это клад:  
 Вставляй в просторную, вместительную раму  
 Картины новые—открой нам диораму:  
 Привалит публика, платя тебе за вход  
 Что даст еще тебе и славу и доход).<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps his novel could be expanded further still, like the modish diorama. The poet might learn from and incorporate still newer forms and media, for the only way to win back the public is to set the fashion once again.

## VI. A Slippery Cornerstone for the Russian Canon

The final untimely hero of *Onegin* is Russian culture, ever in ambivalent pursuit of English, French, and even German traditions. Plot and meta-literary untimeliness interpenetrate in *Onegin*. The three principal readers—Lensky, Onegin, and Tatiana—enter the novel formed by respective Western European reading lists. Lensky is such an evident Germanophile that country neighbors consider him “the half-Russian neighbor” (2:XII). He imagines himself the poet/hero of a Romantic elegy and dies senselessly in a duel with his closest friend.<sup>96</sup> Tatiana, the main reader of novels, mimics various Sentimentalist heroines from Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (in French translation) to Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s *Julie*. Tatiana expresses herself in French and writes to Onegin in her “native” language. Onegin in turn fancies himself a Muscovite Childe Harold, keeps the economics of Adam Smith to his shelf, and dresses like a London dandy; Tatiana is the last to realize that he is a Byronic parody. If Lensky, Onegin, and Tatiana

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<sup>95</sup> “Therefore, the novel is still unfinished—it’s a gold mine. Insert new pictures into a spacious commodious frame—show us a diorama: the public will come flocking, paying you to get in (which will bring you fame and an income).” Quoted and translated in Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 208.

<sup>96</sup> “полурусский сосед.”

misread one another, it is because their borrowed literary fashions clash, and cannot but lead them astray on Russian soil.

Pushkin's lyric persona, like his characters, is forced to rely on foreign material when he finds the Russian language lacking. He is presumably well ahead of literary trends, but he nonetheless constantly and mockingly draws attention to his reliance on foreign languages and traditions. The novel begins with an epigraph from a French private letter and foreign words pepper the text, often at line ends, to draw even more attention as rhyme pairs with Russian (e.g., "*dysha/entrechat*," 1:XVII). And of course there is Tatiana's enigmatic French letter, preserved only in the narrator's "incomplete, feeble translation/the pallid copy of a vivid picture" (3:XXXI).<sup>97</sup>

In Chapter One, the narrator issues a tongue-in-cheek apology for his polylingualism:

Но панталоны, фрак, жилет,  
Всех этих слов на русском нет;  
А вижу я, винюсь пред вами,  
Что уж и так мой бедный слог  
Пестреть гораздо б меньше мог  
Иноплеменными словами,  
Хоть и заглядывал я встарь  
В Академический словарь.

But "pantaloons," "dress coat," "waistcoat"—  
in Russian all these words are not;  
whereas, I see (my guilt I lay before you)  
that my poor style already as it is  
might be much less variegated  
with outland words,  
though I did erstwhile dip  
into the Academic Dictionary. (1:XXVI)

Playful references to foreign words crop up accompanied by *faux* apologies to the conservative A. S. Shishkov. These Cyrillic-ized terms are in touch with the times in a way that the ponderous Academic Dictionary cannot be.<sup>98</sup>

Anything to do with fashion may force the narrator to resort to a foreign language.

Thus Tatiana is "*comme il faut*," and not at all "*vulgar*." After using the latter term in

<sup>97</sup> "Неполный, слабый перевод,/С живой картины список бледный."

<sup>98</sup> "For Russia in the nineteenth century this [the use of French terms] was typical to the highest degree, as the fashionable fops received French fashion journals. And so Pushkin, describing Onegin's costume, did not complain in vain." Vainshtein, *Dendi*, 493.

English, Pushkin continues with a striking enjambment over the stanza break: “I can’t—  
 //—much do I like that word,/but can’t translate it;/with us, for the time being, it is new”  
 (8:XV-XVI).<sup>99</sup> He twice repeats his inability to translate the word and then rhymes  
 “*slovo*” with “*novo*,” highlighting the reliance of the former upon the latter. Words must  
 be new; literature must be modern. The writer/narrator of *Onegin* deliberately invents a  
 new Russian style even as he complains about untranslatable foreign terms. By  
 transliterating borrowed words into Cyrillic and rhyming others with Russian, he is in  
 effect Russifying this transplanted language. Sometimes he translates with an explanatory  
 phrase; sometimes the meaning is evident only in context; sometimes he culturally  
 “translates” a type or context. More grandly, he introduces entire Romantic archetypes,  
 such as the Byronic antihero into Russian literature, transfigured as the Russian Onegin.

Pushkin’s Romantic novel breathtakingly creates new cultural possibilities through  
 synthesis, parody, and innovation. Pushkin imports and appropriates Western European  
 models, but by wittily calling attention to the fact, and exploring the fears of being  
 unfashionably late through plot, meta-literary digressions, and structure, he avoids  
 coming across as derivative. Through the “vast reserves of self-irony” that Marshall  
 Berman found to be characteristic of St. Petersburg’s literary culture, Pushkin distances  
 himself from and complicates his creations. At any given moment, it is one of his  
 characters or some facet of Russian society that espouses a provincially imitative or  
 affected style—the author himself remains one step ahead, and out of reach.

As a result, *Onegin* easily reads as less early-Romantic than presciently modernist.  
 Pushkin’s forced acceleration of Russian literature was astonishing and seemed  
 premeditated: he even wrote in an appended note, “Our destiny, certainly a fortunate one

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<sup>99</sup> “Не могу—//—Люблю я очень это слово,/Но не могу перевести;/Оно у нас покамест ново.”

in all regards, is characterized by a kind of extraordinary velocity: we mature not in the course of centuries, but in the course of decades.”<sup>100</sup> His effort to overtake European trends resulted in a verse novel felt to be ahead of its time, and that would inspire Russian writers for nearly two centuries.

\* \* \*

We have only begun our exploration of *Onegin*: the next chapter will read Pushkin’s masterpiece once more, through the lens of Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin*. Nabokov takes on fashion, literary styles and precursors, Russia’s standing vis-à-vis the West, and offers an evaluation of Pushkin’s masterpiece in temporal terms. As an outsider, Pushkin was all too aware of canon’s dependence on fashion; Nabokov positions himself as an insider, the guardian and gatekeeper of a canon no longer defined along national lines.

I will offer a final analogy from Nabokov’s commentaries, to which I turn next. What Nabokov calls “the Pursuit” motif of Chapter One mimics the whirl of competing fashions:

The series of nineteen stanzas from XVIII to XXVI may be termed The Pursuit. In XXVII Pushkin overtakes his fellow hero and reaches the lighted mansion first. Now Onegin drives up, but Pushkin is already inside... Pushkin, the conventional libertine (XXIX) and the inspired preterist (XXX-XXXIV, ending on the initial flippant note), takes over so thoroughly that the troublesome time element in the description of Onegin’s night is juggled away (since he is not shown wenching and gaming, the reader has to assume that seven or eight hours were spent by Onegin at the ball) by means of a beautiful lyrical digression, and Pushkin, after lagging behind at the ball (as he had lagged in Onegin’s dressing room before it), must again overtake Onegin in his drive home (XXXV)—only to fall behind again while the exhausted beau goes to sleep (XXXVI). The pursuit that Pushkin started upon in XVIII-XX, when, on the wings of a lyrical digression, he arrives at the opera house before Onegin (XXI-XXII), is now over.

If the reader has understood the mechanism of this pursuit he has grasped the basic structure of Chapter One. (2:108)

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<sup>100</sup> Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. and ed. Vladimir Nabokov, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 2:107. I will henceforth cite Nabokov’s version of *Eugene Onegin* (both translation and commentary) parenthetically with volume number and page, for example 2:107.

But perhaps the reader has grasped the basic structure of all of *Evgenii Onegin* through this game of Pursuits: ultimately, it is literary traditions and styles that pursue one another throughout the novel in verse.

## Chapter Two

### Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*: Readings in the Chateaubyronic Genre

Nowadays—an unheard of case!—the foremost French writer is translating Milton word for word and proclaiming that an interlinear translation would be the summit of his art, had such been possible.

—Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin  
on Chateaubriand's *Le Paradis perdu*, 1836<sup>1</sup>

The pursuit of reminiscences may become a form of insanity on the scholiast's part, but there can be no doubt that, despite Pushkin's having by 1820-25 practically no English, his poetical genius managed somehow to distinguish in Pichot, roughly disguised as Lord Byron, through Pichot's platitudes and Pichot's paraphrases, not Pichot's falsetto but Byron's baritone.

—Vladimir Nabokov  
*Commentary to Eugene Onegin* (2:33), 1964

#### I. Nabokov and *Onegin*

The peculiar blend of humility and arrogance, of passionate scholarship and creative ambition that is Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* finds no equivalent in twentieth century literary history. Nabokov threw down a four-volume gauntlet with his notorious annotated translation of Pushkin's novel in verse, defending himself with Pushkin's own aphorism (prose, in pencil, scribbled on a draft of Chapter Eight, upper-left corner): "Translators are the post horses of enlightenment" (3:229). The literary scandal and feud that followed in the wake of Nabokov's translation have become legendary.

Nabokov thought of translating *Onegin* as early as 1948, and suggested a joint "scholarly, copiously annotated prose translation" to Edmund Wilson. Nothing came of

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov borrows Pushkin's words "From an article (late 1836 or early 1837)" for the epigraph to his introduction to *Eugene Onegin*, 1:1. I cite Nabokov's *Commentary* by volume and page number; to indicate Pushkin's chapters and stanzas, I differentiate by keeping his stanza numbers in Roman numerals. As I stress Nabokov's *Onegin* in this chapter, all quoted verses are given in his English translation.

the endeavor, and by 1950 he informed Roman Jakobson that he was working on a translation alone. When a Guggenheim fellowship in 1952 allowed him to research full-time at Harvard and Cornell, he planned to finish in little over a year; instead he continued to work on the expanding, exploding commentaries until 1957, adding a final revision before Bollingen Press released the work in 1964.<sup>2</sup>

Such formidable opponents as Wilson, Anthony Burgess, and Robert Lowell responded by going for the jugular. Wilson in particular denounced the “bald and awkward language that has nothing in common with Pushkin.” His surprisingly personal attacks spoke of “the perversity of [Nabokov’s] tricks to startle or stick pins in the reader”; and “his sado-masochistic Dostoevskian tendencies so acutely noted by Sartre—he seeks to torture both the reader and himself by flattening Pushkin and denying to his own powers the scope for their full play.”<sup>3</sup> Wilson was certain that this *Onegin* was deliberate treason, for as he complained, “It had always seemed to me that Vladimir Nabokov was one of the Russian writers who, in technique, had the most in common with Pushkin.”<sup>4</sup> The battle raged on, fueled by reviews, attacks, and counter-attacks. Nabokov took months to edit and revise an even more aggressively literal translation, and in turn accused Lowell of “mutilating defenseless dead poets” and “doubly martyring” Mandelstam; Lowell and George Steiner responded and the feud continued for years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 318-26.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Wilson, “The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov,” *New York Review of Books* 4, no. 12 (July 15, 1965): 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov’s admirers have since mounted defense campaigns. His biographer Brian Boyd, the unofficial head of the so-called “Nabokovian” camp, maintains that *Eugene Onegin* was never intended as a literary translation: Nabokov had originally hoped to publish an interlinear translation with the transliterated

Steiner, whose pioneering 1975 *After Babel* argued that all of human communication can be considered translation and that “literal translation” between different systems of sense-making is *a priori* impossible, considered Nabokov’s experiment a curio. Steiner writes that “literalism of this lucid, almost desperate kind, has within it a creative pathology of language...[the translator] produces an ‘interlingua,’ a centaur-idiom,” neither English nor Russian. However, he adds in a footnote, “Taken together with the Commentary, Nabokov’s production is a masterpiece of baroque wit and learning.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet this *Commentary* is what so complicates the project. By adding three elaborately worded tomes to his awkwardly literal translation, Nabokov released his *Onegin* into the world as an aesthetic project and not just a practical tool after all—a very peculiar hybrid. In the time that it cost him and judging by his usual rate of production, Nabokov could have written three or four more novels. Why spend a decade on a project that threatened to dim an already considerable reputation with an unpleasant brand of notoriety?

Not unlike T.S. Eliot, Nabokov fully believed that the literary past shaped and haunted the present. As a younger man Nabokov had spoken of his poetry “borrowing on the strength of the tradition”; long before he began work on *Onegin*, he admitted that “Pushkin’s blood ran” in his veins, as could be said of all Russian writers. Nabokov intended to wrest himself a space in the canon: he aimed openly for literary immortality.<sup>7</sup>

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Russian. Never meant to stand alone, his version was instead to prove the inimitable value of the original: Pushkin is to Russian as *nothing* is to English. The four volumes are neither replacement nor equivalent, but a glorified set of Cliff Notes, as suggested by Nabokov’s Translator’s Introduction: “Pushkin has likened translators to horses changed at the post-houses of civilization. The greatest reward I can think of is that students may use my work as a pony” (1:x).

<sup>6</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel*, 332.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty suggests that Nabokov deliberately confuses literary with personal immortality throughout his oeuvre: while one might well achieve the former through art, that “immortal” status has no bearing on “the claim that you will actually *be* out there, beyond the walls of time, waiting for dinner guests.”



Yet an agonistic struggle with the literary father, as in Harold Bloom's violent vision, only partially describes Nabokov's *Onegin*. Nabokov was more interested in championing Pushkin to Western audiences than in clandestinely demonstrating his own superiority.<sup>8</sup> Instead, and to make a mischievous comparison, Nabokov's stakes in winning posthumous recognition for Pushkin resemble feminist revisionist projects: we might think of Virginia Woolf's fervor on the subject of Jane Austen. Every pioneer needs a predecessor, a point of origin that speaks to the legitimacy of the current project; Nabokov is something of a Russianist revisionist. If to read Nabokov's 1964 *Eugene Onegin* is to read Pushkin not *with* Nabokov but *as* Nabokov, the commentaries allow unprecedented access to both grandmasters.<sup>9</sup> Now that the controversy of Nabokov's translation has faded, we can examine the annotated *Eugene Onegin* as a whole and with entirely different interests.

As my first chapter suggested, Nabokov's Pushkin joins a long list of "My Pushkins" in Russian *belles lettres*. While Dostoevsky made Pushkin into a prophet of the millennial role of Russian culture, the subsequent generation of modernist Pushkinist-poets emphasized their unique personal visions in poetic essays. Valerii Briusov, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Vladimir Khodasevich used Pushkin as the background for their own poetic practices—refuting in the process the

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*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 151-52. I return to Rorty's idea in Chapter Five.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson made this accusation in "The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov," the review that effectively ended the Nabokov-Wilson friendship, 3-6. See also the reprinted and amended version in Wilson, *A Window on Russia* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), 209-237.

<sup>9</sup> As Clarence Brown has suggested in "Nabokov's Pushkin and Pushkin's Nabokov," *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*. ed. L. S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 195. See 195-96 for an eloquent summary of "the barrage" that followed the publication of the travesty-translation.

crudely institutionalized national monument of the regime.<sup>10</sup> The Russian modernist poets seized on Pushkin's fragmentariness and ambiguous irony; their musings were often pieced together from memory (most dramatically so in the case of Tsvetaeva) to combine personal memories with explorations of literary tradition as a cultural or even linguistic memory. Nabokov, who was nearly the same generation as the youngest of these modernist Pushkinists, follows in a similar vein in some respects, but distances himself through his international focus.

Like some of these other twentieth-century Pushkins, Nabokov's Pushkin stands for liberty and innovation, and marks the beginning of great Russian literature. Nabokov saw the literature that preceded Pushkin as ignorable or regrettable, even including those eighteenth-century traces still discernable in Pushkin's work: he viewed the eighteenth century as a "pedestrian age," that "most inartistic of centuries," which glorified the generic and betrayed a "pathological dislike" for detail. Not even Pushkin could shed entirely neoclassicism's odious conventionality ("a glorification of the derivative, an affront to originality") but the "intuitive genius of freedom" made quite a bound with *Onegin*.<sup>11</sup> For Nabokov, the Russian canon begins with *Onegin*, a long narrative claiming autonomy and relevance beyond its context: out of a long and derivative eighteenth century suddenly blossoms a timeless masterpiece, a text with its own gravitational pull.

However, Western readers remained at best shakily convinced. A deity second only to Shakespeare on Nabokov's Olympus, Pushkin remained widely under-read outside the

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<sup>10</sup> See Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Boyd in *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 346.

Russophone world. Worse yet, the available channels distorted him to their own ends.<sup>12</sup>

Nabokov fumes over the academic reading on both sides of the Atlantic, the “special term for Onegin’s distemper” (*Oneginstvo*, *Oneginism*) and “thousands of pages of type” devoted to turning Onegin into an archetype, the superfluous man of Russian letters. Stealing from literature for sociological clichés strikes him as the most shameless of appropriations:

Thus a character borrowed from books but brilliantly recomposed by a great poet to whom life and library were one, placed by that poet within a brilliantly reconstructed environment, and played with by that poet in a succession of compositional patterns—lyrical impersonations, tomfooleries of genius, literary parodies and so on—is treated by Russian pedants as a sociological and historical phenomenon. (2:151)

Nabokov defends *Onegin* from one kind of immortality and passionately calls for another. The world is to admire Nabokov’s Pushkin, not the Pushkin of Soviet philology or of Slavic Studies.<sup>13</sup> At stake is Pushkin’s place in a rarified, aesthetically unquestionable list of greats—and implicitly, Nabokov’s own right as *arbiter elegantiarum* to define that canon.

As harsh as he could be with rival readings and competing translations, adaptations of *Onegin* fare even worse. It is for bad adaptations that Nabokov consistently reserves the epithets “criminal” and “insane.” When invited in 1954 to translate Tchaikovsky’s libretto for NBC, Nabokov refused to have anything to do with that opera’s “criminal

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<sup>12</sup> In 1937, Nabokov complained about the French indifference to Pushkin: “Tolstoy, who happens to belong to the very same race as Pushkin, or good old Dostoevski, who is vastly inferior, enjoy in France a fame of the same cloth as many native writers. Yet the name of Pushkin, which to us is so replete with music, remains prickly and shabby to the French ear.” “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” trans. Dmitri Nabokov, *New York Review of Books* 35, no. 5 (March 31, 1988): 38-42 (originally published in *Nouvelle revue française*, March 1937).

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov attacks the Soviet critic N. L. Brodski by name, but adds: “alas, this tendency to generalize and vulgarize the unique fancy of an individual genius has also its advocates in the United States” (2:151).

inaneities.”<sup>14</sup> A decade later in the *Commentary*, he refers mockingly to the “incredible Italian libretto of Chaykovski’s silly opera *Eugene Onegin*,” the “lunatic scenes” of which he describes as follows: “in Act I ‘Signora Larina’ is seated under a tree, ‘making candy’ (with Olga in a tree and Tatiana in a swoon)...” (2:333-34).

Tchaikovsky’s opera was one of several adaptations readily available to international audiences through visual or musical media, and threatening to overshadow the poetry of Pushkin’s original. Nabokov equally deflates Ilya Repin’s “most famous and most execrable picture of the Lenski-Onegin duel, in which everything, including the attitudes and positions of the combatants, is ludicrously wrong.” The painting offers only a double lie, the distorted echo of a distorted echo: “It is doubtful that the ‘great’ Russian painter had read Pushkin’s novel (although he certainly had seen the opera by the ‘great’ composer) when he painted his *Duel of Onegin and Lenski* (1899).” Nabokov scoffs: “As in the opera, everything in the picture insults Pushkin’s masterpiece” (3:42). His *Onegin* vies explicitly with these contending “transfigurations.”<sup>15</sup>

Wilson and others accused Nabokov of trying to upstage his great precursor (a classic case of anxiety of influence), but Nabokov grapples less with Pushkin as rival than with rival Pushkins. Another such threatening impostor is the hero of Dostoevsky’s “Pushkin Speech”:

In the published text of a famous but essentially clap-trap politico-patriotic speech, pronounced on June 8, 1880, at a public meeting of the Society of Amateurs of Russian Letters before a hysterically enthusiastic audience, Fyodor Dostoevski, a much overrated, sentimental, and Gothic novelist of the time, while ranting at length on Pushkin’s Tatiana as a type of the “positive Russian woman,” labors under the singular delusion that her husband is a “venerable old man”...all of which goes to show that Dostoevski had not really read *EO*.

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<sup>14</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 261.

<sup>15</sup> I use George Steiner’s term, to which I will return in the chapters on *Ada*, or *Ardor*.

Dostoevsky is especially dangerous because “Dostoevski the publicist is one of those megaphones of elephantine platitudes (still heard today), the roar of which so ridiculously demotes Shakespeare and Pushkin to the vague level of all the plaster idols of academic tradition” (3:191-92).<sup>16</sup> The game is to determine the canon but also its terms. While not convinced of literary evolution, Nabokov uses the biological metaphor frequently: he battles for the supremacy of his bloodline. But as the quick comparison to Shakespeare already suggests, Nabokov’s *Onegin* reaches past a personal genealogy to claim Pushkin’s relevance beyond the Russian tradition. Nabokov will effectively redraw the Western canon to include as central the Russian strain. My later chapters will argue that as a creative writer, Nabokov held up *Onegin* as a standard and a challenge.<sup>17</sup> The late novel *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), seen by many critics as his other over-extension and self-indulgent failure, brings this idealized new Western canon to life.

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Nabokov’s first published essay on Pushkin, the 1937 “*Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable*,” happens also to be one of the rare pieces he wrote in French. A first pass at the subject and aimed at European audiences, it is the starting point of the campaign that culminates in the monumental *Commentary* of 1964. (The piece only gains gravitas from the story that James Joyce was in the audience on the night that Nabokov delivered

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Nabokov in 1937: “The greater the number of readers, the less a book is understood; the essence of its truth, as it spreads, seems to evaporate. . . . It is only after the first gleam of its literary fame has tarnished that a work reveals its true character.” “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” 42.

<sup>17</sup> Boyd suggests that if Nabokov saw Pushkin as “an intuitive champion of the individual,” in his commentary he “projects an image of himself as the very deliberate champion of the particular and the individual.” Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 348.

a version of the paper as a talk.<sup>18</sup> It is tempting to think of Joyce—or someone with his equivalent level of erudition, versed in all things literary in English and French, but with no Russian—as Nabokov’s ideal audience for his subsequent writing about Pushkin.)

“Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible” opens with an incongruous case study of “the pearl of some lunatic asylum,” a man whose madness induces him to write himself into history, no matter how far removed, with personal anecdotes and recollections. And yet, despite the imaginative potential of this scenario,

sad to say, my chap was fundamentally uncultured and woefully underequipped to profit by this rare psychosis, and was reduced to nourishing his imagination with a hodgepodge of banalities and general ideas that were more or less erroneous. Napoleon’s crossed arms, the Iron Chancellor’s three lone hairs, or Byron’s melancholy, plus a certain number of those so-called historical anecdotes historians use to sweeten their texts, provided, alas, all the detail and color he needed, and all the great men he had known intimately resembled each other like brothers.<sup>19</sup>

Nabokov’s lunatic is the double of all false interpreters: translators, writers of “those curious books customarily called ‘fictionized biographies,’” or other bad re-writers.

When such charlatans turn on his favorite, Nabokov calls for incarceration: “It is fruitless to reiterate”—and yet he does, he will—“that the perpetrators of the librettos, sinister individuals who sacrificed *Eugene Onegin* or *The Queen of Spades* to Tchaikovsky’s

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<sup>18</sup> Nabokov retells his memory of the evening: “I had to replace at the very last moment a Hungarian woman writer, very famous that winter.... A number of personal friends of mine, fearing that the sudden illness of the lady and a sudden discourse on Pushkin might result in a suddenly empty house, had done their best to round up the kind of audience they knew I would like to have. The house had, however, a pined aspect since some confusion had occurred among the lady’s fans. The Hungarian consul mistook me for her husband, and, as I entered, dashed towards me with the froth of condolence on his lips. Some people left as soon as I started to speak. A source of unforgettable consolation was the sight of Joyce sitting, arms folded and glasses glinting, in the midst of the Hungarian football team.” Nabokov, “Pushkin, or the Real,” 38.

<sup>19</sup> Nabokov, “Pushkin, or the Real,” 39.

mediocre music, criminally mutilated Pushkin's texts. I use the term 'criminally' because these really were cases that called for legal action."<sup>20</sup>

And yet look at what Nabokov will do with his poet only paragraphs later:

The life of a poet is a kind of pastiche of his art. The passage of time seems inclined to evoke the gestures of a genius, imbuing his imagined existence with the same tints and outlines that the poet had bestowed on his creations....Here, then, is this brusque, stocky man, whose small swarthy hand wrote the first and most glorious pages of our poetry...it is but imagination that bestows a certain elegance on Pushkin, who, incidentally, in keeping with a whim of the period, liked to disguise himself—as a gypsy, a Cossack, or an English dandy. A fondness for the mask, let us not forget, is an essential trait of the true poet.

...It is not my fault if I get carried away by these images, images common to Russians who know their Pushkin, and a part of our intellectual life in the same inextricable sense as multiplication tables or any other mental habit. These images are probably false, and the true Pushkin would not recognize himself in them. Yet if I inject into them a bit of the same love that I feel when reading his poems, is not what I am doing with this imaginary life somehow akin to the poet's work, if not to the poet himself?<sup>21</sup>

Nabokov also imagines and fictionalizes a masked bohemian behind the beloved verse.

Yet he implies that there is the devil of a difference between his own illusionism and the thievery of opera house, soap-box, and lunatic asylum transfigurations. The difference lies in the stark admission that this is at best a plausible Pushkin; the difference is measured in love, precise knowledge, and imagination. Nabokov never claims to be more sane than his committed competitor, only a good deal more erudite and fastidious.

The early essay beautifully illustrates the paradoxes of cultural heritage and originality. Nabokov, well aware of the difficulty of breaking through to French audiences, may not be speaking for Pushkin alone when he writes:

It is always harder for a poet than for a proseman to cross borders. But in Pushkin's case there is more profound cause for that difficulty. "Russian champagne," a refined litterateur said to me the other day. For let us not forget that *it is precisely French*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 40.

*poetry, and an entire period of it*, that Pushkin put at the service of his Russian muse. As a result, when his verse is translated into French, the reader recognizes both the French eighteenth century—rose-tinted poetry thorny with epigrams—and the artificially exotic romanticism that lumped together Seville, Venice, the Orient with its babooshes, and sweet-honeyed Mother Greece. This first impression is so wretched, this old mistress so insipid, as to discourage the French right away. It is a platitude to say that, for us Russians, Pushkin is a colossus who bears on his shoulders our country's entire poetry. Yet, at the approach of the translator's pen, the soul of that poetry immediately flies off, and we are left holding but a little gilded cage.<sup>22</sup>

The observation is moving and quite subtle, an early illustration of brilliant theft or reflected fire. Decades later in the four volumes of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov is still tracing what Pushkin “put to the service of his Russian muse,” to determine where fashionable borrowing ends and timeless genius begins: 1964's hybrid monster bursts out of 1937's little gilded cage.

Equally striking is the intense modesty of this introduction to Nabokov's Pushkin scholarship. Nabokov wrote then that he nurtured “no illusions about the quality of these translations”; he offers only a “reasonably plausible Pushkin, nothing more; the true Pushkin is elsewhere. Yet, if we follow the riverbank of this poem as it unfolds, we do note, in the bends I have managed to comply with here and there, something truthful flowing melodiously past, and that is the sole truth I can find down here—the truth of art.”<sup>23</sup> For all the austere rules of Nabokov's later translation, for all the perverse purity and painstaking research behind his elephantine notes, he codes in from the start the humorous, the slightly fantastical, and the personal. *Eugene Onegin* too is only Nabokov's best, a reasonably plausible Pushkin.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41, italics mine.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 42.



## II. An Added Element of Time

Few works are quite so temporally self-conscious as Pushkin's *Onegin*; fewer grow that much more so in their subsequent exegesis. Nabokov's composite text and commentary form an apotheosis of temporal concerns.<sup>24</sup> He traces structural and thematic temporality, and finds for example that the "time element" dominates Chapter Seven "rather obsessively, with rhetorical transitions depending on the establishment of this or that season or hour or of the passage of time." Rhetorical transitions ("Now is the time") predominate, picking up the "youth-is-gone" theme with which Chapter Six ends (2:49). But Nabokov is not always complimentary: when Pushkin waxes philosophical in Chapter Eight, ruing the passage of time and his unseasonal hero, the notes grumble, "Sts. XXVII-XXIX belong to the didactic philosophizing order, and the seasonal metaphors with which XXIX is crammed are repetitious and conventional" (1:56).

If Pushkin's *Onegin*, as my first chapter claimed, explores anxieties of belatedness on plot, structural, and meta-literary levels, Nabokov adds an evaluative mood. He not only translates and annotates Pushkin, but assesses every line. Even when we evaluate the transitions in a work, he writes, we pass "esthetic and historical judgment upon them" (2:18). Quality is conveyed through another set of temporal terms: Pushkin is a great writer because he "catches up" to French and English authors, because he "leaps ahead" of his time, because he somehow as a result becomes "eternal," entering a canon outside of ordinary human temporality.

Time and again, Nabokov judges Pushkin's original contribution against what was already familiar at the time, or worse yet, was already dated; his metaphors for literary

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<sup>24</sup> Nabokov stresses that *Onegin* is fundamentally unfinished and highlights one fudged temporal element after another: his point throughout the *Commentary* is that Pushkin concerned himself with language, and not with history or moral philosophy.

progress akin to those of cumulative scientific knowledge. I have discussed the meta-literary fear of belatedness already present in Pushkin's *Onegin*: while the characters fret about fashion and the timing of their life choices, Pushkin worries about literary trends and the timeliness of Russian poetry and prose. However, meta-literary timeliness is the only kind that interests Nabokov. He dismisses Pushkin's didactic stretches as literary clichés carried over from eighteenth-century convention: Pushkin began writing elegies to his wasted youth at the age of seventeen! At twenty-one, Nabokov adds, in a poem beginning "I have outlived my aspirations," Pushkin wrote such pseudo-profound lines as "Under the storms of cruel fate/My bloomy wreath has withered fast" (3:64). Nabokov has no interest in the philosopher or ethicist Pushkin, whom he considers to be largely a critical invention.

Nabokov's *Commentary* consistently moves the reader away from the plot and towards meta-literary patterns. Not unlike the Formalists or the New Critics, Nabokov contends that literature—a novel in verse especially—is made up of language forced and cajoled into doing things. If we forget the medium for the distracting story, we have missed everything:

Pushkin's composition is first of all and above all a phenomenon of style... It is not "a picture of Russian life"; it is at best the picture of a little group of Russians, in the second decade of the last century, crossed with all the more obvious characters of western European romance and placed in a stylized Russia, which would disintegrate at once if the French props were removed and if the French impersonators of English and German writers stopped prompting the Russian-speaking heroes and heroines. The paradoxical part, from a translator's point of view, is that the only Russian element of importance is this speech, Pushkin's language, undulating and flashing through verse melodies the likes of which had never been known before in Russia. (1:7)

He drives the point home with brutality, glossing Pushkin's most beloved aphorisms as filler, transition, and purely functional literary devices. Alas, Nabokov adds, "Pushkin

was a brilliant wit (especially in his correspondence), but he did not shine in the didactic genre, and his indebtedness to the elegant generalities of his time, or more exactly of a period just previous to his time, is sometimes painfully evident in the rather trivial observations of the Social Whirl, Women, Custom, and Mortality that occur throughout *EO*" (1:20). So much for the ethicist Pushkin of Dostoevsky's famous speech. The only thing Nabokov finds brilliant in *Onegin* is the Russian verse—the so-called content is French and English anyway.

Drastically, he even posits that Pushkin wrote about time and belatedness only for the sake of handy rhymes: "In a work where 'novelty' [*novizna*] and 'fashion' [*moda*] are constantly referred to, their juxtaposition with the old, the dismoded, the old times, is inevitable. Moreover, *starina* belongs to the rhymes-on-*na* group, for which Pushkin had a special predilection" (2:212). Nabokov frequently chooses English translations that will emphasize the borrowing, italicizing as it were the cliché. "Social hum" is glossed as "An old French cliché, *le bruit, le tumulte, le fracas du monde*...I have gone to English formulas, e.g., Byron's 'the gay World's hum'" (2:148). These choices seem paradoxical, given Nabokov's 1937 fears that Pushkin inevitably sounded derivative in French. Now he even translates "*Kuda, kuda vy udalilis*" as "Whither, ah! whither are ye fled" in a rare and marked departure from his literal translation method. "Quite literally, 'Whither, whither have you receded,'" he concedes, "but I have preferred to echo the cry so often heard in English seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry" and he gives several examples from Alexander Pope to the nineteenth-century John Keats (2:25). The only thing more important than faithfulness to the original text is a fair exposition of original sources—even to Pushkin's apparent disadvantage.

Nabokov is fascinated by the timeliness and the Pursuits explored in Pushkin's *Onegin*. However, since he means to dissuade readers from viewing these characters as real individuals, he dismisses as irrelevant such questions as whether Onegin withered on the vine, or fell in love long after the springtime of his years. Instead, Nabokov emphasizes meta-literary timeliness. Throughout the *Commentary*, he evaluates Pushkin as well as his Western European near-contemporaries in the tribunal of posterity, to determine where they are innovative, where derivative, and where they become immortal.

### III. The Art of *Bon Ton* Re-examined

The missing link between Pushkin's "Blest who" stanzas lauding the timely man, explored in my first chapter, and Nabokov's emphasis on literary mastery, is once again fashion. For once Nabokov agrees with the critical mainstream in comparing Onegin to Beau Brummel, London's leading "dandy" from 1800 to 1816, although he quibbles with the terms, striving even here for precision: since "glaring extravaganzas in dress constitute dandyism, Brummel most assuredly was no dandy. He was a *beau*.... His chief aim was to avoid anything marked." Nabokov concludes, "Onegin, too, was a *beau*, not a dandy" (2:44).<sup>25</sup>

A detailed analysis of contemporary fashion fills the commentaries, despite Nabokov's protests of ahistoricism; however, the discussion remains grounded in or linked to literary style. When Nabokov argues that Onegin, for all his vague, impersonal *ennui* (plundered from Lord Byron, who stole it from the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, as

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<sup>25</sup> Nabokov quotes Brummel's biographer: "Pierce Egan, in his *Life in London* (1821), bk. 1 ch. 3, thus describes the pedigree of a London dandy: 'The DANDY was got by *Vanity* out of *Affectation*—his dam, *Petit-Maitre* or *Maccaroni*—his grand-dam, *Fribble*—his great-grand-dam, *Bronze*—his great-great-grand-dam, *Coxcomb*—and his earliest ancestor, FOP.'"

we shall see) is less flat a character than Benjamin Constant's Adolphe, he notes that Onegin is a man with a wardrobe. Each mention of Onegin's enviable Breguet warrants a gloss from Nabokov, here to a literary echo (the timepiece of Pope's *Rape of the Lock*) and there to a disapproving aphorism: "Those who have the least value for their time have usually the greatest number of watches and are the most anxious about the exactness of their going" (2:69;76).<sup>26</sup> If we must think of Onegin as any kind of "type," then he is the fashionable type of the moment.<sup>27</sup>

These echoes of Brummel, Constant's Adolphe, and Pope (Pope is often invoked in connection to his student and Pushkin's more immediate influence, Byron) show how closely Moscow and Petersburg fashions aped Paris and London:

Liberal French fashions, such as haircuts *à la Titus* (short, with flattened strands), appeared in Russia immediately after the lifting of various preposterous restrictions dealing with dress and appearance that had been inflicted on his subjects by tsar Paul (who was strangled by a group of exasperated courtiers on a March night in 1801). (2:43)

Fashion is as crucial to duels as it is to dress: like dancing, dueling offers a perfectly semiotized form of social behavior.<sup>28</sup> While Onegin and Lensky face off, Nabokov untangles the origins of the code so ubiquitous to the Russian nineteenth century novel: "The hostile meeting described here is the classical duel *à volonté* of the French code,

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<sup>26</sup> Quoting from Marla Edgeworth's 1809 *Ennui*, chap. 1. Again, the current Breguet advertising campaign, often seen in the *New Yorker*, gives the lines from *Onegin* in white against a full-page portrait of Pushkin: "A dandy on the boulevards.../strolling at leisure/until his Breguet, ever vigilant,/reminds him it is midday." The unattributed translation is far from Nabokov's own purposefully awkward version: "til vigilant Bréguet/to him chimes dinner" (1:XV).

<sup>27</sup> Onegin's behavior closely follows "that ironically described by an anonymous author in the magazine *Son of the Fatherland (Syn otechestva)* XX (1817): When entering high society, make it your first rule to esteem no one...Be sure never to be surprised; display cold indifference to everything...Make an appearance everywhere, but only for a moment. To every gathering take with you abstraction, boredom; at the theater, yawn, don't pay any attention...In general, make it clear that you don't care for women and despise them" (2:90).

<sup>28</sup> Irina Reyfman, "The Duel as an Act of Violence," in *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 15-44.

partly derived from the Irish and English pistol duel, for which the basic code *duello* was adopted in Tipperary about 1775” (3:43).

From literal to literary fashion is a small step. The most elegant fusion occurs in the commentary notes to Chapter Eight, where Tatiana’s perfect social demeanor wins the following frame of reference: Lady Frances wrote to her son Henry Pelham, as quoted in the “tedious *Pelham; or, Adventures of a Gentleman*,” a work that “Pushkin knew well from a French version,” that “Whatever is evidently borrowed becomes vulgar. Original affectation is sometimes good *ton*; imitated affectation always bad” (3:168). Lady Frances’s advice for *bon ton* is essentially what Nabokov demands of literature. Brilliant artifice is one thing, but when caught by the wary reader, whatever is evidently borrowed becomes vulgar and embarrassing.

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In Nabokov’s analysis, the plot twists and character portraits of *Onegin* are excuses to muse on literary fashion. Lensky, the straw poet, dies to the accompaniment of a “deliberate accumulation of classical and romantic metaphors” (1:47). Pushkin describes

the nature of that young and mediocre poet in the idiom Lenski himself used in his elegies...an idiom now blurred by the drift of unfocused words, now naively stilted in the pseudoclassical manner of minor French songsters. Even the closest translation is prone to tough up with some applied sense the ambiguous *flou* of Pushkin’s remarkable impersonation. (2:232)

Tatiana’s and Onegin’s respective reading lists afford a similar opportunity. We make sense of these characters and grasp their relative positions through what is on his shelf or underneath her pillow. They read each other quite similarly: Tatiana conducts herself like a provincial miss initially because her literary tastes are a step behind St. Petersburg fashion. The “rather professional” explanation of Onegin’s library in turn gives us his

favorite books: “*The Giaour*, *Don Juan*, and two or three novels depicting the man of the time.” Snooping Tatiana “from the marks of his pencil and thumbnail...reconstructs the man, and when three years later they meet again she will know he is not a fascinating demon or angel but an imitation of fashionable freaks—and still the only love of her life” (1:51). The reversal of desires between the two reflects Tatiana’s out-reading her now belated suitor.

Pushkin’s lyric persona nurses more explicitly professional anxieties. Nabokov calls these moments Pushkin’s professional digressions: for example, “Pushkin confesses he now dallies more sluggishly with mistress rhyme and inclines toward prose” (1:48).

Elsewhere, in some cancelled stanzas reinserted by Nabokov, Pushkin frets that his book

will finish belowstairs its shameful span  
like last year’s calendar  
or a dilapidated primer.

...

Well, what? In drawing room or vestibule  
readers are equally plebian  
over a book their rights are equal;  
not I was the first, not I the last  
shall hear their judgment over me,  
captious, stern, and obtuse. (2:313)

Critical reception was changing, as the fashion-conscious Pushkin was acutely aware. As many critics have noted, the digressions on Lensky’s old-fashioned elegies serve as a distancing mechanism from his own early work. Nabokov points out that these asides were a response to Wilhelm Küchelbecker’s provocative essay, which “correctly criticized the Russian elegy for its colorless vagueness, anonymous retrospection, trite vocabulary, and so on.” Pushkin doubtlessly grasped that “the vocabulary of his own elegies, despite their marvelous melodiousness, was well within the range of Küchelbecker’s attack” (2:445). Approximately halfway through the serial publication of

*Evgenii Onegin*, fashion turned. Pushkin wrote in one letter, “For a long time reviewers left me in peace. This did them honor: I was far away, and in unfavorable circumstances. They became used to considering me still a very young man. The first inimical reviews began to appear after the publication of *EO*, Four and Five” (2:484).<sup>29</sup> The witty but vicious reviewer Faddey Bulgarin, for example, “welcomed the appearance of a new personage” in the churring beetle of Chapter Seven “and expected him to prove a better sustained [*vidierzhanniy*] character than the others.”<sup>30</sup>

Pushkin closely followed his negative reviews. Bulgarin wrote that Chapter Seven was nothing but “two small printed sheets—variegated with such verses and such clowning that even *Eugene Velskii*,” an anonymous travesty of 1828-29, “appears in comparison to be something having a semblance of common sense....Not one idea in this watery Chapter Seven, not one sentiment, not one picture worthy of contemplation!” (3:125-26). Pushkin, sounding for all the world like a nineteenth-century Nabokov, exploded in response that *what* is not important at all: literature’s only concern is with the *how*. Nabokov translates and includes Pushkin’s self-defense:

The most insignificant subject may be selected by the author for his poem. Critics need not discuss what the author describes. They should discuss *how* he describes it.

In one of our reviews it was said that Chapter Seven could not have any success because the age and Russia go forward whereas the author of the poem remains on the same spot. This verdict is unjust (i.e., in its conclusion). If the age may be said to progress, if sciences, philosophy, and civilization may perfect themselves and change, poetry remains stationary and neither ages nor changes. Her goal, her means remain the same, and while the conception, the works, the discoveries of the great representatives of ancient astronomy, physics, medicine, and philosophy have grown

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<sup>29</sup> I quote Pushkin, here and elsewhere in this chapter, in Nabokov’s translation from the *Commentary*. Pushkin refers in this letter to his infamous political exile in the early 1820s.

<sup>30</sup> Sparked by the beetle’s noise, Nabokov’s notes veer into a wild insect-chase through eighteenth and nineteenth century poetry, ending with Chateaubriand’s translation, “*Les Tombeaux champêtres*”: “...*On n’entend que le bruit de l’insecte incertain*.” Nabokov writes, “—a very uncertain insect, indeed; but then, the Age of Good Taste prohibited one’s using the ‘specific and low’ word *hanneton*. Forty years later the great French writer redeemed this surrender by his excellent translation of *Paradise Lost*” (3:83).



obsolete and are daily replaced by something else, the works of true poets remain ever fresh and young. (3:126-127)

The irony of the claim that Russia was leaving Pushkin behind is that the next centuries would imagine so powerfully the reverse narrative: Russian letters were not yet ready for Pushkin. In other words, if Pushkin was untimely, he was more premature than belated. But this passage also beautifully illustrates the tension between an eternal canon and the vagaries of aesthetic fashion. Pushkin, who mocked Derzhavin's faith in the immortality of his verses in "Exegi monumentum," states plainly that poetry has no teleology: he saw personally that literary tastes followed trends and went the way of haircuts and hemlines. And yet Pushkin, like Nabokov, would like to believe that true talent is eternal; or even, as Mikhail Bulgakov would write defiantly a century later, that manuscripts do not burn.

#### **IV. Plagiarism and Parody**

Where in *Onegin* is Pushkin innovative and even immortal, and where is he merely fashionable? When original and when derivative? Nabokov's *Commentary* brims with elaborate judgments, the tone set by the Translator's Introduction: "The structure of *EO* is original, intricate, and marvelously harmonious, despite the fact that Russian literature stood in 1823 at a comparably primitive level of development, marked by uncontrollable and perfectly pardonable leanings toward the most hackneyed devices of Western literary art still in use by its most prominent exponents" (1:16). *Onegin* rests on eighteenth-century European props, or leans "pardonably" toward hackneyed devices, but the ultimate triumph of the work lies in transcending Russia and the early nineteenth century.

Clearly Pushkin's innovative brilliance lies in his virtuosity with the Russian language. But given the translator's paradox, as Nabokov puts it, what remains when that

play with language is removed? A different reader might concentrate on the characters or on the plot, on the “climate of thought” or on Pushkin’s ideology; Nabokov has forbidden himself all of it.<sup>31</sup> Another translator might instead mimic the wordplay; but this too is against Nabokov’s principles. His own charming, erudite, and fanciful commentaries shimmer with a different kind of English-language virtuosity; but that is all Nabokov, with no pretense of directly conveying Pushkin. Reading somewhat generously, we might decide that the sheer joy in language and brilliant erudition of Nabokov’s notes “reflect” the equivalent in Pushkin—that Nabokov’s *Commentary* is the real, or at least plausible “translation” of *Onegin*.

However, what Nabokov writes about is Pushkin’s source material: the best way that he can show *his* Pushkin is to trace what and how Pushkin borrows, and how wittily he thieves, adapts, and improves. Nabokov’s *Commentary* brims with elaborate evaluations. A dazzling example is the analysis of the independent short poem “Exegi monumentum,” which Nabokov otherwise inexplicably includes:

In 1836, in one of the most subtle compositions in Russian literary history, Pushkin parodies Derzhavin stanza by stanza in exactly the same verse form. The first four have an ironic intonation, but under the mask of high mummery Pushkin smuggles in his private truth...The last quatrain is the artist’s own grave voice repudiating the mimicked boast. His last line, although ostensibly referring to reviewers, slyly implies that only fools proclaim their immortality. (2:310)

All of Nabokov’s key words are here: Pushkin “parodies” rather than imitates; he “smuggles in truth” under the mask of mummery. For parody to be the right way to borrow, it must be supremely conscious, masterful in execution, and spun through with the unique and individual sensibility of the later artist. Pushkin works with and against

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<sup>31</sup> Nabokov wrote of his Cornell University years that his lectures on literature “irritated or puzzled such students of literature (and their professors) as were accustomed to ‘serious’ courses replete with ‘trends,’ and ‘schools,’ and ‘myths,’ and ‘symbols,’ and ‘social comment,’ and something unspeakably spooky called ‘climate of thought’” (SO 128).

his precursor to create subtle meaning that only a reader familiar with both texts can follow.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, less graceful or self-conscious borrowings warrant a rebuke: “All this is embarrassingly close to a passage in Kozlov...and is only a slight improvement”; “A curious rewording of Baratinsky’s *Spring*”; this “stems from Virgil and not from direct observation” (2:83;70;84). Elsewhere, Nabokov is even more precise in his accusations of careless influence: “The recurrent intonations in the listing of the participants of this noble rout [8:XXIV-XXVI] are too close to those in Byron’s *Don Juan*, XIII, LXXXIV-LXXXVIII.” On the same page as he gives the last reproach and hardly by accident, Nabokov quotes from a letter by Count Mikhail Vorontsov that characterized Pushkin as “*un faible imitateur d’un original très peu recommandable: Lord Byron*” (3:194). The crucial difference is that in these verses Pushkin appears to be more generally and vaguely influenced by the style of his precursors: rather than engaging in a masterfully controlled and conscious parody or response, Pushkin seems to lean on the intonations and formulations that were already accepted as poetic at the time.

What peculiar aesthetics/ethics of literary theft do Nabokov’s evaluations reflect? Pushkin is allowed to use previous models: he must, for in literature as in music there is nothing entirely outside of tradition and form. However, he must do so consciously and masterfully; he must innovate or play inventively on the brink of parody. For, as Lady Frances warned, imitated affectation is never good *ton*.

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<sup>32</sup> In contrast, we might consider Nabokov’s evaluations of Dostoevsky: even *The Double*, which he considered Dostoevsky’s most perfect work, he at times calls a “shameless” parody of Gogol. By insisting on Pushkinian parody, Nabokov finds a way to bypass Dostoevsky as a model, and to build an alternative tradition to the international Dostoevsky-inspired modernism that included Sigmund Freud, Virginia Woolf, the French Existentialists, the English modernist poets, and several critical schools as well as literary movements.

## V. Pushkin and his Precursors

Great writers, more so than all but the most powerful scholars, are the ones who preserve and recreate a given canon. In his essay on Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges wrote that we choose our literary, if not biological ancestors.<sup>33</sup> Not unlike their characters, Pushkin and Nabokov load personal bookshelves with literary relations. *Evgenii Onegin* is famously rife with foreign novels: Pushkin seized on excuses to include long lists of authors and books. With near-perverse insistence on the irrelevance of all but style, Nabokov archly suggests that Pushkin did it for the sake of rhyme: firstly, “These tabulations of names of authors and titles of works were well known in French and English literature”; secondly, “What amused Pushkin was to iambize and rhyme them” (3:96). Yet some authors recur far more than others. How amusing could it be to iambize “*Bayron*”? Pushkin evidently intended more with this name. However, when Nabokov does address Pushkin’s precursors and international competitors, the two that emerge glaringly in the *Commentary* are Byron and Chateaubriand. The former is a clear choice: it is more or less impossible to write on *Onegin* without discussing the presence of the British bard. But Nabokov idiosyncratically insists on and inserts Chateaubriand into the commentary, while ignoring and downplaying or even belittling more evident influences.

My previous chapter invoked Pascale Casanova’s globally minded *World Republic of Letters* to examine the *Onegin*-influenced commonplace that Russian literature is unusually synthetic. Pushkin is clearly doing something with French and British precursors, incorporating foreign sources into his own work and attempting simultaneously to “catch up” and move beyond. But the *Onegin* project, to give the screw

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<sup>33</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and his Precursors,” in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 2007), 199-201.

another turn, allows Nabokov to create *his* Pushkin. We choose our own predecessors, but Nabokov claims the right to choose Pushkin's as well—and hence to handpick his own literary grandfathers. Nabokov's *Onegin* exegesis is more than a translation and more than an extensive study of Pushkin: Nabokov uses the excuse and the space to construct an internationalist canon dating from the early nineteenth century, and in which Russian, French, and English literature freely interpenetrate. Chateaubriand is thieved upon by Byron, who is preyed on by Pushkin; in the next generation we have Flaubert, perhaps Dickens, and certainly Tolstoy; and then ultimately Proust, Joyce, and the humble author himself. These are the “greats” of the novel form, the pillars of the canon proposed by Nabokov. Crucially, this particular genealogy of the novel stresses how easily literary bloodlines cross national borders—and how present the “Russian cousins” were from the start.

Voltaire and Rousseau are among those missing or downplayed in this account of Pushkin's genesis; Constant is acknowledged but put in his (minor) place, alongside the entire French classical tradition and the German Romantics. Vicomte de Parny and other poets are mentioned but also curiously de-emphasized.<sup>34</sup> Nabokov could have easily chosen to focus on the “verse” side of Pushkin's novel in verse: instead he primarily scrutinizes the novel form, even anachronistically looking forward to Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Flaubert. It is always more difficult for a poet than a novelist to cross borders, and Nabokov means to prove Pushkin's international relevance. Moreover and more subtly, he positions Pushkin, Byron, and Chateaubriand as precursors to his own poetic novels.

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<sup>34</sup> Likewise in terms of criticism, Nabokov rather downplays the modernist “my Pushkin” tradition of which he was so well aware. The twentieth century is represented by straw (and flesh) Soviet critics, with only faint traces of the other great writer-Pushkinists that I have already mentioned, such as Aleksandr Blok, Anna Akhmatova, or Vladislav Khodasevich. Again, Nabokov places emphasis on an internationally minded and internationally relevant Pushkin, rather than on the Pushkin of recent Russian tradition.

\* \* \*

The vast majority of Nabokov's comments on sources and similarities in *Onegin* center on Lord Byron:

The reader should be reminded of the fascination that Byron exercised on Continental minds in the 1820s. His image was the romantic counterpart of that of Napoleon, "the man of fate," whom a mysterious force kept driving on, toward an ever-receding horizon of world domination. Byron's image was seen as that of a tortured soul wandering in constant quest of a haven beyond the haze. (2:85; 3:85)

Even the *baletmeyster* in 1800s Petersburg, Nabokov notes, was "dubbed the 'Byron of the Ballet' for his 'romantic' fancy."

As Nabokov carefully documents, Pushkin alternately welcomed and parried the comparison. In a much-cited 1825 letter to Petr Viazemsky, Pushkin described *Evgenii Onegin* as "not a novel—but a novel in verse—a deuced difference" (or "the devil of a difference," *diavol'skaia raznitsa*) "in the genre of *Don Juan*." In a draft that he addressed to Aleksandr Bestuzhev-Marlinksy he wrote of the new work: "Its stanzas are perhaps even more licentious [*vol'nee*] than those of *Don Juan*" (1:69-70). He assumed publication in Russia to be impossible. When the publisher I. V. Slenin made an unexpected offer, Pushkin wrote back to Viazemsky, "What say you about Russia—verily she is in Europe, and I thought it was a mistake of the geographers" (1:70). In the fragment of yet another letter, he called *Onegin* a "romantic poem" after Byron.<sup>35</sup> In a published introduction, the oft-quoted preface to Chapter One, after summarizing his piece as "the description of a St. Petersburg young man's fashionable life at the end of 1819," he continues, it "recalls *Beppo*, somber Byron's humorous production" (2:10-11).

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<sup>35</sup> Nabokov sees in Pushkin's choice of words further proof that he read Byron in French: "*romanticheskoy poemi*, 'poème romantique,' as Pichot translated Byron's term 'romount' in Childe-Harold" (1:70).

On the one hand, Byron provides both a model and material for *Onegin*'s structure and parodic play.<sup>36</sup> On the other, Pushkin very quickly tried to differentiate himself and move beyond the prototype. Critics have been quick to seize on this thread: V. M. Zhirmunsky proves "the fact of Pushkin's youthful Romantic 'apprenticeship' to the fashionable English poet" and then argues that "the Romantic influence had been *conclusively overcome* before Pushkin's major works were written."<sup>37</sup> Monika Greenleaf tries to pinpoint the difference:

At first identified with Byron's notorious practice of stitching together narrative poems out of lyrical outbursts, nature descriptions, and garishly lighted fragments of plot, with a self-conscious emphasis on the open-ended process of his improvisation, the rubric "fragmentary" stuck to Pushkin and came to stand for more than stylistic eccentricity. No one could pretend not to know what a Byronic poem meant, where its center of value lay. Pushkin's poems, however, were genuinely ambiguous.<sup>38</sup>

Pushkin emphasized similarities with Byron when it seemed useful to do so: if readers questioned his hole-riddled work, Pushkin retorted, "Pardon me, I am much too lazy. Moreover, I humbly submit that two stanzas are left out of *Don Juan*" (3:128).<sup>39</sup> But when he realized the dangers of being considered overly Byronic, he turned in the other direction. He wrote to Bestuzhev-Marlinksy, "None esteems *Don Juan*...more than I, but it has nothing in common with *Onegin*. You speak of a satire by an Englishman, Byron, and you compare it with mine, and demand one like it from me! No my dear old fellow, you ask too much....There is not a ghost of it in *Eugene Onegin*" (1:72). However the comparisons kept coming, and usually not in Pushkin's favor: in an 1832 letter Evgenii

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<sup>36</sup> See V. M. Zhirmunsky's comparative study, *Bairon i Pushkin* (Leningrad: Academia, 1924).

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 2, her italics.

<sup>39</sup> He must have meant in the first canto alone, Nabokov notes.

Baratynsky, who disliked *Onegin*, deemed the work a “brilliant but juvenile imitation of Byron” (2:381).

How Byronic *was* Pushkin? Nabokov inherits the polemic and tries to differentiate fact from Romantic fiction. Most famously, and in the increasingly vehement polemic with Edmund Wilson, he insisted that Pushkin knew Byron only through French filters:

By 1820, eager Russian readers had already at their disposal the first four volumes of Pichot’s and de Salle’s first edition (1819) of Byron’s works in French, and it is in these prose versions, pale and distorted shadows of the original, that Pushkin read for the first time....*Le Corsaire*, *Manfred*, and the first two cantos of *Le Pèlerinage de Childe-Harold*....It should be noted that while turning the entire poetic production of Byron into easy French prose, Pichot not only made no attempt to be accurate, but methodically transposed the text into the most hackneyed, and thus most “readable,” French of the previous age. (1:159)

We note that this is precisely what Nabokov’s English tried *not* to do.

Edmund Wilson understood Nabokov’s insistence that Pushkin only read the French as prompted by a desire to belittle and one-up the seminal Russian poet. I will skip this debate, but point out a curious side-effect: Nabokov’s claim that Pushkin read Byron through the French shows the two Western traditions crossing even before coming to Russian shores. Nabokov writes: “Mark this curious and significant case: a reminiscence tainted by the influence of a hack coming between two poets” (2:176). Since Nabokov’s *Onegin* posits an English-French-Russian canon and a multinational origin for the Romantic (and neo-Romantic) novel, this side-effect works rather well, marking the beginnings of an attack on traditional studies of national literature.

\* \* \*

Byron is everywhere in Pushkin’s, and in Nabokov’s, *Onegin*. In Pushkin’s *Onegin*, Byron is mentioned directly, by name or through one of his memorable characters, no fewer than six times. Byron intervenes in the plot as well as inspires the structure and



style. Nabokov reminds us that in Chapter Seven “Tatiana discovers Byron (and through Byron, glimpses Onegin’s mind)” (2:352). He retells Pushkin’s absurd claim as to why he did not publish *Onegin’s Journey*: “The thought that a humorous parody might be taken for disrespect in regard to a great and sacred memory also restrained me. But *Childe Harold* stands so high that whatever the tone in which it is spoken about, the thought of a possible offense to it could not have arisen in me” (quoting Pushkin, 3:127). Nabokov in turn decides not to call the missing chapter *Onegin’s Pilgrimage*, concluding that it would “crudely emphasiz[e] a resemblance that Pushkin himself tried to avoid” (3:258).

A mere glance at the index suggests the importance of Byron to Nabokov’s Pushkin: a full column and a half is given over to Byron, or more than 200 individual page references. The discussion of what is and is not Byronic in *Onegin* starts as early as the Translator’s Introduction: the key structural element of Chapter One is, according to Nabokov, anti-Byronic: “In LVI the difference between a stylized Pushkin, blissfully dreaming in idyllic wilds, and Onegin, moping in the country, is used to mark the fact that our author does not share Byronic fad of identifying himself with his hero” (1:26).

For many of the key characterizations, plot developments, or leitmotifs of the book, Nabokov finds an explicitly Romantic and usually Byronic genealogy:

French literature of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is full of restless young characters suffering from the spleen. It was a convenient device to keep one’s hero on the move. Byron endowed it with a new thrill; René, Adolphe, Oberman, and their cosufferers received a transfusion of demon blood. (1:152)

Earlier Pushkin works, such as *The Gypsies*, he calls “frankly Byronic,” and writes of *The Caucasian Prisoner* that the hero “traveled to the distant Caucasus...in a Byronic search for inner ‘liberty,’ and found captivity instead. He is a vague and naïve prototype of Onegin” (1:167). Other tidbits from the commentaries offer fascinating marginalia: “In a

MS note of 1835 Pushkin carefully computed that Byron's father squandered, at twenty-five rubles to the pound sterling, 587,500 rubles in two years" (2:39). Or we learn that on the first anniversary of Byron's death, "Pushkin and Anna Vulf, in the province of Pskov, had Greek-Orthodox rites performed in commemoration of 'the Lord's slave Georgiy' at the local churches on their lands" (3:231).

All of this is fair enough, but Nabokov mentions Byron even when it seems less relevant, comparing works that Pushkin could not have known, such as Byron's "MS variant (unknown to Pichot or Pushkin)" (2:35). Nabokov finds an almost supernatural example of mirrored rhyme-riche linking the two poets: "in can. VII of *Don Juan*, among bungled Russian names that had already been misspelled in their passage through German transliteration into French and English" there is a "'Mouskin-Pouskin' (Musin-Pushkin) rhyming with 'through skin' and 'new skin.'" (The counts Musin-Pushkin are distantly related to the plain Pushkins)" (2:477). Perhaps Nabokov found this detail too eerie to ignore, but when describing Lensky's last days, he offers the following equally unmotivated digression: "It is amusing to examine what live Byron was doing while Pushkin's creature danced, dreamed, and died" (went to the Corso; wrote in his diary about the passing of time; fired pistols) (2:546). Nabokov is willing to devote pages to such details, which is particularly striking since he has virtually nothing to say about Pushkin's own favorite classical authors, even when referred to explicitly in the novel.

This is not to suggest that all the notes laud the demonic Brit: Nabokov is quick to defend the disciple against the master. He suggests that one ought to look again, and critically, at "Byron's famous and mediocre stanzas, *Fare Thee Well*" (3:129). Or he informs that reader that, as Pushkin scribbled in his own manuscript notes, "Byron used

to say he would never undertake to describe a country he had not seen with his own eyes. Nevertheless in *Don Juan* he describes Russia; in result, certain errors can be detected” (2:478). To this Nabokov adds his own complaint that “Russians on the whole had less trouble with Byron’s and his character’s name than Byron had with Russian ones” (2:479). And when Pavel Katenin conjectured in his *Recollections* that *Onegin’s Journey* “contained an imitation of *Childe Harold* canceled by Pushkin presumably because the inferior quality of places and things had not allowed him to compete with the Byronian model,” Nabokov responds to this “ridiculous remark” with the following comment: “Our poet’s respect for Katenin remains inexplicable” (3:254). Nothing could prevent Pushkin from competing with Byron: he did so openly, and in Nabokov’s eyes, he won.

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Another French presence, far more significant than that of Pichot, lurks behind Byron. When Tatiana discovers Onegin’s library and quickly catches up on her reading, Pushkin’s gives merely the lines:

Although we know that Eugene  
had long ceased to like reading,  
however, several works  
he had exempted from disgrace:  
the singer of the Giaour and Juan,  
also with him, two or three novels  
in which the epoch is reflected  
and modern man  
rather correctly represented  
with his immoral soul,  
selfish and dry,  
to dreaming measurelessly given,  
with his embittered mind  
boiling in empty action. (7:XXII)

Nabokov unearths two variants in Pushkin’s draft. The second lists specific titles instead of “two or three novels”: it includes “*Melmoth, René, Constant’s Adolphe.*” Nabokov

leaps on the opportunity to speak about “*René*, a work of genius by the greatest French writer of his time” (3:98), Nabokov’s beloved French Romantic author Chateaubriand.

Nabokov’s hunt for French precursors may have ulterior motives, and his singular fixation upon Chateaubriand quickly becomes evident. Chateaubriand remains a precursor rather ignored by most *Onegin* commentators: the importance Nabokov attributes to Chateaubriand bears little resemblance, for example, to Iuri Lotman’s take on the same subject. Chateaubriand has just under fifty index references in Nabokov’s *Commentary*, although he is mentioned exactly once in the text of *Evgenii Onegin* and once more in Pushkin’s appended notes. For Nabokov, however, this is no minor ghost, but a serious and beautiful presence haunting the text more profoundly than we might otherwise realize. In fact, I would suggest that one of the side goals of Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin* is to restore Chateaubriand to his proper international fame.

Whenever Chateaubriand’s name comes up, Nabokov attaches a suitably grandiose epithet to it: “The French writer of genius, Chateaubriand, is mentioned—somewhat irrelevantly” in Chapter Four (1:38). Onegin’s mood in Chapter Seven warrants another note and a quoted passage from Chateaubriand’s *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*: “*Ce qui enchante dans l’âge des liaisons deviant dans l’âge délaissé un objet de souffrance et de regret. On ne souhaite plus le retour des mois...une belle soirée de la fin d’avril...ces choses qui donnent le besoin et le désir du bonheur, vous tuent*” (3:71).<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere Nabokov inserts him almost wildly: “Speaking of poets, Chateaubriand says through René ‘*Leur vie est à la fois naïve et sublime...ils ont des idées merveilleuses de la mort*’”

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<sup>40</sup> “What enchants us during the years of love becomes in the years of solitude a source of suffering and regret. One no longer hopes for the turn of the seasons...for a beautiful evening at the end of April...those things that provoke a need or desire for happiness, are now lethal.”

(2:276-277).<sup>41</sup> And for little immediately apparent reason, Nabokov translates “*i nechto, i tumannu dal*” into French in the commentaries, adding: “Cf. Chateaubriand’s note on ‘*le vague de ses passions*,’ ‘the haze of his emotions’...” (2:241).

Even when forced to discuss other novels of the period that are directly referenced in the poem, Nabokov throws Chateaubriand back into the discussion. Glossing *Werther* he writes, “A faded charm still clings about this novel, which artistically is greatly inferior to Chateaubriand’s *René* and even to Constant’s *Adolphe*” (2:345); or again on Richardson: “Chateaubriand, by far the greatest French writer of his age, very admirably said in 1822: ‘*Si Richardson n’a pas de style...il ne vivra pas, parce que l’on ne vit que par le style*’” (2:346-347).<sup>42</sup> When noting some number of “analogies” between *Onegin* and Senancour’s *Oberman*, he even concludes that these are “probably coincidental or going back to Chateaubriand” (3:71). Nabokov only alludes, not to mention dwells on, certain comparisons and literary echoes. Naturally, he chooses to include a discarded variant of stanza 1:IX with the lines:

The fervor of the heart torments us early.  
Enchanting fiction:  
not nature teaches us love,  
but Staël or Chateaubriand.  
We thirst to learn life in advance—  
we learn it from a novel. (2:62)

Discussing a variant draft of 4:XXVI, Nabokov suggests, “Pushkin does not seem to have been quite sure of his ground here in using Chateaubriand’s great name” (2:440). Another cut variant is given on the same page: “And, says Chateaubriand,/not nature teaches us love,/but the first nasty novel.”

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<sup>41</sup> “Their life is at times naïve and sublime...they have the most fantastical ideas about death.”

<sup>42</sup> “If Richardson has no style...he will not survive, because one only lives through style.”

Nabokov also goes out of the way to retell and critique Aleksandr Shishkov's conservative charge that the "monstrous French Revolution, having trampled upon all that was based on the principles of Faith, Honor, and Reason, engendered in France a new language, far different from that of Fénelon and Racine." Nabokov explains:

This is presumably a reference to Chateaubriand, whose genius and originality owed nothing, of course, to any "revolution"; actually, the literature produced by the French Revolution was even more conventional, colorless, and banal than the style of Fénelon and Racine; this is a phenomenon comparable to the literary results of the Russian Revolution, with its "proletarian novels," which are, really, hopelessly bourgeois. (3:171)

Lest we miss the parallel to the humble translator, another political exile fond of racy themes, Nabokov's Introduction opens with an epigraph from Pushkin, on Chateaubriand.<sup>43</sup> Clearly, Chateaubriand forms an important part of the heritage that Nabokov is claiming throughout his *Onegin* project.

In fact, the very first note of commentary, on the origins of the word *pétri* in the master motto, mentions Chateaubriand's usages (In *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* he refers to himself as an "*androgynne bizarre pétri des sangs divers de ma mère et de mon père*"; in *René*: "*Mon coeur est naturellement pétri d'ennui et de misère*").<sup>44</sup> Nabokov then traces the further descent of *pétri*: "In Russian literature the next *pétri* (half a century after Pushkin's) occurs, with a literal sense, in the famous French phrase spoken by the repulsive homunculus in Anna Karenin's fateful dream (*Anna Karenin*, pt. IV, ch. 3)" (2:5-6). Like an heirloom or a family trait, this peculiar word passes from Chateaubriand to Pushkin, to Tolstoy, and then to Nabokov: as early as the first note, we glimpse the beginnings of Nabokov's projected literary genealogy.

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<sup>43</sup> See also mine to this chapter.

<sup>44</sup> "A bizarre petrified androgynne with the mixed blood of my mother and father"; "my heart is naturally petrified with *ennui* and misery."

Almost like Charles Kinbote, the villain of *Pale Fire*, Nabokov forces Chateaubriand into the exegesis of an entirely different work.<sup>45</sup> He analyzes Pushkin but seizes on any excuse to bring up the “greatest French writer of that time.” Constant’s *Adolphe* is arguably a more immediate presence in Pushkin’s *Onegin*, but Constant does not really enter Nabokov’s canon; thus he merely writes, “The analogies with *Onegin* are several, all of them obvious: it would be a great bore to go into further details” (3:101). He quotes from Pushkin’s unsigned note on Viazemsky’s translation of *Adolphe*: “Constant was the first to bring out this character, which later the genius of Lord Byron popularized.” Nabokov then continues, “Neither Chateaubriand nor Constant seems to have been highly appreciated by English critics. Of Chateaubriand’s *Atala*, *The Edinburgh Review*, an influential sheet of the period, wrote... ‘The subject, conduct, and language of it, are, to our apprehension, quite ludicrous and insane’” (3:102). Nabokov seems to say that yes, *Onegin* alludes to Constant, but let us return to the far more interesting Byron and Chateaubriand.

One implication is that we should look beyond the obvious reference: Chateaubriand is the genuine and noteworthy source for many of the paradigmatic themes and motifs of European Romanticism. Furthermore, Byron and Chateaubriand go hand in hand in Nabokov’s *Commentary*, granted a near-mystical connection as the greatest writers of their time, a status and connection to which Pushkin will also claim a share: “*René*, a work of genius by the greatest French writer of his time, François (Auguste) René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand... was, he says, thought up under the very elm at Harrow, in Middlesex, England, where Byron ‘s’*abandonnait aux caprices de son âge*” (3:98).

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<sup>45</sup> The 1962 *Pale Fire*, a travesty of annotation, was born out of Nabokov’s experience of working on *Onegin*, and allowed him to parody his own preoccupations and excesses, as imaginative fiction.

Byron and Chateaubriand are likewise linked in a lengthy note on the origins of *ennui*.<sup>46</sup> Under the pretext of demonstrating the French fashion of hyphenating Childe Harold's name, Nabokov includes Béranger's 1855 note "to couplets inscribed to Chateaubriand: '...le chancre de Child-Harold est de la famille de René'" (2:157).<sup>47</sup> It is as if Nabokov takes up the gauntlet on the side of Chateaubriand, who paraphrased "with grim satisfaction" some of Byron's more clichéd Venetian imagery in *Childe Harold*, for he "bore Byron a grudge for his never mentioning René, the Pilgrim's prototype" (2:183).

In his classic study *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz has suggested that it is in fact difficult to calculate how much Byron may have owed to Chateaubriand, and that French critics, following the example set by Chateaubriand himself in *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, tend to exaggerate the debt. (Praz notes that some "even go so far as to say that Byron's incest with his half-sister was a plagiarism, because Byron committed in reality the crime of which René had conceived the horrible possibility."<sup>48</sup>) Instead, Praz argues it much more likely that both drew from a common source, the prevalent demonic and darkly erotic strain in Romanticism.

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<sup>46</sup> The theme "is much too boring to be treated at length...*Ennui* was by 1820 a seasoned cliché of characterization that Pushkin could play with at leisure, on the flowered brink of parody, by transforming West-European formulas into virgin Russian. French literature of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is full of restless young characters suffering from the spleen. It was a convenient device to keep one's hero on the move. Byron endowed it with a new thrill; René, Adolphe, Oberman, and their cosufferers received a transfusion of daemon blood" (2:152). See further: "Chateaubriand, 1837 (*Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, ed. Levaillant, pt. II, bk. I, ch. 11): '*Une famille de Renés-poètes et René-prosateurs a pullulé; on n'a plus entendu bourdonner que des phrases lamentables et décousues...Il n'y a pas de grimaud...qui, à seize ans, n'ait épuisé la vie...qui, dans l'abîme de ses pensées, ne se soit livré au 'vague de ses passions.'* Finally—Byron, *Don Juan*, XIII, CI, 5-8: 'For *ennui* is a growth of English root,/Though nameless in our language:—we retort/The fact for words, and let the French translate/That awful yawn which sleep cannot abate" (2:155).

<sup>47</sup> "The singer of Childe Harold is of the family of René."

<sup>48</sup> Mario Praz, *The Romantic Irony*, trans. Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 69, 71.



Nabokov prefers a model of literary history where the greats steal directly from each other, to an attribution of their common themes to a general “climate of thought.” If he is to write about *ennui* in the *Onegin Commentary* (or in *Ada*, about incest), he turns at once to specific works and to the most sparkling representatives. Finally, Nabokov offers a telltale crossed-orchid of a reference: he describes Charles Nodier’s *Jean Sbogar* as “a short French novel of a Chateaubyronic genre...smuggled in by Pushkin” (2:358). His concern is not with the Romantic novel, but with the transnational Chateaubyronic genre. In the final analysis, it is Chateaubyron whom Pushkin smuggled into Russian literature, and Chateaubyron whom Pushkin must best.

#### **VI. Coda: Nabokov’s Canon**

My reading of Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin* finds that the exegesis project deliberately moves beyond Pushkin to create an entire canon, an international genealogy of the poetic novel—in which Pushkin of course occupies a central space. Pushkin, as a non-Western European outsider, was quite cynically aware of literature’s dependence on fashion: his *Onegin* is a whirl of conscious pursuit, a bid to imitate brilliantly (and hence to “catch up”) but also to innovate, adapt, and thus to overtake his distinguished competitors.

Nabokov in turn not only aims to break into the canon, but changes the terms to position himself as an insider, and hence as a natural authority. The criteria for evaluation are to be inspired innovation and conscious mastery; English language and literature are always already infected with French; and Pushkin and the Russian greats are central, not marginal to *his* Western canon—which is an idealized, glamorous Anglo-Franco-Russo

blend. From here to the meta-literary, incestuous modernist games of his late English-language novel *Ada, or Ardor* remains only a tiny step.

## Chapter Three

### Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor: Translating the Russian Novel*

I once premeditated making a study of Kafka's precursors. At first I had considered him to be as singular as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; after frequenting his pages a bit, I came to think I could recognize his voice, or his practices, in texts from diverse literatures and periods...

The first is Zeno's paradox against movement. A moving object at A (declares Aristotle) cannot reach point B, because it must first cover half the distance between the two, and before that, half of the half, and before that, half of the half of the half, and so on to infinity; the form of this illustrious problem is, exactly, that of *The Castle*; and the moving body and the arrow and Achilles are the first Kafkaian characters in literature.

...In each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist...In the critics' vocabulary, the word "precursor" is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotation of polemics or rivalry. The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.

—Jorge Luis Borges  
"Kafka and his Precursors," 1951<sup>1</sup>

One can borrow on the strength of a legacy.  
—Vladimir Nabokov  
*Dar (The Gift)*, 1938<sup>2</sup>

#### I. Tremors of *Ada, or Ardor*

Moving forward simultaneously a century and a half and a mere few years, we come to Nabokov's 1969 English-language novel *Ada, or Ardor*, one of his last and his most demanding work. Nabokov had planned to write a fictional meditation on time as early as 1958. Shortly after finishing *Eugene Onegin* and his burlesque of the art of annotation in the 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, he returned to his notes for *The Texture of Time*. The project

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<sup>1</sup> Borges, "Kafka and his Precursors," 199-201.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 98.

began to grow and take on new dimensions; in interviews, he described the new work as above all technically ambitious:

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 purpose is to have these metaphors breed to form a story of their own, gradually, and then again to fall apart, and to have it all end in this rather dry though serious and well-meant essay on time.<sup>3</sup>

While struggling with *Ada*'s early stages, Nabokov completed his translation of *Lolita* into Russian. The experience was not wholly positive: in the afterword to the English *Lolita* emphasized the "private tragedy" that "I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English,"<sup>4</sup> the new Russian afterword revealed an equally strong but opposite reaction:

Alas, that "marvelous Russian language" that I thought awaited me somewhere, blossoming like a faithful springtime behind a tightly locked gate whose key I had kept safe for so many years, proved to be nonexistent, and beyond the gate are nothing but charred stumps and the hopeless autumnal vista, and the key in my hand is more like a jimmy.<sup>5</sup>

Nabokov's laments ring somewhat false, or require decoding. It seems unlikely that his rusty Russian was to blame, and his contention in the melancholy afterword, that Russian is "a good 'from' language but a terrible 'into' one," is unconvincing.<sup>6</sup>

The bleak landscape behind the garden gate suggests two possible changed circumstances: one is the natural passage of time from "blossoming" and "faithful

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<sup>3</sup> The interview is quoted in *Strong Opinions* and in Boyd, *American Years*, 487. As some readers have caught, Nabokov quotes verbatim Van Veen's description of *his* treatise within the novel, or later gives Van a paragraph from his own earlier response: see *Ada* 562-63.

<sup>4</sup> Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 316-17.

<sup>5</sup> Translation as given in Boyd, *American Years*, 490.

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

springtime” to “hopeless autumnal vista”; and the violence of “charred stumps” suggests the other. As Nabokov repeated many times, everything that he loved in Russia had been shot through the heart or burnt to the ground. Nostalgia always longs for a lost time rather than merely for a lost place: Nabokov’s enchanted garden is not only the Russian language, but the Russian language of a different era. In translating 1950s Americana “back” into his native tongue, the writer faced the linguistic repercussions of the turbulent twentieth century. Should *Lolita* speak pre-Revolutionary Russian in 1965? Can the American preteen’s maddeningly average slang come across in the archaic lexicon of an émigré bluestocking?

Another translator might have been tempted to interpolate current Russian and hence Soviet jargon, shading Lo into a delinquent pioneer. By translating *Lolita* himself, Nabokov forever avoided such cleverness. The Russian *Lolita* is instead recognizably a translation, unmistakably a novel from *tam* (“over there,” or abroad). Michael Cummins notices a strange kinship with Nabokov’s *Onegin*, “that indefatigably clumsy, ‘literal’ translation of Pushkin’s masterpiece.” In both, Nabokov the translator “gives us a reading of a great classic of literature, a literal copy ‘rendering as closely as the associative and syntactical capability of another language allows, the exact contextual meaning of the original.’”<sup>7</sup> The result is more anachronistic than archaic, even blurring into a cultural collage. Nabokov remained deliberately vague about the intended audience for a Russian *Lolita*, mentioning that it might find the same readers as Osip Mandelstam’s verse. Yet anxiety over the readership is embedded into the newly Russian prose: as Cummins

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<sup>7</sup> George M. Cummins, “Nabokov’s Russian *Lolita*,” *SEEJ* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 355.

notes, “the new *Lolita* has exegesis right in the body of the text. The reader is coached in English poetry, taught the mechanics of the Bronx cheer (36) and hopscotch (12).”<sup>8</sup>

If the decline of *his* Russian literary tradition had not sufficiently preoccupied Nabokov before, the Russian *Lolita* illuminated matters starkly: there was no returning to the garden. However, the oddly hybrid-sounding Russianized American place-names and cultural landscapes must have suggested a new escape. If the original Eden was no more, he could write a new one into existence by translating culture in the other direction. The Russo-American world of *Ada* would resurrect the grand tradition of the Russian novel, but in English.

In those same years, reviews of *Eugene Onegin* continued to come in, and Nabokov revised *Speak, Memory*, working from both his English original and the Russian expansion. The memoir’s themes of idyllic childhood and exile found their way into *Ada*, alongside parodies of his own genealogical research. But what he called the “first flash of *Ada*” came in 1966:

Sea crashing, retreating with shuffle of pebbles, Juan and beloved young whore—is her name, as they say, Adora? is she Italian, Roumanian, Irish?—asleep in his lap, his opera cloak pulled over her, candle messily burning in its tin cup, next to it a paper-wrapped bunch of long roses, his silk hat on the stone floor near a patch of moonlight, all this in a corner of a decrepit, once palatial whorehouse, Villa Venus, on a rocky Mediterranean coast, a door standing ajar gives on what seems to be a moonlit gallery but is really a half-demolished reception room with a broken outer wall, through a great rip in it the naked sea is heard as a panting space separated from time, it dully booms, dully withdraws dragging its platter of wet pebbles.<sup>9</sup>

This early passage already reveals something of the novel to come: a tight circular structure (the description begins and ends with sea and pebbles) sets off an image that could be a painting or a movie still, but for the slight movement and sound. The decaying

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. We will see the same effects in reverse in *Ada*.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in the essay “Inspiration,” included in Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 310.

Villa Venus introduces the motifs of the “sore” and “rose” of Eros, anagrams that will plague the book. The parodic play with the motifs and imagery of Romanticism is already firmly in place—and the decidedly Byronic Van Veen was even originally named Juan.

Nabokov finished *Speak, Memory*, translated Bulat Okudzhava, and read an edition of Mandelstam’s verse sent to him by Gleb Struve. He found Mandelstam’s poems “marvelous and heart-rending,” but as Vera wrote to the *New Yorker*, “V’s blood boils when he sees what purports to be translations from the Russian of, say, poor, defenseless, doubly murdered Mandelstam by some of our modern practitioners.” Nabokov was more direct, writing in *Encounter* that Robert Lowell should “stop mutilating defenseless dead poets—Mandelstam, Rimbaud and others,” and privately to Struve that somebody needed to attack Lowell “for his illiterate and cretinic reworkings.”<sup>10</sup>

Not least among Nabokov’s sources for the expanding new novel was the notoriety and acclaim the 1962 film adaptation of *Lolita*, and the experience of working with Stanley Kubrick on the screenplay. The Nabokovs summered in Italy, hunting for butterflies and the artwork of *Ada*. There was by now a constant barrage of interviewers, photographers, and publishers making the pilgrimage to Montreux, Nabokov’s Yasnaya Polyana. In the span of one decade, his life had changed inconceivably:

Although in 1958, reviewers, readers, and writers across America had hailed *Lolita*, Nabokov himself was not well known... A decade later, his literary reputation was at its height. The publication of his Russian fiction had revealed the depth and breadth of his oeuvre, while *Pale Fire* showed he could produce another surprise as great in scale as *Lolita* yet wholly different in kind. By the second half of the 1960s he was often acclaimed as the greatest writer alive, the standard against which other writers should be measured, the one certain choice for a Nobel Prize.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Boyd, *American Years*, 508.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.

Nabokov had the attention of the world. Hollywood began nosing around *Ada* as early as 1968: it was decided that the asking price for movie rights would be no less than one million dollars.

However, the film never happened and the call from Stockholm never came. Instead *Ada* provoked such critical discord as have few novels aside from *Finnegans Wake*. Devotees hailed the work, while others viewed it as Nabokov's fall into indulgent irrelevance. Steiner wrote in an early review, "At a first reading *Ada*...seems to be self-indulgent and at many points irredeemably overwritten. But with a writer of this reach, first readings are always inadequate. Lived with, the layer cake in *Ada* may prove a culinary find."<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty concluded that if Nabokov's middle period found a balance between the "initial maximum difficulty of synthesis and eventual transparency," with *Ada* "he becomes *merely* idiosyncratic."<sup>13</sup> Michael Wood, evoking Edward Said's and Adorno's notions of late style, sees *Ada* as an odd mix of mastery and apparent ineptness, and points out that Nabokov was seventy by the time of publication. For Wood, *Ada* is "a sickly and elaborate world, a sort of hell which parades as paradise."<sup>14</sup> Finally, in a more recent reading Eric Naiman summarizes wittily: "More than any other book by Nabokov, *Ada* equates complexity with complicity...do we want to be the type of person who appreciates this type of writing?"<sup>15</sup>

Many readers have responded with ambivalence to *Ada*'s literary and linguistic games. However, the novel represents the most ambitious moment of Nabokov's career,

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<sup>12</sup> George Steiner, "Extraterritorial," *TriQuarterly* 17 (Winter 1970): 120.

<sup>13</sup> Rorty compares Nabokov with Heidegger in this regard: both peak in the middle and then become truly difficult. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Wood, *Magician's Doubts*, 206.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 266.



his most self-conscious, and as I hope to show, deeply self-reflective and even ambivalent attempt to write a modernist masterpiece in the late twentieth century. Just like his composite *Eugene Onegin* project, *Ada* reads quite differently from the perspective of the twenty-first century. Now that the controversy has cooled, *Ada*'s transcultural new world seems poignant and prophetic.

## II. Reading *Ada* and Nabokov's Allusions

In *Ada*, Nabokov looks to rescue his beloved Russian literary tradition by crossbreeding it with the European and Anglo-American modernist novel. Once more, he returns to Pushkin as his point of departure. The *fabula*, motifs, and meta-literary concerns of *Onegin* haunt *Ada*, but so do larger patterns, such as a complex temporal structure taken partly from *Onegin* and partly from the added stratum of Nabokov's own *Commentary* notes, and similarly competitive appropriations from other languages and literatures.

Priscilla Meyer has called *Lolita* a disguised "rewriting" of *Onegin*: ultimately, it is possible to read nearly every Nabokov novel in this way.<sup>16</sup> My own interest is to show deep structural affinities, pattern repetition in narrative strategies and in parodic style, as well as infection by plot. Just as my previous chapters have found to be true of Pushkin's and Nabokov's *Onegin*, foreign plots haunt *Ada*, some in central roles and others reading as virtuoso throwaways. The Chilean film-maker and theorist Raul Ruiz (best known for his adaptation of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*) uses the term "immortal story" for *fabulae* that recur across cultures and ages, story lines he often uses in multiple

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<sup>16</sup> See Priscilla Meyer, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and Pushkin's *Onegin*—McAdam, McEve and McFate," in *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov: Essays, Studies, Reminiscences, and Stories*, ed. George Gibian and Stephen Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Center for International Studies, 1984), 179-211.

variations and echoes within the same film.<sup>17</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, describing the echoing *fabulae* in Nabokov's works, turns to a different medium and calls the technique counterpoint.<sup>18</sup> These immortal stories provide depth, historical melancholy, and suggestive cross-cultural echoes; in Nabokov's late novel, stories are shown to repeat across generations and languages, and characters only live by following or adapting the patterns set by other characters. What seemed in Pushkin an appropriative "modernism of underdevelopment," in the late twentieth century reads as additionally inspired by the overwhelming noise of time and the infinite pressure of cultural inheritance.

Alongside an earlier generation of Russian modernists, Nabokov began appropriating Pushkin for his own fiction as early as 1919.<sup>19</sup> He wrote an ending to Pushkin's unfinished *Rusalka* at the age of twenty: even then, the young author realized that the power of the piece lay in its fragmentation, and tried to preserve a tantalizing incompleteness while adding something of his own style. Nabokov had hoped to reuse the scene for the second part of *The Gift*, his most ambitious Russian-language novel. This volume was to be about Zina's death, and Nabokov thought once again "to complete an unfinished Pushkin work as a means to a second ending-that-is-not-an-ending," the counterpart to the Onegin stanza at the close of the first book.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1995), 9-42.

<sup>18</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, "The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov," *Cambridge Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2006): 301-26.

<sup>19</sup> The list of Russian writers who borrowed from Pushkin, as I have mentioned, includes Innokenty Annensky, Aleksandr Blok, Andrei Bely, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Vladislav Khodasevich, and many more. See also Alexandra Smith, *Montaging Pushkin: Pushkin and Visions of Modernity in the Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2006). However, it may be misleading to call this an earlier generation: because his creative output continued into the late 1970s, one forgets that Nabokov was born less than a decade after Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Mandelstam.

<sup>20</sup> Ksana Blank, "The Endless Passage: The Making of a Plot in the Russian Novel" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1997), 96.

Nabokov rewrites Pushkin throughout his oeuvre, using texts that he loves as a springboard for his own work, and returning again and again to the scene of the crime.

Ironically, the common complaint of early critics was Nabokov's "un-Russianness":

While Russian émigré critics (those inside Russia were to mention Nabokov first in connection with the reports about the filming of *Lolita*) disagreed about the merits of Nabokov's work, many of them did agree on one point: they kept referring to his "un-Russianness," to his lack of ties with Russian literature and its traditions. At the same time some of them made a point of establishing his dependence on contemporary European literature and spoke of the influence of such different writers as Proust.<sup>21</sup>

Nabokov's best response to such critiques was to show that there was no lack of ties between the Russian tradition and contemporary European literature.

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The sheer density of Nabokov's allusions can easily lead his reader into a quagmire, the mad pursuit of reminiscence against which even he warned in the introduction to *Eugene Onegin*. How has the critical discourse explained a practice so central to Nabokov's poetics, but radical even among modernists and postmodernists?<sup>22</sup> I will attempt an overview of some of the most relevant writing on *Ada* and on Nabokov's allusions, in hopes of using the insights of Nabokov's most dedicated readers as a ladder to a position of greater perspective.

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<sup>21</sup> Gleb Struve, "Notes on Nabokov as a Russian Writer," in *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*, ed. L. S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 54. Struve continues: "Nabokov's conception of literature as an artifice, his interest in, and concern with the problems of composition, of pattern, his outspoken contempt for any kind of 'message' in literature, be it social, moral, or religious-philosophical, are all against the grain of the Russian literary tradition.... What makes Nabokov even more alien to the Russian literary tradition is his lack of sympathy with, if not interest in, human beings as such."

<sup>22</sup> Ellen Pifer writes that the entire "world of *Ada* has been made strange by art, its landscape saturated with an atmosphere of make-believe.... The artifice is more intricately contrived, the self-conscious allusions more densely woven than in any previous, or subsequent, novel by Nabokov." *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 132. Bobbie Ann Mason, another of the book's early champions, curiously turns to film and photography to explain the novel. The setting is "like a photo with multiple exposures"; the novel is like Bergman's *Persona*, which "shows the cameraman to the audience at the end of the film as a reminder that it was all imaginary." *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1974), 43, 142.

To begin with, many critics distinguish between an all-pervasive state of intertextuality, arguably true of any text, and a deliberate technique of allusion or parody.<sup>23</sup>

Annapaola Cancogni outlines the fundamental assumptions of an allusive technique:

It establishes 1) a literary tradition as source of value; 2) the audience as sharing that tradition with the poet; 3) an echo of familiar yet distinctive and meaningful elements; and 4) a fusion of that echo with elements in the new context...it requires a close poet-audience relationship, a social emphasis on literature, a community of knowledge, and a prizing of literary tradition.<sup>24</sup>

These requirements seem correct, if at odds with Nabokov's reputation as a disinterested solipsist. Is it possible that Nabokov's notoriously difficult style is meant to pull readers closer in, rather than to alienate the non-cognoscenti?

A second set of distinctions begins to qualify whether all allusions are integral to the novel's meaning. Do some allusions determine or seriously affect the plot, structure, and overall reading, whereas others contribute locally to the sheer pleasure of puzzle, recognition, and intricate pun? For example, D. Barton Johnson unearths many of the allusions to Pushkin in *Ada*. He argues that despite the fact that there are more direct references to Tolstoy and *Anna Karenina* in the novel, *Onegin* nonetheless must be the more important source text: the Tolstoy "line of indirection is a snare for the unwary."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokovians thus tend away from Roland Barthes's more radical conception of any given text as a "compendium of intersecting codes," or from Julia Kristeva's poststructuralist theory of inter-textuality, where "the text is no longer legitimately to be understood as the discreet product of a stable, originating consciousness." See Annapaola Cancogni, *The Mirage in the Mirror: Nabokov's Ada and its French Pre-Texts* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 46; and Michael Glynn, *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 308.

<sup>25</sup> D. Barton Johnson, "Nabokov's *Ada* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*," *SEEJ* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1971): 316. Both Johnson's 1971 article and his "The Labyrinth of Incest in Nabokov's *Ada*," *Comparative Literature* 38, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 224-55, are perceptive and informative studies. While I am indebted to many of Johnson's observations and often share his instincts, I disagree with the conclusions. For example, Johnson explains the presence of Pushkin by arguing that *Ada* "completes" Pushkin's family novel ("I shall detail a father's, an old uncle's/plain speeches; the assigned/trysts of the children/by the old limes, by the small brook...I'll have them quarrel and at last/conduct them to the altar") as proposed in 2:60

Carl Proffer began the preliminary work of annotating *Ada*, a project heroically taken up by Brian Boyd's multi-author hypertext exegesis *AdaOnline*. As Proffer colorfully puts it:

The allusion may be a mere fleeting detail which the initiated reader uses briefly like a passing harlot. It is no great loss if one does not realize that the "elongated Persty grapes" described on page 251 are taken from a little known lyric by Pushkin. But *Ada cannot be read intelligently* if the clusters of allusions to works by Lermontov, Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Chekhov remain beyond the consciousness of the reader.<sup>26</sup>

Like details in a realist novel, allusions fall into categories of major or minor significance. Proffer offers no rationale, but he instinctively places the majority of the references to Russian authors in the first group. If Nabokov aims to create a shared literary culture with his English-language readers, he has cause to be most insistent on the Russian authors.

For a general reading of allusion and parody in Nabokov, Proffer refers to his *Keys to Lolita* and to Alfred Appel Jr.'s *The Annotated Lolita*. He assumes that allusions serve the same purpose in *Ada* as in *Lolita*, if presumably more so. The essence of Proffer's and Appel's shared stance is that Nabokov's repeated allusions create an "involved," overtly artistic texture which warns the reader "to seek no reality" beyond that of art.<sup>27</sup> The danger of this position is that it not only erases distinctions between individual Nabokov novels, but also between diverse twentieth-century artistic and critical practices. Proffer's

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of *Onegin*. To me it seems evident that Pushkin in fact mocks novelistic conventions and readers' expectations in those lines. Nabokov plays similar games with literary clichés for twentieth-century audiences. In other words, every bad novel sounds similar, and only good novels are fundamentally unlike.

<sup>26</sup> Carl R. Proffer, "Ada as Wonderland: A Glossary of Allusions to Russian Literature," in *A Book of Things About Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1974), 250; emphasis mine.

<sup>27</sup> Alfred Appel Jr., introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage, 1991), lvi.

Nabokov too closely resembles a faithful adherent of Bertold Brecht.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Appel declares parody the key to Nabokov, but has Joyce even more in mind: “Like Joyce, Nabokov has shown how parody may inform a high literary art.”<sup>29</sup>

A more ethically charged reading, which Appel permits, is that the layer of artifice also establishes a difference between the occasionally clueless Humbert Humbert and the omniscient author. In one form or other, these two broad theories recur throughout much of the existent criticism on *Ada*. Boyd thus considers *Ada* to be Nabokov’s most moral novel: he argues that allusions teach the reader to read below the surface, and to pay attention to ethical as well as aesthetic details.<sup>30</sup> Following a trail of allusions, the reader discovers that Lucette’s story is the hidden counterpoint to Van and Ada’s narcissistic love, and the novel’s moral center.

Pekka Tammi examines Nabokov’s allusions in the light of Kiril Taranovsky’s school of Mandelstam studies. Taranovsky underscored the unintelligibility of Mandelstam’s poems when viewed alone: “Mandelstam is a difficult poet, a poet of cryptic messages....

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<sup>28</sup> This synchronic resemblance among all the writers and artists of an era reminds me of a passage in Proust: Marcel’s memories resemble Swann less than all “the other people I knew at the time, as though one’s life were a picture gallery in which all the portraits of any one period had a marked family likeness, a similar tonality.” Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 24.

<sup>29</sup> Appel, “Lolita: The Springboard of Parody,” in Dembo, *Nabokov*, 114. Appel continues: “With the possible exception of Joyce, Nabokov is alone among modern writers in his ability to make parody and pathos converge and sometimes coincide.... Nabokov has built on Joyce in developing parody as a novelistic form, for in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, which are totally parodic in form, and may be the finest comic novels since *Ulysses*, the parody and pathos are always congruent, rather than adjacent to one another” (116). See also Patricia Merivale, “The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges,” in Dembo, *Nabokov*, 209. Taking such a reading to the next level, Alexander Dolinin has argued that “almost any phrase [in *Lolita* especially] might be decoded as an ‘auto-meta-descriptor’ referring to the text itself.” Dolinin, “Nabokov’s Time Doubling: From *The Gift to Lolita*,” *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995): 3-40. See also Dolinin, “Nabokov as a Russian Writer,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 49-64; Dolinin, “Don’t Ride by, Re-reader,” *Nabokovian* 25 (1990): 37-40.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. “The difficulty in the majority of Nabokov’s allusions lies not in discovering their source but in discovering their part in the patterns of hidden recurrence and in the elusive structuring of the novels.” Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s “Ada”: The Place of Consciousness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985), 8.

The motivating context [in a given Mandelstam poem] is provided...by other poems, or by *other literary texts*, and such motivating texts may be denoted by the term *subtext*.”<sup>31</sup>

Tammi applies the Taranovsky method to Nabokov, suggesting terms like “reading in three dimensions,”<sup>32</sup> which demands “the activation of not just a single source (say, a novel by Dostoevsky), but a compound of multiple subtexts within a single textual unit, demanding precisely that we lift out the text, cube-like, from its immediate background, examine it from diverse intertextual angles, and search out the heterogeneous literary sources.”<sup>33</sup> Sometimes the pre-texts seem arbitrarily joined; at other times the combination creates the impression of a “*genetic* (causal) connection.” For example, in

*Lolita*, Nabokov

operates with a multitude of allusions to Prosper Merimee’s *Carmen* (1847). But, as Nabokov himself has been careful to point out elsewhere (in *EO* 3:155-156), Merimee’s novella is, at least in part, modeled on Pushkin’s narrative poem *Tsygany* (1824), and an “inexact and limp” prose version of the poem (re-titled *Les Bohemiens*) was actually produced by Merimee in 1852....In the following passage the causal chain [T1:]*Lolita* – [T2:]*Carmen* – [T3:]*Tsygany* is laid bare.<sup>34</sup>

Cancogni, in *The Mirage in the Mirror: Nabokov’s Ada and its French Pre-Texts*, her perceptive and richly theoretical monograph on *Ada*, finds that Nabokov’s fiction

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<sup>31</sup> Pekka Tammi, *Russian Subtexts in Nabokov’s Fiction: Four Essays* (Tampere, Finland: Tampere University Press, 1999), 6. Taranovsky’s most often-quoted dictum states: “If an investigator finds a subtitle ‘*Pindaricheskii otryvok*’ in the first printing [of Mandelstam’s poem], it means that he must re-read Pindar’s odes,” 10.

<sup>32</sup> The phrase is taken from *The Gift*, just as Appel’s beloved phrase “the springboard of parody” is lifted from *Sebastian Knight*.

<sup>33</sup> Tammi, *Russian Subtexts*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Of *Ada*, the most exaggeratedly allusive of all Nabokov’s work, Tammi writes: “*Ada* abounds with quotations, thematic echoes, and stylistic parodies of Tolstoy....That attributes of Tolstoy’s style derive from (and are inferior to) Flaubert is a pervasive claim in Nabokov’s writing. In his lecture on *Anna Karenina* Nabokov said that ‘the structure of [Tolstoy’s novel] is of a more conventional kind, although the book was written twenty years later than Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*’ (*Lectures* 2:147). Compare also: ‘that lorgnette I found afterwards in the hands of Madame Bovary, and later Anna Karenin had it’ (*Speak, Memory* 202),” 56.

turns towards its own literary past, in the name of a literature that refuses to be the alleged mimetic transcription of some presumably universal outer reality and instead, drawing from the unlimited resources of language and imagination that this new freedom opens up, creates a new reality with its own rules, its own systems, and its own referential background.<sup>35</sup>

Cancogni focuses on Nabokov's French sources, but she too catches the centrality of Pushkin to Nabokov's oeuvre, recalling that the narrator of *The Gift* "feeds on Pushkin, inhales Pushkin (the reader of Pushkin has the capacity of his lungs enlarged)." For this émigré character, "Pushkin's poetry lends familiar colors to unfamiliar landscapes."<sup>36</sup>

If her overall argument resembles that of Appel and Proffer, Cancogni adds French subtexts often missed by Anglo- and Russophone critics. She traces the "springboard of parody" phrase to find that V. Knight borrowed "the famous Flaubertian expression" from an 1877 letter to Turgenev: "*La Réalité, selon moi, ne doit être qu'un tremplin.*"<sup>37</sup> I would add that this nod to the Flaubert-Turgenev correspondence can hardly be incidental. Nabokov takes every opportunity to recall or forge deep cultural connections between literary Russia and Western Europe, especially at the crucial moments in the history of the novel.

Cancogni concludes that Nabokov belongs in the ranks of the great modernists, with Proust and Joyce:

Unlike the work of most of his contemporaries, whose innovation all too often rests on an alleged break with previous literature and all too seldom soars beyond the level of the experiment, Nabokov's fiction is tautly rooted within a literary tradition and, in this respect, bears greater affinity to that of the so-called "modernists" (and particularly Joyce and Proust) with which it also shares a peculiar concern for language and form, than to that of any of his contemporaries (including Borges).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 185. "Reality, in my opinion, need be no more than a springboard."

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



Michael Wood in “Nabokov’s Late Fiction” also draws an explicit comparison between late Nabokov and the modernist monuments of Joyce and Proust. Wood notices that Nabokov’s last three novels contain glimpses of a reality “located outside the fiction, rather as Joyce’s Molly Bloom suddenly and surprisingly turns out to know her author’s name, and as the narrator of Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu* allows us to wonder on a couple of occasions whether he is or isn’t called Marcel.”<sup>39</sup> Ontological walls slip, for many of Nabokov’s later protagonists peer across the divide of death. Wood concludes that *Ada*, *Transparent Things*, and *Look at the Harlequins* explore the boundaries of mortality, and terms this period Nabokov’s interview with posterity.

I will end with Maria Virolainen, who uses the allusions to Pushkin in *Ada* to explain the significance of Nabokov’s autonomous artistic discourse:

Just as old Van, at the end of his century-long existence, peers into his unforgettable, unvanishing childhood—the time which sparked the entire subsequent plot—just so Nabokov’s late novel continually peers into the mirror of *Evgenii Onegin*—into the mirror in which, analogously, the entire subsequent Russian novelistic tradition was formed.<sup>40</sup>

Like Johnson, Virolainen acknowledges that *Ada* cites other Russian novels as much if not more than *Onegin*; however, she too intuits that *Onegin* holds pride of place.

Virolainen points out that in Pushkin’s work, the difference between the poetic and the prosaic word amounted to diglossia: poetic discourse markedly belonged to a separate world. After the Golden Age, the distinction between reality and artistic discourse quickly elided. The great nineteenth-century Russian novels yearned to make the novel an extension of life; the Symbolists made life an extension of poetry. Virolainen suggests

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<sup>39</sup> Wood, “Nabokov’s Late Fiction,” in Connolly, *Cambridge Companion*, 201.

<sup>40</sup> Mariia Virolainen, “Mimikriia rechi (‘Evgenii Onegin’ Pushkina i ‘Ada’ Nabokova),” in *Rech’ i molchanie: siuzhety i mify russkoi slovesnosti* (St. Petersburg: Amfora, 2003), 400.

that Nabokov separates the two once more in *Ada*, returning to this forgotten aspect of Pushkin's cultural era. In place of the "chasm" between poetry and prose that made *Onegin* possible, he introduces actual diglossia in *Ada* for the same effect:

It is no coincidence that *Ada* is a Russian novel written outside of the boundaries of the Russian language. While it is far from Nabokov's first English-language novel, it is however an emphatically *Russian* English-language novel, with Russian heroes and continual appeals to the Russian novelistic tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Virolainen focuses on the Russian tradition, leaving aside Nabokov's synchronic relationships with Joyce and Proust. As she herself notes, her diglossia reading ignores the active and complicating presence of French.<sup>42</sup> However, she offers a mesmerizing analogy between Van's childhood and *Onegin* as the fountainhead of Russian literature: we can recognize in her reading a strong sense of *Ada* as Nabokov's last "Russian" novel, although empirically it is neither in Russian nor his last.

As even this brief summary of the existent library of Nabokov scholarship shows, critics tend to circle around allusion in *Ada*. For the most part, they read Nabokov's allusions as a common modernist technique carried to the extreme, or they turn to Pushkin, Tolstoy, and the Russian novel for the evident source material. In general, sympathetic readers of *Ada* intuit that there is more than meets the eye in the texture of its prose, and that beyond the pleasurable literary games Nabokov must be doing something more—whether insisting on the artifice of art or on the ethics of close reading. Using the insights of these previous scholars as a springboard, I hope to examine the peculiar meta-literary configurations and potential consequences of *Ada*'s world at still greater depth. Does this Russo-American hybrid, the Russian novel "translated" into the English

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 406-7.

<sup>42</sup> Of course, French is a part of the Russian linguistic and cultural tradition, as we see in Pushkin's *Onegin*, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and in the works of the post-Revolution Russian émigrés.

language and transnational modernism, signal the end of one strain of Russian literature or open a new transnational chapter?

### III. A Romantic Family Novel?

As the previous section suggests, *Ada* is littered with references to the Russian literary tradition. For the most part, Nabokov keeps the markers and signposts to his Russian subtexts in plain view: *Ada* is his only novel where characters from *Onegin* appear on the page to mingle with Nabokov's own. Nevertheless, in 1970 Nabokov appended the "Notes by Vivian Darkbloom" section, to patiently identify lines and echoes that the first readers may have missed. As both the text of the novel and the appended notes readily show, equally direct references to Chateaubriand and Byron occur side by side with those to Pushkin: Nabokov had studied carefully *Onegin* and its sources, and in *Ada* he put seemingly all of his material to use.

In seven pages and at breakneck speed, the opening chapter introduces the reading experience to follow. *Ada* begins with an infamous inversion:

"All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike," says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel (*Anna Arkadievitich Karenina*, transfigured into English by R.G. Stonelower, Mount Tabor Ltd., 1880). That pronouncement has little if any relation to the story to be unfolded now, a family chronicle, the first part of which is, perhaps, closer to another Tolstoy work, *Detstvo i Otrochestvo* (*Childhood and Fatherland*, Pontius Press, 1858).

We begin with a parody of mistranslation, attributed to a cross between George Steiner and Robert Lowell (the latter guilty of re-martyring Mandelstam, the former of theorizing away the crime). This first two-sentence paragraph is ominously dense, with the preposterous verb "transfigured," the title in Russian and in gross English mistranslation, and even that initial provocation that Part One may be "close to" Tolstoy. After assessing

the response, Nabokov added in the first of Vivian Darkbloom's notes that this opening alluded to the "transfigurations (Mr. G. Steiner's term, I believe) and betrayals to which great texts are subjected by pretentious and ignorant versionists" (591).

In the mid and late 1960s, the Nabokov-Wilson feud over Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* translation exploded to include Lowell and Steiner. In 1966, Steiner published the essay "To Traduce or to Transfigure: On Modern Verse Translation" in *Encounter*, an evident response to Nabokov's manifesto for literal translation in the Translator's Introduction to *Onegin*, and in defense of Lowell's translations of Mandelstam. Steiner argued that "the unfaithfulness inevitable in translating into verse is more than compensated for" by the translator's equivalent achievement. Moreover, a "creative insurgence" forms the start of any new poem. For this reason, Steiner concluded that "A great poetic translation—Hölderlin's Sophokles, Valéry's restatement of Virgil's *Eclogues*, Robert Lowell's readings of Osip Mandelstam—is criticism in the highest sense."<sup>43</sup> Nabokov wrote a letter to *Encounter* in response, prompting Lowell to write a piece "In Defense of George Steiner" (*Encounter* 1967); to which Nabokov replied in turn with "On Adaptation" in *The New York Review of Books* (1969), and immortally in the pages of *Ada*.

But is *Ada* another transfiguration? Is it a parody of transfiguration, a trap for influence-hunters, and a labyrinth for readers that proves definitively that Nabokov is always one step ahead? Perhaps, but the work attempts to create something beautiful out of errors and misreadings. "Old storytelling devices," says Van, "may be parodied only by very great and inhuman artists, but only close relatives can be forgiven for

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<sup>43</sup> See George Steiner, "To Traduce or to Transfigure: On Modern Verse Translation," *Encounter* 27, no. 2 (August 1966): 48-54; Robert Lowell, "In Defense of George Steiner," *Encounter* (February 1967); Nabokov, "On Adaptation," *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 4, 1969. Boyd, who summarizes the entire history on *AdaOnline*, quips that "the portmanteau 'Stonelower' neatly packs into one word a reverse 'Exegi monumentum,' the Vandals attacking Horace." See <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada11ann.htm>.

paraphrasing illustrious poems. Let me preface the effort of a cousin—anybody’s cousin—by a snatch of Pushkin, for the sake of rhyme—” (246). Lowell and Steiner are presumably neither great and inhuman artists nor “close relatives” of the writers they disfigure: Nabokov, however, may be both.

So soon after the highly public *Onegin* feud, *Ada* opens with a jab and a feint, announcing with the first lines that it will play all manner of games with the Russian literary tradition. In the next breath, we realize that matters are more complicated still, for “our great and variegated country” joins

lands in the Severn Tories (Severniya Territorii), that tessellated protectorate still lovingly called “Russian’ Estoty, which commingles, granoblastically and organically, with “Russian’ Canady, otherwise “French’ Estoty, where not only French, but Macedonian and Bavarian settlers enjoy a halcyon climate under our Stars and Stripes.

If Russian, French, and American territories intersect “granoblastically” on Anti-Terra, the following four pages covertly introduce all the main characters in several generations of “organically” intermingled Veens and Zemskis, as becomes apparent on re-reading. The themes of adultery and incest are present long before we recognize them.<sup>44</sup>

Next we “see” two children in an attic, in a parody of an exposition scene. Nabokov viciously critiqued the reliance on artificial expositions, such as are occasionally found in Chekhov or Austen. (Here Darkbloom adds the note: “Jane Austen: allusion to rapid narrative information imparted through dialogue, in *Mansfield Park*, 592.”) But in the place of an artificially transparent, reader-friendly exchange, Van and Ada serve us an exaggeratedly opaque improvisation *à deux*. The little Veens’ patter demonstrates their

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<sup>44</sup> D. Barton Johnson argues that “the incestuous relationship of Van and Ada is but the final episode in a series of incestuous matings among Veens and Zemskis” (“Labyrinth of Incest,” 238). Grandmother Dolly was known to be precocious and to have “sur-royally antlered” old General Durmanov: Johnson proposes that her cousin Dedalus may have been the father of her twins. I hear an echo of *Onegin* and Lensky in Veen and Zemski, and see General Durmanov as the unluckier update of Tatiana’s husband.

precocious intelligence and intensely private world. Ada challenges Van with a luxuriant biological monologue that ends with a comparison to the “Stabian flower girl,” ““an allusion, which your father, who, according to Blanche, is also mine, would understand like this’ (American finger-snap)” (8). Camouflaged in their dense exchange is the information that they are brother and sister, as the gossipy maid has already told Ada. Nabokov turns the family chronicle on its head in content as well as style: cheerfully explicit incest replaces the oblique hints at “*cousinage, dangerous voisinage*” in Tolstoy.<sup>45</sup>

The challenge and the key to reading *Ada* is also stated outright: the reader must catch allusions as quickly and accurately as possible. Certain characters, such as Ada, Van, and their father Demon, are wonderful allusion-hunters. Will we be on the inside or the outside of the Veen circle? The next page names the game again, “Re the ‘dark-blue’ allusion, left hanging,” and explains the etymology of a Veen ancestral name that Van likens to that of Proust’s aristocrats: “his favorite purple passage remained the one concerning the name ‘Guermantes,’ with whose hue his adjacent ultramarine merged in the prism of his mind, pleasantly teasing Van’s artistic vanity” (9).

The last page of this brief but demanding first chapter also hints that Van will become a writer, and includes the first editing note by a much older Ada: “Hue or who? Awkward. Rerword! (marginal note in Ada Veen’s late hand).” In seven pages, we have learned that *Ada* is a meta-novel, penned by Van and edited by Ada, and that they are still together at a much later point in time. If we only knew what to look for, the entire novel has been summed up and the plot resolved. The first chapter thus parodies and yet

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<sup>45</sup> In *War and Peace*, Anna Mikhailovna warns Mme. Rostova about her son Nikolai’s attachment to her penniless ward Sonya with this gruesome phrase. In *Anna Karenina*, Dolly worries about the children’s unsupervised games, a moment that *Ada* reinterprets perversely.

obscurely grants the exposition and heavy-handed foreshadowing that we might expect from a family novel.

#### IV. Echoes of *Onegin*

The story proper, with overt references to *Onegin*, begins in the second chapter and with Van and Ada's parents. Demon Veen seduces Marina in the middle of her performance as Tatiana in a travestied stage version of *Evgenii Onegin*, a "trashy ephemeron (an American play based by some pretentious hack on a famous Russian romance)" (10). Demon "proceeded to possess her between two scenes (Chapter Three and Four of the martyred novel)." The description of the play is as fantastic:

In the first of these [scenes] she had undressed in graceful silhouette behind a semitransparent screen, reappeared in a flimsy and fetching nightgown, and spent the rest of the wretched scene discussing a local squire, Baron d'O., with an old nurse in Eskimo boots. Upon the infinitely wise countrywoman's suggestion, she goose-penned, from the edge of her bed, on a side table with cabriole legs, a love letter and took five minutes to reread it in a languorous but loud voice for nobody's benefit in particular.

Even before the old Eskimo had shuffled off with the message, Demon Veen had left his pink velvet chair and proceeded to win the wager...[Marina] had ample time, too, to change for the next scene, which started with a longish intermezzo staged by a ballet company whose services Scotty had engaged, bringing the Russians all the way in two sleeping cars from Belokonsk, Western Estoty. In a splendid orchard several merry young gardeners wearing for some reason the garb of Georgian tribesmen were popping raspberries into their mouths, while several equally implausible servant girls in sharovars (somebody had goofed—the word "samovars" may have got garbled in the agent's aerocable) were busy plucking marshmallows and peanuts from the branches of fruit trees... (11)

*Onegin* is never named but is readily recognizable, as is the adaptation that Nabokov seems to have in mind: Tchaikovsky's opera has the same structural breakdown as this American "trashy ephemeron."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Darkbloom's notes add a gloss for the word "libretto" some five hundred pages later: "that of the opera *Eugene Onegin*, a travesty of Pushkin's poem" (604).

The hero and heroine of *Ada* are thus conceived—almost literally—out of *Onegin*, but again from a twisted adaptation. The seduction takes place during an intermission, an interval where one kind of time interrupts another. Demon recognizes the peculiar poetry of the moment, “so struck was he by the wonder of that brief abyss of absolute reality between two bogus fulgurations of fabricated life” (12). Reality takes place in such intermissions throughout *Ada*, and this scene has more allegorical significance than is apparent at first glance. The erotic interlude even serves as a tongue-in-cheek introduction to “Veen’s Time,” the most significant contribution to philosophy of Demon’s future son.

But the *fabula* of *Onegin* refuses to be confined to the stage and spills into the rest of the novel. Demon races home and makes it back to the theater in time “to fetch his new mistress in his jingling sleigh” (12), a structural tactic familiar from Nabokov’s analysis of the Pursuit theme in Pushkin.<sup>47</sup> Spectacular duels, snowy landscapes, and dangerous card games follow. A rival materializes out of the same source: Baron d’Onsky, a conflation of Onegin and Lensky. Characters and plots often come across as if garbled by aerocable, as does so much of Antiterra, as the alternate world of the novel is called.<sup>48</sup>

Then again, Van is the author of this pseudo-memoir. He reinvents the world in the process of remembering it, without question fictionalizing the portion that precedes his birth. A good deal is imaginatively reenacted, as *Ada* alerts us in an early marginal note: “(Van, I trust your taste and your talent but are we *quite sure* we should keep reverting so *zestfully* to that wicked world which after all may have existed only oneirologically, Van? Marginal jotting in *Ada*’s 1965 hand; crossed out lightly in her latest one)” (15). Van

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<sup>47</sup> See *EO* 2:108, and the end of my first chapter.

<sup>48</sup> See Johnson, “Nabokov’s *Ada*,” 317-18.



must have invented the fanciful pseudonym for his father's anonymous rival, and he repeats the same trick throughout: when he cannot remember the name of the Irish maid that was briefly his father's mistress, he glides from calling her "the Irish rose" to simply "Rose," now her name. (Joyce was a master at this game: we recall the quaking "Quaker" librarian, or the mysterious brown-coated mourner identified by the papers as Mr. M'Intosh in *Ulysses*.) Here the unknown art dealer, rival, and duelist is significant only for his role in Marina and Demon's Pushkin-inspired love story, so Van conveniently blurs fact and fiction.

Once the *fabula* of *Onegin* enters Nabokov's novel, it spreads and mutates like a dark fairy tale. The story retains its links to its original context and yet is emancipated from Pushkin's text.<sup>49</sup> As Demon whisks Marina away, "the last-act ballet of Caucasian generals and metamorphosed Cinderellas had come to a sudden close, and Baron d'O., now in black tails and white gloves, was kneeling in the middle of an empty stage, holding the glass slipper that his fickle lady had left him when eluding his belated advances" (12). In the *Onegin Commentary*, Nabokov had identified a Cinderella motif in Tatiana Larina's transformation from country maiden to St. Petersburg beauty, and here he underscores the resemblance. As he liked to point out in his lectures on literature, great novels are always fairy tales. Van and Ada's story also escapes to find a life outside of Van's memoir, in the competing narratives offered by Mme Larivière's pulp romance about incestuous siblings; in the even worse film adaptation of her novel; in Kim

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<sup>49</sup> Umberto Eco devoted his Arthur Miller lecture at New York's PEN festival (May 4, 2009) to the "eternal truth" offered by fictional works that have entered the public imagination: "We accept various interpretations and degrees of belief or unbelief in the Bible with tolerance...but *it's a fact* that Anna Karenina commits suicide," in my paraphrase from the lecture. Certain characters, however, like Sherlock Holmes, have the ability to break free from the texts that birthed them.

Beauharnais's blackmailing photo-album; and in the legends spread through the Ardis countryside by the Cinderella-like maid Blanche.

These fairy tales and floating stories influence our expectations and often lead to the wrong conclusions. Poor Blanche never finds her prince, instead marrying a local peasant and giving birth to a child disfigured by venereal disease. Larivière's novel, the resulting film, and all the Ardis legends fail to mention that the third Veen sibling Lucette, forever excluded from the perfect love, commits suicide. Stories repeat, but the future is not predetermined, and narratives can evolve. Both readers and characters misidentify patterns and are led astray by stories that turn out to be mortal after all.

Nabokov's variations on Romantic themes are sometimes tragic, but more often comic and sly. Demon duels Marina's other lover D'Onsky, but he fails to either die or dispatch his man with Onegin's ease. He only wounds the humiliated Baron in the groin, and his rival comically survives, marries, and eventually perishes from alleged medical complications. Once more, in the Demon-D'Onsky duel, it is not quite clear who plays the part of Onegin and who is Lensky, since the Baron's name conflates both characters. Pushkin used doubles to great effect: the narrator and Onegin, Onegin and Lensky, Tatiana and Olga, Tatiana and the Muse. Nabokov seems to merge and differently re-divide his own somewhat similar characters. Van is both the protagonist and narrator of this Romantic tale; dark and light Ada and Lucette mimic the Larin sisters; and the twins Aqua and Marina simply confuse us: we seek to identify one sister as the Tatiana-figure, but both and neither one fits. In each generation, some grotesque version of *Onegin* infects the plotline: and so Demon not only flirts with, but marries Marina's sister.

Chiasmic reversals of desire between Demon and Marina, unlike Onegin and Tatiana's chaste and star-crossed longing, fuel a cycle of betrayal and deception that dooms both generations of Veens. Pushkin's story was seen as a parable of restraint, but Demon, "not *quite* a gentleman in amorous matters" (10) uses the fact that Marina "had been in love with him since their last dance on New Year's Eve" (11) to seduce her in minutes and win a wager. Their dance echoes Onegin's flirtation with Olga, which was meant to prove to Lensky how quickly one turned a vain girl's head. Marrying Aqua, Demon dallies with the wrong sister but also espouses an unstable ghost of Tatiana, whose fascination with the other world and attempts at divination end in tragedy. Demon and Aqua's marriage proves even worse than the anguished wedlock that Onegin foresaw for himself and Tatiana. Walter "Red" Veen, who provides Marina with financial and social stability, plays the part of a cuckolded Prince N. (as Nabokov translated the title of Tatiana's husband in *Onegin*), although another character with that title also appears as Demon's "orchestra-seat neighbor" and the duped loser of his libertine bet.

Forty pages in, another variation on the *Onegin* theme opens *Ada*'s central narrative, this time as Van and Ada's love story. A cynical young aristocrat self-modeled on books moves to the country and encounters two sisters, the older dark-haired and bookish, the younger fair and natural. Sounding very much like the worried mother Larina, Marina describes her elder daughter as plain compared to the younger's healthy glow. Pale Ada could easily be Tatiana's great-granddaughter: the fact that her mother had been cast as Tatiana underscores the family resemblances. Both Marina and Ada resemble imitations, or reflections of the "real" Tatiana: Van, parting with Ada for the first time in the Ardis

woods, tells her that she looks like “the young soprano Maria Kuznetsova in the letter scene of Tschchaikow’s opera *Onegin and Olga*” (158).

But that also is the wrong sister, we protest, and suspect a trap. We initially identify Ada as the Tatiana-figure and dismiss the less interesting sister, but it is Lucette who writes Van the excruciating confessional love-letter. It is to Lucette that Van quotes *Onegin*’s most famous lines: “I love you with a brother’s love and maybe still more tenderly” (481). The lines are given exactly as Nabokov translates them in his *Eugene Onegin*, missing only the line break. With uncharacteristic restraint Van refuses to share Lucette’s letter with his readers: “In the fall of 1891 she had sent him from California a rambling, indecent, crazy, almost savage declaration of love in a ten-page letter, which shall not be discussed in this memoir” (366). Tatiana’s chaste love-letter was written in French and given over rather callously to the narrator, who preserved the original and re-wrote it in Russian. Likewise, Van tantalizingly withholds the original and retells the content in his own words. At some point in the novel, the reader is tempted to assume that Lucette is the real heroine, and that Van will recognize and fall in love with the girl he once ignored; but not so. Lucette goes the way of Anna Karenina instead.<sup>50</sup>

Simultaneously drawing our attention to these parallels and leading us further astray, Van also has a near-romance with another Tatiana while recuperating from his own duel. In an aside of no more than a page, his Romantic injury seems to conjure this “Tatiana, a remarkably pretty and proud young nurse, with black hair and diaphanous skin (some of

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<sup>50</sup> Johnson writes, “In Nabokov’s commentary to *Onegin*, he refers metaphorically to Kiti Scerbackaja as one of Tat’jana’s granddaughters [*EO*, II, 504]. In *Ada*, Demon Veen, the children’s father, makes passing mention of ‘his Aunt Kitty, who married the banker Bolenski after divorcing the dreadful old wincher, Lyovka Tolstoy, the writer.’ Thus the literary genealogy is *Eugene Onegin*, *Anna Karenina*, *Ada*, or perhaps more aptly Tat’jana, Anna, Ada” (“Nabokov’s *Ada* and Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*,” 319). Johnson slightly oversimplifies Nabokov’s multivalent fabric of allusions and seems to miss the joke as a result.

her attitudes and gestures, and that harmony between neck and eyes which is the special, scarcely yet investigated secret of feminine grace fantastically and agonizingly reminded him of Ada” (312). But this Tatiana’s story remains within the parentheses. The expected seduction leads nowhere, and the girl vanishes as rapidly as she entered the novel. She too pens Van “a charming and melancholy letter in red ink on pink paper, but other emotions and events had intervened, and he never met her again)” (312).

There is much, much more. “*Tak ty zhenat*” (“So you are married,” Onegin’s words to Prince N.), Van quotes in Russian to Greg Erminin, another rival who might have married Ada: “Might have replied ‘Ada Veen,’ had Mr. Vinelander not been a quicker suitor” (454), Van reflects. When he misidentifies yet another man as Ada’s husband, his first thought is of Tchaikovsky’s “preposterous libretto”: “The next outstretched hand belonged to a handsome, tall, remarkably substantial and cordial nobleman who could be none other than the prince Gremin of the preposterous libretto” (511). Van persistently sees his romance, and perhaps all of his romances, in the light of his beloved Pushkin.<sup>51</sup>

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*Onegin* and *Ada* are both, in a sense, about the problems of novelistic narrative. They chart the failure of narrative, and the illusions of singularity in biography or autobiography, in prose or verse. A multiplicity of stories competes inside of each novel, which nonetheless aspires to be a single meta-story. It would be deeply unsatisfying to read only about Onegin and Tatiana, skipping over the narrator’s meta-literary

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<sup>51</sup> The “Notes by Vivian Darkbloom” will not allow us to forget the presence of *Onegin*, adding clues and even line references. When Van quotes Ada’s translation to their father, he finds the verses “by chance preserved”: Darkbloom quotes “‘The verses are by chance preserved/I have them, here they are’ (*Eugene Onegin*, Six:XXI:1-2)” (599). The dinner that Marina prepares for Demon includes Persty grapes; the notes add, “Evidently Pushkin’s *vinograd*: ‘as elongated and transparent/as are the fingers of a girl’” (599). When Van engages in a scholarly tussle, he warns his school friend, the great Rattner’s nephew, “Your uncle has most honest standards...but I am going to demolish him soon” (317). The notes remind us of *Onegin*’s first line: “my uncle has most honest principles,” etc. (600).

digressions, just as it would be unsatisfying to read Nabokov's novel only for Ada and Van's affair. Instead we suspect that there is crucial meaning in the throwaways and allusions. In both novels, the central story starts late, is interrupted by constant digressions, and is repeated and echoed by endless grotesque variants. Summarized, the *fabula* never quite seems to match the text before us. These self-conscious stories are not about one person or couple, but about many at once: stories overlap, resemble each other, and seem to merge into universal immortal stories that recur across cultures and eras. How then do we maintain the illusion of a single hero or heroine (the Onegin and Ada of the eponymous novels) or even of a single author? The text seems to aspire to solipsism, but the end result prompts us to investigate all the literature that shapes us—and how we read and misread it.

In Pascale Casanova's world republic of letters, languages and literatures have their own borders and capital, but in *Ada*, the world of letters *is* the real world. Nabokov's beloved languages and cultural eras form a magical federation of nations as well; only in such an otherworld of letters would a displaced Russian émigré and self-fashioned European intellectual like Vladimir Nabokov be entirely in his element. The intellectual aristocracy even coincides with financial elite. Historical tragedy and injustice is righted along the way: Russian poets have been safely transplanted to new shores, and that New World is itself better. African-American descent brings automatic prestige in Nabokov's state, because it is a sign that you come from the first families of the great African explorers who discovered the continent. Young Van's exchanges with Demon include the slang phrase, rather incongruous in Nabokov: "That's very black of you, Dad" (241). But

these characters are Pushkin's descendents after all, and on Antiterra African-American and Russian aristocratic culture meet quite naturally.<sup>52</sup>

### V. Pushkin's Rivals, and Interpenetrating Traditions

Nabokov's efforts to transplant the Russian literary tradition to new soil do more than just invent a Russo-American New World. In keeping with his research and his cultural-ambassadorial agenda in *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov insisted that the Russian canon was always richly interwoven with English and French literary sources, as well as the other way around (and especially in the generations subsequent to Pushkin). *Ada's* Romantic roots reach beyond *Onegin* down to Pushkin's illustrious precursors, similarly working with and against earlier Russian, French, and English texts. Pushkin focused his energies on the authors from whom he most wanted to learn: as Nabokov argued in his *Commentary*, the two most marked Western sources in *Onegin* are Byron and Chateaubriand. While *Ada's* allusions seem to lead in all directions, it too leans on Byron and Chateaubriand, emphasizing the roots shared with Pushkin throughout and insisting on an interpenetrating and international genealogy for the poetic novel, the genre that *Ada* seeks to update and reconsider.

In fact, the strange genealogy works as follows. The main story is born of Pushkin's *Onegin*, whose characters and lines haunt *Ada* at its most poignant moments. Demon most resembles Lermontov's character, inspired by Pushkin's 1823 poem "The Demon," but painted over with Symbolist and Vrubel's demons, and throbbing with a generous

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<sup>52</sup> Nabokov, in a long appendix on Pushkin's African great-grandfather Abram Gannibal ascertains that almost nothing is known about the early life of Pushkin's ancestor, despite generations of scholarly conjectures. His insistence on scholarly restraint contrasts sharply with the freedom allowed a novelist.

infusion of Milton and Byron.<sup>53</sup> The Veen family tree includes a Dolly, but Demon also mentions an aunt Kitty who married the banker Bolenski (Lenksy?) “after divorcing that dreadful old wencher Lyovka Tolstoy, the writer” (240). Ada hints at Byron’s daughter and sister; but see also Byron’s character Adah, sister and wife to the unhappy protagonist of his *Cain*. Ada Veen is also the photographic negative of *Bleak House*’s pretty Ada, an angelic blonde who marries her good-for-nothing cousin.<sup>54</sup> Lucette’s final swan-dive off a trans-Atlantic liner crosses Ophelia with Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary, but compare also Lucile Chateaubriand. There is a Joycean grandpa Dedelus, whose Irish blood sharpens the Veen girls’ lovely profile. The ancient noble names of Van’s ancestors shade into Proust’s Guermantes. Chekhov is inescapable, given the theater diva Marina—and this list does not even begin to include the most important poets (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Marvell, and Blok) or the paintings and films that co-haunt the work. Finally, the lush gardens of Antiterra or Demonia borrow from the Eden of *Paradise Lost*, in Chateaubriand’s translation, and crossed with the wild Romantic America of his novels.

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<sup>53</sup> See Pamela Davidson, “The Muse and the Demon in the Poetry of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Blok,” in *Russian Literature and its Demons*, ed. Pamela Davidson (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 167-214. Famously, Nabokov supplemented his translation of Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time* with a sharply evaluative introduction rather than with tomes of commentary: he found Lermontov’s prose sloppier than his poetry, and judged the entire early novel to be very much “of its time”—Romantic, but not immortal. See Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. and with introduction by Vladimir Nabokov with Dmitri Nabokov (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988). For a response to Nabokov’s introduction, see Rebecca Stanton, “Talking Back to Nabokov: A Commentary on a Commentary,” in “My Nabokov,” special issue, *Urbandus* 10 (2007), 212-221.

<sup>54</sup> In his Jane Austen lecture, Nabokov explains that such a heroine, a ward to an aristocratic family, was popular in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. Joseph Frank provides a succinct summary of Nabokov’s reading: such a ward character serves “a variety of narratological purposes. Her alien status evokes pathos, she can enter into love affair with the son of the family. . . . Dickens, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy all used the same convention, and Nabokov remarks that the prototype of these quiet maidens is, of course, Cinderella. Dependent, helpless, friendless, neglected, forgotten—and then marrying the hero [10].” Joseph Frank, “Lectures on Literature,” *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 237. By that logic, Van is the Cinderella at Ardis, observing the manor with an outsider’s eyes, and then entering into a love triangle with both the family’s daughters.



I will focus on the most prevalent sources to sketch a flight-map through *Ada*'s allusions. Despite the incest, hybrids, and anachronism, a beautiful pattern can be made to emerge from the carpet. There is a linked repetition of Russian, English, and French great triads, creating a framework for all other borrowings. The pattern is set by the initial group Chateaubriand-Byron-Pushkin: the Russian imitates and then devours his French and English rivals. The next generation offers Flaubert-Dickens-Tolstoy; and the last important layer is Proust-Joyce—and Nabokov himself.

In the *Onegin Commentary*, Nabokov used Byron to illustrate the heights and pitfalls of Romanticism, and often to show where Pushkin improved on his precursor. But even Pushkin only went so far, leaving plenty of enabling gaps for his heirs. Nabokov writes that from certain passages in *Onegin*, it is

an easy mule's ride to the desolate Byronic scene—up to the boulders above timberline or down to the sea cliffs where the surf boomed...the moonlit ruins remained as noble and blurry as the “passions” inspired by incest in ancient plays...only in a few snowscape stylizations did Pushkin switch (in the established text) from the generalized Arcadian vista to the specific description. (3:290)

Is this critical passage not another springboard for that early glimpse of *Ada*, the first paragraph that came to Nabokov's mind?

Likewise, Nabokov's summaries of Chateaubriand's *Atala* and *René* for the *Onegin* project translate into still more material for *Ada*. Both of Chateaubriand's novels imagine a fantastic New World: “In the wilds of Louisiana, under a sassafras tree, René, a French expatriate...tells the story of his romantic past.” We can find in Nabokov's gloss of *René* the same language that *Ada* and *Van* will so freely borrow:

[René] contemplates suicide, but Amelie comes and saves him...A subtle perfume of incest permeates their relationship: “*cher et trop cher René...*”

She leaves him for a convent. In her passionate letter to him there is “*je ne sais quoi de si triste et de si tendre, que tout mon Coeur se fondaait.*” After a wonderful

visit to the country estate where they had lived, and a description of her consecration (at which she admits her “criminal passion”), Rene sets out for America. (3:100)<sup>55</sup>

The theme of incest blends elements from Byron and Chateaubriand’s lives with their most beloved works: Byron had a troubling relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh, scandalizing both British society and his wife, who firmly believed that his little niece was also his daughter. This did not prevent Byron from naming his legal daughter Augusta Ada, after his sister. Chateaubriand in turn immortalized incestuous love in *René*; and the exact nature of *his* relationship with beloved younger sister Lucille, remains a subject of historical dispute.

While Nabokov’s *Onegin* pushed to establish Pushkin’s international importance, it also dedicated a good deal of paper to describing and building an international canon. Thus, as I have argued in my second chapter, one of the subtler agendas of Nabokov’s *Onegin* was to restore Chateaubriand to his rightful status. If an interpenetrating French, English, and Russian canon emerges behind the scenes in Nabokov’s *Onegin*, in *Ada* it takes the foreground. In 1969, Nabokov attempts to write a novel that will openly draw as well as parody and slyly update the best works of this transnational canon.

In keeping, *Ada* is riddled with Chateaubriandic, Byronic, and mixed Chateaubyronic signposts. Ada and Van are in on the joke from the start: Van very quickly becomes Ada’s “*cher, trop cher René*” (131). The precocious readers find justification in their favorite masterpieces, sharing a copy of Chateaubriand before they become lovers: “Van, lying prone behind Ada, lifted his eyes from his book (Ada’s copy of *Atala*).”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “various things so sad and so tender, that my entire Heart was melting.”

<sup>56</sup> Appel picks up on the curious recurrence of allusions to Byron and Chateaubriand and writes in an offhand but telling footnote, “Chateaubriand and Byron are to *Ada* what Poe and Merimée are to *Lolita*.”

*Atala* hints at the somewhat-excusable incest of these little “natives,” but it also offers another fantasy America. As Nabokov pointed out in his notes to *Onegin*, Chateaubriand’s Europeanized noble savages endure trials and adventures in a wildly improbable but deliciously exotic Louisiana. Chateaubriand presumably teaches the Veens “how to love” all too well, but he also helps Nabokov imaginatively map and claim the landscapes of his New World.<sup>57</sup>

The French author even crops up as a breed of mosquito, *Culex chateaubriandi*, whose bite and resulting itch are a metaphor for incestuous desire.<sup>58</sup> Chateaubriand’s mosquito brings to a breaking point “the excruciating itch that local children experienced in midsummer” (106). Drawing still more attention to this peculiar Latin name, Ada reports that the first bottler of the mosquito “was not related to the great poet” but then quotes Baudelaire instead.<sup>59</sup> This very literary mosquito is “characterized by an insatiable and reckless appetite for Ada’s and Ardelia’s, Lucette’s and Lucile’s (multiplied by the itch) blood” (106): the quick slip shades Lucette’s name into that of Chateaubriand’s sister. Finally, in the last reunion between the surviving Veens, the same insect re-inspires aging Van’s lust for aging Ada: “Pensively, youngly, voluptuously, she was

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“*Ada* Described,” in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations, and Tributes*, ed. Alfred Appel and Charles Newman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 180. These are the key texts to *Onegin* as well, which points to Ada having a more specific project than merely to be a “self-contained survey course [on] the novel from Austen to Nabokov” (170-71).

<sup>57</sup> Cancogni also finds Chateaubriand to be one of the “most pervasive presences” in *Ada*. Without drawing further connections between the two pre-texts, she comments: “Chateaubriand’s *Memoires* are not the only recollections reflected by *Ada*. Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* also plays an important role in the intertextual network of the novel.” *Mirage in the Mirror*, 279.

<sup>58</sup> Is this Nabokov’s subtle revenge for that vague translation “*insecte incertain*,” mentioned in his *Onegin Commentary*? See *EO* 3:83 and my footnote 29 in the previous chapter. Nabokov criticized Chateaubriand for his loose phrasing in “*Les Tombeaux champêtres*,” attributing his lack of specificity to the influence of the eighteenth-century’s “good taste.”

<sup>59</sup> Darkbloom’s notes patiently explain that Ada “liked crossing orchids: she crosses here two French authors, Baudelaire and Chateaubriand” (595).

scratching her thigh at the rise of the right buttock: Ladore's pink signature on vellum at mosquito dusk" (562). The lyrical counterpart to *Culex chateaubriandi* is Chateaubriand's poem "*Romance à Hélène*," whose verses also "plague" *Ada* and provide Van with ample opportunity for parodic, multi-linguistic play.<sup>60</sup>

Van's name was Juan in the earliest drafts of *Ada*, but Van Veen still retains echoes of Don Juan. *Ada* teasingly calls him *le beau ténébreux* (503), an archetype that Darkbloom's notes gloss as "wrapt in Byronic gloom" (604). Demon has a taste for "Lord Byron's Hock," a dish that he mysteriously says "redeems Our Lady's Tears" (255).<sup>61</sup> Marina's talented and doomed brother Ivan, who died young of tuberculosis, wears a *bayronka* shirt in her framed photograph. Van and *Ada* even resume their affair for the second to last time near the Swiss "Château de Byron (or 'She Yawns Castle')" (522).<sup>62</sup> These seemingly incidental references continually cast the Veens in darkly Romantic and seductively demonic shades.

Nabokov especially likes to cross references to Byron and Chateaubriand, as the name of the Swiss chateau fortuitously suggests. Just as in the *Onegin Commentary* he combined the two authors to evoke the intermingled French and English Romantic strains

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<sup>60</sup> Nabokov must have been frustrated indeed by his audience's lack of memory to attach such Cliff Notes to subsequent additions "p. 138. *Ma soeur te souvient-il encore*: first line of the third sextet of Chateaubriand's *Romance à Hélène* ('*Combien j'ai douce souvenance*') composed to an Auvergne tune that he heard during a trip to Mont Dore in 1805 and later inserted in his novella *Le Dernier Abencerage*. The final (fifth) sextet begins with '*Oh! qui me rendra mon Hélène. Et ma montagne et le grand chêne*'—one of the leitmotifs of the present novel...p. 139. Lucile: the name of Chateaubriand's actual sister (596)." In contrast, Nabokov only points out Byron to his Anglophone readers when otherwise obscured in Russian or French, or by an especially wild pun, e.g., *bayronka* and *le beau ténébreux* as quoted above (602-5).

<sup>61</sup> I assume the latter to be a reference to Algernon Swinburne's 1866 poem "Dolores," about the vampiric and poisonous eponymous "Lady of Pain." *Ada* resembles Dolores at several of her most *femme fatale* moments in the novel, but adds always a dose of Nabokovian humor. In general, Nabokov has more sympathy for the original Romantics than for their Decadent heirs.

<sup>62</sup> Chillon's Castle, known from Byron's 1816 poem "The Prisoner of Chillon," is in fact only three kilometers from Montreux, Switzerland.

of a “novel in the Chateaubyronic genre,” so he resurrects and parodies that genre here. Except of course, he infuses the mixture with Pushkin (alas, Pushkin’s name does not lend itself so readily to hybridization as “Chateaubyron,” or perhaps Nabokov means to keep him separate to grant the Russian Romantic pride of place).

Chateaubriand and Byron are so central to Van and Ada’s own story that the Veens even recognize each other by a mixed Chateaubyronic code. Ada plays a minor role in an odd film, *Don Juan’s Last Fling*, which evidently takes its inspiration from Byron’s *Don Juan* as well as from Pushkin’s 1830 short tragedy, *The Stone Guest*.<sup>63</sup> Ada’s beauty achieves a lethal apotheosis in the film, but Van seems to expect her even before she appears on screen. He knows instantly who the actress billed as “Theresa Zegriss” must be, for the Zegriss were the rival family to the Abencerrages, celebrated in Chateaubriand’s 1826 *Les Aventures du dernier Abencerage*. This is a stage name that only Ada would chose; proving the mysterious convergence of their minds, Van publishes his first novel *Letters from Terra* under a pseudonym and “under the imprint of two bogus houses, ‘Abencerage’ in Manhattan and ‘Zegriss’ in London.” Ada tells him years later that, had she seen a copy, she would have recognized “Chateaubriand’s *lapochka* and hence your little paw, *at once*” (342).

Nabokov thus uses Chateaubriand and Byron in *Ada* as indexes to incest, and to a Romantic discourse about demonic passions. Nabokov precisely locates the roots of *Ada*—sources that the novel will use and manipulate to new and remarkable ends—in the same soil as those of Pushkin’s *Onegin*. He makes use not only of the same key texts, but of the very technique of subversive, innovative appropriation that he had learned from his

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<sup>63</sup> Appel calls *Ada* a summary of the “sufferings wrought by freedom...Nabokov’s critique of Romanticism. *Don Juan’s Last Fling* is no idle title.” Alfred Appel Jr., *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 50. I will return to this film in my fifth and sixth chapters.

studies of *Onegin*. What Pushkin's *Onegin* does with Byron and Chateaubriand, Nabokov's *Ada* tries to repeat with the same two authors, before updating the agon to include the great novelists of the later nineteenth and twentieth century.

Pushkin did not look to Byron and Chateaubriand out of mere playful allusiveness: as we have seen, his *Onegin* is riddled with competitive anxiety over the backward state of Russian literature. *Ada* updates the struggle accordingly. The pattern is that the Russian latecomer outdoes the English and French; the twist or novelty is that *Ada* is not in Russian. Nabokov, writing in 1969, attempts to revive, expand, and drastically reinvent a translated Russian literary tradition with the potential to surpass Joyce and Proust.

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But let us turn briefly to the middle generation of Russian, English, and French novelists, and once more to *Ada*'s famous opening line. Part One explicitly begins and ends with Tolstoy, crossed with Flaubert, and somewhat more subtly touched with Dickens. Lucette's suicide recalls that of Anna Karenina and of Emma Bovary; Van's "sentimental education" progresses far more rapidly than that of Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau; Ardis Hall, as a grand old manor in which relatives inevitably fall in love, reads as an X-rated, hallucinogenic Bleak House. In Dickens's novel, blonde Ada marries her cousin Richard in secret, and the heroine Esther very nearly marries her guardian (and suspected natural father) John Jarndyce.

The final one-line chapter ending Part One, "When in early September Van Veen left Manhattan for Lute, he was pregnant" (325), has prompted flurries of critical recognition and has been read alternately as a parody of Tolstoy or of Flaubert.<sup>64</sup> Nabokov's own

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<sup>64</sup> Carl Proffer calls the sentence Tolstoyan. Cancogni challenges him: "Though Proffer might well be right, we find his example inadequate, if not unconvincing, and particularly so when set next to another passage

voice weighed in to insist on Tolstoy: in the Darkbloom notes, in the interviews, in *Strong Opinions*, and in later fiction, Nabokov responded to critics and “corrected” their misinterpretations, as if sufficient reading guidelines were not already coded into the novel. Even a small pun such as “horsepittle” warrants a clarifying comment: it is “borrowed from a passage in Dickens’ *Bleak House*. Poor Jo’s pun, not a poor Joycean one” (592).

It is tempting to read Part One of *Ada* in a Tolstoyan light. If the initial group that I have identified—Pushkin, Chateaubriand, and Byron—may be credited with the birth of the poetic novel in Nabokov’s literary history, the next major layer, that composed of Tolstoy, Flaubert, and Dickens, and in fact the golden age of the novel, reflects and provokes the previous and subsequent generations. But we will slight this generation necessarily, as did Nabokov himself. He had hoped one day to give *Anna Karenina* a fully *Eugene Onegin*-esque treatment, but he abandoned the project. The early Tolstoy chapter of the *Lectures on Russian Literature* is the closest thing we have, and in it we see a less polished but familiar project along the lines of Nabokov’s *Onegin*: Nabokov compares Tolstoy to Flaubert and to other contemporaries, and examines his debt to Pushkin.

The pattern that I have teased out does not mean to ignore other textual presences, but to create a framework for making sense of the most persistent. The task is to trace Nabokov’s complicated literary bloodlines; I focus on the beginning and end of that genealogy, the former to set the pattern, and the latter to see its dramatic return with

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(by another author) whose echo we followed: ‘*Quand on partit de Tostes, au mois de Mars, madame Bovary etait enceinte.*’ Aside from obvious, if improbable, semantic parallels, this passage from *Madame Bovary* also happens, like the one from *Ada*, to close the first part of the novel” (Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 259). Nabokov once warned a hypothetical budding literary critic to be wary of finding everywhere his own footprint. A French scholar finds Flaubert in *Ada*; a Slavist, Tolstoy.

Nabokov's own novel in a starring role. Timelines, like family trees, occasionally reverse direction or collapse in on themselves. As Borges wrote in his essay on Kafka, literary influence works in both directions.

For Nabokov, all of these great names were writers and artists that he admired without hesitation: this is the “right side” in the unspoken war or major artistic dialectic of the twentieth century. Nabokov's list of immortal masters reflects the camp of the individual, the genius, and of masterpieces—a camp that stands for conscious effort, for restraint and aestheticism, and for continuity with the great traditions. The countermovement stands for subconscious creativity, climate of thought, and downplays authorial intent: such is the literature of social engagement and of “ideas,” and the avant-garde. It must be said that Nabokov wastes no opportunity to let us know which side of that cultural cold war he is on.<sup>65</sup>

## VI. Rescue from History

The *Onegin* project and *Ada* read as Nabokov's most fraught battlegrounds, his bids to handpick and then mingle with the literary immortals. Clearly, *Ada* aspires to break free from time and place, and to reach the status of an international, timeless masterpiece. To do so, it imagines a transnational canon and an ever-expanding English as the international language—a vision that is, in fact, not unlike Steiner's in *After Babel*. In truth, Nabokov's canon also resembles that of many Russian and other displaced intellectuals: it includes by necessity the Western classics to which they hope to lay

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Harold Bloom's battle lines in such books as *The Western Canon* and *Genius*. Likewise, there is something of the misplaced modernist in Nabokov writing this way in the 1960s and 1970s. One American-Russian parallel that strikes me is the lingering insistence of intellectuals from both groups on a “Western canon”: both are evidently anxious about defining a list of great books in such a way as to be included.



claim, and by birth, their national literature. However and unlike most émigrés, Nabokov successfully converted foreign readers to his side.

Yet even the escapist fantasy of Antiterra occasionally breaks down. Old Van has doubts at the end of his memoir:

Demonian reality dwindles to a casual illusion. Actually, we had passed through all that. Politicians, dubbed Old Felt and Uncle Joe in forgotten comics, had really existed. Tropical countries meant, not only Wild Nature Reserves but famine, and death, and ignorance, and shamans, and agents from distant Atomsk. Our world *was*, in fact, mid-twentieth-century. Terra convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake, the bullies and beasts that Germany inevitably generates when fulfilling her dreams of glory. Russian peasants and poets had not been transported to Estotiland, and the Barren Grounds, ages ago—they were dying, at this very moment, in the slave camps of Tartary. (582)<sup>66</sup>

We should not miss the undercurrents of historical tragedy always lurking behind *Ada*'s wistful world. Pushkin found Russian literature to be out of fashion and belated, but Nabokov believed his Russian literature had been struck down in full bloom, doubly murdered in inept English translations and in Stalin's labor camps. If, as my first chapter argues, Pushkin sought ways to translate European Romantic fashions into Russian literature, Nabokov makes the opposite move in *Ada*, and tries to transplant the Russian novel into a fantastical and utterly transnational New World. In both cases, parody and vast reserves of self-irony provide the only keys to escape—from provincialism, marginalization, or even history.

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<sup>66</sup> The classical *tartarus* is another name for Hades. I am reminded of Shakespeare's usage: "he's in Tartar limbo, worse than hell," from *The Comedy of Errors*, Act IV, Scene 2.

## Chapter Four

### *Ada* and the Modernist Agon: In Pursuit of Proust and Joyce

Truth will begin only when the writer takes two different objects, establishes their relationship, and encloses them in the necessary rings of his style (art), or even when, like life itself, comparing similar qualities in two sensations, he makes their essential nature stand out clearly by joining them in a metaphor in order to remove them from the contingencies (the accidents) of time, and links them together by means of timeless words.

—Marcel Proust,  
*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-1927<sup>1</sup>

I just don't know what an "anti-novel" is specifically. Every original novel is "anti" because it does not resemble the genre of its predecessor.

—Vladimir Nabokov,  
*Strong Opinions*, 1973 (173)

#### I. The Genius Line of Descent

In 1973, the philologist J. E. Rivers met with Nabokov in Switzerland. He had written in advance to say that he would like to talk about Marcel Proust: when Nabokov and Vera came to meet him, Nabokov was carrying a copy of *Pale Fire* marked with one of his famous index cards. "Perhaps you have read this little book of mine, *Pale Fire*," Nabokov said modestly, and explained that the marked passage remained the best summary of his views on Proust. In that passage, Kinbote indirectly reprimands Sybil via an evaluation of Proust:

"Speaking of novels," I said, "you remember we decided once, you, your husband and I, that Proust's rough masterpiece was a huge, ghoulish fairy tale, an asparagus dream, totally unconnected with any possible people in any historical France, a sexual *travestissement* and a colossal farce, the vocabulary of genius and its poetry, but no more, impossibly rude hostesses, please let me speak, and even ruder guests,

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<sup>1</sup> As translated by Nabokov in Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1980), 211 (hereafter abbreviated as *LL*).

mechanical Dostoevskian rows and Tolstoian nuances of snobbishness repeated and expanded to an insufferable length, adorable seascapes, melting avenues, no, do not interrupt me, light and shade effects rivaling those of the greatest English poets, a flora of metaphors, described—by Cocteau, I think—as ‘a mirage of suspended gardens,’ and, I have not yet finished, an absurd, rubber-and-wire romance between a blond young blackguard (the fictitious Marcel), and an improbable *jeune fille* who has a pasted-on bosom, Vronski’s (and Lyovin’s) thick neck, and a cupid’s buttocks for cheeks; but—and now let me finish sweetly—we were wrong, Sybil, we were wrong in denying our little *beau tenebreux* the capacity of evoking ‘human interest’: it is there, it is there—maybe a rather eighteenth-centuryish, or even seventeenth-centuryish, brand, but it is there. Please dip, or redip, spider, into this book [offering it], you will find a pretty marker in it bought in France, I want John to keep it...”<sup>2</sup>

For his most eloquent and concisely phrased evaluation of Proust, Nabokov turns to a passage from one of his later novels. The embedded commentary works beautifully in the context of *Pale Fire*, not only as an overly-ingenuous retort to Sybil for excluding Kinbote from a party. The quick summary of *À la recherche* harmonizes with *Pale Fire*’s motifs of artistic risk, social exclusion, homosexuality, and memories of lost grandeur. Nabokov’s half-admiring and half-devastating “homage,” stylistically a pastiche of Proust, seems an integral internal echo of his own ghoulish fairy tale. It offers readers a common cultural background with Kinbote, and an insight into the building blocks of his delusional world. The humble Russian immigrant Botkin reimagines himself and his past through luridly literary eyes. In a wonderful example of what René Girard calls “mimetic desire,” Kinbote casts himself as a glamorous homosexual aristocrat, a misplaced Baron de Charlus among the midcentury American plebians.<sup>3</sup> Nabokov acknowledged a

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<sup>2</sup> J. E. Rivers, “Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*,” in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Phyllis A. Roth (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 138-39.

<sup>3</sup> Proust’s Charlus deteriorates mentally throughout *À la recherche*, another signal to the aware reader of *Pale Fire*. See Girard’s chapter on Proust for how the characters of *À la recherche* in turn model themselves on earlier literature (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 193-228). I also detect in Kinbote an echo of Dickens’s harmless mad Mr. Dick from *David Copperfield*, whose mania involves slipping into the first person in a colossal treatise on Charles the First of England. Kinbote’s “slyness,” perceptible to no one but himself, suggests something of Marcel’s maiden aunts. Note also the insistence on Tolstoy and a Russian presence in Proust’s “asparagus dream.”

counterpoint structure to his most complex novels, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*: in one manifestation of this technique, an earlier immortal story begins to feel like a prescient echo of Nabokov's own.

*Ada* is exponentially more riddled with literary summaries and appraisals than is *Pale Fire*, but in *Ada* these embedded commentaries often run together. Part One of *Ada* especially, as many readers realize, presents a kind of parodic history of the novel. The masterpieces of the Western canon are transfigured into a super-saturated backdrop for the Veens' erotic adventures. The story of the Venus villas, floramors built by unrelated Veens, reads as another built-in parallel to the main narrative. Eric Veen's grandfather, a highbrow Antiterran Hugh Heffner, erects pretentious brothels ranging in style "from dodo to dada, from Low Gothic to Hoch Modern. In his parodies of paradise he even permitted himself, just a few times, to express the rectilinear chaos of Cubism (with 'abstract' cast in 'concrete')" drawing inspiration from "Vulner's paperback *History of English Architecture*" (350). This range of pastiches in architecture, bent to erotic purposes, sounds suspiciously similar to what *Ada* does with literary styles.<sup>4</sup>

Nabokov's favorite literature lives all at once on anachronistic Antiterra, for his parodies overlap and turn back in time. Similarly, Van and Ada's childhood takes place in late nineteenth-century Demonica, but the little Veens are already familiar with Proust, Joyce, Hollywood films, and flying. Nabokov claims to detest allegory but loves to literalize a symbol, or to allow images to hover between the allegoric and episodic. From the earliest interviews, he described the *Texture of Time* as the most difficult thing he

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<sup>4</sup> As Naiman writes, "So many of the quibbles in *Ada* are sexual that in its own attitude toward language the narration captures the avidity of its heroes for intercourse...the book sets impressive standards for lexical nymphomania and satyriasis" (*Nabokov, Perversely*, 249). Naiman's central thesis in *Nabokov, Perversely* is that "the task Nabokov sets his reader is to become (more) perverse, to linger uselessly in a state of interpretive uncertainty and pleasure."

ever wrote, and as a text that brought metaphors to life. The romantic plot and science-fiction conceit of *Ada* are at least in part an excuse for Nabokov's most dazzling games with literature. The Veen incest may or may not have allegorical implications for literary "inbreeding," and the magic of Ardis derives from the glory years of the novel form, remembered in a dreamy anachronistic jumble and yet another paradise lost.

My earlier chapters argue for Pushkin's centrality as the Russian fountainhead of Nabokov's canon, and that *Ada* continues the Pushkin/Byron/Chateaubriand appropriations explored in *Eugene Onegin*, but in novel form. The pattern traced thus far helps to chart *Ada*'s allusions when they turn to the twentieth century: Nabokov updates the agon to borrow from his favorite French and English-language authors.<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, arguably the last belated European modernist, turns to Joyce and Proust as the last authors to produce works on the level of their illustrious nineteenth-century precursors. In one of the famous lists of *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov recounts: "In Western Europe, between the ages of 20 and 40, my favorites were Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Bergson, Joyce, Proust, and Pushkin...by now [these] are probably beyond change as far as I am concerned" (*SO* 43).<sup>6</sup> The first three belong to the Cambridge of his

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<sup>5</sup> To my mind, Nabokov's English-language novels are by far his best. The language change, the *Onegin* study, and preparation for his lectures may have jointly provided a catalyst for a new Nabokov. John Updike writes: "The Cornell years were productive ones for Nabokov. After arriving there he completed *Speak, Memory*. It was in an Ithaca backyard that his wife prevented him from burning the difficult beginnings of *Lolita*, which he completed in 1953....The heroic researches attending his translation of *Eugene Onegin* were largely carried out in her libraries...in this his second American decade he managed to bring an entirely new audacity and panache to American literature, to help revive the native vein of fantasy, and to bestow upon himself riches and an international reputation. It is pleasant to suspect that the rereading compelled by the preparation of these lectures...contributed to the splendid redefining of Nabokov's creative powers" (*LL*, Introduction, xxvi-ii).

<sup>6</sup> In another list Nabokov gives his top four novels of the twentieth century: Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *Trial*, Bely's *Petersburg*, and the first half of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. I suspect the inclusion of Bely in this list of four to be a placeholder for Nabokov himself. Certainly these lists were ideologically as well as aesthetically motivated: the only German-language writer Nabokov would admit to admiring was Kafka, a Czech Jew.

early 20s and seem a feint against the English modernist poets, but the latter four form the gist of my dissertation.<sup>7</sup>

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Proust and Joyce are supremely poetic novelists: for Nabokov these two were the torch-bearers of a sensibility to which contemporary poets had far less claim. The greatest poetry of the early twentieth century was to be found in Proust's sinewy sentences and in Joyce's multivalent puns.<sup>8</sup> In the *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov called *À la recherche* "the greatest novel of the first half of our century" (LL 139). By the publication of *Strong Opinions* it had been unseated by *Ulysses*, but these two were clearly the contenders for first prize. As he wrote in the *Lectures*, there are many "talents" in the twentieth century, but "geniuses" only three or four: Proust, Joyce, and Kafka. While Kafka lingers behind certain unusual Nabokov novels such as *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, there is no comparison with the number of allusions, parodies, and embedded

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<sup>7</sup> The modernist poets are unequivocally dismissed: "I was never exposed in the twenties and thirties, as so many of my coevals have been, to the poetry of the not quite first-rate Eliot and of definitely second-rate Pound," Nabokov writes. "I read them late in the season, around 1945, in the guest room of an American friend's house, and not only remained completely indifferent to them, but could not understand why anybody should bother about them" (SO 43; he evidently has Wilson in mind). In a letter to Wilson, Nabokov even berated: "How could you even *mention* that Eliot in the same sentence as P. and J.?" As a poet, Nabokov was far too conservative for the poetic stylings of the era following Eliot and Pound. In prose however, his more conservative verbal music could ring out. It is strange, paradoxical, and typically Nabokovian that conservative restraint in some spheres should be combined with exuberant indulgence in so many others.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. "Poetry, of course, includes all creative writing; I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose...I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme. The magic of prosody may improve upon what we call prose by bringing out the full flavor of meaning, but in plain prose there are also certain rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation. As in today's scientific classifications, there is a lot of overlapping in our concept of poetry and prose today. The bamboo bridge between them is the metaphor" (SO 44).

commentaries on Proust and Joyce to be found throughout Nabokov's work.<sup>9</sup> And in *Ada*, Nabokov grappled with Joyce and Proust as never before.

However, Nabokov also persistently attacked readings and studies that placed undue emphasis on literary influences: "Alas, I am not one to provide much sport for influence hunters," he declared to James Mossman in the same year that *Ada* was published (*SO* 152). Elsewhere he made the audacious claim, "I can always tell when a sentence I compose happens to resemble in cut or intonation that of any of the writers I loved or detested half a century ago, but I do not believe that any particular writer has had any definite influence upon me" (*SO* 46).<sup>10</sup> Is this meant to be a joke, or is Nabokov insisting on a distinction between influence and parody or homage?

Galya Diment suggests that Nabokov's heated denials of literary influence were akin to his well-known hatred of Freud: Nabokov "feared being reduced to a sum total of other writers' influences to the same degree which he feared being dwarfed as an individual by simplistic formulas of mass Freudianism."<sup>11</sup> There is a vast difference between influence and imitation, on the one hand, and conscious playful mimicry, on the other: the former

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<sup>9</sup> Updike comments that even in Nabokov's "first published interview, in 1932, to a correspondent for a Riga newspaper," he rejected the "suggestion of any German influence on his work during the Berlin years, [responding] 'One might more properly speak about a French influence: I love Flaubert and Proust'" (*LL*, Introduction, xx).

<sup>10</sup> Or so he aspired. In the appended essay "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," written earlier than the rest of the Cornell series in 1940-41, originality seems a constant battle: "Creative experience tells [the writer] what to avoid at certain moments of blindness which overcome now and then even the greatest, when the warty fat goblins of convention or the slick imps called 'gap-fillers' attempt to crawl up the legs of his desk" (*LL* 379).

<sup>11</sup> Galya Diment, "Strong Opinions," in Alexandrov, *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, 691. Ironically the *Garland Companion* contains no fewer than twenty-three articles with the title "Nabokov and Writer X." *Ada* is full of feints—against poor translators and transfigurers; against Freudians (try reading an unintended family romance into this "family romance!"); and against influence-hunters through sheer wealth of intercut allusions. Cf. Nabokov's famous rejoinder to Carle Rowe's sexo-symbollic reading: "One may wonder if it was worth Mr. Rowe's time to exhibit erotic bits picked out of *Lolita* or *Ada*—a process rather like looking for allusions to aquatic mammals in *Moby Dick*" (*SO* 304).

suggests a derivative art practice; the latter on the contrary, total mastery. Nabokov was especially sensitive to comparisons with recent precursors and acknowledged grandmasters such as Proust and Joyce. “My sense of places is Nabokovian rather than Proustian,” he snapped at Simona Morini in a 1972 interview for *Vogue* (SO 197). Or in response to the question, what had he learned from Joyce: “Nothing.”

James Joyce has not influenced me in any manner whatsoever. My first brief contact with *Ulysses* was around 1920 at Cambridge University, when a friend, Peter Mrozovski, who had brought a copy from Paris, chanced to read to me, as he stomped up and down my digs, one or two spicy passages from Molly’s monologue, which, *entre nous soit dit*, is the weakest chapter in the book. Only fifteen years later, when I was already well formed as a writer and reluctant to learn or unlearn anything, I read *Ulysses* and liked it enormously. I am indifferent to *Finnegans Wake* as I am to all regional literature written in dialect—even if it be the dialect of genius. (SO 103, 1966 interview with Herbert Gold)

Even the innocuous motif of authorial nail-paring prompts a vehement denial. Appel called Nabokov’s attention to a series of echoes, beginning with Flaubert’s fingernail fetish in *Madame Bovary*, made famous by Joyce’s demand that the artist remain “behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails,” and seemingly alluded to in *Pale Fire*’s lines, “I stand before the window and I pare/My fingernails” (lines 185-86). The interviewer was his former student and friend, and the traced allusion specific and clever; but Nabokov would have none of it: “Neither Kinbote nor Shade, nor their maker, is answering Joyce in *Pale Fire*. Actually, I never liked *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I find it a feeble and garrulous book. The phrase you quote is an unpleasant coincidence” (SO 70-71).<sup>12</sup>

Nabokov’s exchange with Sartre, sparked by their mutually unpleasant reviews of *Despair* and *Nausea*, sheds more light on the question of influence. Sartre gallingly

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<sup>12</sup> Appel incidentally seems a likely model for *Ada*’s fictional editor Oranger, who may or may not have tampered with the “text,” and who has been rewarded in this world or some other with Violet Knox.



summed up *Despair* as too much like Dostoevsky, whereas Nabokov had clearly intended conscious parody. More precisely, in *Despair* Nabokov takes on the one Dostoevsky work that he admired, *The Double*. When the opportunity for revenge arose, he reviewed Sartre's *Nausea* as derivative of Dostoevsky at his worst: "It belongs to that tense-looking but really very loose type of writing, which has been popularized by many second-raters—Barbusse, Céline, and so forth. Somewhere behind looms Dostoevski at his worst, and still farther back there is old Eugène Sue, to whom the melodramatic Russian owed so much."<sup>13</sup> Clearly this is the enemy camp: the writing of second-raters is easily influenced, derivative, and loose.

Perhaps we can phrase the distinction in this way: weak writers lean on the borrowed crutches of cliché, whereas great writers steal stylishly, and have such strong individual sensibilities that anything they take into hand becomes original. For example, they pass along lorgnettes like torches: a lorgnette stolen from a Mayne Reid western heroine Nabokov "found afterward in the hands of Madame Bovary, and later Anna Karenin had it, and then it passed into the possession of Chekhov's Lady with the Lapdog and was lost by her on the pier at Yalta" (*SM* 202).<sup>14</sup> Nabokov uses metaphors of literary genealogy and literary progress despite his uneasiness over the clichés of criticism. But since he defines masterpieces by their innovation and originality, the "genius" line of descent in

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<sup>13</sup> "Sartre's First Try" (*SO* 228), reprinted from a 1949 article in the *New York Times Book Review*. Nabokov played a role in the crowning of high modernism as the reigning aesthetic of the twentieth century: modernism provided both a way of perceiving and a set of criteria for beauty. The cynical, but somewhat reductive response views high modernism as a welcome alternative in the West to socially engaged, populist, or avant-garde praxes linked with Soviet or Marxist aesthetics.

<sup>14</sup> Was Pushkin at least an influence for Nabokov? "In a way—no more than, say, Tolstoy or Turgenev were influenced by the pride and purity of Pushkin's art" (*LL* 102-3). He responds to the persistent interviewer, "I was careful *not* to learn anything from [Gogol]. As a teacher, he is dubious and dangerous...at his best, he is incomparable and inimitable."

nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature only allows for certain degrees of family resemblance.

The distinctions are not always clear, and Nabokov is less averse to discussions of influence when discussing the work of others—or when teaching undergraduates. For that reason, the most accessible treatment of Proust and Joyce in Nabokov’s published work remains that of the *Lectures to Literature*. He by no means admits to being influenced by their great novels, but he systematically highlights their most brilliant innovations and lamentable overindulgences, and all the key points of substance and style that speak to or against his own practice.

Despite Nabokov’s insistence on the originality of genius, the *Lectures* often offer something like the following line of descent:

A master of Flaubert’s artistic power manages to transform what he has conceived as a sordid world inhabited by frauds and philistines and mediocrities and brutes and wayward ladies into one of the most perfect pieces of poetical fiction known, and this he achieves by bringing all the parts into harmony, by the inner force of style, by all such devices of form as the counterpoint of transition from one theme to another, of foreshadowing and echoes. Without Flaubert there would have been no Marcel Proust in France, no James Joyce in Ireland. Chekhov in Russia would not have been quite Chekhov. So much for Flaubert’s literary influence. (*LL* 147)

Artistic talent transforms everything into poetry: its alchemy uses style and formal structure, counterpoint, complexity, and echo. Flaubert’s example allows for the existence of such literary heirs as Proust and Joyce. Then Nabokov catches himself and retracts, leaving us unsure whether even this “influence-chasing” is quite proper.

But Nabokov cannot hold back from genealogies. Describing Flaubert’s bravura set piece, in which Rodolphe seduces Emma at a country fair and one banal horror counterpoints another, he claims that this “wonderful chapter” had “an enormous influence on James Joyce; and I do not think that, despite superficial innovations, Joyce

has gone any further than Flaubert” (LL 160). In another lecture, Nabokov conjures Proust studying Flaubert’s prose style: “Proust says somewhere that Flaubert’s mastery of time, of flowing time, is expressed by his use of the imperfect, of the *imparfait*...to express the continuity of time” (LL 173). After quoting from a wonderful moonlit scene in *À la recherche* he exclaims that Proust “had a precursor” in Tolstoy (LL 221; e.g., the scene where Andrei listens to Natasha singing by moonlight). Finally, Nabokov frequently insists on Tolstoy’s precedence over Joyce in introducing new techniques for inner monologue.

Perhaps Nabokov had not yet begun to mask his influences with parody and fiction: there is a reason that he later preferred his fictionalized ruminations on literature to the early *Lectures*. But it is precisely their lack of polish that makes the *Lectures* useful, allowing us to influence-hunt with the master before he turns his back on that art.

## **II. *Lectures on Proust and Joyce: Style and Time, or Light and Shade***

Nabokov’s *Lectures* share with his *Commentary to Eugene Onegin* a tone of evaluative exegesis: Nabokov tries to parse when Proust and Joyce are at their best and when they slip, as well as the distinctive stylistic, thematic, and compositional traits that comprise their respective signatures. Throughout, Nabokov highlights elements that find their way into his own works. The *Lectures* thus give us an opportunity to reread Proust and Joyce with Nabokov, to catch the peculiarities that he finds most worthy of admiration or of censure, or simply the most memorable. Years later, he will weave both the best and worst of the two great modernists into the dense texture of *Ada*.

The first half of *À la recherche*, Nabokov's lectures claim, that is to say the portion revised during Proust's lifetime, forms the greatest novel of the early twentieth century. Nabokov's broadly stroked analysis promises to focus on the first tome, but ranges all over the monumental text. Nabokov reveals several facets of his author, but far more about his own taste. He focuses on Proust's interest in the visual arts and his other vividly visual verbal descriptions, as well as on time, memory, the philosophy of recall at which Marcel arrives, and its relation to literature: the novel is a "treasure hunt where the treasure is time and the hiding place the past" (207).

Nabokov begins by explaining that Proust's ideas about time and memory are inspired by Bergson's philosophy of time:

In his youth Proust had studied the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Proust's fundamental ideas regarding the flow of time concern the constant evolution of personality in terms of duration, the unsuspected riches of our subliminal minds which we can retrieve only by an act of intuition, of memory, of involuntary associations; also the subordination of mere reason to the genius of inner inspiration and the consideration of art as the only reality in the world; these Proustian ideas are colored editions of the Bergsonian thought.<sup>15</sup>

However, Nabokov seems to conflate Bergson with Proust, even casually admitting in one interview that he had been a great admirer of Bergson's novels in his youth (Bergson never wrote novels).<sup>16</sup> Foster suggests that the formula, Proust is Bergson in colored edition, may give "the impression that Proust is secondary to Bergson," but considering the centrality of the verbal image for Proust, Bergson, and Nabokov, the formula rather

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<sup>15</sup> Here as in the *Pale Fire* pastiche, Nabokov mentions Cocteau: "Jean Cocteau has called the work 'A giant miniature, full of mirages, of superimposed gardens, of games conducted between space and time'" (208). Note the suggestive resemblance to the mirages, games, and superimposed gardens of *Ada*.

<sup>16</sup> Leona Toker writes that "Nabokov mentions Bergson among poets and novelists who were his 'top favorites' between the two World Wars" but does not mention this odd juxtaposition in "Nabokov and Bergson" (in Alexandrov, *Garland Companion*, 367). Cf. Michael Glynn, who writes that Bergson's influence on Proust is usually understood to show in the latter's "concern with the operation of memory, with the interpretation of past and present" (*Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences*, 57).

makes Bergson “the precursor, in mere black and white, for Proust’s more vivid achievement.”<sup>17</sup>

Painting and the visual arts are crucial to Proust’s novel, but his text depends on visual imagination throughout. Nabokov sums up the work as a series of exquisitely curated images. The whole of *À la recherche* is “but an extended comparison revolving on the words, *as if*—” (208). In Part Four of *Ada*, Van will end his *Texture of Time* treatise with a similar broken comparison, “it is like—” (*Ada* 563). *Ada* also speculates that the effort to know the unknowable may not be worth the stained glass, because it is like—and nothing follows. These lines directly parallel the language that Nabokov uses to summarize Proust’s monumental novel in the *Lectures*: “The key to the problem of reestablishing the past turns out to be the key of art. The treasure hunt comes to a happy end in a cave full of music, in a temple rich with stained glass. The gods of standard religions are absent, or perhaps more correctly, they are dissolved in art” (208).

Color is crucial to this stained glass temple, where the very name of Guermantes, “that romantically noble family emerges from the inner colors of the church” (227). Proust was another synaesthete, something that Nabokov seizes on. Words, bloodlines, and memories all have a particular tint: Gilberte’s name is “like a cloud passing over, sheds for Marcel ‘a marvelous little band of light, of the colour of heliotrope,’ and then with an inner simile it turns the lawn to a magic carpet” (241, *nota bene* the magic carpet, to which I will return later in this chapter). *À la recherche* is shot through with

a mauve color, the violet tint that runs the whole book, the very color of time. This rosy-purple mauve, a pinkish lilac, a violet flush, is linked in European literature with

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<sup>17</sup> See John Burt Foster Jr., *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 87. See also Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson: “Colors are essential in the intricate patterns Nabokov invented, to which they contribute mythological, conventional, and cultural connotations,” in *Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 20.

a certain sophistication of the artistic temperament. It is the color of an orchid, *Cattleya labiata*...It adorns Swann's lovemaking in a famous but not very convincing scene. From this mauve to the delicate pink of hawthorns in the Combray chapters there are all kinds of shadings within Proust's flushed prism. (241)

The entire novel emerges from the magic lantern of the opening pages, and is peppered with the play of light and shadow. Proust's light and shade effects in prose, as Nabokov had Kinbote repeat years later, rival those of the greatest English poets.

Thus are the Edenic moments captured in this otherwise melancholy masterpiece. Nabokov draws attention to the children's games in the Bois de Bologne and how perfectly Proust manipulates readers' imaginations to create a four-dimensional "memory": in one long sentence Nabokov finds what he calls "space-time in parentheses, the content of which should be noted for this bright bit of lawn and bit of time in the girls' afternoon, with the shuttlecock beating time" (241). The passage, and Nabokov's description of it here, foreshadows Ada's light and shade games in *Ardis* and Lolita's tennis. Such passages do something to the reader's sense of time, by creating an image so memorable and precise that it seems to "capture" the moment, and to become immortal.

Nabokov also stresses Swann's peculiarity of recognizing and falling in love with his young mistresses for their resemblance to figures in Old Master paintings, a fancy quirk that he will lend to Albinus in *Laughter in the Dark*, Humbert in *Lolita*, and all the artistic Veens.<sup>18</sup> Proust's narrator shares the proclivity, for "Swann sets the pattern, and the narrator follows it" (239). The first incarnation is nearly always the truest, more bright and beautiful than what follows: every particle of Proust's world seems to long for

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<sup>18</sup> Nabokov adds cynically that the secondary reason (the primary being that art *is* life) for this flourish is of a "private kind," e.g., that the author sought to disguise his sexual proclivities behind classically lovely lads and ladies (228). Nabokov consistently takes Proust to task for the falseness of his Albertine, modeled on an Albert. Rivers retorts that "as most students of Proust know, Albertine has female as well as male models and becomes, finally, larger and more complex than any of them...Albertine escapes not only from the limits of gender but from any attempt to categorize and contain her. She represents the flux of time and the pluralistic structure of the self as it exists in time" (Rivers, "Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*," 141).

some other idyllic time. Everything repeats but everything loses color, and the narrator seems condemned to play out grayer versions of Swann's love.

Nabokov emphasizes the doubling and not-quite perfect identity between the text and metatext described in *À la recherche*, as well as between the author and authorial stand-in: "The book that the narrator in Proust's book is supposed to write is still a book-within-the-book and is not quite *In Search of Lost Time*—just as the narrator is not quite Proust." Nabokov calls it a focal shift with a rainbow edge, "the special Proustian crystal through which we read the book," which is only a copy of the ideal work of art that Marcel contemplates at the conclusion (210).

In the last book of *À la recherche*, Marcel arrives simultaneously at an understanding of time and of art. Simple memory, the act of visualizing something in retrospect, does not recreate the past: something more is involved; and the inner meaning must be sought. Only art has the ability "to rediscover, grasp again and lay before us that reality from which we live so far removed...that reality which there is grave danger we might die without ever having known and yet which is simply our life, life as it really is, life disclosed at last and made clear" (248). Nabokov quotes at length one of Proust's loveliest passages:

If, at least, there were granted me time enough to complete my work, I would not fail to stamp it with the seal of that Time the understanding of which was this day so forcibly impressing itself upon me, and I would therein describe men—even should that give them the semblance of monstrous creatures—as occupying in Time a place far more considerable than the so restricted one allotted them in space, a place, on the contrary, extending boundlessly, since, giant-like, reaching far back into the years, they touch simultaneously epochs of their lives—with countless intervening days between—so widely separated from one another in Time. (249)

This passage marks the close of *À la recherche*, but it might just as easily stand at the end of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* and of *Ada*.

Proust's prose style manifests his philosophy of time through metaphors, compound metaphors, and hybrids combining metaphor with simile; the expanded sentence; and seamlessly merged dialogue, narrative digressions and meditations, and extended visual descriptions. Even without the recognizable philosophy outlined above, a mere few sentences would allow us to identify Proust's signature. (Needless to say, Nabokov does not delve into the socio-economic dimensions of Proust's work. If the inhabitants of this dreamy world "happen to be what the gazettes call society people men and ladies of leisure, the wealthy unemployed," it is because the only professions Proust cares to show in action are artistic and scholarly: "Proust's prismatic people have no jobs: their job is to amuse the author," 208. Nabokov will follow suit with his Veens.)

Nabokov pays Proust his biggest compliment in the appended early essay "The Art of Literature and Common Sense," where he describes artistic inspiration in terms that shade from perfectly Proustian to recognizably Nabokovian:

The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist. It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open. (378)

What begins as Marcel's insight ends with Vladimir Nabokov's own distinctive and defiantly joyous imagery. Yet, for all the claims of non-influence, and for all the later attempts to move beyond Proust, this early tribute implies that Nabokov's very notion of artistic insight is deeply colored by Proust.

Between the *Lectures* and the *Pale Fire* pastiche, Nabokov must have soured somewhat on his French precursor. To his students in the 1950s, he insisted on the magic



of this “enormous and yet singularly light and translucent” work. But his later fiction betrays impatience with the nuances of snobbery taken to “insufferable lengths,” the occasionally ludicrous erotic obsessions, and the wild improbabilities of what remained in his final analysis a rough and unedited masterpiece. By 1962 and the short pastiche included in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov was already more critical; by 1969 and *Ada*, he believed he could do better.

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*Ulysses* closes Nabokov’s canon of great fairy tales in the *Lectures*. Nabokov’s fascination with Proust seems to correspond especially with his European years, but it is Joyce’s masterpiece, that impossibly “rich book with a vocabulary of about thirty thousand words” (285), that he increasingly considered the summit of twentieth-century literature. Nabokov reads Joyce with an eye to his parodies and stylistic pyrotechnics, including the much-lauded stream of consciousness technique, and to his complex structures and counterpoint. If Proust hunts for the treasure of time and recalls the past through metaphors and the sheer duration of his prose, Joyce captures a multi-rhythmic, palimpsestic present with all its moving parts.<sup>19</sup>

While he begins, ends, and intersperses this lecture with some of his most admiring remarks, Nabokov insists that not one of his authors achieves perfection consistently. To bring out the diamonds, there is much to clean away, especially in the exegetic paper trail that Joyce has amassed:

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<sup>19</sup> See also: “One essential difference exists between the Proustian and the Joycean methods of approaching their characters. Joyce takes a complete and absolute character, God-known, Joyce-known, then breaks it up into fragments and scatters these fragments over the space-time of his book. The good rereader gathers these puzzle pieces and gradually puts them together. On the other hand, Proust contends that a character, a personality, is never known as an absolute but always as a comparative one. He does not chop it up but shows it as it exists through the notions about it of other characters” (*LL* 217).

*Ulysses* is a splendid and permanent structure, but it has been slightly overrated by the kind of critic who is more interested in ideas and generalities and human aspects than in the work of art itself. I must especially warn against seeing in Leopold Bloom's humdrum wanderings and minor adventures on a summer day in Dublin a close parody of the *Odyseey*... That there is a very vague and very general Homeric echo of the theme of wanderings in Bloom's case is obvious, as the title of the novel suggests, and there are a number of classical allusions among the many other allusions in the course of the book; but it would be a complete waste of time to look for close parallels in every character and every scene of the book. There is nothing more tedious than a protracted and sustained allegory based on a well-worn myth; and after the work had appeared in parts, Joyce promptly deleted the pseudo-Homeric titles of his chapters when he saw what scholarly and pseudoscholarly bores were up to. (287-88)

*En passant*, Nabokov inserts a short sermon on how not to read, and attributes to Joyce the very Nabokovian move of doctoring his manuscript against the misreadings of bores.

As in the lecture on Proust, what Nabokov chooses to focus on is Joyce's signature style and his treatment of time. These two elements seem to form the backbone of a literary work, perhaps especially of the modernist poetic novel.<sup>20</sup> The secret of *Ulysses* lies in the interaction of prose style and temporal structure; in place of Proust's painterly vision, Joyce offers ironic verbal techniques and virtuoso wordplay, paradoxically the only sincere way that this author is able to conjure the past.

Joyce's style in *Ulysses* may be divided into his own unadulterated prose style; the "incomplete, rapid broken wording rendering the so-called stream of consciousness"; and various parodies of literature, pulp fiction, journalese, and other forms of writing (289-90). Nabokov has unreserved admiration only for Joyce's original voice. Stream of consciousness "exaggerates the verbal side of thought" at the expense of imagery, and the parodies are a mixed blessing. Rapidly switching between styles allows Joyce to introduce unexpected lyrical strains, but as quickly descends without motivation "to all

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<sup>20</sup> Nabokov's analysis of Tolstoy in the *Lectures on Russian Literature* finds the most magical aspect of *Anna Karenina* to be the perfect rendering of "real time": readers feel the novel's events to take place at just the pace of life—which is of course a brilliant illusion achieved through careful stylistic manipulation.

sorts of verbal tricks, to puns, transposition of words, verbal echoes, monstrous twinning of verbs, or the imitation of sounds” (290). The sheer weight of these special effects, alongside the local allusions and foreign expressions, can introduce “needless obscurity.”

There is no special reason why...one chapter should be told straight, another through a stream-of-consciousness gurgle, a third through the prism of parody. There is no special reason, but it may be argued that this constant shift of the viewpoint conveys a more varied knowledge, fresh vivid glimpses from this or that side. If you have ever tried to stand and bend your head so as to look back between your knees, with your face turned upside down, you will see the world in a totally different light. Try it on the beach: it is very funny to see people walking when you look at them upside down. They seem to be, with each step, disengaging their feet from the glue of gravitation, without losing their dignity. Well, this trick of changing the vista, of changing the prism and the viewpoint, can be compared to Joyce’s new literary technique, to the kind of new twist through which you see a greener grass, a fresher world. (288-89)

This description converges with Formalist notions of estrangement, but also foreshadows Van Veen’s acrobatic stunts: Nabokov’s narrator in *Ada* takes the metaphor literally.

What Nabokov admires the most is the counterpoint technique, a brilliant intersection of style and structure pervasive in *Ulysses*, from the astonishing synchronized group scenes to “one of the greatest passages in all literature,” the scene where Bloom brings Molly her breakfast. Joyce intercuts their dialogue with Bloom’s inner thoughts, rife with different languages and types of discourse. Elsewhere Joyce manipulates echoes found in banter about the horse Throwaway, the casual phrase “throw it away,” and the throwaway Elijah pamphlet. The phrase, like the pamphlet, crops up recurrently and lends a complex rhythm to the novel. The blind young piano tuner with his tapping stick is another agent of time, synchronizing events in the chapter. Bloom helps him “cross the street in an eastward direction, about two o’clock” (334); the sound of his passage pulls together several key scenes. The musical tapping serves as the blind youth’s leitmotif: through

such verbal magic, Joyce conjures the entire buzzing Dublin machine with all its moving parts.<sup>21</sup>

A passing cloud offers another synchronizing agent, this time visual and through the play of light and shadow, on which Nabokov so often fixates. Nabokov quotes and explicates in between sentences of Joyce: “‘A cloud began to cover the sun wholly slowly wholly. Grey. Far.’...Stephen saw the same cloud before breakfast: ‘A cloud began to cover the sun slowly, shadowing the bay in deeper green. It lay behind him, a bowl of bitter waters’” (304). In the first instance Bloom with his sing-song vocabulary thinks of advertising posters and the East; in the second Stephen’s loftier mind ever turns back to the bowl of green bile at his dying mother’s side, for the “great mother” sea reminds him of his culpability and of his simultaneous rejection of God and humanity.

Nabokov reads *Ulysses* entirely in temporal terms: the hopeless past, the ridiculous and tragic present, and the pathetic future. There is no past without a creative use of the present in Proust; in Joyce the present is always infected by the past. The past weighs us down even stylistically, and only a self-ironizing intelligence can grasp for autonomy under the immense pressure of accumulated cultural debris: hence the parodies and pastiches of *Ulysses*. When Nabokov analyzes the Gerty McDowell passage in Episode 13, he comes up with a veritable manifesto for modernist aesthetics:

When we say cliché, stereotype, trite pseudo-elegant phrase, and so on, we simply mean, among other things, that when used for the first time in literature the phrase was original and had a vivid meaning. In fact, it became hackneyed because its meaning was at first vivid and neat, and attractive, and so the phrase was used over and over again until it became a stereotype, a cliché. We can thus define clichés as bits of dead prose and of rotting poetry...Now what Joyce does here is to cause some of that dead and rotten stuff to reveal here and there its live source, its primary freshness. Here and there the poetry is still alive. (346-47)

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. “These characters cross and recross each other’s trails in a most intricate counterpoint—a monstrous development of Flaubert’s counterpoint themes...in *Madame Bovary*” (LL 330).

But when Joyce has the readers realize alongside Bloom that the girl is hopelessly lame, “the very clichés of her thought acquire something real—pathos, pity, compassion—out of the dead formulas which he parodies.” This is Joyce, and parody, at the very best: this is what real transfiguration looks like.

At other times Nabokov finds Joyce’s technique less revolutionary and overly ornamental. At such moments the reader understands the slip from *Ulysses* to the “grotesque, inflated, broken, mimicking, and punning style of the author’s next and last novel, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), one of the greatest failures in literature” (349). Likewise, Nabokov has reservations about Joyce’s most famous technical innovation. The stream of consciousness device has “unduly impressed” readers:

First, the device is not more “realistic” or more “scientific” than any other...the stream of consciousness is a stylistic convention because obviously we do not think continuously in words—we think also in images; but the switch from words to images can be recorded in direct words only if description is eliminated as it is here. Another thing: some of our reflections come and go, others stay; they stop as it were, amorphous and sluggish, and it takes some time for the flowing thoughts and thoughtlets to run around those rocks of thought. The drawback of simulating a recording of thought is the blurring of the time element and too great a reliance on typography. (363)

Nabokov misses in such passages the visual imagination so prevalent in Proust. Yet when Joyce permits himself to write in his own voice, his descriptions of Dublin and the light and shade effects of his imagery do not suffer the comparison. Joyce’s scalpel wit allows none of the emotional overindulgence or purple prose that overwhelms the second half of Proust’s enormous novel. When Joyce is overindulgent, it is with pun and irony.

Perhaps the most peculiarly Nabokovian moment in the lecture on *Ulysses* is his claim about the identity of the mysterious Macintosh, or M’Intosh:

Do we know who he is? I think we do. The clue comes in chapter 4 of part two, the scene at the library. Stephen is discussing Shakespeare and affirms that Shakespeare himself is present in his, Shakespeare's, works. Shakespeare, he says, tensely: "He has hidden his own name, a fair name, William, in his plays, a super here, a clown there, as a painter of old Italy set his face in a dark corner of his canvas..." and this is exactly what Joyce has done—setting his face in a dark corner of this canvas. The Man in the Brown Macintosh who passes through the dream of the book is no other than the author himself. Bloom glimpses his maker! (320)<sup>22</sup>

As Leland de la Durantaye notes, "no other Joyce scholar that I know of has contended [that] before or since."<sup>23</sup> Authorial visits of this kind are far more typical of Nabokov, who again seems to read backward, finding traces of his own style in his Irish precursor.

Finally, Nabokov prudishly points out that "Joyce with all his genius has a perverse leaning towards the disgusting" (342). Does the following passage tell us something about Nabokov's reading of the "perverse" modernists, or about his own characters?

In the sexual department Bloom is, if not on the verge of insanity, at least a good clinical example of extreme sexual preoccupation and perversity with all kinds of curious complications. His case is strictly heterosexual, of course—not homosexual as most of the ladies and gentleman are in Proust...but within the wide limits of Bloom's love for the opposite sex he indulges in acts and dreams that are definitely subnormal in the zoological, evolutionary sense. I shall not bore you with a list of his curious desires, but this I will say: in Bloom's mind and in Joyce's book the theme of sex is continually mixed and intertwined with the theme of the latrine. God knows I have no objection to so-called frankness in novels. On the contrary, we have too little of it, and what there is has become in its turn conventional and trite...But I do object to the following: Bloom is supposed to be a rather ordinary citizen. Now it is not true that the mind of the ordinary citizen continuously dwells on physiological things. I object to the continuously, not to the disgusting. (287)

This is hardly the response that we would expect from the author of *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Invitation to a Beheading*. Yet Nabokov stresses with bored distaste the obsessive sexual jealousy and "deviance" in both Proust and Joyce. Is it possible that his own later characters in fact

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<sup>22</sup> Molly has the more apparent insight in Episode 18: "O Jamesy let me up out of this." James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 769. It is this moment in *Ulysses*, rather than the Macintosh passage, that most readers see as a glimpse of the author.

<sup>23</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, "Pattern of Cruelty," 306.

parody modernism's overemphasis on the sexual oddity? Is *Ada* only a burlesque, where Van falls into the traps of imitating Proust and Joyce? How then does the author maintain a separate stylistic identity, if his narrator is over-indulgent or easily influenced?

### III. *Ada's* Proust: Vision, Color, Memory

Proust appears in *Ada* through direct reference, hidden allusion, stylistic parody, and embedded analysis: *en masse*, we find an enormous, layered Proustian "presence" in substance and in style. Proust serves as a secret sign between the Veen children, and between the characters and readers as well: great readers seem to identify one another quickly. (In the *Lectures* Nabokov spoke of a "Joycean reader," for "every new type of writer evolves a new type of reader; every genius produces a legion of young insomniacs," *LL* 316). If we share with Van and Ada much of their favorite art and culture, are we drawn into sympathy, or even made complicit with them? Shared literature provides a common language, simultaneously individual and yet potentially more international than English, French, or Russian: Shakespeare has been translated into over 80 languages.

Proust offers another road into *Ada*: the Proustian reader finds much to recognize and compare. These echoes may well be, even *must* be traps for the influence hunter: having seen what the scholarly bores were up to with his previous work, Nabokov delivers a novel so full of "influence" and "family romance" as to drive the comparativist or psychoanalyst mad. And yet the quiddity of the novel lies in the texture of these wickedly layered allusions, demanding that the reader unravel its skeins at the same time as it declares the task to be impossible.

To begin with, the Veens, given their exotic aristocratic past, glamorous opulence, and unrelenting awareness of who is and is not of their set, read as exaggerated and Russified Guermantes. In *Ada* too the only professions we see in action are artistic and scholarly. (If the Veens also have something of the *Speak, Memory* Nabokovs about them, it is perhaps because the characters of that memoir are suspiciously Proustian.<sup>24</sup>) Nabokov makes the connection explicit and colorful:

A former viceroy of Estoty, Prince Ivan Temnosiniy, father of the children's great-great-grandmother, Princess Sofia Zemski (1755-1809), and a direct descendant of the Yaroslav rulers of pre-Tartar times, had a millennium-old name that meant in Russian "dark blue." While happening to be immune to the sumptuous thrills of genealogic awareness, and indifferent to the fact that oafs attribute both the aloofness and the fervor to snobbishness, Van could not help feeling esthetically moved by the velvet background he was always able to distinguish as a comforting, omnipresent summer sky through the black foliage of the family tree. In later years he had never been able to reread Proust (as he had never been able to enjoy again the perfumed gum of Turkish paste) without a roll-wave of surfeit and a rasp of gravelly heartburn; yet his favorite purple passage remained the one concerning the name "Guermantes," with whose hue his adjacent ultramarine merged in the prism of his mind, pleasantly teasing Van's artistic vanity.

Hue or who? Awkward. Reword! (marginal note in *Ada Veen's* late hand). (9)

Van's Proustianisms in this early paragraph range from overt reference to intonation. The Guermantes are mentioned by name; Proust's color-memory is translated and transposed into the Russian Temnosiniy; there is even an early hint of Van's Bergsonian/Proustian philosophy of time. However, there is also assessment, critique, and parody. Van's enjoyment of Proust is conditional in later years; this passage itself is a purple pastiche likely to cause heartburn; and an older *Ada* attempts to reign in his

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<sup>24</sup> See the episodes "Mademoiselle O" and "Lantern Slides"; Nabokov's childhood love for the French girl Colette; and especially Francophile Uncle Ruka. "Ruka's own French writings (74), his *belle époque* affluence, and his homosexuality all recall Proust; and in the Russian variant Nabokov even specifies that his uncle looked like Proust," notes Foster ("Nabokov and Proust," in Alexandrov, *Garland Companion*, 478).



colorful vagueness. We are only on page nine, but it is already evident that *Ada* is the “most steeped in Proust” of all Nabokov’s novels.<sup>25</sup>

The earlier generation of Veens swarms with Swann-like art dealers: Demon collects “old masters and young mistresses,” while his cousin Daniel “Red” Veen deals art professionally (4). Both recognize masterpieces in the living world around them, although the less dashing Dan falls for fakes and goes mad under the influence of Hieronymous Bosch.<sup>26</sup> Likewise both Demon and Baron D’Onsky recognize Marina in “an unknown product of Parmigianino’s tender art.” The sketch, a nonexistent composite of several Parmigianino sketches, which resembles his “Adam” more than “Eve”:<sup>27</sup>

showed a naked girl with a peach-like apple cupped in her half-raised hand sitting sideways on a convolvulus-garlanded support, and had for its discoverer the additional appeal of recalling Marina when, run out of a hotel bathroom by the phone, and perched on the arm of a chair, she muffled the receiver while asking her lover something that he could not make out because the bath’s voice drowned out her whisper. (13)

No Proustian reader can fail to recall that Swann falls in love with Odette for her resemblance to Botticelli’s blondes, a weakness that Nabokov already borrowed for Humbert, who finds tear-streaked Lolita Botticelli-pink, and for Albinus, who falls for fake old masters and cheap Margot. Men’s fashions on Antiterra mimic closely those of *À la recherche*: like Swann, Demon sports a mustache and a monocle. As Cancogni notes, even Demon’s “means of transportation throughout the first period of courtship is a most evocative swan-sleigh.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Rivers, “Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*,” 147. See also Foster, “Nabokov and Proust,” 480.

<sup>26</sup> Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 282.

<sup>27</sup> See Gavriel Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist’s Studio: Nabokov and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009); and de Vries and Johnson, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*.

<sup>28</sup> Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 282.

In the next generation, Proust and Joyce serve as a code for little Van and Ada. The *wunderkinden* recognize each other by their reading, and their favorite literature lends them a code that extends throughout their lives. At first, snobbish little Ada tells Van: “Our reading lists do not match” (53). But they do, as the children soon discover. Their mutual favorites are Joyce and Proust: “Did he like elms? Did he know Joyce’s poem about the two washwomen? He did, indeed” (54); “At ten or earlier the child had read—as Van had—*Les Malheurs de Swann*” (55).<sup>29</sup>

See also Ada’s “shadow and shine” games in the Eden of Ardis:

The shadows of leaves on the sand were variously interrupted by roundlets of live light. The player chose his roundlet—the best, the brightest he could find—and firmly outlined it with the point of his stick; whereupon the yellow round light would appear to grow convex like the brimming surface of some golden dye. Then the player delicately scooped out the earth with his stick or fingers within the roundlet. The level of that gleaming *infusion de tilleul* would magically sink in its goblet of earth and finally dwindle to one precious drop. (51-52)<sup>30</sup>

The infusion recalls Marcel’s famous madeleine with lime tea, which prompts an early bout of involuntary recall in *À la recherche*. Ada’s strange and lovely games are thus explicitly linked with Proust’s art and memory even in these early chapters. Proust

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<sup>29</sup> By Joyce’s poem, Ada seems to mean the final lines from the Anna Livia Plurabelle chapter of *Finnegans Wake*: “I feel as old as yonder elm. A tale told of Shaun or Shem? All Livia’s daughter-sons. Dark hawks hear us. Night! Night! My ho head halls. I feel as heavy as yonder stone. Tell me of John or Shaun? Who were Shem and Shaun the living sons or daughters of? Night now! Tell me, tell me, tell me, elm! Night night! Telmetale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night!” James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1983), 215-16. Boyd on *AdaOnline* notes that this was the section Joyce recorded in his own voice, and quotes from *Strong Opinions*: “A formless and dull mass of phony folklore, a cold pudding of a book, a persistent snore in the next room...only the infrequent snatches of heavenly intonations redeem it from utter insipidity.” See <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada18ann.htm>. Perhaps Nabokov also has in mind Comtesse de Ségur’s *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, a text familiar to both the young Nabokov and young Marcel.

<sup>30</sup> Darkbloom glosses, “lime tea.” See Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 283. When the protagonist of *Look at the Harlequins*, Nabokov’s last complete novel originally published in 1974, “remembers” writing a novel very much like *Ada*, it is the children’s light-and-shadow games that he recalls: “The hideous suspicion that even *Ardis*, my most private book, soaked in reality, saturated with sun flecks, might be an unconscious imitation of another’s unearthly art, that suspicion might come later.” Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 234.

functions as an index to what is most real, artistic, memorable, and beautiful. However, just as Ada and Lucette compete for Tatiana's role, as my previous chapter argued, so both little Ada and little Lucette resemble Gilberte in the Combray gardens. Nabokov's parallels are carefully imperfect: associations slip and collapse. Which is the right little girl? Is this another false lead?

Just when we expect Proust to signify the real and the lovely, he is knocked off the pedestal with obscene mockery. Mlle Larivière remembers Van as a "*bambin angelique* who adored *à neuf ans*—the precious dear!—Gilberte Swann *et la Lesbie de Catulle*." Van adds, "and who had learned, all by himself, to release the adoration as soon as the kerosene lamp had left the mobile bedroom in his black nurse's fist" (66). Virile little Van is a far cry from neurosthenic Marcel. Equally precocious Ada is fond of "the noble larva of the Cattleya Hawkmoth (mauve shades of Monsieur Proust), a seven-inch-long colossus, flesh colored, with turquoise arabesques, rearing its hyacinth head in a stiff 'Sphinxian' attitude" (56). Pages later "the Odettian Sphinx had turned, bless him, into an elephantoid mummy with a comically encased trunk of the guermantoid type" (56-57). In the *Lectures* Nabokov found Swann and Odette's erotic code, "*faire Cattleya*" for love-making, to be silly and unconvincing. Here he indulges in a naturalist's revenge.

What does all this mean? Critics struggle with Nabokov's anti-influence stance, yet recognize these parodies, allusions, similarities, and false leads. Rivers writes, "Sometimes Nabokov pays homage to Proust; sometimes he quarrels with him; sometimes he makes fun of him; but always he is aware of him."<sup>31</sup> Boyd observes: "In place of Proust's meditative languor and torpid narrative speed, Nabokov hurtles the action along at a preposterous pace... the breakneck narrative of Demon's and Marina's

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<sup>31</sup> Rivers, "Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*," 135.

affair takes only six pages.” If Swann and Odette’s love affair has moments of redemption that Marcel and Albertine’s lacks, in *Ada* the brevity and meaninglessness of Demon’s affair with Marina “contrasts sharply with the extraordinary durability—over eighty years!—of Van’s and Ada’s love.”<sup>32</sup> Many critics notice an inversion: if in Proust each generation is a feeble imitation of the previous one, in Nabokov things ameliorate. For all the irony of its first sentence, *Ada* really does seem to hold that only happy families are worth the ink. Yet a good deal of anguish, jealousy, betrayal, and death must take place before two very plump, middle-aged Veens settle down to enjoy their remaining forty plus years in twenty-odd pages.

Part One borrows heavily from Pushkin and Tolstoy, but is also profoundly indebted to Proust. At the end of this section Van loses Ardis for ever.<sup>33</sup> His Marcel-like sexual jealousy is underscored by Ada’s very literary lesbian adventures. (Vanda, possibly Ada’s first lover, sounds suspiciously like a double of Vivian Darkbloom—the author’s joke on his character Van, indeed.) Nabokov also inserts a passage of literary criticism already familiar to us from the *Lectures* and from *Pale Fire*:

Our professor of French literature maintains that there is a grave philosophical, and hence artistic, flaw in the entire treatment of the Marcel and Albertine affair. It makes sense if the good reader *knows* that the narrator is a pansy, and that the good fat cheeks of Albertine are the good fat buttocks of Albert. It makes none if the reader cannot be supposed, and should not be required, to know *anything* about this or any other author’s sexual habits in order to enjoy to the last drop a work of art. My teacher contends that if the reader knows nothing about Proust’s perversion, the detailed description of a heterosexual male jealously watchful of a homosexual female is preposterous because a normal man would be only amused, tickled pink in fact, by his girl’s frolics with a female partner. The professor concludes that a novel

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<sup>32</sup> *AdaOnline*, notes to 1.2, <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada12ann.htm>. See also Rivers, “Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*”; and Foster, *Nabokov’s Art of Memory*, 480. Boyd, Rivers, and Foster all find *Ada* a fundamentally more optimistic portrait of romantic love than that offered in *À la recherche*.

<sup>33</sup> Ardis resembles Humbert’s lost paradise: “A paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames—but still a paradise” (*The Annotated Lolita* 166).

which can be appreciated only by *quelque petite blanchisseuse* who has examined the author's dirty linen is, artistically, a failure. (169)

The professor is of course another double of Vladimir Nabokov, borrowed from his *Lecture* notes but rendered a good deal more Veenish.

In truth Van is jealous of Ada's affairs regardless of gender; but while his anguish is deeply familiar from the earlier literature, the Veens' middle-aged happiness is not. The Veens arrive, or seem to arrive at a triumphant if dearly bought redemption. They are allowed to reunite only after Lucette, Marina, Demon and Andrey Vinelander have all died; after Ada has failed as a film-star and Van has retired from the public eye; after they have lost physical beauty, health, sexual drive, and even their physical similarity; and when both are confirmed childless.<sup>34</sup>

We must remember that young Van and Ada, as well as their parents, live and speak Proust because such is the style of old narrating Van. After Van's indecent above-quoted monologue to Cordula and Ada, the latter mutters, "But *you*'ve had too much Marcel." The narration, and not the young protagonist, responds to the critique by changing style: "Our damp trio found a nice corner table and with sighs of banal relief undid their raincoats. He hoped Ada would discard her heavy-seas hat but she did not, because she had cut her hair because of dreadful migraines, because she did not want him to see her in the role of a moribund Romeo. (On fait *son grand Joyce* after doing one's *petit Proust*. In Ada's lovely hand)" (169). As is so often the case in *Ada*, Joyce immediately follows Proust. The two are organically linked for an author seeking to find a style adequate to his subject and century. Hundreds of pages later, in the Bergson-laced treatise on time,

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<sup>34</sup> Ada, by the time she begins to live with Van, is "in color and contour" a cross between Lucette and Marina, the two women whose Van did his best to avoid.

Van is still struggling with Proust's influence. He warns himself: "beware...of the marcel wave of fashionable art, avoid the Proustian bed" (541).

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I will turn to a lengthy and markedly Proustian passage for vivid examples of the characteristic ways that Nabokov manipulates Proust's presence in his text. Nabokov borrows his precursor's style, embellishes and expands on it, and uses it to enchant and snare his reader. We recognize family resemblances and enjoy catching allusions, but are never comfortably sure about the extent—and intent—of the parody. Does a grand Proustian style exonerate these characters, or damn them further? Many readers ask the same question of Nabokov himself. This passage presents a troubling meta-literary moment and describes a troubling scene, one of the strangest and saddest tableaux of the novel: Marina, Demon, and their two biological children dine together, but deceptions run between them like fault lines.<sup>35</sup> The reunited family masquerades as something else, yet this may have been the closest to happiness that the Veens will ever come. Here is a gruesome family portrait—the parents who know nothing, and the children everything:

It was a black hot humid night in mid-July, 1888, at Ardis, in Ladore county, let us not forget, let us never forget, with a family of four seated around an oval dinner table, bright with flowers and crystal—not a scene in a play, as might have seemed—nay, *must* have seemed—to a spectator (with a camera or a program) placed in the velvet pit of the garden. Sixteen years had elapsed from the end of Marina's three-year affair with Demon. Intermissions of various length—a break of two months in the spring of 1870, another, of almost four, in the middle of 1871—had at the time only increased the tenderness and the torture. Her singularly coarsened features, her attire, that sequin-spangled dress, the glittering net over her strawberry-blond dyed hair, her red sunburnt chest and melodramatic make-up, with too much ochre and maroon in it, did not even vaguely remind the man, who had loved her more keenly

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<sup>35</sup> It is their parents' dark, if romantic-sounding example that robs Van and Ada of mother and father respectively, and from growing up as siblings. As James Wood points out, Nabokov's characters simultaneously do and do not ask to be "recognized" as real people. We alternately feel uneasy and do not care at all about Van and Ada's incest—for these characters are in truth only Nabokov's children. James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

than any other woman in his philanderings, of the dash, the glamour, the lyricism of Marina Durmanov's beauty. It aggrieved him—that complete collapse of the past, the dispersal of its itinerant court and music-makers, the logical impossibility to relate the dubious reality of the present to the unquestionable one of remembrance. Even these hors-d'oeuvres on the *zakusochniy stol* of Ardis Manor and its painted dining room did not link up with their *petits soupers*, although, God knows, the triple staple to start with was always much the same...

Demon popped into his mouth a last morsel of black bread with elastic samlet, gulped down a last pony of vodka and took his place at the table with Marina facing him across its oblong length, beyond the great bronze bowl with carved-looking Calville apples and elongated Persty grapes... [He] tried to *realize* (in the rare full sense of the word), tried to *possess* the reality of a fact by forcing it into the sensuous center, that here was a woman whom he had intolerably loved, who had loved him hysterically and skittishly, who insisted they make love on rugs and cushions laid on the floor (“as respectable people do in the Tigris-Euphrates valley”), who would woosh down fluffy slopes on a bobsleigh a fortnight after parturition, or arrive by the Orient Express with five trunks, Dack's grandsire, and a maid, to Dr. Stella Oспенко's *ospedale* where he was recovering from a scratch received in a sword duel (and still visible as a white weal under his eighth rib after a lapse of nearly seventeen years). How strange that when one met after a long separation a chum or fat aunt whom one had been fond of as a child the unimpaired human warmth of the friendship was rediscovered at once, but with an old mistress this never happened—the human part of one's affection seemed to be swept away with the dust of the inhuman passion, in a wholesale operation of demolition...

Marina, essentially a dummy in human disguise, experienced no such qualms, lacking as she did that *third sight* (individual, magically detailed imagination) which many otherwise ordinary and conformant people may also possess, but without which memory (even that of a profound “thinker” or technician of genius) is, let us face it, a stereotype or a tear-sheet... “poor old” Demon (all her pillow mates being retired with that title) appeared before her like a harmless ghost, in the foyers of theaters “between mirror and fan,” or in the drawing rooms of common friends, or once in Lincoln Park, indicating an indigo-buttocked ape with his cane and not saluting her, according to the rules of the *beau monde*, because he was with a courtesan. Somewhere, further back, much further back, safely transformed by her screen-corrupted mind into a stale melodrama was her three-year-long period of hectically spaced love-meetings with Demon, *A Torrid Affair* (the title of her only cinema hit), passion in *palaces*, the palms and larches, his Utter Devotion, his impossible temper, separations, reconciliations, Blue Trains, tears, treachery, terror, an insane sister's threats, helpless, no doubt, but leaving their tiger-marks on the drapery of dreams, especially when dampness and dark affect one with fever. And the shadow of retribution on the backwall (with ridiculous legal innuendos). All this was mere scenery, easily packed, labeled “Hell” and freighted away; and only very infrequently some reminder would come—say, in the trick-work close-up of two left hands belonging to different sexes—doing what? Marina could no longer recall (though only *four* years had elapsed!)—playing *à quatre mains*?—no, neither took piano lessons—casting bunny-shadows on a wall?—closer, warmer, but still wrong; measuring something? But

what? Climbing a tree? The polished trunk of a tree? But where, when? Someday, she mused, one's past must be put in order. Retouched, retaken. Certain "wipes" and "inserts" will have to be made in the picture; certain telltale abrasions in the emulsion will have to be corrected; "dissolves" in the sequence discreetly combined with the trimming out of unwanted, embarrassing "footage," and definite guarantees obtained; yes, someday—before death with its clap-stick closes the scene.

Tonight she contented herself with the automatic ceremony of giving him what she remembered, more or less correctly, when planning the menu, as being his favorite food—*zelyoniya shchi*, a velvety green sorrel-and-spinach soup, containing slippery hard-boiled eggs and served with finger-burning, irresistibly soft, meat-filled or carrot-filled or cabbage-filled *pirozhki*—peer-rush-KEY, thus pronounced, thus celebrated here, for ever and ever. After that, she had decided, there would be bread-crumbed sander (*sudak*) with boiled potatoes, hazel-hen (*ryabchiki*) and that special asparagus (*bezukhanka*) which does not produce Proust's After-effect, as cookbooks say." (251-4)

The passage hums with Proust from beginning to end.<sup>36</sup> The flower and crystal-laden setting conjures an Old Master backdrop, viewed with the Swann-like eyes of an artistic connoisseur. The exaggeratedly novelistic opening sentence, replete with unnecessary information and markers of space and time (in mid-July, 1888, at Ardis, in Ladore) alerts us that a significant literary passage is afoot. The first person plural is Proustian and Flaubertian; and the momentarily frozen scene limns a verbal painting, a prose-poem, and an attempt to capture lost time.

The scene is thus described through the self-conscious lenses of literature and art. We read it as a markedly literary passage in prose; we imagine a painting; and it "must have seemed" (note the repetition and emphasis) like a scene in a play. Kim Beauharnais must be peeping outside with a camera and not a program, but "the velvet pit of the garden" recalls the start of Demon and Marina's affair during the travestied *Onegin* play. The synopsis of their romance—sixteen years ago, three years in length, with intermissions—recalls also that first theatrical intermission. Here once more is reality masquerading as

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<sup>36</sup> I am not alone in noticing the striking signposts of "Proust's after-effect" combined with rumination on the workings of memory. See especially Rivers, "Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*," 146.



art, or art masquerading as reality. Just as in *À la recherche*, the narrator of *Ada* must have recourse to all the other arts to master his own.

For the rereader, time can flow backwards as well as forwards: Marina's decay, dyed hair, and coarsened features, resemble the older Ada. Van and Ada overcome the shock of physical aging, but Demon experiences "that complete collapse of the past," when the "human part of one's affection" for an old lover vanishes with "the dust of the inhuman passion." How similarly Marcel mourns the collapse of his memories, his past selves, and the vanished house of Combray; how exaggeratedly Proustian too is Demon's ardor—an inhuman or inhumane passion. The only real emotion on Demon's, ardor is defined by lack and the agonies of longing, jealousy, and loss. The narrator of *À la recherche* similarly confesses that, aside from jealousy, he has not known love; aside from erotic longing, he has felt little real emotion for others.<sup>37</sup>

Marina herself is a re-mastered Odette to Demon's Swann. (The "Lincoln Park" courtesan evokes Odette as well, in an ephemeral American incarnation and slightly marginalized according to the *beau monde's* special code.) Demon at least grasps the bitter magic of the moment, and attempts to conjure the past through the opulent meal.<sup>38</sup> But Marina, the cinema automaton, finds a shortcut in montage: her love affair has been

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<sup>37</sup> Rivers writes that in *Lolita*, "Nabokov echoes the Proustian concept of the loved one as an *être de fuite*, a fugitive creature impossible to possess and to comprehend. In *Ada*, however, Nabokov reverses this pessimistic view... Though jealousy functions in *Ada*, as it also does in *À la recherche*, as a kind of artistic inspiration, Van's love for Ada is ultimately non-Proustian, even anti-Proustian" ("Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*," 152-53). Cancogni adds, "If Van's jealousy of Ada is a compendium and a parody of all previous jealousies, it is also their transcendence, for, unlike their parents and their Proustian predecessors, Van and Ada manage to overcome their differences and to live the rest of their lives, and their text, together" (*Mirage in the Mirror*, 295-96).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Proust and food in the *Lectures*: "The cooking abilities of Françoise are beautifully brought into juxtaposition with the artistic carving of the quatrefoils on the porches of thirteenth-century cathedrals. In other words, the steeple is still with us, looming above the fancy food. The chocolate cream is to be marked. Taste buds play a very poetical part in Proust's system of reconstructing the past. This cream of chocolate was as 'light and fleeting' as an 'occasional piece' of music" (*LL* 227).

safely remade into stale melodrama, and she no longer recalls the troubling details. But by the rules of *Ada*, precise and vivid memories are what make us human; Marina's children judge the "automaton" harshly for forgetting. The best Marina can do is to locate the *à quatre mains* image on a polished tree trunk, but the Nabokov-trained reader recognizes the more ominous and erotically charged banister leading to the scene of many incestuous trysts. Perhaps there is something Proustian about Marina's cinematic memory as well: all memories are inevitably "Retouched, retaken." The evocative abrasions, emulsions, dissolves, retrospective edits, and final clap-stick of Marina's movie are not to be dismissed so soon, as I will discuss in my last chapter.

All of this seems quite serious and melancholy. Yet various oddities pepper this grand passage, with its painterly surfeit and anguished musings on time and memory. Nabokov translates Proust's lavish feasts into amusingly mixed-register Russian fare: in place of Françoise's sculptural constructions in *À la recherche*, we have *shchi* with boiled potatoes and cabbage *pirozhki*, celebrated here forever. The "elongated Persty grapes," a seemingly gratuitous Pushkin allusion, add to the sense that this Proustian pastiche is infected thoroughly with Russian food, words, and literary tradition. Most of all it is colored by Nabokov's brand of humor, ending with a self-conscious and comical flourish: special *bezukhanka* asparagus that does not produce "Proust's After-effect." We slide seamlessly from an homage to Proust at his most philosophical and profound, to an overt mockery of his most memorably laughable moments.

Excluded from the strange family portrait described above, Kim Beauharnais lurks outside as the spectator "with a camera or a program" of the opening sentence. In a sense, this imagined, remembered, or reconstructed spectator enables the entire scene: it is to

him that the family dinner must have seemed like a scene in a play, which is how Van goes on to describe it. Without an imagined audience and without readers, Van and Ada's elaborate history does not quite work. The Veens alternately encourage voyeurs and violently defend their privacy.

The offhand way in which Van describes blinding Beauharnais strikes many readers as one of the book's crueler moments, outside of the scenes with Lucette. (Blindness and cruelty are linked in several key passages, including a description of one of Van's psychiatric patients, and in Van and Ada's flippant exchange about Blanche's blind child: "Love is blind," they quip.<sup>39</sup>) Even more pointed is Van's choice of weapon: he blinds Kim with an alpenstock. As an index to Van's violence and cruelty, it is not unlike the engraved walking-stick in *Despair* that dooms Hermann and betrays his intellectual mediocrity; but the specific tool works simultaneously as an allusion to something else. In the later volumes of *À la recherche*, Proust mentions that, for a season or two, alpenstocks were all the rage in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Proust's modish stick finds its way into Van's hands, who grimly uses it to blind his blackmailer.

To give the screw another turn, his propensity to lurk near windows or behind bushes, just as the hero and heroine engage in their amorous pursuits, makes the peeping Kim Beauharnais a parody of Proust's narrator.<sup>40</sup> In the *Lectures*, Nabokov repeatedly mocked Marcel's fortuitous placement just outside conveniently open windows in one scene after

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<sup>39</sup> See also "One Spencer Muldoon, born eyeless, aged forty, single, friendless, and the third blind character in this chronicle, had been known to hallucinate during fits of violent paranoia..." (468). Boyd notes that Ada and Lucette oddly echo "St. Adelia and St. Lucy, both of whom are depicted as having their eyes plucked out: St. Adelia, by herself, to reject her own lustfulness, and St. Lucy, by others, for refusing to marry when she insisted on remaining a virgin." See *AdaOnline*, <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada15ann.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> Kim's surname, shared with the Empress Josephine, suggests one of the many reversals of fortune that take place on Antiterra: African-Americans and Russians make up the world's privileged groups, whereas the Beauharnais family and the occasional German composer work as servants or penniless tutors.

another. Eavesdropping is a well-worn device in *À la recherche*. Passing Mlle Vinteuil's window, Marcel happens to witness her lesbian relationship: "The whole scene," lectures Nabokov, "is a little lame...with the eavesdropping business enhancing its awkwardness" (LL 232). Gossipy old Aunt Leonie serves as a built-in self-parody, a grotesque shadow "of Marcel himself in his capacity of sick author spinning his web and catching up into that web the life buzzing around him" (LL 228). Most outrageous of all, in another early passage we find Marcel "actually eavesdropping on his aunt's dream." Nabokov comments, "Eavesdropping is, of course, one of the oldest literary devices, but here the author goes to the limits of the device" (LL 230).

Thus when Van blinds Kim, the moment shows brutality on the level of character and plot, but on a meta-literary level it serves as Nabokov's retort to Proust's eavesdropping device. To draw attention to literariness of the motif, early in the novel young Ada translates François Coppée's "*Matin d'Octobre*" with a telling creative neologism: "Their fall is gentle. The leavesdropper/Can follow each..." (247). The narrator's voice repeats her wordplay when a "stray ardilla daintily leavesdrops" on Ada and Van in the Edenic shattal tree. Nabokov thus takes a tired literary device and forces it into the open, simultaneously exposing authors and readers as incurable eavesdroppers and voyeurs. In *Ada*, we "leavesdrop" on the fall of man, equipped with a good touristic camera.

The final, bewildering incarnation of Proust in *Ada* is as the French governess Mme Larivière. Her amalgam of literary pretensions blends Guy de Maupassant (Larivière thinks "that in some former Hindooish state she was a boulevardier in Paris; and writes accordingly," 53) with the eighteenth-century lady writer of English amatory pulp Larivier Manley; perhaps George Sand; but also Proust. An increasingly famous writer

throughout *Ada* and in unrequited love with Marina, the governess shows a marked preference for Proust's purple tones. Just as little Ada's pretentious memory-games feature the occasional "mauve tower" (156), the governess also appears clad entirely in mauve.<sup>41</sup> Blending together mostly inferior influences with occasional gems, this authoress seems a talentless French double of Nabokov himself—just as Kim Beauharnais is arguably another such talentless double of Van. Has Nabokov moved past his earlier infatuation with Proust, marking his evolution with *Ada*'s parodies?

We can close with Proust's own words on the subject of influence and cleansing pastiche from "*À propos du style de Flaubert*":

*Aussi pour ce qui concerne l'intoxication flaubertienne, je ne saurais trop recommander aux écrivains la vertu purgative, exorcisante, du pastiche. Quand on vient de finir un livre, non seulement on voudrait continuer à vivre avec ses personnages, avec Mme de Beauseant, avec Frederic Moreau, mais encore notre voix intérieure qui a été disciplinée pendant toute la durée de la lecture à suivre le rythme d'un Balzac, d'un Flaubert, voudrait continuer à parler comme eux. Il faut la laisser faire un moment, laisser la pédale prolonger le son, c'est-à-dire faire un pastiche volontaire, pour pouvoir après cela, redevenir original, ne pas faire toute sa vie du pastiche involontaire.*<sup>42</sup>

The intonations of earlier generations haunt us: Proust haunts Nabokov and Flaubert haunts Proust, who teaches his heirs to seek exorcism through conscious pastiche. *Ada* simultaneously celebrates her many ghosts and performs an elaborate and multi-layered

<sup>41</sup> See *AdaOnline* and the Kyoto Reading Circle notes, "Annotations to *Ada* (7)," May 2005, <http://vnjapan.s141.xrea.com/main/ada/index.html>.

<sup>42</sup> "So far as Flaubertian intoxication is concerned, I cannot recommend enough to writers the purging, exorcising virtue of pastiche. When we finish a book, we not only wish to continue living with the characters, with Mme de Beauseant and Frederic Moreau, but also our interior voice, disciplined during the entire reading process to follow the rhythm of Balzac or Flaubert, wants to continue speaking like them. It is necessary to take a moment, to let the pedal prolong the sound; that is to say, to write a voluntary pastiche, after which one can return to being original, and not make one's entire life an involuntary pastiche" (quoted in the original in Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 208). Cancogni argues convincingly that *Ada*'s pastiches pass through Proust when they echo Flaubert. Part Three begins with: "He traveled, he studied, he taught. He contemplated the pyramids...He went shooting...He learned to appreciate the singular little thrill" (449). This closely echoes Flaubert in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, but also precisely those intonations that Proust singles out for admiration in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*; see Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 261. Nabokov uses a similar opening for Part Two of *Lolita*.

exorcism. The literary past is still with us, and only very great and inhuman artists (or close relatives) add genuinely new voices to the mix.

#### **IV. *Ada's* Joyce: Pun, Parody, and Streams of Consciousness**

What did Nabokov learn from Joyce? According to his interviews, nothing. But in another he responded far more modestly: “Oh, yes, let people compare me to Joyce by all means, but my English is patball to Joyce’s champion game” (*SO* 56). There is humility and arrogance, competition and deference in his attitude toward his precursors: often the contradictory responses blend beyond belief. However, when Nabokov needs an example of twentieth-century literary genius, he turns to Joyce. Grumbling about how generously the word “genius” gets passed around in English, he continues, “Genius still means to me, in my Russian fastidiousness and pride of phrase, a unique, dazzling gift, the genius of James Joyce, not the talent of Henry James” (*SO* 147).

The blood of the Irish genius runs in the veins of the Veens, albeit diluted and weakened through inbreeding with closely related literary giants. Even in early descriptions of the novel then in progress, Nabokov insisted on the ancestry of his characters: “Both my female creatures have Irish and Russian blood. One girl lasts 700 pages, dying young; her sister stays with me till the happy ending, when 95 candles burn in a birthday cake the size of a manhole lid” (*SO* 116). The finished novel explicitly plants a Grandfather Dedalus Veen, to clarify whose Irish blood shapes the Veen profile. Directly and indirectly, through plot points and stylistic inspiration, Joyce is as much of a presence in *Ada* as is Proust. Arguably, the hysterically funny and verbally explosive *Ada* is even more indebted to *Ulysses* than to *À la recherche*.

Like *Ulysses*, Ada devours high and low styles. Nabokov never merely shows us a landscape, but instead offers a composite of literary landscapes parodying eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century culture, such as a bar scene seen through the eyes of Blok, Toulouse-Lautrec, Lautreamont, and modern *New Yorker* advertisements.<sup>43</sup> His narrator Van mimics various other Joycean tricks, such as that of deriving names from metonymic characteristics. Inner monologue and the stream of consciousness technique is put to brilliant use at emotionally strained moments, always with a self-conscious nod to the master, as well as to the master's master in Nabokov's reading, Tolstoy.

To turn once more to the early passage about the Veen ancestry, we find that besides the Guermantes link it also contains a double, or multiple, allusion. Van refers to the sea as "his dark-blue great grandmother" (8): literally he means Princess Sofia Temnosiniy, but the epithet also harks back to the most famous opening chapter of twentieth-century fiction. Buck Mulligan, showing off in the first pages of *Ulysses*, asks: "Isn't the sea what Algy calls it: a grey sweet mother? The snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea. *Epi oinopa pontoon*."<sup>44</sup> The green-gray Irish sea, the wine-dark Greek sea, the "mother and lover of men" metamorphoses into a Veen great-grandmother. The Veens come from water like Venus, their goddess and planet. Greek mythology combines with Old Testament stories, for they are also Adam and Eve: born of Aqua or Marina (whose

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<sup>43</sup> See for example what serves as Sebastian Knight's literary manifesto in Nabokov's first English-language novel (originally published in 1941): "I am going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust that their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it." Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 95. For images that inspired Nabokov's description of Lucette, drinking alone at a Paris bar, see Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Divan Japonais* (1892-93), or the Barton & Guestier wines advertisement in *The New Yorker* (March 23, 1963), reproduced in de Vries and Johnson, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 116-17.

<sup>44</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 4. "Algy" refers to Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909): "I will go back to the great sweet mother, Mother and lover of men, the sea" ("The Triumph of Time," lines 257-58); "*Epi oinopa pontoon*" is the Homeric formula "over the wine-dark sea." Cf. *AdaOnline* regarding this passage: <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada11ann.htm>.

joined names form another shade of blue) and chased from the garden. All is color and sensuality, and shades of literary allusion: the Veens' dark blue claims a space in the rainbow between Proust's purple and Joyce's Irish green.

Even Demon and Marina's affair, analyzed thus far through Pushkinian and Proustian lenses, has something of Joyce about it as well. Boyd recalls that in Episode 4 of *Ulysses*, "Bloom associates Molly with a picture of the *Bath of the Nymph* over their bed, just after the novel's first mention of Blazes Boylan... The *Bath of the Nymph* develops into a motif" linked with Molly's infidelity.<sup>45</sup> And so in *Ada* Marina becomes a nymph called from her bath, cradling the phone in that beautiful Parmigianino gesture. Marina's betrayal is discovered by her lover through a series of recognized gestures and paintings: Demon reasons at first that "such nymphs were really very much alike... the similarities of young bodies of water are but murmurs of natural innocence and double-talk mirrors, that's my hat, his is older, but we have the same London hatter" (13). However, the resemblance between his girl and that of his rival and fellow art-connoisseur turns out to be more than the similarity of young beauty. Just so, Nabokov's literary allusions point to a particular character, a unique scene, and specific works of art.

When in the next generation of Veens, Van in turn is overcome with sexual jealousy, his obsession with predecessors also has in it something of Bloom. Jealousy, deviance, and perversion link our two modernists in Nabokov's mind. Ever suspicious of his century's prurient interest in either latrine or "mauve" sexuality, Nabokov picks up on this aspect of the modernist revolution in art, and returns this too in parodic form. Van's constant, morbid sexuality especially reeks of Bloom when it heads in the direction of the

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<sup>45</sup> Boyd notes that Nabokov's *Ada* "often couples Proust and Joyce (see I.1: 8-9, I.27: 169.33)," and that Marina's bath conjures the "painting of *The Bath of the Nymph* which Joyce associates with Molly's infidelity to Bloom in *Ulysses*." See *AdaOnline*, <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada11ann.htm>.



toilet. Before important events in his life, Van informs us that he has “structurally perfect stools” (310, 389); as an impotent old man, he enjoys “*le plaisir anglais*” (571) of urinating into his bathwater.

Like Proust, Joyce serves as index and code for the Veen children. Again, little Ada charms little Van with her literary taste: “Did he like elms? Did he know Joyce’s poem about the two washwomen? He did, indeed” (54). But even past those moments of mutual recognition, and past the initial family trees and genealogies, there is so much more. Grandfather Dedalus Veen is mentioned at several magic moments, for example when Van learns to walk on his hands:

What pleasure (thus in the MS.). The pleasure of suddenly discovering the right knack of topsy-turvy locomotion was rather like learning to man, after many a painful and ignominious fall, those delightful gliders called Magicarpets (or “jickers”) that were given a boy on his twelfth birthday in the adventurous days before the Great Reaction—and then what a breathtaking long neural caress when one became airborne for the first time and managed to skim over a haystack, a tree, a burn, a barn, while Grandfather Dedalus Veen, running with upturned face, flourished a flag and fell into the horsepond. (81-82)

This passage is additionally marked by the Joycean “Questions for study and discussion” at the end: “1. Did *both* palms leave the ground?”<sup>46</sup> The flight of the magic carpet, like hand-walking, literalizes a metaphor for literary levitation or acrobatics. These physical powers are kin to Van’s later spectacular abilities with words.<sup>47</sup>

It was the standing of a metaphor on its head not for the sake of the trick’s difficulty, but in order to perceive an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis of time. Thus the rapture young Mascodagama derived from

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<sup>46</sup> Jansy Berndt de Souza Mello (NABOKOV-L Archives, April 25, 2004) notes that “Nabokov here pays tribute to James Joyce, whose Stephen Dedalus... is a version of Joyce himself (and a pseudonym Joyce himself used as a young writer)... the description of Van upside down reflects Nabokov’s images in his Cornell and Harvard lectures in praise of Joyce’s stylistic shifts in *Ulysses*.”

<sup>47</sup> Episode 2 in *Ulysses* is the chapter where Joyce’s style-changing technique becomes evident; it is infected by the question-and-answers of Stephen Dedalus’s teaching, including a reference to Tarentum (cf. Van’s legs “hoisted like a Tarentine sail”). Inevitably such adjectives in *Ada* lead somewhere: “You, Cochrane, what city sent for him?” etc. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 24.

overcoming gravity was akin to that of artistic revelation in the sense utterly and naturally unknown to the innocents of critical appraisal, the social-scene commentators, the moralists, the idea-mongers and so forth. Van on the stage was performing organically what his figures of speech were to perform later in life—acrobatic wonders that had never been expected from them and which frightened children. (184-85)

In just these terms Nabokov described Joyce's frequent and unmotivated changes of style in *Ulysses*: viewing the world upside down conveys "a more varied knowledge, fresh glimpses" and a means to see "greener grass, a fresher world" (*LL* 289).

We have already noted Nabokov's multivalent and multi-lingual puns, as well as his reaction to critics calling *Ada* "the same fish fried in an inferior Joycepan."<sup>48</sup> *Ada*'s style-shifts and alternations between pyrotechnics and relative flatness have also been called Joycean. One example is painterly and drug-induced. Demon shows up in Manhattan under the influence of a "dragon drug": a veritable talking palette of Boschian imagery at first, he discovers Van and Ada's affair and abruptly crashes. The prose style, the entire world, and the painting quietly worked on by a butcher-aproned artist across the way all turn gray. Joyce used such shifts in style frequently and dramatically; but Nabokov motivates his own style shifts, often with a comical or attention-grabbing device.

Similarly, in the set piece of Van, Ada, and Cordula's chaperoned school date, after Van delivers his wild Proustian pastiche and is warned by Ada against "too much Marcel," he shifts styles to evoke Joyce: "On fait *son grand Joyce* after doing one's *petit Proust*" (169). The bleak railway station, the tearoom, the heavy rain garb and other vaguely nautical elements all borrow from the drabber landscape of *Ulysses*, but surely Nabokov also means to draw our attention to the repeated "because," "our damp trio,"

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<sup>48</sup> The phrase was used by D. J. Enright in an early review of *Ada*. See his "Pun-Up," *Listener*, October 2, 1969, 457-58. Nabokov responded with the Darkbloom notes, in which he stressed the wealth of allusions and pastiches in *Ada*, pointing to many sources besides the Irish master of verbal pyrotechnics.

and other limp turns of phrase. Such moments are typical of Joyce's parodies of genre literature and journalese conventions: in an incredible double flip, Nabokov parodies the master parodying. To put it another way, he turns Joyce's own wit against him.

Nabokov introduces another important technique at the breakfast table: little Ada is prone to monologue about "a dream, a natural history wonder, a special belletristic device—Paul Bourget's "*monologue intérieur*" borrowed from old Leo" (61). Presumably in response to critical readings, Darkbloom's note clarifies this reference, pointedly excluding Joyce: "the so-called 'stream-of-consciousness' device, used by Leo Tolstoy (in describing, for instance, Anna's last impressions whilst her carriage rolls through the streets of Moscow)" (xxx).<sup>49</sup> The stream of consciousness device, when it occurs in *Ada*, inevitably blends Russian and Irish sources; but Nabokov was incensed at the negative comparisons with Joyce that his ambitious novel had elicited.

The same early scene includes another joke on translation turning "flowers into bloomers" (64), much interpreted and over-interpreted by critics. Van confronts nationalist Mlle Larivière with "atrocious bloomers in French translations from the English" as well as the other way around (270). The word "bloomer" contains a subsidiary echo of *Ulysses*: Leopold Bloom uses the pseudonym Henry Flower for a clandestine but cheap epistolary romance.<sup>50</sup> Other even stranger occasional references crop up throughout: for example, "Van returned to the still-throbbing jolls-joyce" (473).

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<sup>49</sup> Nabokov stresses this point in his Tolstoy lecture in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, as well as on Joyce in *LL*. More obscurely, in 1967 and while working on *Ada*, Nabokov wrote in his foreword to the newly translated *King, Queen, Knave*: "I must admit I was a little surprised to find in my Russian text so many '*monologue intérieur*' passages—no relation to *Ulysses*, which I hardly knew at the time; but of course I had been exposed since tender boyhood to *Anna Karenin*, which contains a whole scene consisting of those intonations, Eden-new a hundred years ago, now well used" (x).

<sup>50</sup>See Boyd, *Nabokov's "Ada": The Place of Consciousness*. Boyd stresses the Joycean subtext as linked with the theme of virginity (flower, deflower) and hence with Lucette. He perhaps takes the point too far when he suggests that all future Joyce allusions should draw our attention to the hidden fate of Lucette.

Equally off-hand, a James Jones delivers Van some Very Private Letters: the name is “a formula whose complete lack of connotation made an ideal pseudonym despite its happening to be his real name” (330). Is this another Irish shadow or a feint? Perhaps whether as car or messenger, Joyce serves as a means of transport—not inappropriate in a book about cultural transmission.

Again, what do we make of all this? Joyce casts an even wider shadow over *Ada* than does Proust, providing Nabokov’s novel with both material and the stylistic means. *Ada*’s stylistic excesses even out-Joyce Joyce. Yet as noted before, Nabokov was careful to express reservations even for *Ulysses*, and considered *Finnegans Wake* one of the great failures of the twentieth century. Why then would he try to match it? Is *Ada* Nabokov’s *Finnegans Wake* after all?<sup>51</sup> Does Nabokov attempt a sleight of hand, where he purposefully allows his creature Van Veen to write an overindulgent novel in the genre of *Finnegans Wake*? How then could the author possibly demonstrate his mastery and control over the book as a whole?

For many readers, *Ada* marks the same crossed boundary in Nabokov’s fiction as did Joyce’s last novel. They declare that this is “late work,” and suspect that Nabokov like Joyce simply ceased to care about reception. Foster writes, “Writers haughtily unconcerned for who will follow the densities and intricacies of their work were not rare in the twentieth century. One need only think of the dense arcane of Pound and Eliot, both of whom Nabokov detested, or the kaleidoscopic allusiveness of Joyce, whom

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<sup>51</sup> One negative review of *Ada* puts it: “Strangely, over the work as a whole is cast the shadow of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Nabokov dismissed Joyce’s last novel as a failed experiment; but the theme of incest; the imitation of parents by their children; the uncertain, alternating identity of the narrator(s); the part played by the book itself in its own story; all recall Joyce’s work. There is even a chapter challenging Jung’s approach to the interpretation of dreams...It’s almost as if Nabokov is trying to correct Joyce’s mistake.” Stephen Crowe, “A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups: *Ada* or *Ardor*,” *UrbanTree*, <http://urbarbo.blogspot.com/2009/05/fairy-tale-for-grown-ups-nabokovs-ada.html>.

Nabokov adored.”<sup>52</sup> He recounts James Mercanton’s visit to Joyce that “found him and Stuart Gilbert at work on the then *Work-in-Progress* (which became *Finnegans Wake*), ‘gleefully’ inserting words taken from a Samoyed dictionary so as to make it more ‘obscure.’”<sup>53</sup>

Does Nabokov succeed in playing close to this edge, attempting similar audacities and then beating a hasty retreat back to lushly seductive narrative? Does he surpass, or correct Joyce’s mistake?

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A closer look at two highly charged passages in *Ada* will serve to illustrate Nabokov’s complicated relationship with Joyce’s literary techniques. In the first and shorter scene, we see Van fleeing Ardis forever:

“The express does not stop at Torfyanka, does it, Trofim?”

“I’ll take you five versts across the bog,” said Trofim, “the nearest is Volosyanka.”

His vulgar Russian word for Maidenhair; a whistle stop; train probably crowded. Maidenhair. Idiot! Percy boy might have been buried by now! Maidenhair. Thus named because of the huge spreading Chinese tree at the end of the platform. Once, vaguely, confused with the Venus’-hair fern. She walked to the end of the platform in Tolstoy’s novel. First exponent of the inner monologue, later exploited by the French and the Irish. *N’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert. L’arbre aux quarante écus d’or*, at least in the fall. Never, never shall I hear again her “botanical” voice fall at *biloba*, “sorry, my Latin is showing.” *Ginkgo*, ginkgo, ink, inkog. Known also as Salisbury’s *adiantofolia*, *Ada*’s *infolio*, poor *Salisburia*: sunk; poor Stream of Consciousness, *marée noire* by now. Who wants Ardis Hall!

“*Barin, a barin*,” said Trofim, turning his blond-bearded face to his passenger.

“*Da?*”

“*Dazhe skvoz’ kozhaniy fartuk ne stal-bi ya trogat’ etu frantsuzskuyu devku.*”

*Bárin*: master. *Dázhe skvoz’ kózhaníy fártuk*: even through a leathern apron. *Ne stal-bi ya trógat’*: I would not think of touching. *Étu*: this (that). *Frantsúzskuyu*: French (adj., accus.). *Dévku*: wench. *Úzhas, otcháyanie*: horror, despair. *Zhálóst’*: pity. *Kóncheno, zagázheno, rastérzано*: finished, fouled, torn to shreds. (299-300)

<sup>52</sup> Foster, *Nabokov’s Art of Memory*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

The brief dialogue with Trofim prompts and intercuts with Van's inner monologue, a stream of consciousness with brief incomplete sentences, three languages, and the fragmented logic of disturbed emotions grasping at verbal straws: e.g., "the skipping stones of consciousness" (*LL*). This being *Ada*, Van's internal monologue jumps straight to literature and to its own stylistic precedents: "She walked to the end of platform in Tolstoy's novel." Van's associations skip from Maidenhair, Venus hair, love, his own misery, self-conscious stream-of-consciousness, literary precedents, to final trains. Van despairs enough to contemplate suicide, and yet is sufficiently composed to remember that Tolstoy used the technique of inner monologue long before the French and then Joyce made it famous. In this passage, Van's agonized inner monologue is also about the very device of inner monologue, without dampening the local emotional impact.

Flaubert also joins the mix: that final trio of words echoes *L'Éducation sentimentale*, translated (and transfigured, like the *n'est vert n'est vert* variant on *King Lear*'s "Never, never, never, never") into Russian and then English.<sup>54</sup> The Russian coachman would not touch the diseased French girl, but he means the wrong girl and the wrong disease, besides which he will go on to marry Blanche himself.<sup>55</sup> Flaubert's style passes into Russian (Tolstoy) and then English, just as Tolstoy's inner monologue passes the other direction into French and English literature. Cultural cross-fertilization on the level of story and action is suggested by Van's determination to duel the neighboring country squire, followed by more Russian dialogue. And yet I would argue that the Irish wins

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<sup>54</sup> In *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Frédéric meets the news of his lost fortune with the words, "Ruiné, dépouillé, perdu!" See Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 265.

<sup>55</sup> The leather *fartuk* ends up as his last name, in typical Van-memoir fashion, as well as a rather silly punning identification with the previous coachman Ben Wright. Trofim and Blanche have a blind child, presumably due to her venereal disease. The "sore of Eros" echoes the risks of incest and inbreeding.

here after all: the very ability to retell one's intense emotional experiences through a filter of ironic models is pure Joyce. Anna Karenina's inner monologue offers little comic relief. But in *Ada*, as in *Ulysses*, patches of sincerity shine through the shades of parody, through earlier and absorbed literary styles.

More prolonged and brilliant still is the terrible and wonderful scene of Lucette's suicide, an echo of the previous passage, and for many readers the heart of the novel. On a trans-Atlantic ocean-liner and after one final attempt to win Van, Lucette does what Van only contemplated, joining the ranks of Anna and Emma Bovary.

She drank a "Cossack pony" of Klass vodka—hateful, vulgar, but potent stuff; had another; and was hardly able to down a third because her head had started to swim like hell. Swim like hell from sharks, Tobakovich!

She had no purse with her. She almost fell from her convex ridiculous seat as she fumbled in her shirt pocket for a stray bank note.

"Beddydee," said Toby the barman with a fatherly smile, which she mistook for a leer. "Bedtime, miss," he repeated and patted her ungloved hand.

Lucette recoiled and forced herself to retort distinctly and haughtily:

"Mr. Veen, my cousin, will pay you tomorrow and bash your false teeth in." Six, seven—no, more than that, about ten steps up. *Dix marches*. Legs and arms. *Dimanche. Déjeuner sur l'herbe. Tout le monde pue. Ma belle-mère avale son râtelier. Sa petite chienne*, after too much exercise, gulps twice and quietly vomits, a pink pudding onto the picnic *nappe*. *Après quoi* she waddles off. These steps are something.

While dragging herself up she had to hang onto the rail. Her twisted progress was that of a cripple. Once on the open deck she felt the solid impact of the black night, and the mobility of the accidental home she was about to leave.

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.

The sky was also heartless and dark, and her body, her head, and particularly those damned thirsty trousers, felt clogged with Oceanus Nox, n,o,x. At every slap and splash of cold wild salt, she heaved with anise-flavored nausea and there was an increasing number, okay, or numbness, in her neck and arms. 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.

She did not see her whole life flash before her as we all were afraid she might have done; the red rubber of a favorite doll remained safely decomposed among the myosotes of an unanalyzable brook; but she did see a few odds and ends as she swam like a dilettante Tobakoff in a circle of brief panic and merciful torpor. She saw a pair of new vair-furred bedroom slippers, which Brigitte had forgotten to pack; she saw Van wiping his mouth before answering, and then, still withholding the answer, throwing his napkin on the table as they both got up; and she saw a girl with long black hair quickly bend in passing to clap her hands over a dackel in a half-tom wreath.

A brilliantly illumined motorboat was launched from the not-too-distant ship with Van and the swimming coach and the oilskin-hooded Toby among the would-be saviors; but by that time a lot of sea had rolled by and Lucette was too tired to wait. Then the night was filled with the rattle of an old but still strong helicopter. Its diligent beam could spot only the dark head of Van, who, having been propelled out of the boat when it shied from its own sudden shadow, kept bobbing and bawling the drowned girl's name in the black, foam-veined, complicated waters. (493-95)

This passage is the novel's masterpiece, Nabokov's most moving virtuoso display.

Lucette downs her cheap Russian vodka, incarnates simultaneously Emma, Anna, and Ophelia, and feels herself to be a cheap parody. We move seamlessly from vivid visual description—Lucette's last swan-dive, "she went with hardly a splash through the wave that humped to welcome her"—to free indirect discourse: "Her head started to swim like hell" must be Lucette's words. And then we are entirely inside her head: "Swim like hell from the sharks" is inner monologue, lines retold from a remembered anecdote.

Clever Lucette, it turns out, is even more literary, artistic, and ironic than Van on her way to death. Her inner monologue is verbal and visual (recalling her Art History background and love for Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*); for all the narrators' claims that "She did not see her whole life flash before her as we were all afraid she



might,” the combination of images and fragments (Van withholding his answer; Ada unnamed) betrays a lonely, intelligent, bewildered life. But just then, we are reminded once more that it is Van who invents for her these final words and thoughts. He pays Lucette the belated compliment of recognizing her posthumously as a kindred spirit.

Stylistically, Lucette’s inner monologue varies from the model of *Ulysses* to that of *Anna Karenina*. From the shortest fragments like “Legs and arms” and “These steps are something” and the French puns (*dix marches, dimanche*), Nabokov switches back to description: “While dragging herself up she had to hang onto the rail. Her twisted progress was that of a cripple.” Nabokov argued in the *Lectures* that Joyce over-emphasized the verbal: we think in images as well as in words. Descriptions in literature have the advantage of conveying both, and in fact can feel more natural than an exaggerated stream of consciousness. Here as never before, Nabokov shows us what he means: we are in Lucette’s tormented head, and then we see her on the deck, over the rail, diving from “such a height,” going in with hardly a splash and cruelly resurfacing. (Anna almost stands up after her leap between the wheels.<sup>56</sup>) If Joyce leans heavily on verbal texture at the expense of visual substance, in this passage Nabokov gives us both.

He then does something even more spectacular, improving on Joyce once more. This passage is rife with narrative interruptions, increasingly painful in tone. Lucette had “never died before—no, *dived* before, Violet,” old man Van corrects his typist. He stops to spell “tentacling,” and then again “Nox,” presumably to distinguish from the last name of his pretty secretary. Just as Lucette is horribly sinking, he fumbles the narration entirely: “Now I’ve lost my next note. Got it.” Just as we feel most in the moment, totally

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<sup>56</sup> Nabokov even corrects for a flaw that always bothered him in Tolstoy: Vronsky’s suicide attempt is dropped and forgotten, and never enters Anna’s head on her way to the train. Nabokov has Van contemplate suicide no fewer than three times, but without leaving traces to alert the other characters.

enthralled in the recounted past, the narrating present interrupts, interferes, makes itself felt, chokes with age and with grief. Gallant old Van is still trying to joke with his secretary, just as he conjures a vision of Lucette fighting to remain clever and ironic even as she is about to die.

Nabokov beats Joyce at his own game by experimenting simultaneously with these two layers of narrative: he gives us two counterpointed monologues and inner states. We see the illustrated thoughts of the dying girl, and hear the old man's interrupted narration. The presence of Violet, the typewriter, Van's reshuffled notes, his presumable emotional state all force us to visualize this other layer simultaneously: old Van is still not quite able to narrate this one unspeakable event, but tries to concentrate on details and force himself through, echoing the anguish of the dying girl. A film is able to do this quite simply by means of delineated flashbacks, but Nabokov employs no such ready-made markers to differentiate between temporal levels. The Nabokov-trained reader must follow the cues and catch both temporal layers.

Nabokov also tries to escape the "insipid" ornamentalism of a text like *Finnegans Wake* by motivating his verbal acrobatics through the narrative, and keeping such dense passages in *Ada* highly emotionally fraught. If Nabokov succeeds, the reader is too enchanted by Lucette and the darkly romantic Veen world to balk at complex devices and meta-literary strategies. The magic and the reward should occur on two levels: the seduction of the plot, and the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of recognizing the author's mastery.

In the last sentence, Van shouts the dead girl's name in the "black, foam-veined, complicated waters." We return to the old grandmother sea, and to the moral culpability

that so often goes hand in hand with great freedom. Their dark-blue element catches up to the Veens. After Lucette, the others will go fairly quickly: in book-space, if not narrative time, Marina and Demon die one after another, until only our last sterile couple is left. The sea has turned as black as death: when it kills Lucette it is a material substance, visualizable by means of detail (“foam-veined”), light and shade, and still something we can only understand abstractly, literarily as “complicated.”

## V. The Modernist Agon, Redux

In *Ada* Nabokov indulges his grand Joyce after his *petit* Proust. He appropriates from the great French and English-language modernists aspects of technique, signature style, as well as beloved themes and motifs: as the *Lectures* show, Nabokov had studied their monumental novels for decades. *Ada* indulges in a combination of Proust and Joyce, transplanted onto Antiterra and crossed with the Russian literary tradition. If Pushkin’s *Onegin* was a novel in the Chateaubyronic genre, *Ada* belongs to the category defined by Marcel Joyce or James Proust.

As I have argued in earlier chapters, Nabokov sought to rescue and immortalize his Russian tradition by translating it into English and transnational modernism. *Ada* explores the aesthetic codes of modernism and the status of immortal masterpieces even as it seems the ultimate incarnation of precisely those values. Nabokov uses Proust’s art of memory to remember the literary and cultural past, and Joyce’s technique of shifting parodic styles to show a scene as it might have been written by Pushkin, Chateaubriand, Byron, Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoy—and Proust and Joyce themselves. Northrop Frye has

suggested that poetry is made out of other poems, and novels out of earlier novels: in *Ada*, Nabokov attempts to build a self-conscious masterpiece out of other masterpieces.

In the process, Nabokov changes the details and irons out wrinkles that had long bothered him, even in the work of his favorites. He not only imitates Proust and Joyce but attempts to improve on them, winking at his trained reader. He considered only the edited half of Proust's *À la recherche* a masterpiece: *Ada* parodies Proust by hinting that old Van similarly dies while editing Part One: "I am weak. I write badly. I may die tonight. My magic carpet no longer skims over crown canopies and gaping nestlings, and her rarest orchids. Insert" (221). Old Ada may have finished Part One for him: Darkbloom's notes for the final sentence ("When in early September Van Veen left Manhattan for Lute, he was pregnant," 325) remark that this one-sentence paragraph "imitates, in significant brevity of intonation (as if spoken by an outside voice), a famous Tolstoyan ending, with Van in the role of Kitty Lyovin" (601).<sup>57</sup> By the final paragraphs of the novel both Veens must be dead, for the "poetry" of the concluding blurb, in its utter lack of sympathy or subtlety (Arcadian innocence in Ardis? Lucette's death "one of the highlights of this delightful book"?), positively drips with Nabokov's sarcasm.<sup>58</sup> The point is of course that Van may die before editing his book, but Nabokov does not: *his* novel, unlike Van's or Proust's, is perfectly edited.

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<sup>57</sup> The outside voice must be Ada's, since we know from two pages earlier that young Ada included in her graduation album a clever pastiche "mimicking Tolstoy's paragraph rhythm and chapter closings" (323).

<sup>58</sup> The final paragraphs of *Ada*, like John Ray Jr.'s Foreword to *Lolita*, contrasts the sparkling prose of the admitted villain with the tin ear of conventional style (and morality). For example, the summary of the novel cheerfully claims, "In spite of the many intricacies of plot and psychology, the story proceeds at a spanking pace"; "Nothing in world literature... can vie in pure joyousness and Arcadian innocence with the 'Ardis' part of the book"; and even "another attractive girl, Lucette Veen, Marina's younger daughter, has also been swept off her feet by Van, the irresistible rake. Her tragic destiny constitutes one of the highlights of this delightful book" (588).

Likewise, Nabokov purposefully plays on the very edge of *Finnegans Wake*, offering a novel nearly as dense in multilingual pun and allusion, and nearly as demanding of its reader. But old Van may have more in common with old Joyce than does old Nabokov: Van may be beyond caring about accessibility, but to my mind Nabokov is not. His *Ada* may aim to shock, infuriate, or deceive, but never to bore, and so unlike Joyce in the *Wake*, he insists on maintaining a seductive narrative arc throughout his experimental anti-novel—and even a happy ending.

Whether he succeeds in improving on his precursors or not, ultimately Nabokov comes across as a far happier writer than either Proust or Joyce, putting forward an alternative vision of life, literature, and love. In *Ada*, love turns out to be possible, offering a kind of triumph over time, as does the novel itself: even writing is not a solitary pursuit, but something that Van and Ada are able to do together. How different their forty faithful years together are from Proust's Zeno's paradox of love: in *À la recherche*, if you lean in to kiss Albertine, she is no longer the same girl. How different too is the fantastic, defiant exilic dream of Russo-American Antiterra from the poverty, grime, and pathos of Dublin as re-imagined from Paris.

As we have seen, the “influences” of Proust and Joyce interpenetrate with previous generations of writers, layered on a foundation built for the poetic novel by Pushkin, Byron, and Chateaubriand. On the surface a trap for influence hunters and other unwary critics, *Ada*'s allusions point to a transnational tradition that means a great deal to Nabokov. He refused to be compared to individual modernists, or to be contextualized solely in the Russian national tradition. But Nabokov takes less issue with being compared to all of his favorite authors simultaneously, and hence the genealogies of *Ada*.

Great literature crosses all borders: Proust and Joyce are carriers of a transnational tradition of imagination, mental mastery, innovation, and creative risk. Nabokov reads Joyce and Proust to be as much the spiritual heirs of Pushkin and Tolstoy as of French and English-language writers. Pushkin's humor, lightness and speed, and inexhaustible talent for parody find full expression in the adopted Irish grandson; Proust's visual imagination and profound treatment of memory resembles the descriptive precision and temporal complexity of the greatest Russian classics. All works of great beauty are similar through some odd family resemblance, or when seen through the right combination of shadow and light.

And yet, as I mentioned in my introduction, the incestuous lovers Van and Ada Veen, heirs to the greatest literary traditions in the world, die childless. The question of inbreeding forms one of the central paradoxes of the novel: since Antiterranean chronology reads as a double or triple-exposure, the great writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries easily coexist in the Veen library and exchange secrets of the trade with Van. The pages of *Ada* are a veritable Olympus for literary immortals, or rather a Garden of Eden constructed out of great books and erotic freedom. But all is not ideal: the Veens' incest and sterility take on looming allegorical significance for the inbreeding of literary masterpieces: crossing related outliers sometimes yields woollier and woollier sheep, and sometimes a sterile and legless lamb. The great love story of *Ada* may well end with the death of the novel.

It is no wonder that readers are left without ground to stand on. *Ada* parodies and at the same time aims to become a grand modernist monument, complete with all the narcissism, morbid sexuality, and various stylistic overindulgences of its modernist and

Romantic heritage. The dark Romantic legacy personified by Demon Veen is simultaneously adored and condemned by his demon-blooded children. With *Ada*, Nabokov pokes cruel and adoring fun at his favorite literature, and poses the question of where one goes next. For while mourning the end of one modernist and Romantic line, *Ada* attempts to create another. As Nabokov wrote in *Strong Opinions* (the aphorism that serves as an epigraph to this chapter), every original novel is an anti-novel, because it opens a genre different from that of its precursors.

*Ada* alienated many contemporary readers, but ultimately it does more than parody previous literature: the novel also reads as a forerunner of new possibilities for literary tradition. Now and firmly in the twenty-first century, when so many readers are themselves hybrids and geographical in-betweens, *Ada* more than ever speaks to a new world. Practically speaking, the text refuses to be read—or taught—as either American or Russian literature, but only as an impossible combination of both. Today the novel reads as charming and strange: terribly modern in its transnational and subjectively experienced territories, if uncomfortably out of fashion in its insistence on genius and masterpieces.

## Chapter Five

### *Ada*, Bergson, and the Texture of Time

O Muse, be justly proud of your achievement  
and if by some you're scorned, scorn them yourself,  
and with a hand unforced, unhurried, crown  
your brow with dawning immortality.

—G. A. Derzhavin,  
“Exegi monumentum,” 1796

To God's command, O Muse, obedient be  
offense not dreading, and no wreath demanding,  
accept indifferently praise and slander,  
and do not contradict a fool.

—A. S. Pushkin,  
“Exegi monumentum,” 1836<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Reality without quotation marks: Bergson and modernism

Nabokov's *Ada*, like Pushkin's *Onegin*, is as much “about” as it is imbued with literary tradition and consciously manipulated cultural heritage. Both texts include complex and self-conscious musings on the relation of literature to time. In my first chapter, I used Pascale Casanova's notions of cultural centers and peripheries to suggest that temporal metaphors of belatedness and cultural pursuit express anxieties over the marginality or provincialism of a national culture. As a Russian outsider to Western European high culture, Pushkin appropriates the motifs and techniques of Romanticism in an attempt to overtake European literary fashions. In subsequent chapters, I argued that Nabokov in turn sought to rearrange the Western canon to position himself and the Russian literary tradition as central and either ahead of the times, or safely immortal.

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov's translations, *EO* 2:310-11; I give the last stanza of each here. Nabokov calls Pushkin's verse-by-verse parody of Derzhavin “one of the most subtle compositions in Russian literary history”: “The last quatrain is the artist's own grave voice repudiating the mimicked boast. His last line, although ostensibly referring to reviewers, slyly implies that only fools proclaim their own immortality.”



Both *Onegin* and *Ada* struggle overtly with the idea of literary immortality, mocking the vagaries of literary fashion and aspiring to break free from the tyranny of time and space. To join an international list of great writers and artists means to win autonomy and a “life” beyond the local context, the here and the now. Paradoxically, both novel in verse and poetic novel remain as much “of their time” as they are determinedly innovative or retrospective: respectively, the two texts bracket the start of a powerful movement in Russian literature, and the end of that movement as perpetuated for half a century in émigré culture. The literature of the subsequent émigré waves arguably represents a different turn for Russian culture as well as a different generation. Nabokov’s was the last generation to have little to no contact at all with Soviet culture, making *Ada* something like the last novel of Imperial Russia. Like *Onegin*, *Ada* marks a temporal border and a sea change: the question remains whether Nabokov’s novel is the first as well as the last of a series.

Pushkin’s motifs of pursuit, didactic refrains, tongue-in-cheek lists enumerating the stages of a chronologically ordered life, and evasive refusal to finalize either his position or *Onegin*’s narrative, all speak to a Romantic distaste for the mechanized life and the pre-determined narrative. Nabokov in turn does something even more extreme, inserting a recognizably modernist philosophy of time into his novel. In this chapter I will study *Ada* in the suggestive context of its working title and Part Four of the finished novel, *The Texture of Time*. Where does Van Veen’s philosophy come from, and does it inform the style and structure of the novel? What is the texture of time, and how does it relate to Nabokov’s ambition to build a transnational, late twentieth-century literary masterpiece?

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Children come up with the purest philosophies, Van muses, reflecting on Ada's tantalizing classification of lived experiences: "'real things' which were infrequent and priceless, simply 'things' which formed the routine stuff of life; and 'ghost things,' also called 'fogs,' such as fever, toothache, dreadful disappointments, and death." Three or more occurring simultaneously form a tower, or if in succession, a bridge: "'Real towers' and 'real bridges' were the joys of life, and when the towers came in a series, one experienced supreme rapture... When the joy and the joyless happened to be intermixed, simultaneously or along the ramp of duration, one was confronted with 'ruined towers' and 'broken bridges'" (75). Ada's sense of reality and beauty also shines through her oddly poetic games with leaf-shadows and roundlets of light cast on the ground, which could be outlined and enhanced with the aid of a sharp stick to appear "convex like the brimming surface of a golden dye" (51-52), only to shift and create complex patterns with the changes of light.

The sensibility so vividly captured by such passages is at once strikingly original and vaguely familiar. Stephen Dedalus tells his students that a pier is a "disappointed bridge," in a favorite passage that Nabokov read aloud to *his* students at Cornell (LL 298). *Ada's* readers may also remember the magic lantern-lampshade in Marcel's childhood bedroom from the colors of which *À la recherche* seems to emerge; or for that matter the play of light and cloud that first Bloom and then Stephen notice in their wanderings through Dublin. *Ada's* peculiarly phrased descriptions of beauty, poetics of memory, and nostalgic yearning for the lost "real" suggest that the novel borrows more than style from *Ulysses* and *À la recherche*. The anguished eroticism that *Ada* also shares with its

modernist precursors speaks to the same visceral longing for authenticity: for the Veens, only in the act of love does reality lose “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” (220).<sup>2</sup>

What is this high modernist “real thing”—what constitutes the effort to shed reality’s quotation marks? Real life can only be glimpsed through an artistic attention to the sensory or sensual detail, or so Proust, Joyce, and Nabokov (and a good handful of twentieth-century philosophers) suggest: the taste of Marcel’s tea-soaked madeleine, the smell of Bloom’s lemon soap, the visual pleasure of Ada’s watercolor orchid. Elusive and fleeting reality must be hidden in these snatches of unnecessary beauty, for the senses, like language or the arts, simultaneously offer only illusions and everything that matters. In these novels, real happiness is felt to be not only elsewhere but “else-when,” located in a hazy, idyllic past: childhood, ancient Greece, medieval France, Renaissance Italy, or the golden era of the Russian and European novel.

Such melancholy, nostalgic literature dreams of a time when lived experiences were felt to be authentic and the poetry of life was readily accessible; when reality did not carry the claw-marks of quotation. The artist, the poet, the thinker—anyone who would be really alive—still chases that dream, and through that effort, attempts to grasp the essence or texture of time. That texture is only accessible through difficult imaginative

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<sup>2</sup> Colleen Lamos writes that “significant effects of sexual energies and identifications that, for male subjects, were (and are) coded as deviant according to modern cultural discourses and psycho-sexual categorizations” characterize the works of the writers “who are widely regarded as the major figures of literary modernism.” *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1. Cf. Mario Praz, quoting Novalis’s aphorism, in his study of the Romantic and Decadent preoccupation with romantic agony: “It is strange that the true source of cruelty should be desire” (*Romantic Agony*, 28).

work and creative art made possible through memory: only by recalling the most real moments and bringing them actively into the present can we hope to construct meaning.<sup>3</sup>

This hazily sketched modernist dream is in essence Bergsonian. Henri Bergson's hugely influential (and Nobel Prize-winning) philosophy sparked and shaped international modernisms from Paris to St. Petersburg in the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> His seminal writings about the duration of the past into the present (*la durée*), our illusory and habitual perceptions of the world around us, and the preeminence of the subjective and creative mind, were central to the Symbolists, to Joyce and Proust, to the Anglo-American modernist poets, and perhaps to Nabokov more than has been hitherto acknowledged.

Years before either his friendship or feud with Nabokov, Edmund Wilson pursued and studied a highly Bergsonian current in the great literary works of the early twentieth century. Wilson's evocative early-1930s work *Axel's Castle* predates the critical rigidification of terms such as modernism: Wilson identifies the new and neo-Romantic strain as "Symbolism" in a very broad sense, largely overlapping if not perfectly coinciding with what today commonly falls under the umbrella category of modernism or European modernism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Using T. S. Eliot's work as an example, Lamos finds that the culture of high modernism does not quite accept a substitute for a lost state (or faith) in literature and art: "Literature is an expression, and further evidence, of our fallen state" (*Deviant Modernism*, 217).

<sup>4</sup> See Glynn, *Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences*, 55: "Major figures such as Joyce, Proust, Lawrence, and Woolf once engaged creatively with Bergson's ideas and it is a critical commonplace that some defining characteristics of Modernism are traceable to the pervasive influence of Bergsonism." Glynn notes that Bertrand Russell as well as many Marxist critics saw in Bergson's cult of motion something dangerously close to fascism. The taint, combined with the dominance of analytic philosophy, made Bergson a marginal figure for decades. See also Hilary L. Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism 1900-1930* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> *Axel's Castle* is structured around six case-studies, sharing something structurally as well as thematically with Walter Pater's famous late-Romantic treatise, *The Renaissance*.

The new aesthetic tendency and poetic sensibility emerged, very much like those of Romanticism a century before, from an individual and subjective revolt against a mechanized world.<sup>6</sup> If the Romantics reflected and inspired a revolution in thought, the Symbolists were *über*-Romantics, responding to another revolution, in part spearheaded by Bergson. More recently, French thinkers including Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze have termed Bergson's breakthroughs another "Copernican revolution," one of the major paradigm shifts of the last century. (The similarities between the two movements, Romanticism and Bergsonian modernism or Symbolism, shed further light on the popularity of Pushkin in turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century Russia.)

Wilson finds traces of Bergson in the poetics that shaped the new century:

The assumptions which underlay Symbolism lead us to formulate some such doctrine as the following: Every feeling or sensation we have, every moment of consciousness, is different from every other; and it is, in consequence, impossible to render our sensations as we actually experience them through the conventional and universal language of ordinary literature. Each poet has his unique personality; each of his moments has its special tone, this special combination of elements. And it is the poet's task to find, to invent, the special language which will alone be capable of expressing his personality and feelings. Such a language must make use of symbols: what is so special, so fleeting and so vague cannot be conveyed by direct statement or description, but only by a succession of words, of images, which will serve to suggest it to the reader.<sup>7</sup>

Symbols meant different things to different writers, and the images and descriptions of some poets and poetic prose-writers are more exquisitely detail-oriented than others.

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<sup>6</sup> If seventeenth-century science "presented the universe as a mechanism [and] caused people to draw the conclusion that man was something apart from nature, something introduced into the universe from outside and remaining alien to all that he found," the Romantic poet feels "the falsity of this assumption... that what we are and what we see, what we hear, what we feel and what we smell, are inextricably related, that all are involved in the same great entity... The Romantic poet, then, with his turbid or opalescent language, his sympathies and passions which cause him to merge with his surroundings, is the prophet of a new insight into nature: he is describing things as they really are; and a revolution in the imagery of poetry is in reality a revolution in metaphysics." Wilson, *Axel's Castle*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, *Axel's Castle*, 18.

Nevertheless, a recognizable if nebulous doctrine underlay much of the new work. The new metaphysics found an especially brilliant embodiment in Proust's prose fiction:

Proust had been deeply influenced by Bergson, one of the forerunners of the modern anti-mechanists, and this had helped him to develop and apply on an unprecedented scale the metaphysics implicit in Symbolism...for the Symbolist, all that is perceived in any moment of human experience is relative to the person who perceives it, and to the surroundings, the moment, the mood. The world becomes...fourth dimensional—with Time as the fourth dimension.<sup>8</sup>

We recall Nabokov's own formulation from the *Lectures on Literature* that Proust was Bergson in an illustrated edition. While Nabokov shied away from general studies of "climate of thought," and defined Symbolism far more narrowly and negatively, as marked by self-indulgence and a lack of interest in detail, his understanding of Proust's and even of Joyce's poetics shares a good deal with that of Wilson.

Very much like Pushkin, Nabokov had a penchant for mimicking and mocking literary sensibilities that were perhaps not so distant from his own recent practice. If in *Onegin* the reader can never quite ascertain Pushkin's final stance on the Romantic trends that he imitates, parodies, and overcomes or subsumes into a new poetic style, so in *Ada* we find that Nabokov out-moderns the modernists. *Ada* offers an alternative illustrated edition of Bergson, but the distance between the author and the narrating Van Veen may prove wider than that between Proust and Marcel, and perhaps quite as wide as that between Pushkin and Lensky, or *Onegin*.

## II. Nabokov and Bergson

Van (crossly): "I don't understand the first word...What's that? *L'adorée*? Wait a second" (to Lucette). "Please, stay where you are." (Lucette whispers a French child-word with two "p"s.). "Okay" (pointing toward the corridor). "Sorry, Polly. Well, is it *l'adorée*? No? Give me the context. Ah—*la durée*. *La durée* is not...sin on what?"

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 126.

Synonymous with duration. Aha. Sorry again, I must stopper that orgiastic soda. Hold the line.” [...]

“*La durée*... For goodness sake, come in without knocking... No, Polly, knocking does not concern you—it’s my little cousin. All right. *La durée* is not synonymous with duration, being saturated—yes, as in Saturday—with that particular philosopher’s thought. What’s wrong now? You don’t know if it’s *dorée* or *durée*? D, U, R. I thought you knew French. Oh, I see. So long.

“My typist, a trivial but always available blonde, could not make out *durée* in my quite legible hand because, she says, she knows French, but not scientific French.”

“Actually,” observed Lucette, wiping the long envelope which a drop of soda had stained, “Bergson is only for very young people or very unhappy people, such as this available *rousse*.” “Spotting Bergson,” said the assistant lecher, “rates a B minus *dans ton petit cas*, hardly more. (376-77)

As far as his scholarly work is concerned, Van is shamelessly derivative of Bergson.

The strange scene above marks his first encounter with the adult Lucette. Her sudden beauty distracts Van and the reader both: for the latter it triggers expectations of an *Onegin*-like reversal in desire, and a new direction for the plot. But Nabokov also uses the scene to plant the information that Van has become a doctor of philosophy (presumably an assistant professor as well as lecher) and a specialist on Bergson.

Van and Lucette’s flirtatious dialogue finds an intriguing counterpoint in his phone conversation: Van rebukes his typist for fumbling the word *durée*, which cannot be translated simply as “duration” since Van refers specifically to Bergson’s term. The two simultaneous interactions cut in and out, making it momentarily difficult to place which is the main conversation and which the intermission. Parodically theatrical, the scene even includes stage directions; in *Ada*, such accumulating self-conscious markers usually signal an important passage. Subtly, this scene foreshadow Lucette’s watery death. Eavesdropping Lucette easily catches the philosophical reference that Polly missed, tries to impress Van, and simultaneously warns him that she is very unhappy.

When dictating the story of her suicide many decades later, Van will spell things out similarly (“Nox, N-O-X”) to another blonde typist. The two passages reflect one another and bookend a love affair that never took place. The beloved older sister (*l’adorée*—the antonym even rings with Ada’s name) haunts all of Lucette’s interactions with Van, who has not yet guessed the origins of the letter amid the spilled soda. Different layers of the past endure into the narrative present, even as he seems to mention off-hand or off-stage Bergson’s famous notion of *durée*. Water powers much of the machinery of Antiterra and of *Ada*, perhaps even Polly’s polliphone, performing magical functions often linked to language. That is, Demonian magic appears to have replaced electricity and other earthly technologies. On closer inspection, the mysterious ability of water to record sounds, or of carpets to levitate, reads as a metaphor for language and literature. In this scene love, death, and Bergson all blend in the fluid medium of Nabokov’s novel.

When Van retires from academia, he delivers three farewell lectures “on Mr. Bergson’s Time at a great university.” Bergson’s own public lectures were famous events, but this stylized description may owe something to Nabokov’s Cornell fantasies:

I was a little late for the first (dealing with the Past) and observed with a not-unpleasant thrill, as if arriving at my own funeral, the brilliantly lighted windows of Counterstone Hall and the small figure of a Japanese student who, being also late, overtook me at a wild scurry, and disappeared in the doorway long before I reached its semicircular steps. At the second lecture—the one on the Present—during the five seconds of silence and “inward attention” which I requested from the audience in order to provide an illustration for the point I, or rather the speaking jewel in my waistcoat pocket, was about to make regarding the true perception of time, the behemoth snores of a white-bearded sleeper filled the house—which, of course, collapsed. At the third and last lecture, on the Future (“Sham Time”), after working perfectly for a few minutes, my secretly recorded voice underwent an obscure mechanical disaster, and I preferred simulating a heart attack and being carried out into the night forever (insofar as lecturing was concerned) to trying to decipher and sort out the batch of crumpled notes in pale pencil which poor speakers are obsessed with in familiar dreams (attributed by Dr. Froid of Signy-Mondieu-Mondieu to the dreamer’s having read in infancy his adulterous parents’ love letters). (548-49)



Each lecture is marked by an incident illustrative of the very points Van wants to prove. He is late for the past but witnesses it like a ghost attending his own funeral (the past is still with us); the real present unexpectedly interrupts his illustrative intermission through unplanned snores and laughter; and the future is as fake as his cardiac arrest, only one of many possible projections based on the past and present. Van's lectures suggest that he is not only a scholar of Bergson but his philosophical heir; by his nineties, Veen's Time will be popularly "termed in one breath, one breeze, with 'Bergson's Duration'" (579). As we shall see, Bergson also offers a far more enticing model for the workings of the mind than does Freud, here "Dr. Froid."

But Nabokov finally explains Veen's Time only in Part Four, the inset philosophical treatise that tantalizingly postpones the denouement of Van and Ada's great love for thirty more pages. After accumulating hints about the nature of Van's work, we see an excerpted selection or a rephrased summary of his wildly successful *The Texture of Time*, for Nabokov lends Van *Ada's* early working title. A philosophical work and not fiction wins Van fame: his earlier novels toil in relative obscurity, with the exception of *Letters from Terra*, which benefited from the notoriety of French director Victor Vitry's racy and "totally unauthorized" film adaptation.<sup>9</sup>

*The Texture of Time* chapter serves to prove that Van is a philosopher, but what is his philosophy? The crucial characteristics of Veen's Time include the following concepts, all borrowed directly from Bergson and very thinly disguised: 1) an attempt to separate time conceptually from metaphors of space; 2) a differentiation between perceived time and "real" time; and 3) the accessibility and duration of the past into the present. These

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<sup>9</sup> There is a suggestive parallel between the works that Van is best known for and Nabokov's *Onegin* and *Lolita* (in the wake of Stanley Kubrick's film)—the two works for which Nabokov predicted that he would be remembered.

ideas are explored overtly in Part Four but more subtly permeate the whole novel. The notion of duration provides the clue to *Ada*'s content, style, and structure, for Van's memoir illustrates and applies Bergson's philosophy of time.

First as a philosopher and then as a poet, Van tries to grasp the nature of "Pure Time, Perceptual Time, Tangible Time, Time free of content, context, and running commentary" (539). However, the final target of Van's attacks throughout the novel is teleological, irreversible time, or as Van calls it, "the ardis of Time" (538). The Greek pun links the arrow of time with Van's lost paradise Ardis Hall. Life infects his philosophy, or philosophy his life. As Nabokov described the project early on, "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."<sup>10</sup>

It is harder to tell whether philosopher Van is an homage or a parody of Bergson and Bergson's influence. Most readers approach Van's treatise as if it were Nabokov's own, inserted into *Ada* unadulterated. Nabokov littered interviews and occasional pieces with a wealth of contradictory clues: for example, "My conception of the texture of time somewhat resembles its image in Part Four of *Ada*" (SO 184). He often called memory and imagination "negations" of time, and when asked whether memories helped to "combat time or offer any clue to its mysteries," Nabokov quoted from *Ada*: "Physiologically the sense of Time is a sense of continuous becoming... Philosophically, on the other hand, Time is but memory in the making." However, he interrupts himself to differentiate his own ideas from those of his invented scholar: "This is Van speaking,

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<sup>10</sup> Boyd, *American Years*, 487. After *Ada*'s publication, Nabokov curbed interpreters by insisting that Van's theory of time had "no existence beyond the fabric of one part of the novel *Ada*." He rebuked Jeffrey Leonard by stating that Veen's Time is "something quite different from what Proust called 'lost time'... And finally I owe no debt whatsoever... to the famous Argentine essayist [Borges]... Mr. Leonard would have lost less of it had he gone straight to Berkeley and Bergson" (SO 290).

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" (*SO* 142-43).

Nabokov was quick to respond to accusations that Van was modeled after himself, and he never forgave John Updike the ungallant suggestion that "bitchy and lewd Ada" might resemble Vera.<sup>11</sup> The relation between author and character is an unpleasant family resemblance and no more. "The more gifted and talkative one's characters are, the greater the chances of their resembling the author in tone or tint of mind," Nabokov protested: "I am not really aware of any special similarities—just as one is not aware of sharing mannerisms with a detestable kinsman. I loathe Van Veen" (*SO* 120).

But even when he was not speaking about *Ada*, Nabokov described matter and memory in Bergsonian terms. The most well-known line of *Speak, Memory*, "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another," sounds very much akin to *Ada*. Magic carpets or "jickers" literally defy gravity in the late novel, just as Van (and Nabokov) hopes to defy one-way time through the creative superimpositions of memory and art. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov's description of memory essentially repeats Bergson's formulations, adding a patch of color borrowed from Proust:

The Past is a constant accumulation of images, but our brain is not an ideal organ for constant retrospection and the best we can do is to pick out and try to retain those patches of rainbow light flitting through memory. The act of retention is the act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events. The bad memoirist re-touches his past, and the result is a blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger to console sentimental bereavement. The good memoirist, on the other hand, does his best to preserve the utmost truth of detail. One

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<sup>11</sup> See John Updike, "Van Loves Ada, Ada Loves Van," *New Yorker*, August 2, 1969, 67-75.

of the ways he achieves his intent is to find the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color. (*SO* 186-87)<sup>12</sup>

The artist chooses carefully the right patch of color and illustrates how selective re-combination can alchemically recreate the effect of an organic whole. We shall see how close Nabokov comes to Bergson's own words.

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Nabokov's affinity for Bergson remains a relatively neglected subject of critical study, especially and paradoxically in regard to *Ada*. Leona Toker writes that Nabokov mentioned Bergson "among the poets and novelists who were his 'top favorites' between the two World Wars," but that "it is not easy to determine whether (or to what extent) Nabokov was actually influenced by Bergson."<sup>13</sup> Toker treats *Ada* mainly in passing: she remarks on the extensive presence of Bergson in Van's *Texture of Time*, but comments: "Paradoxically, the Bergsonian idea of time that Nabokov refers to most explicitly may be the one about which he is most skeptical."<sup>14</sup> Van's treatise borrows freely from Bergson's *Time and Free Will*, but Nabokov seems to have more sympathy with Ada's pragmatic point of view: "We can know the time, we can know a time. We can never know Time" (*Ada* 563). Toker concludes that Bergson's influence on Nabokov is most evident in the Russian-American author's lingering and "tentative mysticism."

Conversely, Michael Glynn argues against the recent critical emphasis on Nabokov's symbolism, mysticism, or other worlds. Glynn suggests that Nabokov's aesthetic and ethical stances are far closer to the anti- or post-Symbolist Formalist critics and to

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<sup>12</sup> The fictional master prose-stylist Bergotte in *À la recherche* is deeply moved by a painting he sees in old age, and exclaims that he should have written all of his books just like that perfect patch of color. Nabokov chooses a moment where Proust beautifully illustrates Bergson's ideas on art and representations of reality.

<sup>13</sup> Leona Toker, "Nabokov and Bergson," in Alexandrov, *Garland Companion*, 367.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

Bergson, whom he places in a similar category: what interests Glynn is the role of art in estrangement and in shaking the veil of habit or delusion.<sup>15</sup> Though *Ada* is Nabokov's only novel to grapple so explicitly with Bergson, Glynn avoids the late works entirely, probably due to their increased interest in the supernatural (most extreme and overt in the case of the ghostly narrators of *Transparent Things*). Glynn summarizes:

[Bergson] enjoyed an enormous international vogue just before World War I... Nabokov must have discovered Bergson in a Russian setting, perhaps from the Acmeist poets or the formalist critics... Bergson offered a positive alternative to Freud among early twentieth-century speculative psychologists. If Nabokov vehemently rejects psychoanalytic conceptions of sexuality, the unconscious, the role of myth, and the very desirability of theory, he strongly endorses Bergson's concern with the lived experience of time, the enriching effects of memory, and the importance of creativity. In these three areas he somewhat arbitrarily saw Bergson as nearly identical to Proust, as the philosophical psychologist whose thought prepared for the *Recherche*.<sup>16</sup>

John Burt Foster acknowledges that there is little "detailed intertextual evidence" regarding Nabokov's early response to Bergson, so "the best indications take the form of veiled allusions or unattributed echoes. It is during the 1930s, for example, that Nabokov starts to take an interest in portraying fictive philosophers who share key traits with Bergson."<sup>17</sup> The fictional Pierre Delalande and Adam Krug from *Bend Sinister* are both potential forerunners of Van Veen. Krug's philosophy and manner of exposition are even introduced by way of a parodic-sounding simile involving a snowball and a snowman's

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<sup>15</sup> "Nabokov's fundamental Bergsonian influence is manifest not in a preoccupation with time or 'duration' per se, but with that which is a corollary of the theory of duration, namely that man has an innate predisposition toward a delusive view of the world." Glynn, *Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences*, 57. Glynn defines these "competing philosophies" in somewhat rigid and problematic terms. Wilson considered Joyce and Proust to share a broadly-understood Symbolist sensibility precisely through the influence of Bergson; many Russian and French Symbolist poets were avid Bergsonians.

<sup>16</sup> Glynn, *Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences*, 14. Glynn finds Nabokov's modernism to have a "markedly Gallic slant." Cf. Foster on Bergson and Proust's conflatibility: "Critics of the two French writers have differed on their degree of likeness, and even on whether the philosopher actually influenced the novelist. But Nabokov has made it clear that he saw them as practically identical" (*Nabokov's Art of Memory*, 86).

<sup>17</sup> Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory*, 83.

broom (*BS 46*), an allusion to Bergson's metaphorical illustrations, and even specifically to a famous simile comparing *la durée* with a rolling snowball.<sup>18</sup>

Foster draws attention to *Ada* and to Van's treatise, which proves that he is a philosopher just as the 999-line "Pale Fire" proved John Shade to be a poet. More interesting is the conclusion of Van's essay with the broken phrase: "It is like—." Despite all efforts, philosophical language must use figurative language and spatial metaphors. To end on this note is another concession to Bergson, for the French philosopher found chains of metaphor to be the only possible language for philosophy and for ungraspable concepts such as time. Literary language rather than abstract exactitude shows language at its most vivid and visual: images "direct consciousness to fuller understanding than was possible with conceptual thought."<sup>19</sup> In consequence, and as Walter Benjamin commented in the 1930s, Bergson defined the nature of lived experience, duration, and memory "in such a way that the reader is bound to conclude that only a poet can be the adequate subject of such an experience."<sup>20</sup>

We might build from Foster's remarks to claim that Nabokov consistently privileged the poet over the philosopher, and recall his formulation that Proust illustrates Bergson in color, which may well be an improvement. But what then do we make of Nabokov's philosopher heroes? For an answer, I will turn to Bergson's seminal early works, to trace in detail where Van draws from the French philosopher and where he adds his own substance and style.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 83, paraphrased from the 1903 *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 157.

### III. Bergson's *Durée* and Veen's Time

It is difficult to imagine today the popularity of Bergson's thought in the early twentieth century, or his wide-ranging influence on various international strains of modernism. Bergson's emphasis on intuition, on the individual subjective experience, and on the role of figurative language, which serves simultaneously as a conduit to the truth and as the glass pane separating us from truth, all marked a radical paradigm shift. Bergson captured and inspired the zeitgeist of the creative classes, and his ideas continued to be disseminated in the years after World War I. Isaiah Berlin describes what Bergson's lectures were like:

In Paris the servants of rich ladies used to come to the lectures in the hall in which Bergson spoke; they came an hour before and attended the lecture of, let us say, some Professor of Assyrian archaeology; he and others were very surprised to find the entire lecture hall so full of odd-looking people very unlike academics. No sooner was the lecture over than the audience rose to its feet and made room for the smart ladies who crowded in to hear Professor Bergson.<sup>21</sup>

In the late 1930s and especially after World War II, Bergson faded from view, only to be rediscovered decades later through the interventions of Derrida and Deleuze.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Bergson's most tangible heritage remains the literature of modernism, which derived from his paradigm shift the authority to openly privilege the intuitive over the analytical. The most relevant theme, as well as what enabled artistic practice, was the

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<sup>21</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Peter Halban, 1991), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Bergson's literary approach to philosophy marks one strain of continental philosophy, including Benjamin and the Frankfurt school, and later Derrida, Deleuze, and the French deconstructive critics. See Valentine Moulard-Leonard, *Bergson-Deleuze Encounters: Transcendental Experience and the Thought of the Virtual* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); and Keith Robinson, *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson: Rhizomatic Connections* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

exploration of interiority, “the nature of consciousness, and the operation of memory.”<sup>23</sup> I will very briefly overview several of Bergson’s most well-known formulations, with an eye to the phrasing as well as to the substance of his thought. As the comparison will show, Van Veen’s philosophy is built with blocks of translated and transfigured Bergson.

Bergson’s first major work was also his breakthrough. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson argued that philosophical models consistently confuse motion, or time, with space. Beginning with the Greeks, he ascribes the paradoxes of the Eleatics to the confusion between time and the space traversed; for “the interval which separates the two points is infinitely divisible,” and if time were similarly so, the interval could never be crossed—a summary of Zeno’s paradox. But the truth is that “each of Achilles’s steps is a simple indivisible act, and that, after a given number of these acts, Achilles will have passed the tortoise.”<sup>24</sup> What Zeno’s paradox leaves out when reconstructing Achilles’s movement is that space alone “can be divided and put together again any way we like.” Bergson concludes that models of time fundamentally misguide us by mis-illustrating time with metaphors appropriate only to space.

Bergson returned to the subject throughout his long career. In *The Creative Mind* he claimed that metaphysics was born out of Zeno’s arguments: “It was Zeno who, by drawing attention to the absurdity of what he called movement and change, led the philosophers—Plato first and foremost—to seek the true and coherent reality in what

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<sup>23</sup> See Glynn, *Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences*, 55. Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* called the Bergsonian moment a “revolt against reason,” marking the sharp division between this particular strain of continental philosophy and the developing Anglo-American analytic school.

<sup>24</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, repr. in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (New York: Continuum, 2002), 65-66.



does not change.”<sup>25</sup> Again Bergson stresses that Zeno’s arguments never questioned the conviction that one could divide time just as one divides space: hence “Achilles, they say, will never overtake the tortoise he is pursuing, for when he arrives at the point where the tortoise was the latter will have had time to go further, and so on indefinitely.”<sup>26</sup> Bergson argues that Western philosophy arises from the wrong response to the wrong problem, fundamentally misleading us about the nature of our experiences, and about ourselves.

Conventional metaphors for time partake of this conceptual original sin: time is a river; time is a road. The equal and opposite philosophical or religious reaction seeks the essence of the self in some indivisible abstraction. However, rather than one constant or several divisible selves perceiving fixed objects, we experience self and the world through infinitely shifting impressions. Just as Bergson seeks a different model for time, so he attempts to unify the fluctuating personality through the idea of duration, *la durée*. Later thinkers have called this conceptual breakthrough Bergson’s “Copernican

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<sup>25</sup> Bergson, *Creative Mind*, in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 255. Nabokov’s hostility to Plato may have Bergsonian roots. See Richard Rorty on the subject of Nabokovian and deconstructive or phenomenological ideas about immortality: “We are told that these tingles [of pure art and science] are the ‘highest forms of consciousness.’ That claim is ambiguous between a moral and a metaphysical interpretation. It can mean that tingles are what is most worth striving for, or it can mean the sort of thing Plato meant, that this form of consciousness is higher in that it gets us in touch with the nontemporal, in that it gets us out of the flux and into a realm beyond time and chance...But Nabokov wanted to absolutize the moral claim by backing it up with the metaphysical claim. He wanted to say that idiosyncratic imagery, of the sort he was good at, rather than the kind of generalizing ideas which Plato was good at, is what opens the gates of immortality. Art, rather than mathematics, breaks through the walls of time into a world beyond contingency.

The trouble...is that once again, Nabokov runs together literary with personal immortality. If only the former is at stake, then, indeed, Plato was wrong, and Nabokov, Heidegger and Derrida are right. If you want to be remembered by future generations, go in for poetry rather than mathematics.” Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 151.

<sup>26</sup> Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 257.

revolution,” and the idea of duration has found continued relevance in the work of late-twentieth century philosophers, for example, in Derrida’s interest in the lingering trace.<sup>27</sup>

Bergson writes, “It is the same self which perceives distinct states at first, and which, by afterwards concentrating its attention, will see these states melt into one another like the crystals of a snow-flake when touched for some time with the finger.”<sup>28</sup> He replaces the conventional metaphors of everyday speech and of Western philosophy with novel, piled-on imagery that illustrates fluctuation and identity through change. Thus history cannot be “instantaneously unfurled like a fan” but “unfolds itself gradually, as if it occupied a duration like our own. If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy nilly, wait until the sugar melts.”<sup>29</sup> The *durée* of an experience, of history, or of the individual personality can only be glimpsed through such imagery as gradually dissolving sugar and melting snowflakes. We must rely on intuition, insight, and poetry to find the figurative language that will best express how we truly interact with the world.

In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson offers an expanded formulation, turning his attention to how duration may explain the workings of the mind:

Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances...[Memory] is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer; there is not even, properly speaking, a faculty...In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earlier infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside. The cerebral mechanism is arranged just so as to drive back into the unconscious almost the whole of this past, and to admit beyond the threshold only

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<sup>27</sup> Gayatri Spivak uses the word “trace” in her translations of Derrida, for “the reader must remind himself of at least the track, even the spoor” contained in the French word *trace*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, preface to *Of Grammatology* by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xvii.

<sup>28</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 176.

that which can cast light on the present situation or further the action now being prepared—in short, only that which can give *useful* work. At the most, a few superfluous recollections may succeed in smuggling themselves through the half-open door. These memories, messengers from the unconscious, remind us of what we are dragging behind us unawares. But, even though we may have no distinct idea of it, we feel vaguely that our past remains present to us. What are we, in fact, what is our *character*, if not the condensation of the history that we have lived from our birth—nay, even before our birth, since we bring with us prenatal dispositions? Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will, and act.<sup>30</sup>

Bergson's thought offers a rich but radically different understanding of memory and the unconscious than does Freudian psychoanalysis, while similarly stressing the formative power of the past and of hidden memories. Bergson posits that the personality is nothing but the swelling accumulation of experiences, but his model allows for infinite variation and individual difference. To put it in Nabokov-inflected terms, Bergson's model accounts for the unconscious without imposing a universal myth of family romance: e.g., "bitter embryos spying on their parents' love-life."<sup>31</sup>

Nabokov notoriously held up Freud as the paradigmatic example of criminally reductive thinking.<sup>32</sup> Freud and Bergson were exact contemporaries: both responded to the era's materialism with systems of thought that sought to explain the mystery and richness of subjective experience. Yet to Nabokov, Freud appeared to "unseat man from the center of his own consciousness and hence to undermine the notion of the artist as a creature capable of consciously achieving his aesthetic ends."<sup>33</sup> For Nabokov, a work of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 20.

<sup>32</sup> As Eric Naiman puts it, "There is Freud and there are vulgar Freudians, and Freud was occasionally one of them," but the same can be said of Nabokov and vulgar Nabokovians. *Nabokov, Perversely*, 267.

<sup>33</sup> Glynn's formulation, in *Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences*, 68.

art is hardly the product of primal and unconscious forces, but rather the closest we can come to a conscious mastery of lived experience.

Here then is another way to explain Nabokov's animosity towards studies of literary influence: "influence" seems to imply unconscious imitation, rather than the triumph of creative will and intelligence through careful study, erudition, and conscious mastery. Bergson offers a rival Gallic school of psychology to that of Freud and his disciples. We might extrapolate further and guess that James Joyce may have disappointed Nabokov not only with his stylistic excesses in *Finnegans Wake*, but also with his interest in Carl Jung and the collective unconscious. Nabokov responds to this wrong turn by writing his own modernist monument, based on the psychology and philosophy of Bergson.

Indeed, Bergson stressed that we can only hope to gain permanent access to the buried past through conscious and arduous work: "We shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it...unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day."<sup>34</sup> We must learn to use and understand memory in a way that harmonizes with its fluctuating and ever-expanding nature. Here Bergson turns to the famous snowball simile: memory carries the past into the present, "continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing—rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow." While we only notice change when it grows sufficiently substantial to impose a new attitude or direction, "the truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state [of becoming] itself is nothing but change."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 171.

The goal of any meaningful, examined, and well-lived life should be the greatest possible awareness of this continual change, and the farthest-reaching understanding and overview of our past and present:

An attention to life, sufficiently powerful and sufficiently separated from all practical interest, would thus include in an undivided present the entire past history of the conscious person—not as instantaneity, not like a cluster of simultaneous parts, but as something continually present...[such] is the melody which one perceives as indivisible, and which constitutes...a perpetual present, a present which endures.

This is not a hypothesis. It happens in exceptional cases that the attention suddenly loses the interest it had in life: immediately, as though by magic, the past once more becomes present. In people who see the threat of sudden death unexpectedly before them, in the mountain climber falling down a precipice, in drowning men, in men being hanged, it seems that a sharp conversion of the attention can take place—something like a change of orientation of the consciousness which, up until then turned toward the future and absorbed by the necessities of action, suddenly loses all interest in them. That is enough to call to mind a thousand different “forgotten” details and to unroll the whole history of the person before him in a moving panorama.<sup>36</sup>

Bergson’s call for a perpetual present, best illustrated by the perpetually moving yet unified melodic line, recalls the Symbolist motto: *la musique avant tout*. The poetry of Symbolism (as well as that of many other modernist movements) seeks to dethrone abstract verbal logic in favor of an intuitive and musical poetics of change and a palimpsestic present.

In Nabokov’s *Ada*, the above passage harmonizes well with the succession of images at Lucette’s death, with Van’s convulsive inner monologues at the most fraught moments of his life, and even with Ada’s sole film performance, which captures for Van her beauty in all the stages of their love affair. Moreover, as Van and Ada’s pseudo-memoir, *Ada* subsumes these examples in an ultimate attempt to erase the border between past and present, and to fully engage with the examined life. Or taking yet another step back,

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<sup>36</sup> Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 262-3.

Nabokov invents these characters and their supposed memoir to engage in an even more grand and subtle game with the reader and the reader's experience of literature.

Bergson writes that great literature often and quite paradoxically feels "real," and that we experience the novelistic insight as personal disillusionment:

If some bold novelist, tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego, shows us under this appearance of logic a fundamental absurdity, under this juxtaposition of simple states an infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions which have already ceased to exist the instant they are named, we commend him for having known us better than we knew ourselves. This is not the case, however, and the very fact that he spreads out our feeling in a homogenous time, and expresses elements by words, shows that he in his turn is only offering us its shadow: but he has arranged this shadow in such a way as to make us suspect the extraordinary and illogical nature of the object which projects it... Encouraged by him, we have put aside for an instant the veil which we interposed between our consciousness and ourselves.<sup>37</sup>

Illusion and disillusionment depend on more manipulations and invented subjective representations of time, and yet we feel, when reading such a writer, that we have been brought "back" into our own presence. The artist is an enchanter, a weaver of gossamer deceptions, but his shadows and illusions prompt in us a genuine response.

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If Nabokov once saw *À la recherche* as a beautiful illustration of Bergsonian thought, he attempts to outdo that accomplishment both through *The Texture of Time* and in *Ada* as a whole. Van writes his treatise to "purify" his notion of time, to examine its very essence and not only its lapse. Or in his words, "I wish to caress Time":

One can be an amateur of Time, an epicure of duration. I delight sensually in Time, in its stuff and spread, in the fall of its folds, in the very impalpability of its grayish gauze, in the coolness of its continuum. I wish to do something about it; to indulge in a simulacrum of possession. I am aware that all who have tried to reach the charmed castle have got lost in obscurity or have bogged down in Space. I am also aware that Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors. (536-37)

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<sup>37</sup> Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 74-5.

Van's principal task seems to be a somewhat reductive recapitulation of Bergson's central argument in his first work *Time and Free Will*: the conceptual need to divide time from space. Van, the Bergson specialist, acknowledges his debt: "Space flutters to the ground, but Time remains between thinker and thumb, when Monsieur Bergson uses his scissors" (542). However, Van means to get even closer to the true essence of time. Laughably, he eroticizes the intellectual feat and casts Time in rather explicit feminine terms. Even the "charmed castle" that he casually throws in alludes to Donna Anna's abode in *Don Juan's Last Fling*, and thus again to the goal of sexual possession. For Van, the philosophical pursuit of time is yet another test of virility.

Several passages from Van's dense and difficult essay will serve to illustrate the parodic play with both Bergson's philosophy and his method of exposition through accumulated metaphor and simile. Van does not entirely succeed in his attempt to go beyond Bergson:

Why is it so difficult—so degradingly difficult—to bring the notion of Time into mental focus and keep it there for inspection?... It is like rummaging with one hand in the glove compartment for the road map—fishing out Montenegro, the Dolomites, paper money, a telegram—everything except the stretch of chaotic country between Ardez and Somethingsoprano, in the dark, in the rain, while trying to take advantage of a red light in the coal black, with the wipers functioning metronomically, chronometrically: the blind finger of space poking and tearing the texture of time...

Lost again. Where was I? Where am I? Mud road. Stopped car. Time is rhythm... I can listen to Time only between stresses, for a brief concave moment warily and worriedly, with 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.

The direction of Time, the ardis of Time, one-way Time, here is something that looks useful to me one moment, but dwindles the next to the level of an illusion obscurely related to the mysteries of growth and gravitation. The irreversibility of Time (which is not heading anywhere in the first place) is a very parochial affair: had our organs and orgitrons not been asymmetrical, our view of Time might have been amphitheatric and altogether grand, like ragged night and jagged mountains around a small, twinkling, satisfied hamlet. We are told that if a creature loses its teeth and

becomes a bird, the best the latter can do when needing teeth again is to evolve a serrated beak, never the real dentition it once possessed. The scene is Eocene and the actors are fossils. It is an amusing instance of the way nature cheats but it reveals as little relation to essential Time, straight or round, as the fact of my writing from left to right does to the course of my thought. (537-39)

Van's "culture of metaphors" overflows the petri dish. Bergson's fans and snowballs seem restrained compared to this baroque profusion, a bravura exposition on the pitfalls of spatial metaphor and simile. Trying to grasp time is like looking for a roadmap in the dark; the sound of time is one's own troubled circulatory system; one-way time is like gravity; and Van's own philosophical endeavors are like a bird trying to grow teeth. Or in an even more telling formulation, the ardis of time is to real Time as linear writing is to real thought.

Van pulls his primary comparisons from his immediate experience, a one-way drive through space. Even ignoring the distraction of the final target, Ada and perhaps ardor, his language is hopelessly infected with space: "I can put my Past in reverse gear, enjoy this moment of recollection" (536). He loses his way mentally and literally ("Mud road. Stopped car") and cannot escape thoughts of the roadmap, the car, his heart, or the twinkling hamlet in the jagged mountains. Not the least distraction is the ever-present possibility of death, which plays like counterpoint throughout Van's agitated alpine drive.

When he turns to analyze memory, the accumulation of the past and its persistence into the present, Van takes another crucial kernel of Bergson's philosophy and illustrates mental duration with scenes from his own life, which the reader is by now well-equipped to follow and share:

The Past, then, is a constant accumulation of images...It is now a generous chaos out of which the genius of total recall, summoned on this summer morning in 1922, can pick anything he pleases: diamonds scattered all over the parquet in 1888; a russet black-hatted beauty at a Parisian bar in 1901; a humid red rose among artificial ones



in 1883; the pensive half-smile of a young English governess, in 1880, neatly reclosing her charge's prepuce after the bedtime treat; a little girl, in 1884, licking the breakfast honey off the badly bitten nails of her spread fingers; the same, at thirty-three, confessing, rather late in the day, that she did not like flowers in vases; the awful pain striking him in the side while two children with a basket of mushrooms looked on in the merrily burning pine forest; and the startled quonk of a Belgian car, which he had overtaken and passed yesterday on a blind bend of the alpine highway. (545-46)

Though Van appears to be in earnest, he can no more help injecting obscene Veen humor and class prejudice into the mix (young governess, prepuce) than he can help exponentially increasing the accumulation of metaphors.

Van insists that Veen's time is about the essence of the Time that "stopped by me and closely attended to by my tense-willed mind," and not at all an exploration of lost time or time's lapse. However, the larger stakes of his project are precisely a denial of aging, of mortality and death. It would be "idle and evil" to confuse his project with a study of lost time, he raves: "Of course, at fifty years of age, one year seems to pass faster because it is a smaller fraction of my increased stock of existence and also because I am less often bored...But that 'quickenings' depends precisely upon one's not being attentive to Time" (540). Van's mental feats will slow the passage of time; or as he responded to a heckler attending his last lecture, who says that I shall die?

The treatise appears to end abruptly with Van's arrival in Mont Roux. He confesses that he has been wounded in the duel with the impostor Space, and notes down the time from every available conventional source: "Today is Monday, July 14, 1922, five-thirteen P.M. by my wrist watch, eleven fifty-two by my car's built-in clock, four-ten by all the timepieces in town. The author is in a confused state of exhilaration, exhaustion, expectancy and panic" (551). The future cannot be predicted and does not yet exist: all Van knows of fifty-something Ada, after seventeen years of letters and telegrams, is her

voice. Aurally, through the medium of music and melody, Van's rejection of the ardis of time seems to work:

The phone had preserved the very essence, the bright vibration, of her vocal cords, the little "leap" in her larynx, the laugh clinging to the contour of the phrase, as if afraid in girlish glee to slip off the quick words it rode. It was the timbre of their past, as if the past had put through that call, a miraculous connection ("Ardis, one eight eight six"—*comment? Non, non, pas huitante-huit—huitante-six*). Goldenly, youthfully, it bubbled with all the melodious characteristics he knew—or better say recollected, at once, in the sequence they came: that *entrain*, that whelming of quasi-erotic pleasure, that assurance and animation...

Would Van come down? She was *neveroyatno golodnaya* (incredibly hungry).

That telephone voice, by resurrecting the past and linking it up with the present, with the darkening slate-blue mountains beyond the lake, with the spangles of the sun wake dancing through the poplar, formed the centerpiece in his deepest perception of tangible time, the glittering "now" that was the only reality of Time's texture. After the glory of the summit there came the difficult descent. (554-55)

All three of Nabokov's beloved languages are present in this vital passage, which as he told interviewers was another of the earliest sparks of the novel, calling the rest into being. For one triumphant moment, Van's "deepest perception of tangible time" appears to capture effortlessly the perpetual present. The past has not been lost, the intervening years not wasted, for the glittering "now" is the only reality that matters.

The set up for Van's *visual* disappointment when the aged lovers meet is positively Proustian. But presumably the difficulty of truly and permanently capturing the perpetual present is what will eventually prompt the Veens to try and conquer time once more, this time with their memoir.

#### **IV. Anachronistic *Ada*: the Veen attack on timeliness**

As I wrote in my second chapter, Nabokov read Pushkin's narrative digressions on timeliness in *Eugene Onegin* merely as the "not-so-very-new advice to be 'young in one's youth.'" Among so many other functions, *Ada* also serves as Nabokov's attack on

all such generalizations and orderly teleologies. If *Onegin* betrays anxieties about not being on time—on levels of plot, literary fashion, or national culture—*Ada* reads as a defiant attack on conventional timeliness. Challenging common sense notions of time at every step in the search for “real” time, *Ada* celebrates the eternal and the anachronistic, the triumph of creative human will against Tyrant Time. In this section I will return to the plots and the backdrops of the novel, to see if Van’s and Bergson’s philosophies of time inform the chronological jumble already noted in my previous chapters.

The Veen timeline collapses in on itself as much as their incestuous family tree. For a start, birth and marriage dates are easily falsified to hide adultery, betrayal, or incest. *Ada*’s heroes stubbornly do everything at the wrong age and often several times over: they fall in love far too young and they love passionately into their late nineties. The repeated story-lines from one generation to the next challenge further any linear narrative trajectory: a male Veen inevitably tangles with two sisters; the less-beloved sister commits suicide clad ceremoniously in yellow and maroon; and either Van or uncle Ivan wrestles with insomnia and nightmares in the Ardis hammock. Time may be a spiral or a vicious circle, but it is certainly not a straight line.

The exceptional hero and heroine are also defined through temporal terms from the beginning: the point of their narrative is that they are like no one else, except each other. As children they are extravagantly precocious, shockingly untimely in both intellectual and erotic prowess. On one occasion their erudite chatter (doubly at the wrong time in this case, at the breakfast table) garners Marina’s complaint: “When I was your age, Ada, and my brother was *your* age, Van, we talked about croquet and ponies, and puppies, and the last *fete-d’enfants*, and the next picnic, and—oh, millions of nice normal things” (65).

But Van and Ada were never normal. Mlle. Larivière says of Ada: “She was never a baby...She could break the back of her pony before she could walk” (155). When Van and Ada meet again in 1888, both have changed but by concurrent stages, “so that their brains and senses stayed attuned and were to stay thus always, through all separations. Neither had remained the brash *Wunderkind* of 1884, but in bookish knowledge both surpassed their coevals to an even more absurd extent than in childhood” (218).

Ada and Van’s “specialness” is their best justification for a life of constant transgression on conventional morality. Ada’s proud summary of their love, eighty years later, serves as a far better blurb than the book’s last and evidently non-Veen paragraphs:

No point would there be, if we left out, for example, the little matter of prodigious individual awareness and young genius, which makes, in some cases, of this or that particular gasp an *unprecedented unrepeatable event* in the continuum of life or at least a thematic anathema of such events in a work of art, or a denouncer’s article. The details that shine through or shade through...convey the fact, the fact, the fact—that among those billions of brilliant couples in one cross section of what you will allow me to call spacetime (for the convenience of reasoning), one couple is a unique super-imperial couple, *sverhimperskaya cheta*, in consequence of which (to be inquired into, to be painted, to be denounced, to be put into music, or to the question and death, if the decade has a scorpion tail after all) the particularities of their love-making influence in a special unique way two long lives and a few readers, those pensive reeds, and their pens and mental paintbrushes...the detail is all...*that* has to be heard, smelled and seen through the transparency of death and ardent beauty. (71)

Young genius, long lives, and an unprecedented unrepeatable event in spacetime: the super-imperial couple refuses to belong or to be defined by any ordinary “when.” Not unlike Humbert’s defense of nympholepsy on grounds of artistic sensibility and genuine love, Van and Ada’s defense rests on whether they are able to convince the pensive readers that their love is a unique and exceptional event, that cannot be judged according to any external standards. It can only be made into art: the particular and the detail is all.

What the Veens more subtly suggest throughout their memoir is that “Vaniada” are divided halves of the same being. Their blue and red edits include a short tiff on the subject: “Sorry, no—if people remembered the same they would not be different people. That’s-how-it-went. But we are not ‘different’!” (120). We visualize Narcissus, but they hint that they are more like one of Aristophanes’s androgynes from the *Symposium*, only very beautiful and fluent in Russian, English, and French.<sup>38</sup> The troubling remainder in this vision is Lucette, who repeats black-and-white Ada’s beauty but in color. Ada’s sister-in-law even comments tastelessly that dead Lucette’s “prettiness seemed to complement Ada’s, the two halves forming together something like perfect beauty, in the Platonic sense” (518). When Dasha Vineland says such a thing, it comes across as pretentious nonsense. But the Veens are far more alluring and persuasive in their rhetoric.

After a grim and lonely adulthood that the novel omits, “real time” resumes. Van and Ada reunite in late middle age and triumphantly refuse to grow old. Overcoming the years and the distance between them, they laugh at a monolingual Englishman breakfasting nearby (“That’s not bananas, sir. That’s *ananas*, pineapple juice”): “Young Van smiled back at young Ada. Oddly, that little exchange at the next table acted as a kind of delicious release” (557). The past, they instinctively realize, is not entirely lost.

Even in the last brief section of the book, Van remains chronologically defiant: “I, Van Veen, salute you, life, Ada Veen, Dr. Lagosse, Stepan Nootkin, Violet Knox, Ronald Oranger. Today is my ninety-seventh birthday... This Part Five is not meant as an epilogue; it is the true introduction of my ninety-seven percent true, and three percent likely, *Ada or Ardor, a family chronicle*” (567). Against all probability, the Veens have

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<sup>38</sup> *Ada* repeatedly hints that the Veens are either mirror reflections of each other, identical in color but with opposite birthmarks on their left and right hands respectively; or two halves of the same spiritual being, as in Aristophanes’s myth explaining the source of erotic longing in Plato’s *Symposium*.

enjoyed over forty cloudless years together, beating many a “normal” happy couple. At the very end one or both suffer tremendously: in the last few pages the words “time” and “pain” become interchangeable. By now indistinguishable, the Veens insist that this epilogue is only an introduction, and their novel remains a cry against death. Not unlike Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray and his ageless portrait, the attractively demonic Van and Ada try to conflate literary with metaphysical immortality by dying into their book: “If our time-racked, flat-lying couple ever intended to die they would die, as it were, *into* the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of its blurb” (587).<sup>39</sup>

But I have already described the banal poetry of the blurb that follows. Several paragraphs before the final period, it is clear that the “I” of the book has in fact died in the book. By now both Veens are in Eden or Hades, and Oranger has taken over the manuscript. The arrow or Ardis of time has been hurtling towards its final destination from the beginning of the story. Only Zeno’s paradox could have saved our lovers; only sleight of logic can keep the arrow and target apart. Whether they intend to or not, Van and Ada must die. However, Nabokov seems to grant their wish to die into their book: the Russian pun on *ad* (“hades”), whether it turns out to be a pagan Hades or Christian Hell, is all too apropos. The moralist may rest assured that the Veens are in eternal flames; the sensualist may imagine a pagan paradise. The author escapes with a shrug.

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<sup>39</sup> Rorty writes that Nabokov often tries to tie in a “highly unfashionable concern for metaphysical immortality together with the more respectable notion of literary immortality...He is sure that there is a connection between the immortality of the work and of the person who creates the work—between aesthetics and metaphysics, to put it crudely. But, unsurprisingly, he is never able to say what it is” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 150). In *Ada*, Nabokov ascribes just such a conflation of aesthetics and metaphysics to the Veens, distancing himself in the process.

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The Veens' untimely lives hardly constitute *Ada's* only chronological defiance: their entire planet is temporally mad. It is still the nineteenth century on Antiterra or Démonia when the story opens; the twin planets of Terra and Antiterra are off-sync by between fifty years to a century, although the temporal gap shifts continuously. The conceit allows several historical times to coexist and blur together, a parallel to the Veens' collapsed timeline and family tree.

The unexplained L disaster simultaneously causes and curses Terra, makes electricity an obscene word, and drives many of Antiterra's sensitive souls to madness or high art.<sup>40</sup> What hints the Antiterrans have of Terra, a scrambled reflection of our world, only further highlights the chronological disarray:

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. (18)

In practical terms, this means that Nabokov is free to conflate duels and fancy sports-cars, airplanes and sleighs, phone-calls with dramatic horseback arrivals. Antiterra operates

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<sup>40</sup> Aleksey Sklyarenko (NABOKOV-L April 2004) suggests a model for the L catastrophe in "La Pointe," a 1900s Russian science fiction story by Konstantin Sluchevsky, in which a similar disaster is caused by the lack of love. It is entirely possible that Nabokov borrowed the bare bones of his stories from pulp sources, as Sklyarenko and Michael Maar suggest. To me it seems that Nabokov had a Shakespearean talent for transforming pedestrian narratives, adding poetry and truth by removing the motivation or expositions.

according to Veen's time and chronologies elide, though most readers glide past, buoyed by Nabokov's super-saturated prose.<sup>41</sup>

Given Nabokov's earlier novels, we might well wonder if Antiterra exists at all. Not content with solipsistic love and language games, have the Veens invented their own planet of love, an alternate Venus? One might even conjecture that the Veens' anguish and guilt over Lucette prompts them to invent the L disaster, and that literary Fate bifurcates as a result.<sup>42</sup> In this reading, Van's Antiterra is Kinbote's Zembla, only far grander in scope: Kinbote invented a kingdom, but imaginative Van can run a planet.

Tell-tale slips and admissions of other possible realities included in the novel suggest that *Ada* does in fact deconstruct its own triumphant narrative:

Demonian reality dwindled to a casual illusion. Actually, we had passed through all that. Politicians, dubbed Old Felt and Uncle Joe in forgotten comics, had really existed. Tropical countries meant, not only Wild Nature Reserves but famine, and death, and ignorance, and shamans, and agents from distant Atomsk. Our world *was*, in fact, mid-twentieth century. Terra convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake, the bullies and beasts that Germany inevitably generates when fulfilling her dreams of glory. Russian peasants and poets had not been transported to Estotiland, and the Barren Grounds, ages ago—they were dying, at this very moment, in the slave camps of Tartary. (582)

Bergson spoke of the way that novelistic illusion could create in the reader or sense of disillusionment and of real discovery. Here the oddly contradictory words about Demonian reality might serve to remind us that it does not really matter: whether Antiterra is Van's creation or not, it is certainly Nabokov's.

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<sup>41</sup> Boyd finds one such metonymic slide in the scene where Van makes his way from the train station to Ardis and back again; without exchanging his ride for a mount, Van suddenly appears on horseback (Boyd, *Nabokov's "Ada,"* 11).

<sup>42</sup> At least three times in the novel, Van is aware that in some other world or story, he has just died. With an eye to Nabokov's 1930 novel *The Eye*, we could read what follows each incident as *postmortem* delusion.



By inventing a planet powered by ardor and literature, and by locating the active part of the Veens' young lives in the nineteenth century and skipping over their years together until the very end in the late 1960s, Nabokov has managed to cover a hundred years while avoiding the real tragedies of the twentieth century. Except for glimpses of real history seen through a distorting mirror, the Veen narrative has, believably and consistently within its own internal logic, broken free of history.

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I will end this section by turning to the “texture of time” suggestively reflected in two embedded works of art, before turning in the subsequent section to *Ada*'s larger structural and stylistic play with time. The anachronistic conflations that Van favors are inevitably those that capture the duration of the past in the present, using ghosts and echoes (or traces) to create a perpetual present, at least in art. What Van ultimately hopes to do with his memoir is akin to the magic of cinema.

In fact, another mysterious double or authorial stand-in, namely V.V., the brilliant French director Victor Vitry, greatly improves on Van's early anonymous novel *Letters from Terra* by taking wild and unauthorized liberties with its temporal backdrop:

Vitry dated Theresa's visit to Antiterra as taking place in 1940, but 1940 by the Terranean calendar, and about 1890 by ours. The conceit allowed certain pleasing dips into the modes and manners of our past (did you remember that horses wore hats—yes, hats—when heat waves swept Manhattan?) and gave the impression—which physics-fiction literature had much exploited—of the capsulist traveling backward in terms of time. Philosophers asked nasty questions, but were ignored by the wishing-to-be-guiled moviegoers. (580)

Vitry's conceit is much like Nabokov's own, but technically somewhat easier to pull off in the medium of film than in linear prose. Conversely, we might remember Kubrick's 1962 trailer: “How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?”

Nabokov's narrator-protagonists often have a peculiar relationship to time, or an exaggerated time-pathology that expresses itself in disturbing erotic obsessions. Humbert's moral and philosophical failure arises from his desire to freeze time. Humbert's nymphets inhabit an enchanted island whose borders are the ages of nine and fourteen (time mapped as space, once more); he fantasizes about retiring with a self-perpetuating breed of lolitas; and even after his alleged redemption, he wishes that the children he hears playing in the distance would "never grow up."<sup>43</sup>

Van Veen's chrono-erotic obsessions are more complicated. On board the trans-Atlantic liner with Lucette, Van accidentally catches Ada's only real film role in *Don Juan's Last Fling*. This film too shares much with *Ada* the novel, and "reads" as a parodic collage of Byron, Pushkin, Merimée, Cervantes, and Nabokov-masquerading-as-Borges (yet another retort to critics eager to see similarities in their work) by a second brilliant director, Yuzlik. When he recognizes Ada, Van's reaction speaks volumes:

The main picture had now started... On the way to the remote castle where the difficult lady, widowed by his sword, has finally promised him a long night of love in her chaste and chilly chamber, the aging libertine nurses his potency by spurning the advances of a succession of robust belles. A *gitana* predicts to the gloomy cavalier that before reaching the castle he will have succumbed to the wiles of her sister, Dolores, a dancing girl (lifted from Osberg's novella, as was to be proved in the ensuing lawsuit). She also predicted something to Van, for even before Dolores came out of the circus tent to water Juan's horse, Van knew who she would be.

In the magic rays of the camera, in the controlled delirium of ballerina grace, ten years of her life had glanced off and she was again that slip of a girl *qui n'en porte pas* (as he had jested once to annoy her governess by a fictitious Frenchman's mistranslation): a remembered triviality that intruded upon the chill of his present emotion with the jarring stupidity of an innocent stranger's asking an absorbed voyeur for directions in a labyrinth of mean lanes.

... Terrible? Wrong? She was absolutely perfect, and strange, and poignantly familiar. By some stroke of art, by some enchantment of chance, the few brief scenes she was given formed a perfect compendium of her 1884 and 1888 and 1892

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<sup>43</sup> Fittingly, Humbert's precursor in the 1939 Russian-language novella *The Enchanter* wears a watch with no hands, a recurring motif throughout the story.

looks...It is no longer another man's Dolores, but a little girl twisting an aquarelle brush in the paint of Van's blood, and Donna Anna's castle is now a bog flower.

The Don rides past three windmills, whirling black against an ominous sunset, and saves her from the miller...She fingers voluptuously the jeweled pommel of his sword, she rubs her firm girl belly against his embroidered tights, and all at once the grimace of a premature spasm writhes across the poor Don's expressive face...

Van, however, did not understand until much later (when he saw—*had* to see; and then see again and again—the entire film, with its melancholy and grotesque ending in Donna Anna's castle) that what seemed an incidental embrace constituted the Stone Cuckold's revenge. (488-89)

Decades later, Van's treatise on time still draws from *Don Juan's Last Fling* to cast elusive Time as Donna Anna's castle. The aging libertine Van will fail in his philosophical conquest as predicted. More immediately, Ada's sole film performance distracts Van from Lucette, seated next to him in full color, and prompts her suicide.

Even more than Vitry's anachronistic portrayal of Terra, Yuzlik's film offers a wonderful parallel to *Ada* as a whole. For Van at least, if not for general audiences, the film creates an apotheosis of time, an enchanted moving collage that captures Ada in all the stages of their love affair. The beauty of the past endures and haunts the perpetual present—this must be how a bewildered scholar of Bergson experiences love.

These commercial films deftly achieve what Van will devote his life to recreating in prose, for film has a different relationship to and existence in time. First of all (and perhaps especially appealing for Nabokov), a director has far more control over the viewer's temporal experience than does an author over his reader. Film also has the simultaneous ability to convey many things at once in composite images, and yet to move and to create a complex narrative in time. It is no accident that Bergson's popularity coincided with the birth of the new medium, which quickly achieved a fetish-status in the early twentieth-century as the medium best equipped to reflect the modern era. (Another of Bergson's most famous analogies suggested that the intellect operates like the film

projector to offer a simulacrum of real duration: “Cinematography can provide us with a plausible impression of movement by stringing together static images and animating them. However, we are not experiencing motion itself but immobile images, rendered mobile in order to produce an abstraction of motion.”<sup>44</sup>) Film offered new possibilities for a synthesis of the arts, but also for a new experience of time, for it is experienced as change or duration while simultaneously relying on the visual and on space.

Van’s enchanted response to Ada, to their love story, or even to his own novels as “captured” on film, contrasts sharply with his horror at Kim Beauharnais’s photo-album.<sup>45</sup> Kim’s utilitarian photographs arrests time primitively and falsely: Van’s violent response is as much of a reaction to bad art as to blackmail. There is something of the vengeful Apollo flaying Marsyas in Van’s ritualistic blinding of the false visual artist with Proust’s alpenstock—or at least, this is how Van wishes his actions to be read. Yet he nevertheless muses that an early erotic romp with Ada and Lucette might “have been filmed rather entertainingly had snoopy Kim the kitchen photo-fiend possessed the necessary apparatus” (205). Van too lacks the necessary apparatus: like Humbert Humbert he too has “only words to play with,” so he responds to Beauharnais’s snapshots with a memoir.<sup>46</sup> But he learns from these entertaining films how to weave together temporal layers, to montage, and to double-expose—only in prose.

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<sup>44</sup> Given here in Glynn’s translation and paraphrase (*Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences*, 72).

<sup>45</sup> The third film in *Ada* is yet another adaptation, this time of Mlle. Larivière’s *Enfants Maudits*, a melodramatic incestuous love story and yet another alternate version of Van and Ada’s memoir. Nabokov must have also have in mind Jean Cocteau’s incest-driven novel *Les Enfants terribles* (1929), and Jean-Pierre Melville’s film adaptation (1950).

<sup>46</sup> Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 32.

## V. Anachronistic *Ada* Part Two: Van and Ada's Metanovel

Van and Ada's climactic final meeting illustrates the aims and difficulties inherent in Van's ideas about time, and ultimately makes possible *Ada* the book. After the brief euphoria of hearing Ada's lovely youthful telephone voice, Van nearly loses her forever. The "ravage and outrage of age deplored by poets" humiliates them both. Conventional time, and the utterly ordinary and inescapable passage of years, looks poised to conquer. As for so many literary lovers, by the time their stars align, it appears to be too late.<sup>47</sup> Van's *Texture of Time* seemed to end with triumphant arrival at Ada's charmed castle, if not quite the castle of Time; now we realize that the essay was only interrupted. Van resumes his work. Their brief and sad encounter was only another intermission, a brief moment of intensely experienced time in the ordinary fabric of life. He sees Ada off and returns to his room alone.

Had they lived together these seventeen wretched years, they would have been spared the shock and the humiliation; their aging would have been a gradual adjustment, as imperceptible as Time itself... Let us recapitulate.

Physiologically the sense of Time is a sense of continuous becoming, and if "becoming" has a voice, the latter might be, not unnaturally, a steady vibration; but for Log's sake, let us not confuse Time with Tinnitus, and the seashell hum of duration with the throb of our blood. Philosophically, on the other hand, Time is but memory in the making. In every individual life there goes on from cradle to deathbed the gradual shaping and strengthening of that *backbone of consciousness*, which is the Time of the strong. "To be" means to know one "has been." "Not to be" implies the only "new" kind of (sham) time: the future. I dismiss it. Life, love, libraries, have no future.

Time is anything but the popular triptych: a no-longer existing Past, the durationless point of the Present, and a "not-yet" that may never come. No. There are only two panels. The Past (ever-existing in my mind) and the Present (to which my mind gives duration and, therefore, reality)...the Tortoise of the Past will never overtake the Achilles of the future, no matter how we parse distances on our cloudy blackboards. (560-61)

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<sup>47</sup> I have in mind Onegin and Tatiana, but also Frédéric and Mme. Arnoux in *L'Éducation sentimentale*.

Van reverses the positions of Achilles and the tortoise, and his logic appear a bit cloudy due to the potent sleeping pill he has just taken, but we can follow the argument still fundamentally familiar from Bergson. The future is but a “hypothetical present” based on our experiences, but hope can do no more about the future than can “our regrets change the Past.” Every moment brings an “infinity of branching possibilities.” One possible future, so ardently hoped for during Van’s alpine drive, vanished over the initial awkward dinner with Ada. He peers over his balcony to the inviting pavement below. The reader recognizes the parallels with Lucette’s swan-dive, and this is at least the third time that Van has contemplated suicide in the novel, but all is averted. Ada has returned and is waiting for Van on the balcony below. Love and the present tense take over, excluding the reader for the next forty years, or until the Veens finish *Ada* the book.

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The duration of the past into the present; its accessibility through memory and art; and the individual’s freedom to choose and shape a wholly novel and unpredictable future, are the keys to *Ada*’s aesthetics. Van’s and Ada’s metanovel means to bring these principles to literary life.

Not only in ear-trumpet age—in what Van called their dot-dot-dotage—but even more so in their adolescence (summer, 1888), did they seek a scholarly excitement in establishing the past evolution (summer, 1884) of their love, the initial stages of its revelations, the freak discrepancies in gappy chronographies... They had to rely on oral tradition, on the mutual correction of common memories. “And do you remember, *a tî pomnish’, et te souviens-tu*” (invariably with that implied codetta of “and,” introducing the bead to be threaded in the torn necklace) became with them, in their intense talks, the standard device for beginning every other sentence. Calendar dates were debated, sequences sifted and shifted, sentimental notes compared, hesitations and resolutions passionately analyzed. (109)

How does their novel fool the ardis of time on structural levels?

Nabokov studied closely what he called the Pursuit device in Pushkin's *Onegin*, comparing drafts, revisions and rewritings, and using the painterly term *pentimento* to describe the effects of the verbal artist's temporal layering. On many occasions he noticed an earlier version, or an earlier stylistic choice, shining through the final copy. Nabokov's monumental *Commentary* carefully reinserted these earlier drafts and discarded stanzas. And of course, the serial publication of Pushkin's novel over time also created a constant sense of change and growth. Thankfully, Nabokov remarks, Pushkin was methodical about dating his manuscripts.<sup>48</sup>

*Ada* in turn abounds with fictive temporal layers: the story of the Veens' childhood is prefaced by their parents' romance, and by the initial genealogies and family tree. Many intervals of Van and Ada's separation are left out entirely or briefly retold through subsequent meetings. In the last ten years of his life, Van writes the bulk of the memoir, and then at some point dictates it to his secretary. And then both Veens edit the manuscript, leaving much of the text littered with their last annotations. Finally, Oranger marries Van's secretary and introduces changes of his own, most noticeably and comically in the final section, where he deletes the exact amount of his wife's salary and whatever followed Van's connoisseurial observations: "Violet Knox [now Mrs. Ronald Oranger. Ed.], born in 1940, came to live with us in 1957. She was (and still is—ten years later) an enchanting English blonde with doll eyes, a velvet carnation and a tweed-cupped little rump [.....]" (576). As a result, *Ada* reads as a forged *pentimento*, complete with the illusion of many temporal levels. The closer we look, the more we realize that sections,

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<sup>48</sup> Compare with Van's admission, "Ought to begin dating every page of the manuscript: Should be kinder to my unknown dreamers" (122).

paragraphs, and even individual sentences contain multiple layers of invention and intervention, each with their own chronology.

Critics have noticed and attempted to interpret this complex and very Nabokovian effect in various ways. Cancogni finds the precision of *Ada*'s timing one of its most remarkable characteristics. Readers are presented not only with "the exact temporal frame of the story," ranging through the genealogical information to include "two hundred and sixty-eight years, though only ninety-seven and ninety-five of these are respectively spanned by its hero and heroine," but also with the time elapsed during its narration, a decade spanning from 1957 to 1967 and that includes "several revisions, rewritings, annotations, and a blurb."<sup>49</sup> Many years of Ada and Van's life together are in fact thus subtly included in the novel, subsumed by the narration of the early years, and glimpsed through the edits and parenthetical comments made by the aging lovers. If many early critics of *Ada* initially found the novel to be structureless or uncontrolled, Cancogni concludes that in the end, *Ada* is "all story."<sup>50</sup>

One crucial side effect of *Ada* being "all story" is that it begins to feel like all present tense. Every temporal layer becomes simultaneously present to the reader. The magic of *Ada* lies in its attempt to prove rather than preach the atemporality of art. In retrospect, the most significant emotional moments in *Ada*, such as Lucette's death, turn out to be also the densest treatments of narrative time.<sup>51</sup> I have already discussed the temporal layering of Lucette's suicide and Van's dictation in my previous chapter, but Lucette also

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<sup>49</sup> See Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 61. I am much indebted to her astute handling of *Ada*'s temporal games, especially her treatment of complex narration, *déjà-vu*, and the temporal elides of metaphor and simile. Cancogni considers such literary devices in Nabokov to show his debt to Proust. I would only slightly disagree to suggest that for *Ada* Nabokov went to the source, drawing directly from Bergson.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



haunts the novel through *déjà-vus*, which further refute linear narrative progression. Just as in movies “stills or freezes consist of a series of innumerable and identical frames,” *déjà-vus* in prose create in the reader a sense of “temporal suspension, eternity, that is to say, life imitating death, or art.”<sup>52</sup>

As Boyd has also noticed, Van is haunted from childhood on by the image of a beautiful redhead in black, drinking alone at a bar.<sup>53</sup> Many years later, in their fateful Paris encounter before the trans-Atlantic cruise, that image finally coalesces into a flesh and blood Lucette, hoping to run into Van. Through another twist in time, Lucette is also the lady who hands adolescent Van his coach upon first arrival to Ladore: “Suddenly a hackney coach drove up to the platform and a red-haired lady, carrying her straw hat and laughing at her own haste, made for the train and just managed to board it before it moved. So Van agreed to use the means of transportation made available to him by a chance crease in the texture of time, and seated himself in the old calèche” (34).<sup>54</sup> Recurring visions and glimpses of Lucette, echoes of her favorite painters, and of her vivid colors (red and green; the yellow and maroon of her and Aqua’s suicide garb) all enforce a foreboding sense of eternal return. The Veens may be already in the depths of a very subtle hell—the most unfortunate kind of perpetual present.

Even the basic building blocks of Nabokov’s language bring together different temporalities through the convergence inherent in metaphor and simile. Many metaphors

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>53</sup> The figure echoes Blok’s “Stranger,” Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster, and a clever *New Yorker* advertisement all at once. See <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada15aft.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> While Boyd pays much attention to Lucette and to the way “Nabokov takes advantage of our fluctuating attention and our ignorance of horse-drawn carriages” to rapidly change Van’s modes of transportation on the way to Ardis, he appears unsure what to make of this particular planted redhead. See: <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/ada15ann.htm>.

juxtapose different temporal layers, but in *The Texture of Time* especially, Van uses recognizable elements from earlier in the novel to form the key metaphors of his philosophical treatise. For example Van writes: “If now, with some poor scraps of teased-out knowledge related to the colored contents of the Past, we shift our view and regard it simply as a coherent reconstruction of elapsed events...we can indulge in an easier game with the light and shade of its avenues” (547). The light and shade of time’s avenues refer back to Ada’s games in Ardis Park.<sup>55</sup>

Retrospectively, we realize that Nabokov lingered over the light and shade games in order to make this particular “memory” stick in the reader’s mind. The striking metaphor that results utilizes shadow and light, almost shorthand indexes to visual beauty, to highlight the aesthetic pursuit of memory in purest terms. Meanwhile, Van highlights the verbal texture by emphasizing such simultaneous memories and metaphors possible in language, that most fluid medium. We have moved far beyond a linear progression of meaning in writing, to a densely textured world imaginable only in four dimensions.

## **VI. Zeno’s Paradox and quotation marks once more**

The most astonishing index to Bergson and to philosophies of time in *Ada*, however, is the over-all structure of the novel, and its breakdown into five parts of receding size. All of *Ada* appears to be structured as an allusion, homage, or refutation of Zeno’s paradox. Part One (323 pages) is approximately half the total novel, Part Two (118 pages) is close to one fourth, Part Three (84 pages) about one eighth, Part Four (31 pages) one sixteenth, and Part Five (22 pages) not far from a brief thirty-secondth. Even the appended “Notes by Vivian Darkbloom” in subsequent editions fit the pattern of

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<sup>55</sup> See Cancogni, *Mirage in the Mirror*, 144.

diminishing returns, taking up only sixteen pages in the regressive sequence—and proving that the pattern is Nabokov’s and not Van’s.

Once again, the Eleatic philosopher’s most famous paradox is alternately illustrated by Achilles’s race with the tortoise, or by the arrow that never reaches its goal. In either case, the crux of the paradox is that the arrow will always remain halfway between its previous position and the target. The Greek word for arrow is *Ardis*, like the name of the Veen estate, as Van points out during an early game of *Flavita* (Scrabble on Antiterra). He toys with the name throughout. Darkbloom’s notes remind us that “*ardis*: arrow” (655), glossing Van’s casual reference to the “the *ardis* of time” (538). *Ardis Hall* is a Romantic New World Eden, paradise lost, a manor house built from great novels, and the setting for Van’s first two liaisons with Ada. When they reunite, he jokes that the only arrow that always remains in flight is the one that reached its goal. And when he first considers writing a memoir about their life and love, the title that he proposes is *Ardis*.

The entire novel thus forms an immense compositional allusion to *Zeno*, and through *Zeno*’s paradox, to the philosophy of Bergson. *Ada*’s seductive plot is the *ardis*-arrow, flying towards or reaching its target, depending on whether one accepts Van Veen’s philosophical and artistic conclusions or not. Part Four, where Van elaborates on his ideas about time while speeding towards Ada, only shows a part for the whole. The entire novel depicts Van and Ada speeding towards death. Once we grasp this structural play, Van’s arrows and *ardises* fall into place. While critics have noticed that there is something odd about *Ada*’s structure, many have attributed the way that the action speeds up to Nabokov’s lack of interest in or control over his text.<sup>56</sup> (In this, *Ada*’s harshest

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<sup>56</sup> Appel notes the regressive sequence, but does not go further to make the connection to *Zeno* or Bergson, or explain the significance of such a temporal structure for Veen’s Time or *la durée*: “Ada is almost two

reviews resemble those of Pushkin's *Onegin* a century and a half earlier.) But on the contrary, few other novels exhibit any similar degree of obsessive control.<sup>57</sup>

What does this imply for the Veens, and for Van's philosophy of time? Despite his Bergson scholarship, Van hopes to postpone death and the end of his memoir indefinitely. If the Veen story could continue to be told in shorter and shorter chapters, perhaps this sleight of hand would work. But Bergson was right after all, and life—or novels—cannot quite be subdivided in the same way as space. At some definite point in time, the Veens die, doomed according to Van's own logic and despite his florid and bewildering eloquence.

Nabokov the author may be imposing his final word: this exquisitely controlled narrative structure is ultimately in *his* hands and not Van Veen's. According to *Ada's* central conceit, Van composes the story of his life, dictates it to Violet, and edits much of the first part with Ada's help. But like Proust with *À la recherche*, Van dies before completing his project and leaves a "rough masterpiece" behind, with elements in place that demonstrate his loss of control. The ultimate mastermind remains Nabokov, who stages every false layer and clever, signifying structure of the entire monumental illusion.

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I began this chapter with the suggestion that Nabokov maintains some distance from his character Van Veen, despite their conflation in the reader's mind as the implied author or authors of *Ada*. Marcel in *À la recherche* is not quite Proust, and Pushkin's lyric

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times as long as any previous Nabokov novel. Although its highly allusive first half constitutes a coherently organized Museum of the Novel (Austen to *Ada*), an array of the exhausted possibilities any practitioner must now confront, the second half of the book poses too many problems...*Ada* is often undermined by impossibly hermetic and gratuitous encrustations" (*Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, 48).

<sup>57</sup> Boyd extrapolates to claim that "far from exhibiting any failure of control *Ada* is not only one of the most morally stringent of novels but is perhaps the most rigorously planned" (Boyd, *Nabokov's "Ada,"* ix).

persona in *Onegin* is not quite the author. However, and unlike either Byron or Chateaubriand, Pushkin did something more complex with his characters, granting them certain aspects of his own style and then using them as straw poets or foils to show his own artistic maturation. Ultimately, Nabokov does something similar with Van in *Ada*. While Van the philosopher reads as a parody of Bergson and perhaps a parody of a modernist, Nabokov subsumes, exorcises, and moves past those “influences” with *Ada*. He tries to comprehend, to illustrate in an original fashion, and finally to outdo the philosopher who was a root source for both Joyce and Proust.

The most poignant experiment with time to emerge out of *Ada* is one with literary tradition itself. While Van tries to make sense of his life through accumulated personal memories, Nabokov compiles memories of literature. *Ada*’s allusions, in this reading, are the memories of prose fiction itself: the novel form dreams about its own past.

As I have attempted to demonstrate in earlier chapters, *Ada*’s chronology toys with two centuries of the novel. When Van first sights Ardis, “the romantic mansion appeared on the gentle eminence of old novels” (35). His love for Ada repeats the common literary trope of recognition: even at fourteen, love can only be remembered or regained, for it is based on earlier literature. Part One of *Ada* especially teems with novelistic signposts: Van and Ada “met in the passage, and would have kissed at some earlier stage of the Novel’s Evolution in the History of Literature” (96); “They had one moment to plan things, it was all, historically speaking, at the dawn of the novel which was still in the hands of parsonage ladies and French academicians, so such moments were precious” (127). But listen to how Nabokov explains his own strategy: as Van procures for Ada all the hitherto forbidden masterpieces of the Ardis library, we are told that it “promised a

long idyll of bibliolatry; it might have become a chapter in one of the old novels on its own shelves; a touch of parody gave its theme the comic relief of life” (137).

These self-referential generic markers have several fascinating effects. We are familiar with the conventional illusion of greater realism that comes from depicting dissonance between earlier literature and the characters’ own experiences: Sentimentally-trained Tatiana or young Marcel misunderstand life and love because they have read too many novels, and so Pushkin or Proust seem the more real. However, in Nabokov the technique doubles and triples until it becomes a parody and has the opposite result: so much literary self-referentiality creates a *mise-en-abyme* effect and a special sense of literary timelessness. Rather than feeling that “thus things really are,” the reader concludes, “thus things are in literature, which really is another world.” But at that very moment, paradoxically, things are no longer so in literature at all.

I have suggested that *Ada* marks the most ambitious moment in Nabokov’s career. The embedded philosophy of time proves it: Van’s philosophy allows Nabokov to attempt a synthetic treatise on memory, time, and the novel, on cultural tradition and dreams of literary immortality. By making Van a parody of Bergson and of the modernist sensibility, Nabokov writes his layer-cake and mocks it too. The themes and motifs that emerged from Romanticism, and from the two centuries that Nabokov considers his own, end here on a heap. To many readers of Nabokov, *Ada* is the book that feels like his final word, despite the fact that he published two (and a half) more novels. *Ada* reads as the last modernist masterpiece, if a masterpiece in quotation marks, and a terribly self-conscious monument to the twentieth century. These last two chapters speak to Nabokov’s own anxieties and manifest ambivalence in the project: he is almost childishly

careful to add, “or so Van Veen says,” after each of *Ada*’s most ambitious and audacious claims. But is this not Nabokov resisting closure and a final authorial stance, just like Pushkin in *Onegin*? The result is similarly new and strange, and perhaps opens as many new possibilities for a subsequent tradition as it seems to close.

## Chapter Six

### Nabokov's Words and Moving Images

Все это живописец плавный  
 передо мною развернул,  
 и, кажется, совсем недавно  
 в лицо мне этот ветер дул,  
 изображенный им в летучих  
 осенних листьях, зыбких тучах,  
 и плыл по набережной гул,  
 во мгле колокола гудели—  
 собора медные качели...

Какой там двор знакомый есть,  
 какие тумбы! Хорошо бы  
 туда перешагнуть, пролезть,  
 там постоять, где спят сугробы  
 и плотно сложены дрова,  
 или под аркой, на канале,  
 где нежно в каменном овале  
 синеют крепость и Нева.

—Vladimir Nabokov, 1926  
 “Ut pictura poesis”<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Beyond Inbreeding Literary Masterpieces

It has become another critical commonplace to stress the visual in Nabokov's verbal art. In his youth, Nabokov had aspired to become a landscape artist, and throughout his life, he stressed the visual orientation of his imagination. One of the most famous of synaesthete-writers, he shares that honor with Proust, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud—

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<sup>1</sup> I give the last two stanzas here. Nabokov dedicated the poem to his early drawing master Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, after seeing his exhibition in Berlin in 1926. “All this the smoothly stroking painter/in front of me unfolded, and/I had the sense that only lately/this very wind my face had fanned/which he'd depicted by the flying/autumn leaves, by the untidy clouds,/and down the quay a humming flowed,/the bells in the penumbra dinned—/the cathedral's bronzen swings...//What a familiar courtyard stands nearby,/what stony posts! If I could only/step across, clamber inside,/stand for a while where snow-banks slumber, and where logs lie, compactly stacked,/or 'neath the arch on the canal,/where on the stony oval, tinted blue,/shimmer fortress and Neva.” Trans. Dmitri Nabokov, in *Nabokovian* 51 (Fall 2009): 28-31.



although the two great French poets may have championed synaesthetic visions in “*Voyelles*” (1857) and “*Correspondances*” (1871) respectively, without otherwise experiencing color-memory. In interviews, Nabokov often insisted, “I don’t think in any language. I think in images” (SO 14). He even suggested that his oeuvre might be better conceptualized in terms of visual art, describing the desired final effect of his novels as something like viewing “a picture within a picture: *The Artist’s Studio* by Van Bock” (SO 73). In numerous novels and poems, including the paradigmatic “*Ut pictura poesis*” that opens this chapter, Nabokov spoke of “stepping across” and into the alluring timeless images that he so admired.

In a sense, he did find ways to step across the painted border. His writings, from the earliest Russian-language works to the final fragments of *The Original of Laura*, are replete with paintings and artist protagonists or antagonists, memorably including Pnin’s genius surrogate son Victor Wind and *Laughter in the Dark*’s ominous Axel Rex. Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson have counted “more than 150 references to painters in Nabokov’s oeuvre, and this number is limited to those references which are either explicit or recognizable.”<sup>2</sup> But once again, in *Ada* the sheer quantity of allusions—this time to the visual arts—translates into a qualitative difference.

*Ada* is even more drastically ekphrastic and visual than Nabokov’s earlier novels: it is as if, having exhausted the possibilities of the literary fashions that he imitated or ironically conflated to create Van Veen’s lush parodic style, Nabokov increasingly looked to painting—and then, as we shall see, to film—for the inspiration to create a new genre of novel. Nabokov was acutely aware of the advantages available to other media: for example, of the wide international audiences that Tchaikovsky’s or Repin’s

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<sup>2</sup> de Vries and Johnson, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 19.

adaptations of *Evgenii Onegin* could reach.<sup>3</sup> Throughout his oeuvre, but in *Ada* especially, his general interest in thinking in images merges into an overt *paragone* contest with the sister arts.

The rivalry is even more apparent when Nabokov turns from painting to film. The two visual arts are linked in Nabokov's artistic practice, for the verbal ekphrasis of painting inevitably re-introduces the dimension of time, animating the image on the wings of action. His character Albinus in the 1938 novel *Laughter in the Dark* dreams of literally animating the Old Masters through the medium of film. Both visual arts afford Nabokov with the opportunity to experiment with his prose: he describes existing and invented paintings and films in great detail in his novels, or else borrows their techniques to conjure "painterly" or "cinematic" scenes. Such effects engage the visual imagination directly, while at the same time utilizing the peculiar pyrotechnics and multivalent meanings available only to language. However, while Nabokov looks to learn as much as he can from Renaissance, Baroque, and nineteenth-century painting, his novels betray a more competitive struggle with the all-consuming twentieth-century medium of film.

Nabokov's relationship with film is more complicated than his open love affair with painting, to say the least, but is all the more interesting for it. Appel suggests that Nabokov's oeuvre "abounds in images and scenes that are cinematic by design."<sup>4</sup> But who in the twentieth century was not shaped by the movies? "The early masters of the

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<sup>3</sup> I focus on the visual arts, and specifically on painting and film, in this chapter, leaving aside entirely the international language of music. While Nabokov's prose is doubtless "musical" in many ways, Nabokov professed to be largely indifferent to the musical arts. His critique of Tchaikovsky's opera, for example, almost exclusively addresses the libretto and staging. Unlike Proust in this regard, Nabokov never studies or borrows from music in any way comparable to his use of painting or film. When he does ruminate on a song or a popular jingle (Humbert is haunted by a very literary jukebox hit, "Carmen"), it is for the words; likewise, counterpoint for Nabokov is a verbal technique.

<sup>4</sup> Appel wrote the first book-length study of Nabokov and film. See Alfred Appel Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 195.

cinema learned from literature (Griffith, Eisenstein), and the cycle is now in reverse. Numerous modern writers have, by intention or osmosis, made use of the film's grammar and syntax, its compression of narrative means," Appel writes: "Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, West, Cain, Hammett, Agee, Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon, Malcolm Lowry, Cabrera Infante, and Graham Greene, to name but a few, have all gone to school at the movies."<sup>5</sup> Even Nabokov, the paragon of high culture, turns out to be no exception.

As Barbara Wyllie points out, Nabokov's interest in film started early, lasted his entire life, and "extended into a desire to participate in the industry itself." In his early years in Berlin, Nabokov not only earned money as an extra but "auditioned as a movie actor, wrote scenarios and screenplays, and negotiated with film directors and producers over potential screen adaptations of his work."<sup>6</sup> While we most often associate him with other and earlier cultural forms, Nabokov, who was born in 1899 and lived until 1977, was an ideal coeval of the new medium. Unsurprisingly, he proved to be an eagle-eyed observer and student of film.

In this last chapter, I turn fully to the ekphrastic and "cinematic" practices in Nabokov's most ambitious novel—already a recurring motif throughout my dissertation—to see if the profusion of borrowings from other media complicates the double bind of literary tradition traced thus far. Nabokov's *Ada*, like Pushkin's *Onegin*, seems to subsume and to crossbreed its sources only to leave them behind. To invoke Pushkin once more, we might recall the *post partum* stanza in which Pushkin toyed with returning to *Onegin*: "Insert new pictures into a spacious commodious frame—show us a diorama:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 257. J. D. Salinger even declared in the 1962 Preface to "Zooey" that "what I'm about to offer isn't really a short story at all but a sort of prose movie" (quoted in *ibid.*, 258).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 5.

the public will come flocking....”<sup>7</sup> Visual media, transfigured into poetry or prose, suggest new and potentially infinitely productive ways to expand the thematic and stylistic possibilities of verbal narrative. Nabokov called every original novel an anti-novel, in the sense that it diverged from the genre of its precursors. If one strain of the Romantic and modernist poetic novel seemed near the point of exhaustion, a deliberate emphasis on the visual arts offers an alternative to circling around the literary past.

Thinking in images, and not in the “minor” or marginalized language of an exile, also plays into Nabokov’s claims to a transnational canon. Paintings are accessible to viewers regardless of linguistic background, and in the visual medium it is evident that stylistic practices and innovations cross national borders unimpeded. As Gavriel Shapiro puts it, “Nabokov’s turning to the works of the Old Masters in his own writings enabled him to view himself as part and parcel of European cultural continuity and to rightly claim his rich cultural ancestry.”<sup>8</sup> In turn, the “international language of cinema,” as it was declared by Dziga Vertov and other practitioners of the new art in the 1920s, aspired to create a visual Esperanto with the potential to unify the world culturally. As utopian as these early claims may seem today, the prophesy has in a sense come true: film has in fact crossed political, cultural, and linguistic borders to forge unexpected cultural alliances and stylistic hybrids in unprecedented ways throughout the twentieth century. Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*, which I have invoked many times, deals only with literature for a reason: film and the visual arts cross language borders in a way that interacts with, but deeply complicates the cultural capital of powerful literary traditions.

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<sup>7</sup> “Вставляй в просторную, вместительную раму/Картины новые—открой нам диораму:/Привалит публика...” (quoted and translated in Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 208).

<sup>8</sup> Shapiro, *Sublime Artist’s Studio*, 189.

## II. Visual Thinking

When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ...that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting (*LL* 3).

Nabokov's fascination with new ways of understanding or combining word and image was hardly singular in the late 1960s. Much of the twentieth century's most interesting and experimental art fused and confused the sister arts, rebelling against a classical understanding of what medium was appropriate for what type of exposition.

In 1969, the same year as *Ada*'s publication, Rudolf Arnheim, a pioneer of film theory (or even, as it has been called, film philosophy), released a treatise on perception called *Visual Thinking*. Arnheim rebutted centuries' worth of logocentric thought to argue for the primacy of the visual. Like Nabokov, he believed that the linear sequence of language expressed only a fraction of the workings of the mind. Only reductive and purely intellectual thought "strings perceptual concepts in linear succession," Arnheim writes: "Caught in a four-dimensional world of sequence and spatial simultaneity, the mind operates, on the one hand, intuitively by apprehending the products of freely interacting field forces; on the other hand, it cuts one-dimensional paths through the spatial landscape intellectually."<sup>9</sup>

While both mental functions are necessary, the verbal medium does not have to cleave to the latter mode: language can also serve as a bridge between images. According to Arnheim, such a model of image-laden language far more accurately reflects the workings of thought and perception. Even our common, everyday language is inevitably

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<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 246.

and deeply visual, for the vast majority of our metaphors and figures of speech rely on visual imagery. Pure sound and abstract symbol in fact communicate very little. As he puts it, “Language turns out to be a perceptual medium of sounds or signs which, by itself, can give shape to very few elements of thought. For the rest it has to refer to imagery in some other medium.”<sup>10</sup>

Sounding very much like a late twentieth-century Bergson, Arnheim writes, “A pictorial image presents itself whole, in simultaneity. A successful literary image grows through what one might call accretion by amendment. Each word, each statement, is amended by the next into something closer to the intended total meaning. This build-up through the stepwise change of the image animates the literary medium.”<sup>11</sup> Writers tend to intuitively rely on the principle formulated by Gotthold Lessing’s famous eighteenth-century treatise *Laocoön*, and guide readers through a static description on the wings of action. Or in Arnheim’s words, “the writer uses the idiosyncrasies of his medium to guide the reader through a scene, just as a film can move the spectator from detail to detail and thereby reveal a situation by a controlled sequence.”<sup>12</sup>

This contemporary philosophical treatment of the relationship between visual thinking and words is rich with significance for Nabokov’s own intuitions, and less theoretical or systematically formulated claims. Thinking in images allows for the instantaneous absorption of enormous amounts of information, a more accurate representation of how our mind experiences the world. But film, or a literature that fully utilizes and includes the visual imagination, animates the static image and creates a four-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 249-50.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 248.

dimensional world. Language even has one ultimate advantage, as Arnheim admits: “One cannot take pictures or pieces of pictures and put them together to produce new statements as easily as one can combine words of ideographs. Pictorial montages show their seams, whereas the images produced by words fuse into unified wholes.”<sup>13</sup> Again, who would dare to try and make a movie of *Ada*?

A turn to visual thinking powerfully highlights the productive innovativeness of Nabokov’s verbal art. Having attempted to master and subsume so much of his literary heritage, Nabokov turned increasingly to other media for inspiration. The evolutionary convergence between Nabokov’s late fiction and film offers an escape route out of many of *Ada*’s paradoxes: here is another way to strive for autonomy from time and place, not to mention from the limits of language or cultural tradition. *Ada* is written and not painted or shot, but in a hybrid English that seems to have absorbed Nabokov’s other beloved languages, an erudite cosmopolitan’s Esperanto. By leaning on an internal gallery of internationally renowned and recognizable works, *Ada* moves further away from the limitations of national canon. Finally, by attempting a kind of filmic prose, *Ada* searches for a way that novels might share the privileges and possibilities of the international language of cinema.

In my introduction, I wrote of Samuel Beckett’s attempt to break free from the confines of national tradition by paring down his “literariness” to find a bare new idiom all his own. Beckett found inspiration in abstract painting, and sought to reproduce its effects in prose. Nabokov, who has the opposite tastes in visual art, seeks a radically different exit out of what Pascale Casanova calls the conundrum of marginal literary traditions. Nabokov’s densely allusive and exaggeratedly literary prose outdoes even the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

modernists; he ends by turning increasingly to figurative painting and to temporally complicated film structures. If Beckett has been hailed as the last modernist, subsequent generations have been quick to claim Nabokov as an early postmodernist, or as the first of some as-yet loosely defined and conceived movement. His influences are as readily noticeable in popular culture as in highbrow literature, and his novels continue to inspire other forms of four-dimensional art, from film adaptations to a fascinating number of ballets and dance pieces.<sup>14</sup> One way out of perpetually inbreeding literary masterpieces, it seems, is to animate the old masters and to write in four-dimensional, cinematic prose.

### III. *Ada* as Gallery: *Ut pictura poesis*

As the early poem “*Ut pictura poesis*” intimates, Nabokov’s works abound with ekphrasis or the “verbal representation of visual representation.”<sup>15</sup> He uses the device in the narrow sense, to describe well-known works of art in detail, but also more broadly to conjure the imagery of his novels through highly painterly means.

Throughout his novels but in *Ada* especially, references to Italian, Dutch, and Russian painters predominate. Nabokov’s allusions to the visual arts are nearly as important as those to literature, and the two meet and cross intriguingly.<sup>16</sup> Demon Veen recalls

Lermontov’s and Vrubel’s demons; he dies in celestial flames like the mythological

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<sup>14</sup> As Yuri Leving writes, “The last years of the twentieth century were marked by a bull market in screen adaptations of Vladimir Nabokov’s novels, including a new *Lolita* (1997) and a feature-length version of *The Luzhin Defense* (2000)...Not only the power of the author’s imagination but also certain narrative mechanisms render the Nabokovian discourse suitable for translation into the cinema idiom.” See his “Filming Nabokov: On the Visual Poetics of the Text,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Shapiro, *Sublime Artist’s Studio*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> As de Vries and Johnson write: “In *Ada*, Nabokov has intensified his longtime technique of enriching his prose with allusions to paintings...In *Ada*, Nabokov has created a hybrid entity created almost equally from library and art museum—the interaction between the written word and the visual arts.” *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 144.



Icarus (son of Dedalus, the maker of living sculptures), suggesting also Pieter Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558). Lucette drinks alone at a bar, reminding Van of Blok's "The Stranger," but her dress and posture are borrowed from Toulouse-Lautrec's *Divan Japonais* (1892-93), modernized through the intervention of Barton & Guestier advertisement for wines in *The New Yorker* (March 23, 1963).<sup>17</sup> Francesco Parmigianino's frescos of Adam and Eve inspire the image of Marina called from her bath, as does the painting *Bath of the Nymph* described in Joyce's *Ulysses*. All the amorous Veens are children of Venus, rising from the sea or associated with mermaids in countless literary and visual representations. It is easy to see why *Ada* has been read as "the most serious attempt since *À la recherche* to combine the aesthetics of painting and the aesthetics of literature."<sup>18</sup>

*Ada*'s gallery is so rich and so intricately intertwined with literary references that I cannot hope to do the subject justice here. But it is worth examining at least several moments when Nabokov (or Van) trades in his pencil for a paintbrush, before turning to Hieronymous Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the visual masterpiece that clearly has pride of place in the novel.

The most lush and sensual imagery of *Ada* is of Italian or faux-Italian provenance, supposedly inspired by one of the treasures that Van and Ada discover in the Ardis library, *The Forbidden Masterpieces*:

This was (beautifully photographed in color) the kind of voluptuous and tender stuff that Italian masters allowed themselves to produce in between too many pious Resurrections during a too long and lusty Renaissance... Van could not recollect whose picture it was that he had in mind, but thought it might have been attributed to Michelangelo da Caravaggio in his youth. It was an oil on unframed canvas depicting

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<sup>17</sup> Images reproduced in de Vries and Johnson, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 116-17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. See also Rivers, "Proust, Nabokov and *Ada*," 144.

two misbehaving nudes, boy and girl, in an ivied or vined grotto or near a small waterfall overhung with bronze-tinted and dark emerald leaves, and great bunches of translucent grapes, the shadows and limpid reflections of fruit and foliage blending magically with veined flesh...he felt himself transferred into that forbidden masterpiece, one afternoon, when everybody had gone to Brantôme, and Ada and he were sunbathing on the brink of the Cascade in the larch plantation of Ardis Park, and his nymph had bent over him and his detailed desire. Her long straight hair that seemed of a uniform bluish-black in the shade now revealed, in the gem-like sun, strains of deep auburn alternating with dark amber in lanky strands which clothed her hollowed cheek or were gracefully cleft by her raised ivory shoulder... Whose brush was it now? A titilliant Titian? A drunken Palma Vecchio? No, she was anything but a Venetian blonde. Dosso Dossi, perhaps? Faun Exhausted by Nymph? Swooning Satyr? (140-41)

The volume of beautiful and frankly erotic paintings is clearly another shadow of *Ada* itself. The original volume is lost, stolen, or never existed at all, and so offers no real competition but only sumptuous inspiration for *Ada*. By rendering the scene in such vivid tones and blending ekphrasis with the moving imagery of Van and Ada's lovemaking, Nabokov renders his own immortal image in prose. He borrows the beauty of familiar works of art to cast his love story in the same rich colors. As a New Master of prose and a belated student in the school of Caravaggio, he moves even further away from national canons and temporal restrictions. If writers and artists can learn from any borrowed fragment of art or life, what do time or place matter? "There is only one school," Nabokov insisted: "that of talent" (*SO* 97).

Many pages later, another of *Ada*'s most erotic scenes uses similar techniques but with ominous and tragic undertones. Childhood is over and innocence long lost; both Van and Ada have left Ardis forever; and death has entered the garden of delight. An adult Van and Ada pull Lucette into their web and bed:

What we have now is not so much a Casanovanic situation (that double-wencher had a definitely monochromatic pencil—in keeping with the memoirs of his dingy era) as a much earlier canvas, of the Venetian (*sensu largo*) school, reproduced (in

“Forbidden Masterpieces”) expertly enough to stand the scrutiny of a bordel’s *vue d’oiseau*.

Thus seen from above...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. Another trip from the port to the interior reveals the central girl’s long white left thigh; we visit souvenir stalls: Ada’s red-lacquered talons, which lead a man’s reasonably recalcitrant, pardonably yielding wrist out of the dim east to the bright russet west, and the sparkle of her diamond necklace, which, for the nonce, is not much more valuable than the aquamarines on the other (west) side of Novelty Novel lane. The scarred male nude on the island’s east coast is half-shaded, and, on the whole, less interesting...The recently repapered wall immediately west of the now louder-murmuring (*et pour cause*) dorocene lamp is ornamented in the central girl’s honor with Peruvian “honeysuckle” being visited (not only for its nectar, I’m afraid, but for the animalcules stuck in it) by marvelous Loddigesia Hummingbirds, while the bedtable on that side bears a lowly box of matches, a *karavanchik* of cigarettes, a Monaco ashtray, a copy of Voltemand’s poor thriller, and a Lurid Oncidium Orchid in an amethystine vaselet...Sounds have colors, colors have smells...Ten eager, evil, loving, long fingers belonging to two different young demons caress their helpless bed pet. Ada’s loose black hair accidentally tickles the local curio she holds in her left fist, magnanimously demonstrating her acquisition. Unsigned and unframed. (418-20)

The three Veens form a tableau, loosely of the “Venetian school” and that Van attributes to the *Forbidden Masterpieces*, showing that memories of that lost volume have intermingled with his own work in progress. Despite the Venetian classification, this second unsigned and unframed masterpiece again borrows from Caravaggio in its lighting and in the diagonal lines of Lucette’s body. The frozen details of Lucette’s aquamarine tear and the bedtable still-life seem more Dutch than Italian; the entire scene, made exotic by the “island” of the bed, the “souvenir stalls,” and the tropical birds and flowers, even suggests something of Gauguin.

Van calls this “painting” Venetian “in the broader sense,” so perhaps he means to pun on Venusian. Lest we confuse this tableau with the libertine confessions of the eighteenth century and of one famous Venetian in particular, the passage opens with a rejection of

Casanova's "dingy era" and "monochromatic pencil."<sup>19</sup> Strictly speaking, all writing is black and white, but Nabokov makes us forget it. Words have colors, words have smells.

The exquisite detail for which the Dutch Old Masters are known is central to Nabokov's practice.<sup>20</sup> In the *Onegin Commentary*, he argued that an "interest in 'ordinary' details and in 'realistic' trivialities" distinguished a later and more interesting wave of Romanticism from the vague generalities that preceded: "It is in connection with this new fashion that the Flemish masters—and the Elizabethan playwrights—were rediscovered by the romanticists" (*EO* 3:290). Clearly Nabokov believed that the discoveries of painters found their way into literary arts, so much so that he felt the need to mention the Flemish innovation in his study of Pushkin.

In keeping, the most important work of art inside, and lurking behind *Ada* is Bosch's infernal or eternal masterpiece, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510). Nabokov even referred to *Ada* as his "Garden of Delights" (*SO* 306), clearly identifying his dense and puzzling novel with Bosch's most ambitious late work. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, perhaps one of the most written-about paintings of all time, has provoked the same confusion in viewers as *Ada* has in readers. The left panel of the triptych depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; the right panel depicts Hell; and the outer leaves, when closed, show the Creation of the world enclosed in a crystal sphere. The main and

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<sup>19</sup> For Nabokov's rivalry with Casanova, see Valentina Izmirlieva, "Nabokov and Casanova, or Lolita and Zaire," in *Poetics. Self. Place: Essays in Honor of Lisa Crone*, ed. Nicole Boudreau, Sarah Krive, and Catherine O'Neil (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2007), 630-647.

<sup>20</sup> As de Vries and Johnson put it, Nabokov was fascinated by the Dutch rediscovery of "that truth which the Hellenistic painters had glimpsed but which had since been lost—that shadow is everywhere, even in brightness, and that light is everywhere, even in shadow" (*Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 54). Shapiro omits *Ada* from his discussion of painting in Nabokov, since de Vries and Johnson devote two chapters to the novel. Shapiro concludes that what makes Nabokov's use of the Flemish Old Masters unique is that he learns from them to "encrypt his own presence," or that of his loved ones, into his work (*Sublime Artist's Studio*, 61).

central panel, however, refuses any clear interpretation. It depicts a detailed and fantastic world of cavorting nude figures; impossible fruit, animal, and human hybrids; and either an innocent and natural eroticism or the seductive corruption that paves the way to Hell.

The parallels to *Ada* are obvious and many. De Vries and Johnson follow recent art historical interpretations and read the painting as a medieval morality tale. *Ada*'s allusions to the painting, in turn, must provide the moral keys to the novel. The new planet invented by Nabokov mirrors Bosch's Creation from the outer panels, while "events within *Ada* mirror the three inner panels, depicting Eden and the Fall, a fecund Garden paradise of sensual indulgence, and a Hell of demons, violence, and cruelty."<sup>21</sup> De Vries and Johnson note the *Garden*'s pools of water and aquatic imagery, which have mythological or folkloric connotations: lovers are said to be the children of Venus, the goddess born from the foam. However, they also notice that the lovers in Bosch's garden are "isolated, absorbed in their individual desires and enclosed within their own worlds, as is even represented symbolically by one couple contained within a bubble."<sup>22</sup> The private world of the Veens is just such an odd crystalline enclosure, excluding the rest of the world. Finally, the utter absence of children or pregnant women despite the plentiful sexual activity lends the *Garden* an otherworldly or ominous sterility.<sup>23</sup> Again, we see an evident parallel to Van and Ada's nearly eighty years of sterile sexual activity.

The conventional art-historical wisdom also holds that all three interior panels of Bosch's triptych are located on the same site, as suggested by repeated patterns in the

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<sup>21</sup> de Vries and Johnson, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 145.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Alternatively, one could read in this panel the absence of death and earthly life cycles.

landscape: the three panels represent three distinct temporalities.<sup>24</sup> Van refuses to believe in the “conventional triptych” of past, present, and future, and when we compare the end of his love story to Bosch’s vision of Hell, we can readily see why: Van hopes to refute both the chronological and metaphysical implications of Bosch’s work. However, in de Vries and Johnson’s reading, the third panel of Bosch’s painting is precisely what awaits the Veens. Brian Boyd has interpreted the novel and its Dutch allusions very similarly, adding that the surname Veen not only invokes Venus but means “bog” in Dutch, a symbol of the “hell that complicates the heaven of love, the bog encircling the garden.”<sup>25</sup>

It is certainly tempting to read the painting behind the novel as the secret moral truth lurking behind Van and Ada’s seductive narrative. But this reading resembles the temptations offered by so many other subtexts in the novel. Nabokov borrows freely from other fairy tales, but in his best works he does not allow his *fabulae* to map these other immortal stories too closely. Even in the very moments when divine (or at least paternal) punishment descends on the Veens, Nabokov rarely allows for a neat conclusion. Or rather, the ethical qualms are certainly there, but the art is in the details: as he phrased it in his *Lectures*, “Any ass can assimilate the main points of Tolstoy’s attitude toward adultery but in order to enjoy Tolstoy’s art the good reader must wish to visualize” the profusion of detail that would follow in Nabokov’s lecture (*LL* viii). One might extrapolate that anyone can guess the medieval view of fornication, or Nabokov’s own attitude towards real-life incest, but a great reader must grapple with his style.

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<sup>24</sup> See for example Peter S. Beagle, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (London: Pan Books, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> Boyd, “Ada, the Bog and the Garden: or, Straw, Fluff, and Peat: Sources and Places in *Ada*,” *Nabokov Studies* 8 (2004), 113. Cf. de Vries and Johnson, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, 150.

Demon Veen voices the aesthete's point of view only moments before discovering Van and Ada's affair and delivering his prohibitive edict. Just arrived at Van's Manhattan apartment to tell him that "poor cousin Dan has died an odd Boschean death" and under the influence of an exotic drug, Demon delivers a tirade on Bosch's art:

According to Bess (which is "fiend" in Russian), Dan's buxom but otherwise disgusting nurse...he had been complaining for some time, even before Ada's sudden departure, that a devil combining the characteristics of a frog and a rodent desired to straddle him and ride him to the torture house of eternity. To Dr. Nikulin Dan described his rider as black, pale-bellied, with a black dorsal buckler shining like a dung beetle's back and with a knife in his raised forelimb. On a very cold morning in late January Dan had somehow escaped, through a basement maze and a toolroom, into the brown shrubbery of Ardis; he was naked except for a red bath towel which trailed from his rump like a kind of caparison, and, despite the rough going, had crawled on all fours, like a crippled steed under an invisible rider, deep into the wooded landscape.

... "If I could write," mused Demon, "I would describe, in too many words no doubt, how passionately, how incandescently, how incestuously—*c'est le mot*—art and science meet in an insect, in a thrush, in a thistle of that ducal bosquet. Ada is marrying an outdoor man, but her mind is a closed museum, and she, and dear Lucette, once drew my attention, by a creepy coincidence, to certain details of that other triptych, that tremendous garden of tongue-in-cheek delights, circa 1500, and, namely, to the butterflies in it—a Meadow Brown, female, in the center of the right panel, and a Tortoiseshell in the middle panel, placed there as if settled on a flower—mark the 'as if,' for here we have an example of exact knowledge on the part of those two admirable little girls, because they say that actually the *wrong* side of the bug is shown, it should have been the underside, if seen, as it is, in profile, but Bosch evidently found a wing or two in the corner cobweb of his casement and showed the prettier upper surface in depicting his incorrectly folded insect. I mean I don't give a hoot for the esoteric meaning, for the myth behind the moth, for the masterpiece-baiter who makes Bosch express some bosh of his time, I'm allergic to allegory and am quite sure he was just enjoying himself by crossbreeding casual fancies just for the fun of the contour and color, and what we have to study, as I was telling your cousins, is the joy of the eye, the feel and taste of the woman-sized strawberry that you embrace *with* him, or the exquisite surprise of an unusual orifice—" (435-7).

Just like Nabokov's allusions to literature, visual allusions also lead and mislead, alternately forcing us to read Van and Ada as Adam and Eve, and yet prompting us to mistrust any allegory that privileges the "myth behind the moth."

The deeper and undisputed parallels take place on the level of style. Earlier works of art offer Nabokov a myriad of possibilities: he can describe ekphrastically his favorite existing works (Bosch), combine and re-imagine art to come up with new but vividly “real” images (Paramigianino’s sketches); or he can invent his own *Forbidden Masterpieces*. The exquisitely curated *Ada* allows Nabokov to steal not only from other literature but from his favorite painters, styles, and schools, and to bring his own hybrid world to vivid life in prose.

#### IV. Animating the Old Masters and Prose-Film

My earlier chapters, which sought to read Pushkin through Nabokov’s eyes, highlighted Nabokov’s animosity toward the existing adaptations of *Onegin*. From Repin’s painting to Tchaikovsky’s opera, the transfigurations of Pushkin’s masterpiece that were widely available to international audiences threatened to eclipse Pushkin’s poetry, subtlety, and Romantic irony with their more garish and accessible colors.<sup>26</sup> One can only imagine how Nabokov would have reacted to the more recent film adaptations of Pushkin.<sup>27</sup>

Much of Nabokov’s fascination with cinema centers on crass commercial culture and its potential for turning consumers into automatons. In Appel’s words, “Nabokov’s opinions about movies are at once those of a ‘classicist’ (after Plato—and Arnheim, whom he has never read) and, loosely speaking, a Marxist, as he will be happy to

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<sup>26</sup> Boris Gasparov explains that Tchaikovsky’s opera, which deserves to be viewed in its own right and not only as a faithless “translation” of the original, bent the *Onegin fabula* to the more Realist tastes of the 1990s. “Eugene Onegin in the Age of Realism,” in *Five Operas and a Symphony* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 58-94.

<sup>27</sup> I have in mind the critically-panned 1999 *Onegin* directed by Martha Fiennes, starring Ray Fiennes and Liv Tyler, as well as several filmed and televised versions of Tchaikovsky’s opera.



learn.”<sup>28</sup> Presumably, by the “classical” position Appel means to invoke a distinction between films that are true to the medium and provoke a beneficial, intellectual response in the viewer, and entertainment-oriented works that use the technology as a means to other ends. (Indeed, Rudolf Arnheim, like Nabokov, preferred silent films to the more “realistic” talkies that succeeded them.) Regarding the Marxist position, we might well think of Adorno and Horkheimer’s grimly mechanized “culture industry” when we see the effects of movie-madness in *Margo* or little *Lolita*.<sup>29</sup> However, and unlike the more doom-saying Western Marxists, Nabokov refuses to throw out the medium’s potential for charm and brilliance with its mainstream abuses. It can hardly be a coincidence that Adorno makes a cameo appearance in *Ada* as a movie star—best known for his film *Hate*.

Appel takes the title of his monograph from the darkness in *Laughter in the Dark* (1938), originally *Camera Obscura* (1932). He argues that “the root meaning of *obscura* survives and persists in Nabokov’s vision of a popular cinema that is dark indeed.”<sup>30</sup> That novel is hardly alone in Nabokov’s oeuvre in provoking shudders against the Hollywood dream factory. The mediocre murderer Hermann idiotically tries to convince bystanders that they are extras who must help him escape in the final scene of *Despair*; his ideas about “artistic” killers owe much to popular crime thrillers. Quilty promises to make *Lolita* a star, but means to cast her in “art films”: the Hollywood hinted at in *Lolita* erodes the thin line between popular entertainment and pornography. Finally, *Bend Sinister*’s

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<sup>28</sup> Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 57.

<sup>29</sup> The concept of the late capitalist culture industry is most famously worked out in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 29.

terrifying final film sequence puts forward the most painful vision of all: the totalitarian regime forces Adam Krug to watch the torture and murder of his little son in a pseudo-research snuff film. Not even the authorial persona can bear it, and interferes to rescue Adam with madness. And this list contains only some of the most memorably sinister movie-moments in Nabokov's earlier novels.

At the same time, Nabokov clearly loved and learned a great deal from the movies. *Lolita* offers obvious examples of this other tendency as well: even before he translated the novel into a (monstrously long and virtually unusable) screenplay for Stanley Kubrick, Nabokov wrote the original with cinema culture and film conventions firmly in mind. He had a sharp eye for absurd comedy and unexpected moments of brilliance, and he found plenty of both in the movies. M. H. Abrams, his colleague at Cornell University for over a decade, recounts one telling incident: "Nabokov entered a living room where a faculty child was watching an old Western on television. Immediately engaged by the program, Nabokov was soon quaking with laughter over the furiously climactic fight scene in a bar."<sup>31</sup> The paradigmatic literary elitist drew on just such popular culture inspirations for Humbert and Quilty's armed struggle. It is no wonder that many of these moments translated beautifully into Kubrick's film. And, as many commentators have noticed, all three *Lolitas*—novel, screenplay, and film—pay homage to the dominant cinematic style of the period, film noir.

Nabokov's screenplay warrants its own studies.<sup>32</sup> Rather than pare down his novel to the bare *fabula* or rely on its literary language in voice-over narrations, Nabokov labored

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-256. See also Julia Trubikhina, "Struggle for the Narrative: Nabokov and Kubrick's Collaboration on the *Lolita* Screenplay," in "My Nabokov," special issue, *Urbandus* 10 (2007), 149-172.

to find cinematic equivalents for his narrative frame and estranging devices, lush prose, and distinctive humor. He thought highly enough of the experiment to publish the screenplay separately once he realized that Kubrick would use very little for the actual film.<sup>33</sup> For, despite his sole screen-writing credit and an Oscar nomination, Nabokov's wittiest transfigurations were all cut out, including the majority of the self-conscious visual effects that sought to impress the viewer with the artifice of the fictional film. Kubrick also flatly refused to allow Nabokov a Hitchcock-like cameo. All things considered, Nabokov was fairly good-spirited about the end result, although the foreword to *Lolita: A Screenplay* affords a glimpse of how he might have preferred to work:

By nature I am no dramatist...I am not even a hack scenarist; but if I had given as much of myself to the stage or the 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 a system of total tyranny, directing the play or picture myself, choosing settings and costumes, terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the bit part of guest... prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual—for there is nothing in the world that I loathe more than group activity, that communal bath where the hairy and slippery mix in a multiplication of mediocrity. (ix-x)

The *auteur* style of filmmaking has had its proponents, but never has a director been able to approach anything near the degree of control that Nabokov wields as a novelist.<sup>34</sup>

But *Lolita* had a precursor as well as a successor. The most overtly cinematic novel in Nabokov's oeuvre, technically speaking, remains *Camera Obscura* or *Laughter in the Dark*: Nabokov intended to write the "entire book as if it were a film." Since color films were still a rarity in the early 1930s, he even invented a preposterously complex scheme to render color through heraldic lines or dots. The rather incomprehensible vision

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<sup>33</sup> Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, 232.

<sup>34</sup> The only parallel to *Ada* that I can think of in film is Godard's *Histoire du cinema* (1980s-1998), which runs four and a half hours and has provoked somewhat similar reactions to Nabokov's *über*-novel.

“proved to be much too ambitious and very soon I was putting in the bright colors of stained glass windows...the scenes and dialogue do manage to follow a cinematic pattern.”<sup>35</sup> The simple colors (such as Margot’s red dress) suggest instead the exaggerated and reduced spectrum of early color film.

When Nabokov translated the novel into English, he tried to make it more cinematic still, with a pragmatic eye toward attracting film producers. One of the intriguing new passages develops Albinus’s vision of producing “animated colored cartoons based on Old Master paintings” (*LitD* 8), an idea that, as Appel claims, owes its inspiration to Disney’s *Silly Symphonies*.<sup>36</sup> Throughout, Nabokov highlighted stylistic elements like set directions, flashbacks, short scene-length chapters, and carefully described camera angles and perspectives. His experiment tried to “fuse the two genres—literary and cinematic—not only to complement the thematic structure of the novel, but also to lend it new technical and perceptual dimensions.”<sup>37</sup> While Margot dreams of becoming a star, the novel mimics and exploits her banal obsession to find new means of expression. Strikingly, *Laughter in the Dark* even moves with the pace and immediacy of film.

There are numerous parallels in style as well as in plot points between *Laughter in the Dark* and *Ada*, Nabokov’s more complexly cinematic late novel. Like Margot, *Ada* aspires but fails to become an actress, and must watch an older rival practice her art with professional ease (*Ada*’s own mother Marina, or Dorianna Karenina in *Laughter in the Dark*). Both Van and Albinus see their slightly poisonous beloveds as “animated” works

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<sup>35</sup> Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 259.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>37</sup> Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*, 68.

of art.<sup>38</sup> However, even if we take Nabokov at his word in the later interviews that Van and Ada are “charming villains,” the Veens are decidedly Nabokov’s most talented and talkative characters. Cheap Margot is far less seductive, and *Laughter in the Dark* as a result remains black and white in its ethical divisions and conventional in plot points. Nabokov even uses a movie to punish Margot: forced to watch her own terrible acting, “she felt like a soul in Hell to whom the demons are displaying the unsuspected lining of its earthly transgressions” (*LitD* 189). *Ada* is far more subtle.

The name of Nabokov’s invented actress Dorianna Karenina proved strangely prophetic.<sup>39</sup> Nabokov later noted with glee that “the name of the leading lady...prefigured that of the actress (Anna Karina) who was to play Margot forty years later in the film *Laughter in the Dark*” (*SO* 162.) After at least four attempts to bring *Laughter* to the silver screen and seven years after the release of Kubrick’s *Lolita*, Tony Richardson’s adaptation finally came out in 1969, the same year as *Ada*. But *Laughter in the Dark* remains weak in all three incarnations: as a Russian novel, an English novel, and a melodramatic film. Nabokov considered the work one of his least successful novels, and deemed Richardson’s film adaptation a common collection of clichés.<sup>40</sup>

The only positive remark Nabokov could make regarding Richardson’s quickly forgotten flop is that it taught him about the absence of intelligent eroticism in film:

I was appalled by the commonplace quality of the sexual passages. I would like to say something about that. Clichés and conventions breed remarkably fast...In recent films, the porno-grapple has already become a cliché though the device is but half-a-

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<sup>38</sup> Ada’s lovers die one by one unless “strengthened” by an infusion of the Veen demon blood. Margot dooms Albinus’s daughter simply by touching one of her plush toys. For a treatment of the “Lamia” seductive but lethal female in Nabokov’s oeuvre, see Michael Maar, *Speak, Nabokov*, trans. Ross Benjamin (London: Verso, 2009), 42-53.

<sup>39</sup> Dorianna conjures a decadent *femme fatale*, crossing Tolstoy’s heroine with Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray.

<sup>40</sup> For a summary of Nabokov’s reaction to the film, see Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 134-35.

dozen years old. I would have been sorry that Tony Richardson should have followed that trite trend, had it not given me the opportunity to form and formulate the following important notion: theatrical acting, in the course of the last centuries, has led to incredible refinements of stylized pantomime in the presentation of, say, a person eating, or getting deliciously drunk, or looking for his spectacles, or making a proposal of marriage. Not so in regard to the imitation of the sexual act which on the stage has absolutely no tradition behind it. The Swedes and we have had to start from scratch, and what I have witnessed up to now on the screen—the blotchy male shoulder, the false howls of bliss, the four or five mingled feet—all of it is primitive, commonplace, conventional, and therefore disgusting... The lack of art or style in those paltry copulations is particularly brought into evidence by their clashing with the marvelously high level of acting in virtually all other imitations of natural gestures on our stage and screen. This is an attractive topic to ponder further and directors should take notice of it. (*SO* 137)

Regardless of form or media, Nabokov remains emphatic on the need for subtle innovation and refinement, to guard against the commonplaces of fast-breeding convention. Sexual passages in literature have a somewhat longer tradition behind them than do those on the screen, but nevertheless Nabokov felt himself to be breaking new ground with the sophisticated, artistic, but very explicit passages of *Ada*.<sup>41</sup>

Somewhat incredibly, Nabokov had even hoped to see *Ada* make it to the screen, although he acknowledged, “*Ada* will be enormously difficult to do: the problem of having a suggestion of fantasy, continually, but never overdoing it” (*SO* 162). Producers circled around the unfinished novel, and the screen rights were even optioned, but in the end no one dared to try and make a movie of *Ada*.

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<sup>41</sup> In his very last work, the fragments eventually published as *The Original of Laura*, Nabokov intimates that explicit sexuality in literature equally lacks the support of tradition. Ivan Vaughan tries to capture his affair with Flora in prose: “Only by identifying her with an unwritten, half-written, rewritten difficult book could one hope to render at last what contemporary descriptions of intercourse so seldom convey, because newborn and thus generalized, in the sense of primitive organisms of art as opposed to the personal achievement of great English poets dealing with an evening in the country, a bit of sky in a river, the nostalgia of remote sounds—things utterly beyond the reach of Homer or Horace. Readers are directed to that book—on a very high shelf, in a very bad light—but already existing, as magic exists, and death, and as shall exist, from now on, the mouth she made automatically while using that towel to wipe her thighs after the promised withdrawal.” Vladimir Nabokov, *The Original of Laura* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 25. While *Laura* may have proven another puzzling and explicit masterwork had Nabokov lived to see its completion, *Ada* remains his best attempt at inventing sophisticated and artistic ways to depict sexuality in literature.

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Perhaps this particular cinematic Nabokov novel did not need to be and could not be adapted to film, for *Ada* already absorbs and includes so much cinematic practice internally. I have already described the montage of Ada in all her various stages of beauty, magically captured or conjured by *Don Juan's Last Fling*, but all of the novel's films reflect the main narrative. Besides *Don Juan*, *Les Enfants Maudits*, and *Letters from Terra*, there are two more minor references to film: Marina's *Torrid Affair*, which she conflates mentally with her actual affair with Demon; and the final incarnation of *Les Enfants Maudits* as a "painted Western," in which all but the shadow of Ada's elbow ends up on the cutting-room floor.<sup>42</sup> *Letters from Terra* adapts Van's first book; *Don Juan's Last Fling* offers a pastiche of Byron, Pushkin, Cervantes, and others. *Les Enfants Maudits* and *The Young and the Doomed* are incestuous love stories inspired by Mlle Larivière's novel, as well as by Chateaubriand and all the other literature that she artlessly transfigures. Van's memoir proposes an artful alternative, but he looks with fascination at these glimpses of his world refracted through the professionals' moving images.

In turn, Van's eternal beloved Ada not only embodies two centuries of literary heroines, but also reads as a classic film noir *femme fatale*. She is even "shot" in black and white, although inexplicably doomed as an actress. Van witnesses the disintegration

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<sup>42</sup> One might conjecture that Ada shares the experience of recognizing her shadow on screen with her author, from his days as a young extra in Berlin. In general, Ada (an amateur scientist and lepidopterist), more than any other female character in his oeuvre, reads as the sole Nabokov-in-skirts.

of the last remaining reel of *Don Juan's Last Fling* and Ada's only real role.<sup>43</sup> As he writes to her after Lucette's death, in a letter never posted:

*I kept pursuing the picture which I had not [badly discolored] on the boat, from cinema to cinema, every time discovering a new item of glorious torture, a new convulsion of beauty in your performance. That [illegible] is a complete refutation of odious Kim's odious stills...And to think, Spanish orange-tip, that all in all your magic gambol lasted but eleven minutes of stopwatch time in patches of two- or three-minute scenes!*

*Alas, there came a night, in a dismal district of work-shops and bleary shebeens, when for the very last time, and only halfway, because at the seduction scene the film black-winked and shriveled, I managed to catch [the entire end of the letter is damaged]. (500-501)*

Just as the volume of *Forbidden Masterpieces* has been lost or destroyed, so Ada's "magic gambols" on celluloid are doomed. Her star performance is reserved for Van's memoir.

Ada's world of cinema, composed of real Hollywood and movie culture, fictional Ada's short career and Marina's longer run, and curiously talented invented directors and their entourages, as Wyllie notes, "functions both as an independent realm existing beyond the scope of Van Veen's control, and as a dimension which is consciously deployed as a narrative device."<sup>44</sup> Van mimics the conventions of film in order to eclipse their accomplishments in his own work. He retells Demon and Marina's affair in a few compressed and sparkling pages; outdoes Vitry's anachronism with his own science-fiction twin planets conceit; creates temporal montages and melancholy pastiches that put *Don Juan's Last Fling* to shame; and the entire novel stands as a rejoinder to *Les Enfants Maudits* in any rendition. Showing off the prodigious prose montages at his disposal, Van

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<sup>43</sup> Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*, 187.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.



boasts to Ada in a parenthetical aside, “(When will film-makers reach the stage *we* have reached?)” (*Ada* 105).

Wyllie suggests that Van’s attempt at absolute control over both his text and the reader’s response is itself adopted from the rival medium, and that Van exploits the reader’s inability to perceive his various deceptions because the story is presented as film.<sup>45</sup> It is well known that film invites viewers to suspend disbelief and to recognize what they see on screen as “real” in a way that written description cannot hope to match. Alfred Hitchcock’s experience with the 1950 *Stage Fright* offers a textbook example of that effect and of audience expectations: “In that film, Hitchcock had one of his characters narrate a flashback—and lie. Audiences saw the lie on screen and when they later found out that it was false they reacted angrily. They weren’t able to accept the possibility that the *image* would lie, although they would have been quite willing to believe that the *character* had lied.”<sup>46</sup>

However, the cinematic devices of *Ada* hardly intensify the novel’s perceived realism or its claims on our gullibility. On the contrary, Nabokov keeps these devices in the open. Just as he had taken pains to subvert the illusionism of film in his *Lolita* screenplay, he now exponentially increases such distractions to defamiliarize both fictional and film conventions in the pursuit of a new genre.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 190, quoting from James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 173. Cf. Appel, *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema*, 255: “Unlike the most lifelike of paintings, which are canvases framed on a wall, and unlike poems or plays which contain their artifice on a page or a stage, cinema is the preeminent illusionistic act. Rarely does a novel equal the way in which the most routine of movies can suspend our disbelief, engage our trust, immerse us in its world.” For comparative studies of Nabokov and Hitchcock, see Barbara Straumann, *Figurations of Exile in Hitchcock and Nabokov* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), and James A. Davidson, “Some Thoughts on Hitchcock and Nabokov”: <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue03/features/hitchnab1.htm>.

I would argue that Nabokov writes in this way for two reasons. First, and as he said of Proust in the *Lectures on Literature*, the man cannot help but write about art, since life for Nabokov too primarily consists of art, artifice, and enchantment. Moreover, he turns naturally to film as the dominant art form of his time. In Nabokov's works, literature and film engage in a *paragone* duel between sister arts. Neither novel nor film is a classical genre, but both modern hybrids claim to express the *zeitgeist* and seek to subsume other art forms. There is not a single film in *Ada* that is not an adaptation or in some way stolen from literature—but just so, Nabokov steals back, adapting the new material in his own inimitable way:

The shooting script was now ready. Marina, in dorean robe and coolie hat, reclined reading in a long-chair on the patio. Her director, G.A. Vronsky, elderly, baldheaded, with a spread of grizzled fur on his fat chest, was alternately sipping his vodka-and-tonic and feeding Marina typewritten pages from a folder. On her other side, crosslegged on a mat, sat Pedro (surname unknown, stagename forgotten), a repulsively handsome, practically naked young actor, with satyr ears, slanty eyes, and lynx nostrils, whom she had brought from Mexico and was keeping at a hotel in Ladore.

...If one dollied now to another group standing a few paces away under the purple garlands of the patio arch, one might take a medium shot of the young maestro's pregnant wife in a polka-dotted dress replenishing goblets with salted almonds, and of our distinguished lady novelist resplendent in mauve flounces, mauve hat, mauve shoes, pressing a zebra vest on Lucette, who kept rejecting it with rude remarks, learned from a maid but uttered in a tone of voice just beyond deafish Mlle Larivière's field of hearing.

...Was he dreaming now that he had been dreaming? Had a grotesque governess really written a novel entitled *Les Enfants Maudits*? To be filmed by frivolous dummies, now discussing its adaptation? To be made even triter than the original *Book of the Fortnight*, and its gurgling blurbs?

...“Okay,” said Vronsky. “Let us get on with this damned script. He leaves the pool-side patio, and since we contemplate doing it in color—”

Van left the pool-side patio and strode away. He turned into a side gallery that led into a grovy part of the garden, grading insensibly into the park proper. Presently, he noticed that Ada had hastened to follow him. Lifting one elbow, revealing the black star of her armpit, she tore off her bathing cap and with a shake of her head liberated a torrent of hair. Lucette, in color, trotted behind her. Out of charity for the sisters' bare feet, Van changed his course from gravel path to velvet lawn (reversing the action of Dr. Ero, pursued by the Invisible Albino in one of the greatest novels of

English literature). They caught up with him in the Second Coppice. Lucette, in passing, stopped to pick up her sister's cap and sunglasses—the sunglasses of much-sung lasses, a shame to throw them away! My tidy little Lucette (I shall never forget you...) placed both objects on a tree stump near an empty beer bottle, trotted on, then went back to examine a bunch of pink mushrooms that clung to the stump, snoring. Double take, double exposure. (203)

Mlle Larivière's novel eventually turns into *The Young and the Doomed*. The director of the adaptation is Tolstoy's Vronsky, give or take a few letters.<sup>47</sup> We hear echoes of Jean-Pierre Melville adapting Jean Cocteau in *Les Enfants Terribles*, but Larivière, clad in Proust's distinctive mauve, steals the most from Chateaubriand. Her monstrous transfiguration of Van and Ada's love story threatens to cheapen Van's project, and even resembles *Ada* ominously with its "gurgling blurbs." The challenge represented by Larivière's novel and its film adaptation calls for more than a refutation of "odious Kim's odious stills," which is easy enough for Van. Instead, *Ada* attempts to make its true rival medium—the fiction film—look clumsy and old-fashioned in comparison.

In the above passage, Nabokov's prose pointedly follows and twists the beloved conventions of film. Mocking and mimicking the imagined camera movements, the narrating perspective "dollies," and includes script directions as well as double takes and double exposures, in color and in black and white.<sup>48</sup> The "camera eye" rendered in prose can go anywhere it likes, to invoke any image or familiar cinematic technique. In *Ada*, Nabokov shows his skill at adapting film's tricks, but offers in his own prose-film a verbal and visual density as well as duration that no *auteur* could hope to match.

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<sup>47</sup> The surname Gavronsky suggests a Russian-Jewish heritage to sensitive ears; see also Baron Klim Avidov (an anagram of Nabokov), who is touchy about a possible dropped D in his surname. Best of all, T. S. Eliot appears in *Ada* as a "Jewish businessman"—Nabokov's nods to and revenge on American anti-Semitism. See Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> The reference to the Invisible Albino crosses H. G. Wells with Ralph Ellison: *The Invisible Man* has certainly inspired an enviable slew of film adaptations.

## V. Film as Memory

My fourth chapter discussed how Marina filters her memories through the clichéd conventions of film: someday her past “must be put in order,” edited and cleaned in post-production to eliminate embarrassing scratches, discrepancies, and unflattering angles. Van condemns Marina’s conventional mind, but he does something very similar, if more sophisticated and complex. He too fills in the missing details and embellishes his past; his memoir also draws upon cinematic devices and the glamour of the movies. In *Ada*, film comes to stand for memory itself, and hence naturally seems the goal of any imaginative and time-defying endeavor. Even the materiality of the medium is rife with metaphors for memory and the mind. As I argued in my fifth chapter, Nabokov echoes Bergson in this respect, for one of the French philosopher’s most famous similes compared the mind to the-then still new-fashioned device, the film projector.

Dan Veen’s microfilm early in the novel can be dated through “shades of heliocolour”:

A reel box containing what turned out to be (according to Kim, the kitchen boy, as will be understood later) a tremendous stretch of microfilm taken by the globetrotter, with many of its quaint bazaars, painted cherubs and pissing urchins reappearing three times at different points, in different shades of heliocolour...most of the film, accompanied by purely factual notes, not always easy to locate—because of the elusive or misleading bookmarks in the several guidebooks scattered around—was run by Dan many times for his bride during their instructive honeymoon in Manhattan. (6-7)

Decades and hundreds of pages later, Van investigates memory in similar terms: “Does the coloration of a recollected object (or anything else about its visual effect) differ from date to date? Could I tell by its tint if it comes earlier or later, lower or higher, in the stratigraphy of my past? Is there any mental uranium whose dream-delta decay might be used to measure the age of a recollection?” (545).

A great deal of what the Veens wish to preserve but have not already covered in their memoir ends up on film. Van erects in Lucette's memory "his famous Lucinda Villa, a miniature museum just two stories high, with a still growing collection of microphotographed paintings from all public and private galleries in the world (not excluding Tartary) on one floor and a honeycomb of projection cells on the other" (336). The other collection donated to the Lucinda Museum consists of the filmed butterflies that Ada, like her author, collects until very late in life: "One would need another book to describe Ada's adventures in Adaland. The films—and the crucified actors (Identification Mounts)—can be seen by arrangement at the Lucinda Museum, 5, Park Lane, Manhattan" (568). Film offers one way to preserve what must not be forgotten, and through this function serves as a metaphor, index, or even an equivalent of memory.

Dmitri Nabokov once described his father's writing as "all there, inside his mind, like film waiting to be developed."<sup>49</sup> Nabokov himself used such cinematic metaphors both inside and outside of his fiction. Fascinated by the permanence and the subjective montages of film, he leaned on metaphors and representations of film in his novels to find new and poetic ways to interrogate time, memory, and his characters' experience of the world. For certain of Nabokov's protagonists, "particularly Humbert Humbert and Van Veen, film offers a form of refuge, the potential for transformation, the means by which to realize their creative ideals and, most critically, the promise of immortality."<sup>50</sup> While Humbert fails to freeze the past, film in *Ada* seems to prove that the past endures into the present. *Don Juan's Last Fling* captures real time so ardently that Van cannot believe the

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<sup>49</sup> Boyd, *American Years*, 585.

<sup>50</sup> Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*, 10.

crucial footage lasts only eleven minutes according to conventional markers of time. In *Ada*, film runs on Veen's time.

In turn, Veen's Time suggests a strategy for reading. Many Nabokov novels train the ideal reader to be a re-reader, but *Ada* enforces re-reading, demanding not only cover-to-cover perusal, but constant returns and back-and-forth movements to decode the novel's many codes. *Ada* drives the reader to familiarize herself with the work and only then to examine its inner workings. As a result, our reading functions similarly to the Veens' filmed montages: if we are to read *Ada* at all, it seems that we must read it in four dimensions.

## Conclusion

### Transculture and the Butterfly Man: Nabokov as Image

Башня до самого неба,  
 башня-библиотека  
 Вьющихся лестниц исвивы,  
 фолианты в размер этажей  
 Хмель-виноградьем увитые  
 с заржавленными замками  
 На шумерских цепях  
 Здесь чернокнижье цветущее—  
 тайную мудрость Адама  
 Кто-то постигнет, вместит,  
 и тогда остановится время  
 Ангел свернет небеса

—Sergey Stratanovsky  
 “The Library Tower,” 1993<sup>1</sup>

The strange unreality of such an existence in a foreign land seems to me nowhere more clearly expressed than in Nabokov’s remark, made in passing, that he had appeared as an extra in evening dress in several of the films shot in Berlin at that time, which frequently included doppelgangers and such shadowy figures among their characters. There is no proof anywhere else of these appearances of his, so we do not know whether any of them may still be faintly preserved on a brittle strip of celluloid or whether they are now all extinguished.

—W. G. Sebald  
 “Dream Textures: A Brief Note on Nabokov,” 2003<sup>2</sup>

## I. The Museum Library

Nabokov’s games with painting and with film—and with painterly and cinematic prose—continue his life-long project to create a peculiar, Nabokovian immortal canon.

His *Eugene Onegin* sought to restore, or even to finally establish Pushkin as a pillar of

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<sup>1</sup> Stratanovsky’s short lyric, in Russian and in English translation, is included in the collection *A Night in Nabokov Hotel*, ed. and trans. Anatoly Kudryavitsky (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2006), 170-71: “It’s a library tower,/and it pierces the sky./Hope and vine/twine around/Winding stairs/and storey-sized volumes./All the locks on Sumerian chains/are rusting./Black magic is blooming here,/the secret wisdom of Adam./Some day somebody will apprehend/and master it—/And time will come to a halt,/An angel will furl the sky.”

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Campto Santo*, ed. Sven Meyer, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamilton, 2005), 143.

that canon, and as a model for how a great artist could escape from time and space and into the autonomous alterity of art. *Ada*, more than any of Nabokov's previous or subsequent works, strains for such autonomy with every means available at his erudite and imaginative disposal. The impossibly ambitious masterwork seems to seek the final word on Nabokov's precursors, rival canons, and, as the last chapter has sought to demonstrate, even on the novel's agonistic competition with rival media. Nabokov's *Ada* is an imagined library and a museum akin to Van Veen's Lucinda Museum; a work that hopes against hope to step outside of conventional time.

Despite, or perhaps because of the controversy that he unfailingly inspired in the last two decades of his life, Nabokov has been acknowledged as the "first among Russian-born literati to attain the interliterary stature of a world writer."<sup>3</sup> An unconventional but influential cultural ambassador, he successfully re-imagined the international relevance of the Russian literary tradition, the Western canon as a complex fabric of intermingled transnational culture, as well as the stylistic and thematic possibilities of the late twentieth-century transnational novel.

As I wrote in the introduction, the larger stakes of my study have been to understand how Nabokov managed to escape the marginal status of a Russian émigré writer to become, in the 1960s and 1970s, the most famous world writer alive; and moreover, how he managed to convince readers that the Russian literary tradition in general was in fact crucial and central to a Western canon. In this regard, and in keeping with the claims of this conclusion, he resembles less the other famous Russian émigré writers (including the Nobel prize winners Ivan Bunin and Josef Brodsky) as much as he does the artists and musicians, who had an easier time translating their life's work to European and American

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<sup>3</sup> Shapiro, *Sublime Artist's Studio*, 100-101.



soil: I have in mind the painters Wassily Kandinsky and Marc Chagall, the composer Igor Stravinsky, or the choreographer George Balanchine, all of whom have been defining voices of international modernisms in their respective media.

Working within the literary medium, Nabokov managed not only to escape marginalization himself, but through his own literary output and through his life-long aesthetic propaganda campaign, to reconfigure the international cultural playing field. Regardless of the difficulties of reading *Ada* and the critical discord that his late novel provoked, Nabokov managed to conjure in the minds of countless readers an alluring vision of Antiterra—a transnational utopia of letters and arts. His oeuvre and his transnational status have in turn captured the imagination of the Iranian-born Azar Nafisi, South African J. M. Coetzee, Turkish Orhan Pamuk, and the German exile W. G. Sebald, to name only a few contemporary practitioners. It is hardly surprising that writers who feel distant from the traditional centers of cultural capital should find in Nabokov an exceptional source of inspiration, nor that they should read him in ways as disparate as do Nafisi, who found in *Lolita* a moving allegory of the subjugation of women (as in her 2003 memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*); and Pamuk, who in his most recent *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist* (2010) argues for the primacy of the visual description in terms often borrowed from Nabokov, but also from the Islamic tradition of illustrating books with ornate miniatures.<sup>4</sup>

I have adopted the term transculture from Mikhail Epstein to describe a new chapter for world literature, of which I see Nabokov—in *Ada* especially—as a forerunner. The term transculture entered widespread critical usage in the 1970s, and was first commonly

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<sup>4</sup> See Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003); and Orhan Pamuk, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*, trans. Nazim Dikba (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

used in colonial and postcolonial contexts. As Epstein remarks, in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt “borrows the term ‘transculturation’ from ethnography to describe ‘contact zones’ or social spaces where ‘disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” in the colonial context.<sup>5</sup> From there, the term has come to be applied increasingly broadly to other forms of cultural production arising from transnationalism. Epstein’s book serves an important function in introducing the notion of transculture into Russian and comparative studies.

Epstein writes that until very recently, the United States and Soviet Union “represented the Other to each other, the immense unknown” in the polarized context and imperial rivalries of the Cold War. But with the “collapse of this dualistic narrative, it now becomes possible to rework the opposition between former antagonists into a new resource.”<sup>6</sup> He distinguishes transculture from other models of the global system, such as the “clashing civilizations” of Samuel Huntington’s model, the American “melting pot” metaphor that promised or threatened to assimilate cultural differences, or international models of “multiculturalism” that posit “aggregates of discrete subcultures (based on racial, ethnic, sexual, or other differences).”<sup>7</sup> In the place of these earlier models and metaphors, Epstein puts forth transculture as a productive new way to imagine the

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<sup>5</sup> Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments*, 4. He refers to Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Despite Nabokov’s meteoric rise to fame in a late Cold War context, as a proponent of the “universal” aesthetic of an anti-Soviet modernism, his oeuvre continues to have relevance and has come to mean something entirely different in the post-Cold War world.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. For the polarizing Samuel Huntington model, see his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

“communication among existing cultural differences,” as well as new “possibilities not yet actualized in any existing culture.”

Epstein mentions Nabokov only once, and in passing, in his more theoretically inclined overview. However, and as I hope my study has helped to show, Nabokov stands as the paradigmatic figure—not of only Russian-American transculture, enabling and inspiring a generation of young, bilingual Russian immigrant writers to invent hybridized Russian-English jargon and utopian or dystopian themes in the Nabokovian vein, but more generally, for increasingly widespread and disparate cultural borrowing and crossbreeding.

## **II. Nabokov’s Children**

By the late twentieth and twenty-first century, Nabokov has become as much of a symbolic value to international artists and writers as Pushkin or Joyce had been to him. Nabokov is maddening or deeply enticing, but certainly by now he is also a symbol—of a densely allusive and parodic prose style, of an uncompromising stance on aesthetic freedom, and even of a mode of artistic existence. The list of international writers that have paid him homage or parodied his work includes the authors that I have mentioned, as well as Umberto Eco, Salman Rushdie, Paul Auster, Roberto Bolaño, and too many others to list. Many of these authors, despite having vastly different aesthetic, ethical, or political projects of their own, are eager to suggest that they are, nevertheless, all children of Nabokov. Why should this be the case, if Nabokov represents a self-indulgent literary dead-end? What has Nabokov come to mean, for these contemporary writers?

In answer, I will conclude with one expressive example of “Nabokov as image” from the works of his unusual and melancholy disciple Sebald. This image of the “butterfly man” speaks both to Nabokov’s innovatively visual mode of writing and to his mythical autonomy, and strikes me as one of the more profound allusions to Nabokov in contemporary literature.

In his own deeply original and thoughtful anti-novel *The Emigrants* (1993), a work that combines the genres of biography, autobiography, essay, cultural criticism, and fiction, Sebald uses the figure of Nabokov, the butterfly man, as a mysterious running leitmotif. In most cases unnamed but always readily recognizable, Nabokov appears in each of the four life-stories that comprise Sebald’s novel: the fictionalized biographies of Dr. Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth, and Max Ferber. The first section establishes Nabokov’s importance to the text through a brief but direct reference; Sebald even includes amongst his own snapshots “a photo of Nabokov in the mountains above Gstaad that I had clipped from a Swiss magazine a few days before.”<sup>8</sup> In the second section, Bereyter approaches Mme Landau, the woman who postpones his imminent suicide and who later provides the narrator with the details of his tragedy, when he sees her reading *Speak, Memory* on a park bench (43).

But the most moving scenes of the *The Emigrants* occur later in the novel. The narrator’s great-uncle Ambros Adelwarth has voluntarily submitted himself to a mental institution, to be slowly destroyed by monstrous and unnecessary administrations of electroshock therapy. The clinic is in the close vicinity of Ithaca, and the only event that stirs the inmate is the periodic appearance of the butterfly man, who hunts within view of

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<sup>8</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Direction, 1996), 16, henceforth in parenthetical citation.

his window. While the dying man watches from inside, “outside the torture chamber, Nabokov dances, making curious jumps with his butterfly net.”<sup>9</sup> In his last visit to his great-uncle, the narrator (who may or may not be Sebald’s prose persona) uncovers Adelwarth’s strange fixation. He joins his uncle at the window:

The air was coming in from outside and we were looking over the almost motionless trees toward a meadow that reminded me of the Altach marsh when a middle-aged man appeared, holding a white net on a pole in front of him and occasionally taking curious jumps. Uncle Adelwarth stared straight ahead, but he registered my bewilderment all the same, and said, It’s the butterfly man, you know. He comes around here quite often. (104)

Later, from the guilt-stricken doctor who had participated in the extreme doses of electroshock treatment, the narrator hears the story of the last day of his great-uncle’s life. The doctor, by now in doubt of his own sanity, recounts how for the first time, that day Adelwarth failed to appear for treatment. When he came to investigate, he found Adelwarth at the window as usual: “When I asked why he had not appeared at the appointed time, he replied (I remember his words exactly): It must have slipped my mind whilst I was waiting for the butterfly man” (115). After that, Adelwarth submits calmly to his final session of treatment, and dies the same day. “I was waiting for the butterfly man,” it turns out, were his last words.

Sebald, who clearly felt the same pressure as Nabokov to expand the novel form beyond pure fiction, chooses to include imagery in his own works quite literally, through the enclosed snapshots for which he is well known. In a sense, Sebald builds from what Nabokov had attempted to do in pure prose. However, Sebald not only takes inspiration from Nabokov, but continually “frames” Nabokov as a still or moving image within *The Emigrants*. Most directly, he pictures Nabokov through the first chapter’s clipped

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<sup>9</sup> Adrian Curtin and Maxim D. Shrayar, “Netting the Butterfly Man: The Significance of Vladimir Nabokov in W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*,” *Religion and the Arts* 9, nos. 3-4 (2005): 272.

photograph, which he includes to ensure that we share his mental picture of the Russian author as an aging but irrepressible Swiss butterfly catcher. But even in the longer prose passage described above, Sebald creates something very much like an embedded prose-film out of Nabokov's cameo. Adelwarth watches Nabokov make his curious jumps through the frame of the window: we imagine and "watch" this footage with the narrator, equally mesmerized and bewildered as to the secret meaning behind the immortalized motions.

In the final section of *The Emigrants*, the fictional painter Max Ferber hands the narrator his mother's diary, written just prior to her death in the Holocaust in 1941. One of her cherished memories from girlhood, preserved in that diary, is of witnessing an unknown Russian boy chasing butterflies in Bad Kissingen, accompanied by two refined Russian gentlemen. The boy, we realize instantly, is the very young Nabokov vacationing with his father in the years before the Russian revolution. Luisa Ferber writes:

Though everything else around me blurred, I saw that forgotten Russian boy as clearly as anything, leaping about the meadows with his butterfly net; I saw him as a messenger of joy, returning from that distant summer day to open his specimen box and release the most beautiful red admirals, peacock butterflies, brimstones and tortoiseshells to signal my final liberation. (214)

In Luisa's memory, just as through Adelwarth's window, the butterfly boy is captured and framed (this time through focus as "everything else around" blurs) like an independent moving image. These dreamy, embedded, and film-like works haunt Sebald's novel, suggesting another man's solution to the crises of emigration, and of art.

For in Sebald's strange and tragic novel, not a single of his emigrants escapes from the past: haunted by history and rootless in any new land, his sensitive and wounded subjects are doomed to wither. At best, they sometimes create works of a quiet and

enigmatic beauty—whether paintings, flower gardens, or mere collections of notes—before coming to some form of self-inflicted demise. For them, as perhaps for Sebald himself, Nabokov symbolizes the longed-for and impossible ideal: he is the one twentieth-century literary émigré who fully made it, who escaped historical tragedy and, seemingly, from psychological trauma as well, to find a provokingly autonomous joy in both life and art.

In each section of *The Emigrants*, Nabokov appears as an image, an immediately recognizable book cover, a veritable short film taking place just outside the madhouse window, and finally as a lingering childhood memory prior to unimaginable annihilation—all of which invoke Nabokov’s practice in his own works. More significantly still, Nabokov, captured at four different ages in Sebald’s book, grows younger as the text progresses until at last he is once more a pre-exilic Russian child and a “messenger of joy.” Nabokov appears to be so free from the bonds that tie down Sebald’s own characters that he even escapes the arrow of time.

Adrian Curtin and Maxim Shrayer have called Nabokov the “exemplary model of the artist-in-exile,” and the literary precursor whose work “both complicates and contrasts Sebald’s own designs.”<sup>10</sup> I suspect that Sebald refuses as well as feels incapable of the butterfly boy’s pure freedom. But the image of Nabokov intimates that such freedom—from the tragedies of history, from the confines of national identity, and hence from both time and space—is possible. Alluring and maddening, he beckons to the reader with his butterfly net.

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<sup>10</sup> Curtin and Shrayer, “Netting the Butterfly Man,” 277.

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