I. The Two Scandals of Vladimir Nabokov

There are two monumental works by Vladimir Nabokov that his most vehement critics—and some of his greatest fans—seemingly never tire of hating, quite as much as the maître loved to detest his own bêtes noires: the annotated Eugène Onegin translation (1964), and the still notorious late English-language novel Ada, or Ardor (1969).

The peculiar blend of humility and arrogance, of passionate scholarship and creative ambition that is Nabokov’s four-volume annotated translation finds no equivalent in twentieth-century literary history. The controversy that followed its publication has become the stuff of legend.\(^1\) Such formidable opponents as Edmund Wilson and Robert Lowell went for the jugular. Wilson’s particularly personal attacks spoke of “the perversity of [Nabokov’s] tricks to startle or stick pins in the reader,” and hypothesized that “he seeks to torture both the reader and himself by flattening Pushkin and denying to his own powers the scope for their full play.”\(^2\) The battle raged, 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” Osip Mandelstam; Lowell and George Steiner responded and the feud continued for years.\(^3\) In the time that it cost him and judging by

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\(^3\) Nabokov’s admirers have since mounted defense campaigns, arguing that Eugène Onegin was never intended to stand alone as a literary translation. 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:
his usual rate of production, Nabokov could have written three or four more novels. To ask a naïve question: Why spend a decade on a project that threatened to dim his reputation with an unpleasant brand of notoriety?

As Brian Boyd has pointed out, Nabokov’s life changed inconceivably in ten years:

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.⁴

Nabokov had the attention of the world. As early as 1968, Hollywood began nosing around Ada: the asking price for movie rights, it was decided, 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 divergence 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ Michael Wood, evoking Edward Said’s

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⁴ Ibid., 518.
⁶ Rorty compares Nabokov with Heidegger in this regard: both peak in the middle and then become truly difficult; in Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 161.
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.” 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?”

What I hope to do, rather than merely become the “type of person who appreciates this writing,” is to mine these texts to unearth a composite and complicated genealogy, its stakes and implications. Alexander Gerschenkron has said of Nabokov’s Onegin translation that it can and should be studied, but that it cannot be read. Many have responded similarly to Ada’s code-switching, trilingualism, and many-layered allusions. The novel is seen as Nabokov’s most overtly aristocratic work—in the negative sense. But what the critical reaction simultaneously points to and obfuscates is that Ada was also the most ambitious moment of Nabokov’s career, his most self-conscious, and as I hope to show, deeply self-conscious and even self-mocking 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 transnational new world seems poignant and prophetic.

II. Nabokov’s Onegin and the Chateaubryonic genre

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Great writers and a handful of powerful scholars are the ones to reimagine and reformulate a given canon. We choose our literary, if not our biological, ancestors. Not unlike their characters, Pushkin and Nabokov load their fictional bookshelves with literary relations. *Evgenii Onegin* is rife with foreign novels: Pushkin seized on excuses to include long lists of authors and books. The commonplace of Slavic Studies that Russian literature is unusually synthetic owes much to *Onegin* and its influential readers; for Pushkin clearly does *something* with French and British precursors as he incorporates them into his own work.

I have suggested elsewhere a somewhat unorthodox theoretical framework for Pushkin’s and Nabokov’s *Onegins*.\(^\text{10}\) Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters* sees the world in terms of competing centers of cultural capital. One can map territories by language and literary traditions, linked with but not identical to political boundaries: Latin, then French, then English languages (among others) compete for global dominance. Since the cultural centers of the so-called major languages define the fashion, other cultures seem out-of-date by comparison—the spatial difference is mapped out as time. A Russian outsider to European Romanticism like Pushkin must steal fire from Paris and London, quickly and well, or seem belated.

My reading of Nabokov’s *Eugene Onegin* finds that the *Commentary* deliberately moves beyond Pushkin to suggest the outlines of an international genealogy of the poetic novel—in which Pushkin occupies a central space. Pushkin, as a non-Western European outsider, was quite coolly aware of literature’s dependence on fashion: his *Onegin* is a

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\(^{10}\) I develop this argument at length in a forthcoming monograph, *From Onegin to Ada: Nabokov’s Canon* (Northwestern University Press).
whirl of conscious pursuit, a bid to imitate brilliantly (and hence to catch up to) but also to innovate, adapt, and thus to overtake his distinguished competitors.

To give the screw another turn, the *Onegin* project allowed Nabokov to create more than just *his* Pushkin, in the “my Pushkin” tradition of Russian modernism. Nabokov handpicks Pushkin’s predecessors as well, and hence something like his own literary grandfathers. 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 French classical tradition and German Romantics. 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 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.

Nabokov’s *Onegin* is more than a translation and more even than an extensive study of Pushkin: Nabokov uses the excuse and the space to construct an international canon dating from the early nineteenth century, one 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, Dickens, and 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 (or more playfully implied) 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. Nabokov thus not only aims to break into the canon, but changes the terms to
position himself as a cultural insider, and hence as a natural authority. 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, and exotic Anglo-Franco-Russo blend. Nabokov’s Onegin is one of his attempted acts of canonical alchemy—beginning with an utterly European Pushkin.

Canon reformations uncover and suggest new, hitherto hidden connections; or, in John Guillory’s formulation from his influential study Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (1993), “the peculiar centrality of a tradition which was perceived to be marginal.”¹¹ Thus the New Critics re-evaluated the preceding tradition and canonized the moderns. Guillory quotes T. S. Eliot’s own words: “From time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the poems in a new order.”¹²

Nabokov used his Onegin Commentary to put forward an international Romantic tradition as the precursor to his competing kind of modernism. Quite like Eliot, whom he detested, Nabokov intended to be both reviewing critic and leading writer of the new order. In a sense, Nabokov used his Onegin precisely to engage in a canon-war with Eliot and others, challenging a reigning Anglo-American modernist list of greats with a Russo-Franco-Anglo World Literature alternative—and insisting on his Russian favorites.

John Guillory, analyzing the New Critical canon-reformation in the early twentieth century, links Eliot’s “legitimation of his poetic practice” with

the emergence (somewhat belatedly in relation to the other arts) of a “modernist” poetic. The status of Eliot’s “canon” (if it can be called that) corresponds exactly to the status of a minority within literary culture, that minority of poets and writers who

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¹²Ibid., 146.
can be associated with the practices of Eliot and Pound, and who are at the time Eliot’s essays are written still relatively marginal to literary culture, a coterie whose work will only later come to define modernism in poetry.\footnote{Ibid., 147-148.}

Nabokov’s \textit{Onegin Commentary} pushes forward as the hitherto undervalued “minority” practices those of his beloved Russian and European stylists, and subtly develops a competing Romantic/modernist poetic. From Pushkin and the Chateaubyrronic genre to the meta-literary, incestuous modernist games of \textit{Ada, or Ardor} remains only a tiny step.

\section*{III. Nabokov’s \textit{Ada}: Transfiguration, Transplanted}

Moving forward simultaneously a century and a half and a mere few years, we come to \textit{Ada}. As is well-known, Nabokov’s longest novel, though written in English, is littered with references to \textit{Onegin} and to the Russian literary tradition. For the most part, these markers and signposts are in plain view.\footnote{Cf. Priscilla Meyer, "Nabokov’s Lolita and Pushkin’s Onegin—McAdam, McEve and McFate," in \textit{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.} Nevertheless, Nabokov appended the “Notes by Vivian Darkbloom” section in 1970, patiently identifying lines and echoes the first readers may have missed. The \textit{fabula}, motifs, and meta-literary concerns of \textit{Onegin} haunt \textit{Ada}, but so do larger patterns, such as a complex temporal structure taken partly from \textit{Onegin} and partly from the added stratum of Nabokov’s own \textit{Commentary} notes, and similarly competitive appropriations from other languages and literatures.

In seven pages and at break-neck speed, the opening chapter introduces the reading experience to follow. The novel opens with the 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 (\textit{Anna Arkadievitch 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 have a parody of mistranslation, attributed to a cross between George Steiner and Robert Lowell (the latter guilty of doubly martyring Mandelstam, the former of theorizing away the crime). This first two-sentence paragraph works ominously hard, what with the preposterous verb “transfigured,” the title in Russian and in gross English mistranslation, and even that initial provocation that Part One may well be “close to” Tolstoy. After assessing the response, Nabokov added as 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” (591).¹⁵

So soon after the highly public *Onegin* feud, *Ada* opens with a jab and a feint, announcing that it will “transfigure” and play all manner of games with the Russian literary tradition. In the next breath, we realize that matters are even more complicated, 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,” the following four pages subtly introduce (as becomes apparent on re-reading) all of the main characters in several generations of “organically” intermingled Veens and Zemskis. For

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Nabokov has turned the family chronicle on its head: cheerfully explicit incest replaces the oblique hints at “cousinage, dangerous voisinage” in Tolstoy.

The challenge—the key to reading Ada—is also stated outright: catch allusions, as quickly and accurately as possible. In seven pages, we learn that Ada is a meta-novel, penned by Van and edited by Ada, still amorously together at a much later point in time. The novel has been summed up and the plot resolved: the first chapter thus parodies and yet obscurely grants us the exposition and the heavy-handed foreshadowing that we might expect from a family novel.

The story proper and the overt Onegin references begin in the second chapter, with Ada and Van’s parents, as Don Johnson and others have noted. 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.

…She 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 Estdoty. 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 shares the same structural breakdown.\textsuperscript{16} The hero and heroine are conceived—rather literally—out of Onegin, but again from a twisted adaptation. Meanwhile Onegin’s fabula spills from the stage into the rest of the novel. There are spectacular duels, snowy landscapes, dangerous card games. A rival materializes out of the same source: Baron d’Onsky (a hybrid of Onegin and Lensky). Characters and plots often come across as if badly garbled by aerocable, as does so much else in Antiterra.\textsuperscript{17}

Once the Onegin fabula enters the novel, it spreads and mutates like a virus—or like a fairy tale; for stories also evolve over time and space. As Demon whisks Marina away, Baron d’O is left 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). Nabokov had identified a Cinderella motif in Tatiana Larina’s transformation into a Petersburg beauty, and here he underscores the resemblance. Van and Ada’s story also escapes to find a life outside of Van’s memoir, in the competing narratives offered by the governess Mme. Lariviere’s pulp romance; the still worse film adaptation of her novel; Kim Beauharnais’s blackmail photo-album; and the legends spread around Ardis by the Cinderella-like maid Blanche. These fairy tales and floating stories influence our expectations and most often mislead. Poor Blanche never finds her prince and instead bears a child disfigured by

\textsuperscript{16} 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).
\textsuperscript{17} Cf. D. Barton Johnson: “One Baron d’Onsky (= Onegin + Lensky), an apparent incarnation of the play’s Baron d’O, counterpoints Demon’s seduction of O’s leading lady during the performance by supplanting Demon as Marina’s lover in the events of the novel,” in “Nabokov’s Ada and Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin,” SEEJ 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1971): 317-8. See also Johnson’s informative “The Labyrinth of Incest in Nabokov’s Ada,” Comparative Literature 38, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 224-255.
venereal disease. The Larivièrè novel, the film, and the Ardis legends all fail to mention the third Veen sibling, Lucette.

Chiasmic reversals of desire between Demon and Marina fuel a cycle of betrayal and deception that dooms both generations of Veens. In each generation, some grotesque version of Onegin infects the plotline. Forty pages in, another variation on the 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 meets two sisters, the older dark-haired and bookish, the younger fair and “normal.” Pale Ada could be Tatiana’s great-granddaughter: the fact that her mother had been cast as Tatiana underscores the physical resemblance. Years later, Van tells Ada that she resembles “the young soprano Maria Kuznetsova in the letter scene of Tschchaikow’s opera Onegin and Olga” (158).

But that 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 novel’s confessional love-letter. It is to Lucette that Van quotes Onegin’s lines (exactly as Nabokov translated them, sans only the line-break): “I love you with a brother’s love and maybe still more tenderly” (481). 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. Van (the mimetic young character? the wiser old narrator? or the laughing shadowy author behind all?) sees all his romances in the light of his beloved Russian literature.

Onegin and Ada are both, in a sense, about the transmission of literary narratives. A multiplicity of stories competes inside of each novel, which nonetheless aspires to be a

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single meta-story. It would be deeply unsatisfying to read only about Onegin and Tatiana, skipping Pushkin’s narrator’s meta-literary 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. 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. Stories overlap, resemble each other, and merge into universals. How do we maintain the illusion of a single hero or heroine (the Onegin and Ada of their eponymous novels)? The texts offer what seem synchronic portrayal of literary evolution—including its failures, monsters, and here the still-born products of literary incest.

In Pascale Casanova’s world republic of letters, languages and literatures have their own borders and capital. In Ada, the world of letters is the real world. Nabokov’s beloved nations, languages, and cultural eras form a magical federation. (Only in such an other-world of letters would a displaced Russian émigré and self-fashioned European intellectual like Vladimir Nabokov be entirely in his element.) Cultural capital is capital—Ada’s intellectuals inherit the riches of the world not only figuratively but literally: the intellectual aristocracy, in Nabokov’s defiant world, is also the financial elite. Historical tragedy is righted along the way: Russian poets have been safely transplanted to New World shores.

Thus Ada’s roots boldly reach beyond Onegin, down to his illustrious precursors, and spread across the New World. The theme of incest blends Byron and Chateaubriand’s lives with their most beloved works: Byron’s unusual relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh scandalized 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 immortalized incestuous love in René; and the exact nature of his relationship with beloved younger sister Lucille remains unknown.

Ada and Van are in on the joke from the start. These precocious readers find justification in their favorite masterpieces, sharing a copy of Chateaubriand before they become lovers. Atala presumably teaches them “how to love” all too well (literalizing Pushkin’s line), but it also offers another, earlier fantasy America. The French author even crops up as a breed of mosquito, Culex chateaubriandi, whose bite and resulting itch are a metaphor for sexual desire; and in the earliest drafts, Van’s name was Juan.

Nabokov uses Chateaubriand and Byron as indexes to incest, and to a Romantic discourse of demonic passion.

The strange genealogy or twisted family tree works something like this: the main story is born of Pushkin’s Onegin, whose characters and lines haunt Ada at its most poignant moments. Demon is more or less Lermontov’s character, painted over with the Symbolists’ and Vrubel’s demons, and throbbing with a generous infusion of Milton and Byron. The Veen family tree includes a Dolly, but also an aunt Kitty who married the banker Bo-lenski “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. At the same time, Ada Veen is the photo-negative of Bleak House’s pretty Ada, an angelic blonde who marries her good-for-nothing cousin.19 Lucette’s final swan-dive off a trans-Atlantic liner crosses Ophelia

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19 In his Austen lecture, “Nabokov explains that such a heroine [ward to an aristocratic family], popular in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, was useful for a variety of narratological purposes. Her alien status evokes pathos, she can enter into love affair with the son of the family…” Dickens, Dostoeovsky and Tolstoy all used the same convention, and Nabokov remarks that the prototype of these quiet maidens is, of
with Anna and Emma, but see also Lucile Chateaubriand. There is a Joycean grandpa Dedalus, whose Irish blood “sweetens” 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 (Rimbaud! Marvell! Blok!) co-haunting the work. 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.

Despite the incest, hybrids, and anachronism, a pattern emerges from the carpet. There is a linked repetition of Russian, English and French “great triads,” creating the main framework. The pattern is set by the initial group Pushkin-Byron-Chateaubriand: the Russian imitates and then devours his French and English rivals. The next generation offers Tolstoy-Dickens-Flaubert; and the last important layer is Joyce-Proust- and Nabokov himself. If Pushkin’s *Onegin* used Byron and Chateaubriand to create an original Russian language masterpiece, *Ada* updates and tries to repeat the accomplishment. The pattern is that the Russian latecomer outdoes the English and French; the twist or novelty is that *Ada* is not in Russian.

**IV. After *Ada***?

Nabokov had no interest in fitting into someone else’s anthology of Russian writers, but provided his own transnational genealogy in the parodic family trees of *Ada*.

Examined, Nabokov’s genealogy reveals an implied trajectory for the Russian course, Cinderella. Dependent, helpless, friendless, neglected, forgotten—and then marrying the hero’ [10],” summarizes Joseph Frank, “Lectures on Literature,” in Vladimir Alexandrov, ed. *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland, 1995), 237. Like Fanny at Mansfield park, and as the “orphaned” outsider through whom we meet and romance the cousin Vees, Van is, as far as narrative device is concerned, the (anti?) Cinderella of Ardis.
Romantic/modernist novel, extending from Pushkin to culminate unexpectedly in a late twentieth-century hybrid, written mostly in English and after fifty years of emigration. *Ada* is Nabokov’s final act of alchemy with the Russian canon. Effectively, he tried to infect our world with Antiterra—to rescue his Russian tradition by translating and annexing it to a hybrid, if English-dominant, canon. As a consequence, the canon of “Western masterpieces” is re-imagined with Russian literature as central strain.

From today’s perspective, he pulled it off awfully well. Despite, or perhaps, due to 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.” An unconventional but influential cultural ambassador, he successfully re-imagined the international relevance of the Russian literary tradition, and a literary canon as a complex fabric of intermingled transnational culture. 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; moreover, he managed to convince many foreign readers that the Russian literary tradition was a part of their canon. In this regard, he resembles less the other famous Russian émigré writers (including the Nobel prize winners Ivan Bunin and Josef Brodsky) than the émigré artists, choreographers, and musicians, who had a far easier time translating their life’s work to European and American soil.

Working within the medium of literature, Nabokov managed not only to escape his own marginalization, but through his creative output and life-long aesthetic propaganda campaign, to reconfigure an international cultural playing field—conjuring in the minds

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of many readers an alluring vision of a transnational Antiterra.\textsuperscript{21} His oeuvre and transnational status have in turn captured the imagination of the South African J. M. Coetzee, the Turk Orhan Pamuk, the Indian-born Salmon Rushdie, the Iranian Azar Nafisi, and the German-exile W. G. Sebald—to name only a few contemporary practitioners. These writers feel distant from traditional centers of cultural capital, but have all claimed themselves to be “Nabokov’s children”; and thus, perhaps, Pushkin’s unexpected grandchildren.

However, turning back to Ada, we find that part of the novel’s interest lies in the fact that it deconstructs somewhat its own triumphant narrative. Van and Ada Veen, heirs to the greatest traditions in the world, die childless. Incest and sterility take on looming allegorical significance, for inbreeding among related outliers sometimes yields woollier and woollier sheep, and sometimes a legless lamb. Novels may share a similar fate: can masterpieces interbreed and borrow plot, motif and stylistic devices indefinitely? The question of inbreeding forms one of the central paradoxes of the novel: since Antiterran 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 the great love story of Ada may well end with the death of the (modernist, monumental) novel; or perhaps already presents its uncanny afterlife.

The ostensible romantic plot hints at the magician’s doubts—we are left with a masterpiece in quotation marks.\textsuperscript{22} I have suggested a sense of finality about \textit{Ada}: the grand tradition of the Russian novel, as such, seems to end with its “translation” into English-language modernism. But this anti-novel or pastiche-monument of modernism also threatens to exhaust the possibilities for one post-Romantic mode of writing. Is \textit{Ada} a dead end, Nabokov’s \textit{Finnegans Wake}?

To put it in another way: once he broke out of a national discourse, 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 a terminal point for one powerful trajectory of post-Romantic culture. Beckett, to escape his cultural baggage, abandoned Dublin for Paris and began writing in French. Divorced from the “nativeness” of his 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 \textit{Ada}. Somehow, this exuberance is possible in the New World: not incidentally, Nabokov relocates the capital of culture from Paris to New York. 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 \textit{Finnegans Wake}.\textsuperscript{23} Like his multi-lingual puns, the allusions double and triple, pointing to film, visual arts, and literary precursors at the same time.

\textsuperscript{22} For a psycho-literary analysis of Nabokov’s ambivalences, see Michael Wood, \textit{The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
\textsuperscript{23} And yet the two projects, \textit{Ada} and the \textit{Wake}, have a good deal in common: Joyce was also accused of “having created in the \textit{Wake} the ultimate private language”: Andrew Schmitz, “The Penman and the Postal-Carrier: Preordained Rivalry in Joyce’s \textit{Finnegans Wake},” in Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer, eds. \textit{Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Control} (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 248.
I will end with this “fourth dimension” of literary allusions to visual arts and moving images. It is a critical commonplace to stress the painterly sensibility of Nabokov’s verbal art; and Nabokov himself emphasized his interest in the possibilities and paradoxes of *Ut pictura poesis*. But 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, even more telling are the embedded films, which engage in a strange internal competition with the novel. The most wonderful use of film, fantasized Albinus in *Laughter in the Dark*, might be to animate Old Master paintings: this is just what many of *Ada’s* scenes try to do. Van’s pseudo-memoir attempts to mimic the special faculty of film, even to surpass it and prove the novel’s superiority. The struggle between media is played out by no fewer than three fictional film adaptations depicted in the novel, echoing Stanley Kubrick’s and Nabokov’s skirmishes for narrative control over *Lolita* the film.

In *Ada*, I would suggest, the transnational imperative drives Nabokov to imitate and improve on the most threatening rival of all, this time among twentieth-century narrative media. He tries to create a kind of text that reaches for the inherent cosmopolitanism of painting, and for the “international language” of cinema. Perhaps this is one way out of inbreeding modernist classics with diminishing results: the novel form, if it is to survive, must subsume far more than its own recent greats.

**Selected Bibliography**


______. “The Labyrinth of Incest in Nabokov’s *Ada.*” *Comparative Literature* 38, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 224-255.


